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TRANSCANADA, LITERATURE
NO DIRECTION HOME

If there is an organizing principle to this gathering of trans-Canadianist, it must certainly be nothing less than a powerful dissatisfaction with the established methods of our discipline for engaging with the many and multifarious literatures in Canada, with the institutional frameworks we occupy and whose work it is to transmute those engagements into pedagogies and into public statements, and with the vast recalcitrance of the discipline of literary studies itself in understanding critical reading as a force for progressive social change. Since I am not really a "Canadianist," and since my dissatisfactions with Canadian literary criticism at this present moment are not, in the first instance, grounded in critical method, I therefore need to begin my comments in this position paper by saying to my fellow Trans-Canadianists—for you are my teachers—and especially to those new or emerging scholars in this discipline, who may still approach the profession of critical reading with hopefulness about its capacity to help generate greater equity in the future, that despite my personal distance from the TransCanada critical project, I share your rage. My comments here arise from a scholarly practice I persist in calling "postcolonial," despite and possibly in celebration of the fact that the critical field of "postcolonial critical studies," having summitted in the academy, is now on its downward climb. I hope from this postcolonial critical perspective to speak to the middle term in our triumverate of conference superordinates—literature, institutions, citizenship. My argument, in a nutshell, is that, despite all appearances, the mission of the panel

for which this paper was originally written—namely, to speak after "the ends of literature" and before "the return of the citizen," simply about this one word, "institutions," and this in a hopeful and forward-looking way, is not actually a depressing and impossible assignment. I begin my argument with a meditation on the hidden logic behind the TransCanada conference's procedural structure, and what it might say about the problem of speaking hopefully about Canadian national institutions.

We often play a shell game when we speak of "institutions" in the human sciences. The definitional apparatus we apply to this general category skitters bewilderingly between meanings, and so the term "institutions" within university culture can refer to those associations or scholarly societies that provide national or international connection, and an avenue for research dissemination, to scholars in similar disciplines; or it can refer to the structural organization of those target-based research projects that position themselves between and across the established academic disciplines, as in the Institute for Globalization and the Human Condition at McMaster University; or the term can identify those foundations, both public and private, that provide specific training services, like the many "institutes" for ESL training in this country; or it can refer to the postsecondary academy or academy-complex itself. Nationally, the "institution" can designate structures that are obviously doing the work of distributive management—like the research granting councils, or the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, or whoever it is that administers the Junos. In the human sciences, "the institution" can also designate any individual unit that does the work of cohesive "institutionalism" within some administrative social massif—as when faculty councils reduce really exciting forms of intellectual and pedagogical pursuit into obedient curricular banality, for example, or when the honours English program or the ubiquitous Norton anthology work to channel students' curiosity-driven intellectual inquiry into disciplinarily sanctioned problem-solving at the expense of a more radical pedagogy based on problem-finding.

Beyond these mundane and dispersed instances of "institutionalization" loom those designations that pertain to organizations and complexes that visibly do the work of maintaining dominant cultural assumptions, like the Althusserian ISAs, the CBC News, or the homophobic Boy Scouts of Canada. And beyond these organizations for the manufacture of hegemony lurks a vast range of social practices, technical apparatuses, and dominant discursive assumptions that we tend to refer to as "institutions" because they operate along the lines of Foucault's "social instruments" for the actuation and

implementation of "bio-political" power—"institutions" like individual medicine, the family, the parent–teacher conference, or the liberal subject itself. This skittering between housing shells in our disciplinary idea of "the institution" means that when we come to speak *in general* about this term, as we do in this panel, we always run the risk of seeming disorganized, or confused, or totalizing, and possibly even wilful. Paul Simon noticed this phenomenon, and wrote about it in his song "Gumboots":

> I said hey Señorita, that's astute.
> Why don't we get together
> and call ourselves an institute.

Put together, these several meanings of "the institution" sound menacing, and we can infer something of the reason for this by attending to the *location* we assign to institutions within our embedded disciplinary narratives.

