Negotiating Canadian Culture Through Youth Television: Discourse on Degrassi
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Known from its inception as a television franchise that targets young people while dealing with the complex issues facing them in a mature and realistic fashion, Degrassi is, perhaps, one of the most internationally recognized aspects of Canadian popular culture. Following the relative success of their CBC series *Kids of Degrassi Street* (1979–1985), Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler created what would, over the next twenty years, become an increasingly popular franchise and an unprecedented international hit for Canadian television. *Degrassi Junior High* (1987–1989), *Degrassi High* (1989–1991), and the made-for-TV movie *School’s Out!* (1992) targeted a niche market consisting mostly of Canadian youth by charting the lives of a large group of Toronto teens and pre-teens. By having its actors go into the real world to discuss real problems facing teens, *Degrassi Talks* (1992)—a six-episode documentary series that provoked the publication of book tie-ins and educational reference materials—capitalized on the unusual combination of popularity and educational value espoused by the series. In 2001, CTV aired the first episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Still set and filmed in Toronto, the show now focuses on the lives of a new group of students, including the daughter of one of the major characters from the original. Like its predecessors, the new show is a hit in Canada and has been steadily gaining popularity in other countries such as the United States and Australia.

Amid the critical discourse pertaining to Degrassi, one encounters questions about television studies, problems facing young people, global youth culture, and nostalgia. But the topic perhaps most often broached by Degrassi scholars and fans is the series’ “Canadianness.” To be more precise, conversations about the series tend to reflect the idea that Canadian culture offers representations of youth and childhood that are somehow more authentic than, say, American television.
childhood that are somehow more authentic than, say, American television. In this review essay, we assess the prevalence of this type of rhetoric by reviewing Degrassi: Generations, Kathryn Ellis’s catalogue of the entire televised franchise, and a collection of essays edited by Michele Byers called Growing up Degrassi: Television, Identity, and Youth Cultures. These non-fictional texts clearly emphasize distinctions between American and Canadian approaches to the “realistic” representation of childhood and adolescence. We then move on to test the assumptions made in these books by looking at four re-released novelizations of episodes from what critics and fans tend to dub “Degrassi Classic,” as well as two graphic novels adapted from storylines found in Degrassi: The Next Generation. None of the fictional texts make overt claims for the authenticity of Canadian representations of childhood or youth, although they do assume an audience that is willing to accept Canada as the setting for a number of events to which middle-class (and ostensibly “Westernized”) children and teens can relate. Generally speaking, the “Canadianness” of the books is rather inconspicuous. What is conspicuous about these texts, though, are the shifts in how the classic adaptations and the Degrassi: The Next Generation graphic novels approach the issue of problem solving for girls and boys. In the earlier novelizations, the “authentic” reality that many critics suggest bespeaks a uniquely Canadian mode of representation problematically renders girls more dependent on adult intervention than boys. The later books, however, largely avoid stereotypical depictions of gender as they emphasize the independent problem-solving skills demonstrated by the female protagonists. These graphic novels emphasize the constructed nature of the “reality” they produce—and, by extension, the “reality” that the Degrassi franchise produces—and thus complicate critical assertions regarding the show’s realism.

The Authenticity of Canadian Television

Michele Byers’s edited collection Growing Up Degrassi contains several claims for the uniquely realistic nature of Canadian television but rarely explores the critical pitfalls of this type of argumentation. This collection of essays is divided into three sections: “Degrassi and ‘Youth Cultures,’” “Building Identity on Degrassi,” and “Web Sites, Fan Clubs, and Reminiscences.” The last section differs from the first two insofar as it does not present itself as a scholarly contribution to academic discourse about Degrassi so much as a collection of anecdotes and personal histories of the article writers’ experiences with the Degrassi franchise: Mark Aaron Polger’s discussion of the development of Degrassi’s unofficial online life; Mark Janson’s memory of forming the Queen’s University Degrassi Club; and Sean Bilichka’s and Brian C. Jones’s short essays on their take, as
Americans, on Degrassi. This section of the book is a light and fun read that stands out from the more critical essays. Considering the relative paucity of significant critical developments in studying Degrassi, however, such marginalia might discourage a reader who has come to this book in search of a more significant contribution to the field. Overall, though, *Growing Up Degrassi* aims to distinguish between Degrassi Classic and *Degrassi: The Next Generation* as well as between Canadian and American culture. As such, it faces several problems, particularly in its occasional constructions of Canadian culture as uniquely capable of presenting an accurate portrayal of childhood and adolescence.

