

Has Canadian Studies had its day?

THE PURSUIT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In the 1970s, Tom Symons' important report on Canadian Studies documented the serious neglect of teaching and research concerning Canada in our universities and called for a more "balanced" curriculum. The "most compelling argument" for Canadian Studies was the pursuit of "self knowledge": every society, he argued persuasively, needs to "know itself through academically rigorous study, research and reflection."¹ Never a clarion call for nationalist, self-congratulatory, or xenophobic exclusions, the report made a strong case for simply rectifying imbalances in post-secondary education without jettisoning or denigrating other areas of study and without abandoning our commitment to critical research and writing.

The impact of the report, as measured by changes in university curricula, research foci, new research infrastructures, and the establishment of Canadian Studies programs, could all be measured positively. Not all Canadian Studies programs survived to the millennium, it is true, but many did, along with other markers of a vibrant academic milieu: a Canadian Studies journal founded and still funded by Trent University continues to publish, some research centres dedicated to Canadian Studies thrive, and graduate programs have emerged. Moreover, the absence of Canadian subjects, themes, and research so noticeable in the curricula of some disciplines up until the 1960s has been rectified: there has been a profusion of excellent research in CanLit, history, and political economy, to name only a few areas. There has been, then, some integration of the early goals of Canadian Studies advocates into post-secondary education. Even the early emphasis on the *interdisciplinary* nature of Canadian Studies, at one time the focus of disciplinary fretting that this was "watering down"

BY JOAN SANGSTER

Joan Sangster teaches Canadian working class and women's history and is the former director of the Frost Centre for Canadian Studies and Native Studies at Trent University.

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standards, has been reformulated as a positive principle in academic life. One now routinely hears calls for more interdisciplinarity in our research and teaching, including from funding bodies like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and from university presidents who are laying claim to interdisciplinarity as the "new" academic innovation on their campuses. In the same way that Women's Studies led to more attention to gender across the academic spectrum, and new paradigms of interpretation, Canadian Studies has created positive and productive dialogue and change in post-secondary education.

Canadian Studies, one might argue, was a product of a particular historical moment when the nation appeared fragile, when things Canadian were understudied, and when some areas of academe still operated in a near-colonial manner vis-à-vis Britain and the United States. Should we now relegate Canadian

Studies to this particular historical moment, saying it is passé, an anachronism that has "had its day"? Or, on the contrary, will Canadian Studies continue to thrive in new ways, transforming itself over time, in a productive (if sometimes painful) manner, continuing to situate Canadianist research on the cutting edge of scholarship? I hope it is the latter, but we face a number of challenges as scholars in Canadian Studies and as *Canadianist* scholars—and I think both are crucial to the project.²

One irony is that some of the early Canadian Studies scholars were in search of what the nation, or two nations meant, culturally, politically, and economically; now, however, many academics are busy deconstructing the notion of the "nation" itself. Can we deconstruct the nation and still develop an academic project articulated around nation? I think so. Many of the academic challenges to idealized notions of the Canadian nation, emerging from queer studies, feminism, and critical race theory to name only three areas, provide means by which Canadian Studies can be kept vibrant as a scholarly area.

KEEPING THE ACADEMIC EDGE

All of us teaching Canadian Studies have encountered the view that it is uncritical and nationalist, that it is a "rah rah" view of Canada, or that it is a child of the state, kept alive through funding and promotion efforts. The former is simply a caricature. There is an element of truth to the latter claim, since some state funds are made available to Canadian Studies. Ironically, these are not *primarily* directed at Canadian Studies scholarship, programs, and institutes in universities in Canada. The Association for Canadian Studies (ACS), which now sees its mandate as public education in the broadest sense, does not simply represent university programs.

