A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON POVERTY IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Poverty is a pervasive social reality in Canada, and yet the perception of Canada’s national identity is one that is built on equality, cohesiveness and inclusion, a myth that has been perpetuated in our culture in part through our films and television shows. This essay is an interdisciplinary cultural studies analysis undertaken to determine the relationship between poverty, reality and culture in Canadian film and television. This study is accomplished through the analysis of two popular and iconic Canadian cultural texts, the 1970 film *Goin’ Down the Road* and the 2001-2008 TV series *Trailer Park Boys*. The essay explores key definitions and concepts of poverty in Canada; outlines the broader real-world social and political contexts of the film and the series; reviews critical literature; and engages in analysis and discussion of the content and themes of the two cultural texts in light of the findings of the preceding sections. Based on the evidence of this multi-part analysis, it is concluded that the reality of poverty in Canada is clearly reflected in both *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys*, and that this may be, in part, why they have been so popular with Canadian audiences.
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INTRODUCTION

While modern views on poverty in Canada tend to be dominated by sociological and economic perspectives, examining poverty through the lens of culture, in particular within the context of the popular entertainment media of film and television, can be particularly illuminating because of their accessibility to everyday Canadian audiences. The Canadian identity is one that is predicated on social equality and inclusion, and yet some of Canada’s most popular films and television shows vividly demonstrate the reality of poverty and the marginalization of its citizens. Despite a strong tradition in documentary filmmaking and a plethora of successful television shows that can best be described as reality-fiction hybrids, Canadian culture has had a tendency to promote a “myth of liberal inclusiveness,” and some scholars have ignored this crucial reality (Khouri and Varga, 2006, p. 4). As a critical, interdisciplinary cultural analysis of the relationship between poverty and culture, the purpose of this essay is to explore how two popular Canadian cultural texts, the film *Goin’ Down the Road* and the TV series *Trailer Park Boys*, reflect the reality of poverty and related social and political issues in Canada. To this end, this essay is divided into the following sections: a background with key definitions and concepts of poverty in Canada; the broader real-world social and political contexts of *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys*; a review of the critical literature on the relationship between poverty, reality and culture in Canadian film and television; an analysis of the selected cultural texts; and finally, a discussion of the findings to generate conclusions and further theories about the reality of poverty as it is reflected in Canadian culture.
PART 1: BACKGROUND

Written and directed by Donald Shebib, the 1970 film *Goin’ Down the Road* is a Canadian classic and is widely considered to mark the beginning of the contemporary film industry in Canada. A gritty, realistic, documentary-style film infused with both humour and pathos, it follows the story of Pete and Joey, two young men from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, as they travel to Toronto, Ontario, for brighter employment prospects, only to find disappointment, disillusionment, and desperation as they struggle to survive in the big city. Shebib’s work has been highly acclaimed for its level of social realism as the film reflects the Westward path that many Maritimers have taken in order to find better lives for themselves (Ramsay). Even American film critic Roger Ebert wrote in his review of *Goin’ Down the Road* that it was a film about “hard times here and now” (Ebert, 1971). *Goin’ Down the Road* won some of Canada’s top film awards in its day and it is considered by many critics and in popular polls to be one of the best Canadian films of all time (Dillon, 2002).

Running for seven seasons on the Showcase television network from 2001 to 2008, *Trailer Park Boys* is a fictional but realistic situation comedy that is shot in a mock documentary, or “mockumentary” style. Profanity laden and politically incorrect, the premise of the series is based on a fictional film crew documenting the daily lives and conflicts of the residents of the fictional Sunnyvale Trailer Park, just outside of Halifax, Nova Scotia. The show focuses on the lives of three best friends, Ricky, Julian and Bubbles, who all live in the park and who spend most of their time looking for ways—most of which are criminal or at the very least questionable in nature—to survive and support their families and hard-partying lifestyles. Many of their efforts to scratch out a living and have fun in the park are thwarted by Jim Lahey, former police
officer and current trailer park supervisor, and his shirtless, bulb-bellied, burger-loving sidekick and romantic partner, Randy. The Gemini award-winning *Trailer Park Boys* has spawned two successful feature–length films and is the most successful Canadian comedy show ever to be broadcast on Canadian cable television (Wise).

Both *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* have experienced iconic cultural status within Canada, which begs the following questions: are they popular because Canadians relate to these characters? Are they a critique of daily life for some Canadians? Is this daily life in alignment with how the majority of Canadians see themselves, and how the rest of the world sees Canada in terms of poverty? Finally, what is the relationship between these popular cultural texts and the social, cultural, political and historical context of poverty in Canada?

**Key Terms and Concepts**

To better understand poverty within the context of the film and the TV series, it is necessary to understand what poverty is from various perspectives. In its most basic sense, poverty is defined as a state of being “extremely poor,” lacking the money to live at a standard that is deemed comfortable or normal, and is characterized overall by deficiency and a low quality of life (Oxford Dictionaries). A deprivation of the necessities of life is another way of characterizing poverty, but then further definition is necessary to determine what those necessities are and how social norms, which change over time, can further affect what we consider to be necessities (Osberg, 2000).

