

National television, global market: Canada's *Degrassi: The Next Generation*

Elana Levine

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE

The tension between heterogeneity and homogeneity, specificity and universality, has become the central problematic of global media culture (Appadurai, 1996: 32). While media scholars have largely discounted claims of total cultural homogenization by examining vibrant local production and reception contexts, the threat of a universal – usually Americanized – cultural colonization continues to operate in tension with those localizing forces. As one of only two nations to share a border with the United States, Canada and its domestic television industry seem particularly vulnerable to the cultural power of their southern neighbor. Thus, as in many countries worldwide, Canadian cultural policy has sought to protect the status of broadcasting as a ‘public service essential to the maintenance and enhancement of national identity and cultural sovereignty’ (Canada Department of Justice, 1991) and scholars have identified ‘the Canadian media-identity problematic’ as being ‘at the forefront of the major debates concerning the relationship between places, media representations, and community formations in a global cultural economy’ (Tinic, 2005: viii). This article examines the production and distribution of the Canadian teen drama, *Degrassi: The Next Generation (DTNG)* as a case study of Canada’s ‘media-identity problematic’. As a program supported by and successful within its domestic, national market as well as the global TV trade, *DTNG* balances the tension between the specific and the universal so central to global media culture and so heightened in the case of Canada.

Recent discussions of Canada’s positioning between the poles of cultural specificity and universality tend to see the global and homogeneous winning out over the local, regional or national. For example, the Vancouver-based television producers Serra Tinic interviewed repeatedly spoke of a ‘perceived need to universalize the culturally particular’ as a strategy for survival (2005:

110). With a tighter and tighter national broadcasting market, dominated as it is by American imports, for many Canadian producers 'there appear few alternatives to diluting domestic content and participating within the global cultural economy instead of the regional or national arena' (2005: 92). Ravindra N. Mohabeer has criticized *DTNG* along similar lines, describing it as 'plastic, generic and universal', 'a product for and about a generic and glamorized adult-take on a commodified youth culture' as opposed to being 'a social forum for and about *Canadian* youth' (2005: 100–1). In this article, however, I argue that what is most significant, and most revealing, about *DTNG* as a product of Canada's contemporary television industry and the 'media-identity problematic' it faces is the way in which the program's success is predicated upon its servicing of both national-specific and global-universal ends, its ability to balance the heterogeneous and the homogeneous such that it can stand as a proud symbol of Canadian culture while simultaneously circulating as a desirable international property. The tension and subsequent balance between these poles pervades the program's production and distribution; these sites are the focus of my analysis.

DTNG is part of a 25-year-old Canadian television franchise centering on a fictional group of Toronto teens and produced in Toronto by Epitome Pictures. A half-hour program, *DTNG* combines comedic and dramatic elements to narrate the lives and loves of its ensemble cast. The series, along with its franchise predecessors, has been on the whole well regarded both within and outside Canada for its age-accurate casting and unflinching, open-minded treatment of social issues, from teenage pregnancy to multicultural identities. *DTNG* thus emerged in 2001 with a built-in fan base and automatic audience interest in Canada, but also in the many other countries in which the earlier series, namely *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High*, had achieved popularity more than ten years previously. Airing its seventh season in fall 2007, the program is funded not only by its domestic broadcast license (from the private, commercial network CTV), but also by Canada's public-private production funds and global sales to such channels as The N, an American outlet for MTV Networks' tween/teen viewers, Filles TV in France, MTV's Latin American channel, and Australia's national public broadcaster, ABC. The different iterations of the *Degrassi* franchise have won multiple Gemini Awards (Canada's highest TV industry award), International Emmy Awards and a Teen Choice Award in the US. Scholars of Canadian and youth media have typically praised the series, as seen in the 2005 volume *Growing Up Degrassi: Television, Identity and Youth Cultures* (Byers, 2005) and in favorable mentions in such publication as Beaty and Sullivan's *Canadian Television Today* (2006) and Grant and Wood's *Blockbusters and Trade Wars* (2004). *DTNG* is thus a critical and commercial success on national and international fronts. For an English-language Canadian television industry that struggles to survive in the face of the massive influence of Hollywood, *DTNG* is a somewhat unusual victory for homegrown production.

In what follows, I detail the ways in which this victory is dependent upon the *DTNG* producers' ability to manage the tension between local/national and global forces. How does the program manage to achieve the status of a legitimately Canadian cultural product yet not suffer a 'cultural discount' on the global TV market? What production factors enable this dual positioning? And what are the implications of that positioning for the survival of the Canadian television industry and for non-Hollywood television productions more generally? If media culture is increasingly global, and if *DTNG* might serve as a case study for the successful negotiation of the heterogeneous and the homogeneous in that global context, what does this case suggest about the costs and the benefits of producing television programming for the global market in general and the global youth market in particular?

***DTNG* as Canadian content**

DTNG's well-established position in the Canadian television industry and in Canadian culture more generally suggests that the program has somehow managed to capture a Canadian sensibility or identity. Yet research on the global media industries contends that any product that too fully embraces the local specificity of its point of origin will have little chance of success on the international market; it will suffer a 'cultural discount' that will fundamentally devalue it (Havens, 2006: 15–16; Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). I argue that *DTNG*'s 'Canadianness' – an inherently ambiguous identity – conversely helps its global marketing, in part because of its very ambiguity. What is this seemingly ambiguous Canadian identity and what part does it play in the production and distribution of *DTNG*?

