



Alena Schmidt-Wehrich

# INTERDEPENDENCIES

A Comparative Study  
of National Mythologies  
and Multiculturalism in the  
United States and Canada

Königshausen & Neumann

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My interest in American and Canadian national mythologies goes back to a seminar at the University of Konstanz called “American Dream versus Survival,” was fostered through my master’s thesis on national myths and multiculturalism (written during my stay as a research student at the University of British Columbia), and now culminates in this project. During my time in Vancouver, which was financed by the Baden-Württemberg-Stipendium, Barack Obama was still president in the United States and Stephen Harper prime minister in Canada. Since then, the two North American nations have changed much and at times in unexpected ways, but their central dreams, ideals, and myths have endured.

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## Abstract

Both the United States and Canada are immigrant countries whose national mythologies and national identities have been the subject of much discussion – albeit for different reasons. Whereas the United States is famous for its various national myths and its strong national identity, Canada has for a long time been known for the contrary. Unlike their southern neighbors, Canadians were said to lack a common mythology and have for a long time struggled to define their national identity. Nevertheless, myths have played a decisive role in the construction of both national narratives. This study comparatively analyzes how national myths have not only shaped the two profoundly different national identities but also the two unique multicultural ideals commonly known as the American melting pot and the Canadian multicultural mosaic. Individual national myths existing in the United States and Canada are investigated with a focus on their respective interdependencies with the two countries' approaches to their multiculturalism. My thesis thus both juxtaposes the two North American national mythologies and provides new insights into the interrelations of national myths, national identities, and multiculturalism in these two immigrant nations. Since my findings overall demonstrate the continuing significance of national myths and national identities in our age of increasingly diverse populations, I argue that a potential reimagination of the United States and Canada should involve a reinterpretation rather than a de-mythification of American and Canadian national myths.





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## 1. Introduction

Both the United States and Canada are immigrant countries whose national mythologies and national identities have been the subject of much discussion – albeit for different reasons. Whereas the United States is famous for its various national myths and its strong national identity, Canada has for a long time been known for the contrary. Unlike their southern neighbors, Canadians are not united by a shared Canadian dream, have been said to live in a “country without a mythology,”<sup>1</sup> and have for a long time struggled to construct a solid national identity. Nevertheless, myths have played a decisive role in the construction of both national narratives. In both North American countries, myths have not only shaped the two very different national identities, but also influenced the two different multicultural ideals commonly known as the American<sup>2</sup> melting pot and the Canadian multicultural mosaic.

The emergence of these differing ways of dealing with immigrants is particularly striking since Canada<sup>3</sup> and the United States share major similarities as New World countries and neighbors. As Caroline Rosenthal points out, “what makes a comparison between the United States and Canada especially worthwhile is that both are formerly white settler societies that have become highly urbanized and multicultural nations” (2011, 5). Despite these parallels, the two countries have developed unique ways of coping as societies largely made up of immigrants. Both managed to produce a national pattern of integration they are today famous for. Whereas the United States continues to be associated with assimilation and the idea of the reborn American, Canada today celebrates its multiculturalism and difference. The emergence of these differing ways of accommodating immigrants goes back, of course, to the two New World nations’ respec-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Douglas LePan’s poem on Canada titled “A Country Without a Mythology” (1948).

<sup>2</sup> As Nischik illustrates in her introduction to *Comparative North American Studies*, the term “America/n” not only designates the United States but is frequently used in a neocolonial way to refer to the whole hemisphere (see 2014, 7–9). Being aware of the power constellations implied in this terminology, I will in the following employ “America/n” for the United States only and talk about an “American” continent exclusively when referring to the time of the continent’s exploration and early settlement.

