

# Knowledge democracy and international Canadian Studies

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Knowledge and understanding are the best diplomats for any nation, people, or group. What we know or learn about a nation, people, or group helps us understand their perspective, world views, and interests. Building knowledge to enable understanding, constructive critique, and the creation of meaningful relationships is the mainstay of any educational institution. Knowledge itself helps build bridges and create relations across oceans, geopolitical and cultural borders, and cultural, racial, social, and linguistic differences. Hence, knowledge building has been seen at the forefront of international political diplomacy, supported by diplomacy via cultural institutions, arts, literature, and sports. International book fairs and soccer championships are good examples of such diplomacy. For a long time, Canada invested in international Canadian Studies through government programs. The last of these, Understanding Canada, was discontinued by the Stephen Harper government in 2012, resulting in a decreasing number of Canadian Studies programs and courses taught at non-Canadian universities, less student and faculty exchange, and less specific research on Canada. From a European perspective, the space for the study of Canada is slowly being taken over by research and study interest in the United States and the United Kingdom, which were always the mainstays of anglophone studies, but increasingly so in Australia, New Zealand, India, Nigeria, and South Africa.

## **BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AND IN CANADA**

The International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS), Canadian Studies centres across Canada and the world, including the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, and many other actors in education and knowledge diplomacy understand the importance of building knowledge about and in Canada. Together with partners throughout Canada and the ICCS, the CanSearch team at the Robarts Centre conducted an international survey on the importance and impact of the study of Canada globally. International Canadian Studies scholars noted a general decrease in the research on and teaching about Canada. They also noted an increasing need for online information and sources for teaching “including databases, journal subscriptions, and documentaries, as well as digital, audio, and visual archives” (Montsion & Formanowicz, 2025).

Despite this general decrease, current research and teaching topics are wide-ranging, including Indigenous peoples and nations; immigration, settlement, and transnationalism; the environment, climate emergency, and green transition; and multiculturalism, diversity, race, and racism. The CanSearch project notes that the conventional features of Canadian society are generally popular themes in the field. These themes provide insight to address similar issues in other contexts, as is the case with Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples (and matters of reconciliation), Black Canadian Studies, French and English Canada, Canada’s North, and immigration, multiculturalism, and the management of diversity, as well as progressive politics (including feminisms and LGBTQ+ rights). This diversity of research interests within the Canadian Studies community speaks to the importance

that the community assigns to diversity in general, and to cultural diversity in Canada in particular. Yet, cultural diversity demands ontological and epistemological diversity, as well as a recognition of the wide range of ways of life and experiences within Canada. It also requires recognition of non-Western knowledges, which continue to be marginalized in educational institutions, as well as recognition of knowledge holders outside of academia.

### THE NOTION OF KNOWLEDGE DEMOCRACY

Engaging the notion of knowledge democracy, one needs to take into account epistemological diversity and the wide range of epistemological backgrounds and perspectives within Canada. Discussing the loss of knowledges resulting from the domination of Western knowledge in educational institutions worldwide, both historically and now, Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon (2015) write: “Knowledge democracy refers to an interrelationship of phenomena. First, it acknowledges the importance of the existence of multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing such as organic, spiritual and land-based systems, frameworks arising from our social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded everywhere, or what is sometimes referred to as subaltern knowledge. Secondly, it affirms that knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, meditation and more. Third, and fundamental to our thinking about knowledge democracy is understanding that knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world. Knowledge democracy is about intentionally linking values of democracy and action to the process of using knowledge.”

### TO DEMOCRATIZE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CANADA

With respect to Canadian Studies, this notion of knowledge democracy means becoming more inclusive of non-Western knowledges and knowledge practices, such as the Mi'kmaw education concepts outlined by Marie Battiste (2013), which support diverse education methods and content, or the Nuuchahnulth concept of *Tsawalk* that Richard Atleo (Umeek) (2004, 2011) suggests helps in fighting climate crises. It means critically revising education methods and introducing land-based and environment-oriented education outside of the university. Projects like the Dechinta Bush University may serve as a model here. As well, knowledge democracy means that the producers of knowledge must include knowledge holders beyond the university, such as hunters, elders, artists and writers, civic scientists, activists, and speakers of non-Western languages. It must also include forms of knowledge containers other than books, archives, documentary films, etc., containers such as stories, performance, and images. It also means recognizing that much knowledge on Canada is contributed by scholars outside the nation, revealed by the CanSearch project and in the many international nominations for the ICCS book awards. Democratic values are supported through shared awareness and understanding—as well as knowledge diplomacy—as strong democracies are based on diverse, educated, informed, and open-minded citizens. The study of Canada characterized by epistemic diversity and inclusion can serve as a model for knowledge building that stands up to right-wing and authoritarian tendencies globally and faces the multiple challenges of our globalized world. ■

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