

Without a Paddle: Schitt's Creek, CBC, and the Return to Community and Family in Uncertain Times

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ABSTRACT

Background *The Canadian television landscape is a key site through which national identity is expressed and debated. This article examines one such site—the recent CBC hit comedy Schitt's Creek (2015–)—that depicts economic uncertainty, family, and community.*

Analysis *A textual analysis of the show and a cultural analysis of its production highlight the parallels between precarious Canadian identity and precarious economic conditions in the neoliberal era.*

Conclusions and implications *Schitt's Creek builds on other “retreatist” texts that portray small-community life and family as sites of stability in times of uncertainty. Yet it de-localizes this community from the Canadian context, using stars and the CBC platform, rather than content, to signify place. The author argues that these alternative signifiers of “Canadian-ness” along with a marked shift in tone potentially account for the show's broad appeal.*

Keywords *Television; Cultural analysis; Textual analysis; Canadian stars; CBC*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Le paysage télévisuel canadien est un site clé pour exprimer et débattre l'identité nationale. Cet article examine une composante particulière de ce site, à savoir la comédie à succès du CBC, Schitt's Creek (2015–), télésérie portant sur communauté, famille et incertitude économique.*

Analyse *Une analyse textuelle de l'émission et une analyse culturelle de sa production font ressortir les parallèles entre une identité canadienne précaire et une situation économique précaire dans cette ère néolibérale.*

Conclusions et implications *Schitt's Creek se fonde sur d'autres récits d'évasion qui représentent la vie familiale dans une petite communauté comme oasis de stabilité dans une période incertaine. En même temps, cette émission retire la communauté du contexte canadien, recourant plutôt à des vedettes et à sa présence sur le CBC pour représenter le lieu de l'action. L'auteur soutient que ces signifiants alternatifs de la culture canadienne ainsi qu'un ton distinct expliquent potentiellement la popularité de cette émission.*

Mots clés *Télévision; Analyse culturelle; Analyse textuelle; Vedettes canadiennes; CBC*

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Introduction

Canada's geographic positioning alongside the United States, one of the largest economic, political, and cultural forces in the world, has long been a source of concern for the nation's policymakers. The constant influx of media content from the U.S. has resulted in a preoccupation on this side of the border with defining and nurturing a distinct "Canadian" identity through broadcast media, resulting in such policies as the establishment of a national public broadcaster (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) as well as "CanCon" (Canadian content) regulations (Druick, 2015; Tinic, 2005). Although such moves have certainly helped to nurture both English- and French-language production in Canada, there has been continued struggle—particularly on the English side—to promote Canadian content to Canadian audiences. This struggle, as noted in the recent report by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (Anderson, 2016), has been exacerbated by the rapid development of digital media technology.

While competition from multinational digital media producers and online platforms grows, the publicly mandated CBC has recently had to deal with its own challenges—at the internal, regional, and national levels (Tinic, 2005). Plagued by a decrease in funding, the loss of exclusive rights to its staple series *Hockey Night in Canada*, as well as the Jian Ghomeshi sexual assault allegations and scandal, the CBC was recently able to "lure back" two notable Canadian cultural exports/expats—Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara—to produce and star in the hit comedy series *Schitt's Creek* (Levy & Levy, 2015–). *Schitt's Creek* marks not only a potential re-imagining of the CBC and its relation to the English-Canadian star system, but also a shift in Canadian content (and its distribution—the show airs concurrently on U.S. network Pop and receives delayed distribution through Canadian Netflix). This shift responds to the current global climate of uncertainty, digitization, and neoliberalization.

This article draws on a cultural studies framework to conduct both a textual analysis of season 1 of *Schitt's Creek* and a production analysis of its stars and production/distribution context at the CBC. It examines these factors in relation to the notion of precarity: in particular, the show's portrayal of and position within a precarious neoliberal economy, as well as the show's production in relation to the precarious Canadian media landscape. Although precarity in this sense describes a specific socio-economic/geographic condition, precarity also has an affective element. Precarious status brings with it attendant feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and—of particular interest to this work—placelessness. These affective registers in many ways align with Canada's precarious national status, defined in relation to the American, British, Québécois, or immigrant "Other" (Bociurkiw, 2011; Tinic, 2005), but having comparatively few of its own cohesive national cultural referents.

One predominant way of coping culturally with precarious states of living has been the recent surge of "retreatist" narratives, as noted by Diane Negra (2009), which celebrate the return to, or re-energizing of, community life or small-town values in times of economic hardship. However, in the Canadian context this emphasis on small-community life also works to affirm national identity projects, particularly in the context of the CBC's mandate to represent the unique and disparate regions of the country

to one another (CBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.; Tinic, 2005). Small-town community life has long been a central theme in Canadian media and has anchored several of the most popular hit television comedy shows in Canada in recent memory, reflecting this broader concern about what it means to “be” or “belong” in Canada and/or on Canadian screens. The shows *Corner Gas* (2004–2009), *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007–2012), and *Trailer Park Boys* (2001–) all operate narratively around a shared rural geographic space and, consequently, a shared sense of community and identity that both compensates for and comprises the broader (non-)identity of Canada. *Schitt’s Creek* arguably extends this trope further—into an imaginary shared rural geographic space—while at the same time complicating it through a marked shift in comedic tone and a de-contextualization from the Canadian context.

In fact, the ambivalent tone and “global” appeal of *Schitt’s Creek* just a few years back might have seemed quite out of place on the national broadcaster. In looking at the show through both an economic lens and a cultural lens, this article highlights that ambivalence in relation to both the family and the community/nation in our contemporary moment. To develop this point, the next section first discusses the themes of the show in relation to neoliberalism on a broad/hemispherical scale. The article then situates these themes within the Canadian context, in particular relation to the already precariously situated Canadian identity, as well as in relation to recent shifts in Canadian popular culture, as demonstrated by and through the show.