Although poverty is a quality of life issue, definitions of poverty in Canada today are often thought of in monetary terms. In the absence of any official measure of poverty, Canadian definitions commonly center on what is called the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO), a measure that
was developed by Statistics Canada in the 1960s. Canadians with after-tax incomes that fall below the LICO are commonly said to be living below the poverty line, however Statistics Canada maintains that the LICO was never intended to be used as Canada’s official poverty line (Fellegi, 1997). The methodology behind the LICO can identify those who are worse off than the average, but this does not necessarily mean that those identified are actually poor (Fellegi, 1997).

Poverty can be defined in terms of absolute poverty or relative poverty, and it is this multidimensional aspect that makes poverty so challenging to measure and define accurately. Although unemployment is a risk factor for poverty, it is not only those who are in receipt of employment insurance or some form of social assistance who live in poverty, as working people may also be poor relative to the upper classes. In fact, it has been determined that the number of people living in poverty in a country can be predicted by the number of people who are earning low wages (Raphael, 2007).

In social and health terms, poverty can be thought of as a lack or poor quality of certain key factors for health. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) identifies several social determinants of health, including income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, social and physical environments (including housing), personal health practices and coping skills, and culture (PHAC, 2010). These can also be thought of as the necessities for participation as citizens because they go beyond basic survival—“poverty is not just about … an inability to meet common basic needs. It also concerns intangibles such as a lack of opportunity, of meaningful employment, of a sense of belonging, and of a sense of citizenship” (CWP, 2010).

A culturalist perspective of poverty might draw on stereotypes and myths about those who live in poverty and attribute their low quality of life to a self-sustaining culture that is seen
to result from individual choices and negative personal characteristics. A recent study by the Salvation Army (2011) shows that many Canadians have negative attitudes toward those who live in poverty, believing that they are lazy and have lower moral values than average, and that if they truly wanted to work, then they could find employment. However, research clearly shows that poverty rates are not due to personal weaknesses or failings, and that structural and policy issues tend to play a larger role as employment income and social assistance are often not enough to keep people from living in poverty (Raphael, 2007).

The consequences of living in poverty often mean that the fundamental determinants of health cannot be met, thus leaving people with higher risk factors for poor physical and mental health, social exclusion, marginalization, substance use, and criminal activity (Raphael, 2007; Public Safety Canada, 2009). In economic terms, living in conditions of poverty and deprivation can have great economic costs due to lost productivity, but despite evidence to the contrary, the argument for increasing government support to alleviate poverty in Canada is often thought of as a threat to the country’s economic competitiveness and, therefore, the health and quality of life of all Canadian citizens (Raphael, 2007).

In Canada, it is estimated that approximately 3 million Canadians currently live in poverty (Salvation Army, 2011); other estimates of poverty in Canada have ranged anywhere between 2.3 to 6.2 million Canadians, or 7 to 19 per cent of the population respectively (CWP, 2010). Certain demographic groups are more susceptible to living in poverty, such as those with a disability, Aboriginal people, those with a low level of education, females, lone parents, recent immigrants to Canada, and persons of colour (Raphael, 2007). Additionally, the Atlantic region of the country has historically been hardest hit by lower incomes and employment rates relative to other provinces in Canada, and this regional disparity has been a longstanding political and
economic issue. The reliance on seasonal work, the location in relation to the seats of power in Ottawa, and the lack of a metropolitan business centre are some of the contributing factors to this disparity in the Atlantic region (Polese).

While poverty and low income are a reality for a large number of people in Canada, it appears to be a mostly hidden issue to the outside world. Maclean’s magazine conducts an annual “How the World Sees Canada” poll to gauge the reactions of other countries to Canada. Most people in other countries around the world see Canada as a country where citizens enjoy prosperity and a high quality of life, a good country with the prospect of a better life in comparison with one’s home country (MacQueen, 2007). However, Canada’s gross domestic product (GDP) makes it a wealthier nation than most developed countries and yet its child poverty rate, for example, is significantly higher than that of several European countries (Raphael, 2007).

Canada also consistently ranks within the top countries according to the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI), which measures human development not in terms of income, but in terms of quality of life, specifically the potential of individuals to make choices that build capabilities to live long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to resources that enable them to live at an acceptable standard, and to participate meaningfully in one’s community (United Nations Development Programme). Many people who live in poverty are not free to develop their capabilities to the same extent as those of a higher socioeconomic status. Canada is considered a world leader in human development, but Canada’s position on the HDI has actually fallen in recent years, despite having been in the number one position from the early to late 1990s. Ironically, during this same time period, poverty in Canada was on the rise (Osberg, 2000).
Real-World Context

In order to better understand the real-world context of poverty for *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* and their audiences, it is important to consider the broader cultural, social and political issues of Canada in the 1960s before the launch of the film in 1970, and in the 1990s and 2000s before the launch and during the run of the TV series. While it is only possible to give a brief outline of these issues here, it will help to situate the film and the series within the state.