Serra Tinic (2005: 20) has explained that: 'The search for Canadian identity has often been regarded as a defining national characteristic in and of itself.' This uncertainty and ambiguity may be largely due to the fact that Canadianness is most often defined in the negative, by what it is not. As Seymour Martin Lipset (1990: 53) writes: 'Canadians have tended to define themselves not in terms of their own national history and traditions but by reference to what they are *not*: Americans. Canadians are the world's oldest and most continuing un-Americans.' Tinic adds that a perception of marginalization pervades Canada, generated by a sense of subordination not only to the US, but also to 'the legacy of Britain's imperial past' or, for many regions of the country, to the national power centers of Toronto and Ottawa (2005: 134).

The Canadian identity of the not-American and the marginalized has been particularly central to the country's television history, and especially to the cultural policy that has shaped it (Beatty and Sullivan, 2006: 18). Canadian broadcasting policy has sought to preserve distinctly Canadian programming as a means of preserving Canadian national identity and protecting it from US

dominance, as well as encouraging Canadian economic health. The imperative to protect television's Canadianness filters down into the way Canadian producers conceive of their work. As Tinic found in her interviews with Vancouver-based producers, television creators' choices of what stories to tell and how to tell them are informed by their 'Canadian sensibility', an outlook related to their experiences of marginality (to the US) as Canadians and (to central Canada) as British Columbians (2005: 13–14).

Scholarly, industry, and regulatory discourses have all identified *DTNG* as a distinctly Canadian show. Grant and Wood (2004: 15) cite the program's 'uniquely Canadian' take on multicultural identities. Similarly, an industry-sponsored 2007 study heralding the importance of children's and youth programming in Canada named the *Degrassi* franchise as a leader in Canada's effort to expose its youth to 'Canadian values', particularly its 'commitment to developing a tolerant and just society that is open to all cultures' (Nordicity Group Ltd: 1). And *Degrassi* creator and executive producer Linda Schuyler (2005: 297) has claimed that: '*Degrassi* is unabashedly Canadian. It is liberal, multicultural and proud of its roots in east-end Toronto.' While such discourses do not explicitly construct the Canadian as the not-American, their adherence to constructions of Canada as multicultural and tolerant echo the long-standing conception of Canada as a cultural mosaic, with multiple ethnic and cultural groups distinctively and equally celebrated, a metaphor meant to contrast that of America as a cultural melting pot, an amalgamation of groups whose differences disappear as they come together.

Despite these attempts to label *Degrassi* as Canadian, in my conversations with multiple members of the *DTNG* production staff I found a consistent hesitancy to assert such an identity. Actor and producer Stefan Brogren (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006), who was also one of the teenage actors on the earlier *Degrassi* series, pointed out that: 'nothing on the school [set] hides the fact that it's Canadian ... if they're gonna talk about sports it's usually the Jays or the Raptors.' But he also wondered, 'What would you actually do to be a Canadian show?' Similarly, director Phil Earnshaw (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006) told me:

Well we have Canadian flags, we don't hide them, which is Canadian but ... that's a good question. [Pause] I don't know. I mean it's hard to distinguish on television the difference between American and Canadian in a way because Canadians are so ... [shifts topic].

At first, executive producer and creator Linda Schuyler (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006) told me, 'I don't feel the show is any different than if I would be an American doing it', but she later speculated:

I suppose the one way being Canadian influences our storytelling [is] that as a country and as a nation we are probably more small and liberal than America ... and there certainly is a lot of liberalism in our storytelling.

Executive producer and head writer James Hurst (personal communication, 3 Aug. 2006) also mentioned the left-leaning tendencies of Canadians as compared to Americans, but denied that they alone could explain the show's Canadianness. He suggested: 'I don't think you could do *Degrassi* in America but ... it's not exactly for the obvious reasons; it's very complex.' Clearly, the purported national characteristic of uncertainty about Canadian identity and the unifying principle of the Canadian being most often identified as the not-American inform all of these responses.

While it is understandable that those who produce *DTNG* might spend little time conceiving of what makes their series Canadian, occupied as they are with their daily work, it is notable that the Epitome Pictures personnel had such an ambivalent perspective on the matter, particularly when their comments are contrasted with those of the producers Tinic studied. Tinic's interviewees repeatedly referenced the impact of a Canadian sensibility on their work; 'they felt their stories could not help but be informed by their experience of place' (2005: 81). The *DTNG* producers had some awareness of this 'sensibility' as well, but their comments on the matter were even more vague and ambiguous than were those of Tinic's Vancouver producers. In part, this may be accounted for by the fact that the Toronto-based *DTNG* is positioned much more centrally in the Canadian television industry than are the regionally remote producers Tinic studied. The added marginality of those producers' location may have increased their awareness of regional and national identities. However, the Epitome staff's hedging around the question of their show's Canadianness is also understandable as a function of the program's somewhat unique positioning in the tension between the national and the global, the heterogeneous and the homogeneous.

