Consumption of popular culture involves complex negotiations that vary according to personal histories and affective investments and cannot be fixed “in terms of a collection of objects or practices or in terms of a single group.” Coming to understand that forms of popular culture are not fully achieved, that identities are not fixed or real, and that one is actively engaged with popular culture as it produces social inequalities involves a learning process; what I refer to as a pedagogy of popular culture.

In this paper, I accept Giroux’s insight that pedagogy is the “doing” or one aspect of the labour of Cultural Studies. I elaborate what this “doing” might look like by using a pedagogy of popular culture informed by Michel Foucault’s ethics to explore intersections of national and regional identity, gender, and sexuality. I use the
Alberta Report’s representation of Molson beer commercials from the 1990s, the promotions of Alley Kat beer, a small brewery in Edmonton, and marketing campaign posters and text from the Alberta Beef Producers. I juxtapose these with alternative performances of regional identity, gender, and sexuality by k. d. lang and a collective drag king group, Alberta Beef. By utilizing these examples, I show how a pedagogy of popular culture can allow consumers to be aware of their negotiations with popular culture and how it is possible to produce intentional, alternative popular cultures of national and regional identity, gender, and sexuality.

Pedagogy of Popular Culture: The Influence of Foucault’s Ethics

Michel Foucault was interested in the emergence of modern institutions and how they constrained participation in modern life. Emerging in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, institutions such as factories, schools, armies, hospitals, and prisons used technologies of time, space, and movement to manage growing populations efficiently. Standards of achievement or behaviour were established for tasks in relation to particular physical and social spaces and these abilities and behaviours were assessed by experts in relation to these standards. Experts also intervened to correct individuals who did not meet the standards of the particular enterprise. This created a “constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be… like one another.” These technologies of homogenization that subject individuals to the standards, codes, and norms of modern institutions are characteristic of what Foucault referred to as a “society of normalization.”

Foucault’s ethics is a way to contend with technologies that normalize individuals by imposing homogeneity in relation to standards or codes. Whereas morality is concerned with how individuals subject themselves to codes, Foucault reserved the term “ethics” for “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the… code.” Foucault argued that there are four components to whether someone might conform to or reject a standard or code, each of which relates to aspects of formation of the ethical self. First, one must ask what part of one’s behaviour is concerned with adherence to codes of conduct. Is one faithful, for example, because one conforms to the rule, feelings for one’s partner, or the mastery of desires? Second, one attempts to understand the source of his or her obligations: “be it by obeying a divine or natural law, by following a rational and universal rule, or by fashioning their existence beauti-
fully.” The third aspect of Foucault’s ethics is “the means by which we can change ourselves” and the fourth is what kind of self one aspires to be. These four aspects are in relation to moral codes but they can be adapted, as I do in this chapter, to other codes or standards, such as national, regional, and sexual identities that homogenize the self.

Ethics asks questions about “the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” so that “we [can] refuse what we are.” Rather than conformity to standards and codes, the emphasis is on the relationship with the self and on the methods and techniques through which this relationship is developed. Refusing a passive involvement in the standards of a culture, including representations of what counts as a standard or normal Canadian or Albertan, allows one to meet what Foucault believed to be an obligation to face the endless task of reinventing oneself. Exposing the limits of identity categories through questioning standards and norms, and then refusing to passively engage these standards and norms, makes it possible to push these limits and create other ways of engaging.

There is a pedagogical component to Foucault’s ethics—a component that encourages an active and ongoing questioning of the ways in which one is implicated in cultural practices. Utilizing Foucault’s ethics as a template, I propose that a pedagogy of popular culture allows consumers of popular culture to recognize when there is dissonance between their experiences of culture and the codified expectations of that culture; to question how this dissonance has occurred; and to refuse and rework cultural expectations in certain instances. Importantly, it allows consumers of popular culture to recognize that everyone else around them is also negotiating multiple expectations.

To engage in a pedagogy of popular culture is to “do” popular culture. Doing occurs at each step: questioning the relationship of representations from popular culture to one’s own historicized engagement with dominant discourses or stories from one’s culture; refusing those representations that bind one to a code or standard of identity to which, upon reflection one cannot give consent; and creating something new out of alternative readings or other engagements. But “doing” first involves recognizing that one actively negotiates the expectations of a culture and is not just a passive recipient of that culture. This recognition of one’s engagement with popular culture may be experienced as a kind of dissonance between standards of a culture and the way in which one takes up these standards or, for
example, as a conflict between the accepted or even alternative readings of a popular culture form and one’s own reading, or as I discuss in the next section, how one’s engagement is often split between or among competing commitments. Since it is as a split subject that popular culture is consumed, recognizing this split subjectivity is an important part of the pedagogical process.