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There are also monies directed at Canadian Studies abroad; some of these funds make productive contributions to academic scholarship, some less so. When I was director of a graduate program in Canadian Studies, one of the ironies I found irritating (or amusing depending on the day) was the “Canadian Studies international junket”: we all know many academics who are happy to travel to Spain, Australia, Italy, or other areas with sun and nice wine, subsidized by some form of Canadian Studies funds. When they return, however, they care little about supporting Canadian Studies programs here, and some even advise their students not to pursue graduate work in Canadian Studies.

What we need is a redirection of funds, competitively applied for, to develop projects here in Canada. Even very small amounts for academic workshops, exchanges, graduate student conferences,³ and other projects would be helpful. We also need a functioning network for the university-based Canadian Studies programs so that they can discuss university curricula, funding, the encouragement of scholarship, and so on. A start was made in 2005, when a founding meeting was held at Trent University for a new Canadian Studies Coordinators Network/la Conférence des coordonnateurs d'études canadiennes. Building this network will help re-invigorate our discussions about university teaching and research in Canadianist and Canadian Studies areas.

MAKING INTERDISCIPLINARITY A REALITY

It may seem ridiculous, given my comments above about the popularity of interdisciplinarity, to even have this heading. But one problem persists with Canadian Studies programs as with some other interdisciplinary areas: the embrace of interdisciplinarity is sometimes more rhetorical than it is a reality. One example of this comes from my experiences with our MA and PhD programs

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at Trent. Incoming students are still warned by advisers that interdisciplinary means “less”: that is, less rigorous, no method, less marketable, and so on. Our joint PhD program with Carleton, the only interdisciplinary Canadian Studies doctoral program in the country, encourages interdisciplinarity, but it has also evolved as a multidisciplinary program in practice. In other words, some students plant their feet in two areas, one interdisciplinary, and the other disciplinary, the second learned through research methods, thesis supervision, and their teaching. One reason is simply the job market our students face. Even if times have changed, some academics still rail against the “less” of interdisciplinarity, ignoring the way in which many disciplines (like my own, History) have become more interdisciplinary, and ignoring the stimulating, rich, and diverse background that interdisciplinarity offers in the education of new teachers and researchers.

LISTENING TO CRITICISM/KEEPING A CRITICAL EDGE

As I mentioned, in Canadian research, there have been a multitude of academic challenges that have emerged to idealized notions of the nation, emanating from critical race studies, queer studies, Native Studies, and perhaps that forgotten approach in these times, class analysis. These are paradigms that stress fragmentation, diversity, particularity, inequality, difference, and conflict. Some might see these as incompatible with Canadian Studies, assuming a certain

commonality behind the notion of “Canada.” These new critiques and theoretical paradigms, however, are absolutely essential to the health and longevity of Canadian Studies. They must be addressed, discussed, and integrated into Canadian Studies, in order to keep it vibrant and relevant, even if many of these critiques are unhappy with the way scholars have taught Canada up until now, or what they have written. We will not survive as a strong academic area by hunkering down with tested recipes; we have to embrace intellectual and academic critiques and productive dialogue. Nor does this mean simply embracing a liberal pluralism that seems very popular in some disciplines, calling (once again) for diversity and tolerance. Indeed, it is precisely this liberal pluralism, as Himani Bannerji argues, that acts *as ideology* in Canada, masking old-fashioned structural inequities such as exploitation and racism, presenting them as things which can be “overcome,” willed away with more tolerant ideas.⁴ In an earlier period, key texts and debates in Canadian Studies challenged taken-for-granted ideas; this was, in part, the nature of its vibrancy. The same process of challenge and contention has to be encouraged, even if we are no longer discussing the “comprador economy” or two solitudes.

For example, there is no doubt that writing on “race” in the Canadian context—by scholars such as Sherene Razack, Radha Jhappan, Yasmin Jawani, Daiva Stasilius, Vic Satzewich, Renaldo Walcott, Nandita Sharma, George Elliott Clarke, to name only a few—has provided

important critical challenges to existing research on Canada, and especially to idealized, popular images of the nation. This writing exists in tandem with and as a challenge to some older Canadian Studies publishing that still embraces the notion of the “peaceable kingdom,” the kinder, gentler, more tolerant society (the peaceable kingdom ironically replicated by American Michael Moore in his documentary *Bowling for Columbine*⁵). Welcoming the critiques that have emerged from this diverse array of writing on race and allowing the taken-for-granted views of Canada to be thoroughly challenged will keep Canadian Studies from falling into irrelevance.

