Bearing Witness:

Bruce Cockburn's Cultural Interventions in Central America

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Abstract: Bruce Cockburn, who is one of Canada's preeminent singer-songwriters, devoted his early work largely to the personal, notably the spiritual, even becoming known as "that Christian singer." But largely in response to the brutal Central American wars of the 1980s, he gradually surmised that a living art cannot evade the political. The numerous songs that Cockburn wrote about those conflicts, which reflect his determination to become a witness rather than a mere bystander, have become testaments to his desire to document the suffering of multitudes of people that lacked the power (or opportunity) to articulate it.

Keywords: Bruce Cockburn. Singer-songwriter. Witnessing. Canada. Central America.

Resumo: Bruce Cockburn, um dos mais destacados cantores e compositores do Canadá, dedicou o início de sua carreira a um trabalho largamente pessoal, notadamente o espiritual, ficando conhecido como "o cantor cristão". Mas em grande parte em resposta às brutais guerras dos anos 1980 na América Central, ele gradualmente deduziu que uma arte viva não pode evitar a política. As numerosas canções que Cockburn compôs sobre aqueles conflitos, que refletem sua determinação de tornar-se uma testemunha ao invés de um simples espectador, tornaram-se testamentos de seu desejo de documentar o sofrimento de multidões de pessoas que sem poder (ou oportunidade) de articulá-lo.

Palavras chave: Bruce Cockburn. Cantor, compositor. Testemunho. Canadá. América Central.

"Muchas veces fumando un cigarrillo
he decidido la muerte de un hombre",
dice Ubico fumando un cigarrillo...
Ernesto Cardenal

The relationship between art and society is always problematic. Artists are expected to capture the essence of life, including social life, yet there is a widely-held belief that true art requires that the artist not engage directly with political matters. This paradox is much evident in the work of one of Canada's preeminent singer-songwriters (and musicians), Bruce Cockburn. In the early part of his career, Cockburn devoted his songwriting largely to the personal, notably the spiritual, convinced that "art could be

held separate from the mundane and tainted rest of human affairs" (COCKBURN and KING, 2014: 78). However, he gradually surmised that a living art cannot evade the political. This realization became especially pronounced in the 1980s after Cockburn first came in contact with the waves of refugees that were fleeing the brutal wars then raging in Central America and felt that, as an artist, he no longer could be a bystander and had to convey their plight to the world. Indeed, his Central American songs reflect his profound engagement with the political realities he encountered, and his desire to document the suffering of multitudes of people that lacked the power (or opportunity) to articulate it.

The ubiquity of human rights violations in our time, including genocide, has prompted an interrogation of the ethical status of those individuals who are aware of abuses but elect not to get involved. For some writers and scholars, the bystander is the quintessential modern symbol of human indifference to the pain of others. After all, when it comes to mass-scale atrocities like "genocide, most of us are bystanders" (KEREN, 2009: 22). There are many definitions of the bystander. One of the most common is extremely sweeping, portraying the bystander as "every contemporary citizen cognizant of a specific ongoing instance of genocide, regardless of where in the world" (VETLESEN, 2000: 520). Another definition is simultaneously more specific and more abstract, restricting itself to "someone [who] is present but not involved in an event demanding involvement, such as an individual ignoring a street fight or a nation-state refraining from humanitarian intervention" (KEREN, 2009: 22). In addition, it is generally accepted that the bystander can be complicit regardless of his or her response. "Knowing, yet still not acting," asserts the philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen (2000: 522), "means granting acceptance to the action", seriously questioning the ethics of non-engagement.

Vetlesen differentiates between two basic kinds of bystanders, what he terms "*passive bystanders*" and "*bystanders by formal assignment*" (2000: 520; emphasis in the original). He defines the first group as "onlookers," people who elect to participate—or not to participate—in certain events. The second group, in contrast, is composed of individuals who are "professionally engaged as a 'third party' to the interaction between the two parties directly involved in acts of genocide," like United Nations monitors (2000:

520-21; 530). But I would argue that Cockburn's Central American songs suggest that we ought to distinguish between the bystander, whether passive or by formal assignment, and the observer. I would further posit that often ethical issues surface when professionals go beyond being observers and intervene physically in activities like ethnic cleansing. To phrase it differently, being an observer is an ethically legitimate position for writers, journalists, and human rights monitors, whose function may be less to try to stop human rights abuses than to make the world aware of them and of the identity of the offenders, as well as to ponder what it says about a society (if not humanity) when such violations become normalized. That said, it must be admitted that, ultimately, Cockburn challenges the effectiveness of witnessing in times of crisis, as reflected in his desire to retaliate against the perpetrators of mass violence in songs like "If I Had a Rocket Launcher."