My text for this argument—and I've chosen it because it is typical, not egregious—is this conference's own organizing logic and scheduling practice, where "the institution" appears as the middle, or second, or *antithetical* term within the tripartite structure of a logical argumentative *syllogism*. A syllogism, as you know, consists of a three-part argument—a thesis or main proposition, an antithesis or qualifying second term, and a synthesis or argumentative conclusion—and my general suggestion is that when "the institution" appears in narrative progression within our disciplinary thinking, as it does in our conference scheduling, it is almost always located in antithesis to some potentially emancipatory or ameliorative force. In the embedded logic of our conference's sequencing narrative, this panel on "institutions" occupied a middle position between an initiating "position paper" panel on "the ends of literature" in the first position, whose work it was to locate literature's potential for effecting a social dynamic, and a synthesizing "position paper" panel, in the third position, on "the return of the citizen," whose work it was to reconceptualize social citizenship in some tomorrow-oriented, politically transformative ways. My suggestion is that when we imagine "the institution" as a social force within our usual disciplinary practices, we do so in a way that positions "the institution" as structurally antithetical to something positive, and therefore as something coterminous with the idea of "the obstacle." Since most of the "institutions" we talk about in the human sciences are indeed doing the work of securing the social dominant, this habitual assumption is usually well founded.

But because we habitually envision institutions as obstacles, we commit

ourselves a priori to thinking of ways of navigating around them, not to ways of working through them in the project of inflecting the social register. We foreclose on the possibility of institutional forces being redirected towards the emancipative work of social transformation. And we overlook the potential social force of syllogistic argument itself, which can actuate second-term forces or propositions, like the institution, not as obstacles to our desired social outcomes but as dialectic energizers of them. I want therefore to shift out of my own place of disciplinary comfort, which is to theorize, and instead to consider in a more pragmatic manner the possible *uses* of institutions to our mutual TransCanada aims. In taking this step, I draw strength from two of my intellectual mentors, only one of whom I am capable of embarrassing at this meeting.

My first mentor in this step, the unembarrassable one, is the Buddha, who according to the Vietnamese writer Thich Nhat Hahn refused to respond when the pedant Vatsigotra repeatedly demanded that he answer this question: "Is there really a self?" After Vatsigotra had exhausted himself and left, a disciple asked the Buddha why he didn't bother to answer. The Buddha told him: "Vatsigotra was looking for a theory, not a way to remove obstacles" (Hanh, 18). I take this performative moment to be an instructive one, for if much of our training in critical theory carries us to the practice of anti-institutional critique, the Buddha's interpretation of a certain kind of failure in critical energy implies that at least part of what obstructs us from effecting our desired social outcomes from our discipline may be our *idea* of the institution as obstacle, and not just the institutional apparatus itself. I read this moment as an exhortation to the practice of a generative dialectics.

My second mentor in this awkward venture—and this is the embarrassable one—is my colleague in postcolonial studies, Les Monkman, who occasioned my present argument through a conference paper he presented last August in Hyderabad. Monkman's claim—and he will not thank me for this savage simplification—was that a major obstacle to the advancement of a political postcolonialism in Canada was the *absence* of postcolonialists in the management of postsecondary institutions. To a large extent, Monkman argued, postcolonial critical thought is institutionally contingent in this country. But postcolonial teachers and researchers have trained themselves through the discipline itself to find ways to avoid institutional administration. Their positions and arguments may flourish in their own classrooms and in their research, but the institution will remain a structural obstacle to the generation of their political claims beyond this level of disciplinary insu-

larity unless they administer the changes they seek. A postcolonial politics will not advance itself in the Canadian university, Monkman warned, simply through the voicing of a pure and unassociated theoretical critique, for no one outside the university will hear it, and no one inside is liable to care. The point is not simply to understand the institution, Monkman argued, but to change it. And that requires a form of institutional avowal.

