The View From Below: Rob Ford and Perceptions of Canada on U.S. Late Night Comedy

May Friedman, Ph.D., Ryerson University

Abstract

This analysis aims to review the means by which an imagined Canadianness is described through the responses of American comedians to late Toronto mayor Rob Ford on comedy shows which aired between May 2013 and May 2014. The Rob Ford story, as taken up in late night U.S. comedy, both maintains and transgresses stereotypes about Canada and Canadians. Likewise, an examination of the constructed Ford (and the constructed Canada which simultaneously emerges) in late night comedy focuses on appropriate behaviours and expectations, especially with respect to the governance of body and mind.

Keywords: Rob Ford; Canadian-American relations; media analysis; popular culture; Canadian-American relations.

Introduction

One of the most divisive figures ever to grace Canadian politics, Rob Ford was a man whose name became synonymous with controversy. From his ten years as a city councillor to his complicated and often confusing reign as the mayor of Toronto, Ford shifted the view of Canadian politics, both within the country and beyond.

While there are many possible angles through which to examine Rob Ford, this paper aims to consider the public perceptions of Ford as portrayed through the medium of late night American

comedy talk shows.[1] While the actual facts of Ford's unusual public history are important, they are not the focus of this study. Rather, this analysis aims to review the means by which an imagined Canadianness is described through the responses of American comedians to Ford on late night shows which aired between May 2013 and May 2014. An examination of the portrayal of Ford through late night American television creates a lens through which to view Canada. The presentation of Ford, as a loud, fat, irreverent politician simultaneously threatens and reinforces the project of a concocted and idealized Canadianness. By positioning Ford as an unlikely ambassador for Canada, silent perceptions about Canada in the American imaginary are exposed and explored. As a result, this investigation sheds light on the project of Canadian nationhood far beyond the specific treatment of a single infamous individual. Likewise, an examination of the constructed Ford (and the constructed Canada which simultaneously emerges) in late night comedy reveals unspoken assumptions about appropriate behaviours and expectations, especially with respect to the governance of body and mind.

As mayor of Canada's largest city, with a population of two and a half million residents, Ford wielded considerable power in the broader Canadian political landscape. As a leader, he inspired strong opinions: his supporters, who came to be collectively known as "Ford Nation," were deeply loyal and fervent, while his detractors were equally passionate about Ford's perceived flaws.[2] In the four years of Ford's term of office as mayor, he garnered attention far beyond the reaches of his own jurisdiction.

---

[1] While an examination of the construction of Ford through Canadian comedic responses (for example, on *The Rick Mercer Report* or *This Hour Has Twenty-Two Minutes*) would undoubtedly be equally fruitful, such an analysis is not the basis of this article.

[2] Importantly, much of the schism between Ford supporters and critics fell along urban and suburban lines: much of the support for Ford's mayoralty came from the ring of suburbs which surround Toronto's downtown. As a result, the narrative of Ford's reign is often positioned as a dialogue of left-wing urban elitism in contrast to right-wing suburban authenticity. Of equal importance, however, is an acknowledgement that both Ford supporters and detractors crossed lines of race, class, ethnicity and other important demographic markers.

While his role as a fiscal and social conservative drew on established scripts of right-wing governance, his public persona and affect were unusual in ways that garnered both positive and negative attention. His focus on accessibility and transparency differentiated him from other politicians—frustrated by bureaucracy and red tape, Ford handed out his cell phone number indiscriminately and committed to constituents that he would personally ensure that their problems were quickly addressed. At the same time, Ford seemed to, throughout his time as a politician in both the roles of councillor and mayor, transgress tacit rules about gentility among public figures: he had a history of impaired driving and domestic violence, and his florid personality led to altercations with police, constituents, and city staff. These behaviours were observed in the Canadian media (especially when Ford announced his candidacy for mayor) but did not make Rob Ford a household name. Instead, it was the specific events of 2013–14 that positioned Ford, as well as Toronto and Canada, as objects of extreme interest in the global imagination.