Geoffrey Pevere’s preface makes the assumptions of the book clear: Degrassi “offers a representation of teenage life that stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of such representations in the media mainstream, and that contrast is valuable and positive” (12). For Pevere, this representation is positive because of its authenticity:

> A recurring experience recounted throughout these essays involves someone getting hooked, usually despite themselves, on one of the Degrassi series because they encountered something—a story, a character, a situation—that echoed their own personal experience. A moment when the screen caught the reflection of the viewer. (12)

Pevere avoids attributing a sense of national specificity by suggesting that interpreting Degrassi as “a Canadian cultural artefact” (12) is simply one among a number of perspectives. Alternately, Mary Jane Miller’s introduction ensures that readers understand this positive and valuable authentic television experience as something that is uniquely Canadian. In her essay, Miller charts the development of Canadian family-oriented television from *Sunshine Sketches* to Degrassi to establish some of the major questions of the text: how has Canadian television changed over the last fifty years? How do young people effect the production of culture, and vice versa? How has technology influenced shifts in youth entertainment? How does Degrassi negotiate identity? How does it negotiate Canadian identity? How does it differ from American television and why? These are good questions for the simple reason that much of the discourse surrounding the series involves the demarcation of identity within the Degrassi narratives as uniquely Canadian. Throughout the book, the approaches to answering these questions are often insightful, but other questions that are not answered by this volume need to be addressed in order to construct a more complete understanding of “Canadianness.” How does one constitute the target of youth culture? What is the impact of defining national identity through this (undefined) youth? What does it mean that we are continuing to define Canadian culture against
American culture? What are the implications of suggesting that Degrassi is both uniquely Canadian (i.e. specifically not American) and universally appealing? Moreover, does Degrassi get described this way because, as James Kincaid suggests, representations of children signal a “repository of cultural needs or fears not adequately disposed of elsewhere” (78)? These questions—key to the usefulness of this critical volume to scholars examining overlapping areas of identity politics—are rarely explored in this collection, and this omission weakens the text’s overall persuasiveness.

That being said, there are a number of excellent contributions to the study of youth popular culture in this book that acknowledge the complex relationship between national culture and authentic representation. For example, Michele Byers’s first chapter addresses the question of whether or not Degrassi points to “some essential difference [from American culture] within the Canadian national imaginary” (32). She proceeds to note several differences between Canadian and American television, including the fact that Canadian television provides its child and teen characters with more autonomy, and suggests that the differences between Degrassi Classic and Degrassi: The Next Generation derive from production values of the new series mimicking contemporary industry standards in America. Byers is somewhat ambivalent, however, suggesting that, while there certainly are differences in production that imply differences in the national imaginary, we cannot discount the fact that Canadian audiences “have embraced [American] series” (47) far more than Americans have embraced shows like Degrassi Classic or Degrassi: The Next Generation. One can witness market forces influencing the popularity of these shows more significantly than any sense of national uniqueness because the American television market is notoriously...
exclusionary toward Canadian and other foreign productions\(^2\) while, at the same time, the exceptionally powerful American distribution companies ensure that the Canadian market is permeated with American products.\(^3\) Tom Panarese further suggests that the Canadian series was never particularly popular in the United States because of the “unintended stigma” associated with its educational value when played in American elementary schools (52). He does point out, however, a number of instances where Degrassi makes its way into American culture, namely in song lyrics and Kevin Smith films. Again, Degrassi’s social function is defined in terms of its relationship to American viewers and culture rather than how the show’s popularity in Canada might itself be an important cultural indicator.

Equally problematic is Jennifer MacLennan’s essay, which underscores the constructedness of “Canadianness” while making claims for Degrassi as an essentially Canadian phenomenon: “Like hockey, Degrassi is an unmistakably Canadian product” (150). The problem here is that by relying on a stereotype of national identity, this statement ultimately relays less to the reader than is intended.\(^4\) To her credit, MacLennan goes on to define Degrassi’s Canadianness in terms of it being influenced by Canadian documentary realism, but, nevertheless, she frequently turns to the ways in which it is specifically “not American”: “Degrassi is a genuine artifact of Canadian culture precisely because of its implicit resistance to the overwhelming influence of American media” (162).\(^5\)

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart’s essay is also troubling. Hart discusses the “right” and “wrong” way to construct AIDS on youth television, contrasting Beverly Hills, 90210 (wrong) with Degrassi (right). Hart’s version of the “right” way includes Degrassi’s prolonged multi-episode approach, featuring a key character, versus 90210’s one episode.
featuring a special guest with no lasting influence on the rest of the characters. While we agree with Hart in this respect—namely, that there are aesthetic and philosophical difficulties in attempting to contain the complex polyphony of issues surrounding AIDS in a one-hour narrative that follows a rigid structural formula for crisis resolution—we take issue with another major distinction to which he attaches value. Hart implies a reductive binary: the “wrong” way to figure AIDS in a show for teens is through a white, homosexual individual, while the “right” way is through a white, heterosexual one. He goes on to claim that “[t]his is especially important . . . given the fact that, by the time these episodes had aired, instances of heterosexual transmission of HIV/AIDS had increased dramatically” (214). This rhetoric, while intended to resist associations between homosexuality and disease, risks othering gay men. By this logic, AIDS is only represented “right” if it is happening to one among the “normative” heterosexual crowd.