The 1960s

Policy solutions and interventions to poverty in Canada began shortly after the Second World War, but comprehensive national improvements were not seen until the 1960s. During a period of post-World War II security and stability, the 1960s saw the development of Canada as a social service state as economic prosperity enabled higher employment and put more dollars into services (Bothwell, Drummond, & English, 1989). Despite the rise in social services, grassroots organizations began to emerge in the mid-1960s representing the interests of persons living in poverty, as well, and by the late 1960s, a new poverty reform movement was underway (Haddow, 1993). The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), a federal anti-poverty program, was launched in 1966 as a reform of the Social Assistance Plan. Despite its promise, inadequacies in the program, as evidenced by a rise in poverty rates, led to widespread criticism and the launch of the Social Security Review in 1973 (Haddow, 1993).

Called “the last good year” by Pierre Berton, 1967 was a turning point for Canada. Berton pinpointed the 1967 World’s Fair or Expo ’67 held in Montreal, Quebec, as a pivotal
moment for Canada and an important moment in the twentieth century in general. Not only was 1967 Canada’s centennial year, during which the country was engaged in a year-long celebration of its Confederation, it also saw the introduction of universal medicare, the National Health Insurance Program (Canadian Museum of Civilization). Offering universal health-care coverage for all Canadians demonstrates the country’s value of equality, and recognizes that health is an important indicator of a country’s overall strength and well-being.

This burgeoning focus on social equality and an increased presence on the world’s stage in 1967 were triumphs that helped to solidify Canada’s identity as a relatively young country. However, Berton argues that after 1967, Canada was never to be the same again. It was a turning point in Canada that was followed not only by economic decline, but was also marked by the appearance of a major rift in the country when the Quebec separatist movement was unintentionally bolstered as its slogan, “Vive le Quebec libre!” (Long live free Quebec!), was cried publically by President of France Charles de Gaulle during his visit to Quebec for Expo ’67 (Axworthy).

**The 1990s and 2000s**

Canada’s issues with poverty and national unity have continued into the 1990s and the present day. As previously mentioned, Canada maintained a top spot on the United Nation’s Human Development Index from the early to the late 1990s, at which point its position fell. Proposed changes to the Unemployment Insurance program, which became Employment Insurance, evoked protest across Canada in the mid 1990s. The resulting changes in social policy at the federal level were intended to alleviate poverty, and they were successful: the overall rate of poverty in Canada actually dropped from 1997 to 2007, during which time the unemployment
rate dropped and employment rose (Richards, 2007). This was also due in part to a stronger Canadian labour market during that time (Richards, 2007).

The poverty rate dropped because the criteria for social assistance eligibility was tightened in the provinces, which had the effect of deeming many more Canadians employable than under the previous program; this made social assistance harder to access. The change was intended to create an incentive for those who would otherwise have received social assistance to enter the labour market, which resulted in the increase in the employment rate (Richards, 2007). However, while poverty rates fell overall, the narrower criteria had other unintended effects, as the new policies led to a widened poverty gap for certain demographics who were unable to obtain employment for various reasons, such as female lone-parent families and non-elderly unattached men (Richards, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2009).

In the late 1960s, Canada appeared to be a friendly, strong, prosperous nation that was unified by its social equality and cultural success, but despite its triumphs, it is evident that economic and social marginalization related to poverty and inequality were issues that were emerging at both the community and the policy levels. In the 2000s, poverty was falling but despite Canada’s attempts to address poverty, it is still an issue for many Canadians today. There are parallels in the federal poverty reform movements during the 1960s and the 1990s that have left many Canadians struggling in a widening poverty gap. Additionally, regional economic disparities have always been an issue, particularly in Atlantic Canada in comparison with Ontario and Quebec. Canada’s relationship with Quebec over the time period since the late 1960s has also helped to both shape and fracture its identity. During and following the 1995 Quebec referendum, a critical light was cast on Canada’s national unity once again when Quebecers were asked whether they wanted to secede from Canada. Despite the strong and cohesive image that
the country projects, like many of its citizens who live in poverty, Canada’s own identity as a country is deeply affected by experiences of cultural and political marginalization within its provinces.

**PART 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Poverty is a long-standing, pervasive social reality in Canada, and yet the myth of Canada’s national identity is one that has been perpetuated in our culture in part through our films and TV shows. The significance of the relationship between poverty and culture in Canada is that there appears to be a contradiction in our culture which seems to on the one hand depoliticize and on the other illuminate the deeper struggles with poverty. The following literature review will provide an overview of some of the key ideas that have been written about the relationship between poverty, reality and culture to provide a context for the analysis of *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys*, to identify existing theories, and expose any gaps or debates in the literature that might be pertinent to the consideration of the selected cultural texts. The sources for this review were drawn from within the time frame of the cultural texts analyzed in this paper, from the early 1970s to the present. Where possible, I drew on Canadian-authored works and theory, and otherwise, key authors and relevant works from the cultural studies field.

In her 1972 book *Survival*, writer Margaret Atwood attempted to outline thematic patterns in Canadian literature to get a sense of its overall shape, which Atwood calls a “reflection of a national habit of mind” (p. 19). The national habit of mind for Canadians, says Atwood, is one of adopting various positions of victimization, and survival has become Canada’s
national symbol. One of Atwood’s key assertions is that Canadian literature reflects an identity that is based on struggle without any triumph or victory after the ordeal except for the fact that the person survived. Trying to survive also means that Canadians have a preoccupation with the barriers to survival as opposed to the victory that should come after the ordeal.