Neoliberalism, retreatism, and the CBC

Neoliberalism has been defined as a broad socio-economic shift occurring in Western democracies that dates back to the era of Prime Minister Thatcher in the U.K. and President Reagan in the United States in the 1980s (Duggan, 2003; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Littler, 2013). Though the term “neoliberalism” is increasingly invoked to describe a variety of economic, social, and cultural policies, it remains useful as a broad descriptor of several related contemporary trends. These trends include, notably, a “winner take all” economic system (Negra, 2009, p. 126), in which personal responsibility, privatization, and deregulation rule (Gonick, 2015); a corresponding emphasis on the individual as independent actor and a de-contextualization of social or structural constraints (Duggan, 2003; Gill & Scharff, 2011); as well as a de-localization—or, inversely, a globalization—of capital, culture, people, and production (Negra, 2009; Tinic, 2005). This last trend, as noted by Marusya Bociurkiw (2011), can both threaten and intensify nationalist sentiment: threaten in the sense of bringing with it an increasing presence of “Others” and a diluting of the definition and identity of the nation, and intensify in the sense of inspiring a redoubling down on the idea of the nation, “a way to maintain a fantasy of bounded national space to which one maintains a strong affective tie” (p. 44). An affective tie is made to the imagined nation, as well as to the ideal (non-Other) citizens of that nation. Neoliberal ideology is notable for delineating who is and who is not a desirable citizen in economic terms; a person can be or start off as “Other” to the nation (i.e., an immigrant), yet their economic success can recuperate or negate that otherness, allowing them to be accepted into the nation. Neoliberal texts further build affective/identificatory ties to the wealthy through stories that encourage empathy for the rich rather than for the poor, despite the effects of

economic decline and lessening welfare support being felt most by those at the bottom of the economic ladder (Negra, 2009; Tyler, 2013).

The CBC represents a key public site where the effects of neoliberal policy are directly playing out in Canada. In her research on Canadian television production, Serra Tinic (2005, 2006) summarizes the evolution of both the content and production at the CBC in the 1980s and 1990s. The massive cuts to regional jobs and production had a significant impact on the kinds of programming offered by the national broadcaster, diluting its ability to represent the distinct and disparate regions of Canada to the rest of the nation (Tinic, 2005, 2006). Both the centralization of production (in Toronto) and the increasing drive toward globalization contributed to a growth of content that would have international appeal—that is, content that de-articulated Canadian identity and location. In the years since then, several “regional” comedy hits have emerged that have proven, despite their specific geographic positionality in Canada, to have appeal abroad (*Corner Gas* on CTV, *Trailer Park Boys* on Showcase, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* on CBC), thus challenging the de-Canadianization model that shaped much production policy in the 1990s. Furthermore, during the early 2000s, the CBC “Canadianized” its brand (Bociurkiw, 2011, p. 36), as signified by the introduction of the word “Canada” into its slogans (e.g., “Canada’s Own,” 2001–2007, and “Canada Lives Here,” 2007–2014) and its expanded use of what Cormack and Cosgrave (2014) call “state celebrity”: that is, CBC personalities who appear across CBC programming as ideal citizens and representatives of both the “nation” and the public broadcaster itself (see also Cormack & Cosgrave, 2016). This kind of stardom, as will be discussed further, serves as a significant contrast against the stardom of both Eugene Levy and Catherine O’Hara, whose fame is neither sutured to the CBC, nor contained within the (imagined) borders of the Canadian nation-state.

The CBC’s focus in the early 2000s on “personalities” over “stars” is also reflected in the network’s turn toward the highly economical strategy of reality television production, often through the licensing of internationally successful formats. One of the biggest recent hits for the CBC has been its national version of *Dragons’ Den* (Kleinfeld, Middleton, Armitage, & Tighe, 2006–), a program of particular interest for its reproduction/celebration of neoliberal ideology at the content level (celebrating entrepreneurship and monetary success) as well as its relation to Canadian identity. *Dragons’ Den* reproduces an international format in a de-specified yet central location (Toronto), with the identity of its dragons and product-pitchers, as well as its place on the CBC, serving as sufficient signifiers of “Canadian” content. Although certain products—say, hockey or winter-related ones—hint at the show’s Canadian production and economic context (made in Canada with the Canadian market/consumer in mind), the U.S. market is interestingly often verbally invoked, by both the dragons and the pitchers, as a particularly desirable and difficult market to enter. That two dragons were able to break into that market, not economically but culturally, as judges on the U.S. version of the show *Shark Tank*, is of particular interest in the context of the CBC losing its stars (a “fame drain,” if you will) and perhaps recognizing the appeal of American success and fame (even for the most privileged) in relation to the more quaint forms of Canadian “success.” This context is crucial in appreciating the significance of the CBC’s decision

to not only “lure back” two internationally successful Canadian stars (O’Hara and Levy) to headline a primetime comedy, but also to “import” American comedian Chris Elliott to star alongside them.

In many ways stardom can function to highlight nationalist sentiment. Cormack and Cosgrave’s (2014, 2016) important work on state celebrities helps to delineate some of the ways in which “personalities” who appear across various programs and genres of state broadcasting come to signify the nation. The international “star”—and here star is used to differentiate from personality, in that an actor is understood to not be merely “playing themselves”—who has achieved success abroad (i.e., in the U.S.) and returns to Canada, and the public broadcaster specifically, signifies citizenship in a different and much more precarious way, for at any moment, they could return to their success abroad.