TWO NATIONS—AND MORE

When Canadian Studies emerged, the project was to understand the “nation” better, though there was also an investment in two founding nations, and an intense sense of urgency with the political question of Quebec given the growth of a sovereignty movement. Unfortunately, students seem far less interested in Quebec now, as if it has already separated (though amicably), and they are more concerned with issues such as identity politics, Aboriginal issues, and the environment. These latter concerns are, of course, crucial issues, though one sometimes wishes that understanding Quebec was not abandoned quite so easily. We also have to face the reality, however, that Canadian Studies has been more an English Canadian project than a Quebec project, even if that has not been its intention. Perhaps it is time to recognize this, by establishing some links of solidarity with Quebec Studies programs, and facilitating as much academic debate as possible between the two nations.

For my colleagues in Native Studies, a two-nation approach is not enough. Those writing Native history have understandably challenged the old idea of two “founding nations” in Canada. The concept of nation is still important to my First Nations colleagues, who list themselves in our calendar by their nation—Onedia, Cree, Métis, Algonkian—but not in the

‘older’ colonialist sense of two white settler societies/nations. The challenges offered by Native Studies to Canadian Studies curricula must also be addressed. In some programs Native Studies is integrated as part of Canadian Studies, in some cases, there are separate Native/Indigenous Studies programs, and, in our case at the graduate level, the MA program combines the two, and the PhD program separates the two areas. Whatever approach is assumed, we have to be conscious that “Canadian” is not a label that all Native Studies scholars necessarily embrace. Again, a conversation across difference and the ability to debate this dilemma openly and honestly are perhaps the best we can hope for.

THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALIZATION

One of the earlier concerns of Canadian political economy, a handmaiden of Canadian Studies in some universities, was the question of Canada’s economic relationship to other nations, particularly the United States. Canadian Studies has always welcomed research that situates Canada within the world and uses comparative and transnational approaches. However, there is even more concern now in universities with globalization, as both a teaching and research area, a concern replicated in funding agencies that extol the need to situate our research internationally. Of course, some of this concern with globalization has a decidedly unpleasant neo-liberal cast to it, but other efforts to think internationally have resulted in the welcome diversification of our curriculum in the universities: many universities, for example, have expanded their offerings in areas like international/global/development studies. An overwhelming emphasis in many humanities departments on North American and European topics has been altered (not transformed, as critics rightly point out) to include other areas of the globe. There is no reason that this emphasis on internationalization should negate the need for Canadian Studies, but economic exigencies and competition for resources, as well as persisting

“colonial” views of Canadian research by some academics do sometimes result in an either/or approach, and in the claims that the study of Canada is too particular, too local, a narrow nationalist endeavour, while global studies (meaning any other country or even piece of it) provides students with critical knowledge, with a more expansive, valuable view of the world.

I have heard all of these comments, and they are disturbing because of the false hierarchy they establish between research areas, because of the implicit notion that we no longer need the navel-gazing localisms of Canadian Studies, because of the unnecessary antagonism established between two important areas within the university. The idea of “less” has thus reappeared once again despite the fact that Canadianist/Canadian Studies research draws on transnational debates, international theory, and engages actively with writing from other nations. One is reminded of Australian Ann Curthoys’ clever title for a recent article, “We’ve Just Started Making National Histories and Now You Want Us to Stop Already?”⁶ As Curthoys points out, nations *or groups* whose history was somewhat marginalized in the past have found that soon after they begin to find a voice, they are told that it is “not enough” or too partial.

