

# The Transnational Return: Tracing the Spatial Politics of CanLit

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FOUR DECADES AGO, IN THE OPENING ARTICLE of the inaugural issue of this journal, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Sandra Djwa examined a Canadian journal marking a major anniversary. The essay is a celebration of the *Canadian Forum* (1920-2000) and its role in facilitating a vibrant critical conversation around the literary arts, but Djwa makes it clear early on that the *Forum* was really about Canada itself. Grounding her assessment of the journal's value in the common argument that the country was born in the fires of the First World War — “Canada had just come out of the Great War as a nation,” she writes, “and the task of building the new nationality at home now lay ahead” — Djwa affirms the original editors' “manifestly nationalist desire” to aid in what they described as the “spiritual” project of “Real independence.” After emphasizing the journal's early engagement with “the national versus international arguments” that would come to “dominate Canadian criticism for the next forty years,” Djwa concludes that a great lesson of the *Forum* is that “a national literature can only develop in a supportive national context.” On this, the fortieth anniversary of the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures and its flagship journal, we might ask: was it by design that *Studies in Canadian Literature* began its run with an essay celebrating the nationalizing role of literary journals in Canada? Or was it simply inevitable?

In this essay, I want to reflect on the past four decades in Canadian literature by exploring what is broadly understood, for better or worse, as the defining feature of English-Canadian literary criticism: literary nationalism. I'm not interested, here, in offering answers to any of the most conventional questions begged by discussions of this sort, including *What is Canadian about Canadian Literature?* or *Who counts as a Canadian author?* Nor will I make any attempt to systematically historicize such questions, which somehow manage to predate Canada itself.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I'm interested in the stubborn endurance of the nation as a focus

of critical concern, of the simple fact that in Canadian literary studies, as Imre Szeman writes, “the nation has become the concept around which every other consideration revolves and to which every discussion turns” (176). More specifically, I want to consider the much-heralded transnational turn in recent Canadian literary criticism, a wide range of self-consciously spatial critiques that have quite literally introduced another dimension into our longstanding debates about literary nationalism. Taking the rise of hemispheric criticism as a particularly charged case study, I argue that the most common function of such work has been a *transnational return*, less a decisive move beyond the limits of the national frame than a complex extension of English-Canadian criticism’s habitual “worrying” of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

### The Topocentric Foundations of CanLit

Was it inevitable that *Studies in Canadian Literature* would begin its run with an argument for literary nationalism? Well, consider 1976: Canada was just under a decade removed from its centennial celebrations, the period of which Margaret Atwood declared the country had finally “ceased to be a kind of limbo you were stuck in . . . and became a real place” (“Nationalism” 84). Thematic criticism was burning brightly, though on the verge of being roughly extinguished. D.G. Jones’s *Butterfly on Rock* was published in 1970; Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Garden* in 1971; Atwood’s *Survival* in 1972; and John Moss’s *Patterns of Isolation* in 1974. In introducing *Survival*, Atwood crystalized the grounding assumption of thematic criticism in her explanation that she “treated the books as though they were written by Canada” (12).

And yet even as thematic critics were celebrating the link between the literary and the nation, others were loudly calling it into question. It was at the inaugural 1974 meeting of the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures, for example, that Frank Davey presented “Surviving the Paraphrase,” in which he declared it to be a “testimony to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism that thematic criticism should have become the dominant approach to English-Canadian literature” (1).<sup>3</sup> In 1977, when Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon edited a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* with the explicit aim to “expand the scope of Canadian criticism,” the target was clear. Declaring it “self-evident” that “Canadian literature deserves treatment as part of the

autonomous world of literature,” Cameron and Dixon call it “ludicrous” and “embarrassing” to even be required to point out that “‘special pleading’ on the grounds of national origin” — i.e., thematics — is critically “invalid.”