This impermanence of place, however, takes us back to the concept of “retreatism” outlined earlier. In certain ways, the tale of Levy and O’Hara “returning” to Canada/CBC serves allegorically as its own retreatist narrative, emphasizing the importance of nation and community in hard times. As outlined by Negra (2009) and Thoma (2014), retreatist narratives not only celebrate small-town/community life (i.e., with Canada serving as small community in contrast to the U.S.), but also reinforce the increasingly dubious separation between “work” and “home” life that defines neoliberal states of being. (Here the merging of Eugene Levy’s onscreen family with his offscreen family takes on considerable importance.)

Notably, these retreatist stories often feature a contrast between the “city” person (whose value system seems to have much in common with multinational neoliberal forms of capitalism) and the small-town “community” into which they eventually integrate by adopting values other than capital. The clash between and eventual transformation of individuals takes plot precedence over any discussion of a redistribution of resources or potential government supports that might ease and equalize urban life (see also Weber, 2009). Again, this contrast is mirrored through a Canadian system of production/values that may be more “quaint” and “modest” than American ones, but these differences can be overcome with, say, enough star power or budget (as evidenced by *Schitt’s Creek’s* successful ongoing run on a U.S. cable network).

The contrasts of retreatist narratives often play out in the genres of melodrama and comedy. As viewers of these shows, we are encouraged to alternately identify with both perspectives—recognizing the excesses and superficialities of urban/capitalist expectations as well as the idiosyncrasies and quirks of rural populations. The Canadian television landscape has seen a number of successful shows that play upon our familiarity with regional stereotypes across Canada as well as our knowledge of, and perhaps exhaustion with, the limitations of metropolitan value systems. It has also produced many “urban” texts that are not quite recognizable as specifically Canadian ones (Tinic, 2005).

Because of its circulation in a global media market (airing in the U.S. and available to stream on Netflix), *Schitt’s Creek* follows a long line of Canadian-made content that is not clearly identifiable as “Canadian” (Tinic, 2005, 2006). In this way, the setting of the show follows the de-localizing logic of neoliberalism. As noted by Cindi Katz (cited in Negra, 2009):

A hallmark of the globalization of capitalist production has been a retreat by capital from its prior commitments to place. Reproducing a labor force and the conditions of production in any particular locale is less germane to enduring economic growth than it was in the past. (p. 28)

This characteristic might be especially true of the conditions of media production in the neoliberal, globalized marketplace, wherein the site of production (either externally, or as suggested in the setting of the show/text) is of less importance in signalling “Canadian-ness” than the presence of internationally “mobile” Canadian stars. In fact, the Canadian-ness of *Schitt’s Creek’s* stars, and the “place” of the CBC (a broadcast space rather than a geographical one) allows Canadians to recognize the show as a Canadian one, while the retreat from a “commitment to place” signified by both the international fame of the show’s stars (including American star Chris Elliott) and the alternative sites of distribution/consumption (Netflix, Pop network in the U.S.) contribute to the show’s global appeal. “Canadian-ness” here becomes tied to a range of signifiers (which themselves require a Canadian context in order to be decoded by audiences as such), rather than a specific geographic space of production and consumption.

Yet this precariously signified Canadian identity has long been a site of concern (and anxiety) vis-à-vis nation-building media, locating it within the same affective register, therefore, as neoliberalism. While for many nations, globalization presents a strong threat to nationalist sentiments (and the resurgence of nationalist sentiment in the face of globalization suggests just how fragile national identity projects are in contemporary neoliberal society), the Canadian context is exemplary of this trend. Canada has long struggled in defining itself against the global market and now, more than ever, must also cater to that market. For many years, the CBC has worked to offset this precarious identity, producing programs and stars that build, rather than challenge notions about what it means to be “Canadian.” With *Schitt’s Creek*, however, the CBC takes a much more ambivalent stance. The show’s portrayal of economic hardship, family, and de-localized community both speaks to and challenges contemporary neoliberal ideology, using wry humour and internationally known Canadian stars to signify a “new” Canadian content that appeals to both domestic and global markets.

Economic precarity: From riches to rags

The first scene of the CBC hit comedy *Schitt’s Creek* (Levy & Levy, 2015–) depicts members of the affluent Rose family learning that their business manager has lost all of their money in a series of bad investments (“Our Cup Runneth Over,” 2015). As the scene unfolds, the government reclaims the family’s opulent home and assets, despite the confusion of family patriarch Johnny Rose (Eugene Levy) and the desperate objections of wife Moira (Catherine O’Hara) and their adult children. The family learns that they have only one remaining asset out of the government’s reach and/or interest—the town of Schitt’s Creek, purchased by Johnny Rose as a gag gift for his son David (played by Eugene Levy’s son, Daniel Levy). The family has no choice but to move into the town they own, put up by the local mayor (and town namesake) Roland Schitt in the dingy motel just down the road. In this first episode of the first season, the show establishes three central themes that this article explores: economic precarity, geographic community, and family.

The very premise of *Schitt's Creek* speaks to economic uncertainty. Although it is articulated in the show that the family's wealth was initially accrued by the entrepreneurial savvy of patriarch John Rose, the tie of his business to outmoded forms of media consumption (a video store conglomerate) is significant in establishing how the family lost its money, not only due to their (manager's) mismanagement, but also because of the broader trend of digitization that characterizes today's global marketplace (in which the CBC itself competes). Through this riches-to-rags tale, the show thus sets up an initial relationship to capitalism and meritocracy that mirrors contemporary concerns with outmoded skills and uncertain futures. The fact that the Rose family was not generationally rich but were themselves an example, through John, of the successful "American Dream" speaks to a broader economic power dynamic that continues to favour the established elite over the precarious (and less informed) newcomers, thus undermining the notion of a realized American Dream as the happy ending.¹

In fact, *Schitt's Creek* picks up where that happy ending leaves off. The newly rich are not only implicated here in at the very least an economic naïveté, but also in a reference to the dubious practice of money management. (After losing their money, the Roses' business manager has run off to the Cayman Islands, thus alluding to the Wall Street corruptions and bailouts that led to the 2008 global recession.) Although the Roses themselves are not the crooks here, they are the ones left paying the price, and the comedy results from an alternating sense of empathy for the rich and their plight (we have all had to "cut back" in hard times) and mockery of their lack of self-awareness, in contrast to the homey, pragmatic, if somewhat plain and tacky townfolk of Schitt's Creek.