Cockburn's emergence as an artist-activist was not exactly predictable. Bruce Douglas Cockburn was born into a white-collar family in Ottawa on May 27, 1945, which ironically means he "*share[s] a birthday*" with Henry Kissinger, a political figure that he asserts was "*apparently indispensable to the design of policies that killed millions of unarmed, innocent peasants in Southeast Asia, and destroyed the lives of countless others around the world*" (COCKBURN and KING, 2014: 259, 260; emphasis in the original). Cockburn started to work professionally as a folk singer and songwriter in the mid-1960s but after having "found Jesus Christ" in 1974, he focused mainly on his spiritual side, even becoming known as "'that Christian singer'" (2014: 1, 2). Although he later stopped writing overtly about his relationship with Jesus, amid "the din of disingenuous right-wing Christian exploitation," he has never ceased to attempt "to live [his] life somewhat in line with his Word" (2014: 1). Yet, even during his most religious phases, Cockburn has not usually been willing to turn the other cheek. Perhaps as befits someone who hails from a military family—being both the son and the brother of Canadian Armed Forces medical doctors—he does not believe in the idea of peace at all costs. For instance, Cockburn has stated that while he "honour[s] nonviolence as a way of being, and as a political tactic," he is "not a pacifist" (2014: 2). Untypically for a Canadian, to say nothing of a Canadian folk singer, he is also a champion of recreational guns (as opposed to hunting ones). To the "consternation" of some of his friends, Cockburn even professes that "responsible

citizens of a democracy should enjoy the right to bear arms" (2014: 336, 337). He thus undermines the myth that his native land derives its national identity from the fact it has "no guns" (OZEKI, 2013: 42), a myth that he himself sometimes promulgates (COCKBURN and KING, 2014: 407). Such conflicting beliefs may of course explain why he would eventually lead a frontal discursive war against what he deems the violators of human rights in Central America, and elsewhere.

Significantly, despite his socially and economically privileged background, Cockburn has always considered himself an outsider. Since he was an indifferent student in high school, he started socializing with working-class kids who were being groomed for the trades. He relates that, like the protagonist of John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*, "I was a fellow traveller in their company. Not an impostor, but an observer, a contributor, someone who authentically cared—but never a true insider. I would find myself in this role throughout my life" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 29). Needless to say, Cockburn does not equate the observer with the bystander, given that the former is supposedly capable of empathy with members of other groups. In fact, by 1981, in the song "Broken Wheel," from the album *Inner City Front*, he writes unequivocally that "*No adult of sound mind/ Can be an innocent bystander,*" (2014: 202; emphasis in the original). Yet he would soon begin to question whether it is enough for artists to be observers or if a more direct engagement is required.

One factor that Cockburn has identified as having played a pivotal role in his transition to an artist-activist was his newly found interest in Central America in the early 1980s, which led to his songwriting becoming "infused" with a more internationalist perspective and sound (RICE, GUTNIK, 1995: 249). At the time, he was already undergoing a shift from the "deep introspection" of the 1970s to "a more exterior orientation" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 198). This transformation was marked by the 1983 release of *The Trouble with Normal*, which began "a trilogy of albums focusing in large part on North-South issues, especially the ongoing attacks against life itself – on humans, rivers, mountains, oceans, air – for the benefit of an already wealthy few" (205-6). The songs that comprise the trilogy convey his rage at the excesses of consumerism and the ever-widening gap between the obscenely rich and the rest of society, a divide that

he claims is "becoming almost medieval in scale" (206). "*Fashionable fascism dominates the scene*," he observes in the album's title song, and industrialists "Play pinball with the Third World trying to keep it on its knees" (205; emphasis in the original). Cockburn acknowledges that his early songs about the so-called South were based on "remote observation" (206). More specifically, they derived primarily from a series of books and magazines supplied to him by his brother Don, a political activist who supported El Salvador's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Cockburn credits his younger sibling with sharing with him not only numerous "political tracts" about various conflicts in Central America, but even "a small volume of poetry" by the Nicaraguan Jesuit priest-poet and politician Ernesto Cardenal (206, 208), an individual who would have an enormous impact on Cockburn politically as well as artistically.