Looking back to the mid-1970s in Canadian literary studies means looking back, in large part, to these debates over thematic criticism. However, the oversized role of the thematics debates in Canada’s literary history belies the fact that the number and influence of explicitly thematic critical works was rather limited. Its prominence has been bolstered, certainly, by the fact that Frye was easily the most prominent literary critic in Canada at the time, and that Atwood has gone on to become, well, Margaret Atwood. And yet it is worth remembering that as a self-conscious and distinct critical approach to literature, thematic criticism rose and fell remarkably quickly, and that today its common celebration-through-excessive-rejection — routinely undertaken, ironically enough, through a crude critical paraphrasing — functions primarily to establish a distinctively Canadian critical tradition against which contemporary scholars can position themselves.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, the thematic debates of the 1970s reflected what were already at that point longstanding debates about literary nationalism in Canada, including a consistent appeal to geography as the source of the country’s literary distinctiveness — an effort Leon Surette has usefully surveyed as the “topocentrism of Canadian literary criticism.” Perhaps the key difference of the thematics critics, however, is that their particularly self-conscious topocentric critiques were made at a formative historical moment that enabled them to become paradigmatic of Canadian Literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> As Barry Cameron points out, “the full institutionalization of Canadian literature as a recognizable and relatively autonomous discourse did not take place until the mid- to late 1960s, when it became thoroughly inscribed in both the agenda of Canadian publishers and the curriculum of Canadian university departments of literature” (124). There is no shortage of earlier literature and criticism by Canadians, of course, but this is the period in which the first wave of journals, university courses, and conferences dedicated specifically to Canadian literature was able to reach a critical mass. The prominence of thematics at this formative moment, it should also be noted, was not a coincidence, but a consequence of the larger nationalizing effort that

was underway following the country's centennial celebrations. In this sense, the thematics debate was never really about literature at all, but rather about the terms on which English-Canadian literary studies were being established as "CanLit" — that is, as an institutionalized field of study.<sup>6</sup>

As one would expect, the concerns and points of emphasis in the study of CanLit over the past four decades have ranged widely, including the rise of literary theory and the canon wars, the theorization of translation and multiculturalism, the interrogation of the roles of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality in the study of literature, and so on. To the extent that these conversations took place firmly within the institutionalized field of specifically Canadian literary studies, however, the spatial foundations of the field were effectively settled — not by directly addressing and adequately answering the conventional questions about the scale and politics of literary study, of course, but rather by circumscribing the spatial parameters in which these questions would be asked.

Surette makes a similar point regarding the prevalence of topocentrism in the field, which he describes as "an essentially invisible intellectual environment in which Canadian criticism moves and breathes and has its being," one that is "not a matter of debate or dispute, but . . . the ground upon which most disputes are fought." Importantly, Surette goes on to argue that part of the reason that critics turned to the land as the source of Canadian cultural distinctiveness was because the claim to the more conventional notion of peoplehood — "what the Nineteenth Century called 'race,'" he writes — was undermined by Euro-Canadians' deep cultural and linguistic connections to Europe and the United States. While this is true, it is equally important to note that the shift from a discourse of peoplehood to a discourse of geography — from "race" to "space" — should not be accepted as ideologically neutral, as if the latter is somehow entirely distinct from the biopolitics of the former. To the contrary, I would argue that such a shift simply folds the racialized elements of a normative Euro-Canadian (i.e., "white") peoplehood into the ostensibly neutral discourse of a nationalized geography, coding race in spatial terms. This, then, is another sense in which the larger question of scale had been "settled" in CanLit: the topocentrism that attended the field's institutionalization at once revealed and affirmed a settler-colonial logic in its claiming of the land as the source of a distinctly Euro-Canadian identity.

It may not have been inevitable for a journal of Canadian criticism established in 1976 to open with a discussion of literary nationalism, but it is hard to imagine a more appropriate place to begin.