Such comparisons between Canadian and American television are not always so problematic. Ravindra N. Mohabeer and Sherri Jean Katz discuss Degrassi in terms of its relationship to American culture in highly productive ways. Mohabeer evaluates how Degrassi changed when it began to air as Degrassi: The Next Generation on CTV, particularly how its “value” shifted from a publically funded entity with an underlying educational mandate to become a commercial niche product on a private network. Similarly, Katz explores how shifts in the show’s authenticity correspond with its reliance on and thematizations of technology. She also hints at a conception of national difference when she points out that “concern by Viacom over the highly serious nature of some episodes” led the American network The N to refuse to air certain episodes and to re-edit others (86). “Realness,” in this context, does, indeed, depend on the nation where it is created, and Canadian television does allow depictions of controversial material that overlap with the sense of authenticity that Degrassi’s producers wish to invoke. Katz goes on to discuss the former official Degrassi website in Canada (<http://degrassi.tv>) as a place where, by contributing their opinions about how the show is broadcast, viewers can react to the corporate decision to withhold “authenticity” from them. In his essay, “Online Fan Fiction: Is Self-Expression Collaboration or Resistance?” Michael Strangelove discusses fan-written erotica about the program as the production of story arcs that fans wish they could see—a kind of productive frustration with the show’s creators and networks, and a fantasy of self-expression. He leaves out of his paper, however, the question of who, demographically speaking, writes the fiction. It is true that the online community is anonymous, but the question of the ages of the writers complicates Strangelove’s conclusions considerably, and one is left to question whether the authors of such
works might have motives differing from those behind other gestures of fan participation. Despite these interesting theoretical discussions, however, as a whole, *Growing Up Degrassi* does not sufficiently examine the provocative issues about nation and representation that it raises.

Likewise, Kathryn Ellis’s *Degrassi: Generations*—the “Official 411” on Degrassi—assumes that Degrassi’s “Canadianness” somehow contributes to the series’ realism, but avoids critical interrogation of the relationship between Canadian culture and authentic representation altogether. *Degrassi: Generations* consists of photographs of cast members and sets; informative but brief excerpts from interviews with various Degrassi writers, producers, and cast members; an episode guide; and a “where are they now?” feature. The book is essentially a teen-magazine-style celebration of and advertisement for Degrassi’s realistic depiction of children’s and teenagers’ lives. It deserves praise for its introductory history of Degrassi as a franchise, its openness about production, its apparent respect for the intelligence of its readers, and its detailed research.\(^8\) We are concerned, however, by Ellis’s argument that the show can achieve its high level of authenticity because it is Canadian, without defining what it means to be a Canadian cultural artifact or discussing why it might be problematic to suggest that any one national culture produces work that is more true to life than another.

According to this book, Degrassi is both “a television show that seems to have captured the spirit of growing up for two separate generations” (5) and something that is uniquely Canadian. In a segment entitled “The Degrassi Story,” for example, Linda Schuyler suggests that the following sets the series apart: “Good, human storytelling. And it’s Canadian” (8). Here, being Canadian apparently means using age-
appropriate actors and enforcing a “double mandate of entertainment and education” (8). There is no discussion, however, about those factors that more readily distinguish Canadian television from non-Canadian television, such as the CBC funding that might favour such a double mandate. Nor is there any mention of the fact that some of the funding for the Classic series derived from WGBH Boston, which, furthermore, is the studio that has released the entire Classic series on DVD. Grants are mentioned throughout the text, but never in reference to what sets the show apart. A strong argument could be made that the sense of authenticity that the Classic series evokes has more to do with the educational mandate of its production team rather than a sense of participating in the creation of a narrative for the nation as a whole. Instead, “Canadian” is invoked as a descriptive term synonymous with “good,” “human,” and “appropriately pedagogical.”

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Clearly, then, Degrassi: Generations is replete with various problematic constructions of Canadian culture. For example, the book opens with an introduction by American film director Kevin Smith. A long-time fan of the series, Smith appeared as a guest star on Degrassi: The Next Generation episodes in which he played himself directing a film called “Jay and Silent Bob Go Canadian, Eh.” Smith’s love of all things Canadian is immediately apparent, but his appreciation frequently reads like infantilization. He refers to Degrassi as a “teen soap operatic gem from the True North” that he fell in love with because of the actors’ “adorable accents (’aboot’ and the like).” He goes on to describe the crush he developed on Caitlin Ryan because, as a social activist and epileptic, she “could stand on her own two feet, yet still needed to be cared for and protected from the cruel, harsh world” (6). Smith even alludes to what many non-Canadians (and Canadians) erroneously believe to be Canada’s national sport to
describe his scenes on *Degrassi: The Next Generation*: “I got to play tonsil-hockey with the Canadian girl of my dreams” (7). Summing up, Smith notes that the power of Degrassi is that “it’s a crafted world that’s so real, you can get sucked in” (7), but, by this point, one wonders if Smith is referring to a show set in Canada or Canadian culture itself. For Smith, it seems that Degrassi is a cute show with cute girls that represents a cute country, and his claims that it presents a “real” world are undermined by his patronization of the show and the culture that he claims produced it.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Degrassi: Generations* is that, even as it stresses the show’s specially “Canadian” ability to bear resemblance to real life, it is invested in uncovering the processes of production, from set design to writing, inevitably reminding the reader that the show is, Canadian or not, a hyperreal commodity. The book insists on the verisimilitude of the narrative illusion—Degrassi characters are used as case studies for a brief discussion of drug use, sexuality, and physical and emotional abuse—while simultaneously exposing the production details that helped to create the illusion. Ellis makes a claim for Degrassi’s universality, noting that “viewers seem to take the show to heart and are often surprised to find so many others out there who feel the same way” (4). In an interview on the issues broached by Degrassi, Aaron Martin, executive producer of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, insists that “if it’s a hard-hitting issue, like cutting, date rape, or abortion, we have to make sure that our research is there, and there entirely, and that we’re telling the right story” (21). The book also dedicates a great deal of space, however, to uncovering the manufacture of the series’ “authenticity.” For example, a segment called “The Rules” explains how to write an episode of Degrassi Classic—“Each episode has an A plot, a B plot, and a C plot”; “There is a crisis at the midpoint for the commercial out” (22)—versus an episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*—“The B plot is usually more comedic”; “The teaser is always from the A plot” (22). The subsequent segment similarly explains how to write a screenplay. In “The Look and Sound,” we learn about pre-production and post-production, and in “A Heck of a Lot” and “Set Decoration,” readers discover how the world of Degrassi has literally been constructed over the years. Careful details—like the fact that in Emma’s basement bedroom, “the wall colors [sic] are a liver pink and lime green, as if they were painted with what was left over from previous paint jobs” (120)—underscore the series’ efforts at authenticity, but they also demonstrate that Degrassi is a commercially constructed universe.