As I will consider shortly, the international circulation of *DTNG* makes any claims of the show's national specificity a potential detriment to its success in the global TV marketplace, which may in part explain the Epitome personnel's reluctance to declare the series' Canadianness. But the series is equally, if not more fully, indebted to the Canadian television industry and its funding practices as it is to the revenues of global distribution. Thus, while Epitome personnel may have a difficult time describing the program's Canadianness they are also mindful, even proud, of its Canadian roots. Such roots may have an impact on the program's characters, narratives or themes, but they most certainly have an impact on the program's economic viability. Epitome and *DTNG* are expert in negotiating the complexities of the Canadian television industry and its funding, however, this structure also shapes the production and distribution of the program in ways that help define its identity. The series' reliance on the Canadian system thus determines its 'Canadianness' in fundamental ways that may have little to do with any kind of essential national character.

DTNG and many other Canadian television productions are financed by a combination of domestic sources. Not only do they receive a license fee from

their broadcaster, but they can also receive funding through a number of public/private organizations meant to boost the Canadian production sector. That sector needs boosting because Canadian broadcasters and cable/satellite channels can achieve greater profits from purchasing American series than they can from licensing domestically generated content. Because of the large license fees US producers receive from the networks that carry their shows, they can sell those same programs to foreign markets for less than those foreign broadcasters pay for indigenous content. Thus, while a US drama series might accrue a \$1.4 million/hour license fee from its domestic broadcast network, a Canadian network could purchase the same hour for \$50,000 (US). In contrast, a Canadian-produced series might cost that network much more per hour. For example, in 2002–3, Canadian private broadcaster CTV licensed one hour of *DTNG* (two half-hour episodes) for \$165,000 (US) (Grant and Wood, 2004: 19). These factors make a production like *DTNG* expensive for Canadian broadcasters (compared to US shows), even as, for the show producers, those ‘expensive’ license fees are inadequate for the creation of programming with production values anywhere close to those of a US-based series.

DTNG and other Canadian productions thus depend upon financiers such as the Canadian Television Fund (CTF). Independent film and television production first became viable in Canada in 1983 with the government’s creation of Telefilm Canada as a funding source.¹ In 1996, the Canadian Television Fund (CTF), a private-public partnership supported in part by Telefilm, was created, and it eventually became the central funding venue for Canadian TV. CTF support is dependent upon a given production receiving 10 of a possible 10 points in the Canadian content requirements established by the Canadian Audio-Visual Certification Office. These points are awarded by virtue of the number and kind of Canadian personnel employed on a given production. The CTF also requires that productions be shot and set primarily in Canada, that the producers are Canadian, and that significant portions of the budgets are paid to Canadian individuals and firms. In addition, only certain kinds of programming are funded by the CTF; genres such as sports, news, reality and talk are not eligible.² Instead, CTF support is divided among documentary, drama (fictional programming, either comedic or dramatic, in series or special form), children’s/youth and variety/performing arts categories, and is shared between English-, French- and Aboriginal-language productions. The CTF declares its mission to be supporting:

... the production and broadcast of a specific type of culturally significant television production. These productions speak to Canadians about themselves, their culture, their issues, their concerns and their stories. These productions reflect the lives of Canadians across the country and reveal Canadians and their society to the viewer. (CTF, 2007–08)

The CTF’s policies and practices are thus rooted in a rhetoric of Canadian national identity, but, practically speaking, that identity and the funding it

allows is predicated more upon a given production's employment of Canadian labor and ability to substitute for the kinds of programming that Canadian broadcasters can buy relatively cheaply from US producers than it is upon any kind of essential national character.

DTNG fits these criteria well and thus has been well supported by the CTF. But the production also has supplemented its CTF backing by taking advantage of domestic funding sources designed to support new media and web-based initiatives, including the Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund, and Telefilm's New Media Fund. This choice of financing not only marked the program as a product of a Canadian system, but also shaped the kind of show *DTNG* would become, one in which viewers are invited to engage with the characters through technological means, initially through an interactive website but in more recent years through mobisodes and other new media content. According to Raja Khanna (2002), president of Snap Media, Epitome's partner in developing the transmedia component of the series, the plan was to make *DTNG*:

... reflect the culture of the young people today, a culture that has been revolutionized in terms of the way it communicates.... So the idea was from the very beginning to produce this property as a cross-platform piece of entertainment.... This meant doing it on television, on the web, and on wireless devices all at once. Throughout the project there would be no separation.

DTNG was thereby designed from its inception as a multi-platform show that would not only attract young viewers but also would take advantage of the various new media funds available in Canada. The *DTNG* creators had an incentive to produce this kind of transmedia content years before it would become more standard practice in television around the world because of the Canadian funding structure.