### Post-Postnationalism

Given the centrality of the nation for institutionalized literary studies both within and beyond Canada, Paul Jay may well be right when he argues that nothing since “the rise of critical theory in the 1970s” has “reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism” (1). The transnational critical turn emerged in response to the accelerating globalization of culture and capital, which, some argued, increasingly threatened to render the nation irrelevant, along with nation-based fields of study. At the turn of the millennium, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri influentially argued that the rise of “the global market and global circuits of production” meant that “nation-states should no longer be thought of as supreme and sovereign authorities, either outside or even within their own borders” (xi). Critics who champion hybridity and migration as counters to modern forms of sovereignty, they insisted, have been “outflanked” by globalized capital and its “postmodern sovereignty.” “Power,” they continue, “has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them” (138). Writing at roughly the same time but in the context of CanLit, Barbara Godard suggested that “everything has changed under the material conditions produced by the rise of a distinctively transnational capitalism,” in that “[l]iterature no longer ‘expresses’ and so binds territory,” but is “caught up in struggles for economic domination” (222). In this quickly changing context, scholars were urged to recognize how their scholarly fields may have been quietly but firmly invested in a methodological nationalism, and to reconsider their work in the emerging context where the primary sites of power and representation lay elsewhere, beyond the nation-state.

Was it possible, in this new context, that Canadian criticism’s long history of self-consciously wrestling with the relationship between the literary and the nation-state could suddenly be an advantage — that the conversation that has looked to many like a century-long exercise in colonial cringe had become the cutting edge of critical sophistication? This is the backhanded compliment offered by Fredric Jameson, who

suggested that the “vulnerability” of Canadian cultural theory is its primary strength, in that its “openness to a variety of influences” (xii) has resulted in an unintentional cosmopolitanism that makes it a model for the needed globalization of cultural studies more generally. Diana Brydon and Marta Dvořák are right to question the politics of Jameson’s claim, pointing out that his comments were made “as an American to Americans” (9-10), not closely engaging Canadian criticism but simply positioning it as a learning opportunity for U.S. scholars. Still, there is no question that Canadian literary scholars have been quick to engage the transnational turn: Lily Cho, David Chariandy, Smaro Kamboureli, and others have productively interrogated Canadian literature through diaspora studies, while Brydon, Szeman, Roy Miki, and Herb Wyile have explored the field via globalization, and Rinaldo Walcott, George Elliott Clarke, and Winfried Siemerling have worked to locate Canada within the Black Atlantic, and so on. Hemispheric studies, New North American studies, border studies, and a resurgent critical regionalism; cosmopolitanism (rooted or otherwise), the global, the world, and the planetary: today, in literary criticism in Canada as elsewhere, the question of scale is everywhere anew.

As important as this recent surge of self-consciously spatial work is for the field, it should be recognized as an extension of the field’s longer history. A.J.M. Smith’s conceptualization of competing native and cosmopolitan schools of poetry in Canada — “The one group has attempted to describe and interpret whatever is essentially and distinctively Canadian,” he writes, and the other “has made a heroic effort to transcend colonialism by entering into the universal, civilizing culture of ideas” (5) — is but the best remembered example of earlier critics wrestling with the international nature of Canadian literature. In less abstract ways, too, literature in Canada has exceeded the country’s borders from its very beginnings, whether it be by drawing on the British tradition in subject and style, bending to the economic weight of the American tradition by having “moved to New York,”<sup>7</sup> or preceding the Canadian nation-state altogether, as in the various First Nations traditions. This is one key sense, then, in which the recent transnational turn in Canadian literary criticism is best recognized as a *return*.

In much the same way, however, it was also easy to overestimate the extent to which contemporary globalization had rendered the nation irrelevant in literary studies more generally. Accordingly, what we

might call a post-postnational moment has begun, in which a broad-based counter critique has emerged alongside the transnational turn that attempts to grapple with the endurance of the nation within an ostensibly postnational age. Whether as a valued model for engaging competing sovereignty claims, or, together with the state, as a key regulatory scale for environmental action, whether as a means to interrupt the rise of transnational capital or as a reinvigorated bulwark in a time of heightened security concerns, the nation endures. Recent work by Stephen Henighan, Donna Palmateer Pennee, Jeff Derksen, and others has varied widely in its politics, but is linked by arguments regarding the enduring import or even (qualified) rehabilitation of the nation within Canadian literary studies.