**Girls, Boys, and “Authenticity” in Degrassi Novelizations**

The republished Degrassi novels further reveal why assertions regarding the authenticity or “Canadianness”
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of the franchise render the critical work so problematic. Degrassi is supposed to consist of authentic representations of Canadian youth, and yet girls are depicted as having little or no autonomy, and their problems as needing a great deal more adult intervention than those faced by boys. The graphic novels provide a degree of contrast because they are more critical of gender ideology and allow the female protagonists, who possess problem-solving skills, more autonomy. But this does not mean that the later adaptations are more fully authentic than the earlier novels. Rather, like parts of *Degrassi: Generations*, the new books encourage readers to be more critical of “things as they appear.” Like Ellis’s book, the graphic novels reflect a deconstruction of the authenticity of the fictional universe.

In their representations of how children handle problems, the Degrassi novelizations seem to move away from gendered double standards that construct boys as exempt from, and girls as in need of, adult intervention. For example, in one of the graphic novelizations of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, a female character experiences sexual harassment by her boss at a new job and is able to deal productively with the situation herself, whereas, in the Degrassi Junior High novel named after her, Caitlin requires adult intervention as she learns how to be an environmentalist. This shift implies a number of possibilities about the imagined audience for Degrassi, particularly in viewers’ progressive understandings of gender and equality.

Originally printed at the height of the popularity of the original series and re-released in 2006, *Caitlin, Joey Jeremiah, Snake*, and *Spike* expand on key episodes for major Degrassi Classic characters. Each text presents one character from the series with a set of related dilemmas and concludes when that character can solve or at least cope with those problems. While these are separate examples about
a few individual characters, when congregated as a group of texts, patterns of gender essentialization begin to emerge. In *Caitlin*, fourteen-year-old Caitlin Ryan begins to feel lonely, even among her friends. While the other girls want to watch *Dirty Dancing* and talk about boys, Caitlin’s interests lie in social problems like the environment. In order for Caitlin to realize her potential for personal and political agency, she must first turn her back on the emblems of femininity consumed and expressed by her peers, further alienating her from them. Caitlin’s parents are too busy to notice that she’s going through major social changes, and Mr. Raditch insists that Caitlin run apolitical stories in the school paper. Caitlin’s sense of political and personal agency is further critiqued for being a somewhat dangerous transgression when she meets Robert, an older boy, who invites her to join his activist group, and she and her new friends end up getting arrested for trespassing. At this point in the text, the importance of proper adult intervention becomes evident. It is only after Caitlin’s brush with the law that her parents begin to pay adequate attention to her. The adults learn that they must keep a closer eye on their children, who are becoming engaged in politics; paradoxically, they believe that, in order to protect their daughter’s innocence, they must assume her guilt and extend their surveillance to include both her behaviour and her ideologies. Furthermore, Mr. Raditch treats her like an equal, admitting that he was arrested for political activism as a youth. He drives home the point, however, that political activism is not really the province of the young, and that, while it is good that Caitlin expresses her opinions, what she really needs is adult guidance. Caitlin must learn to listen to adults, and to respect their authority over the “false” authority of a group of politically active teenagers.

The overarching moral of the story is made clear in the piece Caitlin begins to write for the school paper at the novel’s end: “Yesterday I was arrested. I learned a lot from this. I learned that sometimes bad things come from good causes. But that does not mean the cause is not still good” (145). Caitlin learns that boys like Joey, with no political interests and benign anti-authoritarian interests (“fooling around” instead of studying), are safer than boys like Robert, who are politically motivated to break the rules. Robert’s form of rebellion is portrayed as far more dangerous than Joey’s, and Caitlin makes the “right” choice in the end by abandoning her friendship with Robert and agreeing to get together with Joey at the next dance. Obviously, Joey is not the sort of rebel who will negatively influence Caitlin’s activist instincts. The novel is based on a combination of “Loves me, Loves me not” from the third season of *Degrassi Junior High* (Caitlin and Joey negotiate their relationship) and “All in a Good Cause” from season one of *Degrassi High* (Caitlin gets involved with Claude). Perhaps an increasing desire on the part of the author to convince the reader of Caitlin’s
innocence and manipulability might explain why an episode of *Degrassi High* was adapted into a novel in the *Degrassi Junior High* series.\(^{13}\) In the novel, Caitlin is fourteen. She can, therefore, be more realistically naïve, she can more clearly require the help of the adults, and her activism can be part of what constitutes childlike behaviour. Caitlin is clearly invested in the supervision of “reining in” autonomous children and tempering their passions with the wisdom of age. Positing Caitlin as a naïve fourteen-year-old, rather than a more experienced high-school student, justifies that investment.