Pedagogy of Popular Culture: The Split Subject

The idea of a natural, essential, unified, and coherent human subject is a legacy of modernism that continues to inform how individuals think of themselves. Pedagogy of popular culture starts from the position that identity is continually in process, incomplete, and indeterminate. Miller describes this incompleteness or indeterminacy in terms of split subjectivity. Split subjectivity is a consequence of engagement with competing demands and interests and ways of participating in a culture while questing for completeness. A quest to become a “well-tempered” or harmonious human is compared by Miller to Bach’s well-tempered “harmonious” clavier/keyboard, from which Bach banished unruly notes through his musical compositions. A drive for harmony or completeness is reflected in attempts to adhere to, as examples, dominant ideas about national or regional identity, making good consumer choices, or adhering more closely to gender and sexuality norms. Understood in relation to Foucault’s ethics, a quest for harmony is a quest to adhere to the norms and standards of a culture; for example, a quest to meet cultural expectations that bodies, behaviour, desire, and sexual activity should cohere in a two-sex, two-gender, one-sexuality determination.

Unlike Bach’s well-tempered keyboard, a quest to live harmoniously with the codes and standards of a culture is undermined because it is not possible to banish all the contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes with which one lives. As we eat into or consume popular culture, we consume or take up multiple subject positions, some of which are contradictory. Judith Butler captures the inevitability of this incompleteness when she writes of expectations of femininity that “to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of demands all at once” produces “necessary failures.” Split subjectivity or incompleteness in relation to the codes of a culture, in turn, leads to multiple ways to engage with one’s culture, producing yet more indeterminacy.

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Miller is interested in subjectivity that is split between a desire to promote oneself and a desire to be civic-minded. These desires, in turn, are split since ways to make one’s own life better are varied and often contradictory, and, in the case of a desire to be civic-minded, there are often competing ideas of what good citizenship entails in relation to competing stories or discourses of national identity. In Canada, this split in relation to national identity is between identities based in common history, geography, and values and those based in difference and plurality. Consequently, desire for sameness in civic responsibilities compete or split with desire to honour differences.

Notions that Canadian identity is based on sameness come from long-told stories about struggles with “wilderness” and inhospitable weather and geography and about shared Canadian values in relation to fairness and peacekeeping. According to this latter story, Canada’s “tenacity” for peacekeeping, is part of what Canadians believe to be their national character. The assumption that there is a unified, coherent Canadian identity is taken up in a number of ways, including commercials; Molson’s “I am Canadian,” commercials between 1994 and 1998 and then again between 2000 and 2005 are some of the more notorious of these.

Competing with stories of Canadians who share common experiences and values are stories of Canada marked by plurality and difference. This notion of Canada and Canadian identity is supported by a complex of public policies and celebrations of cultural heritage. In this competing story about Canada and Canadian identity, it is acknowledged that individual Canadians experience life differently according to a diverse mix of age, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and physical ability and that these are further complicated by regional differences. In this story, acknowledgement of differences among Canadians as individuals and as they are recognized within groups is important because these differences are the source of social inequalities.

Official multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms have complicated the notion of a common set of Canadian values and experiences by acknowledging different histories, competing values, and discrimination and inequalities among Canadians. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial human rights codes contribute to experiences of split subjectivity by Canadians by focusing on individual rights even as they assign these individuals a group identity. In Alberta, for example, the Individual Rights Protection Act protects individuals according to their status within a group category such as gender,
Those seeking redress for discrimination must approach rights tribunals as individuals while claiming a group status. In turn, each of these group categories challenges the notion that there is a coherent, unified Canadian citizen or regional community member.\textsuperscript{28}

It is to regional differences that I now turn in order to demonstrate in the last sections of the chapter the work of pedagogy of popular culture. I am interested in how the province of Alberta is distinguished as a region within Canada. While “Alberta is a modern, urbanized province, deeply integrated with national, continental and international commercial and political networks” in popular accounts, “it is portrayed as a maverick agrarian region that is distinct, politically, socially and economically, from the rest of Canada.”\textsuperscript{29} Sydney Sharpe argues that Albertans are, on the one hand, contrarians and doubters; “the wealthy westerners who question national habits and search for other paths” but who, on the other hand, are proud Canadians who want to take a central role in Canada’s affairs. She believes the Alberta spirit “springs from a well of independence and self sufficiency: …we want to control our own destiny and march to our own beat.” On the other hand, Sharpe argues that Albertans have a communal pride of place and deep-rooted sense of responsibility.\textsuperscript{30} Governor General Michaëlle Jean built on this characterization of Alberta in her 2006 address to the Alberta legislative assembly when she proclaimed: “The pioneer spirit of independence and resourcefulness in the province is legendary, yet your deserved reputation for fierce individualism and economic self-reliance belie another, lesser known aspect of Alberta: your people are the most generous of Canadians. Eighty-five percent of you make financial contributions to charitable and non-profit organizations.”\textsuperscript{31}