After recognizing the importance of alternative “modes of cultural analysis,” for example, Jennifer Blair, Daniel Coleman, Kate Higginson, and Lorraine York suggest that “the continuing existence of the nation within globalization, the existence of enabling or decolonizing nationalisms, and the material effects of Canadian nationalism and its state apparatuses” are “compelling reasons to continue using the nation” as a way to engage literature (xxvii). Tony Tremblay, too, has argued for a return to “place” against capital’s globalizing “shift in spatial ethos,” leveling a warning to “those theorists in Canada whose discomfort with nationalism has spawned alliance with far more sinister forces of homogenization” (37). Others caution against mistaking the nation as synonymous with the state in writings about globalization, or of accepting what Len Findlay has called the state’s attempt to “paraphrase” the nation in its own image.<sup>8</sup> Naava Smolash and Myka Tucker-Abramson, for example, note that the “horizons of Canadian literature” remain problematically tied to the state via “the naturalization of citizenship rights as the basis for inclusion in the Canadian literary project” (165), while Godard contrasts her acknowledgement of the impact of globalization by reminding readers that not only does the nation remain the “frame of reference for thinking the literary,” it also remains as the locus of “material production, where publishing is organized under the state apparatus of the Canada Council and Heritage Canada” (222).<sup>9</sup> Finally, Daniel Heath Justice argues for the “necessity of nationhood” on the grounds that while Indigenous authors and critics have long written passionately against the oppression of the Canadian nation-state, the nation

remains a key conceptual category for recognizing how the differentiated Indigenous literatures reflect distinct and sovereign communities.<sup>10</sup>

The nation has endured in more direct ways, as well. Recent work by Lorraine York and Gillian Roberts, for example, has shown how the rise of a CanLit celebrity culture — from the unabashedly sociological goals of *Canada Reads* and its search for “the one novel that could change Canada”<sup>11</sup> to the nationalist glitz of the Giller, the Governor General’s, and the Writers’ Trust awards — continues to frame the reception and circulation of literature in decidedly national terms. Quoting Lynette Hunter’s description of artists as the “licensed transgressors of liberal democratic nations,” Roberts notes that “prize-winning writers may both contest the nation-state and be celebrated for doing so” (6), concisely describing the paradox of how easily the international circulation and global celebration of texts is recuperated within the discourse of literary nationalism. What is more, state funding, including large-scale Major Collaborative Research Initiatives (MCRI) and Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants, continue to funnel resources and interest toward nation-centric concerns and methodologies. As valuable as many of these projects have been, they have also resulted in what we might call the “MCRI-zation” of a new generation of CanLit scholars: generously enabled, to be sure, but also gathered and conditioned, at a formative moment in their careers, around a relatively few key projects and their attendant concerns and methodologies.<sup>12</sup> SSHRC’s recent prioritization process, which incentivizes emerging scholars to work at “Imagining Canada’s Future,” similarly prioritizes the national as the natural framework for humanities research.

While the changing social, economic, media, and political contexts make clear the need for scholars to engage alternative scales of thought, the demand to continue grappling with the nation-state within these changing contexts is equally clear. What does it mean, then, to speak of the post- or transnational in Canadian literature today? My larger argument focuses on the cumulative impact of such efforts, but I want now to pause and briefly consider hemispheric studies as a case study in the transnational turn within Canadian literary studies. The persistence of the nation within CanLit’s engagement with the hemispheric turn, I will suggest, neatly demonstrates the forces at work in re-centering the nation within alternative scales of literary studies.



### Who's Afraid of Hemispheric Studies?

Djwa's 1976 essay identifies "continentalism," the "literary correlative" of which she suggests is the "view that there exists a common North American literature," as one of the primary challenges to the early development of a distinct literary culture in Canada. The First World War made the dangers of unfettered nationalism horrifically clear, and Djwa positions continentalism as part of a broader internationalist consensus in the postwar period that ran directly counter to the burgeoning patriotism of postwar Canada. "From the viewpoint of a developing national literature," she writes, "it was unfortunate that Canada's strongest sense of 'the new nationality' came at the very point when nationalism in all of its forms was suspect and at a time when a growing cultural continentalism made such a position difficult if not impossible to maintain."