Similarly, *Joey Jeremiah* deals with a major life lesson, although, for Joey, lessons can be learned without adult intervention. In this novel, Joey finds out that while his friends will proceed to grade nine, he will not. Based on the episode “Pass Tense” from season two of *Degrassi Junior High*, the book details summer events that never aired on the series. During the summer, Joey learns about self-respect and responsibility through his involvement with the Toronto Battle of the Bands. Not only does Joey successfully encourage his band to play in the contest, but he also takes on an active role in organizing the event. This involvement leads Joey from an obsession with quitting school and becoming a rock star to accepting a vision of himself as a more realistic, valuable contributor to society, even if he has done poorly thus far in his academic career. Joey’s lesson is far more implicit than is Caitlin’s. Joey sees himself as appreciated by his boss, gets a kiss from a girl, and wins third place in the battle of the bands. As a consequence of his actions, Joey begins to feel good about himself and to realize that his peers will still accept him, even if he isn’t a scholar or a rock star. In keeping with a somewhat stereotypical conception of a male adolescent benefitting from an adventurous and benignly rebellious spirit, it is a good thing, then, that Joey stands up to his parents when they try to make him study all summer, by insisting on having the freedom to realize other goals. Unlike Caitlin, Joey is not compelled to defer to adult guidance, but to remain independent and self-reliant, and to believe in himself rather than absolute authority. While Caitlin is arrested when she tries to become politically active on the “wrong” terms, Joey’s lesson does not cost him any punishment other than the brief and ultimately unimportant social stigma of having to repeat a grade.

The other novels in the series continue to promote this idea of a gendered hierarchy of behaviour. *Snake* endows the protagonist with a great deal of initiative and the capacity to solve problems on his own. This novel is based on the episode “He Ain’t Heavy” from season three of *Degrassi Junior High*, in which Snake’s brother Glenn comes out of the closet. In the episode, Glenn is kicked out the house; tells Snake, “I don’t exist anymore. You’re the only son they have now”; and is thereafter never mentioned on the series. But
in the novel, which goes into great detail about how Snake deals with his own masculinity in the face of his brother’s homosexuality, Snake takes an active role in bringing his brother back into the family. Initially, Snake is hurt by his brother’s confession, and worries that he, too, might be gay. He starts spending time with homophobic, hypermasculine boys at school, and passively watches one of them gay bashing another student. At the same time, however, Snake worries that he does not feel adequately attracted to women, and even admits that he is, at times, also attracted to boys. In the novel, Snake is tortured by the loss of his brother, and, after sneaking away from his parents to visit Glenn and his partner, he comes to terms with their lifestyle. As a consequence, Snake’s parents learn from their youngest son’s experience and decide to mend their relationship with Glenn. While Snake shows agency and influence, the girls in this novel are either unable to conquer their insecurities or constructed as props in his quest for masculinity. Both Snake and his “dream girl,” Tamara, have poor body images, but, whereas Snake eventually sees his body as muscular and capable (he wins MVP on the basketball team and admires his physique in the mirror), Tamara remains insecure about her looks. As the most attractive girl in school, Tamara is little more than a marker of social status for Snake and his friends. Melanie, the girl Snake chooses over Tamara, may have more confidence—she pursues Snake even though she hasn’t yet physically developed and isn’t as popular as Tamara—but she, too, acts as a prop for Snake’s self-discovery. Snake can only choose Melanie—the “right” girl—once he has saved his family and dealt with his homophobia.

Like Joey, Snake does not rely on his parents or any other adult to help him realize the folly of his ways. In fact, once he begins to come to terms with his brother’s homosexuality, it is Snake who becomes a voice of authority. Insofar as it portrays a child who deals with a problem on his own, this novel is more true to the tradition of the Degrassi series than Caitlin. Also distinct from Caitlin, and similar to Joey Jeremiah, Snake depicts a child who faces no real consequences for his actions. Snake stands up to the homophobic school bully and faces no reproach. He watches his friend gay bash and nobody ever blames him for his inaction. He lies to his parents and leaves town for an entire weekend and is merely grounded for two weeks—with the happy knowledge, mind you, that he has reunited his family.