While these accounts represent Albertans as split between their regional and national identities and between desires of individualism and civic responsibility, they also cast Albertans as a unified whole. Albertans are also often represented in national media as, among other things, homogenous in their support of provincial government initiatives to withdraw from fiscal and ethical responsibility towards, for example, public education, affordable housing, health and welfare, the environment, non-human life forms, and infrastructure funding.\textsuperscript{32}

Canadian and regional identities are disrupted by discourses of difference and by individual rights understood in relation to group identities. In the following sections, I return to a pedagogy of popular culture, using popular culture in
Alberta as an example to illustrate how recognition, questioning, refusal, and creating something new can make it possible to recognize split subjectivity and from this, cultivate a kind of unruliness\textsuperscript{33} rather than a conformity with a vision of a harmonious self.

**Pedagogy of Popular Culture: The Labour of Recognition**

Recognition is central to the work of a pedagogy of popular culture. A first step in the process of learning from one’s engagement with popular culture is the recognition that this is an active not a passive engagement—that one negotiates popular culture and that one’s negotiation is often as a split or indeterminate subject. This noticing may not be explicit—indeed it may involve quite complex psychical investments—but it is required on some level if consuming popular culture is to be a critical practice; that is, if one is to proceed with attempting to understand how one does engage.

It is unlikely that recognition that one actively engages popular culture or how one engages will be undertaken, even with prompting, without some discord experienced between popular cultural representations of cultural codes and one’s own beliefs and investments, or between one’s own negotiations of popular culture and others’ negotiations, or internally in relation to one’s own competing or split allegiances. Dissonance may be experienced as everyday trauma that arises from ordinary experiences of inequality and discrimination as a consequence of not conforming to cultural codes of citizenship, gender, or sexuality.\textsuperscript{34} This trauma from everyday actions of exclusion rather than sensational moments of harm is a sense “that something is wrong here, and that what’s wrong is a matter of national trauma, not because they are isolated or extraordinary events but because these are the kinds of things that happen all the time.”\textsuperscript{35}

It is by recognizing discord, trauma, and inconsistencies that consumers of popular culture can begin to question how they are implicated in their consumption of it and subsequently how they conform, refuse, and/or rework their engagement relative to the level of dissonance experienced. As an example of the importance of recognition in the work of pedagogy of popular culture, I turn to how the *Alberta Report*, a weekly newsmagazine that published for 30 years until 2003, represented Molson commercials from the late 1980s and early 1990s and the juxtaposition of these commercials with an image of a cowboy on Redneck
beer, a beer from an Alberta brewery, Alley Kat brewery. But first, I want to say something about the cowboy.

The cowboy is often mobilized as a symbol of Alberta-ness that gestures to a common past. The cowboy as representative of Alberta-ness is taken up by those in and outside the province. A standing exhibit at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary celebrates the important place of the cowboy in Alberta’s short history and the Calgary Stampede is a world famous exhibition celebrating cowboy culture. Festivals celebrating cowboy poetry proliferate in towns and communities across the prairies and the image is consumed through products and services like hairstyling, car care, beef, blue jeans and other clothing, trucks, bars, bumper stickers, and beer.

Cowboys are essentially cow-herders ranging over wide-open spaces—the ranch and beyond—spaces of unfettered possibility, representing an unfettered freedom. Van Herk writes of this time as “before barbed wire”; a time prior to fences and forms of governance that closed off possibility. According to this familiar story, cowboys were free in their isolated lives; often a “cowboy’s only company was the soft ballad he sang to lull the animals.” Cowboys had to be self-reliant and independent; they had to think on their horses. Cowboys were hard-workers—quintessential rednecks, earning their red necks from physical work under a strong Alberta sun. Cowboys were a tough breed and yet had a “restless charm.” They were known for their “determined bachelorhood…the cowboy code of neighbourliness, loyalty, independence, and uncomplaining persistence became a part of the West’s code…[although] now pickup trucks have replaced horses.”

