

## Locality and Culture: Creating Public Spaces for Culture in the Mind and in the Civitas<sup>1</sup>

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The invitation given us was to reflect on our research as it relates to the themes of the colloquium: the handing down of culture in smaller societies in a context of globalization. I join Michel de la Durantaye in considering this theme in relation to local and regional cultural policy making and cultural development.

The aspect of the topic that tickled my curiosity was the question posed by Jean-Paul Baillargeon about the role of memory and of future possibility in the generating/handing down of culture in small societies in a context of globalization. He put the question this way: “In the face of an a la carte culture consumed only in the present, should we be concerned about the handing down of culture from one generation to the next and, ... what role should we attribute to memory, to future possibilities?” He posed the question in reference to creators, their works and their public. I am going to respond with reference to citizens who are engaged in the creative process of generating alternatives to those aspects of their collective lives that are unacceptable to them. That is, I will describe a research process in which the creators are citizens, their works are the imagined futures they seek to create together, and their public is their fellow citizens in the public sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> A first version of this paper can be found on the web site of Heritage Canada.

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Does that sound like I am stretching the invitation? Perhaps some will conclude that I am, however, for me, there is a fit with the themes of this colloquium, and the fit is in two dimensions. One dimension is that my research and work are most often in the domain of culture and the arts. The second dimension is that the process by which we conduct the research is, in my mind, an application of the artistic process or creative process to the production of, not art, but new states of affairs in our public worlds.

In research terms, I understand what I do as a form of participatory action research undertaken collaboratively with peers who, in these cases, are citizens. Our collaborative work is to two ends: addressing some problematique in the shared life of the community; and, along the way, intentionally developing and refining skills and competences needed in that community to address this and other problems they are encountering.

My research has been exclusively in Canada outside of Québec, mostly with local communities, that is, communities defined first geographically and then by interest or shared concern. Some of those communities have been small and remote, as were Dawson City and Terrace; others like Edmonton and Winnipeg could be described as large and remote! In between I might categorize Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie and St. John's NF. I am using remote in the sense that one travels a long time to get there and the travel is challenging.

None of the communities have been remote in the sense of being beyond the reach of external influences including global cultural influences. Whether remote or not (for I have also worked with citizen groups in Toronto, Kitchener, Vancouver, Victoria), when a local community makes public policy in support of its own cultural development, global cultural forces form an inevitable part of the context in which citizens do their work. Cultural globalization and homogenization are embraced by some as the high point of our cultural evolution; accepted by others as the inevitable price of doing business with the wider world; and resisted by others as colonizing the public space available for distinctive local cultural expression. These differing attitudes comprise part of the diversity to be taken into account by all participants in making sense of the present and imagining the future.

Global forces make themselves felt on the local stage, says Jill Grant in *The drama of democracy. Contention and dispute in community planning* (1994). Grant uses a dramaturgical metaphor to examine the cultural implications of local planning, with specific reference to two case studies in peninsular Halifax.

International and national policies and examples are evoked in local debates, says Grant, by all players: politicians, planners, and citizens. “Local practice occurs within [an] international and national context and frequently refers to it” (p. 143).

However connected they are to a larger reality, the starting place of the work of citizens in these communities is primarily local — what will we do here to address this issue about which we are concerned. A premise is that it is possible to take action locally. If it were not, action to address an issue would not make sense.

One scholar who views the municipal or regional as promising political space for action taking is Warren Magnusson. Cities, according to Magnusson in *The search for political space. Globalization, social movements, and the urban political experience* (1996), are the nexus where global social movements and locality intersect and interact, where the benefits and stresses of globalization are experienced. It is where people move outside their everyday activities to see themselves not as passive subjects but as citizens making wider political claims. In so doing so, they “lay claim to a political space that may or may not conform to the spaces allowed by the existing systems of government” (p. 10).

Another of Mr Baillargeon intriguing questions, concerning our capacities for creative expression and for handing down culture in the face of globalization, was:

[C]an we not still find open spaces yet to be overrun by [...] homogenizing multinationals? And within these spaces, is it not still possible to encourage originality [...]? Is it not fertile ground for the encouragement of diversity in the midst of uniformity?