In terms of representing the reality of Canadian struggles to survive in our culture, the gritty, documentary style of Goin’ Down the Road with its working-class characters was seen as a revolution in the Canadian film industry in 1970. Yet Canadian film comes from a strong tradition of documentary film-making that reaches back to the early twentieth century. Writer and journalist Katherine Monk (2001) argues that Canadians are “grounded realists” and, therefore, our films are all strongly rooted in the real world. Our Canadian identity as polite, practical, peacekeeping, non-threatening and internationally loved—but ultimately self-loathing—people does not lend itself well to popular American-style narratives of victory, success, and the fulfillment of dreams on the big screen.

Despite the tradition of realism in Canadian film, Khouri and Varga (2006) look at the representation of the working class in Canadian film, and argue that film studies in Canada have not represented the working class realistically. Film scholars, they contend, have had a tendency to include the stories of working-class Canadians within the “myth of liberal inclusiveness” without taking into account class relations and the social context of the film and the audience. This failure to consider the social context has resulted in the marginalization of an important topic, and has created a blind spot in favour of canonizing certain films and defining an unrealistic Canadian national agenda and identity. Depoliticizing Canadian film for export to other larger and more lucrative film markets, such as the U.S., has also played a role.
From a cultural studies perspective, the political nature of culture can be revealed in our language through the analysis of dominant discourses. Sometimes this hegemonic influence on culture is subtle and cannot be readily discerned from the content of a film, but state and identity building through culture are important for nations, as are the economic benefits to the market. It was for these reasons that the Canadian Film Development Corporation, now Telefilm Canada, was established in 1968 (Magder, 1993). Magder’s overview of state building through Canadian popular culture and film looks at the economic connections to our cultural and national identity. Magder argues that the decisions of a state, including its cultural policies, do not necessarily reflect the priorities and values of the citizens, and this is true in relation to Canadian film, as well. Magder writes:

The production and distribution of cultural products is not completely governed by market forces. The state, in particular, plays a crucial role in both the production and regulation of cultural products. State patronage has been an important catalyst of cultural production throughout history; and state regulation of the content and uses of cultural products has constituted an important element in the attempt to manage and to police social and cultural norms. (Magder, 1993, p. 10)

The notion of state building and unification of identity, and the exportability of Canadian films and television, contradicts the idea of “popular” culture, which is developed from within culture. Media theorist John Fiske argues that culture is an active process, and that this aspect is in contradiction with the industrialized, profit-motivated nature of popular culture that is produced for the market: “Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it
stems from within, from below, not from above” (Fiske, 1989, p. 25). Fiske believes that there are many different audiences who consume popular culture and they receive or interpret cultural texts such as television shows differently. Therefore, a TV show or film that may not seem to have the potential to do well with one-dimensional conceptions of a mass audience from an economic or political standpoint may in fact be popular with audiences because it speaks to their unique identities and social backgrounds.

Like the development of the film industry in Canada, the emergence of television broadcasting was primarily intended as a nation-building platform, a way to construct a sense of cohesive Canadian-ness (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006; Bodroghkozy, 2002). Broadcasting a sense of a Canadian identity was a way to culturally unify a diverse set of citizens over a vast geographical landscape, analogous to the transcontinental railroad, and offset the infiltration of American culture, as Bodroghkozy explains:

Thus a top-down construction of an economic structure would be complemented by (an equally) top-down mandated communications system that would somehow elicit bottom-up allegiances to an agreed upon sense of shared identity and national purpose. Public broadcasting would also, crucially, serve as a weapon to keep seductive American mass culture on the other side of the border. The constructing of a Canadian-ness could never succeed if the nation’s inhabitants were perpetually being enticed to participate in the fictions that helped to solidify the imagined community to the south. (Bodroghkozy, 2002, p. 566)
Partly because of the cultural shadow of Canada’s powerful neighbor to the south, the U.S., Beaty and Sullivan (2006) argue that Canada’s cultural identity crisis stems from its desire for legitimacy as a state, which also results in part from its colonial legacy. The sort of cultural control that Canada has tried to exercise via its broadcasting is common in democratic states where violent force and economic coercion are not considered to be legitimate means of control (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006).

The broadcasting of reality TV specifically is also a key area for consideration. While Canada does not have the same tradition of reality TV as the U.S. and Britain, reality-fiction hybrids have had a long history on Canadian television, with popular and critically-acclaimed shows like *Da Vinci’s Inquest* and the *Degrassi* franchise making their mark both in Canada and around the world (Druick & Kotsopolous, 2008). While *Da Vinci’s Inquest* and the early shows of the *Degrassi* franchise are works of dramatic fiction, they are for the most part filmed in a highly realistic documentary style and highlight relevant, real-life social issues facing the city of Vancouver, and Canadian children and youth, respectively. Additionally, the character of Dominic Da Vinci is loosely based on a former real-life Vancouver city coroner, Senator Larry Campbell, who also served as Vancouver’s mayor for a time (Lowry, 2008). Druick and Kotsopolous argue that shows such as *Da Vinci’s Inquest* which are a combination of reality and fiction have “thrived in the Canadian regulatory and cultural context” (p. 1). Part of this is related to cultural policy and nation-building functions of public broadcasters like the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and their focus on the importance of reflecting Canadians back to themselves, much like the mandate of Telefilm Canada.