Cockburn writes that he was deeply touched by the brutal assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero, the theologically conservative Salvadoran Catholic prelate who was shot by a military death squad as he celebrated Mass in 1980 (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 207). In particular, he became captivated by the Sandinista experiment in Nicaragua, a development that owes much to Cardenal. Cockburn attests that it was Cardenal's "beautiful and painterly" verse that "piqued my interest in the region and its struggles, and contributed to my songwriting in both form and content" (2014: 209; see also COCKBURN, 1984: 12). According to him, Cardenal's "passionate and sharply drawn poetics" does nothing less than "portray the history of U.S. imperialism in Central America since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823," when the United States began its concerted campaign to gain control of the middle of the continent "for the benefit of American business" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 208, 245). So enthralled was Cockburn by the fact that there was now in Central America a government that promoted "literacy, health care, no bloodbath, and at least some tolerance for democratic opposition" that part of him wanted to head south "to see up close" what was transpiring there (p. 210). The one thing that held him back was his knowledge that, since he did not speak Spanish, he might not be able to capture the complexity of the situation. However, serendipitously but not unrelated to the political turn in his music, early in 1983 Cockburn was invited by Oxfam Canada to join the team that the anti-poverty organization was sending for three weeks

to Central America “to witness and report on the situation in the region” (2014: 210; 215). This was precisely the opportunity that Cockburn had been looking for, “a chance to witness rather than be a mere tourist” (p. 210), and which would have such a palpable effect on his subsequent work.

Cockburn states that his aim in writing about Central America was “to tell real stories with real information, and . . . to make it clear how I felt about it” (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 206). He made a number of visits to the region in the 1980s, starting with the Oxfam fact-finding jaunt in 1983, a fateful journey that his long-time manager Bernie Finkelstein contends “literally changed his life, personally and musically” (FINKELSTEIN, 2012: 247). On that initial trip, Cockburn was accompanied by fellow Canadian singer-songwriter Nancy White and Rick Arnold, a Canadian who grew up in Venezuela, and who would serve as interpreter (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 215). After stopping in Mexico City to buy suitcases of much-needed medical supplies, the trio travelled to the refugee camps of southern Mexico, where “more than one hundred thousand Guatemalans” lived in wretched conditions right by the border with their war-ravaged country (214). Cockburn leaves little doubt that he was transformed by what he witnessed along the Mexican side of the Lacantún River. This was the northern extension of a vicious political and military conflict that had been raging since 1960 and which targeted chiefly Guatemala’s large Mayan population, turning whole “provinces into perpetual war zones” (GRUENDING, 1983: 27). He notes that he “had seen refugee camps on TV . . . , but face to face it was different. TV has no smell, no feel. This kind of poverty stinks. It smells like too much sweat and not enough soap. It smells like human shit baking in the sun” (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 220). Besides the squalid conditions and the dearth of both food and medicine, the refugees were under the constant threat of violence. Cockburn, who “experienced intense waves of emotion, alternately dark and light” (221), became especially affected by his awareness of their exposure to air assaults. He charges that the Guatemala military “continued to harass the survivors” even after they fled the country, “crossing the border into Mexico and attacking the refugee camps, strafing from helicopters, now and then dragging people off into the jungle and hacking them to pieces with machetes” (221). After

witnessing such a relentless barrage of violence, he has an epiphany, confiding that he "*understand[s] now why people want to kill*" (223; emphasis in the original), something he then tries to capture in his writings.

Although Cockburn may have grasped the plight of the refugees in the camps, he only articulates his aesthetic response to what he sees after he and his companions return to their base in the picturesque colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas. It is in the old capital of Chiapas that he buries himself in his hotel room and attempts to "intellectually understand, or at least consider (because who can understand it?), the evil that humans inflict upon one another," and particularly "to feel the results through the faces and stories of the survivors" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 225). Cockburn's challenge is compounded by his realization that it will not be enough for him to illustrate what might have led the government of Guatemala to turn on its own people. He must also explore, as he phrases it, "What could possibly convince the world's most powerful nation, our neighbour the United States, not only to accept but to support, even design, such slaughter?" (225; emphasis in the original). In other words, the Guatemalan military are far from being the only perpetrators of violence in their open war against their citizenry, notably the Maya.

