

# The future of Canadian Studies: A Gen-Xer's perspective

BY PETER HODGINS

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Canada is a discursive and material construction that is always contested, contradictory, and complex and must be studied using tools of analysis that are critical and radically contextual.

When I was invited to write on the future of Canadian Studies from the perspective of a scholar new to the field, I immediately jumped at the opportunity. Then the panic set in. I quickly realized that I really did not know that much about the history of the field and that published historical reflections on Canadian Studies were relatively scarce. What follows, therefore, is a brief autobiographical account of how I came to find myself in a Canadian Studies department and, on the basis of that limited vantage point, an attempt to offer some of my reflections on the future of Canadian Studies.

## ECONOMIC CYCLES AND CAREER CHOICES

As befitting the worst nightmares of Robin Matthews, I completed my BA in philosophy in 1993 at an institution that nowadays brands itself as “Canada’s University” without ever taking a Canadian-focused course. To no one’s surprise, my freshly minted BA failed to open any career opportunities, and I continued to work as a waiter in an art café in Ottawa’s Byward Market. Canada was in a prolonged recession for the first 10 years or so of my adult life. Other Gen-Xers and I listened as the newly regnant baby boomers called upon us to sacrifice for the benefit of the national economy’s long-term health. The irony of the boomers calling upon us to sacrifice our futures in the name of the nation was not lost on me. It seemed to many of us that in their youth, the boomers had championed left-nationalism in order to ensure that they benefited from a strong economy and generous social programs. The moment that they achieved financial security, however, the “social safety net” was deemed unnecessary, and they began to demand tax cuts and massive reductions to government programs in order to be able to upgrade from a Toyota to an Audi.

This bleak economic reality and the generally dispiriting character of a Canadian public culture dominated by the likes of Mulroney, Chrétien, Martin, Harris, and Parizeau forced a renegotiation of my relationship to the Canadian state and to Canadian nationalism. As I watched the standoffs at Oka and Ipperwash, the Somalia Inquiry, Chrétien throttling a protestor, and RCMP officers pepper-spraying demonstrators in Vancouver, it became quite clear to me that the Canadian state had shed whatever utopian potential it might have once had in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, it had revealed itself to be yet another liberal capitalist institution whose main role was to protect and expand ensconced interests by any means necessary.

In spite of my anxiety about the very real prospect of downward mobility, my loss of faith in the Canadian state, and my growing annoyance toward my baby-

boomer customers, working in a busy tourist district did come with the unexpected benefit of forcing me to try to explain Canada to tourists. They asked me many questions to which I could provide no clear answers. It gradually became clear to me that, as an aspiring intellectual, I would have to come to grips with the country in which I lived.

## CULTURAL STUDIES AS A WINDOW INTO CANADA

In order to pursue this growing curiosity about Canada and to hopefully improve my economic prospects, I enrolled in Carleton’s MA program in Mass Communication. One reason for my attraction to the program was that I, like many people who know little about their country and its history, was probably still a cultural nationalist. From the outside looking in, the program looked like a nationalist paradise: courses in the political economy of communication, international communication, cultural policy, and the relationships among media, capitalism, and democracy. Little did I know that I would come under the influence of scholars like Michael Dorland, Paul Attallah, and Kevin Dowler. They were part of a larger movement in Canadian media studies that was engaged in a wholesale rethinking of the intellectual and political legacy of Canadian left-nationalism. Challenging the received wisdom of “the state or the United States,” they painted a vision of “official” Canadian culture and nationalism as a WASPish, resentful, and fearful construction of a paternalist and almost Stalinist Canadian state that, in league with various Canadian media companies and rent-seeking culturecrats and university researchers, used the rhetoric of “cultural protection” to legitimate their existence as heroic defenders of the always weak and embattled Canadian nation.

For these scholars, the most interest-

ing examples of Canadian culture came from intellectuals and cultural producers who resisted the attempt by the Canadian nation-building apparatus to co-opt them for its own legitimation/nation-building projects. Like them, I was always struck by the fact that while the study of Canada should be fascinating because all of the complexities and contradictions of modernity could be found in one place—colonization, imperialism, nationalism, industrialization, globalization, democratization, mass immigration, and so on—the reality (especially before the 1990s) was generally disappointing, boring, and uninsightful. Because Canadian writers seemed obsessed with defining the Canadian identity or reading the Canadian past as a prefiguration of their preferred model of the Canadian or Québécois nation-state, they often overlooked the object of their study in their rush to secure their own political projects. In my MA research on New France, for example, I was struck primarily by, quite frankly, the weirdness of the French colonial project (canoe-licensing systems, missionaries teaching Aboriginal men the need to beat their children and wives, etc.) but the majority of the historians skirted around such details in order to prove how the colony's history does or does not support the claims of Quebec secessionists. What I learned quickly from all of this was that the best place to learn about Canada was from the writings of British, European, or American writers on Canada or Canadian writers who were positioned at the margins of the traditionally defined Canadian nation. Presumably because neither was part of the Canadian garrison to begin with, they had a certain freedom to see and say things that the "official" or would-be "official" voices of the "national soul" would or could not.