Much of the idealism associated with the cowboy has been achieved via exclusions, even while the cowboy has come to signal a homogenous Alberta-ness. Cowboys are able-bodied, physically hard-working individuals. They are men and cowboy virtue is a white man’s virtue. Cowboys, like all good male Albertans, are heterosexual.

In an article, “No Queer Beer Here,” the Alberta Report described Molson’s as “the official beer of gender ambiguity.” The Molson Canadian commercials from this period showed men and women in a range of activities and often in homo-social settings. These commercials are not as flamboyantly patriotic in their attempts to define Canadian-ness as are the more recent “I Am Canadian” commercials but they do complicate gendered and sexualized identity.
Kat’s Redneck beer. *Alberta Report* was effusive in its praise of Redneck beer as a beer “targeted at westerners”; at “Albertans proud to stick out their red necks.”

What is at stake here and in so much of what the *Alberta Report* published, especially in the 1990s, is what counts as a true Albertan in the context of Canada. *Alberta Report* was committed during this time to distinguishing Alberta and its interests from the rest of Canada, particularly central Canada. To the *Alberta Report*, the Molson beer commercials represented the worst of central Canadian-ness—“hyper-urbane,” self-centered, and decadent. Albertans, on the other hand, as represented by *Alberta Report* were alienated-from-the-rest-of-Canada, right-thinking individuals, in support of a particular sense of family values, business and free enterprise, unfettered economic growth, and small-g government. Not only did these characteristics distinguish Albertans from other Canadians, anyone living in Alberta not matching these characteristics was cast as an outsider—as not a true Albertan.

*Photo Credit: G. Filax.*
The label on Alley Kat’s Redneck beer features a cowboy, dressed in traditional
denim shirt and a large western style cowboy hat. He sports a large handlebar
moustache. He is white, and, in Alberta Report’s reading of the Redneck cowboy
juxtaposed with Molson’s gender ambiguous Canadians, he is decidedly straight.
In Alberta, beer can announce the ideal of Alberta-ness.

There is no apparent recognition on the part of the writers for Alberta Report
of their reification of Alberta-ness. In a later column, editor, Paul Bunner, wrote
that he had since discovered that Alley Kat Brewery, described without irony as
“proud makers of Redneck Beer,” hosted a fundraiser for Gay Pride Week in
Edmonton. Rather than recognize that the Alberta Report’s representation of red
necks and, by implication, Albertans as heterosexual might be problematic,
Bunner’s response was “memo to real rednecks: choose your beverages care-
fully.”

I have argued that one of the ways that pedagogy of popular culture gets
started is through recognizing dissonance or discord between what is being
depicted and personal histories and investments. As is apparent from Alberta
Report’s literal, conservative reading of both the Molson Canadian commercials
and the Redneck beer image, there is no dissonance recognized by the writers of
Alberta Report, even in the face of contradiction, or, if dissonance is recognized, it
is denied or explained away as the fault of outsiders.

It is hard to know what kind of dissonance could have shaken the writers of
Alberta Report into recognizing inconsistencies in their portrayal of Albertans as
unified in their values and identity, including their sexuality. Pedagogy of popu-
lar culture has limits for those who are committed to the realness and homoge-
neity of identity and hence who fail to recognize their own negotiations with
popular cultural representations of identity and their own split allegiances.
Noticing or recognizing internal dissonance or discord between one’s values and
beliefs and how others live their lives does not necessarily lead to questioning
one’s beliefs and values. As is evident with the writers for Alberta Report, recog-
nizing dissonance can also lead to solidification of the positions one holds. If the
writers of Alberta Report recognized that a homogenous Albertan identity is con-
tradicted by other ways of living in the province, they did not use this dissonance
to question their values and beliefs. Instead, their reaction was to cast these oth-
ers as outsiders. Contradictions, in this case, served to solidify the Alberta Report’s
position, not undermine it.

