

Canadian Studies in parallel: Challenges and hopes for academic exchange and cooperation

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My research in Canadian Studies began in 1996 when, as a recent graduate of English and French departments, I was strongly encouraged to become interested in Canada. Several centres for Canadian Studies were opened in Central Europe at that time, including at my own university. In the last 28 years, I have attended over 30 conferences in Canadian Studies, mostly in Europe, some in Canada. I completed five fellowships at the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia and have a good network of contacts in the Canadianist community. My reflections on the current crisis of Canadian Studies, and my hopes for new opportunities, are therefore based on almost three decades of academic activity; however, they are necessarily limited to a European perspective.

CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL CANADIANISTS

Since the Understanding Canada program was discontinued more than a decade ago, many Canadianists have complained of a “crisis” in Canadian Studies. If it is true that the lack of financial support from the Canadian government renders research on Canada much more difficult, it is not the only reason for the problems encountered by the global Canadianist community. A serious challenge comes from the Canadian academic culture as well. The last 10 years saw the development of a radically critical, revisionist approach in Canada itself, mostly noticeable in the academic study of Canadian literature, which unsettled many Canadianists abroad. This is not to deny the traditions of colonialism, racism, and economic privilege, which have undoubtedly dominated Canadian history and culture. As a post-colonial scholar, I am convinced that new conceptual paradigms are much needed, and Canada calls for a decolonizing transformation. However, it must be noted that, in the wake of these debates, many Canadianists in Europe felt that they were not entitled to study Canada any longer and as a result shifted their attention to other fields of study. In this tense context, it is difficult to encourage emerging scholars abroad to study Canadian culture when certain research subjects are deemed less correct and desirable than others. They often feel surprised by the condescending approach to their work when they travel to Canada, especially if they come from countries with limited traditions of colonialism.

What Canadian academics do not realize is how difficult it is to do Canadian Studies outside Canada. Access to many resources published in Canada is limited in privileged Western Europe, not to mention its central and eastern regions, and other parts of the world. However, when we travel to Canada for a short time, Canadian universities do not grant us immediate access to their electronic

databases either. While European universities are eager to offer a visiting professor or an honorary guest status to their visitors from abroad, the process is much more formalized in Canada. This is also connected with the different expectations toward European and Canadian academics. At most European universities, international cooperation is currently a priority, and we all make huge efforts to create international clusters and research groups. This does not seem to be the case in Canada. I am not judging which system is better; it is important, however, to highlight these differences. They have a huge impact on publishing expectations as well. European academics are obliged to publish internationally, particularly in high-quality journals indexed in Scopus,¹ the number of which is limited in Canada. Accordingly, they disseminate the results of their research on Canadian topics in prestigious American, British, and other European journals. Consequently, we can speak of two parallel research microcosms in Canadian Studies.

ONGOING INITIATIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

However, there are some new opportunities as well. While many national associations for Canadian Studies have disappeared or limited their activity in the last decade, some have continued to thrive. With the help of local Canadian embassies, they have struggled to integrate the Canadianist community, inviting scholars from abroad to their conferences. The most famous examples are the Grainau conferences of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries (GKS), which have provided a wonderful opportunity for academic and social contacts, but such efforts have been made by associations with much more limited resources, too. Furthermore, some international research groups devoted to the study of Canada have been created to encourage international exchange. For instance, I myself have been invited to become a member of TransCanadian Networks, directed by Professor Eva Darias-Beautell from the University of La Laguna in Spain. The objective of this group is to strengthen the international dimension of research and thus develop more multidisciplinary academic approaches. All of the Spanish and international collaborators have published innovative research on Canadian topics, responding to recent developments in Canadian culture and applying, as well as contributing to, novel theoretical paradigms. TransCanadian Networks regularly organizes webinars in Canadian Studies, which involve emerging scholars as well. Our cooperation has been most inspiring and fruitful, and we plan to apply for research grants together, given that the new openings in Horizon Europe offer entirely new opportunities for international research clusters. Such networks of cooperation are very promising for the future of Canadian Studies and provide stimulating venues for dialogue and academic exchange.

The International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) has also gained more visibility in the recent years due to the sustained efforts of past and current presidents, Professor Munroe Eagles, Professor Kerstin Knopf, and Professor Jane Koustas. It continues to offer awards and scholarships, thus integrating the global Canadian community, and reaching new academic partners. The 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit organized by the York University Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, in cooperation with the ICCS, has garnered much interest from the Canadianist community all over the world. A summer school for graduate students was organized together with public events, centred around key issues in Canadian culture and scholarship. Such initiatives are much needed to encourage young people to pursue their research on Canada and to overcome the isolation that many Canadianists have complained about, effecting a rapprochement between the parallel worlds of Canadian and international researchers in Canadian Studies. The ICCS has committed itself to encourage such developments and is offering a mentoring program in Canadian Studies this academic year, hoping that the seminar series will open new perspectives to a new generation of Canadianists and will invigorate international Canadian Studies. ■

NOTE

1. Scopus (<https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus>) is a leading abstract and citation database.

Depending on the level of citations, journals are divided into four quartiles. Journals listed in the top quartile (Q1) are regarded as the most authoritative in the field. Research published in these journals is assumed to be of the highest quality and to have a considerable impact on the academic community.