Signifying (and Psychoanalyzing) National Identity in Rock: Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip

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Abstract

This article addresses the broader issues of national identity in popular music, while focusing on Bruce Springsteen as an icon of "American-ness." Springsteen's ideas about American identity—and especially how identity is tied to place, and to abstract notions like the American Dream—are addressed through an analysis of the song "Born to Run." This analysis examines how the elusiveness of American identity and the American Dream are embedded in the musical features of the song itself, including aspirational melodic structures and successions of non-resolving chords that signify a sort of never-ending pursuit. Springsteen and his music are also juxtaposed here with the music of the Canadian band The Tragically Hip, who are widely considered "Canada's band" by the Canadian media, and whose music is reputed to capture the essence of the Canadian identity; however, as in Springsteen's music, the articulation and expression of national identity proves problematic, and "The Hip" often resort to musical processes—especially harmonic stasis—that suggest not only the vast emptiness of the Canadian landscape, but also a kind of fruitless encircling of "Canadian-ness" as something that can never be fully grasped or realized.

The popular, journalistic and scholarly discourse surrounding Bruce Springsteen has long made it clear that Americanness is central to his musical identity. An informal survey of recently published monographs, for instance, finds reference to Springsteen's "American vision," or describes the rocker as an "American poet and prophet," or links him and his music directly to the "American tradition." Springsteen's central place in the American cultural imagination offers a cogent foil to the problem of Canadian national identity, in both a general sense and in

popular music in particular. After Gord Downie, the singer of the popular Canadian rock band The Tragically Hip, revealed his diagnosis of terminal brain cancer in 2016, "The Hip" soared to national prominence: the band undertook a highly-publicized farewell tour, with the final concert broadcast on national television and attended by the Canadian Prime Minister. The group was celebrated by fans, journalists and scholars alike as "Canada's band," and Downie's subsequent death in 2017 sparked a period of public mourning and gave rise to countless elegies for the "unofficial poet laureate" of Canadian music.

If Springsteen's American identity can be described as sometimes changeable—especially in its critical/political manifestations—then The Hip's connection to Canadian identity must be described as downright nebulous. The band has openly disavowed any nationalistic agenda, and its brand of generic, folksy blues-rock—notwithstanding references to Canadian places, people and historical events in some of its song lyrics—is very difficult to map onto a coherent representation of "Canadian-ness," whatever that might be. In an effort to disentangle some of the complexities and ambiguities of the discourse of national identity in popular music, this paper compares Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip—two so-called national musical icons—focusing on the relationships between musical style and aesthetics, identity and place. We conclude that both Springsteen and The Hip serve as symbols for the representation of national identity, but in very different ways: Springsteen is an "American body" whose songs musically signify an engagement directly with American people and places, real and imagined; on the other hand, The Hip takes an oblique approach that situates it—psychoanalytically—as a locus

of desire and as a placeholder for the construction of a polysemous Canadian identity.

Music, Nation, Place and Identity

Musicologist Ricard Taruskin, writing on nationalism and national identity in European art music, notes that a certain imprecision and vagueness necessarily attends any attempt to define a concept like "nation" or the concepts that underwrite it, like "shared historical experience"; in the end, he asserts, the definition of a nation depends on a "negotiation of the relationship between the political status of communities and the basis of their self-description, whether linguistic, ethnic (genetic/biological), religious, cultural or historical."[1] In Taruskin's context, musical nationalism, as a form of cultural self-description, typically refers to the inclusion of indigenous (usually eastern European) folk music elements in art music: folk melodies, rhythmic patterns associated with ethnic dance forms, and harmonic practices related to folk traditions.

However, Taruskin also invokes a theory of European musical nationalism that relates neatly to the Canadian-American context at the heart of this paper, namely that it can be oppositional and reactionary. Nationalism in European art music arose in the 19th century explicitly in reaction to the hegemony of the German art music tradition: it was, in other words, a movement in reaction to a "dominant culture."[2] In the Canadian-American context, as we

[1] Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," *Grove Music Online,* 2001. https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000050846.

[2] Taruskin, "Nationalism." As Taruskin observes, western European nation-states like Germany and France, as cultural hegemons, do not have nationalistic

discuss below, Canadian identity is often predicated on what Canada is not—that is, that Canada is not America, and Canadian culture is defined in part through its ongoing resistance to the overwhelming influence of American culture. This presents a primary challenge, namely defining identity in the negative.

Another challenge of discussing national identity in music—and specifically, in popular music—according to Rob Boffard, is the recent homogenizing globalization of music: it is "a situation brought about by the massive sameness of chart music and the colossal amounts of money thrown around by the big record labels and media companies. Simply put, when all music created for the charts sounds the same…there's no point in having national identity."[3]

Much of the recent scholarly literature concerned with music and the representation of national identity focuses mainly—though not exclusively—on non-Western music and on how music functions as a text used to articulate place and space, how it explores ethnicities and diasporic cultures, and how it exists as a key component of the various "ethnoscapes" that constitute the increasingly globalized and constantly shifting populations of our world.[4] At the heart of the issue of national identity in the music of Springsteen and The Tragically Hip, we argue here, are place and

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musical traditions; those countries on the margins or outside of Western Europe do.

[3] Rob Boffard, "National Identity in Popular Music," *Aesthetica* 46 (2017), http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/national-identity-in-popular-music/. This was not always the case, according to Boffard, who cites Bruce Springsteen in particular as a singer-songwriter who was able to express a sense of national identity through place, to "use the concrete and metal landscape of New Jersey to root his music, and people loved him for it."

[4] See Sheila Whitely, Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins, eds. *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 2-3.

space: for Springsteen, it is the American heartland, broadly speaking—more narrowly, it is working-class neighbourhoods, desiccated and haunted factory towns, the Jersey shore; for The Hip, it is something more amorphous—a more poetic and phantasmal Canada constituted through invocations of hockey, fleeting glimpses of places across the Canadian landscape, and decontextualized morsels of Canadian history. There is a strong desire in rock historiography to link sites and sounds, whether it be a particular recording studio, a neighbourhood, a city or a region. Indeed, as Connell and Gibson argue, this sense "of finding geographical roots for musical sounds and styles, of locating the artist or the scene in physical space, is a dominant theme in the music press, artist biographies and 'rockumentaries'."[5] The effect of place, and the identities it can represent, manifests itself across the whole field of musical production, from the content of song lyrics to the choice of genre, from the visual representation of an artist or band to the sound of the music itself. The "sound" of a place is a hazy and complex construct, necessarily linked to a wealth of factors, from the local cohesiveness of groups of musicians—constituting a particular sonic "scene"—to socio-economic and socio-cultural realities (say, the intersection or collision of rich and poor, urban and rural, or black and white in a given location), to the relationships between large and small musical landscapes (urban New York versus the backwaters of New Jersey, for instance)[6] and of course the deployment and reception of musical signifiers (the Seattle sound of the grunge era, for instance, which is aurally marked by strong dynamic and