Of course, the Canadian system places constraints around *DTNG* as much as it offers opportunities, and these constraints shape the program's Canadianness. These constraints come into play, for example, in the relationship between the show's producers and its domestic distributor, private broadcaster CTV. The prime-time schedules of Canada's private broadcast networks are largely made up of US imports, thus working with the producers of original, scripted drama is not a central part of their programming efforts. In addition, because the private networks' profits are so heavily dependent on ad sales for the US shows they purchase, they do not have a strong financial stake in the small amount of homegrown content they carry. Economically speaking, they license such shows not because they are profitable but because national broadcasting policy mandates it. This results in domestic productions being scheduled during times when they are unlikely to succeed (such as on Saturday evenings opposite hockey broadcasts), as well as generating strained interactions between broadcast executives and Canadian creative personnel. A number of Canadian television writers have

criticized the networks, both public and private, for their unwillingness to embrace creative experimentation, to put the time and energy into making a homegrown series into a hit. For example, writer Denis McGrath (2006) argues that the secret to success in the US network television business is the network executive who 'speaks up for a project, and really pushes it, believes in it, tends to ride their way to the top'. But, he asks:

Is there anyone at CBC or CTV or Global or other Canadian networks willing to be that person? Or is that even relevant here? ... before the current shakeup, the people making the calls about what went on the schedule at CBC had been in their jobs for twenty years. People can fail here, and not get fired.... Is anyone going to stop being quite so Canadian for a second and do what needs to be done to generate a creative hit and make some money?

McGrath's reference to the network executives' Canadianness is notable for its construction as the not-American, with a supposed disinterest in profit and an apathy about the commercial success of domestic content as the marked opposites of the American TV industry's practices.

Although *DTNG* is a relatively successful Canadian production for CTV, the network's interactions with the show's creators reveal the ambivalence in the private network's attitude toward domestic content. CTV executives seem uncertain about the role a series like *DTNG* is to play in its program line-up. Because the program cannot generate the advertising profits that American imports can, the network seems uninterested in using the show as a money-maker. Thus, CTV (as well as other Canadian networks) typically license just 13 episodes per season of domestic series, while the American programs they purchase often run for 24 episodes per season. *DTNG* has managed to offer between 19 and 22 episodes most of its seasons, but these additional episodes have been funded either through a government mandate that CTV extend the number of episodes per season for some Canadian series, or through the support of *DTNG*'s US distributor, digital cable/satellite channel The N. CTV's reluctance to see the show as a profit generator is also evident in the fact that the network only began to promote *DTNG* with any real presence and to invite its cast members to industry events once the series became a niche hit on the American cable station. Its US popularity additionally has led CTV to charge more for ad time during the *DTNG* broadcasts (Stephanie Cohen, Vice-President, Communications and Marketing, Epitome Pictures, personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006). Investing in the promotion of a domestic series is not a high priority for CTV dollars, although the network can be moved to promotional action when a series garners US approval.

The more typical treatment of homegrown series like *DTNG* by Canadian private network executives is to handle such series as if they are public service programming. The fact that *DTNG* and other domestically-produced programs help the network fulfill its mandated responsibility to carry a particular percentage of Canadian content motivates this attitude, although *DTNG*'s

subject matter – teens facing myriad social issues and problems – most certainly encourages such a stance, as well. This approach can result in CTV attempting to guide creative decisions toward unspoken ideals of social responsibility. For example, head writer James Hurst (personal communication, 3 Aug. 2006) told me about CTV executives challenging story decisions, such as having a 17-year-old female character ‘acting dumb’ with a choice she makes because, as Hurst claimed the executive put it, ‘Well, I have a 14-year-old daughter and I don’t want to put this out there.’³ In this case, the CTV executive was focused on the potential social impact of the representation, while the *DTNG* creatives were focused on the dramatic resonance and truthfulness of the character’s actions.

Television producers and distributors often have competing interests. In the American context, this can result in network executives wanting to temper producers’ desires to represent an admirable main character as a feminist or to depict stories of racial inequality, given network anxieties about advertiser and audience approval (D’Acci, 1994; Lotz, 2004). In the Canadian context, executives at a network such as CTV may be most interested in having the Canadian content the network carries offer a ‘positive’ or educational message as a way of affirming the network’s support for the proud national identity embedded in the country’s broadcasting policy. Meanwhile, program producers and/or writers may be more invested in their creative vision, in telling an involving story with fully realized characters, a goal that does not necessarily intersect with pretensions toward national cultural uplift. Indeed, in the Canadian context, these sorts of tensions can even play out between a given program’s producers and its writers, as the executive producers of Canadian series are rarely also their head writers, unlike American prime-time series in which the showrunner (who is in charge of all creative and business dimensions of US TV series production) is nearly always a hyphenate writer-producer. The particularities of the relationships between producers, writers and network executives are elements of *DTNG*’s production context that are specific to Canada and thereby part of its identity as a Canadian show.

DTNG’s Canadianness is not an essential trait, embedded in the very stories and characters of the series. Yet aspects of the Canadian location of the program’s production and initial distribution do make *DTNG* Canadian. From the perspective of the program’s production personnel, the Canadian identity of the series they create is both a matter of significance and pride and a matter of uncertainty and disadvantage. The multiple economic and cultural forces working against the success of homegrown television make *DTNG*’s ongoing existence a clear triumph for Canadian TV, and yet those same constraining forces make understandable the desire of those involved to downplay the production’s Canadian roots. In a context in which the very meaning of Canadianness is a matter of ambiguity and debate, in which the trait that most unifies Canadian national identity is its non-Americanness, categorizing any given series as truly Canadian is an inherently frustrated act. This very

ambiguity of identity helps make *DTNG* a valuable property in the global TV market, a place where universality and homogeneity – a rejection of geographic or cultural specificity – is a distinct advantage.