Literary continentalism has returned a century later, and it is once again being understood as both a promise and as a threat. Rachel Adams describes hemispheric studies as "a heuristic frame designed . . . to bring into view alternative histories and cultural formations that might be obscured by an exclusive emphasis on the nation-state" (246). Although this could meaningfully describe the transnational turn in general, Adams draws on the related concept of continents to argue that the hemispheric "maintains a consistent investment in place, which is often lost when culture is studied through the lens of more geographically inchoate rubrics such as globalization or diaspora" (7). Accordingly, much of the work in what is ostensibly a hemispheric-wide approach proceeds comparatively modestly, with scholars in hemispheric studies and related fields routinely adopting continental perspectives — almost always in the Americas — to map earlier or alternate literary geographies across national borders. Indeed, as Claire F. Fox writes, the sheer "geographical sweep" of the hemispheric frame is so large that it most commonly functions as "a field for locating particular trajectories rather than an object of analysis itself" (643).<sup>13</sup>

Even as hemispheric studies have seen what a recent *PMLA* article called a "veritable explosion of scholarly activit[y] in the past decade" (Bauer 235), however, Canada has been conspicuously absent from the field. Albert Braz suggests Canada is among a number of countries so completely ignored by hemispheric discussions that it should be labeled

“Outer America,’ a geographic entity that both is and is not part of the continent” (120). Winfried Siemerling expresses his frustration with “the routine marginalization of Canadian culture in hemispheric scholarship” (“Trans-Scan” 140), and, together with Sarah Philips Casteel, cites “the invisibility of Canada in discussions of the literatures of the Americas” as the impetus for their 2010 collection *Canada and Its Americas* (8). Similarly, Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup introduce their 2014 collection *Parallel Encounters: Culture at the Canada-US Border* by declaring that the book aims to “redress the balance of the US-centered narratives that continue to dominate the New American Studies” (11-12). A few U.S. scholars have noted this imbalance with frustration as well: Adams acknowledges that the field “typically ignore[s] Canada” (7), for example, while Claudia Sadowski-Smith and Claire Fox point to facile assumptions about Canada’s similarities with the U.S. as a reason for its “exclusion . . . from hemispheric frameworks” to date (15).

So common is this lament, in fact, that pointing out the Canada-shaped hole in hemispheric studies has become something of a critical trope over the past decade. The endurance of this trope risks ignoring direct precedents for the approach in fields that clearly overlap with what is now being framed as the “hemispheric,” however, including earlier Canadian studies’ work in border studies, in critical regionalism, and so on. It also risks ignoring early work specifically within hemispheric studies that has directly engaged Canada, including Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s collection *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (1990) and Earl Fitz’s *Rediscovering the New World* (1991), both routinely cited as foundational studies in the field. Finally, it underestimates the now quickly accumulating body of work in the field that attends directly to the Canadian context. In Canada, scholars such as Siemerling, Casteel, Szeman, Cynthia Sugars, Robert Thacker, Jennifer Andrews, W.H. New, Hugh Hazelton, and others have been exploring CanLit’s position vis-à-vis the U.S. and North America for some time, and this work should only intensify with the recent establishment of the SSHRC-funded Canadian Consortium on Performance and Politics in the Americas.

As a means of underscoring the urgency of one’s own efforts to locate Canada in the field, then, the trope of CanLit’s absence from the hemisphere has presumably reached the point of diminishing returns. As a reflection of a broader ambivalence about placing Canadian stud-

ies within the transnational, however, its repetition remains of interest. For the fact is that the absence of Canadian literature from studies purporting a North American frame has been actively facilitated by a number of established Canadian scholars who have openly cautioned that the field may be, in effect if not in intent, a form of U.S. intellectual imperialism. Herb Wyile is likely the most explicit in this regard, being careful in his engagement with the hemispheric turn but blunt about its dangers: raising the specter of the field as a “Scholarly NAFTA,” Wyile warns that it could “threaten to relegate Canadian literature, which has spent roughly the past fifty years shedding its status as terra incognita, to where it once belonged” (49). Even critics who approach the field more sympathetically have expressed caution. Marie Vautier, for example, urges scholars to recognize a “hemispheric shift in the imaginaries of the literatures of Canada,” but insists that the U.S. is to be excluded from this larger shift — that Canadian literatures are looking, as she puts it, “South beyond the elephant” (205). Similarly, a recent essay by Sugars acknowledges the potential of hemispheric studies, but wonders “Are we proclaiming the subsumption of the Canadian into the alluring liminal realm of the inter-American while we watch the only too tangible American universal become fat on a surfeit of these posthumous postnational satellites? (“Worlding” 45).

