

# I AM HALF-CANADIAN

*Americans have a cohesive culture and a strong sense of identity. Luckily, u*

IN TIMES OF DEEP NATIONAL SELF-REFLECTION, AND EVEN ON THE OTHER two days of the year, I tend to think there's nothing wrong with being Canadian that being an ex-American wouldn't fix. We expat Americans are probably the happiest Canadians around, taking Air Canada convolutions and hospital waiting lists as minor burbles of an admirable system. Some of this is probably indoctrination — our upbringing inclines us to be patriotic — but more of it, I think, is inoculation, particularly against that great pox of the Canadian psyche, the so-called identity crisis.

Not that we don't experience Canadian society as amorphous and callow, like everyone else; just that we can see these qualities are only a "crisis" in the same way that Vancouver is part of the Pacific Northwest — which is to say, strictly by American reference points. Conventional wisdom holds that the U.S. attained its cohesive culture by leaping into the nation-forging crucible of war at every opportunity, whereas Canada, having chosen a more peaceable route, remains (to use Robert Fulford's words) "an art object, an abstraction — a piece of fiction, perhaps."

Philosophical footsy-playing aside, what ex-Americans know that other Canadians do not is that America has historically used a less, shall we say, traditional method to maintain its self-definition. America treats identity as a zero-sum proposition: you can be this, but only if you're not that. Canadians may worry that we sketchily define ourselves by what we are not, but Americans suffer the opposite problem: everyone's forced to pick one definition and stick to it. As such, Americans have become the most highly summarized people on the planet; if this makes their national fabric a tightly woven one, it also makes it one of a largely synthetic fibre.

Take, for instance, a typical American employment form, such as the one I recently received from a college in California. "Federal and state mandates require that we compile summary data on the gender and ethnicity of the applicants," it declares, before assuring you that although it is about to elicit

personal information from you, nobody will ever use any of it for any purpose that could remotely affect your life. It then offers six choices of what it calls "ethnic background" (a category that wanders happily between skin colour, continental origin, language, and state residency) and exhorts, "Please check only one." You may be black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Hawaiian, or American/Alaskan Indian. Or again, you may not, in which case you're out of luck. (By contrast, the Canadian census form allows you to check as many boxes as you like.)

Americans are required to pigeonhole themselves in this manner at every turn: on college applications, insurance forms, medical forms, military forms, and in many states used to have to do so on their driver's licences. As cultural conception goes, it's about as organic as a Kraft Singles slice.

Nor is this fixation a recent contrivance: America has taken a (literally) black-and-white view of identity from the day it was born. Marriage or propagation between blacks and whites was outlawed in nearly every state during the antebellum years, and in almost half of them it remained a crime until 1967. (Fortunately for my black father, my white mother, and my sister and I, California was not one of them, though my mother was disowned and our house in Oakland was torched.) The "one-drop" rule, which states that any person of traceable African ancestry is legally black, had become law nationwide by the 1850s, and variations of it still exist throughout the country. To this day, as sociologist F. James Davis writes, "'racially mixed' is not an accepted racial category in the United States for a child who has any black ancestry at all. One is either white or black." (I tried saying I was "both" once, in an NBA locker room at the beginning of my sports-writing career, and set off a debate that ended with Michael Jordan saying gravely, "You want to know what you are, Pam? You are 'other.'")

Though racial identity is the big bugaboo in the U.S., nationality has been fashioned into a similar kind of straitjacket. Canadian brain-drainees may be

ILLUSTRATION BY ALAN PILON

## *don't have that problem* By Pamela Swanigan

surprised to find that their new government used to forbid, and still does not recognize, dual citizenship, and that indeed, their new American compatriots regard anything beyond a passing fondness for one's origins as vaguely seditious. My American-born stepfather got some insight into U.S. attitudes about national identity last summer, on a family trip to San Francisco, when U.S. customs officials hauled him into an interrogation room at the Vancouver Airport and searched his luggage. "Is it because I'm a known socialist?" he asked hopefully. (At the time, he held a minor post in the provincial NDP cabinet and was eager for any sop to his ego.) The customs officials growled back, "How did you lose your American status?" When he told them that he had voluntarily relinquished it in order to become a Canadian citizen, they searched him thoroughly. And then they sent his luggage to San Luis Obispo.

Granted, the crenellations of the boxed-in American national psyche can be fascinating; I myself used to find them the most mysterious and seductive questions of identity in the world. (This was before we had both the Tories *and* the Alliance.) But envy-prone Canadians might also want to note that to many ex-Americans, living in Canada is like getting out of jail, and that perhaps if there is a crisis, it is only the natural crisis of freedom. I can't speak for central Canada, with its 350-year-old Euro-colonial foundation, but here in Vancouver almost everybody has some major ambiguity or conflict or multiplicity of heritage; we swim around in our fluid identities like Alice in her pool of tears, battling and occasionally appreciating our aggregate citizenships and the expansive versions of our selves. It's unsettling and often distressing, yes; West Coast Canadian culture is congenial and unsophisticated, true; and no one who has lived here for very long could fail to notice the indecisiveness about identity that, especially among young white males, amounts to an epidemic. But to American-Canadians, who know something about the most proximate alternative, this is exactly the way it should be. ■

SATURDAY NIGHT JANUARY 27 2001

### THE WORK:

George Orwell's foreboding novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949.

### WHAT IT FORETELLS:

The world is divided into three massive political entities that are constantly warring with one another. In the oppressive, totalitarian society of Oceania, the Thought Police deal cruelly with members of a resistance movement named the Brotherhood.

### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED:

The world is united by a telecast of the Live-Aid benefit concert. Genetic fingerprinting is invented. *Murder, She Wrote* debuts.

### 1999

#### THE WORK:

"1999," a song by Prince, released in 1982.

#### WHAT IT FORETELLS:

The sky is all purple, there are people running everywhere. Prince tries to run from the destruction, but you know he doesn't even care.

#### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED:

The last full solar eclipse of the millennium takes place over Europe and Asia. Prince ends the year with a pay-per-view TV special.

### 2000

#### THE WORK:

*Death Race 2000*, a film produced by Roger Corman and released in 1975.

#### WHAT IT FORETELLS:

The United Provinces of America are led by a god-like president who resides in a Chinese palace. The most popular sport is the Transcontinental Road Race, a car rally between New York and New Los Angeles in which the winner is decided by speed and the number of pedestrians killed. >

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14