[5] John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002), 91.
[6] See Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks,* 92-93.

textural contrasts, thick midrange timbres and dropped tunings, idiosyncratic guitar distortion, dissonant solos, etc.). With respect to Springsteen, Neil Daniels makes the contentious argument that there is a definable "Jersey sound," audible in well-known rock artists ranging from Springsteen to Bon Jovi, which includes not only a certain raw, "blue-collar" quality, but also dance elements drawn from the strong Italian presence on the Jersey shore, along with R&B and soul influences.[7] Rob Kirkpatrick suggests that the Jersey sound is an admixture of various pop sounds and styles—notably the Stax sound, Phil Spector's wall of sound, elements from Motown, blues and psychedelia—all "coming together on the shores of New Jersey, where water met sand, rich met poor, black met white, boardwalk life met New York bohemia, California surf met Philadelphia soul, and music's past gave birth to rock 'n roll's future."[8]

While Kirkpatrick's account of the genesis of a Jersey sound is somewhat romantic and whimsical, it links usefully to the notion of place as a sonic locus. In this depiction of the Jersey shore, specific geographical elements of place play a part, albeit a metaphorical one: sounds meet and mix at the actual physical point where sea and land meet and mix. Geography and identity are intrinsically linked, and traditionally music has always been part of this equation. Regions of the world that are isolated and geographically extreme seem to produce music that is specific to place and intimately tied to the cultural identities of the people who live there. Iceland is a prime example, and the unique sound of Icelandic pop music, typified by the very unusual vocal melodies

[7] See Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks,* 92-93.
[8] Rob Kirkpatrick, *The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 2

and timbres associated with singer-songwriter Björk and the band Sigur Rós, is commonly attributed to the island nation's remoteness, its desolate landscapes, and the country's folk beliefs.[9] As Tony Mitchell maintains, Iceland's music is often characterized in romantic terms, with music as a necessary product of the country's natural beauty and ruggedness, noting that many scholars assume that "a relational affinity exists between the natural environment and autochthonous activity."[10] Mitchell also offers a cogent warning about such assumptions, however, namely that they are reductive and often tied to tourism marketing schemes. These assumptions make simple claims about complex relationships between musical practices and nature; in the case of Iceland, Mitchell avers, landscape plays less of a role in the dissemination of Icelandic music: for Icelandic musicians, "landscape" in relation to music is actually a clichéd notion they prefer to avoid.[11]

This all certainly applies to Canadian music and is worth keeping in mind. The association between nature/geography and cultural production in Canada has a long history. Landscape art—perhaps most notably, the Group of Seven's famous depictions of northern Ontario and the Great Lakes—has long dominated the Canadian cultural imagination; Canadian literature, likewise, has often focused on place, and on the harshly oppressive and foreboding qualities of the country's natural world. The canon of

[9] Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks,* 94.
[10] Tony Mitchell, "Music and Landscape in Iceland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in Nordic* Countries, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä, pp. 145-162 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 145.
[11] Tony Mitchell, "Music and Landscape in Iceland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in Nordic* Countries, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä, pp. 145-162 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 145-146.

Canadian art music, as represented in the works of composers like Harry Sommers and Violet Archer, includes descriptive and austere-sounding instrumental pieces with titles like *North Country* and *Northern Landscapes*, intended to reflect the coldness and desolation of much of Canada. In popular music, singer-songwriters attempting to define a distinctive Canadian sound in music took cues directly from Canadian literary figures like Robertson Davies, whose writing featured "strong regional ties and a receptiveness to the influence of climate and geography."[12] Historically, Canadian popular musicians have typically approached the question of Canadian identity in two main ways: fleeing from it, adopting a more marketable, generic North American pop/rock sound that does not draw upon signifiers of place or cultural identity (examples range from The Guess Who, Shania Twain, and Nickelback to Avril Lavigne and Justin Bieber); or taking a more parochial approach dependent upon signifiers of regional—though not necessarily "Canadian"—musical practices (for example, Scottish/Irish folk music on the East Coast, or country/folk-derived music in the Prairies). The Tragically Hip seem to have taken a different tack entirely, creating in many of its songs what we argue is a very nearly empty musical space—perhaps not unlike the vast undifferentiated emptiness of much of the country, but at the same time no-place: it is a "libidinal space," where desire is focused—around which fans, music critics and academics alike can and do construct notions of Canadian nationhood and identity.

[12] Tom Harrison, "Popular Music" *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2006. http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/popular-music/ - .

Springsteen and Signifying America

There is an abundance of literature on Springsteen that presupposes his "American-ness."[13] Music critics regarded Springsteen as an "American archetype" as early as the mid-1970s, coincident with the release of *Born to Run*[14] and his rise to national rock stardom. Springsteen's very credibility as an artist, Connell and Gibson insist, is based on a distinctly American image of "class, place, nation (and himself) that Springsteen created…[m]ore than most other performers, Springsteen sought to emphasise the relationship between place, community and identity."[15] Numerous scholars have gone so far as to theorize about Springsteen's American-ness as it relates to his masculinity and his body. In this view, Springsteen literally embodies American-ness—especially during the *Born in the U.S.A.* era—through the presentation of a working-class, heteronormative masculine body: a muscular, labouring body at work on the stage, representing a range of political positions and possibilities, including a Rambo-like body at once evoking and criticizing American military might and Reagan-era exceptionalism, or a working-class body representing both the promise of the American work ethic and the exploitation of the

[13] See Jim Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Donald L. Deardorff II, *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2010); Louis P. Masur, *Runaway Dream:* Born to Run *and Bruce Springsteen's American Vision* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); Jimmy Guterman, *Runaway American Dream: Listening to Bruce Springsteen* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005); Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zoltan and Mark Bernhard, eds.
[14] Masur, *Runaway Dream,* 4-5.
[15] Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks*, 42.

labouring class.[16] As Bryan Garman has argued, "Springsteen's sexuality, like Rambo's, was inextricably bound with national interests."[17]

Springsteen's lyrics are rife with verbal signifiers of American identity. His songs contain frequent references, for example, to recent events in American history, most notably the Vietnam War and its lasting effects on American society, and the aftermath of 9/11. Many of his songs are firmly rooted in place—typically, small-town U.S.A., and more specifically, Asbury Park in New Jersey—or are "road songs" that invoke America through populist tributes to working-class people and working-class landscapes.[18] As an American bard, Springsteen is directly linked to American cultural heritage and tradition via the musical legacy of Pete Seeger; thematically, many of Springsteen's songs address—and often criticize and problematize—explicitly American concepts and themes, most notably "the American dream" and the struggle to achieve it, but also "the quest for fulfillment,"[19] or what Masur characterizes more expansively as "escaping and searching…redemption and connection."[20]

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[16] See Klaus Heissenberger, "An All-American Body? Springsteen's Working-Class Masculinity in the 1980s" in *The EmBodyment of American Culture*, Heinz Tschachler, Maureen Devine, Michael Draxlbauer, eds., pp. 101-110 (Münster: Lit Verlag Münster, 2003). Jim Cullen echoes Heissenberger, describing Springsteen's physical transformation from a "skinny, bearded, unkempt…Beat street poet" to the subject of "teen fantasy," appearing in the "Dancing in the Dark" video as a representative of a vital "vibrant, working-class white male heterosexuality" that contrasted starkly with the androgyny of Prince and Michael Jackson, and with the hyper-sexualized image of Madonna. See Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.*, 119-120.