The immediate result of Cockburn's musings was the 1984 album *Stealing Fire*, which he still considers his "most 'political' record up to that time" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 271). Along with "Dust and Diesel," "Maybe the Poet," and "Nicaragua," *Stealing Fire* includes two of Cockburn's signature songs, "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" and "If I Had a Rocket Launcher." The latter is the work that Cockburn himself believes he "will probably be most closely associated in the public's memory" (3), and it is easy to understand why. After watching a military helicopter fly over a refugee camp for the second time on the same day, terrorizing everyone, the singer wishes that he had "*a rocket launcher*" so that he could "*make somebody pay.*" He says that he does not "*believe in guarded borders*" and "*hate*," but he also does not "*believe in generals or their stinking torture states*" and hungers to "*retaliate*" on behalf of the refugees (226; emphasis in the original). To quote the closing stanza:

> *I want to raise every voice—at least I've got to try*
> *Every time I think about it, water rises to my eyes.*

> *Situation desperate, echoes of the victim's cry*
> If I had a rocket launcher
> Some son of a bitch would die (226; emphasis in the original)

As Cockburn writes in his memoir, when he relived the helicopter attacks on the refugees, he "felt all-consuming outrage" at the sheer inhumanity of the perpetrators (226), a fury that he fully conveys.

Possibly excluding "Stolen Land," in which Cockburn "explicitly challenges the listener to do something" about First Nations-settler relations throughout the Americas (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 149; see also BRAZ, 2016: 356-57), "Rocket Launcher" is his most openly ideological song, one that calls into question the thesis that "folk music... is not very good at capturing or expressing anger" (RICE, GUTNIK, 1995: 244). It is also arguably his most influential song, judging by its popularity around the world, including the United States. Despite its uncompromising critique of US imperialism in Central America, "Rocket Launcher" "reached the top ten of album-oriented rock FM playlists... and number eighty-eight on the Billboard Hot 100 chart" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 271), leading Cockburn to tour throughout the United States for the first time in his career (FINKELSTEIN, 2012: 247-48) – in contrast, in Canada the song "reached just forty-nine on the RPM chart," with Canadians favouring "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" over it (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 272). The magnitude of the impact of "Rocket Launcher" is manifest when Cockburn decided to play it in Chile during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, even before the song was released, and where he was accompanied by an unidentified Chilean singer who sang "the lyrics in Spanish" (262). Cockburn relates that "[t]he atmosphere was charged" among the audience of approximately six hundred people, which likely included a few of the ever-present government spies. "When we got to 'some son of a bitch would die,' the translator thrust his fist in the air and shouted the line, and the crowd erupted. They could relate. It was a standout moment, a once-in-a-lifetime rush of human coalescence and expanded meaning" (262). Cockburn was proud that his "little howl of outrage" was noticed in the corridors of power in world capitals like Washington, DC, which demonstrated to him that "a song can be a focusing agent, a rallying point" (275; 265-66). Yet Finkelstein reveals that Cockburn hesitated to record

"Rocket Launcher," fearing "the real possibility of it being misunderstood as some kind of rallying cry, urging people to incite violence" (248). Finkelstein further notes that, because of Cockburn's habit of discussing US foreign policy as he introduced the song, "there were nights in some U.S. cities when I worried for his safety" (250; 273-74). That is, Cockburn has always been conscious that "Rocket Launcher" was never merely an aesthetic exercise, and would likely be interpreted as such by audiences.

Part of the explanation for the extraordinary power of "Rocket Launcher" lies in its feeling of immediacy. Cockburn manages to give the impression that he is not only familiar with the subject of his song, but that he witnessed the events he depicts, underlining that he "*talk[s] with the survivors.*" This is something that he reinforces in his memoir *Rumours of Glory*, co-written with the US author and environmental activist Greg King. Cockburn describes an exchange that he has with a California acquaintance who dares him to prove that the Guatemalan military dictator "[Efraín] Ríos Montt was so bad" and that "there were massacres?" The singer provides a pithy answer, "I met the survivors" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 227). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Toronto writer William Richard Harris wrote that people at the time did not know the age of the ancient Mayan city of Copán, who built it, or when it was abandoned. But he stressed that there was no doubt that it existed because of its ruins. In his trenchant words: "It was alive, for we have found the corpse" (p. 163). Similarly, the fact that there are legions of victims of genocidal violence in the Guatemalan refugee camps of southern Mexico, many of whom Cockburn had seen, demonstrates to him that there are also perpetrators of violence.