Setting the Stage: Rob Ford 2013–14

In order to unpack the variety of American comedic responses to Rob Ford, it is important to briefly review the events of 2013–14 that led to his gaining international attention. Prior to his election as mayor in 2010, and throughout his ten years as city councillor (2000 to 2010), Ford was no stranger to controversy. As councillor, he represented Etobicoke North, located in the northwest corner of Toronto. He became renowned at City Hall for making provocative and nonsensical comments and, as discussed above, he was embroiled in both personal and professional challenges such as domestic violence allegations and heated interactions with city staff, journalists, and constituents (Doolittle). While notable, Ford's transgressions prior to his reign as mayor went largely uncommented upon beyond local (and occasionally national) media. Even in his 2010 mayoral campaign, when many of Ford's prior challenges were exposed, Ford still successfully rode a populist wave: his role as the accessible non-elitist "every man" abided, and his past faded into the background.

Ford's role as a colourful but otherwise unexceptional politician abruptly shifted in May 2013. While there had been prior rumours of Ford's excessive drinking and drug use, U.S. media site *Gawker* and two investigative reporters from the *Toronto Star* broke a news story suggesting that they had viewed a video of Ford smoking crack cocaine (Cook; Doolittle and Donovan; Doolittle). Ford cited his past combative relationship with the media and scoffed at the story, which he viewed as evidence of a media witch hunt. In November 2013, however, Toronto's Chief of Police, Bill Blair, indicated that the video did exist and was largely as reported. Ford, after an initial claim that the police were likewise attempting to victimize him, finally admitted that he had smoked crack.

After this stunning admission, another video was leaked, this one showing a very impaired Ford angrily uttering death threats. At this point, his staff began to desert his office. City council, unable to unseat Ford, instead denuded him of all his powers, as well as his office budget. Ford responded to allegations that he had sexually harassed female staffers with degrading and sexist language. His anger was clearly visible. Despite Ford behaving in repeatedly shocking ways, on what seemed a daily basis, he refused to resign and held on to his office, albeit stripped of most of his powers. Furthermore, Ford steadfastly maintained his candidacy for the mayoralty race in fall 2014 and only withdrew late in the campaign due to significant health concerns. These concerns ultimately led to his death in March 2016.

During the height of the Rob Ford crack cocaine scandal, he emerged as an international media story with coverage of his antics spreading across the globe. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Ford's behaviour caught the attention of U.S. comedians on late night talk shows. While this particular site of discourse was not unique in its coverage of Ford (who had gained notoriety during this period across virtually every possible media platform in seemingly every possible jurisdiction), the specifics of the ways that Ford's story was constructed in American comedic venues betrayed some interesting conclusions about images of Canadianness as well as tropes of

appropriate behaviours and normative bodies. It is these tropes which form the substance of this paper through a discourse analysis of forty-eight clips covering responses to Ford from eight late night U.S. comedy hosts; namely, Jimmy Fallon, Jon Stewart, David Letterman, Craig Ferguson, Stephen Colbert, Jay Leno, Jimmy Kimmel, and Conan O'Brien. What can be gained by examining the role of this group of (rich, white) men centering their humour on another (rich, white) man? While it is imperative to note that these comedians are generally homogenous, and while it is difficult to ascertain the scope of their audiences, it is nonetheless meaningful to analyze their responses as a form of knowledge production about popular culture. As mediators into current events, the musings of this group of comics reflect and amplify dominant discourses on a range of topics and thus their reactions to Ford, and to Canada, present a meaningful site of analysis.

The clips under discussion were aired between May 2013 and May 2014 and covered the majority of the Rob Ford crack scandal saga right through responses to Ford's decision to enter rehab in May of 2014. In examining these artifacts, four major themes emerge: first, Ford's behaviour as shockingly antithetical to Canadian decorum; second, Canadian responses to Ford's antics as evidence of Canadian "niceness"; third, the attention paid to Ford's fat body; and fourth, Rob Ford as an example of carnival grotesquerie.

Trope 1: But How Could This Happen in Canada?

Like many Canadians, I eagerly consumed the Ford scandal as it was unfolding, and one of the most entertaining sites of engagement with the story was through late night U.S. comedy television. Suddenly, Jon Stewart wasn't talking about esoteric U.S. politics on *The Daily Show*, he was talking about Toronto. Images of the CN Tower and Toronto City Hall were shown on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. The familiarity that I normally associate exclusively with Canadian media was suddenly present in every late night comedy talk show I could imagine. Yet, even as I rolled in my seat laughing at these funny men roasting my city's mayor, I was struck by the extent to which their reactions were rooted in perceptions of stereotypical Canadianness.