[17] Bryan Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 222-223.

[18] Connell and Gibson, *Soundtracks,* 42.

[19] Deardorff, *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet*, 23.

[20] Masur, *Runaway Dream,* 4.

As Springsteen himself asserts, "I've spent 35 years writing about America, its people, and the meaning of the American Promise."[21] But how do his songs signify national identity musically? Consider an iconic song like "Born to Run," from the eponymous 1975 album that Springsteen insists contains "the primary questions I'd be writing about for the rest of my work life."[22] A lot of ink has already been spilled over "Born to Run," and the song's contribution to Springsteen's emergence as a major artist is already well documented. What is of interest here is how the song functions as a musical embodiment of so many of the nationalistic themes attributed to Springsteen's songs, specifically the American Dream, questing, and a sort of desperate striving for something ineffable, something more.

A song like "Born to Run," as historian Joshua Zeizt observes, emerged out of Springsteen's rejection of American soft rock: the song might be quintessentially American by dint of its whole-hearted assault on the easy-listening pantheon—The Bee Gees, Elton John, Chicago, The Carpenters—dominating the pop charts in the early seventies, music that failed to connect with blue-collar listeners on the Jersey Shore.[23] The *Born to Run* album as a whole arguably serves as a kind of negative image of this music, drawing instead from other, more robust and deeply-rooted American musical traditions like R & B, jazz, Motown, and funk for

[21] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, "Introduction: The Bard of Astbury Park" in *Reading the Boss,* ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, pp. 1-20 (Lanham, MD: Lexinton Books, 2010), 18.
[22] Springsteen, quoted in Masur, *Runaway Dream,* 4.
[23] Joshua Zeitz, "*Born to Run* and the Decline of the American Dream" *The Atlantic* August 24, 2015.
https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/born-to-run-at-40/402137/

its core sound.[24] Zeitz contrasts Springsteen directly with James Taylor in this period, characterizing Taylor as a purveyor of "I-rock," as something of a navel-gazer: an introspective singer-songwriter who espouses a cerebral, melancholy liberalism in his intimate "songs about the self." Springsteen, by contrast, eschews this inward turn and instead "embod[ies] the lost '70s—the tense, political, working-class rejection of America's limitations" through music that is big and boldly extroverted in term of sound.[25]

Much has already been made of the political elements of "Born to Run," and specifically its class consciousness and its affinities with contemporaneous blue-collar political activism of the 70s. Musically, however, the song tells a very different story about the American Dream. As music journalist Kyle Smith counters, "Born to Run" is a different sort of working-class statement: "It's a celebration, not a rejection. It's a barbaric yawp. It's a blaze in the dark, a cry of pride amid desolation."[26] Indeed, Springsteen himself seems to uphold this interpretation of the song, suggesting that the American Dream—as it appears in "Born to Run"—is not about success as such, but rather it has to do with optimism, opportunity, and the freedom to strive for something better: "that everyone was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and a chance for some self-respect."[27] Reflecting on the genesis of the song in a *Rolling Stone* interview, Springsteen characterizes "Born to Run" in a decidedly apolitical way, as a song of "enormous longing, tremendous

[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Kyle Smith, "Elites Just Don't Understand 'Born to Run'" *NY Post* August 26, 2015. https://nypost.com/2015/08/26/liberals-just-dont-understand-born-to-run/
[27] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Zeitz, "*Born to Run* and the Decline of the American Dream."

longing…It's just about 'Hey, you're gonna take that step into the next day and nobody knows what tomorrow brings'…it continues to speak to that part of you that is both exhilarated and frightened about what tomorrow brings…that's how it was built."[28]

When Springsteen speaks about how "Born to Run" was built, we find ourselves in interesting and important territory, in what the ethnomusicologist and semiologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez identifies as the "poietic" dimension of music, or the realm of the creative process: the realm of composition, structure and intention.[29] Springsteen talks in poietic terms about the origins of the song, allowing that it has sonic elements borrowed from guitar legend Duane Eddy, that Roy Orbison's arrangements influenced the whole album, and that Springsteen was seeking to create a record with a particular sonic signature that linked directly to the emotional and lyrical content of the songs: "I wanted it to sound enormous and I wanted it to grab you by your throat and insist that you take that ride, insist that you pay attention, not just to the music, but to life, to feeling alive, to being alive."[30]

If the song "Born to Run" embodies anything, it is Springsteen's longing, not his political activism. The song's harmonic language makes this clear: most of the chords in "Born to Run" feature suspensions—the holding-over of tones from one chord to the next in a play of consonance and dissonance. While suspended chords are commonplace in rock and pop, and typically

[28] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Brian Hiatt, "Bruce Springsteen on Making 'Born to Run': 'We went to extremes'" *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 2015. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/bruce-springsteen-on-making-born-to-run-we-went-to-extremes-20150825.

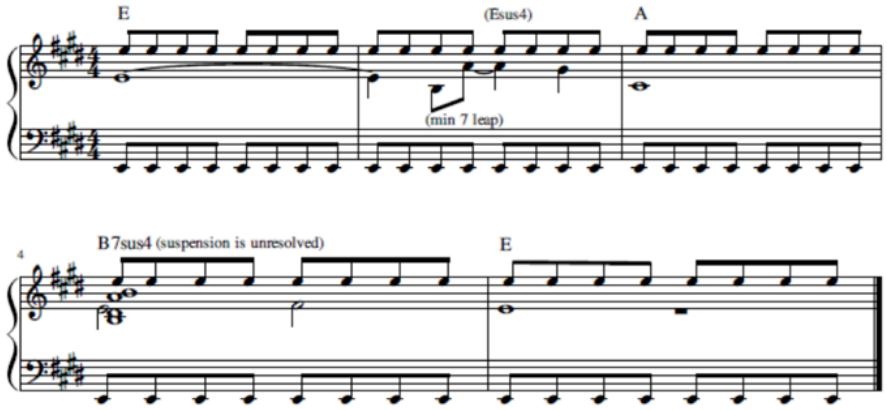
[29] See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music,* trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11-12.