I understand the concept of open spaces to be both within the mind and within the public sphere, the collective mind. We might have concern for the openness of both. For surely what we have in the public sphere is colonized space, space occupied and defined by stock images pressed upon us for decades by the behemoths of both advertising and entertainment until they have now merged into the global lifestyle branding operation described so thoroughly and chillingly by Naomi Klein in her recent book entitled *No Logo* (2000). Looking outward, we can feel as though the public space of the imagination is completely colonized, completely sealed, without points of entry for new ideas and without much capacity for idea generators to engage in creative dialogue with one another to shape new possibilities. Perhaps an even

bigger concern is whether our imaginations have not themselves become so determined by stock images that we merely recycle these, while thinking that we are generating original images from within. From my experience with thousands of imagers over the past 15 years, I can report that, when invited, when hope and trust are present, and when the status quo will no longer do, people generate new, sometimes even remarkable, alternative visions of the future individually and collectively.

What is the nature of the inner space in which new images are generated, and of the shared public space of the imagination in which to conceive the outer action that flows from the inner action of imagining new possibilities? The space created in an envisioning project is already a newly configured political and cultural space. In that space, imagers listen to one another in new ways, and these ways of listening are often designed into the future that persons envision together. In that space, protocols are introduced and used for the inner search for images, for discerning their soundness, for the outer search for collective vision and for discerning the soundness of those visions. Just as the visions entertained in the present are a foretaste of the futures people seek to invent, so is the space for imaging in some senses a foretaste of the kinds of new political/cultural space needed for enacting those futures. Just as it is possible for people to generate new images in the face of crowded imaginal space, so it seems possible for people to open new spaces for their work despite crowded public space. And these spaces have particular qualities.

Returning to Magnusson, we are invited to consider that cities embody the contingent, limited, fragile and dependent qualities of political space in which citizens can make wider political claims. He reminds us that “we cannot locate ourselves in relation to just one world and just one history; instead we have to come to terms with the multiplicity of worlds and histories — spaces and times — that make up the political conditions we face... (1996: 7). For it is considering claims in relation to one another that we begin to see the connections between problems, the commonalities in the solutions (*idem*: 114). Perhaps it is these qualities of the political space locally that have led me to work most often with groups whose focus is the local level of political action. Into just such contingent political space can the new offerings of citizens be made, responded to, discerned, judged and potentially enacted.

I return now to my primary question: to consider the roles of memory and of future possibility in culture-making in smaller societies in a context of globalization. The following observations have emerged from practice as I have coached citizens working together to describe their concerns with the present (that which they do not want to pass on to their grandchildren) and to image a future in which those concerns

have been well addressed (a world they do want to bequeath to the next generations). “Future” in this work functions as a metaphor for the human imagination, for what is possible, for our worthiest aspirations, for what we stand for and seek to create. Future is understood in this work as the domain of action, not of knowledge. The claims we make on behalf of the future are not about what will or must happen, but about what could happen, what we intend. These are offerings to our fellow citizens, starting points for the difficult work of discovering what we have in common and what we can come to share in order to take action together rather than alone.

Future possibility functions as a lens through which to view the present. When we have glimpsed our purposes, our intentions, we know what aspects of the present are intimations of the future, however awkward and half-expressed. We know what to give attention to in the present, what to build on, affirm and encourage, and what we don’t have to bother with.

Images of the future, or of possibility and intent, serve as the basis for discovering people with whom we might take joint action. Often community processes group people who hold similar concerns. In this process, groupings form around shared images of the future, of what is possible. The data of individual images is collected and categorized, not by a researcher or even by a facilitator, but by the citizens themselves. There is creative and necessary tension here between the intended future imagined by individuals and the shared vision, or scenario, gradually taking shape as a group of people image collectively. How do we move from one to the other if not by the intervention of a single mind discerning the patterns? By a difficult and messy process we refer to as “raw democracy,” wherein people seek out those whose images connect to their own and agree to work together on a scenario of a future they can share. If done with fidelity to one’s own images, a compelling shared vision of the future emerges from the imaginations of the imagers, one rooted in their intentions, that is, a vision on behalf of which they cannot **not** take action.