***DTNG* as global television**

The difficulty inherent in articulating *DTNG*'s essential Canadianness works to the program's advantage on the global TV market, where a lack of local specificity is a plus. As Epiteome's director of digital media and merchandising, Chris Jackson, has put it in a promotional push for the series' graphic novel tie-ins:

It's easy to say that *Degrassi* is uniquely Canadian for we Canadians, because it's been a part of our consciousness for so long, but is it really? When we see and hear how teens around the world (and not just in English-speaking markets, either) react to *DTNG* ... the argument could be made that the show totally transcends any nationalistic considerations. (Singh, 2006)

Jackson's market-savvy remarks point out the centrality of a transnational teen identity to *DTNG*'s successful global circulation. In this section, I examine the ways in which the assumed universality of youth helps *DTNG* to sell well internationally, but I also consider two other aspects of *DTNG*'s positioning as universal that operate in tension with its positioning as Canadian. The tension, ultimately kept in balance, between *DTNG* as Canadian and as global demonstrates the costs and the benefits for non-Hollywood productions in a transnational media age.

DTNG's success on the global TV market is indebted, at least in part, to its connections – linguistic, cultural and economic – to the US, and to the US's positioning as globally desirable. In the global market, the national origins of television programming play an important part in establishing a hierarchy of desirability for those productions. US series are often the most coveted worldwide. Data from 2006 reveal that US sales make up 70 percent of the total hours sold to foreign broadcasters, while UK sales make up 10 percent. The distant third place TV exporter is Canada, with 3.7 percent of the sales market (Nordicity Group Ltd, 2006). Because US television is omnipresent and favored worldwide, any association with the US benefits a program's fortunes. Thus, the fact that *DTNG* is produced in English and that its actors have accents difficult to differentiate from those of US performers works in its favor. So, too, does the program's generic and narrative similarity to US teen series. Finally, as the number of Hollywood-based productions that shoot in Canada makes clear, a Canadian location – especially an English-language metropolis like Toronto – can stand in for the US on screen, offering yet another advantage to Canadian productions seeking success on the international stage.

All of these factors make Canadian programming sellable within the US as well as around the world. This even further advantages the program purchased in the US, as a US sale makes sales elsewhere in the world all the more likely. As one Canadian entertainment executive has explained: 'Around the world, one of the first questions a Canadian selling a product will hear is, "Who is buying it in the United States?"' (Rice-Barker, 1996). Another Canadian TV distributor adds:

As much as some countries are anti-American, it really helps them feel comfortable with a series if it's run in America.... We can get a great review anywhere in the world – it won't matter as much as a great American review. (Davidson, 2006)

Degrassi's long-time relationship with US broadcasters and audiences has thus been central to its longevity. *Degrassi Junior High* and *Degrassi High* were co-produced with Boston's public television station, WGBH, and ran on PBS stations across the US. *DTNG's* relationship to its US outlet, digital cablecaster The N, is, technically speaking, less closely entwined than was the earlier generation's relationship to WGBH. Yet, *DTNG's* positioning on The N has been one of the most significant factors in the program's viability. Until the end of 2007, when it became a stand-alone station, The N was the evening programming block of Noggin, a preschool-targeted channel during the day; both ventures are part of Viacom's MTV Networks. The N began as a 'tween'-targeted channel, seeking to attract pre-teen viewers, and thus *DTNG's* cast of characters, in grades 7 and 8 when the series began, was an appealing match. Unlike WGBH, however, The N is not a co-producer of *DTNG*. Instead, the network is one of 70 international licensees (Vlessing, 2007). Still, The N has a much more prominent role in the show's production than does any other international buyer.

Executives from The N preview *DTNG* scripts and offer input to the show's writers and producers, just as do representatives of CTV. The N affects the show's production in multiple ways, some of which place constraints around its storytelling and some of which open up possibilities both narrative and economic. Early in the program's run, executives from The N went so far as to urge *DTNG's* creators not to shoot certain scripted episodes such as season four's 'Secret', which dealt with the phenomenon known as 'rainbow parties', where teenage girls perform oral sex on one or several boys (J. Hurst, personal communication, 3 Aug. 2006). The Epitome staff has largely resisted these censorship efforts although, as Linda Schuyler (2006) notes, it is always a challenge 'to not let the economic contributors to your show become the dictators of your content'. In addition to supporting the production of extra episodes in certain seasons, The N has also initiated and funded the production of *DTNG* webisodes, special behind-the-scenes episodes and other on-line content, helping to extend the brand across media (S. Cohen, personal communication, 3 Aug. 2006). The N thus supplies a direct financial benefit

to *DTNG*'s production and promotion; this connection to the US helps the producers to generate content that circulates not only within the US, but also in Canada and around the world.