The family's loss of money is dealt with explicitly in an early episode where John discovers that his son has continued to use his remaining functional credit card to purchase expensive creams from Europe ("Don't Worry, It's His Sister," 2015). John suggests that his son find a job if he "want[s] the smooth under-eyes of a 16-year-old" and David struggles to find a match for his skills in Schitt's Creek. When motel clerk Stevie, in an attempt to help, asks him what skills he has, David's answer is predictably out of touch and impractical: "art-curating and trend-forecasting." Such skills, however, are valued in today's creative economy, thus marking them simultaneously as legitimate in a broader contemporary context while also mocking that context. An earlier episode expands upon David's old life working in the New York art gallery system—he explains that he once curated a performance piece by a Brooklyn-based artist who would don a mask, disrobe, and then "breastfeed members of the audience. It was a commentary on income inequality" ("The Drip," 2015). Again, the ambivalent comment both pokes fun at self-indulgent performance art and reminds viewers of the current economic state, marked by an increasing wage gap.

Yet the threat of a primetime CBC sitcom that speaks to income inequality and financial loss is tempered by its containment here—both comedically and narratively. Only the privileged Roses specifically lament and strategize around their economic state. Although it is suggested that, for instance, motel worker Stevie is perhaps in the same state if not worse off than the Roses (jokes repeatedly reference her cheap car and her complete disdain for being the housekeeper, manager, and front desk clerk at

a dingy roadside motel), her relation to wealth throughout the first season is one of indifference.

Other moments help underline the privileged lives of the Roses, such as in the episode “Bad Parents” (2015) when John and Moira feel guilty for not being closer with their grown children David and Alexis. They ask Twyla, the diner waitress about her relationship with her parents. She informs them that her mother often no longer recognizes her and her father is in prison. When they offer their sympathy, Twyla cheerily brushes it off. Worry and hardship are not her domains. This contrast, again, points back to Negra’s (2009) assertion that popular texts build sympathy for the most privileged in society, while at the same time depicting the less privileged as embodying values other than material wealth. In fact, this representation of Schitt’s Creek’s citizens can be read as a sign of how “strong” they are in the neoliberal sense—they do not rely upon anyone but themselves, nor do they whine or complain about what they do not have; they merely do the unglamorous, low-paying service work that needs to be done. It is no coincidence, then, that the road toward “enlightenment” (character development) will entail for each of the Roses to quit whining, get a job, and start contributing to and putting down roots in the community.

Community: “Welcome to Schitt’s Creek, where everyone fits in”

If the path to enlightenment comes through work, it remains a rocky path to navigate. Throughout the first season, the members of the Rose family take on various ventures to earn money and ease their boredom. As the characters’ lives stabilize, and as they each discover their own inner strength, we see that their economic and materialist concerns start to wane. Yet, the message is complicated in that viewers are encouraged to identify with the continued reluctance and inability of the Roses to fit in, particularly in situations where citizens of Schitt’s Creek overstep personal boundaries. For instance, in the first episode (“Our Cup Runneth Over,” 2015), a drawn-out scene depicts oblivious mayor Roland overstaying his welcome as he helps the Roses move into their new motel abode. After sitting to watch television, then rising to tease his departure when, in fact, he is merely taking a washroom break before returning to watch more television, John understandably tells Roland to “get the f**k out!” A hurt Roland retaliates, drawing on one of the stunts his father used to pull on him: he takes away the Roses’ motel doors as punishment. “Privacy is earned,” Roland tells a bewildered John, who clearly does not yet understand the rules of small-town community life.

Have the Roses earned their right to privacy? Within neoliberal logics of individualism, privacy is a right, not a reward. There is capitalist dignity in having a separate private life, in which the government does not interfere. As Margaret Thatcher famously noted in 1987: “[T]here is no such thing as society. There are men and women and children and there are families” (cited in Littler, 2013, p. 63). Yet within this logic, the mismanagement of money is an unforgivable misstep. In trusting “outsiders” and then losing the most valuable asset one could have (literally—their wealth), the Roses perhaps then deserve Roland’s juvenile punishment. Of course, neoliberal ideology is riddled with paradox. As discourses of individualism and privacy rise, so too do government surveillance and so-called security measures (Tyler, 2013). Under neoliberal logic, where government interference must be minimized, evading government taxes

is less about mismanagement than it is about the wealthy retaining what they have earned. Within this logic, the Roses have done nothing wrong and have earned their right to privacy by being proper neoliberal capitalist citizens. The show complicates this, offering viewers both readings as again we alternate between laughing with the Roses and laughing at them.

Like many retreatist narratives, much of the humour in *Schitt's Creek* comes out of the clash between the rich, big-city folk and the quirky small-town people and their values. We are encouraged to find humour in the fish-out-of-water tale and to empathize with the pains of budgeting in rough economic times. However, the Roses are not a stand-in for the “average” family; they do not demonstrate for viewers—who, in Canada, are mostly watching in cities (Government of Canada, 2011)—that small-town values, community, and downsizing are desirable lifestyle choices. The Roses’ desire to leave remains constant throughout the entire first season; the town does not win them over. In fact, *Schitt's Creek* is represented ambivalently, with the more intelligent characters (e.g., Stevie) regularly articulating how horrible it is there, and how anyone who is “funny and smart and [has] a well-rounded sense of humour” has “move[d] away from here” (“The Cabin,” 2015). As the show develops into its second and third seasons, we do see that the family is able to forge deeper roots in their new home (David putting his trend-forecasting skills to use first at the local “Blouse Barn” then at the General Store, Moira running for city council). Yet even then, the characters are unable to erase their idiosyncrasies (and here, Moira’s outrageous wigs come to take on extreme importance), thus disproving the town motto above—that *Schitt's Creek* is a town where “everyone fits in”—and, perhaps, demonstrating that fitting in is not a requirement, as the town comes to welcome the Roses for who they are. However, if the community of *Schitt's Creek* comes to stand in narratively for economic success, it does so equivocally. The importance of the family, on the other hand, is constant.