Based on “It’s Late” from season one of Degrassi Junior High; “Eggbert,” “Censored,” and “Pass Tense” from season two of Degrassi Junior High; and “Season’s Greetings” from season three of Degrassi Junior High, Spike explores the consequences of teen sex. Fourteen-year-old Spike has sex with Shane at Lucy’s party and soon realizes that her period is late. She talks to her friends first, but very quickly turns to her mother, who takes her to see a doctor. When Spike finds out that
she is indeed pregnant, she debates her options and occasionally discuss them with Shane and her mother. Over the course of the novel, the hopelessly immature Spike and Shane try their best to prepare themselves for the responsibilities of parenthood, including taking care of an egg and pretending it is their child. Ultimately, against all of the advice given to her, Spike decides to give birth and keep the baby. In this sense, she does show some independent decision-making skills. As a consequence of this decision, however, Spike is forced to leave Degrassi because her pregnant body signals “deviant” sexual behaviour. Parents of some of the other children at the school find out about the pregnancy and are “demanding that their precious little children not be exposed to such a visual display of immorality” (91). Moreover, her mother (herself once a teenage parent) refuses to help Spike raise the child. There is no mention of how Spike will take care of the baby, only that she will do so on her own. The television series, however, shows Spike with the child, still living at home with her mother. While there are some benefits to the novel’s open-endedness—in pedagogical terms, it suggests that the reader must come to an understanding of the material and emotional realities of pregnancy him- or herself, ostensibly through dialogue with a parent about how their own family coped with pregnancy—it fails to address the complicated consequences of choosing to keep a child at fourteen, and implies that Spike’s autonomous choice will lead only to hardship.

Moreover, as a pregnant teen, Spike embodies the child most in need of adult intervention after transgressing beyond the boundaries of “appropriate” child behaviour. Shane is able to go through most of the novel without help from his parents, and he is able to stand up to his parents and reject their ideas almost immediately when they do intervene. The reader is meant to agree with Shane’s decision...
to refuse his parents’ attempts to send him to a different school. Of course, given her situation, adult intervention is necessary for Spike, but, in the context of all four novels, it becomes difficult to overlook the sharp distinctions between how the “girl” and “boy” problems are addressed.

In comparison to the Degrassi Junior High novels, we see an almost direct reversal in how boys and girls get represented in the examples from the Extra Credit series. Unlike the earlier adaptations, each graphic novel deals with two key issues, giving one slightly more prominence, and thus more accurately adhering to the structure of the new show. Far more often than Degrassi Classic, Degrassi: The Next Generation deals with two major story arcs per episode. The first book deals with J.T. and Ellie. Ellie experiences sexual harassment at the comic-book store where she works, and learns how to handle it from talking with her female friends: be assertive, and tell him he’s “not funny.” Thus, Ellie requires no adult intervention and takes a confident, autonomous role. J.T., on the other hand, overcomes his problem in a far less autonomous fashion. J.T. is overwhelmed by his ex-girlfriend’s pregnancy and the fact that she chose to give their baby up for adoption. He has since turned to stealing prescription drugs, and, in keeping with his addictive personality, becomes consumed by internet pornography when he stops using. J.T.’s grandmother suspects that something is wrong and enlists the help of J.T.’s friend Toby. Toby discovers J.T.’s addiction to pornography but offers no real help. Rather, he expresses disgust, and the entire situation is presented as somewhat humorous. Toby does try to find alternative things to do to distract J.T. from sex, but there is no heart-to-heart discussion of the problem like there is among the girls for Ellie. Instead, J.T.’s ex-girlfriend brings him out of his addiction when she phones him to let him know that she is making a gift for their baby and would like him to help. It is the proactive girl who saves J.T. by handling the pregnancy better than he can.

In the second installment of the Extra Credit series, Emma, Spike’s teenage daughter, copes with recovery from anorexia and a manipulative boyfriend. Emma lies to her family and friends so that she can spend more time with Peter, who is controlling and selfish. She even forces her family to cancel a trip to New York City, claiming that she is still too unstable to go, when, in reality, she wants to help Peter move. With the help of her all-female group meetings, however, Emma begins to see her situation in a different light, and stands up to Peter by going to New York after all. In the big city, she bonds with her family and her best friend Manny (who, in the televised series, has been cruelly ill-used by Peter). The “girl bonding” in New York—a shopping spree during which Emma’s stepfather waits outside the store, a pillow fight with Manny during which the two girls mock their respective boyfriends—is conspicuous.
in both its exclusion of men and its emphasis on the healing powers of female friendship. It is only after this trip that Emma establishes the boundaries of her sense of personal agency and is able to have a healthy relationship with Peter and take her recovery seriously.

Although largely set in Toronto, these graphic novels are less concerned with their “Canadianness” than the non-fiction under review. While they make blatant references to Canadian cities and culture, they present the “every teen” as a person who just happens to be Canadian. In issue two, in fact, the setting for Emma’s major life lesson occurs in New York City, as though she has to leave the safe, familiar world of southern Ontario to learn about herself. In this case, then, the “Other,” outside universe is the United States, and readers understand Canada as home. New York is the setting for realizing self-identity in a great deal of cultural references, and would be recognized as such by a wide readership. All of this suggests that, while the author conceives of an audience that may be primarily Canadian, or at least willing to identify with Canada, there may be more at play. A greater project undertaken by the producers of the modern Degrassi franchise seems to be to allow the degree of Canadianness typical for the original Degrassi to be subsumed by the marketing realities of modern Canadian media producers.