<sup>3</sup> Since the scope of this study does not allow me to do justice to the decisive linguistic and cultural differences between English and French Canada, the direct comparisons I draw between the United States and Canada primarily focus on English Canada and the construction of a shared Canadian identity.

tive historical, geographical, and political conditions. However, these different conditions at the same time created unique national myths and national identities that in turn shaped the two remarkably distinct multicultural ideals. By revealing these profound interdependencies between national mythologies and multicultural ideals, I will highlight the continuing significance of national myths and national identities in our age of high migration and globalization. I will demonstrate that rather than discarding national myths and national identities for the sake of utopian visions of a postnational world, it is crucial to recognize, deconstruct, and reinterpret them.

Considering the fact that “the idea of a nation can arise from historical events, religious beliefs, or ancient myths” (Rosenthal 2011, 12), it becomes apparent that in countries comprising people with different histories and different religions, national myths play a key role as an element that makes up a common bond and forges a sense of community. While national myths further a sense of community in all kinds of nations across the globe, they thus fulfill a unique role in immigrant societies, where they function as a crucial source of identity and unification. Here, and accordingly in the United States and Canada, national myths face the additional challenge of having to appeal to diverse people and having to address former and new immigrants alike. In both the United States and Canada, these myths have furthered what Benedict Anderson calls the “imagined community,” a concept that describes how “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991, 6). Hence, national myths are – even more so in immigrant countries – of a decisive impact since they forge a nation’s image of itself. As Daniel Francis explains, “with repetition they come to form the mainstream memory of the culture, our national dreams, the master narrative which explains the culture to itself and seems to express its overriding purpose” (1997, 10). These central myths forge a national identity across differences and thereby shape a set of shared fundamental beliefs and values. As will be shown in this study, in the case of the United States and Canada, they additionally find expression in the two countries’ unique approaches to immigration and integration.

In the following, I will primarily focus on how national myths in the United States and Canada have not only forged a common national identity but also a corresponding version of multiculturalism. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that this process is not unidirectional. While the myth of American exceptionalism, for instance, no doubt fed into American assimilationist views, the pride in the country’s melting pot, in turn, heightened the belief in the nation’s exceptionalism. Thus, I will also look at the way multiculturalism may, in turn, shape national identities and

strengthen or weaken individual national myths. In that context, it is important to note that nations are not “fixed and stable units, but are, on the contrary, in constant need of re-imagination and reproduction” (Rosenthal 2011, 12). The interdependencies between myths and multiculturalism I intend to analyze are, in that context, crucial for the reimagination of nations. After all, they imply that the transformation of an established national identity by, for instance, the reinterpretation of a myth, might at the same time affect that country’s multicultural ideal and associated policies. In the same way, a country’s multicultural ideal can influence and change its national myths and identity – a potential way to rewrite exclusionary national myths and reimagine the nation as more open and inclusive.

Whereas national myths, national identity, and multiculturalism differ strikingly in the United States and Canada, there are equally striking connections between these concepts within the two countries. Broadly speaking, the United States has been shaped by self-glorifying myths, a prominent national identity, and the ideal of the melting pot asking immigrants to assimilate into the dominant culture. Canada, however, has by tendency been shaped by an initial lack of widely acknowledged myths, a former absence of a solid national identity, and, more recently, the ideal of a multicultural mosaic allowing immigrants to preserve their ethnic heritage. While differences between the United States and Canada no doubt result from the two countries’ respective historical and cultural developments, the aim of my study is to show that these unique connections within and, as we will later see, also between the two countries are not coincidental but rather the result of mutual influences and interrelations between the two nations’ national narratives and their multicultural ideals. The main questions I will try to answer can hence be formulated as follows: How did the strength and content of American and Canadian national myths influence the two countries’ national identities and forms of multiculturalism? What consequences do these interdependencies imply for present-day attempts to deconstruct these myths and reimagine these nations? What impact did the strength of the two countries’ national identities have on their stance on multiculturalism as a policy?<sup>4</sup> Are national identity and multiculturalism as often believed contradictory concepts or compatible in the United States and Canada? How are individual national myths related to the ideals of the American melting pot and the Canadian multicultural mosaic, respectively? How does multiculturalism, in turn, influence national identities and individual national myths in the United States and Canada? In addressing these questions, I attempt to

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Angus: “The stronger the national identity, the lesser the acceptance of multiculturalism, and vice versa” (1997, 143).

explain how the two neighboring New World countries and former settler societies each managed to produce a unique national mythology, national identity, and pattern of integration they are today famous for.