This brings me to a fourth function of future possibility in the creation of culture. Satisfying individual and collective images of the future release energy in the imager, energy needed for moving from vision to action. One can feel that energy present in a group of people, or a room full of groups, when, with their eyes shining and frequent bursts of laughter, they tell stories in the present tense — the future present moment — of what it is like when they dwell in the new place they have imaged together. Or when they enact for one another the futures they have envisioned and someone says, “I’d like to live in your future!” Or when the moment of truth comes as people recognize that only they can take action on their images,

and they self-assign to take the action steps they have identified. Or when the action taking gets tough and people persevere, not by forcing but by a process of continuous imaging and enacting in response to the evolving present. This aspect of imaging is so important that it constitutes one of the criteria of a sound goal: that the imaging of it releases more energy than it consumes. As one participant said in the context of a personal envisioning, when I consider the future from the vantage of the present, I have no energy for what needs to be done, but when I consider the present from the vantage of the future, I have all the energy I need.

I have been describing the functions of future possibility when groups of citizens in a given locale gather to address shared concerns. Are there some parallels we might draw to culture making in smaller societies? In Canada outside of Québec we often give as justification for protectionist cultural policies the need for our particular stories to be told on the world stage. Our stories are unique and if they are not heard, the world's story bank will be diminished. When we say this, we probably mean stories of things that have already happened, that is, stories of the past. Could we also mean our stories of the future we intend? Our small society could offer its stories of the future, its future possibilities, as stances we are prepared to take in the world. Continuing the parallels, would we find other smaller societies, even perhaps Québec, who stand for similar futures and work together in discovering and enacting our shared vision for the world. From these stories of what is possible and desired, we would know what to give our attention to, and would find the energy to attempt it against all odds, including the odds of a suffocating global monoculture. It is interesting that with regard to the FTAA negotiations, it is not our governments but our civil society organizations who have functioned in this way to articulate an alternative possibility to the global order, to find alliances with other countries' civil society organizations, and to find in the shared vision the energy to seek to bring it about. In the early protests organized in Québec City (at the start of April), the process of protest was clearly holographic of the world envisioned by those offering alternative future possibilities. It was peaceful, it sought to inform, it held out alternatives, participation was equitable, and so on.

When we come now to consider the role of memory, we might be inclined to think of memory as an opposite pole to future possibility; however, in my experience, the two form a kind of an axis, as I hope to show.

One important role for memory is as a site of hope. Hope is a prerequisite for envisioning alternatives to

the status quo. If we do not believe that something other than the status quo is possible, we would have no reason to attempt to address present problems, however intolerable they are. “Hope can neither be created nor destroyed. It is like a path on the hillside. At first there is no path, however as more and more people walk this way, a path appears.”

Ronna Jevne, executive director of the Hope Foundation at the University of Alberta, speaks of the importance of a person’s hope quotient in overcoming adversity, especially illness. In her research with people living with cancer, Jevne seeks to help the person build their hope quotient (Jevne, 1998). In my work, we help people ground themselves in their own hope by inviting them to recall a time in their own lives when their spirit was emancipated, when their inner and outer lives were in harmony, when newness entered the world through them and changed them and their world. The question varies according to the group and its focus, but some examples are: recall a time when learning was empowering to you; or a time when you took a risk for the sake of something you believed in and, against strong odds, something good happened; or a time when you were an actor in history rather than a bystander. Everyone has such a story. Most people have many such stories. Telling the stories reminds us of how we have acted in the past to address issues and we come to see ourselves as capable of acting in the world to create something new, as citizens making political claims rather than as passive subjects. At this point, the diversity among people is evident and respect for that diversity begins to develop. The validity of each person’s experiences, of each person’s concerns, becomes apparent, even when those experiences and concerns differ significantly one from another. Memory, and the sharing of memories, begins to shape the flexible, contingent, fragile space needed for considering claims upon the future in relation to one another.

