

TransCanada 3: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship, International Conference, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada, 16-19 July 2009

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Literature and Canadian Studies have come down from the ivory tower—at least, that was the message emanating from TransCanada 3, one in a series of meetings sponsored by the TransCanada Institute (University of Guelph, Ontario, directed by Dr. Smaro Kamboureli)¹. Even the conference name/logo embodies the idea: *trañsCânađa*. To change your language you must change your life, said the Nobel Prize-winning poet, Derek Walcott. *trañsCânađa* used orthography to signal and enact its commitment to re-examining the old Canada—Eurocentric, monolithic and, above all, white. The opening speaker, Dr. Marie Battiste (Saskatchewan) called for the ‘decolonization’ of knowledge, specifically from the perspective of indigenous peoples, and decolonization expressed the commitment of both the July conference and the TransCanada institute itself to trans-nationality, pluri-lingualism, inter-disciplinarity and reinscribed margins. From the opening Mi'kmaq prayer, through the reading by Acadian artist Hernénégilde Chiasson, to its list of delegates from 12 countries and all regions of Canada, the conference practiced its creed by bringing together visual and verbal arts, majoritised and minoritised cultures and both immigrant and indigenous inhabitants of North America. A lunch excursion was taken to Fort Beausejour, where French and English forces met in 1755, a conflict played out, as delegates were reminded, on First Nations land. TransCanada 3 trod lightly on that land, emphasising with Battiste, a Mi'kmaq scholar, the primacy of locality and never forgetting that Mount Allison University, the quietly dignified host institution, sits on land taken from indigenous peoples.

The conference programme offered a discourse of prefixes: *trans*, *inter*, *hemi*, *eco*, *pluri*, *hetero*. Some of these were deployed in startling configurations: trans-local (Julie Rak, Alberta), trans-poetics (Alessandra Caperdoni, British Columbia) or pluri-affiliations (Martin Kuester, Marburg). Dense noun-phrases struggled to articulate the delegates’ will to change the world through language: we heard of minoritised experience, diasporic identities, ecologies of justice, planetary understanding, transdifferent positionality, activist cosmopolitanism and collaborative scholarship. No one, however, was allowed to forget place, locality and situatedness in the midst of all this trans-this and pluri-whatever. The inspiring eco-critical speakers Roy Miki (SFU, British Columbia) and Laurie Ricou (UBC, British Columbia) took us back to place—where Canadian literature had its beginnings. But their place was habitat, not setting—a significant shift in the meta-narrative of North American settlement. Metaphors drawn from the Maritime locality also decorated the discourse: the coast, the marsh (Tantramar), the tide, the shells and the lighthouse—all played a part in defining the self-and scholarly narratives unfolding during the conference.

Yes, there were papers on Margaret Atwood, on the novel, on poetry (e.g. Mark McCutcheon, Sharlee Reimer, Christine Lyons, Brent Wood), but these were in the minority. More presentations focused on critical pedagogy, ecology, citizenship, aboriginal law, social activism and transcultural geographies. While the panel topics at TransCanada 3 drew on the strengths of Canadian academia, they also made it impossible to ignore its burdens—of aboriginal displacement and historical racism, of Eurocentric pedagogy and knowledge construction. Scholars faced the present dangers of “research capitalism” and “market-driven

¹ For more information about the TransCanada Institute at the University of Guelph, see its website at www.transcanadas.ca.

forms of knowledge” (Miki), while lurching towards “chameleon cultures” (Patrick Imbert, Ottawa).

Reading has changed, said TransCanada 3; reading, in fact, is running madly off in all directions. Scholars were reading not just literature, but treaties, graffiti, conversations, court transcripts (Shurli Makmillen, British Columbia), absences and landscapes—even bridges (Christine Stewart, Alberta), hotels (Jennifer Blair, Ottawa) and parks (Maia Joseph, British Columbia). “Creative critical reading” was invoked by Miki’s plenary, which was accompanied by photo-shopped visuals, interspersed with poetry, jokes and a call for more creative work for graduate students. Ruby Arngna’naaq, Inuit artist (Nunavut), explained how to read money in terms of caribou, while worrying that Inuit artists are being used to “market the North.” It was a new experience being at a symposium where *IP* meant “Indigenous People” more often than it meant “Internet Provider.”

Several European scholars appeared on the programme of this 4-day conference in cool, windy Sackville: Astrid Fellner (Vienna, Austria), Elizabeth Tutschek (Vienna, Austria), Martin Kuester (Marburg, Germany), Gillian Roberts (Nottingham, UK), Danielle Fuller (Birmingham, UK), Katrin Urschel (NUI, Ireland), Eva Darias-Beautell (La Laguna, Spain), Pilar Somacarrera (Autónoma, Spain), Klara Kolinska (Masaryk, Czech Republic), Jeannette den Toonden (Groningen, Netherlands), Eugenia Sojka (Silesia, Poland), Natalija Kaloh Vid (Maribor, Slovenia) and Michelle Gadpaille (Maribor, Slovenia). Vid, Sojka and Somacarrera spoke about the oldest *trans* of all, translation, proving in the process that European literary theory may be retreating from its own multiple solitudes.

We were there to partake in this new, exciting mixture, to make literature “accountable” (Donna Pennee, Ontario), to go beyond the nation framework (Peter McLaren, California), to import a whiff of chaos into the order of academia (Phanuel Antwi, Ontario), in short, to make a real difference in the world (Smaro Kamboureli, Ontario).

To some of the non-Canadians at the conference, the insistent call for change sat oddly with the perfect dynamics of the event: the idyllic college-town setting, the waterfowl refuge on the doorstep, the impeccable organization and hosting by Christl Verduyn (Mount Allison, the conference co-chair), the rainbow spread of peoples and the veritable Babel of participants’ names. The Canada on display was welcoming, engaged, inclusive, responsible and egalitarian. Privilege, the conference said, should bring not complacency, but continuing vigilance.