The TransCanada conference was predicated on the argument that over the past two decades the "pressures of globalization" have changed Canada's "cultural geography" and "global politics," that a new "multicultural formation" has unravelled "the nation's coherence," and that Canadian literary studies are now at "a turning point," one "that necessitates complete rethinking of the disciplinary and institutional frameworks within which Canadian literature is produced, disseminated, studied and imagined" (Conference cfp). I believe very strongly in the general call for a reframing of our disciplinary practices, and I am completely at one with the genuine commitment of this conference to carry Canadian literary critical study forward to the project of social transformation. But I am not persuaded by the conference's predicative ruse. Over the past two decades the record of social reorganization around multicultural and Aboriginal claims in this country has proven genuinely undistinguished. Canada has not repositioned itself in global politics in particularly meaningful ways. The world has changed to little, not too much. The United Nations Millennium Project, which has the goal of reducing global poverty by half by the year 2015, reports that 22.5% of the world's citizens now subsist in conditions of "extreme poverty" (that is, they subsist on less than US $1 per day), that 17% of the world's population is severely undernourished, and that 121 million of the world's children are without schooling of any kind, a disproportionate number of them girls (United Nations, "Progress"). World Bank celebrations of poverty-level reductions in East and South Asia—down by half since the 1980s ("Global Poverty")—echo against a continuing postcolonial history of uneven global development, where poverty levels over the past two decades have stayed consistent in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, and extreme poverty levels in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have actually gone up. The national situation is no more ameliorative than the global one. The Canadian Council on Social Development calculates that 16.2% of the Canadian population currently lives below the poverty line—a total that includes 23.5% of women over the age of 65, 42.5% of "visible minority children," 52.1% of Aboriginal children, and 55.8% of persons living in "female lone-parent" families. Each year these percentages *grow*. It is not, in my view,

external change at either the national or the global level that is driving our sense of urgency at this conference about the project of disciplinary renewal. Nor is it a change that has happened within the Canadian literatures themselves—the resources we find now in literatures for multicultural, or postcolonial, or feminist or queer or Native social transformation, dispersed as they may seem at the level of enunciation and cultural provenance, differ quantitatively a little, but not qualitatively, from those that were there in the writing twenty years ago. What *is* changing now, however, is our collective sense of confidence in carrying our literary critical projects forward into social transformation. Our "turning point" is a disciplinarily insular one, and one of the implicit assumptions within the progressivist narrative I seek to challenge is that generative political effectiveness will come about through an inner redistribution of our objects, methods, and enabling theories for the practice of disciplinary criticism. My argument will be simply that disciplinary reformation, though necessary, will not be sufficient to our aims.

My evidence for this claim rests on the once-robust fortunes of the discipline of postcolonial critical studies, most of whose upwardly mobile practitioners are now employed elsewhere. It goes without saying that postcolonial critical studies found itself in desperate need of methodological renewal through the 1990s. The language of postcolonial theory was not a global language. Too many postcolonialists fitted too many postcolonies to the same conceptual straightjacket. Too many cross-national organizing principles displaced too many registers of internal national division, too many scholars sought anthological and other unities at the expense of radical difference, too many researchers conflated a postcolonial critical perspective with too many forms of minoritarian claim. And then there were the terminology wars. Administrators noticed this, and now hiring practices in English Departments are being refitted accordingly. Last year, Columbia University considered 200 applicants for a tenure-track position in postcolonial literary studies and rejected all of them. An applicant for a postcolonial job at a major research university in Canada was recently told: "We don't do postcolonial resistances anymore."

Postcolonial critical study is now in the process of disciplinary redistribution, and by far the most salient of its new formats is the emerging field of critical globalization studies—the new comet in the academic firmament. The reformation of postcolonial into globalization studies has reorganized debate within the discipline in some important ways: Jawaharlal Nehru's "underdevelopment theory," for example, now appears less often than it once did as an explanation for exploitative persistence; Hardt and Negri's