Family: “In times of crisis the one thing we need to hold onto is family”

Within neoliberal capitalist logic, the key economic unit is the family. In times of crisis and uncertainty, “patriarchal models” of family structure bring a sense of stability and certainty (Stephens, 2014). Recessions have a double effect on families in Western economies, both “delay[ing] and fray[ing]” the family unit (p. 172): people are less inclined to have the children that replenish the labour force, and they are often required to reduce consumption and downsize lifestyles to adjust to lower, less secure incomes.

The Rose family within *Schitt's Creek* seems emblematic of these concerns. Although they increasingly come to be implicated in the community around them, their physical isolation (as outsiders, for the most part the lone guests at the *Schitt's Creek* motel) distinguishes them from their neighbours. As outlined earlier, their financial woes are marked out as distinct from the finances of the characters around them, and their shared perspective vis-à-vis the “townies” further unites the Roses, despite their internal squabbles. However, this family unit does not quite reach the neoliberal ideal of independence, entrepreneurship, and hard work. Not only are the characters often idle throughout the first season, but the fact that the grown Rose children Alexis and David, 27 and 34 years old, respectively, are still reliant upon their par-

ents and have not yet moved on to establishing independently wealthy family units of their own marks them out as failures within discourses of meritocracy. John and Moira might have lived the American Dream, but the children's relation to the loss of wealth is marked out much more ambivalently by their lack of merit yet clear sense of entitlement.²

This dependence upon their parents, and everyone's dependence upon patriarch John, is both celebrated and undermined by the show. Although John is replete with street-smart bits of wisdom about how to make it through tough times, "getting back on [one's] feet" and holding onto one another through crisis, he is also shown to be less skilful than his family members at adapting to their new economic reality. (Moira, David and Alexis all quickly develop economic ties to the community, while John struggles to re-define himself as an entrepreneur.) In a related sense, John is also shown to have lost touch with "commoners" (and common sense), as is demonstrated by his complete ineptitude at the unemployment office ("Allez-Vous," 2015). John's shame at having to collect unemployment cheques speaks to neoliberal concerns over welfare dependency and unfair wealth redistribution. At the same time, his utter lack of understanding of the process could be read as a larger critique of the efforts of the rich to undermine government supports while also disproportionately benefiting from the government's efforts to stabilize economies brought into crisis by the wealthy.

Unable to grasp the concept that in order to collect employment insurance, one must have been employed in a position that pays into the insurance, John argues with the clerk, insisting that he is entitled to money because he used to employ people. "Am I the only one who understands how the economy works around here?" he asks in frustration. His logic is future oriented: he needs EI payments so that he can get back on his feet, to employ people who will then no longer be a similar burden on the unemployment office. Yet this logic does not apply in (neoliberal) societies where workers are measured not by potential, but by what they are and what they have done or overcome. Only when Roland steps in, using his own social connections to the clerk, and lies on John's behalf (stating that he is John's former employer) is John able to secure the unemployment cheque that he authentically needs. This scenario simultaneously speaks to both the increasing suspicion within neoliberalism that welfare recipients are "scamming" the government of taxpayers' hard-earned money, and the much less discussed propensity of the rich to defraud government and tax services (Dubinsky, 2016). Despite the lie, John truly needs the money to take care of his family, not only sacrificing his sense of self-worth as a successful businessman and patriarch (even though Moira reassures him that he remains "masculine" and "brave" in her eyes), but also deferring to the detested Roland (and his social skills) to secure the cheque.

Although John faces ongoing challenges to both his masculinity and his patriarchal control (both from within his family and beyond it), he maintains his status as the wisest, strongest Rose, upon whom the others all rely, despite their own growing competence. He is presented as less emotionally volatile than the others and is the one to whom they all turn to rescue them from their dire economic and geographic situation. In fact, this straight-man role seems quite at odds with the persona that Eugene Levy has crafted over his career—much of which has also included onscreen

pairings with Catherine O'Hara. Before looking more specifically at this show within the Canadian context, and in relation to Canadian stardom, the next paragraphs briefly consider the role of family in the production of *Schitt's Creek*, as both the long-term onscreen relationship (40 years) between Levy and O'Hara could be considered in familial terms, and, more obviously, the Levy family is heavily involved across the production: Eugene Levy, Daniel Levy, and Sarah Levy all act on the show; Eugene and Daniel both have writing and producing credits; and Eugene's brother Fred also shares a producing credit ("*Schitt's Creek* (TV Series 2015-)—IMDb," n.d.).