This idea of witnessing infuses most of Cockburn's Central American songs of the 1980s. After touring the Guatemalan refugee camps, Cockburn, White, and Arnold travelled farther south to Nicaragua to observe the revolution (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 215), a journey that generated more songs. In many ways, Nicaragua was the perfect antidote to Guatemala. The Sandinista Revolution of 1979 had put an end to the brutal and corrupt four-decade long Somoza political dynasty, and appeared to many people as the embodiment of hope not only in the region but the world. Cockburn, who would make "several visits to Nicaragua between 1983 and 1988" (232), certainly became aware

of the myriad of challenges faced by the new government. In the title song of his 1987 compilation album *Waiting for a Miracle* he actually suggests that the revolution might not be able to succeed without supernatural intervention:

> *Struggle for a dollar, scuffle for a dime*
> *Step out from the past and try to hold the line*
> *So how come history takes such a long, long time*
> *When you're waiting for a miracle* (233; emphasis in the original)

While Cockburn may be positive that the Sandinistas are "at that moment the absolute best option for the Nicaraguan people" (233), he has no illusions that they are likely to deliver any time soon on the radical changes they have promised.

Cockburn of course was not alone in his undisguised support of the Sandinistas, even if not everyone's contribution was passionately poetic as his. By 1985, some "thirty thousand foreigners, many of them Canadian," had made the pilgrimage to Nicaragua to behold the "Sandinista revolution from within her borders" (ROMANO, 1987: 75; see also MCFARLANE, 1989: 193). The Canadian response to the regime change was predictably multi-faceted, with some of the visitors asking if it was not really a sign of admiration for the fact that Nicaragua, unlike Canada, finally refused to "cry uncle" before the mighty United States (LETSON, 1987: 7). As one of those travellers ponders, it is possible that the reason he treks to Central America is "to see firsthand if Nicaragua has found another way, neither capitalist nor communist, neither from the east nor the west. Perhaps we gringos could better understand our own ways by looking to Nicaragua, a nation that has dared in its difference and originality" (ROMANO, 1987: 76). In other words, some of the journeys were probably as much about showing solidarity with Nicaragua as about trying to discern whether it could serve as a model for a country like Canada.

There was, however, one other reason why so many Canadians (and other foreigners) were entranced by the Sandinista experiment, and that was that it was led largely by artists. This was very much the case with Cockburn. He writes that he and his companions went to Nicaragua "as guests" of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 236), whose director was the poet Rosario Murillo,

the wife of President Daniel Ortega. Cockburn talked several times with the "well spoken and engaging" Murillo and he confesses that, as he did, he "thought with some envy, 'There is no other country in the world with a government like this—a government of artists and intellectuals" (237; see also LETSON, ROMANO, 1989: 46-47). Not surprisingly, a "highlight" of his first visit to Nicaragua was meeting with his hero Cardenal (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 237), the Sandinistas' minister of culture, who avers that one "can't be with God and be neutral" (CARDENAL, 1980: 73). Cockburn also met with Ortega, who told him that Nicaraguans "were very surprised when all this support came from Canada, and I just wanted to say thank you." To which Cockburn gave what he terms a "typically Canadian" response: "Canada will do whatever the U.S. tells it to do. Don't count on anything from us" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 244). This may have been true of the Canadian government and of the business community (279), but clearly did not reflect the actions of individual Canadians such as himself.

In any case, Cockburn comes to see Nicaragua as a great symbol of humanity's hope that at least a modicum of civil and economic rights is within reach of most of the world's populace. When his own father expresses skepticism that such a "tiny" country could have much influence, he replies that "Nicaragua was special because the Sandinistas had cut the reins of imperialism to create a greater good for a majority of people, a very rare occurrence and an example that would have shone like a beacon to the rest of the post-colonial world" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 237). No less important, the Sandinistas represented the possibility of national sovereignty for both the South and the North. As Cockburn writes in the song "Nicaragua," "*You're the best of what we are*" (247; emphasis in the original). They had shown they were not intimidated by a superpower like the United States, proving that even small nations can shape their own destiny.

The significance of the Sandinista Revolution for Cockburn becomes conspicuously evident later in the decade when he travels to Honduras. Through representatives of Canadian church groups, Cockburn had "learned that the Honduran army had attacked a U.N. refugee camp full of Salvadoran civilians, inside Honduras near the border with El Salvador" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 285). So, again working with

Oxfam, he rushed south, to ensure that there would be some international figures to witness if any abuses of human rights were taking place. This time he and his colleagues would not be able to slip into the camps since, unlike in Mexico, the camps were surrounded by soldiers. Cockburn, nevertheless, deems the operation a success. "The whole point of being there," he explains, "was to be visible, so that the higher-ups literally calling the shots would know the world was watching them" (p. 290). Judging by the reactions of the Honduran soldiers, and by implication of their superiors, there is little question that they knew they were being watched by external forces.