[30] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Hiatt, "Bruce Springsteen on Making 'Born to Run.'

provide ornamental dissonance, they are used in "Born to Run" in a particularly pervasive and purposeful way. The chord progression underlying the song's melodic hook and verses is an archetypal blues-rock progression in the key of E major: I-IV-V, or E-A-B. But the V chord (B) in this progression—the chord of greatest harmonic tension, typically creating cyclicity by demanding a return to the stability of the I chord (E, the tonic)—is made even more tense by being a chord with added dissonances: it is seventh chord—B7, in this case, a chord with an extra note on top, spelled B-D#-F#-A—but also a suspended chord—its nomenclature is B7sus4.

Using a seventh chord in this context is not unusual at all, but the suspension is worth some comment. The "4" in the chord's nomenclature is an added, non-structural tone positioned at the interval of a fourth above the root of the chord (an E above B in this chord: the full spelling of the chord is B-D#-(E)-F#-A). The suspended fourth is expected to resolve harmonically, downwards by a half step to a structural tone, the third note of the V chord (D#). In "Born to Run," this suspension does not immediately resolve—the pitch E is pervasive in the accompaniment and the vocal melody, and so is heard clearly as a dissonant suspension against the B chord, especially in the song's opening measures, where the bass line does not move but rather holds a steady E as a pedal point below and a high keyboard part rings out the pitch E from above—and the progression simply cycles back to the tonic chord and starts again. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: "Born to Run," reduction of the first five measures



The suspended note E in the B7sus4 chord is also an anticipation—as such, a kind of doubly dissonant gesture. The suspension never resolves; the anticipation "resolves," but only when the phrase cycles back to the beginning, and the note E held over from the B7sus4 chord is simply subsumed into the E chord that begins the phrase: (in other words, the note E in the B7sus4 chord anticipates the arrival of the E chord to which it belongs). What is the sonic effect of all of this? An increase in the phrase's tension—a sense of mild unease, that something has been left unresolved. Metaphorically, such unresolved harmonic tension stands—as it has done for centuries—for some of the key affective-thematic qualities that Springsteen attributes to "Born to Run," namely longing and searching.

The song's striking main melodic riff likewise conveys some of these metaphoric affective-thematic traits (see Figure 1). The riff contains a large upward melodic leap of a minor seventh (from the note B up to the note A), creating an unprepared dissonance—an appoggiatura—that promptly resolves down by step to the note G#. Such large, sometimes dissonant upward melodic leaps in tonal music can signify many things, but are almost always potent expressive gestures and are commonly used to represent intense emotional states, especially longing, yearning and aspiration.[31] The riff continues with an unexpected downward tumble to C#, scale degree 6 in the song's key, before moving back upwards to concludes on tonic note (E), but via a three-note neighbour figure (E-F-E) that is not strongly conclusive. This melodically ambivalent phrase—with its heroic, searching leap followed by an inconclusive

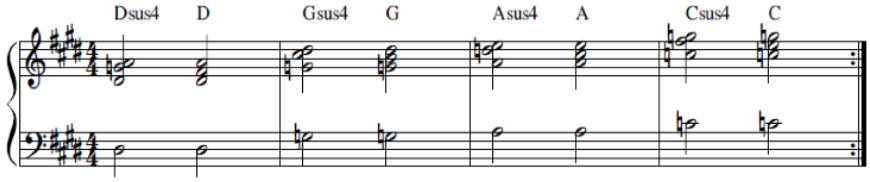
[31] Consider, for instance, the historical importance of a large melodic leap, followed by dissonant, unresolved harmony in its most famous iteration: the so-called "Tristan chord" heard in the Prelude to Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*—a now-iconic melodic-harmonic gesture standing for longing, and for "suffering and insatiable desire." See Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "Death Drive: Eros and Thanatos in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11, no. 3 (1999): 273.

A large leap like the one in "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" provides a more anodyne example, but it likewise represents hopeful longing: musicologist Walter Frisch argues that the octave leap at the beginning of the vocal melody, underscored by shifting jazz-inflected harmonies, "captures the uneasy blend of hope and anxiety that lies at the core of Dorothy's personality." See Walter Frisch, *Arlen and Harburg's Over the Rainbow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 59.

Large upward melodic leaps are also a readily recognizable aspect of the expressive vocabulary of film music: the famous *Star Wars* title theme, for instance, features a succession of large leaps that represent hope, heroism and achievement. See Emilio Audissino, *The Music of John Williams:* Jaws, Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Art *and the Return of the Classic Hollywood Music Style* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 154.

ending—coupled with the unresolved harmonic suspensions and pervasively optimistic major mode creates the musical underpinning for the song's lyrics and for what Springsteen hopes to express in "Born to Run": namely a potent version of the American Dream that is literally a "runaway dream"—not necessarily something that is lost, but rather something that is meant to be relentlessly pursued, as part of a hopeful, and perhaps endless search for greater meaning and dignity in life. If this is not clear enough, consider the song's strong rhythmic syncopations in the pre-chorus, also building the tension, and especially the song's extended bridge, which comprises a literal chain of suspended chords, a succession of mildly unstable sonorities that compulsively thrusts the music ever-forward in a play of tension-and-release (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: "Born to Run," harmonic reduction of bridge



It is a romantic musical vision, built to surge forward and serving as a musical metaphor for questing, longing, and striving, for being in one place but looking to be elsewhere. This, coupled with the song's "enormous sound," serve Springsteen's self-described purpose as a songwriter, a purpose that is especially apposite with

respect to "Born to Run," namely to "measure the distance between the American dream and American reality."[32]

The Tragically Hip: Canada's Band?

As noted in the introduction, the now-legendary Canadian rock band The Tragically Hip has seen a sharp spike in media attention in recent years, beginning with lead singer Gord Downie's terminal cancer diagnosis in the spring of 2016 and continuing until his death in the fall of 2017 and beyond. The onslaught of media coverage surrounding Downie and The Hip sparked a renewed interest in the band's music and has brought to the fore the truism that The Tragically Hip is "Canada's band." As a corollary, the band's music and especially Downie's lyrics have been interpreted by journalists, music critics and fans as somehow reflecting Canadian nationalism and national identity. The members of the band, however, have disavowed the suggestions that The Hip is any kind of nationalist band and have insisted instead that they never intended their music to provoke Canadian