Several hosts included sketches of fake Rob Fords drunkenly strutting around their offices, filled with stereotypical Canadiana, including flags, maple leaves, and beavers. Hosts practiced their Canadian "hoser" accents (drawing on further stereotypes of Canadianness made popular through the fictional Bob and Doug McKenzie on *SCTV* in the early 1980s). On a more nuanced level, however, multiple comics picked apart the controversy and used it to show the ways that Ford deviated from an essentialized Canadianness. While initially much of the joking was rooted in disbelief that *any* public official could behave in potentially anti-social ways, the response quickly moved toward an analysis of the ways that Ford's drug use and antics were, in particular, un-Canadian.

On *Conan,* Conan O'Brien stated, "I will say what is so strange to people was that it's Canada. You guys are so—you're always on the ball, you don't have scandals like this!" (14 Nov. 2013). Jimmy Kimmel interviewed Bill Clinton who said, "[Ford] has absolutely destroyed every stereotype people have about Canadians… you know, that Canadians are upbeat, optimistic, can-do, they're embracing, they're inclusive…" (3 April 2014), while Jon Stewart noted: "It's like Canada is that friend you had in high school. And all the parents love him because he calls everyone Mr. and Mrs., but then you find he's like, actually a date rapist with a roofie line" (21 May 2013). The core of these jokes is in the cognitive dissonance which occurs when anti-social and illegal behaviours emerge from a country characterized as staid and reliable. The confusion of these comics quickly segued into jokes about country-wide impairment. For example, on *The Late Show with David Letterman,* Letterman quickly suggested, "The entire country, as far as I know, of Canada, is now on crack" (21 Nov. 2013), while Jimmy Kimmel asked with incredulity, "What the hell is going on? Are they all on crack?" (17 Dec. 2013). Kimmel also noted,

> Here's the thing: I think this Mayor Ford experience has been very educational. For a while I thought it was just him, I thought it was just Mayor Ford, but what I've realized is that Canadians are much, much weirder than anyone of us had any

> idea they were. They seem so normal, but they're not. They're different. And I think it's important that going forward, we keep this in mind. These people are coconuts. And we could be in danger. (17 Dec. 2013)

The bewilderment of these comedians was rooted in an interpretation of Canada as dependable and deeply moral. This view of Canada hearkens to writer Mordecai Richler's edict: "The sour truth is that just about everybody outside of Canada finds us boring. Immensely boring" (quoted in Hart 202). The unsubtle subtext of this particular line of humour was to suggest that Ford, in his drug use and deceit, was too flamboyant for a steadfast and humdrum nation like Canada. In other words, any deviation from the standard script, especially by a public figure, was much more shocking than it would be if it were to occur in a different jurisdiction.

Importantly, much of the shock centred on the very specific trope of Ford using crack cocaine, a method of drug use that is often associated with people who are street involved. This perception was strengthened by the still images from the crack video which pictured Ford with reputed drug dealers. In other words, Ford's drug use even transgressed the "normal" scripts for addiction among the rich and famous, suggesting that his behaviour was not merely unusual, but rather unseemly. Ford's alcoholism and related behaviour wasn't nearly as entertaining: drunkenness is prosaic, but crack is attention grabbing and is deeply and particularly un-Canadian.

Trope 2: Are Canadians Too Nice?

If Ford's exuberant personality and illegal drug use were viewed as diabolically un-Canadian, there were other ways that the narrative of Ford's experience, and its subsequent reception, were seen as emblematic of Canadian identities. Specifically, the perceived tolerance by Torontonians for the mayor's antics was viewed as evidence of Canadians' famed niceness.

On *The Late Late Show,* Craig Ferguson asked, "How come he's still in office? I'm thinking the Canadians are just too polite to tell a

crackhead to step down. 'He's been smoking a lot of crack, well I'm not going to talk to him'" (5 Nov. 2013). Jon Stewart, discussing the city council response to Ford said, "Ultimately, the council voted 37-5 to request, non-bindingly, if the mayor would consider, respectfully, a leave of absence, sir, please. Or, as that's known up there—justice, Canadian style" (14 Nov. 2013).