Furthermore, the Honduran political and military elites were probably right to suspect that not only were they being observed but by people who had the power transmit what they had seen to the rest of the world. One of the most fruitful consequences of Cockburn's visit to Honduras, which he says at the time the United Nations considered "the world's most violent country" (COCKBURN, KING, 2015: 294), was the composition of "Where the Death Squad Lives." The song, which first appeared in the 1988 album *Big Circumstance,* explores what it is like to live in a country that has come to be defined by its utter lack of security. In particular, it details the trials faced by farming families attempting to work "*the land in an age of terror,*" anxiously waiting day after day for "*the night to explode*" (p. 294; emphasis in the original). Given the despair that permeates their present condition, the most that people can do is to try to persuade themselves that the future will be different. As Cockburn ends his song:

> *This world can be better than it is today*
> *You can say I'm a dreamer but that's okay*
> *Without the could-be and the might-have-been*
> *All you've got left is your fragile skin*
> *And that ain't worth much where the death squad lives* (295; emphasis in the original)

Even if the Sandinista Revolution had transformed Nicaragua, it is clear that most of the region is still waiting for some succour, whether miraculous or otherwise, ironically by now including from the Sandinistas themselves (GLAVIN, 2018; HERRERA VALLEJOS, 2019).

Cockburn is not only "one of Canada's most valuable artists" (YOUNG, 2007: 39) but also one of the preeminent singer-songwriters of his time, to say nothing of being a "virtuoso" guitarist (SMUCKER, 2004: 22; DOYLE, 2014: 35-36). Now in the fifth decade of his career, he has recorded over thirty albums in a wide range of genres, often dealing with controversial issues around the world. For the musicologists Timothy Rice and Tammy Gutnik, Cockburn is "interesting musically and culturally precisely because he has always refused to accept the boundaries of styles, particularly ones dictated by the American music industry" (1995: 243). While Cockburn has enjoyed much success internationally, he has always occupied a special place in Canada, which probably reflects his sustained engagement with Canadian society. Canada, in turn, has reciprocated his commitment to the country by showering him with some of its highest awards. In addition to being given several honorary doctoral degrees by Canadian universities, Cockburn is the recipient of the Order of Canada and of the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement, and an inductee into both the Canadian Music Hall of Fame and the Canadian Broadcast Hall of Fame (COCKBURN, BRAKE: 2016).

Rice and Gutnik, in fact, contend that the trajectory of Cockburn's songwriting reflects not only his deep attachment to Canada, but to a particular idea of his homeland. More specifically, they posit that there is a "correspondence between Cockburn's and Pierre Trudeau's vision of Canada" (243). They make a compelling case that there are striking parallels between Cockburn's work and the senior Trudeau's policies on bilingualism and multiculturalism (243, 248). However, they sound much less persuasive when they claim that Cockburn's Central American songs of the 1980s are "the musical embodiment of a third element of Trudeau's Liberalism, his . . . North-South vision" (249). Although Trudeau may have promoted "[c]loser relations with Latin American countries on a basis of mutual respect and reciprocal advantage" (qtd. in MCFARLANE, 1989: 133), in practice he very much followed what Peter McFarlane calls the long Canadian tradition of viewing "Latin America as primarily a rich field for Canadian business to conquer" (133). Notwithstanding Trudeau's fervent pronouncements about inter-American solidarity, his government "quietly support[ed] the Nixon administration against Chile" in the early 1970s, thus "accepting the legitimacy of the so-called Kissinger

Doctrine of limited sovereignty for the countries in the hemisphere" (136; 177). Likewise, during the peak of human rights abuses in Central America in the 1980s, Trudeau and his government systematically refused to get involved, arguing that the region was "not an area of traditional Canadian interest" (qtd. in MCFARLANE, 1989: 175). As Nicaragua's Consul-General in Toronto Pastor Vallé-Garay lamented in the mid-1980s, "The people of Canada are telling us [Nicaraguans] that they care and are here to help. If only the government of Canada could work in tandem . . ." (CARDENAL, VALLÉ-GARAY, 1984: 33; ellipsis in the original). The only reason that Ottawa eventually reversed its position, was not because of some principled initiative by Trudeau or his ministers, but because politically they could no longer ignore the growing protests by citizen groups. This was particularly true of church-affiliated organizations, which were "demanding a made-in-Canada policy" for Central America (MCFARLANE, 1989: 175), one that did not instinctively side with the corrupt local elites and their Canadian corporate confederates.