The proliferation of reality TV in the 1990s in the United States and Britain was in part due to the political economy of the networks, a way to keep audiences from changing channels
amidst an ever-growing number of entertainment options, but the fascination with reality programming in popular culture and academic scholarship “is linked to its claims to documentary reality, to its foregrounding of ordinary people, and to its emphasis on confession” (Druick & Kotsopolous, 2008, p.4). Although the reality genre may seem like a relatively new development, it has been popular in the U.S. since the 1960s with shows like *Candid Camera* and documentaries about real families, and it was often intended as pedagogic or educational, a way of highlighting the social rules of everyday life in the “real” world, rather than just pure entertainment (Rojek, 2007).

Rojek argues that, despite audience expectations and perceptions, however, reality TV is not necessarily a true reflection of reality because it merely “reflects how rituals of behavior designed to convey reality are performed for tv transmission and consumed in consumer culture”, and that the knowledge that participants are being taped and watched has an influence on their behavior as they might act differently if they were not being watched (Rojek, 2007, p. 15). Even the most realistic TV shows are not transmitted directly to viewers by the producers. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1973) contends that every stage of the process of broadcasting is affected by discourse in terms of the encoding and decoding of the messages. Stuart conceptualizes the sending and receiving of messages in culture in Marxist terms of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction, arguing that at each stage, dominant discourses affect audience reception and interpretation. Therefore, the message that audiences receive when watching a realistic film or TV show is already influenced at every level by dominant discourses, regardless of the intentions of the individual producers, directors, writers and actors involved.
Overall, there is a significant gap in the literature in terms of poverty in film and television, specifically the relationship between poverty and Canadian culture. However, what can be concluded from this literature review is that one of Canada’s central cultural concerns is survival and the barriers to survival rather than victory over those barriers. Portraying Canadians and their struggles, concerns and values realistically has long been a tradition on both big and small screens, because it is a way to help shape our “true” Canadian identity. However, the messages that audiences receive are produced and received in such a way that they are shaped by both our close cultural and political relationship with one of the biggest film markets in the world, the United States, and Canada’s own dominant discourses and the political intentions behind them.

PART 3: Goin’ Down the Road and Trailer Park Boys

I will now turn my attention to the analysis of the two central cultural texts of this study, the film Goin’ Down the Road and the television series Trailer Park Boys. In terms of the limitations of this study, it should be acknowledged that it is difficult to determine with a high degree of certainty the direct connections between the broader social, political and cultural contexts outlined above and what messages the creators of the film and the television series themselves were intending to send. Additionally, although it could be argued that larger theories about Canadian social issues cannot be generalized on the basis of one film and one television series alone, the fact that both have been so iconic and popular with audiences makes them ideal case study material. The approach that follows consists of an overview of the film and select episodes of the series which is then followed by a discussion of the findings that draws on the preceding parts of this essay.
We first meet the film’s two main characters, Pete and Joey, as they are about to leave what appears to be a bleak, dilapidated, rural area, which we find out is Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The two young men are heading to Toronto for work opportunities as other Maritimers have before them. There is joy on their faces and a sense of excitement as they drive in a flame-detailed convertible, their chance to get away from the typical “sweat and dirt,” working-class jobs at the cannery back home. Despite the prospect of a better life in the big city, there is some uncertainty. Joey worries that they will have trouble in Toronto as some of their peers have, but Pete’s optimism about their future is irrepressible.

Not long after they arrive in Toronto, things start to go wrong. Pete’s relatives will not let them stay at their house in the suburbs, perceiving them as unsavory characters, and so without anywhere to go, they end up at a Salvation Army hostel. The shelter is crowded and full of despondent-looking men—evidently, there are many men like them in the same situation in the city. Joey already is beginning to wonder if they should turn around and go home, but they have no money and so they are stuck for the time being.

Pete is still optimistic; even in the shelter, he is already scanning job ads in the newspaper and imagining a better life for himself, perhaps a white-collar executive job with a company car and a secretary, and his name on his office door. Pete applies for an advertising job, but is told by the manager that without a high school education, and his background of solely blue-collar, working class jobs, Pete would be better off going home and attending university. Pete explains his mismatched work experience and lack of education by telling the manager, “There ain’t a hell of a lot to choose from in the Maritimes.” It is at this point that Pete realizes that for him and
other working-class men, there is not a lot choose from in Toronto, either, except for the same types of “sweat and dirt” jobs for low wages.