Significantly, several hosts touched on the issue of approval ratings and the fact that Ford maintained his voter appeal despite the chaos of the situation. On *The Tonight Show with Jay,* Leno stated: "His approval rating has gone up five points… which makes you wonder—how many crack heads are there in Toronto?" (7 Nov. 2013). On the same night, Letterman noted: "His approval ratings have skyrocketed since he announced he's smoking crack. Is everybody up there on crack, is that the deal?" (7 Nov. 2013). Kimmel argued, "What makes this story remarkable to me is that despite the fact that he admitted to smoking crack after lying about it for five months, Rob Ford's approval rating has not dipped a bit in Toronto… he's still holding rock steady at 44%, which I think is better than Obama is doing here… Canadians really are nicer than we are" (13 Nov. 2013). Stewart had a slightly different take: "I heard that your mayor Ford approval ratings went up after he admitted to smoking crack. You know what that makes you? Enablers, eh?" (5 Nov. 2013).

These examples suggest that the constructed Canadian response to Rob Ford is that of heightened tolerance and moderation. In fact, however, the details of Ford's tenure as mayor lend themselves to an entirely different reading. Rather than epitomizing Canadian civility, Ford's rise to mayor and subsequent and ongoing popularity may show the hollowness of the Canadian myth of tolerance in ways similar to those analyzed by Eva Mackey in her 2002 book, *The House of Difference*. Mackey found that, specifically with respect to ethnic and cultural diversity, Canadians were invested in the *image* of multiculturalism and tolerance to a far greater extent than was specifically manifested in their behaviours. She asks, "How does 'tolerance' for 'others' work in the construction of an unmarked and yet dominant national identity? What are its effects?" (3). In

Mackey's survey of Canadian cultural events across the country, she found ample evidence of xenophobia and intolerance being expressed side by side with a smug assurance that Canada is a nicer and more welcoming country than others, and specifically more so than the United States. Ford's public persona allowed American television hosts to centre the image of Canadian gentility while masking the ways that Ford's political stance was actually quite consonant with Canadian values. This view of Canada is consistent with Mackey's analysis.

Examining the Ford situation from a scholarly perspective, cultural scholar Duncan Koerber writes:

> Even after Bill Blair's news that the police had recovered the video, Ford's support stood at 44%. Two conclusions follow from these results: first, segments of the Toronto population clearly supported Ford strongly in the face of any negative news; and second, Torontonians had very different views on Ford's situation, despite the universally critical commentary on his crisis response. (317)

It is important to note that Rob Ford was, throughout his political dealings, both fiscally and socially conservative. He was infamous for his homophobic and racist gaffes. At the same time, Ford consistently enjoyed support across a number of demographics transcending race and class divisions. Something about his populist approach and perceived accessibility allowed him to perform as an advocate for the "little guy," even as he simultaneously slashed public services and publicly equated poverty with laziness. Most importantly, his style was seen as a refreshing antidote to a perceived elitism and a lack of transparency associated with city politics, specifically attributed to left-leaning candidates and politicians in Toronto's downtown core.

Geographer Zack Taylor, whose academic work focuses specifically on Toronto politics asks, in his analysis of the 2010 mayoral election, whether "the election of Rob Ford and the persistence, and perhaps sharpening, of the urban/suburban

cleavage in Toronto foreshadow the breakdown of centre-left political hegemony in Toronto at the federal and provincial levels?" (22). Taylor's analysis suggests that the politicized, feminist, and left-leaning political base is increasingly shrinking in favour of populist politics like Ford's. In the ongoing support for Ford we may, in fact, see evidence of Canadian *intolerance* rather than the impression of events put forth by American comedians.

This reading, that Ford met with success because the climate of this country is increasingly swinging to the right, is entirely absent from late night U.S. comedy reactions to Ford. An overwhelming theme across many of the clips was a sneering judgment of Canadians for being too soft. Interestingly, both Craig Ferguson and Conan O'Brien invoke socialized medicine, suggesting that a perceived Canadian overtolerance had a role to play in Ford's challenges, as explained in these comments. Ferguson says:

> "Before we start pointing fingers, I think the Canadians need to start looking at their role in all of this. Oh sure, sure it's easy to blame the fat crack head. And it's also hilarious. But isn't crack smoking mayors what happens when everybody has free health care?" (6 Nov. 2013).

On the same night, O'Brien says:

> "Since he admitted to smoking crack, the mayor of Toronto's approval rating has actually gone up. That's true. So apparently, if your government health care system works, you can do whatever the hell you want." (6 Nov. 2013).