The popularity of the series in the US not only enhances the production's budget and increases its cachet on the global market, it also has a psychological impact on the program's cast and crew that shapes the way they experience their work. The program's success in the US is a point of great pride for the Epitome staff. Studio hallways are papered with photos from the cast's summer 2005 US shopping mall tour, where the thousands of fans screaming with excitement at meeting their idols surprised and somewhat overwhelmed the cast, used to the more decorous responses of Canadian viewers. Many Epitome staffers told me about the remarkable turnout of fans during that mall tour, perhaps because of my status as an American but nonetheless suggesting their sense of pride and accomplishment in the show's transnational appeal. This pride is clearest in Cohen's tale of Epitome's efforts to acquire the surfboard trophy awarded to *DTNG* at the 2005 US Teen Choice Awards, where the show was voted Choice Summer Series. Epitome happily paid to have their own board shipped to Canada, where it is now displayed in Cohen's office, signifying, as Cohen (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006) laughingly put it: 'Oh my God, we're good! They like us!' The emotional component of The N's involvement – and the success with US viewers that involvement has brought – is a significant matter in the culture of the Epitome workplace; in the Canadian context, achieving the admiration of Americans is seen as a victory, even while maintaining one's difference from Americans, one's identity as the 'not-American' is equally prized. Thus, *DTNG*'s success in the US offers the production direct economic and psychological benefits. Its popularity south of the border signifies a kind of global acceptance; it secures the series a status of universality that flatters the participants in its production for its ability to overlook – or at least not be deterred by – the program's Canadian roots.

The show's creative workers have a significant investment in their series having a universal appeal. Not only does such a position secure some of the funding so necessary in the Canadian context, but also it enhances the creators' own visions of the work they do. Linda Schuyler has long treated her work on *Degrassi* as an educational mission. As she explained to me: 'We are working with a double mandate. We are working to entertain and educate' (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006). While she emphasized the importance of strong storytelling and entertainment as the series' first priorities, she also reminded me of her personal history as a teacher, a biographical fact often mentioned in media coverage of the series, and one that is clearly meant to imply an educational foundation to her work as a producer. Schuyler's investment in education makes her belief in the show as universally appealing all the more flattering to her efforts, and thus she is eager to assert its broad reach (and thus its lack of Canadian specificity).

Head writer James Hurst also benefits from a conception of the series as universally appealing. Artists' desires to speak to a universal human condition have long been central motivators of creative expression and Hurst's motivations are no different. While he described the ways that personal experiences and contemporary social issues feed into *DTNG*'s storytelling, he also insisted that attention to any given issue was not the focus of the series, not the purpose or the primary appeal of the *DTNG* narratives. As he explained, the show's writers:

... think more in terms of characters and just emotional stuff ... they're all love stories, all of them, every single one of these stories is a love story. So the issues frankly are bullshit.... [the issues give] us the excuse to talk about this stuff, whether it's questions about love, questions about revenge, guilt, grief, depression, anxiety. (personal communication, 3 Aug. 2006)

Hurst heralds emotions and themes that may be taken as universal, thereby allowing him to ascribe a kind of humanist breadth to his creative labor that understandably informs his identity as an artist. Thus, whether imagining their work as the educational discussion of contemporary social issue or as the creative expression of fundamental human emotions, the *DTNG* creators have a significant investment in their program's identity as universally resonant.

In addition to an economic dependence on international sales and a creative commitment to universal appeal, *DTNG* is also positioned as a global commodity through its affiliation with youth. As a category of age rather than of a more culturally specific identity, an association with youth easily translates into an association with the global and the universal. Charles Acland (2004: 44–5) notes that debates about the Americanization of global culture have youth culture as their subtext: 'This cohort is taken as the embodiment of the potentials of a global village and of the anxieties about the social change implied by international connection in general.' This conception of youth as a global identity is a logic regularly articulated by corporations as well as by cultural commentators. As Coca-Cola's Director of Global Marketing has noted: 'There is a global teenager. The same kid you see at the Ginza in Tokyo is in Piccadilly Square [sic] in London, in Pushkin Square, at Notre Dame' (quoted in Campbell, 2004: 1). Such thinking also pervades the *DTNG* creators' conceptions of their work and its wide appeal. As Schuyler (personal communication, 2 Aug. 2006) remarked: 'the teenage years, there's a huge commonality of experience regardless of what culture you come from'. The assumed universality of youthful identity has helped to generate a vibrant market for youth-targeted television around the world; *DTNG*'s articulation to such an identity has thus helped to negate any 'discount' resulting from its national origins.

The global market for youth-targeted TV grew strongly in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the 'tween' audience, described as ranging anywhere from 8 to 14 years old, became a new target of television programmers

worldwide. In certain respects, this was a surprising turn, as animation targeted to younger kids had long been the focus of the youth-oriented international TV trade (understandable given the ease with which animation can be dubbed into different languages and dialects) (Esposito, 2004; Mesbah and Kirchdoerffer, 1998). Animation is still a primary seller in the global children's marketplace, not to mention a primary export of Canadian producers, but the tween market became especially significant in the early 2000s, no doubt because advertisers believed such a market had been theretofore under-tapped. Live-action programming, rather than animation, is often preferred for this slightly older market, a fact that boosted *DTNG*'s foreign sales potential when international distributor AAC Kids first offered it to buyers such as The N and France's Filles TV, which went to air in September 2004 as a channel aimed specifically at 11 to 17-year-old girls and for which live-action drama series make up 75 percent of its schedule (Esposito, 2004).