### State of Research and Relevance of the Project

National myths, national identity, and multiculturalism are topics that literary and cultural scholars frequently deal with. Even if these topics are not at the center of a study, they are often present through the cultural background of American or Canadian works and themes. To name only two examples, Lorraine York, for instance, concludes her discussion of “Literary Celebrity in the United States and Canada” by declaring that “national myths and relations of power continue to affect who we celebrate as authors and how we celebrate – or refuse to celebrate – them” (York in Nischik 2014, 312). Similarly, Caroline Rosenthal notes in her analysis of “North American Urban Fiction” that “English Canada and the United States significantly differ [...] in how physical space has been transformed by founding myths (or the lack thereof)” (Rosenthal in Nischik 2014, 237). As these two examples illustrate, many scholars acknowledge the power of myths and the way they pervade all areas of society. Yet, national myths are frequently discussed as a side note rather than a main subject, considered a given rather than analyzed in detail. The fact that the insights gained in York’s and Rosenthal’s comparative analyses both reflect the decisive impact of the unique workings of national myths in the United States and Canada clearly illustrates the need for a comparative investigation of the two national mythologies.

American national identity and individual national myths like the American Dream have, of course, been discussed by Peter Freese (1994), Jim Cullen (2003), Heike Paul (2014), Cal Jillson (2016), and many others. Scholars such as Northrop Frye (1965), Margaret Atwood (1972), or Daniel Francis (1997) have identified and analyzed Canada’s myths and national identity, many also focusing on individual Canadian national myths such as the North or survival. However, while Sherrill Grace and Caroline Rosenthal, for instance, comparatively analyze the American West<sup>5</sup> and the Canadian North,<sup>6</sup> there is, to my knowledge, to date no

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<sup>5</sup> Since the American West has already been thoroughly studied in relation to Canadian myths, this study will not discuss it in a separate chapter. Instead, aspects of the myth that are relevant in connection with the American melting pot such as expansion and the frontier are analyzed in chapter 4.2.4. on Manifest Destiny.

<sup>6</sup> See Grace’s “Comparing Mythologies: Ideas of West and North” (1991) and Rosenthal’s “Introduction” to *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* (2011), as well as Rosenthal’s “Comparing Mythologies: The Canadian North versus the American West” (2005).

work providing an extensive overview of American myths juxtaposed with the altogether less often analyzed Canadian national myths.

Multiculturalism has been defined and investigated in numerous studies, a few of them even comparing the forms it has taken in the United States and Canada like Sabine Sielke's article "Multiculturalism in the United States and Canada" (2014). However, multiculturalism has less frequently been analyzed in relation to national myths and national identities, let alone from a comparative perspective. Eva Mackey's *House of Difference* (1998), for instance, provides valuable insights into the role multiculturalism plays in Canada's mythology and self-image but has a Canadian rather than a comparative focus. A rare essay that comparatively analyzes American and Canadian multiculturalism in relation to the two countries' national identities is F.L. Van Holthoon's "The Melting Pot and the Vertical Mosaic: Some Considerations on Cultural Pluralism and National Culture in the United States and Canada." However, Van Holthoon claims in his essay written in 1993 that Canada "has no national culture" (1993, 259) and thus primarily compares the successful American culture to a supposed lack of culture on the Canadian side. Nowadays, there is no longer a need to prove that Canada indeed has a national culture, but there is still a need to analyze this more recent culture in relation to the older and more prominent one produced by Canada's southern neighbor. Consequently, I intend to provide a balanced analysis of both national cultures and their interrelations with multiculturalism.

