

CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

DIRECTOR'S INTRODUCTION

Robarts conference continues to showcase best graduate research in Canadian Studies

In April 2017 the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies hosted its annual graduate student conference. The theme for the conference was “Transgressing the Nation-State: Constructs of Canadian Identity.” The conference was held over two days and was, by all accounts, another successful event (in no small part due to the excellent organizing committee, led by acting director Anna Hudson and York graduate stu-

BY GABRIELLE SLOWEY

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dent Erin Yunes). In July 2015, when I took over as director of the Robarts Centre, I really wanted to bolster the profile and reputation of the Robarts Centre at York (because, let’s be honest, when

most people hear the name Robarts, they still think of the library at U of T). An obvious way to do this was to promote new and cutting-edge graduate research in Canadian studies.

I recall with much fondness my own first conference experience, at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, when two of my best friends sat in the audience and rooted me on as I delivered

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ORGANIZERS' INTRODUCTION

Transgressing the nation-state: Constructs of Canadian identity

Coinciding with Canada 150, a year-long national celebration of Confederation, in April 2017 the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University hosted its fourth annual graduate student conference, entitled “Transgressing the Nation-State: Constructs of Canadian Identity.” This conference aimed to interrogate the embedded systems of colonialism, racism, sexism, and other social and economic disparities that continue to shape our country.

Over the course of two days, 30 students from universities across the country engaged in critical explorations of inequality in Canadian society. Presenters and attendees participated in

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dynamic conversation that touched on subjects ranging from the difficulties in reconciliation, narratives of erasure, invisibility, and marginalization, to state policy and the trauma of colonization. The panels were further supplemented by an extraordinary keynote lecture,

“Canada at 150: Where Is the ‘Truth’ in the Reconciliation Process?” by Dr. Bonita Lawrence; a virtual reality installation of Lisa Jackson’s “Highway of Tears” (2016), exploring the 1994 disappearance of Ramona Wilson from Highway 16 in northern British Columbia; and a screening of the documentary

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my paper. That conference was fairly informal. It was held in Thompson Hall, the graduate centre, but it was a wonderful and positive experience.

With that in mind, I wanted to build up the Robarts graduate conference initiative, launched under my predecessor, to provide a similar opportunity for graduate students to experience their first conference, with an eye to offering students a more professional experience in a supportive and nurturing setting.

To that end, the annual graduate student conference follows the traditional conference format, with a call for papers, a 12-15 minute presentation, and an opportunity to revise and submit for publication, thereby making it as real a conference experience as possible.


At the Robarts Centre we are fortunate to be able to draw on a wide array of faculty associates who also participate in the conference by reading the student papers, providing feedback, and acting

as discussants on the various panels. Having discussants contributes to the professional element of the conference and gives students a real feeling for how conferences function.

Finally, as this edition of *Canada Watch* demonstrates, the final stage is publishing a selection of papers presented at the conference, thereby giving students the final goal of turning a paper into a publication. We are so excited to share with you some of the wonderful work being produced by these amazing graduate students.

As the conference enters its fifth year, we are excited to see more and more students apply to participate as we continue to cultivate a reputation as *the* premier place for graduate research and *the* graduate conference that students want to attend.

We are indebted to the endowment that enables the Centre to finance the conference and to subsidize students

travel costs, thereby increasing the accessibility to students from across the country. We are thankful for the work and engagement of our support staff, faculty, and students who make the conference such a success each year. Overall, as the director of the Robarts Centre, I am pleased to see the way that the graduate conference continues to grow and thrive and remind us that the study of Canada is alive and well. I am particularly proud to see the way the conference provides an important academic, learning, and professional opportunity for so many graduate students. With that in mind, please enjoy yet another stellar edition of *Canada Watch*. 

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tions.” Relaying the heartbreaking account of Adam Capay, an Indigenous man who was kept in solitary confinement for four years, O’Connor outlines the controversial use of confinement in the Canadian justice system, and its disproportionate use within the systemic mistreatment of First Nations prisoners. Next, Irwin Oostindie also engages the problems of Canada’s policy development as it relates to First Nations peoples. Through direct reference to the celebrations of Canada’s confederacy, his essay “Anniversaries of Denial: Canada 150 and the Impacts of Settler Cultural Policy” interrogates the problematic nature of colonial celebrations as an entrenchment and camouflaging of ongoing applications of policy that erases Indigenous culture.

With these continuing legacies of colonialism, how is reconciliation even remotely possible? In our last two essays,

the authors confront the potentials and pitfalls of such an endeavour. In “Conceptualizing Collaboration Between Indigenous Racialized Immigrants and Aboriginal Peoples,” Brenda Polar describes the alliances that Indigenous peoples worldwide have formed in an attempt to contribute to decolonization. While immigrant populations often experience similar systemic racism, they also contribute to some of the problems of erasure that efface Indigenous culture. Polar addresses this dichotomy and explores the potential collaborations that might ensue. Finally, in “Colonialism vs. Truth and Reconciliation,” Ada Uddoh considers how the legacy of colonialism persists in our legal and governmental systems. In particular, she describes the child welfare system, which has been vigorously criticized for the removal of First Nations children from their parents during the “Sixties

scoop.” As in any other colonial system, change occurs slowly, and despite the renunciation of this policy, First Nations peoples are still overrepresented in foster care. Where does such a broken system go from here? Uddoh outlines a few of the proposed changes to the Manitoba welfare system that seek to take steps toward reconciliation.

Together, these essays conclude that the Canadian legacy is deeply entrenched by social and economic inequalities along lines of gender, race, indigeneity, ability, region, socio-economic status, and migration status, among others. As we struggle with the lack of justice for Colten Boushie and Tina Fontaine, along with the numerous missing and murdered Indigenous women, there is no better time to reflect on the fact that some Canadians are confined within the constructs of Canadian identity. 