

## Art Hysterical Discourse

Revisioning the rapture.

—Ken Allan

## Avant-Garde

A new perfume by Calvin Klein.

—Janine Marchessault

## Beaver

Beaver hats, beaver tails, beaver droppings, beaver club, beaver colony, beaver hunt, busy beaver, sheared beaver, beaver-beaver (censored) citizen beaver?

Canadian history is informed by the culture of the beaver on so many levels that any debate about the nation becomes a truly sexual experience. Anyone interested in the history of this country has crossed paths with extremely rich narratives of the nation, in which the quintessential Canadian experience is often documented as a matter of beaver [snap]shots. Those narratives written by early French explorers, British diarists as well as very serious Canadianists—mostly male, and sometimes female—describe the she-nation through graphic imaginings of beaver fur, detailing the luxury of colours, shades, softness and darkness of the fur patches, nicely distributed according to the specifics of North American geography. Some accounts go so far as to claim that the best furs are to be found around Lake Ontario and in Québec, and that this rich brown glamorous fur is a matter of the northern exposure of the pretty beaver. In a very telling and significant way, these natural scientific descriptions of the beauty of the nation propose a constant crossing between beaver the beast, beaver as the route to penetration of the land, and the beaver-beaver as a sexual embodiment, a space conveniently framed as female, as female sex, as the she-nation. (For the record, the Jesuit periodical *Relations* and Canadian historian Harold Innis's famous book on *The Fur Trade in Canada*, offer the most exciting erotic taxonomies of fur geographies hands down). Looking at these epic journeys into beaver land, one cannot help but notice how the little beast is treated as a first-class citizen.

This historical queer fascination for the beaver found a strange echo in the governmental dams of Ottawa and Quebec during the summer of 1999. Suddenly, the cute, funny, puffy little beaver was the “sex” object of a national scream from coast to coast. The beaver, the first-class citizen of this country, was outed as *sexually confused*. The unique Castor

Canadensis, the industrious beefcake/stud par excellence, rather than its fussy evil renowned queer European cousin, turned out to be a hermaphrodite.

In its July 10, 1999 edition, the *Ottawa Citizen* brought out “scientific” evidence that the Canadian beaver, for centuries marketed as a monogendered mammal, was a pseudo-hermaphrodite. In fact, the news was not such a scoop. Already, an obscure nineteenth-century study had suggested that the anatomy of the most precious resource of the country was, well . . . anatomically gifted. The study was quickly dismissed as tabloid material, and did not stop the Canadian government from proudly standing by the assumed one-gender-one-nation heterosexual beaver, choosing the little muncher as the symbol of the sovereignty of Canada in 1975. Hence the shock, the shame, the national scream: how can a nation become so confused as to make its representatives a queen and a beaver? While for years, the government had no problem in flagging and greeting the nation and the world with a fur patch, suddenly the dubious gender of the beaver was an issue. As the *Ottawa Citizen* article laconically comments: “The symbolism is inescapable. Just south of the nation’s capital, in South Nation River, Canada’s national animal—the beaver—lives in profusion. And sexual confusion. Two professors were looking for something specific and they found it in 100 per cent of the males—a uterus. The finding may someday officially tag the North American beaver, *Castor canadensis*, as a pseudo-hermaphrodite—an animal that has sex organs from both genders.” (*Ottawa Citizen*, p. A-1). This latest ho-hum episode in the secret life of the busy *Castor Canadensis* aroused dismay and silence among federal and provincial bodies, literally leaving the country to the beaver. Even the vociferous pro-fur agency, the Fur Council of Canada, usually so keen to hunt the beaver, didn’t trail on the tale this time, silenced by the mystery of the male womb. While the gem of the nation was getting a close shave, or should I say a sheared beaver, a different sort of national identity debate was in full swing, and as the *Ottawa Citizen* article bravely pursues: “the truth—whether the beaver represents a sexual oddity or an environmental casualty—points to yet another Canadian identity crisis” (A-2). For future generations and to celebrate the new millenium, in addition to avoiding any further sexual confusion and postcolonial beaver fever, let’s make a plea to have Canadian citizenship reverted and perverted to that of the Citizen Beaver. Welcome to Beaver Land!

—Chantal Nadeau

## Bi-polar

Semiotic or psychological disorder.

—Janine Marchessault

## Bit

“Bit” designates the minimally meaningful units of both early twentieth-century live performance and late-century informatics. In vaudeville, radio comedy and post-war stand-up, a “bit” was a well-honed piece of comic business, a unit of gesture (such as the “double-take,” the comically delayed response to word or action) or of linguistic play (as in the double-talk of Abbot and Costello skits). Bits were part of the rich tapestry of narrative films or combined within the larger syntax of the live routine. By the end of the twentieth century, a “bit” was no longer the richly condensed legacy of performance traditions. Rather, it named one of the building blocks of computer-mediated information, utterly meaningless on its own.

—Will Straw

## Blue

You say to the boy open your eyes  
 When he opens his eyes and sees the light  
 You make him cry out. Saying  
 O Blue come forth  
 O Blue arise  
 O Blue ascend  
 O Blue come in

I am sitting with some friends in this cafe drinking coffee served by young refugees from Bosnia. The war rages across the newspapers and through the ruined streets of Sarajevo.