Despite being wholly funded by Canadian sources, the new series demonstrates a desire to engage with an international audience without alienating the somewhat culturally xenophobic, yet very important, American market.

The graphic novel format reflects the changing nature of Canadian youth audiences and television. The quickly paced and dynamically arranged story boards, the short dialogue, and the absence of inner monologues in the graphic novels resemble the production techniques
of *Degrassi: The Next Generation:* its quick pacing and editing, dynamic camera movement, and frequent use of short, stylized dialogue. The choice of graphic novels over conventional novels also seems like an appeal to the modern child-and-youth market that is rapidly becoming more invested in genres that require less time and textual reading in favour of a visual literacy in contemporary techno-culture that is often replete with quickly and immediately consumed information. Furthermore, through their mimicry of the extremely popular Japanese Manga form of graphic novel—principally demonstrated in the use of dynamic and yet simultaneously visually minimal background textures and patterns to express rapid movement or the emotional state of characters—the graphic novels for the new series invoke both the book producers’ intention for an international audience as well as a degree of international-media literacy within the domestic Canadian audience. Like the *Degrassi Junior High* books, these novels are also more loosely adapted from the episodes, thus the name *Extra Credit.* Likewise, this idea of “extra” reflects the changing technological nature of youth entertainment, particularly new modes of supplementing television shows with internet fan fiction, podcasts, bonus scenes, and webisodes that exist on the official website.\(^{15}\)

These kinds of “extras” construct a new sense of reality\(^ {16}\) around the show that did not exist in *Degrassi’s* earlier versions. Like the website, the graphic novels go beyond reiterating the already-televised material by offering something never seen before. Therefore, they function somewhat differently than many of the earlier novelizations. By offering supplementary experiences to watching *Degrassi*—experiences that do more than repeat or closely adapt the televised episodes—the creators add another dimension to the *Degrassi* universe, and allow fans to be more integrated into its narrative “reality.” There is, however, a striking contradiction apparent in these novels, one that resonates with *Degrassi: Generations.* At the end of each novel, the authors reveal exactly how these extra experiences have been constructed. In the “bonus section” of issue number one (yes, a bonus section in what is already being billed as an “extra”), for example, one finds “three comic book pages that were part of the initial pitch presented to the producers of *Degrassi: The Next Generation.*” These pages give readers insight into production, particularly that it is a process reliant on the approval of financial backers. In volume two, which begins with Emma’s dream that she is Alice from *Alice in Wonderland,* the author and illustrator provide early sketches of Emma’s encounter (as Alice) with a tempting cupcake (she is a recovering anorexic), which “looks more like a jumbo bran muffin—not exactly enticing.” In a second illustration with accompanying captions, we see the cupcake’s transformation.

In this bonus, there is no mention of producers
presiding over artistic production, but the impulse to underscore the processes of constructing the Degrassi universe remains. While the graphic novel form has never been adverse to betraying production secrets through the publication of rough drafts and concept art—and, as such, the Degrassi graphic novels are certainly not original or exceptional in terms of the genre—in many ways, this section is reminiscent of the production diaries present as extra material in the various DVD releases of each season of the television series. The creators of the Extra Credit graphic novels clearly envision an audience that is savvy about media production and appeal to this audience through a refreshing openness about the work of constructing a fantasy world. Part of the enjoyment of these texts, then, is predicated on the appearance of the creators’ appreciation of the media literacy of young readers, and an understanding that no commodity represents youth culture with complete authenticity.

The fictional and non-fictional discourses surrounding Degrassi reveal much about how it has begun to be thought of as an influence on Canadian culture and youth identity. The Degrassi Classic adaptations and Degrassi: The Next Generation graphic novels underscore shifts in understandings of how children can deal with their problems as autonomous beings, and reflect the ways in which new practices in television produce generic shifts in literature for youth. The non-fiction tells a different story, one about the ways in which national identity can take cues from youth identity and vice versa. The overwhelming preoccupation with “Canadianness” and “authenticity” in these texts bespeaks a fascination with the possibility that Canadian culture is, at its heart, somehow “more real” than that which is not Canadian. The weakness of such discourse lies in its lack of attention to the ways in which these terms come to be defined, but its strength lies in its refusal to continue to understand Canadian culture as “Other” to or “less than” American culture. That this happens through the figure of the child implies a discourse between popular youth markets and the figuration of a national identity, and suggests a fertile area for the further study of identity politics and youth literature.
Notes

1. For example, in “Degrassi Junior High and Beverly Hills 90210: Teenage Truths and Tribulations Across Cultures,” Marie Claire Simonetti suggests that Degrassi is more realistic than 90210 insofar as “both shows’ narratives translate the values of the respective cultures: The American Dream conquers odds, whereas the Canadian ethos cautions against the very same odds” (2).

2. PBS is a notable exception to this trend because, in addition to the Degrassi series, the network routinely broadcasts foreign (principally British Commonwealth) content. Almost without exception, however, the other television networks operate under a different mandate. Foreign shows that are deemed admissible to the American market are copied by domestic production studios. Consequently, the foreign show is reclaimed as American and the original show remains marginal to American viewers. Examples include The Office (from England), Big Brother (from the Netherlands), and The King of Queens (originally the CBC's King of Kensington).