Moving, then, to the broader media context in which the show emerged, perhaps for the Levys as well as for the Roses, John's advice rings true: "In times of crisis the one thing we need to hold onto is family" ("Little Sister," 2015). Prior to the production of *Schitt's Creek*, Eugene Levy was working sporadically though continually in Canadian and American television and media, having taken on mostly guest appearances and voice work over the past decade (with the exception of reprising his role as Jim's dad in the *American Pie* franchise in 2012) ("Eugene Levy," n.d.). Daniel Levy's breakout roles were hosting rather than acting gigs on MTV ("Dan Levy," n.d.). Again, over the past decade Daniel has been working sporadically and precariously. Although work across the film and television industry is highly precarious and porous to borders, the Canadian market is more precarious than the American one by sheer number of opportunities. By taking matters into their own hands, then, in creating a vehicle for themselves as a creative family (and including Eugene Levy's long-term screen partner O'Hara), and by merging their "home" and "work" lives, the Levys could be said to be exhibiting the entrepreneurial "bootstraps" initiative encouraged and fostered by neoliberal policies. But Eugene Levy himself also does the ideological work of masking privilege beyond the text of the show. Countering any potential charges of nepotism, during a promotional interview, Levy positions his family's involvement as earned: "It would be hard for me to do a show with my kids if they weren't *pulling their weight* and they didn't have *what it takes*. ... But I'm the proudest father in the world" (Wong, 2015, para.10, emphasis added).

In this way, then, the Levys succeed where the Roses fail, demonstrating that if the market is not currently working for you, you must make it work. After having "earned their stripes" in various projects apart, they come together to create opportunities for themselves that provide more secure, long-term employment than what had currently been on offer to them. They deny or conceal their privilege through discourses of "pulling their weight" and "having what it takes," which, in turn, obscure the talents and work ethic of thousands of performers (and other Canadians) who remain precariously employed in Canada. It is to this state of precarity in Canadian television production that this article now turns.

Anytown, Canada

Unlike recent hit Canadian sitcoms like *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, *Schitt's Creek* does not present itself as specifically located in Canada. Although the town of Schitt's Creek can be read as a stand-in for "Anytown, U.S.A" (Wong, 2015), likely aiding in its appeal to broadcasters south of the border, a few elements of the show allow it to be read, by Canadian audiences, as distinctly Canadian. The remainder

of this article first discusses *Schitt's Creek* in relation to, and as distinct from, the Canadian television comedy landscape before it. The article then demonstrates the ways in which the show's stars help to articulate its "Canadian" identity, even while it distinguishes itself from Canada's national comedic genre/brand, as well as from the CBC image that preceded it. Finally, the article examines the ties between Canadian media stars, as part of a national identity project, and neoliberalism more broadly—particularly in relation to the concept of precarity and ideas about Canadian-ness as reflected by the national public broadcaster.

Canadian identity, media, and stars have long been precariously situated, particularly in relation to the American identity, media, and stars against which Canadians define themselves. Due to the comparatively few successful sitcoms generated within Canada's borders, much focus has been given to (and much pride associated with) the three major comedy shows that have come to "represent" Canada and its production potential abroad—all of which not only articulate, but also centre narratively on geographic spaces in Canada. *Trailer Park Boys*, though situated within a fictional trailer park, unfolds in and around Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Both *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* take place in fictional small-towns in Saskatchewan. Reviewers of these shows note that they all share a focus on community life, and also emphasize Canada's diversity and "gentle" nature (Doyle, 2007, p. 5). The laughs garnered in these shows are through their anti-pretentiousness ("anti-bourgeois"-ness) and their "embrace [of] those at the bottom of the social ladder" (p. 8), which, in turn, helps to define us as a nation that cares—at least more than Americans do—about not leaving anyone behind.

But that was before the effects of the 2008 global recession (and Stephen Harper's Conservative government) hit. Although *Schitt's Creek* could be said to be "anti-bourgeois" in that it does poke fun at the "hoity-toity" Rose family, as Roland Schitt describes them ("Honeymoon," 2015), the "townies" are equally prone to be the butt of the joke. Furthermore, the notion of gentle and anti-pretentious comedy is overturned in *Schitt's Creek*, which relies on satirical humour that often includes intertextual cultural references, requiring audiences to be somewhat informed to get the joke (particularly the jokes of Alexis and David, which rely upon viewers having a certain cultural capital to appreciate, for instance, David asserting his suitability to join in Roland's annual turkey hunt: "I could not be more at one with nature. I do Coachella every year so ...," "Turkey Shoot," 2015). Additionally, the redemptive potential of small-town values as exhibited on other Canadian sitcoms is somewhat thwarted by the Roses' continued desire to escape the town and hold onto their distinct, "nouveau riche" identities, as well as their position as butt of the joke. These tensions could speak to a Canadian audience that, in the aftermath of recession, is less naïve about the socio-economic ladder—and their position on it—than they once were.

At the same time, certain elements of this socio-economic ladder remain distinctly Canadian, despite the encroachment of neoliberal ideals. *Schitt's Creek* airs not on the privately owned CTV but on Canada's national public broadcaster, an institution that remains highly susceptible to the sweeping reforms of conservative economic policies, though situated beyond the governing logic of the market. In recent years the CBC has struggled due to staff and budget cuts, as well as increasing competition from cable

and online distribution platforms (Conway, 2014; Tinic, 2005). In fact, the broader programming mandate for 2015 of which *Schitt's Creek* was an example—the specific rebrand toward “darker” content (Eastwood, 2014; Wong, 2015)—speaks precisely to a notion that Canadian audiences are looking for something beyond the gentle fare previously on offer. Although the lackadaisical success of much Canadian content has often been tied to a notion that Canadians are averse to such content, this lack of success could speak to the continued efforts by those working within the Canadian industry to shape a broad and simplified version of an identity (“gentle,” “nice,” “equalizing”) that can easily distinguish “Canadian-ness” from “American-ness.” This (mis-)ascription of certain characteristics to Canadians has long been sustained by the programming of the CBC, which, as outlined by Cormack and Cosgrave (2014), would find itself redundant if it ever truly succeeded at “[solving] the problem of Canadian identity” (p. 326). Perhaps, then, Canadian audiences are not so much averse to Canadian content as they are averse to the continued ascription of these so-called Canadian qualities that, if they ever existed, are less and less suitable for success within the neoliberal global marketplace. The CBC, however, is a highly charged platform upon which to experiment with other forms of “Canadian-ness.”