enthusiastic meditation on "complex regimes" of "biopolitical production" now crops up quite frequently (*Empire*). But critical globalization studies, to the extent that they remain insular critical practice in the human sciences, have not sutured postsecondary disciplinary politics to the public sphere in new or transformational ways, and they have not accrued new interventionary powers in the fashioning of national or international social policy. In a telling critique of "the optics of globalization" from the perspective of "the research imagination," Arjun Appadurai explains why it is that a certain failure in democratization *continues* to attend research work in the human sciences, and why "globalization resists the possibility of just those forms of collaboration that might make it easier to understand" ("Grassroots" 4). "New knowledge" in the disciplines, Appadurai argues, has to meet established criteria within a stable "community of assessment" and must therefore be a product of "some sort of systematic procedure." Advances in disciplinary understanding, claims Appadurai, must be grounded in protocol, citational recognizability, and the principle of replication—they come about by "*re*-search," not by "search." The result is that "new knowledge" in the human sciences almost inevitably ends up being disciplinarily agonistic, parochial, inaccessible, and alienated. And so postcolonial studies give way to globalization studies in the academy, a new style of critical engagement comes forward to anneal the old, and new hires attend the disciplinary transformation. But research in the newly reformatted discipline, energized though it is from a sense of having distanced itself from a past political quietism, continues structurally to replicate precisely those disciplinary practices and protocols that maintain a distance between the critical field and the riotous, risky, messy, uneven, and generally unverifiable project of positive intellectual contribution to the work of social transformation. It is likely that by the time another academic generation has rolled through the discipline, the field of critical globalization studies, too, will have sped through its predictive undertheorizations and overgeneralizations, its own pitched campaign in the terminology wars, and settled into a similar state of political defeatism that now informs its disciplinary predecessor. A shift from postcolonialism to globalization may therefore have its uses to some forms of political critical practice within the academy, but at the level of genuine social transformation from disciplinary thinking outward, an insular shift within the discipline will not redress the originary disenchantment.

The progressivist logics of disciplinary reformation seek to package and displace our structural predicament—our contradictory location in the field of political work—into a discipline-specific fall-and-redemption narrative,

and I take my own point of intervention into this progressivist narrative from another of my mentors, Homi K. Bhabha, who argues that "newness" is to be discovered *not* in the "progressivist division between past and present," not in a reification of the modern against the archaic, but *in medias res,* in "the foreign element that reveals the interstitial," in the "indeterminate temporality" of the structurally "in-between" ("Location" 227). Here is my thesis for this paper. The foundational first-term principles that brought us to this conference—postcolonial thought, feminist theory, Marxist, anti-racist, or queer critique—are *not* dated commitments within the practice of literary reading. Our political desire for third-term social outcomes for these disciplinary commitments—outcomes like genuine equity in a global cross-culturalism, representational inclusion at all levels of national articulation, a participatory role for everyone in public debate and decision-making—are not archaic forms. We cannot provide an answer to all of our anxieties about the generative political effectiveness of our disciplinary investments, for those anxieties are truly well founded. But we can seek some forms of contingent political effectiveness in locations *other* than the place of disciplinary reformation. And some of those locations will be at the disciplinary narrative's syllogistic second term. Not just obstacle, then, though still that; not just antithetical, but dialectical—my commitment in what follows is to attempt to understand at a pragmatic level what a thinking *through* "the institution" would look like if it were approached as a site of *necessary* incommensurabilty, engagement, compromise, and risk.

The Granting Councils

A claim made equally by a principled, student-centred professoriate in the Canadian university *and* by corporate university administration itself is that the primary function of the Canadian university is to teach, and the primary function of research in the university is to support that teaching. The reason the first group makes this claim is politically obvious: our postsecondary institutions should be devoted to the processes of intellectual empowerment and principled social engagement, not to the manufacture of resources for private profit taking. The reason the second group holds this position, however, *is* the profit-taking motive. The fact is that very little R & D in Canada receives public funding *outside* the postsecondary structure, and the reason for this is that what profit-taking industry requires most in this country is the "human capital" that R & D research produces through training, not specific research findings. For that, corporate Canada mostly draws

on the international research community.