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The example from the *Alberta Report* shows that conflict in the face of contradiction may not trigger dissonance or if there is dissonance, it may solidify rather than change values. How else, then, might a pedagogy of popular culture get started? When one’s position is entrenched nothing short of a major personal upheaval is likely to evoke change but recognition of dissonance can also be facilitated by what Kellner refers to as “critical-oppositional” public intellectuals who serve as pedagogues. Critical-oppositional public intellectuals can “mobilize desires” by introducing popular culture in ways that “conflict will emerge” and then by generating questions and suggestions about how representations of the codes and standards of one’s culture may not coincide with personal histories and investments. This creation of discord and its recognition by public intellectuals can occur in a number of ways. Kellner argues that public intellectuals can no longer rely on written texts to generate debate. Instead, he says, public intellectuals must be engaged in community and low-power radio, public access television, computer bulletin boards, and discussion groups. Interventions can also be into chat rooms and discussion boards about popular culture. For example, YouTube is a site ripe for critical public intervention. Many of the Molson commercials from the last five to ten years can be found on YouTube and these and other videos beg for public critical intervention. In the case of *Alberta Report*, university professors did intervene on *Alberta Report*’s letters pages about various issues and readers were often faced with dissonance between *Alberta Report*’s staunch positions and the critique in the letters.

**Pedagogy of Popular Culture: The Labour of Questioning**

If learning is to occur from recognition of ambiguity, dissonance, and contradiction, recognition must be followed by questions about how one’s engagement with popular culture is so different in certain instances from that of others and/or how one’s split engagement with the cultural stories that identify a nation, region, sexuality or other identity categories contribute to these differences. Posing these questions makes it possible to further question how experiences have been produced in the way they have, in relation to identity categories such as gender, class, race, ability, and citizenship. Morris argues that the process of noticing and interrogating, for example, “racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, class, generational and national differences… [includes how] these are produced and contested in history” and how these, in turn, “critique… cultural universals.” For those engaged
in pedagogy of popular culture, this questioning process may involve a genealogy of experiences: tracing those processes that position people, including oneself, in particular ways and which produce their particular set of experiences and not others, in relation to identity categories. To illustrate how this questioning might work, I want to return to the Alberta Report’s representation of the Molson commercials and Redneck beer and present a different reading of these representations based on an understanding of a small part of my own historicized experience. During the 1990s, I was researching how queer youth in Alberta negotiated expert, legal, and popular culture discourses about sexuality, many of which overwhelmingly denied the value of their lives. Remarkably, Alberta Report had the most complete and comprehensive coverage of queer issues in the province during the 1990s. I spent many fraught but often amused hours reading the Alberta Report as part of this research. In almost every issue, the Alberta Report represented gays and lesbians as disgusting deviants. Their accounts were often hateful but many were presented in a way that was so flamboyant or outrageous as to be almost camp. Consider these headlines from among hundreds in Alberta Report:

Of Chemicals and Sex: Can Pollutants Cause Promiscuity and Homosexuality?
The Skater-Boy Who Wasn’t: A Lesbian in Drag Seduces Young Girls
What Exactly Was It That Gained Sodomy Such a Fine Reputation?
Homosex for the Masses: The Showcase Channel Airs a Celebration of Gay Porn
From Dyke to Diva: Lesbianism Has Become a Sexy and Sophisticated Refuge for Women Who Have Given Up on Men
Abuse Made Me Gay, Now I Have AIDS
Diesel Dykes and a Devil Worshipper Named Louise
How Did It Happen That We Have no Right to Life, but Do Have a Right to Sodomy?

When the article “No Queer Beer Here” appeared in the Alberta Report, I was already familiar with local Alley Kat brewery. I had attended their fundraisers to kick off Gay Pride week in Edmonton and I was acquainted with one of their brewmasters, who had input into the brewing of Alley Kat’s Redneck beer. This
award winning brewmaster, Roxxie, is a transgender male to female, who is very involved in the Edmonton queer community. I was aware that my reading of the Molson commercials, the image from Redneck beer, and the dissonance I experienced from Alberta Report’s initial enthusiastic response to Redneck beer as representative of Alberta straightness was a consequence of my own investment in queer communities in Alberta. The dissonance I experienced about Alberta Report’s reading of the Molson commercial and the cowboy image was also informed by my knowing that “the cowboy” is a gay male trope, parodied by the American group, The Village People, most famously in their song “YMCA.” I also knew that, to the dismay of the AR, the Alberta Gay Rodeo Association sponsored the first public gay rodeo in 1994 outside Calgary. Along with regular rodeo events, the rodeo included events such as the “drag” race featuring men in drag attempting to move a steer to the finish line. Rather than see a straight, redneck cowboy on the Redneck beer label, I read this cowboy as decidedly campy, queer, and gender ambiguous. I knew from Roxxie that Redneck beer was intended as a “joke beer.” The fact that Redneck beer was produced by a queer-friendly brewer and that one of its brewmasters is transgendered, allowed me to understand that the joke was on the Alberta Report and to question why, even in the face of contradiction, the writers for Alberta Report were not prepared to modify their assessment of who counts as a true Albertan.