Canadian stars and the CBC

Elements of *Schitt's Creek* speak to aspects of Canadian identity that extend beyond the constrained notions of niceness for which Canadians are apparently known. Clearly, viewers have a long-standing, pride-filled association with Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara as Canadian stars who have not only “made it” south of the border but have also risen through the ranks of satiric comedy—a form of comedy that is rarely associated with nice and gentle forms of humour. This more “biting” form of humour, in fact, bridges Canadian comedy/identity with broader success, as it was through their cross-border texts (in SCTV and beyond) that Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara became household names in both Canada and the United States. Actors who succeed in the United States generate a distinct national pride among Canadian audiences, despite—and because of—such successes being American defined: as noted previously, many notions of Canadian identity centre around a comparative American identity that both distinguishes and underlies our own (Bociurkiw, 2011). Although the proximity and size of the U.S. media industry almost mandates that Canadian performers seek out opportunities in the States if they want steady employment, the stars who continue to demonstrate their Canadian identity—either through their continued working and living associations (e.g., Jay Baruchel, Drake) or through repeated reference to or inability to hide their heritage (e.g., Mike Myers, Céline Dion)—become themselves not only symbols of Canadian identity, but also, quite literally, embodiments of it.

Eugene Levy is an actor who consciously positions himself, as part of his star persona, as being tied to Canada—by continually starring alongside Canadians, and by working concurrently in both Canada and the United States. Here, again, Levy succeeds where the Roses fail. While those big-city folks are fish out of water, unable to adapt to or fit into community ways of life, Levy enjoys fluid, cross-border success, making the market adapt to him rather than the reverse. As a cast member on one of Canada's

most beloved sketch comedy shows (SCTV kick-started the careers of not only Levy and O'Hara, but also John Candy, Rick Moranis, and Dave Thomas), Eugene Levy came to be part of Canada's comedy heritage but has since gained much more cultural capital than most stars who remain working within Canada.

Levy's previously established international cultural capital afforded him a unique power as co-creator of a new comedy for CBC in 2015. In this way, *Schitt's Creek* reverses the role of CBC in providing a platform for "unknown" or lesser-known Canadians to rise to national renown, but rather calls on viewers' extended knowledge of both Levy and O'Hara as Canadian stars, which, in turn, is apparently enough in and of itself (in the eyes of CBC) to signify "Canadian content." This renown additionally affords Levy a primetime slot in which he can take more comedic risks, including naming a show after a profane colloquialism, which might not be so welcomed if coming from a younger, lesser-known talent. Furthermore, as a cross-border star, Levy had already transcended the gentle "Canadian-ness" with which other CBC stars are identified (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2014), thus immediately signalling the "darker" elements of CBC's re-branding.³ In choosing, then, to return to Canada to produce and star in his own CBC show, which, in turn, necessitated the hiring of other Canadian actors, Levy symbolically located *Schitt's Creek* within Canada's cultural landscape and re-inscribed Canadian-ness onto his already established multinational star persona—a persona which, by then, was likely associated by many with an edgier comedy than most recent Canadian television.

Although *Schitt's Creek* is neither set specifically in Canada, nor does it depict specifically Canadian concerns, its airing on Canada's national public broadcaster and its use of Canadian stars situate it as Canadian content to Canadian audiences. Although there is not yet enough theoretical work on Canadian stars to delineate the pleasures gleaned from seeing "our own" return to their home country to potentially save the CBC, it is worth considering that our national pride in these (and other internationally successful) Canadian actors is tied to our own precariously situated media system. As noted at the outset of this article, English Canadians have long seen their media mandated to meet content regulations intended to ensure that Canadians' national identity is not lost in the deluge of American cultural imports. At the same time, Canadians have witnessed countless actors and comedians re-locate to the U.S. to pursue more lucrative and visible careers. While some television stars—particularly the sketch comedy stars from shows like SCTV and *Kids in the Hall*—were able to establish themselves as "names" in Canada before crossing into the U.S. for broader success, most Canadian actors must at some point choose between their nation and their career.

Countering that dilemma, the CBC has fostered its own form of stardom—what Cormack and Cosgrove (2014, 2016) have termed "state celebrity." Though not "actors," these stars (e.g., Don Cherry, Ron MacLean, Peter Mansbridge, and George Stromboulopoulos) wield large amounts of cultural capital that, because of their ties to the CBC, are also uniquely linked to the nation-state and their citizenship within the nation-state. This form of stardom has even extended to the CBC's reality stars, including the "dragons" of *Dragons' Den*. However, in recent years the ties between these stars, the CBC, and the nation-state have lessened in strength. In losing the ex-

clusive rights to broadcast NHL hockey, for instance, the CBC lost exclusive rights to Cherry and MacLean. Peter Mansbridge's recent retirement left a gaping hole in CBC's primetime line-up. And the Ghomeshi scandal of 2014–2015, as well as the CBC's handling of the case, tainted the image of the supposedly benevolent public broadcaster (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2016). Finally, as discussed earlier, the loss of two popular "dragons" to the U.S. show *Shark Tank* exposed the limits of CBC's appeal to some of their most valuable stars. (The disdain with which these dragons-turned-sharks are treated on the U.S. show certainly highlights the disparity between the "nice" Canadian way of doing business and the much more cutthroat yet appealing American forms of success.)