Researchers in the "human sciences" in Canada, however, have not attempted substantially to leverage the general principle of research-teaching continuity, grounded though it is in mixed university motives, towards greater disciplinary participation in national research funding. Fifty-nine percent of postsecondary students in this country are enrolled in Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded programs, but SSHRC receives only 12% of the total funding allocated to the three main granting councils (CASA). This disparity, and the radical differences it produces between SSHRC and the other Councils in both success rates and funding levels, remains nationally normalized and disciplinarily aggrieved. For the most part, we have entrusted the voicing of this sense of grievance in the public sphere to SSHRC itself and to our university administrators. Not many in government, or indeed in the general public, have found good reason to be convinced. University administrators have found us a distraction. And SSHRC has advanced a distorted claim: its argument has been that research work in the Canadian human sciences comprises an end in itself, that applied and targeted research practice depends on foundational knowledge, and that research in the human sciences advances basic knowledge, and so it should be funded. We have internalized this argument in the disciplines, reified our critical research activities into intellectual practices of free-standing inquiry, and legitimized our research procedures and methods by placing them in opposition to other, especially earlier, critical practices within our own scholarly disciplines. Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with disciplinary thinking, but as public arguments our claims for why postsecondary intellectual training in the human sciences *needs* a research platform have generally been insular, and therefore weak.

The truly strong claim at hand is that research in most of the human sciences, and certainly in literary criticism, really matters, and should be funded, *not* because it pertains to a particular object or employs a particular method but because it has the capacity, when brought into alignment with a vigilant and forward-looking institutional pedagogy, to bring students to the heat of current research inquiry, where they learn, through the application of approaches and intellectual assumptions that may usefully fail in the production of positive research outcomes or "new knowledges," exactly how critical thinking advances and changes as it moves through new material. This argument, needless to say, can be made *only* by those whose professional work inhabits the teaching–research continuum, not by distant administrators, and not by the granting councils themselves. For the

granting councils inhabit a structural anomaly. Research funding in Canada is a federal prerogative, but teaching a provincial one. In a meeting about sshrc transformation at the University of Alberta in 2003, sshrc President Marc Renault reported that he would have liked to advance further arguments about the centrality of human sciences research to postsecondary teaching practice but had been told this offended some political protocols and he should perhaps back off.

A dialectical engagement with the institutional framing of research funding for the human sciences, I suspect, would not acquiesce so easily to this structurally incommensurate ventriloquizing of our professional *raison d'être,* nor would it fail to notice the general practice of sshrc, arrived at through the peer-review process (which means us), to afford most of the larger research grants in our discipline to methodologically conservative, and politically neutral, research projects. This engagement would foreground precisely what it is that students gain from their proximity to volatile, intellectually exciting, and politically committed research inquiry in the human sciences, it would enter into transformative discussion with the ever hardening research project norm in our discipline that trains participating students merely to put a competent research brick into a monumental and unmoving research wall, and it would noisily question the usefulness of those research institutes in Canadian postsecondary institutions that contribute nothing to university teaching. This dialectical engagement would embrace the commitment to speak beyond the university cantonment about the work of the human sciences. And it would seek good ways to bring our research methods and protocols, and not just our research findings, into line with our teaching practices. This last engagement would almost certainly prove the most substantial of all of these challenges, but it could also ground a form of disciplinary transformation that would begin to approach the public sphere.

Research Institutes

Research institutes appear within university culture when a specific research project cannot be mounted from within the individual disciplines. For the most part, such institutes draw on donor funding or corporate partnerships to energize their projects, and so it is unsurprising to find that the very few left or liberal research institutes seeking to contribute to public policy discussion in this country—the Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta, for example—are spectacularly outmuscled in Canada by an army of

derechista institutes, both affiliated and "independent": the Frazer Institute, the C. D. Howe Institute, the Centre for Cultural Renewal ("we focus on the important connections … between public policy … and religious belief" ["Our Goal"]),[1] or, at the University of Alberta, the recently proposed Institute for United States Policy Studies. Because of this imbalance in institutional presence, we find reason to assume that the formal institutionalization of human sciences research within the university is generally the prerogative of interest groups for the social dominant, not for the forces of equitable social change. And so we continue our habitual practice of looking to the paradigm shift within the discipline, not to formalizations of the place between disciplines, when moments of disillusionment overtake us, hoping that some inner reformation in method or object will lead our discipline forward to the rivers of academic renewal.