To my knowledge, there is as of yet no analysis of the interdependencies between national myths and multiculturalism in the United States and Canada, although the two countries' myths and identities are inextricably linked with the two distinct North American approaches to their multiculturalism. By highlighting crucial similarities and differences between the two nations' mythologies and multicultural ideals, I hope to further a better understanding of American and Canadian attitudes towards immigration and integration and of what it means to identify as American or Canadian in today's turbulent times.<sup>7</sup> In our times of high migration, the two countries' unique models of integrating different ethnic groups within one nation are of particular significance. Through my analysis of the

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware that a topic as broad as mine necessarily relies on generalizations. Although every generalization implies numerous exceptions and much harm has been done by pigeonholing people or, by extension, nations, we nevertheless need a certain amount of classification in order to make sense of the world. The challenge is not to let these categories become absolute and exclusivist, but rather regard what we know about, for instance, the profession, origin, or religion of individuals or groups as clues to their identity rather than fixed categories. In terms of national identity, this means that while we may have some knowledge about the basic core of a nation, its citizens, of course, identify with these values, myths, and ideals to varying degrees.



national characteristics behind these models, I intend to show that the concepts of national identity and multiculturalism are not – as often believed – contradictory, but that it is, after all, possible for countries to have both a multicultural nation and a unique national identity. Furthermore, by highlighting how the two North American forms of multiculturalism are, in fact, inherently national products, I will stress that existing multicultural ideals and systems cannot be randomly adopted by other nations (see Sielke in Nischik 2014, 63), but should indeed always be in line with a country's national narrative and national identity in order to be successful.

### Introducing my Comparative Approach

Why study two nations in our global twenty-first century? Why two dominant national mythologies rather than marginalized minorities? With its focus on and interest in transnationalism, postnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalism, the academic world has long been inclined to turn its back on the nation since, as Aleida Assmann explains, “any engagement with the nation was suspected to – wittingly or unwittingly – promote ‘nationalism’” (2020, 1). However, Assmann warns that this neglect of the nation by intellectuals may have opened the doors to the nationalism it sought to erase: “In our liberal thinking, we have forgotten the nation, but illiberal thinkers and movements have not. Right-wing nationalists have returned” (2020, 2). Citing Germany as an example, she describes how “the extreme right had an easy chance to pick up the empty and neglected container of the nation to fill it with its own values, images, emotions and promises” (Assmann 2020, 3). Seen in that light, studying the nation may thus *prevent* rather than *promote* nationalism. As a consequence, Assmann calls for a much-needed reimagination and, in a sense, also an intellectual reappropriation of the nation.

An approach that enables scholars to study nations without losing sight of today's global interconnectedness is a moderate form of transnationalism. Donald Pease, for instance, argues that “the transnational prevents the closure of the nation. But the transnational is not the Other of the nation” (2011, 5–6). Instead, “the transnational names an undecidable economic, political, or social formation that is neither in nor out of the nation-state. Inherently relational, the transnational involves a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces introduce a new configuration” (Pease 2011, 5–6). Rather than refraining from studying nations, it is important to study a nation both in terms of what defines and unites it and in terms of how that nation relates to the world and is shaped by outer influences.

I agree with proponents of the transnational turn that nations should no longer be analyzed as fixed and isolated units in an age of globaliza-

tion. However, I disagree with more radical transnationalists and postnationalists who believe that nations and national identities are becoming redundant. Cynthia Sugars argues in a similar vein, stating that “to discard the concept of national identity as an oppressive construct seems counter-productive” (2001, 117). After all, a heightened international contact may result in a heightened awareness of international and intercultural differences and similarities, since, as Stephanie Lawson argues, all identities “are invariably relational, depending on the existence of other quite separate identities to achieve contrast and therefore affirm a sense of self as belonging to a unique entity” (S. Lawson in Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2011, 181). As Reingard M. Nischik states,

the rupture of the relation between nation and cultural identity – formerly thought to be a stable one – in the wake of economic and cultural globalization thus does not result in a relinquishment of national focus. Yet the latter today more than ever needs comparative counterparts in order to critically reflect, and reflect on, its own premises. (2014, 16)