The dissonance I experienced between my reading of the beer commercials and that of Alberta Report was in relation to who counts as an Albertan or a Canadian and this dissonance has prompted an ongoing questioning for me of how these identities are produced. Much of my present work is directed by questioning of identity categories. I want to refuse dominant discourses about who is to count as Albertan and, through my work, create alternative representations, so that Albertans who do not match dominant representations of what it is to be an Albertan, like those queer youth in my earlier study, won’t be dismissed, scorned, or worse for not conforming.

**Pedagogy of Popular Culture:**
**The Labour of Refusing and Creating Something New**

As I outlined in the section on Foucault’s ethics, Foucault argued that coming to understand how we are constituted as subjects in relation to norms and standards of
a culture can result in a refusal of who we have become; a refusal to continue to harmonize oneself to the norms of one’s culture; to resist “new totalizing, difference-crushing machines achieved [through] hegemony: citizenship and consumption.”

Rather than harmonize, it is important to recognize that one lives within contradictions, ambiguities, incongruities, and that these can be cultivated into an unruliness that “promotes new forms of subjectivity.” Refusing a passive involvement in cultural standards permits the possibility of reinventing oneself or creating something new. As Foucault indicates, this new way of participating is “not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture.” Nevertheless, these “patterns” can be pushed to their limit, played with, reconfigured, and redeployed. When undertaken by individuals or by a group of people, playing with the limits of cultural expectations can have a disarming effect that can produce dissonance in audiences that may prompt their own recognition, questioning, refusal, and reinvention.

The connection of Alberta-ness to Alberta beef and the cowboy is very powerful in Alberta. How successful might refusal of this connection be in a province that is identified by its beef production?
Significantly, Alberta beef is not Canada beef. It represents a regional identity in much the same way that Alberta oil stands for values, beliefs, and norms of a people contained within the geographic space of the province of Alberta. The association of Alberta values with Alberta beef is captured in the Alberta Beef Producers’ (ABP) 1988–2001 marketing campaign: “If it ain’t Alberta, it ain’t Beef.” ABP launched this campaign as world attention was being paid to the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary. Utilizing imagery of three cowboys on a ranch, the public were given a face to associate with the Alberta beef industry as well as a public face of Alberta. An association of beef production with open range grazing was promoted despite the fact that open range ranching ended in Canada in 1906 and that by the beginning of this century, 60 percent of the cattle industry occurs in feedlots. Describing the significance of this marketing campaign, ABP indicated that “the open landscapes and ranches showed the clean and healthy environment that the cattle are grown in which further solidified Alberta Beef as the best in the world and ABP as caring stewards of the land.”

Albertans who identified with cowboys and beef were shocked when an international singing star from Alberta, k. d. lang, was featured in a 1990 television ad produced by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), urging a boycott of the beef industry. Her “Meat Stinks” ad, which was never aired but was reported to exist by Entertainment Tonight, riled the cattle ranchers of Alberta as well as the immediate community of Consort where her mother still lived. In January 1993, attention was again on lang, who had been named a third-time recipient of a Grammy award. It was usual for the Alberta government to honour outstanding achievements of people who lived or had lived in the province by extending congratulations in the legislature. In lang’s case, public acknowledgement was withheld for a month while politicians debated whether she should receive official recognition from the province. Accounts varied as to whether the delay was because lang is a lesbian or because she is a vegetarian. The Alberta Report’s take was that the singer was using her prodigious talent and fame to “mess with youth’s impressionable minds.”

Lang came out publicly as a lesbian in the gay magazine, the Advocate, in 1992 and posed in 1993 on the cover of Vanity Fair in male drag with model Cindy Crawford provocatively perched over her as lang sat in a barber’s chair. Lang had teased her public about her sexuality long before her public outing. When she received a Juno award in 1985 as most promising female vocalist, she wore a
wedding dress, a pair of cut off cowboy boots, and her hair was cropped short. In interviews, lang made it clear that she was consciously parodying gender norms.62

lang began her career as a country music artist but she was controversial in Nashville circles. Nashville tolerated her lesbianism but not her animal rights advocacy because of the close ties between country music and cattle ranching. Not only did lang not look like a female country music singer, her music had an edge to it that suggested to some that she was not entirely serious about country music. With albums such as Absolute Torch and Twang and lyrics such as “She was a big boned gal from Southern Alberta,” the effect for some was that this androgynous female wearing femme clothing and cowboy boots was playing with cowboy culture.

k. d. lang pushed the limits of country music, of country values and sensibilities, and ways of being a female performer. She created something new within the confines of her culture, which suggested other ways to be female, Albertan, and a cowboy. However, in Alberta, “questioning the consumption and production of beef is akin to being a traitor to the region”63 and for many these new configurations did not disrupt gender, sexuality, or regional identity. Instead, k. d. lang was confirmed as “queer.”