That is, rather than sharing Trudeau's vision of North-South relations in the Americas, Cockburn was part of an oppositional movement in Canada that forced the government (at least briefly) to change its policy toward Central America. Moreover, his views toward the region were not rejected only by Trudeau but also by many members of the Canadian cultural establishment, including the media. Cockburn describes an interview he had on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television news show after his return from Honduras. During the discussion, he caught "a glimpse of the anchorwoman's production notes, which read: 'We have this commie fag sympathizer who wants to talk about Central American refugees and what a rough time they're having. Nix on that . . . .'" As he adds, the unidentified anchorwoman "waxed pretty embarrassed when she realized I had seen the cue sheet" and Cockburn was "quite put out" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 291-92, ellipsis in the original; see also JENNINGS, 2019). Still, the extent to which Cockburn differs from Trudeau is most evident in a song like "Yanqui Go Home," which he wrote in 1983 but released in the 2003 remastered version of *Stealing Fire*. In the song he tells the United States that it is time it realize that its attempts to be "*the Pharaoh of the West*" have brought nothing but destruction to the world and that, unless it changes course, "*All those petty tyrants in your pocket gonna weigh you down*" (COCKBURN,

KING, 2014: 240-41; emphasis in the original). Even though Cockburn concludes by stating that he is a "*friend*" of the Yanqui (241; emphasis in the original), he makes it explicit that, contrary to Trudeau, he does not believe the middle of the continent is only threatened by non-hemispheric powers. For him, one of the great menaces to the security and well-being of Central America is indubitably the United States.

Cockburn's own relation to Central America, though, is not uncomplicated. In light of Canada's problematic history in the region, particularly when it comes to resource extraction (MCFARLANE, 1989: 63-67, 81-91, 122-31), "Yanqui Go Home" could easily have been titled "Canuck Go Home." In fact, Cockburn's hero, Ernesto Cardenal, had serious reservations about the ways Canadians have related to Latin America, writing in "Canto Nacional":

> El canadiense dijo al miskito: el comunismo es malo
> nos quita todo. Y el miskito que oía Radio Habana en Miskito
> contestó: Malo para vos que tener todo
> bueno para miskito/ miskito no tener nada. (CARDENAL, 2004: 107)

Cardenal's critique is adroitly rendered into English by Robert Pring-Mill in what he translates as "Nicaraguan Canto":

> The Canadian said to the Miskito: communism is bad
> it takes all that we own. And the Miskito (who listens to Radio
> Havana in Miskito answered): bad for you, got everything
> good for Miskito he not got anything. (CARDENAL, 1980: 30)

Yet Cockburn completely glosses over the likelihood that Central Americans, like other people south of the United States-Mexico border, do not always distinguish between Canadians and Americans, seeing them collectively as predatory gringos.

Similarly, Cockburn has provided mixed messages about his views of the military, especially in light of his authorship of an anti-martial anthem like "If I Had a Rocket Launcher." Thus he writes in his 1972 song "You Don't Have to Play the Horses," from the *Night Vision* album, "*Anyone can be a soldier/ It's a prevalent disease*" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 105; emphasis in the original). Yet, by 2009, he proudly

travels to Afghanistan to entertain Canadian troops at the Kandahar Air Field, where his brother John was serving as a medical doctor. Even more telling, when he sings "Rocket Launcher," he discovers that the soldiers responded to it "the best in that context and got all excited over the last line of the song" (qtd. in GREEN, 2015). His performance actually led to what he calls "a funny moment." As he finished singing, "someone came running over . . . and hands me a shoulder-fired missile launcher. So there I am holding a rocket launcher for a photo op" (qtd. in GREEN, 2015). But then, as his brother John points out, Cockburn has "always been interested, even as a kid, in military issues and hardware and explosions" (qtd. in GRAVELAND, 2015). Indeed, it might be worth pondering if one of the reasons for the success of "Rocket Launcher" is not the fact that its author is so at home in the world of guns.

