Too much of a good thing? The case for Canadian Studies in the 21st century

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Is Canadian Studies a victim of its own success? The question is politically charged because it implies several things: that the objectives originally set for Canadian Studies have been accomplished, that the study of Canada is overextended, and that overextension impedes a scholarly or educational focus on other matters that are of supposedly greater import than Canada. These assumptions are not new. The idea that Canada is important enough to merit scholarly attention has always been contested.[1] More recently, proponents of "North American Studies" have argued that Canadian Studies programs need to broaden their focus to take account of a wider political-economic framework[2] while the discourse of "globalization" suggests that a similarly broader framework and international focus are needed in the contemporary academy.

The simple question about the scope and focus of Canadian Studies as part of a post-secondary environment is, in this sense, more complicated than it first appears because the "Canadianization" of the academy carried with it more than one objective. It was about scholarly, cultural, and educational issues. A consideration of the status of Canadian Studies needs to look at these diverse aims. It also needs to avoid a "balance sheet" approach to the study of Canada. Such an approach might conclude that some objectives have been met while others retain their relevance. I want to suggest a different way of looking at Canadian Studies. My goal is to suggest two different but interrelated points. First, what constitutes Canadian Studies today is something different than its foundational documents forecast. The study of Canada has shifted ground markedly over the last generation; Canadianists[3] are not, by and large, working to accomplish the aims of a previous generation but have established new goals. Second, the further development of Canadian Studies is hampered by a discourse that sets it apart from other possible subjects of scholarly attention, such as globalization or North American Studies. The study of Canada is not a zero sum game. Consideration of the practical and actual context of, say, globalization enriches Canadian Studies, and the study of Canada can enrich a consideration of globalization. Canada is part of the globe (or, part of North America) and to proceed as if it were not is to make an odd counterfactual assumption. It is to assert that the Canadian experience can tell us nothing about globalization. Such an assumption obscures the degree to which a consideration of Canada is actually of use to a range of other peoples concerned with a supposedly new and global environment.

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THE OBJECTIVES OF CANADIAN STUDIES

The development of Canadian Studies was part of a longer historical process through which Canadians narrated—and hence constructed—the ideal of a Canadian nation-state with its own history, demographics, culture, and political processes. The foundational ideals of Canadian Studies were overtly political. As Tom Symons noted in his influential report on Canadian Studies, a core objective of a Canada-centric curriculum was to enhance self-knowledge.[4] At Mount Allison University, the ideal of self-knowledge animated the organization of one of Canada's first interdisciplinary Canadian Studies programs in 1969.[5] Established through a combination of faculty interest and philanthropy, Canada-centric courses began to develop in increased numbers at Mount Allison University in the late 1960s and 1970s. Initially, the program involved using a combination of discipline-based Canada-centric courses. Among the first interdisciplinary courses offered was an intermediate-level course that traced the "[c]ultural and intellectual development of Canada from the Ancient Regime to the present."[6] The same approach had been earlier highlighted by Dr. G.F.G. Stanley, the first director of Mount Allison's Centre for Canadian Studies. Among his intermediate-level history courses was a third-year course called Canadian Civilization, which examined the political as well as intellectual and cultural development of Canada.[7] In these courses, self-knowledge was equated with historical knowledge, an understanding of the events, processes, patterns, and peoples that formed Canada. While the approaches of individual instructors undoubtedly varied, the ideal

of teaching Canadian Studies as history focused on foundational "moments," events, patterns, and key national characteristics and attributes remained current through the 1990s.[8] It encapsulated a generational approach to the study and teaching of Canada.

