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PREFACE

Preamble

Canadian literature: a construct bounded by the nation, a cultural by-product of the Cold War era, a nationalist discourse with its roots in colonial legacies, a literature that has assumed transnational and global currency, a tradition often marked by uncertainty about its value and relevance, a corpus of texts in which, albeit not without anxiety and resistance, spaces have been made for First Nations and diasporic voices. These are some of the critical assumptions scholars have brought to the study of CanLit, as we have come to call it for the sake of brevity, but also affectionately, and often ironically as we recognize the dissonances inscribed in the economy of this term. Whether it is considered an integral part of the Canadian nation formation, an autonomous body of works, a literature belonging somewhere between nation and literariness, or a part of "world literature," CanLit has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization. Sometimes subtly, sometimes crudely, it has always been employed as an instrument—cultural, intellectual, political, federalist, and capitalist—to advance causes and interests that now complement, now resist, each other.

This is not a process peculiar to CanLit. From the literary traditions of Germany and France to those of Brazil, India, and Australia, literature has been mobilized as a discourse that, no matter the diversity of its particular aesthetic and formal configurations, has served the geopolitical and sociocultural ends of institutions that are often at odds with what it sets out to

accomplish. The conditions under which CanLit is produced and the ways in which it is appropriated differ from one context to another, but one element is constant: literature is inextricably related to certain practices of polity. It may be understood and employed as a special category, as it is in English studies, but this category unravels when literature is seen to operate as an inter- and intra-, as well as a discursive, cultural site of exchanges. What this means, among other things, is that literature functions as a sphere of public debates, but is never fully harmonized with them, thus registering the limits of cultural knowledge and politics. Complicit and compliant, literature is also purposefully defiant and joyfully insolent. Hence an incommensurability delineates literature, and this condition is also reflected in how it is read.

CanLit, then, is not a term to be taken at face value. It resonates with the same ambiguities characterizing literature at large, but also with the complexities—even nervousness—associated with its own history and location. The specific trajectories of CanLit bespeak a continuing anxiety over intent and purpose, its ends always threatening to dissolve. This accounts for its intense preoccupation with its own formation: its topocentrism; its uneasy relationships with the British, the Commonwealth, and the American; its uneven responses to the (post)colonial and its so-called minority literatures; its desire to accommodate global cultural contexts; its obsessiveness with identity; and its institutionalization and celebration through cultural, social, and trade policies. These diverse preoccupations attest to CanLit's specificity, but also to its nervous state.

Though not always read or theorized as a discourse related to the formation of the Canadian nation-state—its early fantasies of homogeneity, its strategic cultural and language policies, and its fetishization of its multicultural make-up—CanLit is marked by a precariousness suggestive, in part, of the nation-state's politics of remembering and forgetting, on the one hand, and the positivism with which Canadian literature has been supported and exported by government agencies, on the other. Such a politics of representation has its own storied tradition to which the idiom of the CanLit imaginary is vulnerable. Still, if the state posits Canada as an imagined community, CanLit is both firmly entangled with this national imaginary and capable of resisting it. The body literary does not always have a symmetrical relationship to the body politic; the literary is inflected and infected by the political in oblique and manifest ways, at the same time that it asserts its unassimilability. A similar multifarious yet intransigent condition also marks CanLit's institutionalization within academe. From the

belated and gradual fashion in which it has entered the curriculum of Canadian English departments to the ways it has become a popular field of study, from the various critical debates as to how it should be read to the professional and disciplinary determinants that influence its teaching and study, CanLit has reached a certain deadendedness; yet it also displays a resistance to being entirely subsumed by the very processes and institutions that influence its course.

