"The long fetch of history"[1]

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Twenty years ago, Lawrence Levine—esteemed cultural historian and winner of a MacArthur "genius" fellowship—described his colleagues' nervous laughter when he classified certain popular entertainers as great artists. Levine asked himself why it mattered so much to distinguish between "high" and "low" culture, and he set out to discover when the categories crystallized in the United States and whose interests they served.

The result was *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. The book zeroes in on mid-nineteenth-century phrenology, which measured cranial dimensions to establish a hierarchy of racial types, from the high brows of European Caucasians to the low brows of alien races: *Coombs' Popular Phrenology* of 1865 typically illustrated the domed forehead of Shakespeare against the flat-headed skull of "A Cannibal New Zealand Chief" (Levine 222). As the century wore on, that distinction was increasingly wielded by a class of "old stock" Anglo-American gentlemen who sought to shore up their privilege in the face of threats posed by

1 The phrase—which derives from the oceanographic measurement of waves' hidden origins and cumulative power—comes from George Lipsitz's brilliant study of contemporary popular music, *Footsteps in the Dark* (passim).

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galloping immigration, industrialization, and technology. Levine closely documents how this class succeeded in fissuring what had been "a rich shared public culture," removing Shakespeare, symphonic music, opera, and the fine arts to a pantheon of inaccessible high culture (9). Other scholars of the late-nineteenth-century U.S.—such as Ellen Gruber Garvey, Kathy Peiss, and Richard Ohmann—have traced parallel power relations in struggles between established middle-class book publishers and the makers of mass magazines, in the gendered division of commercialized leisure, and in the commodification of audiences by advertisers. The eastern establishment sought both to distance itself from and to control this new mass culture marketplace, and a new class alignment—sometimes named the professional-managerial class—emerged.

Repeatedly, the cultural categories which crystallized in this period—highbrow/lowbrow, literary/commercial, elite/mass, serious/popular—served to widen the gap between "us" and "them." In a period which saw the collapse of Radical Reconstruction, the attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples, the violent suppression of labour action, and the first wave of women publicly agitating for suffrage, these categories did crucial cultural work. They naturalized the hierarchies of race, class, and gender, and their divisions underwrote other forms of segregation.

Some, of course, refused such distinctions and their own relegation within the cultural hierarchy. S. Alice Callahan (Muskogee)—currently identified as the first Native American woman to publish a novel, *Wynema* (1891)—used the popular sentimentalism associated with white middle-class women to launch an excoriating attack on the genocidal policies and practices of the government of the day. In the same period, African-Americans across the country did an end-run on the white monopoly on publishing and distribution, seizing the new tools of mass publishing for their own ends. The Colored Cooperative Publishing Company in Boston, James McGirt in Philadelphia, and Sutton Griggs in Tennessee all produced and marketed popular magazines and books to Black communities, heroizing African-American and mixed-race figures and raging, in their various ways, against racial inequities. Along the fault lines and colour lines of cultural hierarchy, such creative forces marshaled solidarity and resistance.

What has all this, an argument from U.S. studies, to do with our position as academics, in Canada, right now? Ohmann argues that mass culture emerged hand in hand with the modern research university, each shaping and serving the other. To simplify his argument: the new universities trained the professional-managerial class which shaped and consumed

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the new commercial culture which, in turn, helped corporate capitalism to find stability in the economic chaos of the post-bellum U.S. Although the PMC could—and still does—generate temporary opposition to capitalism, it has also provided long-term support to the system. Now, as the corporatization and Americanization of Canadian universities gallop on apace, we are living the next step in this process, as universities fit themselves to the needs of agile capitalism. Our institutions continue to refine nineteenth-century forms of cultural distinction—celebrity culture, niche marketing, the commodification of students' attention—while resorting to the agile tactics of twenty-first-century globalization: downsizing, outsourcing, the dependence on casual and migrant intellectual labour, and the like.

If we accept this version of history, then there is no golden age when the university stood above mass culture—they rose together, and symbiotically, to the point that Michael Denning calls the neoliberal university "a form of global mass culture" ("Lineaments"). From this perspective, the nervous laughter described by Levine sounds less like the condescension of a secure ivory tower elite than the discomfort of those who know that the university has long participated in and profited from the mass culture they deride. If the overlap between these histories tells us that there is no incongruity in studying forms of popular culture in the academy, there may be less challenge involved in defending the practice than in continuing to develop analyses that are both acute and enabling.

Currently, I'm teaching an undergraduate seminar on the high-low split in the nineteenth-century U.S., and I'm puzzling how to help students convert their encounter with the history of our own commodification into constructive analysis and action.[2] An otherwise disparate group seems uniformly to resent being relentlessly positioned as cultural consumers. They object to the corporate synergies which convert bookshops into "cultural department stores" and readers into market segments and to the digital capitalism which converts their homes into shopping malls every time they turn on a computer.[3] One young man became apoplectic at how scrapbooking—which Garvey analyzes as a nineteenth-century tool for asserting a degree of individual and community control over the burgeoning print marketplace—has been commercialized into yet

2 An excellent example of a work which helps undergraduate students connect the history of popular culture with their localized positions in the Canadian academy is O'Brien and Szeman.

3 The racial dynamics of students' various reactions to their reading material being emblazoned with Oprah's Book Club stickers are more complex than I can address here.

another prefabricated commodity. Many seem hungry for examples of community-making which defy the odds by turning the containments of consumer-commodity culture into sources of solidarity. They see connections, for example, between nineteenth-century Indigenous and African-American voices and contemporary pan-African and pan-Caribbean groups of popular music-makers explored by George Lipsitz, who seize the tools of the U. S. music industry to build collective memory and resist dispossession. Encountering "the long fetch of history" can breed both anger and inspiration; above all, it produces frank conversations about our relationship—as students, teachers, researchers, commentators—to the mass culture that we live and study.

Those were the arguments which came to my mind on encountering Robert Fulford's attack on one scholarly study of popular culture. Fulford's sneers echo the uncomfortable laughter in some halls of academia, and part of what he fears is precisely the making of alternative community. His wielding of cultural hierarchies for purposes of—here, homophobic—bigotry has a long and illuminating history.

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