Jon Stewart, by contrast, invokes a utopic Canada, saying: "Good on you, Toronto. Must be nice to live in a city so problem free that it can be run by a hard-drinking crack mayor." (4 Nov. 2013)

If American comedy responses to the Ford scandal construct an imagined Canadianness, how does this mythic nationalism stand up against our own perceptions of ourselves? Canadian studies scholars Holman and Thacker note: "The relationship between these

countries [U.S. and Canada] has not been symmetrical or equal; with ten times the population of Canada and a much more powerful economy and military, the United States is 'big brother' to Canada" (145). Viewers' responses seem to echo this fraternalism—Canadians are shyly proud that big brother has noticed us, but concerned with his snarky teasing. Writing for Toronto's NOW Magazine, John Semley argues that while "It's nice to have people share our embarrassments. It's even nice to have people acknowledge us. At all…. If anything, Rob Ford is an anomaly in Canada because of how *American* he seems: everything about him outsized and totally unembarrassed." In his examination of Canadian–American relations, scholar Michael Hart makes this point more strongly:

> Canadians are the closest thing to Americans, making Canadians insist even harder that they are not and leading Americans to wonder why. That is why Canada–US relations, viewed from the Canadian end of the telescope, tend to be as sensitive and intense as they are. From the other end of the telescope, awareness of Canada and things Canadian does not amount to much. Canada is the source of cold weather on the evening news, and unless you are professionally engaged, not much else. For many Americans, what happens in Canada is about as important as what happens in Wyoming or New Hampshire. Usually not that important in the global scheme of things! That attitude has its own way of grating. (202)

Ford's detractors argued that he was embarrassing Canada on the world stage (Layne). Yet few comments were made about the ways that Canadianness itself was being constructed and consumed in these late-night musings. If anything, the commentary from Canadian media outlets constructed a similar "imagined community" (Anderson), presenting Canada as virtuous and kind, with Ford shown as a singular bad seed. As Holman and Thacker suggest, "In a strange way, Canadians have embraced and appropriated (and occasionally embellished) this caricature of themselves as a nation of rustics—homespun and simple, forthright but happy" (149).

Such a reading ignores Ford's tremendous and consistent popularity. An "imagined community" of Canadians who are tolerant and kind presents "Ford Nation" as antithetical to the Canadian nation. Instead, a true analysis of Ford's popularity suggests that Canadians are increasingly moving toward social and fiscal conservatism and away from any illusion of tolerance.

Trope 3: The Fat Body

It is impossible to speak about the comedic coverage of Rob Ford without focusing on the specific treatment of his body and his mind as non-normative. Arguably, Rob Ford predominantly got traction in American late night comedy not because of his voting record, not because of his shady past, not because of his addictions or other scandalous behaviour, but because of his appearance.

In no small part, Ford was held as the butt of the joke for so long because he was fat. Ford's fat body was invoked in most of the clips under discussion. Letterman, following his reduction in power, called him "large and no longer in charge" (19 Nov. 2013), and later referred to him as a "blimp" and made reference to Shamu the whale (22 Jan. 2014). Craig Ferguson said "looks like the only thing this guy smokes is ham" (5 Nov. 2013). Canadian comedian Seth Rogen, interviewed by Conan O'Brien, pointed to an apparent contradiction in Ford's demeanour, stating: "Rob Ford is a fat crackhead, which you don't see that often. I don't know how he's doing that, maybe he's eating the crack" (2 April 2014).

The humour brought forth at the expense of Ford's fat body draws on existing tropes of fat people as lazy, gluttonous, out of control, and above all, unworthy of respect (Murray; LeBesco). In the particular case of Ford, his large body was seen as confirming his anti-social tendencies. These tendencies, as mentioned earlier, either make him a weird Canadian or show how Canadians are weird for ignoring—and electing—a weirdo in our midst. Yet the story is more complicated. Writing in *Shameless* magazine, Julia Horel engages with the endless fascination with Ford's large body:

> When you tell Rob Ford that he's a fat fuck who needs to get on a bike, you erase me as a fat cyclist. When you say that mentioning Ford's weight is justified metaphorically because it represents conservative values, you erase me as a fat progressive. If you think that correlating Ford's fatness with his terrible politics doesn't also strongly imply a criticism of fat more broadly, you aren't thinking critically. When you brush off my concerns about the language that we're using in our critiques of the mayor, I'm hearing, loud and clear, that I don't have the right progressive body, that I fall outside your realm of acceptability as a progressive person in Toronto. (n.p.) (July 27, 2011)

Horel reminds us that functional citizenship is not equally available to all bodies; notably, Horel also makes clear that fatphobia and size oppression are not uniquely conservative positions. While left leaning political views are often perceived as anti-racist or queer positive, looking at Horel's writing reminds us of the extent to which fat bodies are maligned across the political spectrum. Ford's body, in particular, was ripe for comment in the way that it represented a failed masculinity, suggesting, as Gilman writes, that "The fat male becomes a pathological case" as the most obvious example of a body out of control. (64) Charlene Elliot echoes this point in considering the ways that obese bodies are constructed as selfish and irresponsible. Elliot writes that "obese individuals are implicitly and explicitly framed as 'less equal' citizens, and the conspicuous body is read as not merely the sign of moral failure, but the failure of personal responsibility as well" (135). She adds: "This is the body of the lesser citizen, the one that explicitly cries out to be controlled because it has shown that autonomy has led to poor choices" (140). These failings are made evident through the recent Canadian Senate Report on Obesity, which chides Canadians to stay in shape, in part to ensure that fat bodies do not overconsume health care dollars (2016).

On the one hand, Ford, in reaching the post of mayor, even temporarily, obviously transcends some of the limitations of citizenship placed upon his fat body. Yet it is notable that, as soon as

he faced other trouble, his body became an appropriate site for mockery. In other words, once he transgressed the contract of "acceptable" behaviour, the public was free to remark upon his fatness, and to comment on it as a manifestation of his other failings. As a fat and functional mayor, he was exposed to a particular kind of genial hilarity; when coupled with his other transgressions, however, the humour moved toward cruelty and his fat body became a completely acceptable, almost unavoidable target. As a fat Canadian, in particular, Ford was a ripe mark for American comics who capitalized on the shift away from Americans as the chief obesity offenders and revelled in focusing on the deficits Ford offered as a nearby foreigner. His fatness, as a marker of his lack of gentility, further mark him as un-Canadian; the specifics of the ways fat is constructed in the super-sized American political landscape hasten the glee with which American comedic responses were particularly offered.

Trope 4: The Grotesque

While Ford's large body may be the most obvious manifestation of his large personality, the comedic attention he received was also rooted in his presentation of the grotesque. Drawing from the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), Victoria Pitts writes, 'The grotesque body is the eating and drinking body, the body of open orifices, the coarse body which yawns, hiccups, nose blows, flatulates, spits, hawks' (1998: 69)—in short, a body very reminiscent of Rob Ford. Ford was fat; he was sweaty; he grew very red, he shouted, he yelled, he smoked crack! He was, across all axes, the antithesis of the demure and contained body that we are taught to admire and aspire toward. If politicians are meant to maintain a degree of decorum, the intersection of "Canadian" with "politician" further constructs Ford as deviant, especially to an American audience. There is no question that Ford's crassness, in both physical and verbal manifestations, was a huge reason for the fascination with him as an American comedic subject, as shown in an example from Jon Stewart (perhaps the most famous clip of a late night comedian responding to Ford):

Stewart showed a clip of Ford responding to allegations appearing in police reports of abusive behaviour toward his staff. In a now infamous quote, Ford said: "It says that I want to eat her pussy. I've never said that in my life to her. I would never do that. I'm happily married. I've got more than enough to eat at home." Stewart, unsurprisingly, had the same reaction as many viewers, which was to scream "Whaaaaat?" over and over for quite a long time (14 Nov. 2013).

Stewart's hysteria, while hilarious, also gives pause for thought in its insistent focus on Ford as, first and foremost, uncouth, rather than problematic as a public servant. Stewart's response to Ford's emblematic performance is rooted in his shock at the mayor's crassness, shifting the focus away from any other concerns. For instance, it is not clear that Stewart is unnerved by Ford's sexism in the example above, so much as his choice to use lurid language on national television.