CanLit is, then, at once a troubled and troubling sign. Troubled because "Canadian" minus any qualifiers evokes the entirety of the geopolitical space it refers to, but it also siphons off large segments of this space and its peoples into oblivion at worst, and circumscribed conditions at best. Nevertheless, the term conveys a semblance of plenitude. Notwithstanding the various attempts to instigate and maintain a dialogue between anglophone and francophone literatures in Canada, CanLit has, more or less, always functioned as a referent to Canadian literature in English. What's more, even within the parameters of this English idiom, CanLit's feigned plenitude has been forged by means of occlusion and repression, marginalizing particular idioms of English, as the language has been othered by indigeneity and diaspora. If CanLit has revamped itself, and is employed today as a referent to a body of works that includes Sto:lo, Okanagan, Cree, Ojibway, Métis, South Asian, Japanese Canadian, Trinidadian Canadian, and Italian Canadian authors (to mention just a few examples of literatures that have a minoritized history), it remains a tradition that bears the signs of its troubled trajectory. Its alteritist configuration may have compelled it to question some of its institutionalized and institutionalizing practices, but it has also recast its semblance of plenitude in new guises, if not with greater force. With what was illegitimate now legitimized, CanLit may be in a position to applaud itself for the "progress" it has made, but it also runs the risk of wresting difference and otherness into a Canadian trope: rendering otherness as familiar and familial, thereby situating it within the history of its present. While CanLit as an institution reflects this process whereby the other becomes the same, normative and therefore transparent, it also insists on positing itself as a discursive site where the other can deflect its assigned familiarity, its status as a vanishing object. Despite the various ways in which it is managed, CanLit has the potential to challenge the presumption of its intelligibility and, in turn, defy the notion that Canada is an imagined community. It is in this sense that CanLit is a troubling sign: never fully released from the various ways it is anchored, it can disturb and alter the conditions that affect it.

CanLit may thus be instrumentalized by and concerned with the Canadian state, but it also contests the stateness, and boldly points beyond it, to an elsewhereness that is not yet legible, that defamiliarizes the tropes that produce transparency and its accompanying contentment and complacency. An alternative cognitive space, this elsewhereness demands epistemic breaks that require new tools to comprehend its materiality; it calls for an understanding of temporality and space that questions the assumption that knowledge is residual, always anterior to what has come before, the product of the same epistemological gestures that have cultivated the categories of "proper" subject and "other" in the first place. This elsewhereness inscribed in CanLit intimates that Canada is an unimaginable community, that is, a community constituted in excess of the knowledge of itself, always transitioning. Thus CanLit demands a transformation of the codes and means of its self-representation and its representation of others. It is to this summons for developing new terms of engagement with CanLit and Canada as an un/imagined community that the TransCanada project responds.

The TransCanada Project: Its Inception and Process

The TransCanada project was conceived three years ago at Alexis, a Greek restaurant on Broadway West, Vancouver. A short walk from Roy Miki's house, it is where we usually go for a late evening talk when I visit him and Slavia. Over the years that we've been going there, we have conjured up different scenarios explaining how Alexis has managed to remain in business since it is always virtually empty; but that spring of 2004, while a boisterous young crowd watched sports in the next-door pub, we conjured up TransCanada. It was not a project devised out of the blue. We had been concerned about the state of CanLit for a while, and we speculated on the current debates, and the possibilities they created, the consequences of which, no matter how exciting, often dissipated almost before they had the chance to make a dent in the field, gone adrift in the frenzy that has come to be a permanent feature of our profession.

There was no doubt in our minds that what had been happening to and what continues to characterize the production and study of CanLit was—is—symptomatic, on the one hand, of how the humanities continued to be under siege and, on the other, of the changes happening in our discipline. This was not a situation unique to Canada. Drastic changes in the university system in the name of efficiency, fiscal responsibility, and

accountability and ethics had already been under way in Australia and the UK. Going by the personal accounts of colleagues there and the scholarly analyses of the impact of these changes, the effects had been ambivalent at best, and detrimental at worst. What we were witnessing, then, was in keeping with the ethos of globalization, an instance of the contingencies of global affairs.

We worried about the pressure from outside and inside the university for academics to perform in ways that met the goals of the newly introduced performance factors and strategic plans; to apply for grants, especially large-scale ones; to join large collaborative teams and establish partnerships; to pursue research the results of which were immediately transparent and useful; and to engage in projects defined as innovative and interdisciplinary. All of these directives, we thought, offered signs of certain kinds of potentiality, but at the same time were decidedly pre-emptive. By operating on the fallacy that the humanities, compared to the social and hard sciences, were lagging behind in their contribution to the Canadian polity (though never quite articulated as clearly, this was, in our view, the underlying premise), but, more importantly, by adopting the rhetoric of knowledge production, corporatization, and global citizenship, Canadian academe in general and the humanities in particular were caught in a web of paradoxical circumstances. Major changes were, at least in part, reinforcing some of the very systems of thought and knowledge gambits that many of us had been trying to dismantle.

