

# CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

## CANADIAN STUDIES: A FUTURE?

### INTRODUCTION

## Son of phase one

As many of the articles to this special issue of *Canada Watch* dedicated to Canadian Studies incorporate the personal histories of their authors, I am afraid that I will have to come clean with mine. I was in the process of completing my doctorate in a rather innovative media studies program at SUNY/Buffalo when, much to my surprise, I was hired to teach Film Studies at the University of Western Ontario. Yes, I had to find London, Ontario on a map.

BY SETH FELDMAN

Seth Feldman is the director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies.

When I arrived in 1975 and took my place as a newly minted New Yorker/Canadian, I was in for a bit of a culture shock. My knowledge of Canada was largely limited to my field, though no small thing that. McLuhanism was in its heyday, the National Film Board and the CBC

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## Canadian Studies: A victim of its own success?

### CHALLENGES FACING CANADIAN STUDIES PROGRAMS IN CANADA

In theory, Canadian Studies should be a thriving academic pursuit across the country. Today, an unprecedented number of scholars focus on Canadian issues. We Canadians have good reasons to be interested in the issues we face as individuals and as a collectivity: because of the series of challenges facing the country as a whole, ongoing concerns about Quebec's place in the country, the historical inequalities experienced by Aboriginal peoples, women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the differently abled, and current fears about

BY COLIN COATES

Colin Coates is coordinator of the Canadian Studies program at Glendon College, York University and holds the Canada Research Chair in Canadian Cultural Landscapes.

economic and environmental change, Canadian concerns are very much as relevant and important as they are in any other country.

Yet Canadian Studies as an academic enterprise faces difficulties. In many programs, the number of students choosing to major in the "multidiscipline" remains low, even while demand for specific classes

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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

were flourishing and innovative institutions, and Canada was known internationally in that small circle of experimental film and video of which I was a part. During my five years in Buffalo, we became familiar with the CBC and often visited Toronto to see films, videos, and the many other cultural artifacts not available where we lived. We also suffered from chief executive envy—Nixon vs. Trudeau—and with the Vietnam War still beckoning, a quick dash to the Peace Bridge was always a possibility.

## CANADIAN CONTENT?

It was only when I arrived at Western that I discovered a side to Canada that I could not have imagined. My new employers soon made it clear that they were less interested in Canadian film and Canada's contribution to the new media age than they were in my contribution to the departmental enrolment count with large Hollywood cinema classes. Surely, I thought, the lack of a Canadian Cinema course was an unfortunate oversight. When I proposed designing and teaching such a course, the curriculum committee wanted to see a list of critical literature that would support such a field. There was very little. So Joyce Nelson at Queen's and I, with the energetic support of Peter Medjuk at the University of Toronto, compiled an anthology and found a small publishing house willing to print it.

"And where will you get the films to show?" the curriculum committee asked; another good question. In addition to the National Film Board's rich and universally admired collection of documentary and animation, there were a small number of titles available from the experimental film co-ops and a thin blue catalogue from the Canadian Film Institute that contained most of Canada's surviving cinema heritage (our national film archive having burned to the ground in 1967). Few distributors of Canadian features bothered releasing prints for classroom use. In 1976, a dozen or so of us (an embarrassing number of whom were

## Many a Canadian film and filmmaker has been grossly overvalued in an effort to build a national self-esteem.

newly arrived Americans and Brits) organized the Film Studies Association of Canada, in part to generate a demand that might get some films into distribution.

The last piece of the puzzle was the students. It seemed a safe assumption, in the Canada of Pierre Trudeau and the post-PQ national unity crusade, that students would swarm Canadian Cinema. They didn't. Enrolments were small and those students who did enrol grew impatient with the quality of the films. They discovered to their horror that the feature films didn't have the production values or big name talent of Hollywood features. Their comments on the course implied that we were being malicious holding back a parallel universe of film achievement when, in reality, Canada's feature film industry was, at that time, only about a decade old. Its productions were under-budgeted and the true talents of the day were still honing their skills.

Students did admit that the animations were funny—for five or ten minutes. But who cared about documentary? They had seen enough of that in high school. And experimental film, despite our best efforts, was a taste that most students lacked the patience to acquire.

## CANADA IN THE SHADOW OF THE UNITED STATES

For a recently arrived immigrant from the self-proclaimed centre of the universe, this willingness to dismiss one's own culture was culture shock indeed.