The approach of Comparative North American Studies will enable me to bridge this gap between a more radical form of transnationalism and an isolated study of nations. After all, Comparative North American Studies tries to gain deeper insights into the United States and Canada by comparing the one country with the other and thus approaches “North American literatures and cultures [...] without neglecting or completely dismissing the nation as an analytical category” (Freitag 2013, 12). As Nischik explains in her *Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature*,

it is this location in-between nationally circumscribed fields of study on the one hand and hemispheric or global studies on the other hand that makes transnational Comparative North American Studies [...] a timely, illuminating, practicable, and future-oriented approach to the literatures and cultures of Canada and the United States (2014, 18).

Accordingly, my analysis will highlight that the nation, and, by extension, national myths and national identities, is of continuing relevance in today’s transnational and multicultural age. Applying a comparative method will allow me to study each nation “from a critical distance by standing outside of its borders and by putting it into comparative dialogue with its closest neighbors” (R. Adams 2010, 7). It will enable me to reveal similarities and differences between American and Canadian national myths, national identities, and forms of multiculturalism and at the same time stress the two countries’ uniqueness. After all, as Nischik states, the “comparative method enriches not only our understanding of [...] the interconnectedness of both cultures, but also our awareness of the characteristics of both cultures as such” (2014, 18).

## Outline

In an age that has frequently been designated as transnational and even postnational, I find it necessary to explain my scholarly interest in national myths and national identities. Consequently, this introduction will be followed by the chapter “The Continuing Significance of National Myths and National Identity.” In this second chapter, I will first clarify the concepts relevant for my analysis by “Defining the Nation, National Identity, and National Myth,” before moving on to the subchapter “Between Nationalism and Globalism: The Revival of the Nation.” Here, I will comment on the proclaimed death of the nation(-state) and its more recent revival. Although the nation is today challenged by both nationalists and globalists, it continues to be a basic and much-needed source of identity for many people across the globe. After all, national identity creates solidarity and a sense of community among heterogeneous populations that are divided along class and other lines such as gender, religion, or ethnicity – qualities that are crucial whenever a nation is in crisis, as the COVID-19 pandemic has recently revealed.

My third chapter, “North American Multicultural Ideals,” introduces the different ways of dealing with diversity in the United States and Canada and includes an assessment of the problems and limits of the two countries’ multicultural ideals. After first providing the necessary definitions in “Defining Multiculturalism,” I will use the subchapter “The Concepts of the American Melting Pot and the Canadian Mosaic” to establish the differences and similarities between American and Canadian patterns of integration fundamental for my analysis. After all, I intend to link the development of these differences to the countries’ national myths and identities. I will highlight that the image conjured up by the Canadian mosaic expresses “unity-within-diversity” (Fleras and Elliott 1992, 56), while the American melting pot stands for ‘unity out of diversity.’ While Canada has dedicated itself to official multiculturalism and today encourages immigrants to maintain their cultural heritage in a multicultural mosaic, the United States still clings to the ideal of the reborn American. Although scholars have proposed other images like the ‘salad bowl’ or ‘kaleidoscope’ to illustrate North American integration, the idealistic concepts of the melting pot and mosaic remain dominant in the minds of the people and in the rhetoric used in multicultural discourses. How powerful the often-criticized ideology of the American melting pot still is will be pointed out through its persistence in the face of a very different reality. Thus, I intend to defend my usage of both concepts and to stress the continuing usefulness of the melting pot and mosaic in describing American and Canadian self-conceptions as immigrant nations.

