

Book Reviews

Literary Reviews

Michael Amo, creator, *Pure*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017.

In early 2017 (Jan. 9–Feb. 13), the publically funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired the six-week mini-series *Pure* centred on the character Noah Funk (Ryan Robbins), an ordained Mennonite pastor of the fictional Edenthaler Mennonite colony. While the mini-series is fiction, it was inspired by the reality of the involvement of Mennonites from Mexico in the drug trade. Set in southern Ontario, the series follows Noah’s attempt to redeem his church, whose members are involved in the cocaine distribution business. Eli Voss (Peter Outerbridge), head of the “Mennonite mob” headquartered in Mexico, demands of Noah that he assume leadership of the distribution network in Ontario, following the incarceration of the Ontario mob head Jerry Epp (Patrick Garrow). With his family’s wellbeing held hostage by Voss’s threat to kill them if he refuses, Noah accepts the role forced on him but is determined to eradicate the drug infestation in his congregation from within. This takes him and his wife Anna (Alex Paxton-Beesley) into uncharted moral deep water as they become more and more entangled in the bloody and violent business that is the drug trade. His entanglement takes him to

Mexico for a grand showdown with the boss himself, where Noah must make the ultimate moral choice of whether to kill the mob boss in order to save his community. In the final scene, when Noah returns home to Ontario and the church service where his son is being baptized, he cannot find his redemption in the community—and its purifying ritual—for whom he has sacrificed his ethical core, but must remain outside the church building in the embrace of his forgiving wife.

Pure fits firmly within the police show genre, filled with fast-paced action and violence. In its efforts to move beyond its generic conventions by situating the drama within a Mennonite community caught in a web of crime, the show falters and becomes problematic. The measured development of characters that is needed to explore the ethical ambiguities and conundrums presented in the story is lacking, and instead, the show resorts to stereotypes and a two-dimensional portrayal of individuals and the communities in which the drama unfolds. This is most obvious in the contrast between the two central characters. Bronco (A. J. Buckley), the “bad cop” pursuing Noah and the drug ring, spends no time deliberating the implications of his methods to eradicate the drug trade. Any soul searching is the prerogative (and obligation) only of the Mennonite pastor, who is held to a high moral standard and is ultimately required to choose between his convictions and his community.

Pure is equally facile in its blurring of the line between fact and fiction. Promotional materials and the show itself awkwardly conflate two distinct groups of Mennonites—Old Colony and Old Order Mennonites—into one fictional community, resulting in, for example, the incongruity of Low German-speaking, buggy-riding Mennonite farmers with ties to Mexico (see Fig. 1). The focus of the show is clearly Old Colony Mennonite migrants in Ontario, some of whom are involved in drug trafficking between Mexico and Canada, but the story is indiscriminately situated in a blend of Old Order and Old Colony Mennonite characters and life. Consequently, the portrayal of Mennonites is less a fictional rendering than a jarring misrepresentation.

CBC reiterated that a fictional community was created so that the public’s gaze would be removed from the actual groups of Mennonites depicted in the series. The failure of CBC in its use of a fictionalized community (Edenthaler Mennonites) to address misrepresentation lies in the irony that the believability of this fiction relies on the actuality of the two Mennonite groups in question; without the reality of Old Colony Mennonite involvement

in drug trafficking and the visibly traditional lifestyle of Old Order Mennonites, the show's cachet would be markedly reduced.

The fictionalizing of *Pure*'s Mennonite community does not so much address the problem of representation as it obscures the misrepresentation that is taking place. CBC perpetuated this misrepresentation by airing *The Fifth Estate*'s documentary on the Mennonite Mexican drug connection, "The Mennonite Connection" immediately on the heels of, and incorporating scenes from, *Pure*.

In its lack of nuance and explicit jumbling of fact and fiction, the show raises important issues regarding media representation and cultural appropriation of marginalized groups, issues that have been hotly debated in Canada and beyond in recent months (e.g. Houpt, 2017; Malik, 2017). In defense of the show, CBC's Executive Vice-President, English Services, stated that the "story is a universal one, of conflict that threatens and tests people" (Personal communication, March 9, 2017). At the same time, we note that the producers of both the fictional series and the documentary failed to situate this "conflict" in its historical and social context, that is, "the 249 Mexican drug cartels (according to Mexican researcher Sergio Aguayo) that have expanded their business to include extortion, human trafficking, and kidnapping, and prey on Central American and Mexican migrants, including Mennonites, who have been made desperate and vulnerable" (Good Gingrich & Fast, 2017). As orientalist scholar Edward Said has so deftly shown, the ahistoricizing—universalizing—of the "exotic other" for use in artistic expression, academic pursuit, economic gain, or political dominance is one of the insidious suppositions of colonialism. Even if *Pure* is a softer version of such an attitude, and the Old Colony Mennonite context is quite different in its racial history and politics, this is the same colonial posture that brought us residential schools and apartheid, and that perpetuates racist practices and exploitation of groups made vulnerable.

But most importantly, the series presents an opportunity for us to examine the place of *self*-representation in entertainment programming, particularly for minority groups who easily become targets of stereotyping and discrimination. The premise of the show – a "Mennonite mob" – is, itself, an inflammatory and disparaging portrayal for the purposes of entertainment of a serious social issue within an ethnic and religious immigrant minority group. The representation of Old Colony Mennonites and Old Order Mennonites is further problematic because neither group on which *Pure* is based is likely to challenge these misrepresentations in conventional ways. Public media is not the forum in which either group chooses to contribute to Canadian

society. Any voice they might have about who they are—self-representation—is effectively rendered mute because the media of representation is television. Is it ethical for a national broadcaster to ignore religious values and beliefs of minority groups in Canada in its programming and use the groups for entertainment purposes because it knows there will be no rebuttal from group members? This representation overrules the possibility for self-identification, and perpetuates and exploits a negative and sensationalized stereotype according to CBC's own definition of the term as outlined in its policies.

There is little doubt that CBC has rightly made a concerted effort not to sensationalize and sell stereotypical representations of other marginalized groups in Canada, especially without consultation with leaders of those groups—the potential for social harm is too great. The media's influence in Canadian society when it comes to difference and diversity can hardly be overstated. In this time when we see blatant criminalization, demonization, and dehumanization of “difference” among us, along with an increase in hate crimes, words and images—representation—matter. *Pure* is by no means the first, nor will it be the last, misrepresentation of Mennonites in media. But it does remind us again that the representation of others is a complex and delicate creative endeavor.

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