## GUEST EDITOR

Colin Coates, *Canadian Studies Program, Glendon College, York University*

## MANAGING EDITOR

Laura Taman

## COLUMNISTS THIS ISSUE

Seth Feldman	Colin Coates
Janice Dickin	Pierre Ancil
Natalie Riggs	Della Stanley
Richard Nimijean	Joan Sangster
Peter Hodgins	Ian Angus
Claire Campbell	Andrew Nurse
Stéphane Castonguay	Donald Wright

## PRODUCTION

WordsWorth Communications

## CONTACT FOR INFORMATION

Canada Watch  
227 York Lanes, 4700 Keele St.  
Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3  
Phone (416) 736-5499  
Fax (416) 736-5739  
www.robarts.yorku.ca

For information regarding future issues, contact Laura Taman, Project Manager, Robarts Centre. Please address comments to Seth Feldman, Director, Roberts Centre.

*Canada Watch* is produced by the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies of York University.

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Printed in Canada ISSN 1191-7733

In the years that followed, I have participated in the argument for Canada's importance, hoping all the while for a methodology that avoided the American hubris, allowing Canada to judge itself by its own standards. I'm not sure how successful that has been. Much of what I have experienced as Canadian Studies has been grounded in American-style identity politics as it was practised in the 1960s and 1970s. Many a Canadian film and filmmaker has been grossly overvalued in an effort to build a national


self-esteem. Perhaps too much time has been wasted in the struggle against the oppressor (something else the Americans supplied). Or perhaps it is only in Canadian Cinema that it has taken so long to arrive at the point where we may dismiss some of our work as unworthy and a few well-intentioned policies as really bad ideas.

Still, the end hasn't done badly in justifying the means. Canadian Cinema now has that rich critical literature once in such short supply. From time to time, we catch the notice of the world's top thinkers in our field. And for good reason. It would now be simple to program any Canadian Cinema course with feature films that have won prestigious prizes at international festivals—not that many of us would wish to deprive our students of the old and obscure works.

I can only guess at what, if any, correspondence my experience with Canadian Cinema has with the more general development of Canadian Studies. But I am certain that, ten years from now, Sesquicentennial Canada will celebrate an imagined community that Centennial

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Canada could barely imagine. Whether that community is a true post-modern nation or a hollowed-out brand will have to be settled by a very different generation—a generation shaped by the emergence of intellectual tools that, in the last half-century, have turned the humanities and social sciences inside out. The future of Canadian Studies as a victim of its own success or as a more subtle conscience for a mature (or post-mature) Canada will be up to the students we have seen come and go all these years.

The contributors to this issue of *Canada Watch* are a cross-section of scholars from the early, middle, and later moments of Phase One Canadian Studies. *Canada Watch* and the Robarts Centre are grateful for their thoughts about turning this historical page. We are especially grateful that Colin Coates, a tireless contributor to and organizer of such inquiries into Canadian Studies, has agreed to guest edit this issue for us. And we thank our readers in advance for the thoughtful responses they may wish to share. 

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remains high. Few institutions outside of Carleton University, the University of Calgary, Trent University, and Mount Allison University are willing to make designated appointments to Canadian Studies programs; most rely on more cost-effective individual faculty enthusiasms and cross-listings to cobble together a suite of courses. The majority of Canadian universities do not provide a program labelled “Canadian Studies.” Moreover, the first generation of Canadian Studies supporters has reached retirement age, leaving a new cohort to establish and enhance the programs, if they are indeed able to survive. We have arrived at an historical moment when reflection on the future of Canadian Studies is not just of passing interest, but is mandatory.

This Robarts Centre publication examines important issues related to the current state of Canadian Studies in

Canada, with a few glances abroad. In some lights, Canadian Studies is healthy; in others it is in difficulty—hence the differences of opinion expressed in these pages. Some of the contributors call for a return to the origins of the Canadian Studies project, while others celebrate the new directions that the field has taken of late.

### CANADIAN STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

As many of the writers indicate, there is no doubt that Canadian Studies receives weak institutional support in many parts of the country. In many universities and colleges, it depends on a small number of academic enthusiasts (and of course students!). Moreover, Canadian Studies does not really have a counterpart in francophone Quebec (even if the challenges facing the graduate program in

Études québécoises at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières will resonate with anglophone Canadian Studies administrators). Canadian Studies remains, at heart, an English-speaking Canadian endeavour. Even if Canadian Studies was never intended to be unremitting flag-waving patriotism, for some colleagues the future lies in a more critical and theoretical approach to Canadian issues, focusing on First Nations and multicultural critiques of the Canadian nation. For other contributors, institutions must provide better support for their Canadian Studies programs. A few writers point out the vital contributions of Canadianist scholars and students based outside the country, international reminders—borne of the necessity of providing a venue for a wide range of scholars—of the importance of interdisciplinary exchange.

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