As much as the assumed universality of youth and the new tween market enabled *DTNG*'s robust sales globally, the series has also had to negotiate the aging of its initial tween target audience since its early 2000s debut. As the 2000s have progressed many of the new tween-oriented outlets have begun to skew a bit older, fashioning themselves as tween/teen stations, or simply as teen-targeted channels. Following the tweens of the early 2000s into their teen years is a worthwhile business practice for such channels because of the impressive numbers of this cohort. These young viewers are the children of the baby boom generation, the upsurge in people born post-Second World War throughout the Western world. The 'echo boomers', the progeny of the baby boomers and the primary target of the new tween channels, were born between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. Thus, by the mid-2000s, the youngest of these kids were exiting their tween years, necessitating a gradual upward shift in the target age for those channels trying to reach this large cohort. *DTNG*'s commitment to age-accurate casting – a feature that has helped to earn the program some of its critical plaudits and its educational credibility – has kept the series a sellable commodity over the years, for the cast members have aged alongside the target audience, moving from tweens to teens across the 2000s.

DTNG's success on the global TV market is thus a product of a number of aspects of its production and distribution, from the alignment of the program's young cast, the growth of tween/teen outlets worldwide, and the assumed universality of youth to its secure position in the US and its creators' investment in seeing their work as having resonance across national borders. In all of these ways, *DTNG* is able to balance its status as a Canadian product with its status as a global one, a factor crucial to the economic survival of Canadian-produced television. Still, however, I argue that *DTNG*'s global vitality is not a result of its ability to deny or reject its Canadian origins; instead, it is the specificity of its Canadian identity, at least as applied to its cultural products, that centrally enables its global reach.

A global/Canadian series

Canadian television productions, particularly when they take the form of a series such as *DTNG*, do not succeed internationally simply because of their similarity to Hollywood product. Instead, such series, and *DTNG* in particular, benefit from their slight differences from American programming, from the very elements of Canadianness that are typically constructed as the not-American, as such differences can become the brand identity with which buyers worldwide connect. Andrew Higson identifies this flash of cultural specificity as the 'Unique Selling Point' for non-Hollywood products. To Higson, such products can be sold because of 'their exoticism, their foreignness – so long as the sense of cultural difference is not too great' (2006: 213). Tinic (2005: 108) has noted the same of European buyers' interest in Canadian-produced programming, in which both a similarity to and a difference from American TV establish that programming's value. This is potentially *DTNG*'s greatest global selling point, as well. As Beaty and Sullivan (2006: 82) contend: 'The success of *Degrassi* as a distinctly Canadian show is defined through its ability to emulate American television, but only because it is more edifying, less commercial.' Beaty and Sullivan are referring to the series' success in the US, but their claims apply equally to *DTNG*'s global circulation, in which the series benefits from both its similarity to and its difference from Hollywood-produced fare.

Canada's worldwide reputation for exporting well-regarded children's and youth programming (Nordicity Group Ltd, 2007), combined with the Canadian television industry's structural incentive to create 'culturally significant' products (CTF, 2007–8) and *DTNG*'s specific mandate to educate as well as entertain help *DTNG* to acquire the air of the more edifying and the less commercial, the air of the not-American. Those factors specific to the context of the series' Canadian production and domestic distribution have been important to its global reach in that they have helped to differentiate *DTNG* from otherwise similar US productions. Such factors also operate within the context of Canadian national identity more generally. However, because Canadian identity is most typically conceived in terms of vagueness or negation, as marginal or as not-American, the very lack of specificity inherent to Canadianness allows the difference and distinctiveness of Canadian fare such as *DTNG* to be taken up and read in any number of ways – as rather like US-produced teen series (as in *DTNG*'s attractive and fashionably dressed cast), or as definitively unlike typical US programs (as in *DTNG*'s willingness to confront core characters with controversial circumstances such as abortion or testicular cancer). The flexibility of *DTNG*'s identity as Canadian – its ability to seem American, or to seem not-American – is thus central to its assumed universality. In the end, *DTNG* depends heavily upon the very Canadian roots it finds it economically necessary to transcend. The vagueness, flexibility and connection to American fare that assist *DTNG*'s

successful circulation in the global TV trade are not only central to the program's status as Canadian, but also are key attributes in the economic sustainability of non-Hollywood products as they work their way through today's transnational media industry.

Notes

1. Additional factors also encouraged independent production in Canada, among them the government's requirement that the CBC acquire programming from outside sources, instead of producing programming solely in-house. Independent film production has had additional means of support since the late 1960s origins of the Canadian Film Development Corporation.

2. This is not to say that such productions have no place on Canadian television. In fact, a 1999 Canadian Radio-Television Commission policy made it easier for broadcasters to substitute this cheaper form of programming for drama in their Canadian content requirements.