Over the last decade, Canadian historians, media commentators, and other intellectuals continued to argue for the importance of this educational objective. At times, as in the work of historian J.L. Granatstein, this focus was linked directly to national political life. Canadian history education, in Granatstein's view, could—and should—be tied directly to the development of a stronger sense of Canadian identity in that it stood to provide a common narrative that bound citizens together in a cohesive national community.[9] Self-knowledge is an important educational objective. Studies of Canadian political knowledge, for example, indicate that there is a significant disjuncture between the ways in which Canadians understand their country and what is actually going on in it. This disjuncture is particularly pronounced with regard to Native issues and has a definite effect on voting patterns and the degree to which Canadians are receptive to social reform measures.[10] The problem with this approach is that it can subject scholarship and education to the politics of patriotism. Moreover, national narratives are never ideologically neutral. They carry with them an often implicit but potentially powerful political message that serves to both rationalize and justify specific conceptions of Canada.[11]

I suspect that it is this political conscription of the scholarly and educational enterprise that draws the concern of those interested in establishing a wider context for Canadian Studies. The patriotic manipulation of scholarship can turn Canadian Studies into a narrowly focused pursuit that appears overly concerned with traditional issues. What is important to note, however, is that this politically oriented conception of Canadian Studies is a minority position among Canadianists. At the same time that Canadian academics, such as Tom Symons and others, rationalized Canadian Studies in terms of self-knowledge, scholars in a wide range of disciplines began a series of critical studies focused on the multiple dynamics of inequality in Canada's past and present. Often organized through new journals—such as *Labour/Le Travail* (which looked at processes of class formation, material inequality, and social conflict), *Studies in Political Economy* (which published studies exploring how processes of state formation bolstered capitalist political economy), *Acadiensis* (whose studies provided a critical reflection on processes of regionalism and stereotypes of regional culture), and *Canadian Woman Studies* (which offered a feminist critique of Canadian society, culture, and political economy)—university-based scholars developed a new conception of Canada's national development.[12]

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RECONSTRUCTING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

What is this conception? Answers to this question are difficult because no single narrative emerged from the re-orientation of Canadianist scholarship that took place from the 1970s to the 1990s. In brief, however, the ideal of Canada as a unique nation conditioned by its own history and defined by a series of characteristics gave way before a conception of Canada in which the Canadian nation-state was viewed as a particular project defined by socio-economic, political, ethnic, and cultural inequalities. Retold, the story of Canada is less the story of the evolution of a Canadian nation than the story of a particular project of nation, realized through a process of conflict involving subject social groups, marginalized communities, and "historic nations."[13] What was important to learn about Canada was not just how the country evolved as a nation-state but the processes of political and economic marginalization, the resistance of marginalized communities that made space for themselves in a racist society, the ways in which women challenged sexism, and how the Canadian political-economic system reinforced socio-economic inequalities across time. This narrative moved away from explaining foundations and defining Canadian characteristics as part of a process of self-knowledge to looking at Canada as an unfulfilled national project.

At Mount Allison University, this new approach to a consideration of Canada developed on two interrelated fronts. First, it developed through an expansion of interdisciplinary inquiry that interrogated "the Canadian experience" from a range of different directions and that asked questions about the ethics of contemporary Canadian life. Second, it developed through an expansion of specialized courses that explored historically marginalized peoples in Canada, including First Nations, ethno-cultural communities, and women.[14]

It is this particular line of inquiry that merits the attention of those who wonder about "overextension" as it provides the basis for a reconsideration of what Canadian Studies is all about. On this level, the study of Canada provides important grounds for research into global issues. There are, of course, a broad range of issues that could be considered from a global perspective.[15] Some examples might include migration, the politics of difference, regional development in the service of increased socio-economic equality, and the politics of state formation. In each of these instances, experiences in Canada provide an important basis for research into processes affecting different parts of the globe. Consider, for example, the issue of migration. Increased international migration from developing to developed countries has produced rising ethnic conflict in a range

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of different locations.[16] As a 2001 International Labour Office/United Nations report noted in its introduction:

> The twenty-first century promises to be a new age of migration. Intensifying international migration pressures present many societies with major policy dilemmas; most countries of the world are becoming more multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual. These changes challenge governments and civil society to accommodate and gain from this diversity in ways which promote peace and respect for human rights.[17]

From this perspective, what is interesting about Canada is the relatively peaceful and effective process of political-economic integration of ethno-cultural difference (without a concomitant state-sponsored assimilation campaign) compared with other societies. There are, to be sure, problems with Canadian multiculturalism.[18] Nevertheless, as Will Kymlicka has pointed out, the creation of multiculturalism marked a different and inventive policy response to racism in Canada that, when measured against its objectives, can be considered more than a qualified success.[19] Both the successes and failures of Canadian multiculturalism can, then, be instructive to countries addressing increased ethnic tensions as a result of migration, or other, issues.