In chapter four, “Inextricably Linked: National Myths and Multiculturalism,” the heart of this study, I dive into the analysis of the close con-

nections between national myths and multiculturalism in the two former settler societies. Although national identity is not explicitly mentioned in the title of this chapter, I will in the process also look into interdependencies between national identity and multiculturalism both in general and in a North American context. I will analyze in which way the prominent American national identity and the set of values and beliefs Americans share are responsible for the country's skeptical attitude towards the concept of official multiculturalism. In opposition to that, I will show how Canada's initial lack of a clearly defined set of values, along with its former difficulties in constructing a stronger national identity, made it fit for adopting multiculturalism (see Angus 1997, 143). I thereby intend to show that although this former absence of a unifying national identity might have initiated the idea of multiculturalism in Canada, the country's multiculturalism is much more than a replacement and Canada has indeed developed a unique national identity. Nowadays, national myths are widely accepted to be part of national identities. Anthony D. Smith, for instance, identifies "common myths and historical memories" (1991, 14) as a central element of national identities.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the close relation between national myths and national identities will be considered a given rather than analyzed in detail. Instead, I will devote the largest part of this chapter to the analysis of individual American and Canadian national myths and their respective connections with the two corresponding multicultural ideals. Throughout this chapter, I will support this mostly cultural analysis with case studies that demonstrate the development and workings of American and Canadian national myths, national identities, and multicultural ideals in historical, political, and literary texts. The primary literature I have chosen to analyze in that context is mostly canonical. After all, as Rosenthal states, "canons not only select certain texts and modes of representation that are deemed to be more valuable than others but also teach us what to recognize as typically American or typically Canadian fiction" (Rosenthal in Nischik 2014, 241) and, as a result, provide a valuable basis for the comparisons I intend to draw between the two national narratives. Throughout my analysis, I will refer to the histories of the United States and Canada in order to illustrate how their national myths, identities, and multicultural ideals have developed over time and how these unique histories have been transformed to forge corresponding national myths and self-conceptions.

Chapter four will start with a close analysis in the form of the subchapter "Myths, Identity, and Multiculturalism in the Nations' Beginnings: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American*

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<sup>8</sup> See also Castaños: "today it is usually taken as a premise that a national myth conveys meanings that are central to the identity of a nation" (Castaños in Bouchard 2013: 77).

*Farmer* (1782) and Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852)." I will provide a close reading of these two famous settler accounts as examples of how the presence and role of myths in both countries already varied greatly during the times of early settlement. Both of these texts are highly relevant since they shaped their countries' national identities and myths while at the same time telling us much about the differing expectations of early immigrants and, accordingly, about the beginnings of the two unique forms of multiculturalism. Since the insights gained in this comparative literary analysis will serve as a basis for some of the conclusions drawn in later chapters, it amounts to a literary introduction into the primarily cultural investigation of the linkages between individual myths and multicultural ideals that follows.

Subsequently, I will first discuss the American myths and their influence on the melting pot ideal before focusing on the Canadian ones and their influence on the ideal of the mosaic. The subchapter "American Myths and the Melting Pot" discusses early myths of America, the myth of a new beginning, American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and the American Dream, each with a focus on their respective connections to the melting pot. I will thus start my analysis of American national myths from scratch, namely with the dreams Europeans had of an imagined 'America' upon the continent's so-called discovery. I will show how utopian visions and wishful projections inspired the long-lasting belief in the creation of a superior society, a belief that lies at the core of the melting pot with its expectation that immigrants should shed their cultural heritage to become a part of that great society. The next American myth I intend to address is the myth of a new beginning. I will demonstrate that the belief in a new beginning is deeply rooted in American culture and the ideal of a melting pot. Such a thorough belief in new beginnings is as contrary to the Canadian model of a multicultural mosaic as it is essential for the American melting pot. Equally important is the myth of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism that can be traced back to the early Puritan settlers and their belief in a divine mission. Since the belief in Manifest Destiny involves the conviction that other countries, too, would benefit from following the American model, the people who chose to come to the United States were even more so encouraged to embrace American ideals in order to join this exceptional nation. As Peter Freese convincingly shows in his study, these myths all contributed to the formation of the most prominent narrative: the American Dream. I will analyze the various "American Dreams" circulating and show to what extent this myth constitutes an immigrant dream attracting and uniting diverse people from every corner of the globe in their belief in a brighter future as citizens of a nation full of possibilities. I will demonstrate that, all in all, American national myths have forged a strong national identity and a