In 2001, ABP re-launched its “If it ain’t Alberta, it ain’t Beef” campaign. This time, three women were featured that “all people could relate to… a young mother, a mother and producer, and a grandmother.”64 Each “reflected the contribution made by women to Alberta’s ranching legacy as well as women’s role as primary household food purchasers.”65
While there is the potential for dissonance between images of the cowboy and the female faces in traditional male cowboy gear that might lead to questioning about the work women do on ranches, this dissonance does little to disrupt the notion of open range ranching under the watchful eye of the cowboy. The women who posed for this poster are members of traditional ranching families and their images do not draw attention to the massive feedlots, which produce most Alberta beef. Therefore, while opening up questions about gender expectations, these “Ranchers” do not disrupt notions of Alberta, gender, and the cowboy. They do not evoke the images of k. d. lang in her cut off cowboy boots and short hair, singing her “Big boned gal from Southern Alberta” and espousing vegetarianism.

In 2003, the United States banned the import of Alberta cows and beef because of a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (bse). In response to the U.S. boycott, millions of dollars were made available by governments to support beef producers and in Alberta thousands of I love Alberta Beef bumper stickers appeared on cars around the province.

Those associated with the beef industry were shocked that the entire export of cattle and beef to the United States had been shut down. People in Alberta were encouraged to continue to eat beef to show the rest of the world that there was not a problem with this emblem of Alberta-ness. bse could have provided an opportunity for a public discussion about beef production in Alberta,66 which in turn might have allowed questioning of the association of the province with the cowboy. However, with the bse crisis identification of beef with Alberta identity was strengthened67 because “it was linked with a discourse rooted in a folk tradition of wholesome cowboys, wide open spaces, and ‘natural’ modes of beef production.”68
Alberta beef has been featured in attempts to push the limits of what counts as Albertan, particularly in relation to the masculinity associated with the cowboy image. In January 2007, a drag king group, *Alberta Beef*, formed in conjunction with a talk by Judith Halberstam, author of a number of books and articles on female masculinity and transgender identity. *Alberta Beef* uses cabaret to take up ideas of female masculinity, performativity, and gender. The unofficial theme song of *Alberta Beef* is “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy,” which is also the name of their first public performance. In each of their performances, which also included “Alberta Beef … Rebranded!” and “Alberta Beef Overexposed,” they “play up Albertan cowboy masculinity.”

Founding *Alberta Beef* member Laura “Lawrence” Crawford argues that transgender people—those who move between genders—offer a site to investigate gender demarcation and the regulation of public space. Ironically, Crawford is a recipient of a Trudeau Scholarship, named for former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau who promoted unification of regional identities under the umbrella of the Canadian federation. Crawford’s performance as drag king pushes the boundaries of what counts as gender and sexuality as well as a unique Alberta identity in
relation to Canada. As Crawford says, “questioning… can be rewarding, fun, and change your life… [I]t’s hard to let things remain in question, yet those moments I didn’t know lead me to some of my greatest moments of understanding.”

Through their public performances, *Alberta Beef* have the potential to expose the limits of regional, gender, and sexual identity in a province whose dominant identity is straight masculinity, exemplified in the figure of the cowboy. Challenging cultural norms of sexual or gender appropriateness as well as what counts as regional identity through a popular culture form such as drag produces new ways of participating in public culture. Whether these new ways of participating in Alberta’s public culture will produce questioning and refusal of dominant stories about sexuality, gender, and Alberta identity by those who consider their identity immutable is not predictable. The possibility of parody creating something new “depends upon a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered.” Shogan underscores this point when she writes of a photograph of the wild drag race at the Calgary Gay Rodeo: “He is dragging what appears to be a full-grown steer while wearing a chiffon dress, gloves, a crown, and sneakers… It is possible for the man in drag participating in the gay rodeo to be ‘read’ as a spoof on rodeo, as an insult to women, a spoof on the artifice of gender, or as a consolidation of gayness as perverse and of a notion of what rodeo ‘really’ looks like when ‘real’ men participate. Only some of these readings have the potential to create new ways of understanding.”