[32] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Mark Hagen, "Meet the New Boss," *The Guardian* January 18, 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/18/bruce-springsteen-interview. Here, we observe that, from a semiotic perspective, Springsteen's "measur[ing] of the distance between the American dream and American reality" via songs like "Born to Run" hints at the structure of musical semiosis as Nattiez describes it: a tri-partite process in which composition and intent –the poietic dimension—gives rise to the "music itself"—this is the dimension of the (sonic) trace; the trace is the middle ground on which the music as constructed object meets its auditors and is received and interpreted in light of a vast array of factors and contingencies—the esthetic dimension. In the case of Springsteen's "Born to Run," the "American dream" as Springsteen imagines and interprets it, is "built" into the song at the poietic level; the song itself is the trace; and the song's intended meaning encounters what Springsteen calls "American reality" at the esthetic level when it is heard and placed into a socio-cultural context. See Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, pp. 11-12.

patriotism.[33] Downie's published comments about the way he has portrayed Canada in his writings reveal that his intent was to primarily critique and problematize Canadian identity rather than celebrate it.[34] In a 2016 interview on Canada's national television service, the CBC, Downie admitted that, though his lyrics mention Canada often, he never wrote about it in a "nice" way, and that he was not able to explain Canadian nationhood, asking "What is it about this country that is not a country?"[35] This perspective is expounded upon in the official statement Downie's released in conjunction with his *Secret Path* project in 2016, a ten-song album and graphic novel based on the true story of Chanie Wenjack, a young First Nations boy who froze to death after running away from a residential school in northwestern Ontario. Downie's statement, like his album, exposes Canada's dark past of neglect and abuse of indigenous people, which has provoked considerable division in the country. As Downie insists, "Chanie haunts

[33] "I'm not a nationalist…I started using Canadian references not just for their own sake, but because I wanted to pick up my birthright, which is this massive country full of stories." Gord Downie, quoted in Michael Barclay, "How We Will Miss Gord Downie and the Tragically Hip," *Maclean's* October 17, 2017. http://www.macleans.ca/culture/how-we-will-miss-gord-downie-and-the-tragically-hip/

[34] As Robert Morrison has observed, the band's "vision of Canada is beset by tragedy and injustice, but also lifted by beauty, humour, and courage. Most of all, at their finest, they urge us to rethink the present, and to imagine a more generous and accepting future." See Morrison, "Remembering Gord Downie Through his Lyrics," *The Conversation* August 17, 2017. http://theconversation.com/remembering-gord-downie-through-his-lyrics-82507.

[35] CBC News, "Gord Downie Exclusive Interview," *The National* Oct. 13, 2016. http://www.cbc.ca/news/thenational/gord-downie-exclusive-interview-1.3804422.

me…We are not the country we thought we were."[36] At the end of the statement, Downie suggests that, though the thought of Canada not being a country is not a popular one, Canadians can only begin to call their nation "Canada" once they allow themselves to learn the truth of Canada's disturbing past. Nationhood, in this view, is constituted through and determined by a solid knowledge of the past. It is an interesting claim, given that The Hip's body of work—notwithstanding the claims to the contrary by journalists and fans—offers at best a fragmented and deconstructed account of Canadian history.

The Problem of Canadian Identity

Scholars who have tried to tackle the issue of defining Canadian identity have often been halted by the country's vastness, diversity, and concomitant ambiguities. As noted above, the answer to the question of a Canadian national identity often comes via a comparison between Canada and the United States. It is typically formed as the assertion that Canada is not America and that Canadian national identity is different from the loud nationalism found in the United States. The flaw in this approach is that it does not offer a positive definition of Canadian identity but rather relies on a negative one based on "othering."[37] Millard, Riegel, and Wright likewise expose the shortcomings of this approach and reject the notion that Canadians are "retiring, unassertive, and diffident," arguing that Canadian nationalism is

[36] Gord Downie, "Statement by Gord Downie," *Secret Path* Sept. 9, 2016. Date of access 2 March, 2018. http://secretpath.ca/

[37] See Olaf Kuhlke, "The Geography of 'Canadian Shield Rock': Locality, Nationality and Place Imagery in the Music of the Rheostatics," in *Sound, Society and Geography of Popular Music*, ed. Ola Johansson and Thomas Bell, pp. 161-180 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 166-167.

now strikingly similar to extroverted American nationalism and that the "myth of diffidence" is only sustained because it serves as a way of differentiating between Canadian and American nationalism.[38]

The inability to agree on a unifying and unified definition of Canadian identity can have negative effects on Canadians' self-concept. These negative effects can be viewed through the lens of social identity theory, which suggests that one's self-concept is comprised of both personal identity and social identity. In order to maintain self-esteem, these two components of one's self-concept must uphold a positive self-image. One of the ways to do this is through identification with, and favoring of, an *in-group* and the subsequent othering of the *out-group*. This could explain why Canadians often compare themselves in the negative with the United States and derive from this comparison a sense of national identity and pride.[39]

Social identity theory also presents Canadians with a problem: theorists suggest that people have a natural drive to build a positive self-concept by bolstering their private and public identities, but the inability of Canadians to reach a consensus on Canadian identity—their in-group—puts them at an immediate disadvantage in achieving a positive self-concept. From the social identity theoretical perspective, then, the innate need to arrive at a specific and stable definition of their public identities has arguably

[38] Gregory Millard, Sarah Riegel and John Wright, "Here's Where We Get Canadian: English-Canadian Nationalism and Popular Culture," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 1 (1990): 11.
[39] See Garold Lantz and Sandra Loeb, "Country of Origin and Ethnocentrism: An Analysis of Canadian and American Preferences Using Social Identity Theory," *Advances in Consumer Research* 23 (1996): 374-378 *passim*.

caused Canadians to grasp at any definition or source that is presented to them.[40]

Evidence of this need for definition can be found in the famous Molson Canadian's "I am Canadian" ad campaign, which ran from 1994-1998 and 2000-2005. The beer company's attempt to provide a clear definition of "Canadian" relied on a nationalistic branding of Canada. These ads—especially the notorious "Rant," which originally aired in 2000—were directed at Canadians and Americans as they aired in both countries and focused on debunking Americans' popular misconceptions of Canada while at the same time reinforcing Canadians' popular arguments for what makes them distinct. This ad campaign, though popular, still did not arrive at a substantial definition of Canadian identity that went beyond beavers, Prime Ministers, and pronunciation of the letter 'Z'. Furthermore, the Canadian nationalism presented in these commercials was predicated on anxiety over American nationalism and "othering."[41]

Seeking (and Finding) National Identity in Music

For many Canadians in search of Canadian identity, The Tragically Hip and its music seem to offer one. As early as their second LP *Road Apples* (1991) the band had already begun to be labeled as markedly Canadian. In 1995, *Maclean's* magazine asserted that "the Hip's dark and edgy songs dealing with forgotten hockey hero Bill Barilko and drowned Group of Seven

[40] See Lantz and Loeb, "Country of Origin and Ethnocentrism: An Analysis of Canadian and American Preferences Using Social Identity Theory."
[41] See Kuhlke, "The Geography of 'Canadian Shield Rock'," 161-162.

