



The Robarts Centre today and tomorrow: From the quest for self-knowledge to an ethics of care

BY JEAN MICHEL MONTSION

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The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies was established in 1984, many years before the creation of organized research units (ORUs) at York University and the settling of the administrative structure in its current body, the Office of the Vice President Research and Innovation (VPRI). With an initial focus on welcoming visiting research chairs and supporting post-doctoral scholars, it has taken on several new tasks over the years, including managing scholarly exchanges abroad and serving as a small publishing house. Many internal and external shifts in the academic research landscape have determined the current priorities of the Robarts Centre in supporting the study of Canada, in line with Thomas Symons's vision for Canadian Studies as a quest to knowing ourselves better.

In his 1975 *Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, Symons observed that the most valid and compelling argument for Canadian Studies is the importance of self-knowledge, the need to know and to understand ourselves: who we are in time and space; where we have been; where we are going; what we possess; and what our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others (Symons, 1975, p. 12).

A guiding principle to many in Canadian Studies, the quest for self-knowledge remains key to situating the contributions of the Robarts Centre at York. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly difficult to achieve this goal, notably as a result of the declining popularity of the field and the withdrawal of support by Canadian political authorities. This includes the end of the federal program "Understanding Canada" in 2012, a federal initiative designed to support international Canadian Studies (Coates, 2018). In this context, the Robarts Centre's mission has expanded to host research projects in what looks like an eclectic manner, and to collaboratively maintain strong collegial relations with other Canadian Studies centres and international colleagues. As a result, the Robarts Centre has moved toward supporting a more inclusive, plural, embodied, and detailed study of the country, often by decentering Canada itself.

STRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES

Several academic research units across Canada have followed Symons's adage, despite their institutional differences. At York, the Robarts Centre favours a critical, collaborative, and interdisciplinary study of Canada, but it is institutionally detached from cognate degree-granting programs. It contrasts in mandate and structure with centres such as the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada that have a more public-facing mission; the Frost Centre at Trent University, where Indigenous and Canadian Studies are combined; and the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University, which

emphasizes regional experiences like the Atlantic Canadian perspective. The Robarts Centre has also moved away from the research chair model, still in existence at the University of British Columbia.

No matter the mandate or structure, as a research engine dedicated to the study of Canada, the Robarts Centre faces similar institutional pressures as these units in having to consolidate several research endeavours under the one exercise of “knowing ourselves.” With 166 faculty associates from the 11 faculties of York and 8 interdisciplinary research clusters as of 2023, the Robarts Centre supports many distinct and highly diverse research agendas, with a tradition in prioritizing research geared toward 2SLGBTQIA+ realities, Black Canadian experiences, Canadian politics, climate change and green technologies, environmental history, gender relations, immigrant communities, Indigenous cultural and environmental realities, Northern Studies, urban politics, and visual arts.

The Robarts Centre does not have a monopoly on the study of Canada at York. Many colleagues do not frame their work as “research on Canada.” This led the Centre to embrace a broader definition of “the study of Canada,” and to collaborate with other research units in incorporating a panoply of scholarship and academic conversations in the quest for self-knowledge. More importantly, some colleagues do not wish to associate their scholarship with a reference to “Canada” or “Canadian Studies,” a country and a field that have marginalized, dispossessed, and excluded specific groups, experiences, and voices, and that continue to do so.

DECENTRING THE STUDY OF CANADA

Today’s eclectic scholarship at the Robarts Centre shares some guiding principles, rather than a unified narrative or quest. We are committed to rendering visible the perspectives of people who form Canada, notably historically marginalized voices, and to understanding the shifting nature of the processes, communities, and realities of a country that is always changing. Rather than solely focusing on the nation-state as a unit, our researchers favour an examination of place-based realities that ground plural experiences of Canada, and a broader contextualization of the Canadian experience within international realities and transnational processes.

The Robarts Centre encourages research endeavours that are lived, promoted, and pursued in ways that are often far from conventional Canadian Studies scholarship, notably as the field is moving from understanding the study of Canada as a form of area studies toward more comparative, transcultural, or transnational approaches (Hodgett & James, 2018). Moreover, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, the Robarts community has a responsibility to work toward changing Canada’s settler-colonial structures that shape the country’s relationship with Indigenous nations. While it promotes reconciliation efforts and works on fulfilling the TRC calls to action by creating space, active listening, and witnessing, the Centre supports and collaborates with a myriad of stakeholders, including York’s Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Languages.

“CARING FOR OURSELVES AND FOR OTHERS”

Although Symons’s quest for self-knowledge remains important in the study of Canada, institutions that were created to support this mission, such as the Robarts Centre, are well positioned to fulfill another dimension of the task at hand: the importance and responsibility to care for ourselves and for others. Supporting the study of Canada from a critical, collaborative, and interdisciplinary standpoint requires an ethics of care that complements and grounds our collective quest for self-knowledge. For instance, emotional labour can help foster important conversations about difficult historical and present-day injustices, especially for people from different backgrounds and experiences. It is also key for any productive discussions about Canadian citizenship, notably amid ongoing and recurring debates around immigration.

At a time when knowledges about Canada are plentiful and knowledge production is itself criticized as a restrictive process, we cannot pursue our quest for self-knowledge uncritically, and without institutional support. “Knowing ourselves” too has reproduced structural inequities, and there-

fore requires ways of moving toward a more inclusive and plural understanding of “us” (away from an us-versus-them mentality), a clearer ethical grounding to our quest for self-knowledge, and a variation on Symons’s adage: Caring for ourselves and others will lead to knowing ourselves better and more responsibly. ■

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