**Closing Comments**

In this chapter, I have shown how Foucault’s ethics can be helpful in understanding what is involved in a pedagogy of popular culture. By taking up recognition, questioning, and refusal, and creating something new, a consumer of popular culture can be aware that popular culture is “a site... where different groups collide in transactions of dominance, complicity, and resistance over the power to name, legitimate, and experience different versions of history, community, desire, and pleasure” and that these clashes are often the source of social inequalities. Using popular cultural representations of Alberta-ness as varied as the *Alberta Report* and k. d. lang or the *Alberta Beef* drag king group and the Alberta Beef Producers, I have shown that “doing” pedagogy of popular culture involves a labour of recognizing conflicts in what is represented as valuable or desirable in a culture,
questioning these representations, refusing them in some instances and, in doing so, producing other ways to engage with one’s culture.

Pedagogy of popular culture permits consumers of popular culture to be as aware as cultural studies scholars that popular culture is a site of active negotiation. This awareness or recognition also involves noticing ways in which one is a split subject of many often-competing stories about, as examples, regional, national, or gendered identities, and how these stories often conflict. Recognition of split subjectivity opens up the possibility of historicizing one’s experience by identifying the discourses or stories to which one has been subjected. In turn, this permits the opportunity to read representations of popular culture differently and the possibility of producing alternative ways of participating in a culture, including undermining social inequality.

Notes

3. I take seriously the importance of acknowledging the labour of cultural studies, including exploited, overlooked labour for example that of students, housewives, subsistence farmers. See Toby Miller, this volume, “Cultural Labour, Cultural Relations, Cultural Politics: The Context for Canada.”
4. See Patricia Hughes-Fuller’s “Gothic Night in Canada” and Heather Devine’s “After the Spirit Sang: Aboriginal Canadians and Museum Policy in the New Millennium” in this volume for disruptions to Canadian identity and myth. See Michele Helstein’s “Producing the Canadian Female Athlete: Negotiating the Popular Logics of Sport and Citizenship” in this volume for research that disrupts gender and sexuality norms.
5. Some theorists take issue with what they perceive to be Foucault’s idealism—that is, explaining social relations without granting primacy to what they consider material conditions. Foucault does not highlight, as do Marxists, relationships people have to economic processes, and in particular, the relationship people have to the prevailing mode of production, nor does he concern himself with neo-liberal accounts of consumption or with some feminist concerns with the primacy of patriarchal relations in materializing social inequalities. However, anyone reading the relentlessness of the descriptions from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* can’t help but be convinced that
Foucault locates his account of modern power within material conditions.


10. Ibid, ibid.


16. Ibid, 90.

17. Ibid, 91.


22. Ibid, 145.

23. Miller 1993. Following the work of Foucault, Miller considers how the interplay between knowledge and social control produce subjects and the contexts within which talk, action, and representation make sense. Foucault referred to these practices as discourses, contending that they are not merely bodies of ideas or ideologies, but they are also attitudes, modes of address, terms of reference, and actions that are reflected in social practices.


28. Scholarly work that challenges the notion of a coherent, unified Canadian or regional identity include Yasmin Jiwani’s *Discourses of Denial: Meditations of Race, Gender, and Violence* (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2006); Erin Manning’s *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press; and Eva Mackey’s *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics & National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).


35. Ibid, 278.


37. For a counter claim to van Herk’s more romanticized version of the cowboy see Max Foran’s *Icon, Brand, Myth: The Calgary Stampede* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2008).


41. In Molson’s later commercials, such as “The Rant” and “Where’s Your Pet Beaver?” the Canadian viewer is encouraged to identify with longstanding stories about Canada as distinct from the United States that differentiate Canadians as peace loving, nice (hence non-racist), quiet, uncritical, and who have embraced and succeeded at multiculturalism.


50. Ibid, xiii.
51. See Toby Miller’s article in this volume.
52. Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”
54. Shogan 1999, 93.
55. Discourses of “beef” disregard cows as sentient beings whose interests are not reflected in beef production.
64. Alberta Beef Producers: Marketing Campaigns.
66. Ibid, 82.
67. Ibid, 71.
68. Ibid, 82.
69. In keeping with recent demographic trends in Alberta, most of the members of Alberta Beef migrated from elsewhere in Canada.
70. Halberstam is the author of *Female Masculinity, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* and a new book from NYU Press, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*.


74. For scholarly writing on transgender theory see Jean Bobby Noble’s *Masculinity Without Men?: Female Masculinity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003) and *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Rising Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2006); and Vivian Namaste’s *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).


77. Shogan 1999, 97.