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# The Bottle Imp

**Issue 5, May 2009**  
**A New Perspective**  
**on the Scottish Diaspora**  
**Leith Davis**

**I**n his contribution to the recent volume on *Transatlantic Scots*, Colin McArthur comments on what he calls the "Scottish Discursive Unconscious," a restricted range of "images, tones, rhetorical tropes, and ideological tendencies, often within utterances promulgated decades (sometimes even a century or more) apart" (p.340). As McArthur suggests,

anyone setting out to describe, comment on, or make images of Scotland and the Scots, rather than producing a novel and "personal" take on the subject, switches on to automatic pilot, so to speak, slots into a preexisting and hegemonic bricolage of images, narratives, subnarratives, tones, and turns of phrase (p.341)

The Scottish Discursive Unconscious, or, SDU, as he somewhat flippantly describes it, dates back to the post-Culloden laments of James Macpherson, and relies on nostalgia for its primary affect. Moments of SDU are produced, according to McArthur, not only in Scotland but also in North American contexts, where they "rush[ ] in to fill over the cracks in (transatlantic) Scots' cultural identities" (p.341).

Vancouver, British Columbia, serves as a good test case for McArthur's comments. Like so many Canadian cities, it has been home over the years to a large population of Scottish immigrants. The St. Andrew's and Caledonian Society of Vancouver was established in 1886. In the same year, Vancouverites elected a Scotsman born in Tiree, Malcolm Alexander MacLean, as their first mayor. In 1928, an extensive crowd turned out to see the unveiling of the first statue in the city's Stanley Park: a copy of the George Lawson original of Robert Burns that graces Robert Burns Square in Ayr. Today, the city of Coquitlam in Greater Vancouver hosts an annual Highland Games, while the Simon Fraser University pipe band in nearby Burnaby won the 2008 world pipe band and drum corps championships.

There are indeed traces of the Scottish Discursive Unconscious at work in Vancouver. Every St. Andrew's Day, the Saltire Society of Vancouver hosts a ball that features a nostalgic toast to "the Twa Lands." Every January 25, Scottish immigrants gather at Burns suppers organized by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, the Burns Club, the St. Andrews and Caledonian Society and other Scottish-oriented groups. Whiskey is drunk, haggis is ingested and toasts are made to the Immortal Memory of a poet whose actual work is unknown to many. But Vancouver is also the site of a celebration that is anything but a manifestation of SDU: Gung Haggis Fat Choy. A mixture of Burns Night and Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations, Gung Haggis Fat Choy is a pun on the transliterated words for "Happy New Year" in Mandarin, Gung Hay Fat Choy. Gung Haggis Fat Choy is the brainchild of Todd Wong, a fifth-generation Asian-Canadian who takes the name Toddish McWong every year for the occasion. In 1993, Wong was working as a tour guide for Simon Fraser University. When a request went round to find someone to carry the claymore for the University's annual Burns Day events, Todd was the only volunteer to be found. He made the connection between the two celebrations as he was planning to attend a Chinese Lunar New Year celebration just two days after participating in the Burns event. The first Gung Haggis Fat Choy dinner took place in Wong's kitchen. In 1998, it had grown so hugely that he moved it to The Floata restaurant in Vancouver's Chinatown where it has been situated ever since. The 2009 Gung Haggis Fat Choy dinner for Burns's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary sold out with 500 tickets.

Gung Haggis Fat Choy takes many of the features of traditional Burns nights and gives them a non-traditional twist. The "Address to the Haggis" morphs into the "Rap to the Haggis," featuring Joe MacDonald and Todd Wong with a synthesized beat maker in the background. The "Toast to the Lassies" in 2009 was a rap-poem delivered by a lassie with an all-male chorus. In addition, Asian elements are added, such as a "bamboo clappertale" about Robert Burns and his teacher by Jan Walls and music by the Silk Road Music Ensemble. Haggis wontons and other delicacies suggest a culinary as well as cultural fusion. Gung Haggis Fat Choy does not stop at mixing together those of Chinese and Scottish heritage. Rather, its aim is to provide a celebratory venue in which those from all cultures can be comfortable. The 2009 dinner opened,

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for example, with a blessing from Musqueam elder Larry Grant, a reminder, perhaps, that we are all immigrants here at some time in the past.

Where traditional Burns suppers of today include very little poetry, apart from snippets of the bard's most famous works, Gung Haggis Fat Choy keeps the spirit of Burns's creativity alive by featuring readings from Asian-Canadian poets and donating money to the Asian-Canadian Writers' Workshop, Ricepaper Magazine and the Joy Kogawa House. Kogawa was one of the first Asian-Canadian writers to reach a national popular audience with her 1981 novel *Obasan*.

In "Nation, Migration, Globalization," Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur suggest a different force at work in diaspora communities than the nostalgic impulse that McArthur identifies as typically Scottish. In particular, they argue that

Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself—religious, ethnic, gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and—as diaspora itself suggests—are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming.

They suggest, in other words, that aspects of immigrant cultures of origin get decontextualized and recontextualized in creative ways in diasporic contexts. Vancouver's Gung Haggis Fat Choy celebration is certainly one such "diasporic traversal." While it arguably relies on symbolic accoutrements of Scottishness – tartan, bagpipes, haggis, Burns – it presents them in such a way as to divest them of their nostalgic contexts. They become not so much elements supporting a Scottish Discursive Unconscious as sites which can encourage a regeneration of interest in Scotland by young people of Scottish as well as non-Scottish heritage. And who knows. Gung Haggis Fat Choy may have much to offer Scotland as well in helping to make Burns appealing to a new generation.



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