This increased scepticism toward Canadian nationalism, the Canadian state, and the received tradition of writing about Canada was exacerbated by my master's and doctoral thesis research, which familiarized me with the growing body of research in the areas of Canadian aboriginal studies, gender studies,

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cultural studies, and cultural memory studies. As a result, it came as a surprise to many who knew me that I accepted a position at Carleton's School of Canadian Studies. To me, however, it made perfect sense. Having worked there as a sessional during my PhD, I knew that, under the leadership of directors like Jill Vickers, Pat Armstrong, Natalie Luckyj, François Rocher, and now Pauline Rankin, the School of Canadian Studies had been actively working to take up Vickers' call in 1994 to develop a Canadian Studies program that rejected "the sexism, the racism, and the Anglo-Canadian ethnic chauvinism ... [and] the emphasis on passivity, dependence and despair" that characterized "much of the underlying thought in Canadian studies."<sup>1</sup>

In getting the job at Carleton, I thus had the very good fortune of joining a department in which the faculty members and the students were committed to a project of developing new ways of reading and writing Canada. If I had to brand our approach to Canadian Studies, it would have to be the 6 Cs: "Canada is a discursive and material construction that is always contested, contradictory, and complex and must be studied using tools of analysis that are critical and radically contextual."

#### **TRADITION OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

In studying Canada in this way, we are helped greatly by the long-standing tradition of interdisciplinarity within Canad-

ian Studies. While it is true that most of the other disciplines in the arts and social sciences have begun to embrace interdisciplinarity in limited ways, the fact of the matter is that Canadian Studies departments have an existing organizational capacity to facilitate the sharing of intellectual resources by scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds on an everyday basis. In such a space, interdisciplinary collaboration becomes second nature. Testifying to the intellectual fertility of this atmosphere is the fact that our student numbers, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, have been growing of late and the frequency with which my Canadianist colleagues in traditional disciplinary departments tell me that "I'd like to be more involved in Canadian Studies."

Along with its interdisciplinary character, much of our success can be attributed to the strong influence of feminism, critical race theory, and Native Studies in forming the curriculum and intellectual agenda of the School. While I suspect that traditionally defined Canadian Studies programs tended to replicate the discourse of the Canadian State in their mapping of the field (the "problem" of regionalism, the "national unity" issue, etc.) and tended to focus on the activities of "leaders and nations," we tend to focus on the experience of Canada "from below." In other words, we study Canada from the vantage point of those who are the objects of the proj-

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sertions work to obscure the important heritage of left-nationalism through a caricature that it was supposedly homogenizing, special pleading, and itself oppressive because of its orientation toward the national state. Neither of these positions is adequate. The task is to continue the critique of dependency and frustrated identity in a more plural context; neither abandon social criticism and a public project on the one hand, nor assert it unchanged on the other.

## CANADIAN STUDIES AS COUNTER-HEGEMONY

But how can one do this? What is the public project that can unify individual studies in the present climate? What is first needed is some clarity about the current situation: the combination of neo-liberal political-economic hegemony with the intensification of the national security state. The renewal of public scepticism toward the American agenda is, in this context, important. The international interest in Canada as another paradigm of English-speaking politics and culture is a good sign. Social critics can use these as public entry points into more critical discourses: dependency

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has not disappeared; it is evident in the relations between regions and classes in Canada, as well as internationally. The plurality of nations within the Canadian nation-state requires analysis of internal imperialism, which runs parallel with international inequalities. The critique of empire needs to be turned against the history and pretensions of the British Empire and the Canadian state as well as turned outward toward the United States. Perhaps most important, the defence of community in Canadian thought needs to be radicalized into a political and philosophical inquiry into the grounds of human solidarity—for it is this that the neo-liberal economy and the national security state most threatens.

These issues represent a new emphasis in Canadian Studies. The turn inward toward self-discovery never involved the parochialism that the caricature suggests, but the interplay between domestic and international concerns is now more intense than ever. The hope for community and social solidarity expressed through the creation of Canadian Studies requires renewal. Recovery of social solidarity within Canada can motivate international involvement and steer it away from liberal guilt toward an analysis of the sources of exploitation. Social criticism aware of its tradition in Canada has a certain style and emphasis that can contribute meaningfully to new international debates. For this, we still need to know our history, because human solidarity finds its grounds in particular histories. The turn inward also opens outward. We must now explore the terms of the new configuration that is being set into place.

### Note

1. Ian Angus, *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), pp. 27-40.

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ect of national subject-formation and their negotiations with and resistance to that project. Analogous to Michel de Certeau's description of the difference between experiencing the streets of Manhattan from the top of the (now destroyed) World Trade Center or from the teeming and chaotic sidewalks, the result of the shift in optics that has taken place at Carleton is the discovery of a Canada that is confusing, complex, and conflictual. Ultimately, I would argue, it is also more interesting and more in tune with our experience of Canadian post-modernity.

### LINKAGES BETWEEN PROGRAMS

While this shift has rejuvenated Canadian-focused research here at Carleton, it seems to have come with a certain price:

a growing cleavage between the way that Canadian Studies is being reconceptualized in university departments and the way in which the Canadian Studies project has been conceptualized and institutionalized by the Canadian state. As a result, Pauline Rankin of Carleton University, Pierre Anctil of the University of Ottawa, and Jim Struthers of Trent University have been working with the chairs and directors of other domestic Canadian Studies programs to create a university-based scholarly association. This association has tentatively been named the "Canadian Studies Coordinators Network," and it plans to hold a national workshop in Ottawa in November 2007 with the aim of strengthening linkages between Canadian Studies programs and faculty in Canada and to begin the pro-

cess of creating a national organization of Canadianists at the university level. Such an association, I would argue, marks the future of Canadian Studies in Canada: its emergence as an inclusive, mature, and fully autonomous field of study. 🍁

### Note

1. Jill Vickers, "Liberating Theory in Canadian Studies," in *Canada: Theoretical Discourse/discours théoriques*, ed. Terry Goldie et al. (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1994), p. 364.

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