Other aspects of Canada's diverse experiences can be instructive too. Canadianists have appreciable experience with issues relating to federalism in multinational societies, international trade, multilateralism on the global stage, ecological mismanagement, and the complex dynamics of accommodation for indigenous peoples within the nation-state. All of these issues are important to a consideration of what globalization actually means in practice. In theory, globalization can mean a wide variety of things. It can signify new technologies of communication, a "global consciousness," the development of a "global civil society," or expanding patterns of trade.[20] In reality, globalization has been a messy process involving unequal relations between states, manipulated patterns of trade, and—perhaps most importantly—a need to address the realities of American power in the world.[21] Here, the Canadian experience can be particularly instructive. Studies of the effects of continental free trade agreements on the Canadian economy show the remarkably uneven impacts of these economic treaties.[22] Canada's high volume of trade and interaction with the United States illustrates the dilemmas confronted by states looking to access the American market and take account of US homeland security policy.

Perhaps most importantly, the Canadian example has a particular salience for cultural issues. Among the different possible effects of globalization is an expanded prevalence of American cultural products. Canadians have, perhaps, a longer experience with American cultural power than any other nation.[23] The dramatic international diffusion of American culture through both new and old communications technologies raises questions about national cultural autonomy and the abilities of smaller countries to preserve, develop, and maintain control of their own cultures.[24] Canada's complicated and often fragmented cultural policy is far from perfect. There is good reason to raise questions about the ways in which domestic music industries have been developed, media convergence, the dynamics of federal Internet access policy, and a host of other matters.[25] Even with this in mind, Canadian cultural policy provides a series of important case studies in creative and often constructive responses to a globalized media. For all its problems and for all its limitations, Canadian cultural policy and the artistic, literary, musical, cinematographic, etc., developments that have emerged out of it are impressive and illustrate how smaller countries can enhance, promote, and protect domestic cultures under conditions of an increasingly globalized media and consumerism. The Canadian experience points to, and provides examples of, a range of policies that are important to the "wider context," such as content regulation, non-market media sectors, state support for Internet diffusion, and ownership and distribution regulations.[26] With regard to all these points, Canada's record is mixed. Precisely for this reason, they should command wider attention.

THE RELEVANCE OF CANADA

In *Borderlands*, W.H. New reminds us that borders are complex things. The discourses of North American integration and globalization suggest that national borders are becoming less important. This may be the wrong way to look at borders and at the nation-state. New suggests that borders serve as points of negotiation through which national communities debate their own modes of interaction with the wider world.[27] If this is true, the Canadian experience is instructive to a wider context in terms of people, material goods, culture, and political processes. Borders are not shields that deflect the world and force introspection. They are a way in which parameters of difference are determined in the 21st century. In this regard, Canada should be thought of not as a nation per se, but as a national project, the aim of which, on its most basic level, is to develop a different type of North American society. Said differently, the Canadian national project is built around the organization of a society that does not reject Americanism, American values, and globalization, but through its border negotiates the degree to which these are accepted, modified, reformed, or rejected. The Canadian national project is, in this sense, intended to preserve the ability of Canadians as a national community to build a society organized

around values different from those of the United States.[28]