Tania said “Your clothes are on back to front and inside out.” Since there were only two of us here I took them off and put them right then and there. I am always here before the doors open.

What need of so much news from abroad while all that concerns either life or death is all transacting and at work within me.

I step off the kerb and a cyclist nearly knocks me down. Flying in from the dark he nearly parted my hair.

I step into a blue funk.

The doctor in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital thought he could detect lesions in my retina—the pupils dilated with belladonna—the torch shone into them with a terrible blinding light.

Look left  
 Look down  
 Look up

Look right  
Blue flashes in my eyes.

Blue Bottle buzzing  
Lazy days  
The sky blue butterfly  
Sways on a cornflower  
Lost in the warmth  
Of the blue heat haze  
Singing the blues  
Quiet and slowly  
Blue of my heart  
Blue of my dreams  
Slow blue love  
Of delphinium days

Blue is the universal love in which man bathes—it is the terrestrial paradise.

I'm walking along the beach in a howling gale —  
Another year is passing  
In the roaring waters  
I hear the voices of dead friends  
Love is life that lasts forever.

My heart's memory turns to you  
David. Howard. Graham. Terry. Paul...

But what if this present  
Were the world's last night  
In the setting sun your love fades  
Dies in the moonlight  
Fails to rise  
Thrice denied by cock crow  
In the dawn's first light

{ ..... }

I caught myself looking at shoes in a shop window. I thought of going in and buying a pair, but stopped myself. The shoes I am wearing at the moment should be sufficient to walk me out of life.

Pearl fishers  
In azure seas  
Deep waters  
Washing the isle of the dead  
In coral harbours

Amphora  
 Spill  
 Gold  
 Across the still seabed  
 We lie there  
 Fanned by the billowing  
 Sails of forgotten ships  
 Tossed by the mournful winds  
 Of the deep  
 Lost Boys  
 Sleep forever  
 In a dear embrace  
 Salt lips touching  
 In submarine gardens  
 Cool marble fingers  
 Touch an antique smile  
 Shell sounds  
 Whisper  
 Deep love drifting on the tide forever  
 The smell of him  
 Dead good looking  
 In beauty's summer  
 His blue jeans  
 Around his ankles  
 Bliss in my ghostly eye  
 Kiss me  
 On the lips  
 On the eyes  
 Our name will be forgotten  
 In time  
 No one will remember our work  
 Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud  
 And be scattered like  
 Mist that is chased by the  
 Rays of the sun  
 For our time is the passing of a shadow  
 And our lives will run like  
 Sparks through the stubble

I place a delphinium, Blue, upon your grave.

—Derek Jarman

Excerpted from *Blue* (1993), a film by Derek Jarman. Text © Basilisk Productions, 1993.  
*Public 10: Love*, 1994.

## Borders

Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*<sup>1</sup>

Borders are as much virtual as material. To create a border, one needs not merely a concrete geographical space, but an imaginary one as well. In the absence of both these conditions being met, the symbolic efficacy of the border dissolves. One would be hard pressed to find a more telling manifestation of this fact than the current situation in Quebec. The Parti Québécois claims Quebec's borders are inviolate. The federal government, on the other hand, maintains that if Canada is divisible, then so is Quebec. Aboriginal groups, for instance, demarcate their own ancestral borders and may opt to be part of Canada or indeed to create their own sovereign states in the event of Quebec secession. Add to this possibility the prospect of Quebec anglophones in west-end Montreal and other federalist regions insisting on their right to stay in Canada, and the fragility of the political demarcation of places becomes painfully clear.

Indeed, in Quebec, the proliferation of imaginary border spaces seems to become all the more frenetic as the “differences” those borders would vouchsafe lose their grounding in everyday experience. In the 1995 referendum on sovereignty, leaders of the secessionist movement claimed that after separation nothing would change in Quebec, yet everything would. In the rest of Canada, the state of things is hardly clearer: in Parliament, Reform Party representatives from the prairies argue that decentralization is the only way to strengthen the Federation. In these times of increasingly ambiguous nationalist definitions, the desire for notions of nationhood at once more concrete and more historically resilient becomes palpable. For both Canadian and Québécois nationalists, the notion of the land as geographical site of nationhood has gained much credence of late. Not infrequently, this appeal to the land disregards the complex legal, historical, and cultural practices that have defined the lives of that land's inhabitants. Its limitations notwithstanding, this notion of the nation as land is a necessary prerequisite for the development of what Benedict Anderson has called the “imagined community.” In the context of Quebec, this rhetoric of “the land” has increasingly become a key factor.<sup>2</sup> When land becomes the defining element of nationhood, borders—signs of a break, a gap, a demarcation of difference—become of paramount importance, and the “site” of the border often takes the form of images.