Discussion

Viewing the coverage of Ford's performance through an American comedic lens has implications for Canadian studies, media studies and fat studies. Media (particularly, in this instance, media from the outside looking in) may both amplify and create culture. In the example of Rob Ford, a consideration of the messages beneath the words in late night American comedy may expose normative tropes of Canadianness while upholding dominant discourses about "right" bodies. This examination of media suggests that an analysis of the view of Canada from the U.S. can yield useful information about both how we are seen and how we see ourselves. Interestingly, a view of the Ford coverage as a lens through which to examine dominant discourses destabilizes the political spectrum and leads to a broader analysis of the ways that the spectacle of Ford may be worthy of celebration, even to those who deplored his political leanings. In order to understand this shift, however, the core message about Ford, as seen on TV, must be clearly exposed.

American late night comedy finally concludes that Ford is a failure as a Canadian. The response to Ford rests largely on the contradiction between expected Canadian minimalism and by pointing to Ford's larger-than-life body and behaviours. Both premises are problematic: Canadians are not essentially kind and nice, and Ford's intemperance ought not to be the chief site of controversy.

Late night U.S. comedy responded to Ford as a person of excess: excess weight, excess emotion, excess volume, excess indulgence. He was bigger than alcohol—he actually smoked crack. He didn't just grope a staffer; he made completely sexist remarks about her at a media scrum. Several views are thus conflated: Ford's immoderation becomes somehow irretrievably tied to his homophobic views, his addictions are somehow tied to his racist posturing. In condemning ways that Ford behaved deplorably, license was also given to judge his body and his corporeality as equally detestable. The view of Ford as seen through American late night comedy thus retrenches the same moral code that (mistakenly) portrays Canada as polite, humble, and restrained. Where is the Canadian icon who transgresses this mythic and constraining Canadianness without immediately being branded a villain and a laughing stock? If Rob Ford is not the Canadian who ought to represent Canada beyond its borders, neither are the anemic and staid politicians who have followed in his stead. These alternatives merely maintain a fictional Canadianness that itself masks the more disturbing elements of Canadian society: racism, colonialism, sexism, the shaming of poor people and fat bodies—all handily obscured by Canadian decorum.

Without minimizing the impact of Ford's truly appalling political decisions, and the fundamentally oppressive beliefs which lay beneath them, this analysis suggests that Ford, in breaking the contract of Canadianness so publicly, may have offered Canadians some interesting alternatives. Instead, the comedic view of Ford abandons critical analyses of his policies and instead merely takes aim and laughs at difference. In particular, the joke is found in the perceived chasm between American and Canadian identities, or the

perceived, presumably quiet, thin, and "appropriate" "us" in response to Rob Ford's "them." The limited modes of civic engagement available to Canadians—particularly the stereotypical hackneyed version put forth on late night comedy—may thus be seen as evidence of Canada's failings rather than as this country's core beliefs. Mackey writes, "One of the essential features of Canadian nation-building is its flexibility and ambiguity. The project of Canadian nation-building is an extremely contradictory, conflicted, contested and incomplete process" (18). What would an approach to Ford, or to political engagement more broadly, that drew on Mackey's view of nation-building offer? How could a robust engagement with Rob Ford allow for both a celebration of excess and a critical response to intolerance?

Conclusion

On March 22, 2016, Rob Ford died of cancer. In the tributes which followed his death, Ford suddenly much better fit in the imagined Canadian nation: presented as an embattled and hardy warrior, instead of a laughingstock. In death, Ford's body was cut down to size and he was thus re-inscribed within the constraints of good Canadian behavior.

As Ford recedes from public view, the imagined Canadian nation floats back into the foreground. With the handover of Toronto city council on December 2, 2014 there is a turning away from the carnival of Toronto politics back toward the kind of bland and slippery, beige city council that exemplifies municipal government, a style that veils the excesses of its oppressive conservatism under political correctness and rigourous adherence to *Robert's Rules of Order*. While it is doubtful that the new Toronto city councillors will have reason to see themselves mocked by Stewart, Kimmel, Fallon, and the like, this does not assure them of responsible leadership. Rather, it may signal a return to the type of occult and inaccessible politics that are emblematically Canadian: politics that may favour normativity over justice, and politeness over compassion. The amplification of Canadianness through the twin lens of American perspectives and comedy presented an unusual mirror through

which to examine both the decorous myths and uglier realities of stereotypical Canadianness. By moving beyond Ford, we may have lost an opportunity to interrogate myths of the Canadian nation as well as gut-level intolerance of particular kinds of flamboyance and excess.