Shortly after, both Pete and Joey land jobs at a bottling plant, loading and unloading boxes of bottles. By now, Pete is beginning to realize that the quality of life in Toronto is no better than living at home in Cape Breton, but he still sees a better future for himself. Despite making more money in Toronto, the high costs of living do not allow for a higher quality of life. Pete explains to Joey that they have nothing lasting to show for their hard work, and expresses his desire to escape his fate, while Joey is content to live with whatever is in front of him, including women. During a night of drinking, Joey confides in Pete that he is thinking of marrying his now-pregnant girlfriend, Betty. Pete responds, furiously, “You ruin your life if you want, buddy boy, but I’m on the move. I got places to go and things to do and plans …you think I need you?”

Eventually, Joey and Pete are laid off and they have to move in to a small, run-down apartment together to survive, along with Betty, to whom Joey is now married. Joey begins drinking heavily, and conflict between the friends begins. While Pete finds low-paying, temporary jobs and is in a position where he is supporting all three of them, Joey makes excuses and only half-heartedly attempts to look for work. They have no money, no food, no privacy, and little life outside of getting drunk and wandering around the streets or watching TV in their cramped quarters. We later discover that Joey has applied for unemployment assistance, but he has not been working long enough to receive benefits.

By Christmas, Pete and Joey are in a desperate financial situation and decide to steal two carts full of groceries from a supermarket, resulting in a brutal fight with a store employee that leaves the young man unconscious in a snowy parking lot. Pete and Joey hide for the night, and
when they return to their apartment in the morning, they learn that the police have been looking for them, that Betty has left and is staying with relatives, and that they are now homeless because their landlady has kicked them out. Pete convinces Joey to leave Betty behind so that they can escape to the West and thus evade responsibility for their crime.

*Trailer Park Boys*\(^1\)

Most of the episodes of the series are about the plots concocted by the three main characters Ricky, Julian and Bubbles, or the Boys, to sell drugs or make money by other criminal means. All three of the Boys live in the Sunnyvale Trailer Park, but only Julian has his own trailer. Ricky sleeps in an old, rusted car with a missing door in the driveway called the Shitmobile, and Bubbles lives and sleeps in a small tool shed with his many pet cats. Alcoholism, substance use and addictions, and intoxication are evident throughout the series: Julian has a glass of rum and Coke in hand at all times, even while driving; Jim Lahey, the trailer park supervisor, is often intoxicated and guzzling straight from a liquor bottle; and Ricky’s favourite pastime is growing and smoking “dope”, i.e. marijuana.

None of the Boys appear to have completed high school, and none of them is employed on a long-term basis—indeed, few of the residents of the trailer park appear to be employed save the park supervisor. All of the boys are single, and Ricky is the only friend of the three who has a child, who lives with her mother, Lucy. Ricky’s desire to better himself in order to provide for his daughter is generally the impetus for his job-seeking: he has worked as the trailer park supervisor and he occasionally gets a job outside the park, such as his stints as a community college janitor and as a mall security guard, but his jobs are generally short-lived positions. Bubbles’s only source of income is from stealing shopping carts from stores and then fixing

\(^1\) A sample of episodes was chosen from across the seven seasons of the series for analysis.
them to sell back to the stores, which makes him about $80 a month, much of which he admits is spent on cat food. In one episode, Bubbles expresses his concern about getting caught stealing the carts because he would be left with no source of income. Bubbles confesses that he is unable to apply for employment insurance benefits because he has been stealing shopping carts for eighteen years: “I haven’t been payin’ into UI…EI…whatever the fuck they call it these days” (2002, Season 2, Episode 1).

_Trailer Park Boys_ also has an Us-versus-Them setup as the Boys often have an oppositional and conflict-laden relationship with authority figures, such as Lahey the park supervisor and his sidekick/lover, Randy, and to law enforcement officers in general, who not only pose barriers to the Boys’ lifestyle but who are also perceived as enjoying a higher socioeconomic status than the residents. In one episode, Ricky comments directly to the camera crew in an interview segment that a female police officer has “this attitude like she’s better than everybody else just ‘cause she’s wearing a fucking badge, and that’s bullshit. Like, she’s not better than me. We just have different occupations or whatever. I’m just as good as she is” (2003, Season 3, Episode 8). Themes about trying to move into a higher socioeconomic status within the trailer park through gainful employment or by pursuing educational opportunities are common. In one episode, the money that the Boys have made from selling marijuana is intended to buy the whole park to take control away from Lahey, whose ex-wife, Barb, currently owns the park, but the money is mismanaged (2005, Season 5, Episode 1). So, the Boys feel that they should have access to the life that others with a higher social status already seem to enjoy.

Most of the narratives of the series center on the Boys’ life of relatively minor crimes, which includes growing and selling marijuana; stealing barbecues to sell at the flea market; bootlegging liquor; stealing meat from the grocery store to sell at a discount to others in the store
parking lot; and Bubbles’s independent shopping cart-stealing venture. As a result of their actions, Julian and Ricky often find themselves in jail, and many seasons of the series begin with one or both in jail. To these characters, however, jail is a place without the stresses and struggle of life at home in the trailer park: they always have a hot meal, a roof over their heads, and a social atmosphere where they can play sports and get drunk with their friends, and reflect on and dream about how much better life will be once they are released and can start fresh, back in the trailer park again.