While image-making is often used in order to demarcate cultural and national difference, it is frequently the case that this serves to exacerbate rather than resolve uncertainties concerning what kinds of difference really

exist. This is especially true of the Canadian Federation. This is not to claim that difference does not exist; instead, it is to posit that the boundaries that define such difference are far more blurred than nationalists of any stripe wish to believe. Indeed, it is at these points of uncertainty concerning identity that the various collective identities populating Canada find their deepest affinity. Regardless of one's national status within Canada, the one notion that unites Canadians and Québécois alike is the fear that they are no different from those who surround them. So as nationalists continue to produce countless images in an effort to clarify their difference, those images belie the very anxiety they were intended to assuage.

#### Notes

1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin Books, 1972), 9.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), *passim*.

—Scott MacKenzie

Excerpted from "A Line in the Snow: Visualizing Borders Imaginary and Real," *Public 14: Québec*, 1996.

## Boredom

Bore was first used in English in the eighteenth century, and boredom itself in 1862. Boredom is a luxury product. Though originally the province of courtiers, once given a name, boredom became democratic: anyone may be bored. Boredom is to be distinguished from the more contemplative French *ennui*, and from melancholy: it is available to those who are not of introspective disposition, who don't care what boredom is. Boredom has become an academic growth industry, the object of a number of theoretical studies of its social and intellectual history.

Boredom may be considered as an absence of entertainment, or as an unfulfilled desire simply to feel desire. As an injured sense of one's own centrality (we demand to be distracted, desired, desiring) it is a form of self-recognition and self-assertion as powerful as the fundamental twentieth-century theoretical desire to be desired by another's desire. It functions as a kind of Polyfilla for the decentred self. There is an aura of boredom. Akin to migraine aura, it gives acuity, and elevates the most interminable fluorescent-lit daily transactions in which everyone else's skin looks terrible.

Being boring is equally a function of self-assertion. The most boring people are those who are most fully absorbed in their own interests and not in your own: the bores who tell you what their pet did or thought (boring even if the cat is a bomber pilot), bores who tell you their dreams (I kept putting on socks and they were all too big and they kept falling off

and I couldn't go to work), bores who tell you the plots of movies (Tom Cruise plays this guy), bores who make lists.

#### Note

On the broad explanatory power of boredom, see Patricia Meyer Spack, *Boredom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

—Elizabeth Legge

## Boredom

Boredom is at once an empty and an overflowing conceptual category—empty, because it has no ultimate, transcendent meaning; overflowing, because it has been the source of a relatively exhaustive study, especially in the West.

In eighteenth-century theories of the sublime, for example, boredom was assumed to mask uneasiness, anxiety, or terror; as such, it was theorized as a reaction to privation or absence, a refusal to engage the unattainable or unrepresentable (the realm of the sublime itself) by remaining resolutely within the domain of the common, the ordinary, or the everyday. In nineteenth-century Romanticism, boredom assumed the quality of negative passion, associated both with the nothingness and nonbeing of the sublime as well as the unbearable experience of being in the everyday (in other words, a negative passion was transformed into passion for negativity and negation). In the twentieth century, particularly in the discourses of psychoanalysis and clinical practice, boredom became inextricably linked to depression, and to anger, grief, or loss as the source of a negativity which must be experienced, overcome, or worked through. (In this respect, the psychoanalytic cure of boredom was similar to that evoked by the Romantics.) In German critical theory of the 1920s and 1930s, boredom was once again transformed as a concept, understood in relation to leisure, and also to waiting, to an expectation or future orientation of subjectivity devoid of anxiety or alienation. Finally, in contemporary theories of postmodernism, boredom has been associated with both frustration and relief; in other words, with the frustration of the everyday and with the relief from this frustration in the gesture of aesthetic refusal (in the work of Jameson, Baudrillard, and Lyotard, among others).

The very instability of the concept suggests, among other things, that boredom has a history, which is as much a history of subjectivity as it is of cultural change. As French theorist Michele Hugué explains, “There is not one psychology of boredom but many, the common feature of which betrays the way in which, when confronted with a void which is painfully experienced, the subject can elaborate its defenses according to an ideal that is perceived as absent, unsatisfying, or impossible. . . . The subject expe-



riencing boredom is not suffering from an absence of desire, but from its indetermination, which in turn forces the subject to wander, in search of a point of fixation.”<sup>1</sup>

This notion of indetermination (of desire, an ideal, the void) helps to explain how boredom came to confound the oppositions so central to eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinking about work and leisure, nobility and commonality, excess and lack, fullness and emptiness, and—by implication—masculinity and femininity, that earlier had defined philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic approaches to this conceptual category. Indeed, with the rise of visual culture, mass society, mass production, and consumerism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, boredom came to epitomize the modern experience of time as both empty and full, concentrated and distracted. This is perhaps why boredom continues to offer such a useful conceptual language for contemporary theorists, who struggle to come to terms with the status of experience and history in postmodern representational forms.

Note

1 Michele Huguet, *L'Ennui et ses discours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 215.

—Patrice S. Petro

## Breast

Cancer.

—Janine Marchessault

## Chemical

Replaced chemistry in the 1970s, was superseded by “nuclear” only to resurface at the end of the century as “organic.”

—Janine Marchessault

## Classroom



#1



#2



#3



#4

—Lynne Cohen