painter Tom Thomson are pure Canadiana."[42] Since this initial labelling in the 1990s, The Tragically Hip continue to be branded as "Canada's Band,"[43] and the band and lead singer/songwriter Downie have been regularly characterized as iconic national spokespersons by major mainstream news outlets in Canada and the U.S. The claims that The Hip is a distinctly Canadian band have been justified in many ways by journalists, fans, and music critics, who cite the band's lack of international success and strictly Canadian appeal—here, again, defining the band as Canadian by virtue of what it is not, namely popular in the United States—its support of up-and-coming Canadian artists, and the references to Canadian places and history in Downie's lyrics as proof of their Canadian identity.[44]

A surfeit of news reports that confidently named The Tragically Hip as uniquely Canadian and even a locus for national unity followed lead singer Gord Downie's cancer diagnosis in the spring of 2016. Unsurprisingly, the idea of The Hip as "Canada's Band" became something of an unavoidable cliché during this period due to the widespread promulgation of this interpretation. Indeed, how else should Canada understand The Hip when the

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[42] The article is archived on the website of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. See Nicholas Jennings, Kyle Shaw and Robin Ajello, "Canadian Rock Music Explodes." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-rock-music-explodes/

[43] Michael Barclay, Ian Jack and Jason Schneider, *Have Not Been the Same* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2011), 652.

[44] Kate Heartfield, "How The Hip Reinforce the Canadian Personality," *Ottawa Citizen,* August 7, 2016. http://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/heartfield-how-the-hip-reinforce-the-canadian-personality. See also Gordon Capel, "Damned If they Do and Damned if they Don't: The Inferiority Complex, Nationalism, and *Maclean's* Music Coverage, 1967-1995." Master's Thesis. University of Waterloo, 2007.

country's Prime Minister attends the band's final concert—subtitled "A National Celebration"—and boldly asserts that "Gord and The Tragically Hip are [an] inevitable and essential part of what we are and who we are as a country."[45] This statement is just one of many like it that have populated news feeds since May 2016.

The Tragically Hip's catalogue does contain a number of songs with Canadian references, for example, names of famous Canadians (Hugh MacLennan, Tom Thompson, Northrop Frye, Joni Mitchell), names of Canadian towns or cities (Toronto, Churchill, Springside Park, Bobcaygeon), and historic Canadian events (the disappearance of Tom Thomson, the October Crisis, the death of Bill Barilko, the incarceration of David Milgaard). It should be noted, however, that while the band is feted for its promotion of Canada and its inclusion of Canadiana in its songs, its corpus of 13 studio albums and over 160 songs contains just a few dozen songs that could be said to contain Canadiana. Of this subset of songs, many contain what are at best oblique "Canadian" references—for example, to hockey and hockey rinks, frozen lakes, pine trees, and prairie winds. Those songs that refer directly to places or people often mention them in passing: a place name, such as "Toronto," appears only in the song's title; or the name of a historically significant Canadian person—such as the novelist Hugh MacClennan—appears as the dedicatee of a song; or famous Canadians—such as literary scholar Northrop Frye—appear in annotated footnotes to song lyrics. Even an iconically "Canadian" song like "Bobcaygeon," with its references to Toronto and to a real event in Canada's past—an anti-Semitic riot in the 1930s—and its

[45] CBC Music, "'An essential part of who we are': Justin Trudeau on the Tragically Hip," *cbcmusic.ca*, Aug. 21, 2016. http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/12563/justine-trudeau-on-the-tragically-hip-kingston.

romantic invocation of an eponymous cottage town in southeastern Ontario, is only nominally concerned with Canada: the historical event hinted at in the song is a backdrop to a contemporary love story, and the song apparently only contains a reference to the town of Bobcaygeon because it was a close rhyme with the word "constellations" in the song's refrain.[46]

Musically, it is remarkable how many Tragically Hip songs make use of drones. That is, musical stasis is something of a hallmark for the band, with a significant number of songs in its catalogue relying on static harmonies supporting vocal melodies with a very narrow range. Why is this important? Given the paucity of ready-made "Canadian" musical signifiers, and the fact that there are many different conceptions of Canadian identity, it is clear that the arbitrary symbolic signifiers that are meant to refer to Canadian identity are even more loosely used and interpreted because the very concept they stand for has no stable definition. In this context, The Hip's music can really only be construed as

[46] Journalist Adrian Lee recounts that "Downie himself has admitted he didn't choose the town for any specific reason. 'You could use any small town, really,' he said in 1998. 'Bobcaygeon rhymes with constellation. . . sort of.' […]
'There really isn't a romantic, beautiful reason they wrote that song as far as I can tell, and as far as we talked about it,' said Andy Keen, who directed *Bobcaygeon*, a concert doc about the Hip's sold-out show there in 2011—a Heritage Moment equivalent of Roger Waters playing *The Wall* in Berlin. Keen and crew interviewed roughly 25 locals—and although they appreciated the song, 'they were a people who didn't really have too much of a relationship with it. It became this soundtrack for them, but also for so much of cottage country in this province and this country.' […] Indeed, even if it resonates widely, the Hip's mythical Bobcaygeon no longer quite exists, if it ever really did." See Lee, "Searching for the Tragically Hip's Mythical Bobcaygeon," *Maclean's* July 15, 2016.
http://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/searching-for-the-tragically-hips-mythical-bobcaygeon/

Canadian by virtue of the musical space that it creates: if Springsteen's American-ness can be said to reside in the ways he measures the space between dream and reality in the American cultural consciousness, then The Hip can be said to occupy a (musical) space around which fans and commentators can project and construct notions of national identity. This desire to situate the songs of The Hip and the band itself as uniquely and specifically Canadian can be understood via the lens of musical semiotics. While Springsteen deploys musical signifiers of longing and desire in a song like "Born to Run" to map out the literal and metaphoric space between the American Dream and reality, The Tragically Hip and much of its oeuvre serve as empty signifiers—creating a locus around which polysemeous texts can be created and interpreted as "Canadian," but at the same time can never reach the stable object that is "Canadian identity." This creation of meaning, and of Canadian identity via The Hip and its music, is described below through the analysis of two Hip songs and through contemporary psychoanalytic theory that helps to explain the nature of the desire for identity, and its pursuit.