PART 4: DISCUSSION

To begin the discussion of the cultural texts, it is important to note that the main characters from both *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* are all young men in their late twenties or thirties (their exact age is never specified) from Nova Scotia. What Margaret Atwood wrote about *Goin’ Down the Road* in *Survival* could also be extended to *Trailer Park Boys*, i.e. that it is a dramatization of Canadian failure in general because of Canada’s pervasive victim identity: “The heroes survive, but just barely; they are born losers, and their failure to do anything but keep alive has nothing to do with the Maritime provinces or ‘regionalism.’ It’s pure Canadian from sea to sea” (1972, p. 43). However, Christine Ramsey argues that *Goin’ Down the Road* does not characterize all Canadian men as victims and losers, regardless of region, but “foregrounds and calls attention to the differences of region, class, culture, and gender that separate people as subjects of culture – that contribute to make some people ‘winners’ and others ‘losers’ within the ‘nation’” (p. 12). The Canadian imagination, suggests Ramsay, may have a tendency to examine social issues from the margins where the so-called losers and victims live because of our colonial roots where the centre—i.e. the provinces in power and the seat of the
federal government—and the margins are at once separate and oppositional, yet are still entwined.

This marginalized identity that is formed in relation to exclusion or distance from a powerful economic and political centre forms a foundation from which to examine the other similarities between the film and the TV show, the content and themes related to poverty that go beyond region. In terms of the specific indicators and risk factors for poverty that are outlined in Part 1 above, Pete, Joey, Ricky, Julian and Bubbles all have chronic low income, and have few employment and educational opportunities; tend to have alcohol or other substance use issues; engage in criminal activity to survive; lack safe, affordable housing; and face marginalization or exclusion in general due to their lower socioeconomic class backgrounds, which results in them being unable to participate in their communities to the same extent as the upper classes and relative to the cultural norms of the broader society outside of their immediate social environments. Additionally, themes of mobility, freedom, and human capability run throughout, and structural barriers versus personal choices are also issues that are explored, as I will discuss in turn below.

**Marginalization** - Pete and Joey are both unskilled working-class men with little awareness of the political position of their status in relation to higher socioeconomic classes, but Pete, while he may not be able to articulate the issue in these terms, is reflective, and is aware that there is something more for those in the higher classes, something which he wants for himself (Harcourt, 1976, p. 37). Pete and Joey experience this in their exclusion from the home of Pete’s middle-class, suburb-dwelling relative; from their threatened exclusion from the club where they are drunk and upsetting the other customers; and through Pete’s rebuffed advances against more
sophisticated, cultured, middle-class women. Pete is becoming aware that he is excluded from a life and a world that he wants access to, bourgeois and commonplace thought it may be—this indicates his social marginalization, an inability to participate in the comfortable quality of life that others enjoy. In Trailer Park Boys, the motif of physical marginalization represents social marginalization. The Boys not only live life separated from the larger community of Halifax in an outlying trailer park, they are also often in jail, thus physically and socially marginalized, completely segregated and excluded by law from living with others in the community.

**Mobility** - The theme of mobility is one that is key in both Goin’ Down the Road and Trailer Park Boys, and it is symbolic of the characters’ desire and inability to move up in socioeconomic status and ahead in life. In Goin’ Down the Road, the characters leave their home to escape a hard life but find barriers despite their initiative and agency. In Trailer Park Boys, the setting of the trailer park indicates that the characters have the potential to leave their current fortunes behind, but they stay in place. The homes in the trailer park also symbolize the transience and displacement that has historically affected Maritimers who have had to move West to find employment opportunities (Hughes-Fuller, 2009).

In terms of upward social mobility, when Pete sees someone or something he likes, whether a woman or a white-collar job, he goes after it, but social structural barriers, attitudes and cultural norms get in his way. Similarly, Ricky is optimistic that he can provide a better life for himself and his daughter by applying for jobs outside of the crime of the trailer park and by taking over the role of supervisor in the trailer park. Even if Ricky is unable to articulate it in such terms, he seems to be acutely aware of the overarching sociopolitical structure and his position in it in relation to Lahey and other authority figures—the law enforcement characters
see themselves as above and thus better than the poor trouble-causing and crime-committing residents of Sunnyvale. Ricky is aware of his own position in the hierarchy and wants to move to a higher level, but he sees the authority positions in relation to his own as oppressive and unjust, especially given the apparent similarities between them.