References

Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1983. Print.

Canada. Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. *Obesity in Canada: A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Healthier Canada.* http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/sen/committee/421/SOCI/Reports/2016-02-25_Revised_report_Obesity_in_Canada_e.pdf

Colbert Report, The. CBS. 27 Nov. 2013. Television.

Conan. TBS. 6 Nov. 2013. Television.

Conan. TBS. 14 Nov. 2013. Television.

Conan. TBS. 2 April 2014. Television.

Cook, J. "For Sale: A Video of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford Smoking Crack Cocaine." *Gawker*. 16 May 2013. Web. 2 Nov. 2013. <http://gawker.com/for-sale-a-video-of-toronto-mayor-rob-ford-smoking-cra-507736569>.

Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The. Comedy Central. 21 May 2013. Television.

Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The. Comedy Central. 4 Nov. 2013. Television.

Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The. Comedy Central. 5 Nov. 2013. Television.

Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The. Comedy Central. 14 Nov. 2013. Television.

Doolittle R. *Crazytown: The Rob Ford Story.* Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2014. Print.

Doolittle, R. and Donovan, K. "Rob Ford in 'Crack Cocaine' Video Scandal." *Toronto Star.* 16 May 2013. Web. 23 May 2013. <http://www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/2013/05/16/toronto_mayor_rob_ford_in_crack_cocaine_video_scandal.html>.

Elliot, C.D. "Big Persons, Small Voices: On Governance, Obesity and the Narrative of the Failed Citizen." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41.3 (2007): 134-49. Print.

Gilman, S. *Fat Boys: A Slim Book.* Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. Print.

Hart, M. "Of Friends, Interests, Crowbars, and Marriage Vows in Canada-United States Trade Relations." *Images of Canadianness: Visions on Canada's Politics, Culture, Economics*. Ed. L. d'Haenens. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1998. 199–200. Print.

Holman, A., and Thacker, R. "Literary and Popular Culture." *Canadian Studies in the New Millennium*. Ed. P. James and M. Kasoff. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008. 125–64. Print.

Horel, J. "Fatness and Rob Ford." *Shameless Magazine,* 27 July 2011. Web. 2 Jan. 2015. <http://shamelessmag.com/blog/entry/fatness-and-rob-ford/>.

Jimmy Kimmel Live. ABC. 13 Nov. 2013. Television.

Jimmy Kimmel Live. ABC. 18 Dec. 2013. Television.

Jimmy Kimmel Live. ABC. 3 April 2014. Television.

Koerber, D. "Crisis Communication Response and Political Communities: The Unusual Case of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 39 (2014): 311–31. Print.

Late Show with David Letterman, The. CBS. 7 Nov. 2013. Television.

Late Show with David Letterman, The. CBS. 19 Nov. 2013. Television.

Late Show with David Letterman, The. CBS. 21 Nov. 2013. Television.

Late Show with David Letterman, The. CBS. 22 Jan. 2013. Television.

Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson, The. CBS. 5 Nov. 2013. Television.

Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson, The. CBS. 6 Nov. 2013. Television.

Layne, K. "The Assassination of Canada by the Coward Rob Ford." *Gawker*. 6 Nov. 2013. Web. 16 Aug. 2014. <http://gawker.com/the-assassination-of-canada-by-the-coward-rob-ford-1459026074>.

LeBesco, K. *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity.* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2004. Print.

Mackey, E. *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. Print.
Murray, S. "(Un/be)coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics." *Social Semiotics* 15.2 (2005): 153–63. Print.

Pitts, V. L. '"Reclaiming" the female body: Embodied identity work, resistance and the grotesque', *Body and Society*, 4: 3, pp. 67–84. 1998.

Semley. J. "SNL's Rob Ford Sketch is Not Funny." *Now Magazine*. November 18, 2013. Web. April 4, 2016. https://nowtoronto.com/news/snls-rob-ford-sketch-is-not-funny/

Taylor, Z. "Who Elected Rob Ford, and Why? An Ecological Analysis of the 2010 Toronto Election." Canadian Political Science Association Conference. Waterloo, ON. May 2011. Paper. Web. 2 Jan. 2015. <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2011/Taylor.pdf>.

Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The. NBC. 7 Nov. 2013. Television.