We should resist a false dichotomy between teaching about Canada or the world, urging instead the expansion, not contraction, of curricular options in post-secondary institutions and exploring the myriad of ways in which these areas intersect in the study of diasporas, comparative colonial studies, migration, and more. The solution to understanding the world is not to abandon “understanding ourselves” since that always involved a relational, expansive, and critical understanding of research. 🌱

NOTES

1. Thomas H.B. Symons and James E. Page, *Some Questions of Balance: Human Resources, Higher Education and Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities **Has Canadian Studies had its day?, page 30**

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15. Denis Stairs, "Canada and the New World Order" in *Canada and the New World Order: Facing the New Millennium*, eds. Michael J. Tucker, Raymond B. Blake, and P.E. Bryden (Toronto: Irwin, 2000), pp. 1-15.
16. Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Reactions Toward the New Minorities of Western Europe" *American Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 77-103.
17. International Labour Office, International Organization for Migration, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *International Migration, Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2001), p. [I].
18. Yaseem Abu Laban, "For Export: Multiculturalism and Globalization," in *Profiles of Canada*, eds. K.G. Pryke and W.C. Soderlund, 3rd ed. (Toronto: CSPI, 2003), pp. 249-277.
19. Kymlicka, supra note 13, *Finding Our Way*.
20. Stairs, supra note 15, "Canada and the New World Order."
21. Daniel Drache, *Borders Matter: Homeland Security and the Search for North America* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004).
22. George J. De Benedetti, "Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement," in Tucker, Blake, and Bryden, *Canada and the New World Order*, supra note 15, pp. 151-62.
23. Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada* 3rd ed. (Toronto: Lorimer, 2000), pp. 24-29.
24. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), especially chapter 5.
25. For an overview, see the essays in David Taras, Frits Pannekoek, and Maria Bakardjieva, eds., *How Canadians Communicate* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003).
26. For case studies, see Taris, Pannekoek, Bakardjieva, *How Canadians Communicate*, *ibid.* A nuanced treatment of one Canadian cultural sector is Ted Madger, *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
27. W.H. New, *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998).
28. Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (Toronto: Penguin, 2004).
29. The Canadian Democratic Audit, for example, organized by the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison under the direction of Dr. Bill Cross, explored the degree to which the ideal of democracy was realized in Canadian political practice. For further information on the Canadian Democratic Audit, see Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, "The Canadian Democratic Audit," http://www.mta.ca/faculty/arts-letters/canadian_studies/cda/index.html (accessed 13 September 2007).

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of the program's founder and the hiring of its new director.) Just like undergraduates, young academics need to be reassured that it is a teachable and a recognized field of study. The dramatic opposition to the proposed cuts to funding for Canadian Studies abroad in the summer of 2006 was an encouraging

sign: scholars at all stages of their careers recognize its importance. An artifact of third-pillar internationalism, perhaps, but this is one thing from the 1970s that hasn't gone out of style. 

Notes

1. J.B. Tyrell, ed., *David Thompson's Narra-*

tive of His Explorations in Western America 1784-1812 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1916).

2. Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America* (London: C. Knight, 1836).

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- ties and Colleges of Canada, 1984), p. 3. See also the abridged version of *To Know Ourselves*, T.H.B. Symons, *The Symons Report* (Toronto, Book and Periodical Development Council: distributed by McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
2. I see two parallel and overlapping projects: Canadian Studies as an interdisciplinary area of study, with its own programs, projects, and publications and Canadianist research focusing on Canada and on

- Canada in comparative and global perspective. The latter may be consciously disciplinary, but it still contributes to the Canadian Studies project.
3. Very small amounts exist now. For example, the ACS currently has \$5,000 a year for student conferences, to be shared across the nation.
4. Himani Bannerji, "On the Dark Side of Nation: The Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of Canada," *Journal of Can-*

adian Studies, 31:1 (1996), pp. 103-28.

5. *Bowling for Columbine* (dir. Michael Moore, Alliance Atlantis Communications, 2002).
6. Ann Curthoys, "We've Just Started Making National Histories and Now You Want Us to Stop Already?" in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 70-90.