3. Hurst did not specify what choice the character, Manny Santos, was to make that was so undesirable to the network executives. However, I suspect that it was Manny's one-time use of cocaine when she feels out of place at a dinner party with her boyfriend and his friends in 'What's It Feel Like to be a Ghost?' (Part 1, 2 Jan. 2007).

References

- Acland, C.R. (2004) 'Fresh Contacts: Global Culture and the Concept of Generation', pp. 31–52 in N. Campbell (ed.) *American Youth Cultures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beaty, B. and R. Sullivan (2006) *Canadian Television Today*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Byers, M. (ed.) (2005) *Growing Up Degraded: Television, Identity and Youth Cultures*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Campbell, N. (2004) 'Introduction: On Youth Cultural Studies', pp. 1–30 in N. Campbell (ed.) *American Youth Cultures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Canada Department of Justice (1991) 'Broadcasting Act', 1 Feb., URL (consulted April 2007): http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/showdoc/cs/B-9.01/bo-ga:l_I-gb:s_3/en#anchorbo-ga:l_I-gb:s_3
- Canadian Television Fund (2007–8) 'Introduction to the Canadian Television Fund: Spirit and Intent', in *Broadcaster Performance Envelope Guidelines*, URL (consulted April 2007): www.canadiantelevisionfund.ca/producers/bpe/
- D'Acci, J. (1994) *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Davidson, S. (2006) 'Da Vinci's Leads Cancon Pack in US', *Playback* 20 March, URL (consulted September 2006): www.playbackmag.com/articles/magazine/20060320/syndie.html?
- Esposito, M. (2004) 'Children's Channels – A Niche Too Far?' *C21Media.net* 20 October, URL (consulted September 2006): www.c21media.net/common/print_detail.asp?article=22202
- Grant, P.S. and C. Wood (2004) *Blockbusters and Trade Wars: Popular Culture in a Globalized World*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.

- Havens, T. (2006) *Global Television Marketplace*. London: British Film Institute.
- Higson, A. (2006) 'Crossing Over: Exporting Indigenous Heritage to the USA', pp. 203–20 in S. Harvey (ed.) *Trading Culture: Global Traffic and Local Cultures in Film and Television*. Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing.
- Hoskins, C. and R. Mirus (1988) 'Reasons for the US Dominance of the International Trade in Television Programmes', *Media, Culture & Society* 10: 499–515.
- Khanna, R. (2002) 'Creation', *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27(September), URL (consulted March 2007): www.cjc-online.ca
- Lipset, S.M. (1990) *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge.
- Lotz, A.D. (2004) 'Textual (Im)possibilities in the US Post-network Era: Negotiating Production and Promotion Processes on Lifetime's *Any Day Now*', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21(1): 22–43.
- McGrath, D. (2006) 'Desperate Canadian Networks and the 'Permanent Downturn'', *Dead Things on Sticks*, 24 May, URL (consulted March 2007): heywriterboy.blogspot.com/2006/05/desperate-canadian-networks-and.html
- Mesbah, M. and E. Kirchoerffer (1998) 'Mipcom Jr. Market Intelligence', *Playback* 21 September, URL (consulted 15 September 2006): www.playbackmag.com/articles/magazine/19980921/23252.html
- Mohabeer, R.N. (2005) 'Changing Faces: What Happened When *Degrassi* Switched to CTW', pp. 96–112 in M. Byers (ed.) *Growing Up Degrassi: Television, Identity and Youth Cultures*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Nordicity Group Ltd (2006) *Green Paper: The Future of Television in Canada*, 8 June, URL (consulted September 2006): http://www.nordicity.com/reports/The_Future_of_Television_in_Canada.pdf
- Nordicity Group Ltd (2007) *The Case for Kids Programming: Children's and Youth Audio-Visual Production in Canada*, February, URL (consulted April 2007): www.act-aet.tv/PDF_aet_act/The_Case_for_Kids_programming.pdf
- Rice-Barker, L. (1996) 'The Ins and Outs of the International Market', *Playback* 20 May, URL (consulted September 2006): www.playbackmag.com/articles/magazine/19960520/5350.html
- Schuyler, L. (2005) 'Afterword', pp. 295–9 in M. Byers (ed.) *Growing Up Degrassi: Television, Identity and Youth Cultures*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Schuyler, L. (2006) 'The Future of Television in Canada', Plenary Panel at the 'Two Days of Canada: Television in Canada' conference, November, Brock University, Ontario.
- Singh, A. (2006) 'School Is in Session and on Television as the *Degrassi* Comic Hits TV', *CBR News: The Comic Wire* 1 November, URL (consulted November 2006): <http://www.comicbookresources.com/news/printthis.cgi?id=8780>
- Tinic, S. (2005) *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Vlessing, E. (2007) 'Today Canada, Tomorrow the World', *Playback* 16 April, URL (consulted April 2007): www.playbackmag.com/articles/magazine/20070416/mip.html

Elana Levine is Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the author of *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Duke University Press, 2007) and co-editor of *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Duke University Press, 2007). Address: Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2522 E. Hartford Avenue, Milwaukee WI 53211, USA. [email: ehlevine@uwm.edu]