"At the Hundredth Meridian"—a song on The Hip's 1992 album *Fully Completely*—is often a first choice for fans and journalists seeking Tragically Hip songs with Canadian signifiers.[47]

[47] Jeff Ferreras cites "At the Hundredth Meridian" as quintessentially Canadian, but mainly by virtue of the fact that Downie wears a hat with the name of a Canadian national park on it for the song's video. See Ferreras, "The Tragically Hip Taught Us About Being Canadian These 11 Times," *Huffington Post* May 24, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/24/tragically-hip-canadian-history_n_10116384.html. The song appears in a list of Hip songs about Canadian places compiled by *Maclean's* magazine, though it should be remembered that the hundredth meridian is also an important American geographical feature, marking off many significant geographical, climatological, political, and

The song's title, repeated in the chorus, refers to the geographic point at which "the Great Plains begin," or in terms of Canadian landmarks, the city of Brandon, Manitoba (though the song never references anyplace in Canada directly—indeed, the lyrics begin with the words "Me debunk an American myth?"). Downie's lyrics describe the plains as a vast, desolate place: "left alone to get gigantic / hard, huge and haunted," and offer poetic observations of the landscape: a bumpy "corduroy road," shoulder high weeds, and a rusted Ferris wheel and wires off in the distance—evocations of the Canadian prairies as a neglected, abandoned space.[48] Among these haunted relics, death is also a recurring theme, and the narrator describes taking his life in his hands, and invokes a raven carrying a skull, burial, exhumation, and re-burial.

The vocal melody of "At the Hundredth Meridian" is low-pitched and monotonous through the verses, acting as a kind of drone; the guitar riff that plays through the verses of the song supports this droning vocal melody: the guitar simply oscillates between an open fifth built on the tonic (D5) and a subtonic chord (C5) in each measure. The chord on the subtonic is significant not only because it is a common compositional trademark of many Tragically Hip songs, but also because it is an example of how stasis and space are present in the band's music. Instead of using a natural leading tone that would give listeners the sensation of closeness to the song's tonic (the "home" note, or note of resolution, which is "D" in this case) a half step away, The Tragically Hip displace the leading tone (the note "C-sharp" in this case, which

historical boundaries. See Amanda Shendruk, "Mapped: The Canadian Locales in The Hip's Iconic Songs," *Macleans* June 30, 2016. http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/mapped-the-canadian-locales-in-the-tragically-hips-iconic-songs/

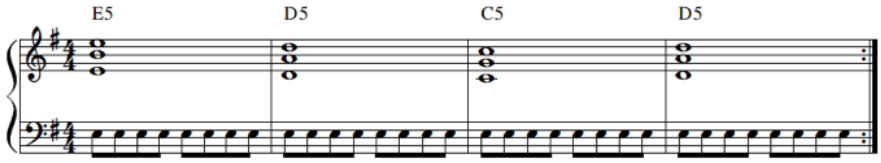
[48] The Tragically Hip, "At the Hundredth Meridian," *Fully Completely* MCA 1992.

points the ear to the tonic as the note of resolution) from the tonic by a whole tone (to the note "C") This creates a sense of moving a full step away and back rather than a slight leaning and readjustment; at the same time, while the progression consists of two chords, this oscillation feels harmonically static because there is no tension in the voices of the chords: the gravitational pull between the chords is rather weak. The themes of barrenness, stagnation, and death in the lyrics and the monotony of the vocal line and harmonic progressions combine to paint a bleak portrait of the (empty) prairies—a starkly unpopulated song that contrasts sharply with Springsteen's Americana-infused sketches of places and the people inhabiting them.

"Fifty Mission Cap"—also from *Fully Completely*—is another Hip song frequently cited for its Canadian references. The song refers directly to hockey player Bill Barilko, who played in the NHL for the Toronto Maple Leafs from 1947-1951. Barilko is famous for scoring the winning goal in the 1951 Stanley Cup final between Toronto and Montreal, and for having disappeared under mysterious circumstances while returning from a fishing trip in northern Quebec in the summer of 1951 (his small plane crashed in northeastern Ontario). The song "Fifty Mission Cap" ties Barilko's disappearance to the Maple Leafs' subsequent decade-long playoff draught; the year Barilko's body was found, 1962, the Leafs finally won another Stanley Cup. Downie's song mythologizes Barilko's story, and has itself become intimately entwined with Canadian hockey culture. The song is another clear instance of The Hip building a song on drones. As with "At the Hundredth Meridian," but even more so, "Fifty Mission Cap" places a monotonous, halting, spoken-sung melody above a harmonically static accompaniment: in the song's verses, the bass provides a tonic

pedal point, while the guitar moves through a cyclic, modal pattern of chords.[49] (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: "Fifty Mission Cap," reduction of harmonic progression in verses



Like "At the Hundredth Meridian," one could hear the musical stasis and spaciousness of this song in part as a musical invocation of geographical vastness and emptiness—in this case, the vast wilderness of northeastern Ontario.

Lyrically, the song seems to be pure Canadiana, exploring and mythologizing hockey history. It is not clear, however, how seriously listeners are meant to take this song as statement about hockey as it informs national identity: Downie provides some meta-textual commentary at the end of the first verse, seeming to reveal the origins of the song's lyrics as merely some on-hand trivia (again, in sharp contrast to Springsteen's studied approach to Americana)—"I stole this from a hockey card/I keep tucked up under/My fifty-mission cap."[50]

[49] In terms of texture and compositional approach, it seems to us that songs like "Fifty Mission Cap" and "At the Hundredth Meridian" are distinct from Springsteen's deeply-rooted folk and rock approach, and more reminiscent of the often-abstruse songs of Jim Morrison and the Doors.
[50] The Tragically Hip, "Fifty Mission Cap," *Fully Completely* (MCA 1992).

The Hip, Springsteen and Identity: The Lost Object of Desire

With respect to The Hip and Canadian identity, songs like "Fifty Mission Cap" and "At the Hundredth Meridian" serve as a locus for the desire of Canadian consumers of the band's music to create Canadian identity. In semiotic terms, the songs—and by extension the band—function as flexible signifiers in a kind of feedback loop: the songs and the band are consistently lauded as emblems of Canadian identity by fans and commentators, such that they have become de facto emblems of Canadian identity. This is possible not because of a studied, Springsteen-like engagement with the nation's social, political, musical and cultural history—a multi-layered American "authenticity" that is predicated on fans identifying with Springsteen, the accessibility of his music, and his connections to artists and styles bearing the imprimatur of authenticity and American-ness[51]—but rather because the relative lack of musical activity allows listeners to not only focus on the lyrics, but also to impose the meaning that they think they find and recognize.

The Slovenian theorist and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, who uses psychoanalytic theory and semiotics to explore meaning in popular culture, draws on the work of Fredric James to argue that some cultural objects—like Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme, or the shark in *Jaws*—have been used and interpreted in so many different ways that they have becoming floating signifiers, seemingly capable of bearing an infinitely vast range of meaning. In semiotic theory, a signifier that does not have a precise signified is called an

[51] See John Sheinbaum, "'I'll Work for your Love': Springsteen and the Struggle for Authenticity," in *Reading the Boss*, ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, pp. 223-242 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

empty signifier: "a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning."[52] *Jaws* serves as an example of an empty signifier insofar as there are many interpretations of what the shark stands for (capitalism, the threat of immigration, the dangers of emergent sexuality, the threat of the natural world, etc.), all of which are both correct and incorrect.[53] Meaning circles round these objects and their final meaning remains undetermined. An interpretation informed by psychoanalysis would argue that the object is the cause of the desire for meaning, but not meaning(ful) itself—the object gives rise to desire, but is not the object of desire.