The implications of this for Canadian Studies are multiple. First, it illustrates the ways in which the study of Canada has changed over the last generation and how new approaches to Canadianist research and teaching can be of value in a time of "broader" contexts. Where Canadian Studies formerly focused on defining the key attributes of Canada and charting its evolution as a nation-state, the current focus is to explore the ideas and values that animate Canada as a national project. There is now a generation of scholarly literature pointing to the different ways in which "the Canadian experience" has "played out" for different Canadians. Questions relating to discrimination, marginalization, power, and diversity are core elements of Canadian Studies. In addition, critical attention is directed to whether or not Canada lives up to its ideals.[29] Second, it illustrates how the experiences of Canada and Canadians are not secondary to a consideration of a wider context. Nor should they be displaced by consideration of other issues. The reverse is true. Consideration of Canada can illustrate important dynamics associated with globalization, for example, and the ways in which public policy has responded to new socio-economic, demographic, and international contexts. Canada should be an important consideration for anyone interested in population movements, citizenship in diverse polities, multinational federalism, indigenous peoples, and cultural autonomy under conditions of advanced communications technologies.

It is, of course, important that people who live and work in Canada know more about the country. This is not a nationalist idea, but a pragmatic and common sense contention. Increased formal education, studies suggest, promotes higher levels of citizenship engagement, which (in turn) enhances democracy and expands popular agency. For this reason alone, knowing more about Canada will remain important to people living here, whether or not they self-identify as Canadians. And, for this reason alone, it is difficult to believe that Canadian Studies provides "too much of a good thing." Even if one rejects this argument, the idea that the Canadian academy should focus on other issues (North America or globalization) does not necessarily follow. The idea that one can or should assess the one (say, globalization) without a consideration of the other (Canada) is built around a faulty either/or premise. I've tried to show precisely the opposite: a consideration of important, say, global, issues should involve a consideration of Canada.

The either/or approach to Canadian versus some other studies is underscored, I think, by a particularly problematic trend in Canadian Studies: the political conscription of scholarship and education into the service of patriotism. This potential danger is best addressed, however, not by shifting the focus of our work away from Canada but by bringing a critical lens to bear on the Canadian experience. Canadian Studies was once concerned with the nationalist question and there are Canadian intellectuals and public figures who are still concerned about it. Happily, this is not the general case. Canadian Studies has already made the transition to critical scholarship and is already ready for the 21st century.

Notes

1. For a narrative of the development of Canadian Studies, see Jeffrey Cormier, *The Canadianization Movement: Emergence, Survival, Success* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
2. Raymond Blake, "The Future of Canadian Studies in 'La Gran Familia,'" *Canadian Issues* (March/April 2001), p. 40.
3. I will use the term "Canadianist" to signify both discipline-based scholars working on Canada-centric or Canada-comparative subjects and interdisciplinary scholars who are based on an identification with Canadian Studies programs proper.
4. T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975).
5. Canadian Studies "Fact Sheet" (Mount Allison University, n.d.).
6. Mount Allison University, *Calendar 1976-77* ([1976]), p. 49.
7. Mount Allison University, *Calendar 1969-70* ([1969]), p. 101.
8. For example, see John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Penguin, 1998) and Philip Resnick, *The European Roots of Canadian Identity* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2005).
9. J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).
10. Elizabeth Gidengil et al., *Citizens* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004). To state my point bluntly: the fact that a sizable percentage of Canadians are misinformed about issues, such as Aboriginal standards of living, has clear implications for the degree to which they are receptive to policies designed to improve the lives of First Peoples.
11. Katarzyna Rokszto, "Up for Sale: The Commodification of Canadian Culture," in *Canadian Communications: Issues in Contemporary Media and Culture,* eds. Bohdan Szuchewycz and Jeannettee Sloniowski, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2002), pp. 391-396.
12. Other important new journals that evolved in this period include *BC Studies, Prairie Forum, Atlantis, Histoire sociale/ Social History*, and *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. While often containing a high percentage of historical work, a significant number of these journals (for example, *Labour/Le Travail, Atlantis, Prairie Forum, BC Studies, Studies in Political Economy*) were overtly designed as interdisciplinary forums.
13. On the concept of "historic nation," see Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethno-Cultural Relations in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998).
14. What is, of course, equally important is that current Canadianist scholarship approaches the consideration of diversity and its political-economic and power dynamics from a non-essentialist position that explores processes through which particular people and communities become, for example, racialized.

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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 Narrative 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 Canadian 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.