What are we to make of such arguments, reflective of what Roberts and Stirrup call the “carefully considered hesitation among many Canadianist scholars about regarding the hemispheric paradigm” (11)? From one perspective, of course, they seem compelling arguments *for* the field, rather than *against* it: after all, when Latin American critics worried that hemispheric studies might constitute an intellectual “Monroe doctrine,” they responded with a surge of work to establish their presence in the field.<sup>14</sup> From another perspective, however, such arguments can be said to reflect the unique challenge that hemispheric studies may present to specifically Canadian scholarship. It is surely true, as Sugars suggests, that such fears rehearse familiar CanLit debates about the native and the cosmopolitan, but it seems important to recognize that in linking Canada to specifically *U.S.* concerns, hemispheric studies makes immediate and concrete the prospect of absorption into dominant U.S. cultural and critical discourses in a way that other transnational frames such as, say, globalization or diaspora studies, simply do not. And, as we know, this is not just one concern among others.

Anxiety about the influence of the U.S. on Canadian culture is deeply imbedded not only in Canadian studies in general — one thinks immediately of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* — but more specifically in Canadian literature as an institution and area of study. For evidence, one need only glance at the Massey Report. A foundational document in the establishment of state-sponsored Canadian culture, the Report was the product of a Canadian Cold War state that was not only “anti-communist” but “also anti-American” (Cavell 5), promoting a national literature in Canada as a necessary “front” in the defence against U.S. influence. Not that this was particularly new. Writing of “Post-Confederation cultural nationalists” and their drive to establish a distinctive Canadian literature, Carole Gerson suggests that “resistance to the influence of the United States” was “basic to Canadian cultural nationalism then as now” (36). In fact, more than one critic has suggested that anti-American anxiety is all but constitutive of our field: Szeman, for example, argues “it is the threat of American cultural dominance . . . that is the most important stimulus for literary and critical examinations of the Canadian nation” (161), while Thacker suggests that “anti-Americanism” is a “fundamental,” or even “defining” characteristic of English-Canadian criticism (75). That Cameron and Dixon, writing in 1977, could drolly flag anti-American sentiments in the opening line of an essay arguing against national considerations in Canadian criticism — they begin by invoking “Observers from Mars, or someone equally alien (Americans, say)” — indicates the thoroughness with which the field has been saturated by this line of thought.

Whether or not we are prepared to crown anti-Americanism as the field's originary myth, what such arguments do show is how the trope of CanLit's absence from hemispheric studies draws on a longstanding line of critical anxiety, and how its repetition serves to effectively re-trench the boundaries of the field. Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising to find that most of those studies published in Canada that intentionally bring CanLit into conversation with the hemispheric frame do so with the aim of estranging (rather than rejecting) the national frame for Canadian texts, in order to insert the Canadian context into hemispheric studies. Roberts and Stirrup, for example, write that their own collection seeks to route much of its hemispheric concern “through largely Canadian cultural lenses” (12), while Siemerling and Casteel are similarly unapologetic about their intention to foreground the Canadian

texts, contexts, and concerns within the hemisphere (8). For all its value in opening the nationalized conversation to a broader geographic and political territory, the hemispheric turn in Canada has been, we might say, nearly a full turn, returning us to many of the old questions about how the nation, the international, and the literary intersect. The hope, of course, is that it does so productively, asking such questions from a fresh perspective so that it might enable a fresh set of answers, revealing the extent to which the nation is embedded in larger and longer histories. Yet there seems little risk thus far that the nation will dissolve into the hemisphere, regardless of whether or not that hemisphere is simply an expanding U.S. realm of influence. In this sense, at least, hemispheric studies, as it has been practiced in Canada to date, is better understood as a complex extension of the field's engagement with nationalism, rather than its rejection.