The Hip functions as the object that gives rise to desire—the desire for a stable identity. The attribution of Canadian identity to The Hip and its songs is an example of what Rex Butler, writing on Žižek, ideological critique, and semiotics, describes as a "performative, fundamentally self-referential operation, in which it is not so much some pre-existing meaning that things refer to as an empty signifier that is retrospectively seen as what is being referred to."[54] That is to say, as Žižek argues about the shark in Jaws, when we enter into the interpretation of such an empty signifier—in this case, an iconic movie monster that can represent many things—and its correspondence to "the truth of contemporary society,"

> we already have something to say about society (some point to make about the environment, sexuality or capitalism), which [we]

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[52] *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.v. "Floating Signifier," by Ian Buchanan. http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-254?rskey=15jkP3&result=251.

[53] See Žižek's analysis of *Jaws* in Sophie Fiennes' 2012 documentary film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. *Critical Theory*. http://www.critical-theory.com/watch-zizek-jaws-fascism/.

[54] Rex Butler, "Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master Signifier?" *Lacan.com*. Date of access 23 Feb., 2018. http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm.

> the attribute to the shark…What is not seen is that the circularity according to which the shark is seen as embodying certain tendencies that have already been attributed to the shark.[55]

The attribution of Canadian identity to The Hip is a "self-referential operation" that we fail to recognize: we approach The Hip, thanks in part to the raucous media discourse surrounding the band, as a "Canadian" band—our analysis and interpretation of the band's music, as Butler says, "already has something to say" about this. As an empty signifier, an object giving rise to our desire, the band and its music are a placeholder: an open and empty space in which a nebulous Canadian identity can come into being via ideas about the band and Canadian identity that are already formed, and seem in retrospect to be a natural fit. As Žižek asserts, the desired object, the object of the drive, "is ultimately indifferent and arbitrary," but "if an object is to take its place in a libidinal space"—the space held open by The Hip, as we argue--"its arbitrary character must remain hidden."[56] The Hip, in this psychoanalytic formulation, function as the object—as "any object"—that

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[55] Butler, "Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master Signifier?" Curiously, Gord Downie wore a now-iconic *Jaws* T-shirt as part of his on-stage outfit for The Hip's final tour in 2016. What can this possibly mean? Fans of the band speculate, among other things, that the shark on the t-shirt symbolizes Downie's cancer. It is worth noting that one of The Hip's nominally Canadian songs, "The Dark Canuck" (*Canuck* is a euphemism for a Canadian), also makes a reference to *Jaws*. The song's lyrics are rather abstruse, but seem to hint strongly at autobiography and the struggle of the artist as they make literary allusions and explore the duality of inside and outside. Downie sings, "You can cast your doubts/Turn them inside out/Hang them upside down/'Till their art falls out." The song concludes with a verse describing a drive-in movie: "In the clouds of blood at the end of Jaws/In the misted cars honking their applause/At the drive-in double feature/At the heart of dark enough/It's Jaws and The Dark Canuck." See The Tragically Hip, "The Dark Canuck," *In Violet Light* (Universal 2002).

[56] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 33.

> can occupy the place of the Thing [but] it can only do so by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e. that it was not placed there by us…Although any object can function as the object-cause of desire—insofar as the fascination it exerts is not its immediate property but results from the place it occupies in the structure—we must, by structural necessity, fall prey to the illusion that the power of fascination belongs to the object as such.[57]

Contrasting Springsteen and The Hip with regard to this desire for a stable or coherent national identity, a song like "Born to Run" can be described as dramatizing this desire and the process of seeking. Springsteen already defines his project as a songwriter as navigating the gap between (American) dream and reality. Our analysis of Springsteen's "Born to Run" points out the use of modestly dissonant harmonic and melodic practices—suspended chords and weak resolutions—as signifiers of unresolved longing. We would argue that Springsteen's longing follows a circumscribed path, albeit one between two imaginary possibilities: dream or reality. By contrast, much of the music of The Tragically Hip, relying as it does on drones and musical stasis, embodies a circular—and arguably, more quintessentially romantic—journey, namely, the endless circuit of desire—in this case, for a stable Canadian identity—that has no end, but rather takes pleasure from its perpetuation. Where Springsteen deploys musical signifiers of longing and desire, Hip songs are often comprised of signifiers of lack (as heard in the absence of harmonic direction, drone, monotone): that is, of the very thing that gives rise to desire and pursuit of the lost object.

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[57] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995)., 34.

Conclusion

Springsteen is America's bard. Gord Downie is Canada's unofficial poet laureate. The Hip are Canada's band. Where does this leave us, with respect to our understanding of the relationship between national identity and popular music? Springsteen is somehow fully, or at least more fully present as a signifying body, literally the embodiment of American-ness; The Hip and Downie, by contrast, as floating signifiers, are a source of disembodied sound that invites imaginative interpretation and whose meaning is only clarified as the source becomes present—as Peter Garret from the band Midnight Oil seems to imply, as he attempts to explain how and why The Hip have such rabid Canadian fans but no impact internationally: "You don't make sense of the musical vision and the fabric of the lyrics until you see the band. I feel like unless you saw them, you weren't going to get the full picture. They were Canada's best-kept secret."

National identity is a chimera. Springsteen's runaway American Dream and blue-collar sensibilities do not reflect the totality of the American experience; nor do the cerebral, poetic musings of Downie and The Hip capture the essence of Canadian identity. In each case, place and space play a role in expressing something about identity; however, in the end, Springsteen and The Hip create two very different types of spaces. Springsteen's music is rooted in real places, and his songs contain dramatic accounts of spaces populated by characters having real experiences and striving to live meaningfully within those spaces. On the other hand, Tragically Hip songs are often full of empty spaces: described in the lyrics but also present in the music, mirroring in some ways the vast, relative emptiness of Canada but more importantly providing spaces around which the desire for a stable, unified sense

of Canada and Canadian-ness—or "One nation under Gord," as one of Canada's national newspapers trumpeted[58]—can circulate but never be satisfied. Two points of clarity emerge from the comparison of Bruce Springsteen and The Tragically Hip: one, notions of national identity are necessarily imprecise and vague; and two, representing national identity is a form of negotiation, in which relationships between the political, social, cultural (and psychological) realms are discovered, created, and imagined.

[58] Jonathan Hayward, "One Nation Under Gord" *The Globe and Mail,* August 19, 2016. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/one-nation-under-gord-fans-share-their-memories-in-a-tragically-hip-tourdiary/article31466982/.