We knew we were not alone in thinking along these terms. This was the year the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) had launched its Transformation process—"a nation-wide consultation to transform the Council so that it can better support researchers and ensure that Canadians benefit directly from their investment in research and scholarship" (SSHRC)[1]—and the entire professoriate was alert as to what impact that initiative would have on the Canadian academy. SSHRC's transition from "Granting Council" to "Knowledge Council" was of particular significance to Canadianists. Not only as academic citizens, but also as scholars for whom the politics that determine the making of culture in Canada are integral to our particular object of study, we understood this Transformation process to be intimately related to the epistemic frameworks within which CanLit is produced, disseminated, taught, and studied. The governmentality of knowledge production and the market mechanisms that influence as much how knowledge is regulated as what kinds of knowledge can circulate are embedded in the cultural grammar and materiality of CanLit.

In our view, that Transformation process, together with the unprecedented visibility of CanLit in the public sphere, marked an important juncture that called for large-scale critical reconsiderations of the pedagogical and curricular challenges facing Canadianists. This was especially urgent, we thought, at a moment when the multicultural idiom had become normative but was being challenged by the immediacy of diasporic and transnational politics in our daily lives. We realized, that evening at Alexis, that we could not afford to elide what that moment entailed. It called for a practice of what Donna Palmateer Pennee has defined as "literary citizenship": to instigate and take part in "communicative acts" that are responsive to the polity and the discipline, as well as to our production as subjects, that is, as citizens, scholars, and teachers, as men and women inhabiting particular locations.

We soon came to name the project we envisioned that night. "TransCanada" felt just right: a familiar sign, a highway most of us have travelled on at some point, yet another symbol of national unity—one, however, put into the service of a project designed to dislodge the notion from its familiar moorings. More significantly, the name was a direct homage to Roy Kiyooka, an artist and writer that both of us had an abiding interest in. Roy had edited Kiyooka's collected poetry, *Pacific Windows* (1997), and I was in the process of producing a corrected edition of his *Transcanada Letters* and editing *Pacific Rim Letters* (both 2005), all projects left unfinished at the time of his death in 1994. Kiyooka remained exemplary for us. His writings and his art, the instructive ways in which he performed his subjectivity, his practice of a pedagogy that disavowed coercion and comfort, his profound awareness of how the market place co-opted an artist's agency, his notion of academic citizenship that eschewed conformity and narrow concepts of specialization, and his inglish that spoke to his diasporic condition in a mode that resisted easy definitions—all of these aspects of Kiyooka, which had affected both of us over the years in different ways, were akin to the kind of critical attentiveness we wanted the TransCanada project to propose and enact.

Three things, we agreed, were equally crucial to materializing how we had imagined TransCanada to take shape. First, it would focus on CanLit, and it would do so in the contexts of citizenship and institutions. More specifically, as we put it in the call for papers for the first TransCanada conference, it was a project intended to create a forum that would foster "the study of Canadian literature as a field produced in the context of globalizing processes and critical methodologies, but also in that of institutional struc-

tures such as the Humanities, the cultural industries, curricula and anthologies" (*TransCanada*). Since the national, multicultural, and postcolonial idioms are affected by globalization in ways that make it imperative we confront how citizenship, in its different configurations, is controlled and performed today, it was important to make citizenship one of the operative terms in our proposed investigation of CanLit. Methodology was also central to our understanding of the thematics TransCanada was to explore. As we put it in our SSHRC conference grant application and explained in our different communications with the delegates, we wanted their contributions to directly address methodology, to take on method as constitutive rather than supplementary. The task, then, was to undertake a major rethinking of the assumptions that had governed the field of CanLit studies and to rejuvenate the field through a renewed sense of collective purpose. This, we believed, was essential both in dealing with the urgency of the moment to which the TransCanada project was responding and in bringing "to light the incommensurable aspects of the study of Canadian literature as praxis in Canada" (*TransCanada*).