The larger transnational turn in Canadian literary studies parallels the hemispheric in doubling back to the nation as its core concern, tracing a similar trajectory to the broader public discourse that is attempting to position the internationalization of Canadian culture as evidence of national maturation. “[I]n the midst of the euphoria over Canadian literature’s international success,” Sugars writes, “a rhetoric of globalization masks an underlying anxiety about Canadian national and postcolonial identity” (“National” 80). In the critical conversation, this anxiety is often something less than masked; much of the actually existing transnational criticism in Canadian literary studies openly takes the national frame as the foundation and ultimate end for its transnational critique. The list of recent work is too long to recount in full, but it would surely need to include Kit Dobson’s *Transnational Canadas*; Brydon and Dvořák’s *Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*; Kamboureli and Miki’s *Trans.Can.Lit.* series; Siemerling and Casteel’s *Canada and Its Americas*; Christine Kim, Sophie McCall, and Melina Baum Singer’s *Cultural Grammars of Nation, Diaspora, and Indigeneity in Canada*, and so on. These recent engagements with the transnational turn vary widely in the specifics of their arguments, and all open to the global in productive ways, but they also continue to turn, explicitly, on the hinge of the nation. Individual texts can be, and often are, engaged outside the logic of the nation altogether, but whenever critical conversations begin by taking as their object or accepting as their frame a body of literature rooted and defined in national terms —

whenever they begin by tethering themselves to something thinkable and recognizable as *Canadian literature* — we should not be surprised to find ourselves returning, over and again, to the nation.

### The Spatial Politics of Canadian Literature

In 1967, as Canada was proudly celebrating its centennial, Michel Foucault was in Paris giving a lecture entitled “Of Other Spaces.” Declaring that the “great obsession of the nineteenth century” was history, Foucault predicted that the “present epoch” would be “above all the epoch of space” (1). Today, Foucault’s essay is widely acknowledged as anticipating the larger spatial turn, which, building on Foucault and other key works such as Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974) and Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989), aims to denaturalize space and move beyond its conventional framing as either fundamentally conceptual (i.e., imaginary) or concrete (i.e., physical). A primary insight of this turn is to recognize that whenever scholarship begins by accepting any given scale as the normative parameter for study, it naturalizes the complex social processes at play in the production of space itself. Such approaches, write Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, allow space to remain “a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed,” so that while it serves as the “central organizing principle,” it “disappears from analytical purview” (7). The spatial turn, accordingly, aims to explore how space is produced as part of, rather than previous to, the cultural, economic, material, and political arenas.

Although, as we have seen, Canadian critics have rarely allowed the nation to pass as a neutral category and have largely embraced aspects of the transnational turn, the field as a whole has been slower to engage with the spatial turn. In a 1998 special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* entitled “Writing Canadian Space,” however, editors Linda Warley, John Clement Ball, and Robert Viau rightly insist that “space and place have always mattered” in Canadian literary studies (1), even if they have not been conceptualized in explicitly spatial terms. While cataloguing recent critical work that sets out to directly consider “the complexities of Canadian representations of spaces” (4), the editors point to the thematic criticism of the 1970s as exemplifying the field’s underlying “geographical determinism” in defining literature “in terms of

the human relationship to a distinctly Canadian natural environment” (2). The larger critique of thematic criticism and its earlier approximations routinely dismiss such appeals to nature as hopelessly romantic, of course, but the rise of ecocritical approaches over the past decade — along with essays with titles such as “In Praise of the Garrison Mentality: Why Fear and Retreat May be Useful Responses in an Era of Climate Change”<sup>15</sup> — suggests a context in which even the most canonical expressions of this relationship are being revisited.

The most common engagement with the spatial turn in literary studies has been to explore the construction and representation of space within particular literary texts, but it can also be taken as an opportunity to reconsider the larger critical frames through which we engage such work. In *CanLit*, several scholars have already begun this project. Lisa Chalykoff and Sabine Milz, for example, have each drawn on Lefebvre to reconsider the spatial foundations of regionalism in Canadian literary studies. Chalykoff’s essay traces a shift in critical regionalism away from what she calls the “first solitude,” akin to Lefebvre’s “illusion of opacity” in that it “inflates space to a universal ‘given,’” toward a “second solitude,” akin to Lefebvre’s “illusion of transparency” in that it “reduces [space] to a subjective condition” (162). Critical regionalism in Canada oscillates between these positions, Chalykoff suggests, because they both “negate the role society plays in shaping subjects’ perceptions” of space and scale (170). Milz also invokes Lefebvre, positioning her interviews of prairie-based publishers of Canadian literature as a way of exploring the “spatial reconstitution of Canadian-national literature since 1970” (8). Where Chalykoff explores the tensions inherent in scholarly conceptualizations of regional and national literatures, Milz emphasizes the material and economic processes that underpin their shared production. While recognizing that the globalization of *CanLit* has “resulted in a considerably commercialized and complexified space of national literature” (32), Milz argues that her interviews suggest that the “space of Canadian literature” is alternatively “centralized and decentralized (rather than eroded)” (34): even where individual texts circulate in regional terms, they can “be conceived as different spaces of national literature, with ‘national literature’ being a multiple and shifting space that works at and across local, regional, national, and global scales” (33).