Some in our ranks, however, have found a place for politically vigilant, socially transformative institutional work within the Canadian university, and my contention is simply that we might seek to learn from them. The Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster University seems to me an exemplary example of this kind of institutional engagement. Administratively it comprises representatives from arts, science, engineering, health sciences, and humanities. Pedagogically it mounts a foundational first-year course and then organizes student programming through courses in various departments—critical race studies, for example, or the history of modern Latin America, or peace-building through health initiatives. In programming the Centre mounts public lectures, organizes peace festivals, and runs essay-writing competitions for area high-school students, but it also co-sponsors, and seeks to learn from, the Mahila Shanti Sena ("Women's Peace Brigade") peace movement in Vaishali, Bihar, which among other things puts on an annual training camp in peace, democracy, and development for rural women. The impetus for the constitution of this Centre for Peace Studies, I am told, came from a university biologist (Singh).

One reason there could be real value in a dynamic, *initiatory* engagement with research institutionalization from literary scholars in this country pertains to the place of representations in the fashioning of both domestic and foreign social policy. Literary critics have long attempted to position their own cross-cultural approaches, which necessarily rest on representations, in dialogue with that vast range of social-sciences disciplinary practices that claim cross-culturally to *know* the condition, the assumptions, and the values of others, and we have consistently argued from within our discipline that the study of representations can help inform cross-cultural prin-

ciples of mutuality and contribute to the development of a self-critique. What would it mean to carry this order of fractured and hesitant cross-cultural understanding out of postcolonial, diasporic, or multicultural critical theory, and into the framing of social policy in Canada and the world? My suspicion is that literary critics (like me) have tended to join research institution initiatives on social policy when someone else has conceptualized them, not through their own originating imagination and design. And so this question remains more or less unanswered.

Hiring

One of the major challenges now facing the discipline of literary critical practice in Canada—and this includes Canadianists—is not disciplinary reformation but disciplinary survival. Language departments in Canada are everywhere under pressure to drop literary and cultural engagements in lieu of language training. English programs are being morphed into training units for writing skills. At the global level, literature studies is being buried by the monolith of Media and Communications Studies, as has happened at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. And English Departments can just be cancelled and their professors made redundant, as they were in the late 1980s at the aptly named University of Darwin.

A seemingly rational response by scholars to such an obvious obstacle to their disciplinary vibrancy is to hunker down into research and teaching, and to seek continuation. We know the value of what we do, and we hope things will not change. This structural response can inflect the way we administer the particulars of institutional renewal in our discipline, however, and one instance of this pertains to our hiring practices. I have long been struck by the ways in which hiring habits within the discipline of literary studies rest on principles of recognition and comfort. Our tenure-track job advertisements have changed very little over the past four decades. We continue to fetishize undergraduate and graduate training in our own specific discipline at the expense of real experimentation and inquiry across disciplinary programs. We hope desperately to include third-world, Aboriginal, diasporic, and minority individuals of all kinds within our chromatically challenged disciplinary collectives, but we also want to set the critical and pedagogical agenda for them, assume our social issues are their issues, locate their critical edges, and know them by who they cite.

My closing suggestion for this position paper is that a discourse of continuance organizes our most fervent disciplinary hopes, and so our admin-

istration of disciplinary change becomes a shell game of its own. We manage our inclusions through a self-replicating principle of disciplinary citizenship, and in doing so we become complicit subjects of the institutions we abjure. But literary critical practice in Canada will not find its way forward into political effectiveness unless its organizing practitioners relinquish control of the transformational agenda and submit disciplinary management to the participatory unpredictability of radical inclusiveness. The true place of literary critical studies in Canada is open-gated and future-oriented. The highway runs through troublesome country, and there is no other direction home.