This moment of upheaval is crucial to appreciating the shift in CBC's decision to "lure back" two of Canada's biggest comedy exports. The international success associated with O'Hara and Levy suggests that their stars signify "Canada" in a much more broad and abstract sense than for state celebrities born of the CBC. This move toward a different signification of "Canada," as reflected in the content, production, and distribution of *Schitt's Creek*, speaks to not only the shift in comedic tone discussed above, but also to a shift in the CBC brand. Instead of choosing and nurturing stars that merge with the CBC brand (and therefore whose image and its related significations vis-à-vis national identity are under the control of CBC), the CBC turned to internationally successful Canadian-born stars who signify "Canadian" in ways that are distinct from the CBC's own image. Instead of building the show from the bottom up, the CBC further allowed the Levys to operate independently, licensing the show rather than serving as production house. The willingness of the CBC to not only invest in Canadian, non-CBC stars, but also to help "import" American ones to star alongside them, suggests a precarious view of their own prior investments in the Canadian media and star system, always at risk of succumbing to scandal, loss to another Canadian network, and/or American export. While the international star's position at the CBC is just as precarious (for they could always return to their international careers if and when they wanted), the more abstract/diluted ties to the CBC (especially when the CBC becomes more of a "middleman" distributor than all-responsible producer) signal less of a threat to its identity—and its role as nation builder—if ruptured by scandal and/or economic upheaval.

Therefore, while O'Hara, Levy, and even Chris Elliott live out their own retreatist narrative—moving (back) to Canada from the harsh, cutthroat world of American media, but bringing with them biting humour, cultural references, and a newfound economic anxiety—it is the CBC (rather than Canadians) that comes to stand in for the "quirky" townfolk of the smaller community. The humorous clash of civilizations is not between the international stars and Canadian viewers—for we have followed them in and out of the Canadian media for decades—but rather between them and the CBC; we watch in delight as the CBC adapts to these newcomers (rather than the opposite), bringing with them a cynicism and self-awareness to a network that no longer (if it ever could) decide what it means to be Canadian, and perhaps no longer even wants to decide. In this world nationhood is relative and only we, the audience, who watch (in Canada) get to decide what is and is not Canadian.

Yet still those decoding decisions are often necessarily made in relation to American programming. Because *Schitt's Creek* is not clearly articulated as being "Canadian" (within the show), its identity as Canadian, much like that of Canadians themselves who travel abroad, can be lost in other contexts or absorbed by American ones. *Schitt's Creek* is only decoded as Canadian by (Canadian) audiences who recognize both its stars and its platform as Canadian, and the further it travels from the nation and its public broadcaster, the less recognizable it is as a national product. The global economy necessitates the de-localization of media, people, and capital, while producing alternative sites of affective ties to nation and identity. A show that is filmed in Canada, features Canadian stars, and airs on the Canadian public broadcaster re-localizes Canadian media production in the global market, yet always in precarious ways; it could be filmed anywhere, its stars could leave Canada, and it need not (and does not) exclusively air on the CBC. That the subject matter of *Schitt's Creek* so masterfully speaks to this precarity is perhaps not incidental, but rather central to its success as a Canadian production.

Conclusion

Schitt's Creek serves, then, as a uniquely situated Canadian text in a global market. In relying on national stars rather than content to signify its national origin, the show's national identity becomes more obscure the further from the Canadian market that the show travels. Much like other commodities in today's global market, *Schitt's Creek* is designed to maximize its appeal (and, therefore, profitability). It is a transitional show that speaks directly to concerns over economic uncertainty, crisis, community, and family. Though dealing with these issues ambivalently, the show clearly situates itself in relation to a renewed rhetoric of "hard work," "fiscal responsibility," and individual accountability in neoliberal societies. As it airs in Canada and the U.S., countries that are both dealing with the fallouts of the global recession of 2007–2008, *Schitt's Creek* is careful in crafting different forms of appeal. Although the show stars known Canadians, the scenarios and places depicted on *Schitt's Creek* stand in for "Anytown, North America."

In this refusal to "be Canadian," the show speaks to more than merely an interest in widespread audience appeal or a neoliberal decline in the meaning of "nation." It also potentially speaks to a broader reputational decline that has plagued Canada in recent years. Our infamous human rights missteps (our mistreatment of Indigenous populations; Québec's controversial Charter of Values), our notable absence in dealing with global climate change, and our ongoing cooperation in imperialist operations have damaged our own identity claims as global peacekeepers and upholders of social justice. With the election of a new government, there was hope that the damage here might be undone, but countless broken election promises and growing discontent have brought cynicism to the forefront of Canadian society. Meanwhile the increasing injustices, fear-mongering, and "Othering" taking place around the globe indicate that our nation's example might no longer be enough. The shift in tone from 2004's *Corner Gas* to today's *Schitt's Creek* might just be speaking to our new-found knowledge that not only has Canada failed to look out for those "at the bottom," but that it might be too late—we might all, like the Roses, be up Schitt Creek without a paddle.

Notes

1. As noted earlier, perhaps because the show airs simultaneously in the U.S. and Canada, *Schitt's Creek* does not, in the early episodes, articulate a national setting. However, as noted by Brenda Weber (2009), the ideology of the meritocratic “American Dream”—that anyone can be successful if they are talented and work hard—is neither specific to nor contained merely in American popular texts, but is a “universal signifier” (p. 46) that speaks to an imagined conception of what both America and its capitalist system stand for.
2. This view on parents who have “earned” their rewards and their entitled children perhaps reflects a “baby boomer” generational view more than an objective reality, as suggested by recent outrage by young Britons over the Brexit referendum—in which an older generation of Conservative Brits, who have been “given everything,” are being blamed for spoiling the next, more progressive, generation’s “future” by voting to leave the European Union (Cosslett, 2016). Johnny Rose’s son David, in particular, could be said to speak to this ambivalence, through his struggle to find appropriate small-town outlets for his creativity and pansexuality (and the generational differences represented in the show are not surprising, considering that it incorporates two generations of Levys in producing and writing).
3. It is worth noting that although Levy often plays the “gentle” or “naïve” character, this character is often satirical (*SCTV, Best in Show*) or in a context of dirty or “frat humour” (*American Pie*).

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