The other complication for Cockburn, a more philosophical one, is that he is not able to condemn the abuses of human rights in Central America without demonizing their perpetrators; that is, without placing them outside the human family. In "Rocket Launcher," he writes that he does not believe in either "*guarded borders*" or "*hate*." But since he also does not believe "*in generals or their stinking torture states*," he fantasizes about having a rocket launcher so that he could blow up the "*son[s] of a bitch*" (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 226; emphasis in the original). This obviously means that Cockburn does harbour some hatred inside himself, at least toward generals who torment or murder their co-citizens. In addition, he must believe that there is a border between the civilized and the barbaric. The way Cockburn tries to circumvent this dilemma is by arguing that people who willfully violate the rights of others because of their collective identities have "forfeited any claim to humanity" (226). The problem is that even Cockburn must realize that this is a subterfuge. While such individuals may not be humane, they are definitely human. Therefore, one cannot eliminate them the way they eliminate their victims without descending to their level. Cockburn, in fact, has shown that he is aware of the ethical conundrum at the heart of "Rocket Launcher." In 2015, he told an interviewer that there were times during his trips to Africa and Central America when he felt that the people he encountered had "no choice but to fight. I mean, literally no choice—you either fight or die" (COCKBURN, BRAKE: 2016), which is one of the reasons that some

scholars question if bystanders have the "right . . . to condemn armed resistance by a desperate people" (KEREN, 2015: 38). At the same time, Cockburn conceded that "I don't think that violence produces justice" (COCKBURN, BRAKE: 2016). This would suggest that the sort of scenario he depicts in "Rocket Launcher" may require a response beyond justice. In other words, perhaps we should contemplate the possibility that some individuals or groups are unredeemable. Cockburn hints as much when he states that "I sort of agree that you can't have a country in the world these days where people go around throwing acid in women's faces simply because they want to learn to read. There are some cultures that don't deserve to persist" (qtd. in ROBB, 2016). Or as he elaborates subsequently in an attempt to clarify his response, "I don't take back what I said about aspects of certain cultures that seem to have no justification, in my worldview at least" (COCKBURN, BRAKE, 2016). If those cultures do not deserve to endure, it would seem logical to wipe them off the face of the earth. The question, then, would be, who is this "we" that would make such a decision, and who or what gives it authority to do so?

Considering that Cockburn presumably has not murdered any torture-state generals—he only pictures himself doing so with "*an RPG*," or rocket-propelled grenade (COCKBURN, KING, 2014: 226; emphasis in the original)—he would appear to remain a bystander to genocide. Yet by writing so passionately about the killing fields of Central America, he becomes more than a bystander. He is an observer who is able to convey the inhumanity of the events he witnesses to a hitherto seemingly indifferent world. This is no mean achievement for an artist, or anyone else for that matter. After all, we live in a world where, as Cardenal writes in the segment of his poem "Hora 0" that serves as the epigraph to this essay, a dictator like Guatemala's Jorge Ubico Castañeda can decide "la muerte de un hombre" while casually smoking a cigarette (CARDENAL 2004: 21; 1980: 1). Or as Tom Wayman bewails in his elegies about Chile at the time of the death of Salvador Allende, "Men are alive who are killers/ and not a word or a vote anywhere can stop them" (120). It is exactly this overwhelming sense of powerlessness that often leads people not to get involved when they witness acts of genocide. The forensic anthropologist Clea Koff relates her reaction after reporting the killings of presumed Rwandan rebels by Rwandan soldiers on a lake right by where a group of United Nations scientists was trying

to unearth evidence of the Rwandan genocide: "I hated the impotence of not being able to do more than just report the killings and I hated the fear I now felt for my own life, even though the bullets hadn't been directed at me or my teammates" (67). Given the results, any kind of intervention seems both extremely dangerous and pointless.

Needless to say, it is impossible to gauge the real-world impact of Cockburn's Central American songs in general and of "If I Had a Rocket Launcher" in particular. Cockburn himself has stated that he does not believe that any song is "going to change the world." Yet he thinks that "a whole bunch of people singing about an issue and encouraging people to feel the truth of an issue might result in some sort of demographic of resistance," which politicians then simply could not ignore. Cockburn is especially sanguine about the power of songs based on first-hand experience to generate "empathy" toward the people they portray (COCKBURN, BRAKE, 2016). In such instances, the songwriter would make the outside world aware of human rights abuses and, in the process, become not just a bystander but a witness.

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Note

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