A second function of memory in this approach to creating culture is as an analogue to futures imaging. We are all comfortable with memories. We all have them. We know what they are, where they come from, how they act. They record events which have, after all, happened. And we can recall them at will. Once we recall some part of a memory, all the rest will come, for the memory is holographic, that is, all of it is contained within each part of it. If we want to, we can begin anywhere with an aspect of a remembered event or person and continue to recall and relive and relate the memory in considerable detail. Now consider the possibility that images are memories of the future. Images will have exactly the same qualities as memories: they are concrete and specific, not abstract and theoretical; we can relive them in our imaginations — taste, touch, smell, see, feel, hear them and explain the significance or meaning they have to us.

So too, by analogy, can we taste, touch, smell, see, feel, and hear images of the future, live them in our imaginations, and grasp their significance and meaning to us. Images of the future operate in our imaginations in exactly the same way as memories of the past, even to the fact that two people remember the same “future” event differently! The only difference between memories and images is that memories have happened and futures images haven’t — or so we think. But in the imaginal world this is not a very big difference. So entertaining images of possible futures, or futures we desire and intend, is a way of rehearsing them, living them in our imaginations, initially within ourselves and then with others, to see if they meet our criteria of loving, good, just and humane futures. For these are the futures we seek to create.

Memory functions in a third way. In addition to reminding us of the basis of our hope and serving as an analogue of futures imaging, our memories are also a storehouse of ideas and possibilities we have entertained through the years. When invited to imagine alternative futures, some imagers will produce memories of the past — stories or feelings or actions which fully embody the world they long for, that have become their touchstone for the future. They have glimpsed their future and it is yesterday. As I said before, in the realm of the imaginal, this is not a consequential difference so long as the image stands the tests for concreteness, specificity, compellingness, etc.

I wonder if these functions of memory have any relevance for the creating and handing down of culture in smaller societies in a context of globalization. In Canada outside of Québec, I see the role of memory in building hope. From time to time, being smaller than the source of the global monoculture, we have needed to remind ourselves that we have taken action in the past to address our concerns and the results have been successful, even impressive. I think here of the gradual process by which we in Canada put in place a social safety net over a period of nearly a century, a social safety net that has served us well in Canada and received favourable reviews beyond Canada. As a smaller society, too, we have had to remind ourselves that not all that can be invented has been invented and that we have the capacity to imagine worlds other than those we now inhabit which are, after all, inventions of those who came before us. I think here of our failure, so far at least, to imagine (perhaps more a failure of will, but also of imagination) a just social order with First Nations and Metis and Inuit people in Canada. Memory functions, too, in our smaller society as a storehouse of policy ideas we have thought and tried, or not tried, in the past; ideas that may be more valid for us than those imported from other places. I struggled for an example here, but perhaps it is our early and sometimes misguided applications of multicultural policy.

Well, I put out for discussion these ideas about memory and future possibilities, about creating inner and outer spaces for culture. It seems to me that at every level of meaning making, from the inner to the local to the societal and the global, there is a tremendous tension between homogeneity and diversity, between status quo and newness, between the powers of the king and those of the poet, as Walter Bruggemann (1978) would say. Based on my experiences with citizens groups, I am hopeful. My hope quotient is high! I see groups broadening the notion of cultural resources, and using cultural mapping processes and methods, to discover and articulate for themselves those characteristics of place that make it unique. I see them opening spaces, both internally and in the public sphere, in which to imagine and to enact what they have imagined. I see them capable of identifying for themselves what is not okay about the present, what they do not wish to hand down to their grandchildren. I see them imagining alternatives that are fully satisfying and on which they are prepared to take action individually and collectively. Being smaller groups within a larger community has not prevented either the imagining or the enacting. True, all groups wrestle with two difficult questions: what about those who aren't here, and who are we to invent futures for our communities? But the futures they imagine pull them forward, releasing energy for the task. And their offerings as small groupings within the larger community constitute new offerings to that larger community. So might we, Canada outside of Quebec — or even Canada with Quebec — as a smaller society, make our contributions in the face of global cultural homogenization to hopeful, just, and more fully human futures. What are we doing when we do this? We are creating new political spaces: provisional, unsealed, dependent. We are shaping new worlds for ourselves and for future generations who will find in the culture we hand down the dissatisfactions which lead them to imagine their alternatives. We are, in the words of Walter Bruggemann, “transforming the world [and, I would add, ourselves] for the sake of humanness” (1978).

## REFERENCES

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