Second, we wanted the project to be launched with a conference, but not a conference whose momentum would dissipate soon after it was over. Conferences as conventional venues in which we disseminate our research, network, and dialogue, no matter how productive, tend to be ephemeral. They may energize us, inform us, and make us think differently, but their effects rarely outlive their occasion. Even conferences that make history and become part of the CanLit archive—consider, for example, *Taking Stock: The Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel* (Steele) and *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature* (Moss)—often have a teleological structure that does not allow them to assess their own institutionalizing effects, be they intentional or beyond their control. In our effort to circumvent these limits, we conceived of TransCanada not as a single conference, nor as a series of three conferences (this number is more a matter of stamina than anything else), but as "a future-oriented project." This emphasis on futurity, we hoped, would allow the project to initiate a process that would be designed to generate its own momentum, thereby developing in a manner that could accommodate what transpired at the TransCanada conferences, what was happening elsewhere in the field in the interim between them, and all the other research and publications initiatives undertaken through the TransCanada project.

Third, the TransCanada mandate could be actualized only through collaboration, but not in the tightly administered sense of collaboration in

currency these days. As we did with method, we encouraged the delegates to reflect on collaboration. Why did funding agencies and university research offices privilege it as the most desirable mode of research? Why were large collaborative clusters seen as being more effective in terms of research outcomes and more accountable to the community at large? Was collaboration, designed in clusters or otherwise, more suitable to the pursuit of interdisciplinary research as SSHRC seemed to suggest? What about the administrative challenges collaboration posed, the labour-intensive efforts it required? Could we think of collaboration in ways other than those designed by SSHRC? What difference would a sustained collaborative effort make to the study of CanLit? As we said in our description of the TransCanada conference's Research Cells, our goal was to see "a loose collective of scholars," students as well as faculty, from Canada as well as from elsewhere, coming together and networking in ways that would extend the dialogue initiated at the first conference to other venues: the future TransCanada conferences; the various TransCanada projects scholars would participate in; conferences and projects organized by others; and the work we are producing collaboratively as well individually. Though we had envisioned that "'collaborative' clusters" might "emerge from the Research Cells," a major part of the TransCanada conference's structure, we intended neither to make them happen at all costs nor to fully coordinate them if they did (*TransCanada*). Acting otherwise would run the risk of centralizing, if not homogenizing, the study of CanLit, thereby reproducing the same patterns and expectations we sought to resist and transform.

A quixotic plan? Perhaps. Still, the fact that the colleagues we invited to join us in this venture responded with a resounding "yes" confirmed our belief that the time was ripe for such an undertaking. David Chariandy, Jeff Derksen, Sophie McCall, and Kathy Mezei, the first members of the TransCanada conference's organizing committee, as well as Alessandra Capperdoni and Mark McCutcheon, doctoral students then, who joined the committee soon after, have played a seminal role in imagining this project along with us, giving clarity and direction to our original thinking, and, above all, making it happen. Together, we designed TransCanada as a provisional site, one enabling a collaborative endeavour through which we could begin to rethink the "disciplinary and institutional frameworks within which Canadian literature is produced, disseminated, studied and taught,"[2] and thus move toward the elsewhereness of CanLit.

Trans.Can.Lit

Initially presented as plenary talks at the inaugural event of the TransCanada project, the essays edited for this volume face head-on the issues the conference was intended to put forward. They place CanLit, the conditions that produce it, the idioms it privileges, and those it does not feel comfortable with under the lens. Provocative and eye-opening, they are marked by a keen awareness of how history, ideology, method, pedagogy, capital economies, cultural capital, institutional and social structures, community, citizenship, advocacy, racialization, indigeneity, diaspora, and globalization are all intricately related to CanLit and its complex, often tortuous, trajectories. CanLit is not the sole object of their focus, however. They display, too, great attentiveness to the politics of the critic's self-location, to the ways in which we are invariably implicated in what we take CanLit to be and in how we practise citizenship. Written by scholars and writers who have already helped shape the field of CanLit in significant ways, they split CanLit open. They reflect how daunting a project it is to "unmake" CanLit, despite its relatively short history, but also show that the undertaking of this project demands that we pursue different strategies and methods, ask new questions, and work collaboratively within and across the particular locations we inhabit. These essays are posited here as terms of action that we can deploy outside of the accustomed routes we have taken as scholars.

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