3. American television networks amount to 34% of the networks available to Canadian satellite providers, with the remainder made up of domestic as well as non-American foreign networks (“Regulatory Policy”). Furthermore, many Canadian networks purchase a percentage of their programming from American producers, and typically broadcast this material during “prime time” hours.

4. After all, insulin, the telephone, the zipper, plastic garbage bags, paint rollers, the electric oven, Plexiglas, instant mashed potatoes, and basketball (appropriate given the author’s invocation of hockey) are all examples of Canadian products, and yet one would be hard-pressed to cite these as “authentically” Canadian or as aiding in the construction of a national identity.

5. This statement is further problematized by the understanding that by being broadcast on American networks, Degrassi is a part of, and has, to a degree, profited from, “the overwhelming influence of American media.”

6. A similar shift is visible in the United States. Degrassi Classic, despite being exhibited in syndication on the privately owned HBO, Showtime, and Disney channels, was initially associated with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Degrassi: The Next Generation airs on the privately owned specialty channel The N.

7. Laura Tropp’s essay makes many similar points in terms of technology, but adds that Degrassi: The Next Generation’s use of technology on the program—in particular, the foregrounding of digital media and communications—connotes a kind of self-consciousness about fame and the shifting nature of television.

8. Despite a title that implies focus on the development of the series, Ellis seems to be presenting her book to the newer generation of viewers rather than to fans of the original series. Degrassi: The Next Generation is heavily represented, yet the earlier series, especially the Kids of Degrassi Street, are only briefly summarized. Illustrative of this point, the book’s cover features only one character who was exclusive to the original series; the other nine characters depicted are either Degrassi: The Next Generation characters or characters who appear in both the original and the new series. This choice reflects the cross-promotion of the series, the book, and the networks that
currently air Degrassi: The Next Generation.

9 The graphic novels reflect the increasing popularity of children’s novels that depict young female protagonists who display a high degree of autonomy. See, for example, Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter series of novels or “Tibby” Tomko-Rollins from the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants series.

10 Furthermore, the graphic novels avoid the common depiction of women who can solve their own problems as inhabiting a space of personal agency engendered as “masculine.” Episode five of the first season of Degrassi Junior High provides a good counterpoint to these texts. A “battle of the sexes” has been created to determine which gender should have authority over the school’s athletic facilities. While the narrative demonstrates that female athletes are certainly as capable as their male counterparts, in order for them to accomplish this goal, the girls must take on ostensibly masculine characteristics such as behaving tough and uncaring, while simultaneously disavowing traditional emblems of femininity.

11 Other, more generic, changes between the old and new books also reflect the shifting contexts of youth television and audiences. The move from novels to graphic novels, for example, corresponds to the contemporary popularity and cross-media influence of the graphic novel form—it is a medium more in dialogue with the audiovisual culture of film, videogames, and television than prosodic text—and appeals to narrative technologies and aesthetic forms to which younger viewers have become accustomed. Furthermore, techniques adapted from graphic novels have come to permeate the marketing tools available to producers; as a consequence of updating the video production techniques of Degrassi to The Next Generation, the books would have to be updated in order to maintain the aesthetics and market strategies of the entire Degrassi franchise.

12 In the years following their initial release, these four volumes were reviewed in issues 66, 62, 76, and 55, respectively, of CCL/LCJ. The fact that these four characters continue to exist in Degrassi: The Next Generation should not be viewed as incidental to the decision to republish these particular volumes from among the series of twenty original novels.

13 A more likely suggestion is that, as a brand name, Degrassi Junior High was more of a marketable commodity than Degrassi High; in other words, the longer phrase was likely more popular and well-known.

14 References to the process of rebirth and renewal invoked by New York are quite numerous; perhaps the most prominent are Woody Allen’s film Manhattan and Frank Sinatra’s recording of the “Theme from New York, New York”: “These little town blues, are melting away / I’m gonna make a brand new start of it—in old New York / And if I can make it there, I’m gonna make it anywhere.” A reference that is more contemporary with Degrassi’s youth audience is the film Herbie: Fully Loaded (2005), starring Lindsay Lohan: the actress plays a young college graduate who moves to New York to begin an “adult” job and, in the process, discovers her true calling in life, which is to re-establish ties with the “hick” roots of her race-car-driving family.

15 As of January 2008, the official Canadian site is located at <http://www.ctv.ca/mini/degrassi2006/index.html>. The website allows registered fans to “become” Degrassi students of sorts. Members have assigned groups called homerooms and their own home pages (called lockers), and can chat with fellow “students” in the Degrassi online community.

16 Here circumscribed as believability in the narrative (see Sherri

17 For example, since the inception of his long-running graphic novel, Cerebus, in 1977, Canadian artist Dave Sim has not only included production notes and concept art at the back of many of the issues in the series, but has also incorporated details of production—financial matters with distribution and publishing, the material process of creating a page of narrative art, and biographical details related to the production of his work—into the novel as narrative elements. Sim even goes so far as to include himself in the novel, when he berates the authenticity of his own artistic creations.

Works Cited


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