This theme of mobility is related to competing perspectives on causes of poverty, i.e. structuralist versus culturalist. Joey was not employed long enough to qualify for unemployment insurance, and Bubbles was not paying into UI for eighteen years and so is ineligible for benefits. Bubbles’s comments about the name change in employment insurance, from UI to EI, reflects the change in federal policy that resulted in the change in the name of the program. Although it can be argued that Joey and Bubbles made individual choices that led to their poverty and ineligibility for benefits, structural barriers also played a role in terms of the criteria that prevent people who are engaged in nontraditional, seasonal, or temporary work from moving out of poverty. As outlined earlier, Canadian policy changes that were intended to reduce poverty in the 1960s and 1990s resulted in a widening poverty gap, into which men such as Joey and Bubbles fell because they did not meet criteria for social assistance and were unable to find employment with wages high enough to alleviate their poverty. Despite making more money in Toronto, the high costs of living in the city do not allow for a higher quality of life for Pete and Joey, and so they are no further ahead than they were in Cape Breton. With the Trailer Park Boys, they seem to have difficulty finding lasting traditional employment, and as discussed earlier, it was unattached, non-elderly males who were one of the demographics more likely to find themselves in the poverty gap after the policy reforms of the 1990s.
**Freedom and Human Capabilities** - Whereas Pete and Joey see imprisonment as negative and therefore escape Toronto to avoid responsibility and to find better opportunities further West, characters in *Trailer Park Boys* see incarceration as a holiday, an escape from their destitution and daily struggles in the trailer park. Pete and Joey see more for themselves than poverty and jail in Toronto, and the solution to their current troubles lies in their freedom. Ricky and his friends, on the other hand, appear to think of jail as a stepping stone to better things ahead, a place that creates a temporary sense of stability and comfort in a chaotic world, and provides an opportunity to reflect on their past mistakes and their potential to make a new start once their sentences are fulfilled.

**Style and Reality** - While the content of *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* clearly reflect the reality of poverty in Canada, the realistic documentary style of the film and the TV series strongly reinforces this relationship between poverty and culture, and gives viewers the impression that they are watching the lives of real Canadians and their experiences. However, R. Bruce Elder (1989) argues that while the cinéma vérité style of *Goin’ Down the Road* is reflective of real-world social and economic concerns, it limits the potential of the film, because Shebib’s struggle to maintain the real-world representational style of the film at all costs is at odds with and represses what could be a more dynamic dramatic conflict within the story. This is one of the tensions that can occur when blending reality and fiction, says Elder, and the film’s narrative and Shebib’s message become less effective overall as a result because the realism is unnecessary to understand the social meaning.
Trailer Park Boys is a fictional show that was filmed in a mockumentary style, similar to other reality TV shows where a camera crew follows the characters as they go about their daily lives, and confessional one-on-one interviews with the camera crew are also used as part of the structure of the shows. Trailer Park Boys is not a true reality show but a parody of American reality TV shows that exploit marginalized persons living in poverty such as COPS, which focuses on the pursuit of criminals by law enforcement officers. Unlike COPS, however, Trailer Park Boys is from the criminals’ perspective. Patricia Hughes-Fuller (2009) argues that Trailer Park Boys is realistic because it reflects both Canadian and American realities, who both “continue to experience the effects of the hegemony of neo-liberal political and economic policies brought in during the 1980s and 1990s, along with associated cultural deformations,” which include a proliferation of attacks on poor and marginalized persons on reality television (Hughes-Fuller, 2009, p. 106). One of the issues in terms of parodying reality TV is that Trailer Park Boys has itself been accused of exploiting marginalized people, which would in theory make its brand of realism less effective. Director Mike Clattenberg has denied that his show is ridiculing people who live in poverty in trailer parks: "The idea isn't to make trailer parks look bad or have fun at their expense…It's about the people on the show playing the card they're dealt" (Durbin, 2003). Taking reality to another level, the actors who played the main characters on Trailer Park Boys would often appear in character in real-life settings during the run of the series, thereby maintaining the illusion that these characters were real people (Hughes-Fuller, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings above, it is clear that both Goin’ Down the Road and Trailer Park Boys reflect many sociological, economic, and other aspects of real-life poverty that contribute to
exclusion and a poor quality of life for many Canadians. The film and the TV series both reflect general indicators of poverty for all Canadians such as low income and poor quality of housing, and the specific changes to government policies in the 1960s and the 1990s that have left many Canadians struggling in the poverty gap for the last fifty years. Although *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* both unflatteringly portray Canadians and avoid pandering to audiences with the same sort of convenient happy endings found in the endless stream of popular Hollywood films and TV programs that make their way across the border for mass consumption, they have become a part of Canada’s culture and identity. However, this seems to suit Canadian audiences because unlike American audiences, as Katherine Monk argues, Canadians have a distinct inability to love ourselves, both on the big screen and in person; and as Christine Ramsay notes, Canadians see themselves best from the margins given our colonial history. These key facts about how Canadians see themselves may translate to the types of gritty realism and marginalized “loser”-type characters in Canadian film and television, and the success of *Goin’ Down the Road* and *Trailer Park Boys* with Canadian audiences is a strong indication of their ability to reflect back to Canadians a readily recognizable Canadian identity. What is clear from the analysis above is that many of the truly nation-defining stories of marginalized Canadians have historically been lost within the “myth of liberal inclusiveness” that Canada has tried to project to the world and to its own citizens. The purpose of this myth is, ostensibly, to connect a vast country of increasingly diverse peoples where a colonial history, regional disparities, questions of national unity, and an all-too-close relationship with a powerful and influential neighbour across the border have infused our public consciousness with deeply ingrained narratives of political, socioeconomic and cultural marginalization. It would seem as if there are many divisions and gaps between people at many levels in Canada, nationally, provincially and
individually, but there is a need for more scholarship on the relationship between Canadian poverty and culture to more fully explore and definitively pinpoint the connections.
REFERENCES