Jeff Derksen’s recent essay, “National Literatures in the Shadow of

Neoliberalism,” also considers the contemporary spatial restructuring of national literary traditions, but comes to more explicitly political conclusions. Derksen draws on scale theory to note how conventional understandings of the nation-state presume it to be “caught in absolute space,” and thus “a container to jump out of, or the apparatus to be eroded away by global flows” (48). Quoting Neil Smith’s suggestion that we are today in a “period of scale reorganization,” Derksen insists that this “series of shifts does not dissolve the nation as one of the possible scales of a public sphere or a civil society; rather, it opens the question to how nation-states function within neoliberalism and what the stakes for the nation-state are” (50). What is needed, he insists, are critical perspectives that “embed the nation-state, and the nation as scale, as a necessary and productive agent of the neoliberal restructuring of the geography of globalization,” in order to allow “a deeper historical grasp on the present” (60).

Like Derksen, my own interest here is not in spatial readings of individual texts, regions, or specific critical approaches, but rather in the cumulative spatial impact of the broader transnational turn in CanLit criticism. My sense is that the various space-based critical paradigms I have been cataloguing in this essay not only reflect Derksen’s notion of shifting scales, but also confirm Foucault’s prediction regarding the present epoch being *about* space in much the same way that the earlier period was *about* time. Indeed, in the postcolonial and poststructural critique of the 1980s and ’90s, the conceit of a nation reliant upon what Benedict Anderson (drawing on Walter Benjamin) called “homogenous empty time” was exposed as a fiction, as effaced histories of oppression were recalled and asserted against the nation’s celebratory, teleological narratives of progress. Anne McClintock rightly took the proliferation of *posts* in the theory in this period — think poststructural, postmodern, postcolonial, and so on — as evidence of a “widespread, epochal crisis in the idea of linear, historical ‘progress’” (292). Today, the studies of the hemispheric, the diasporic, the cosmopolitan, and the border, of globalization, the Black Atlantic, the Pacific Rim, and so on, are collectively rethinking the spatial foundations of literary studies. More than this, however, the proliferation of explicitly spatial critical paradigms that have arrived or are being emphasized in contemporary theory can also be understood as reflecting a widespread, epochal crisis in the idea of space as a stable, empty container for the time of history.<sup>16</sup>



When Cameron and Dixon argued, in 1977, that Canadian literary criticism's emphasis on the nation was ultimately a "problem of time," they meant that the field was simply too young to know better than to emphasize the nation, and they assumed it was a stage the field would quickly outgrow. Looking back on this claim some forty years later, with the critical conversation still circling back upon the nation, it is possible to affirm their reading of the spatio-temporality of the field, though not their reasoning. Thematic criticism's emphasis on the nation may have been rooted in what Warley, Ball, and Viau call "geographical determinism," but surely it also reflected a wider set of critical assumptions about "homogeneous empty time," the nation-based temporality that would be interrogated by postcolonial criticism in the decades to come. It is true that the current interrogation of "nation space" mounted by the larger transnational turn does not appear any more likely to move us beyond the nation than did that earlier examination of "nation time." But is moving beyond the nation really the primary goal of Canadian literary criticism?

### Conclusion: Postnational All Across Canada?

In light of the transnational turn, it is easy to see the perpetual return of the nation in Canadian literary criticism as a failure of the critical imagination. One need only focus on what Sugars calls the "hypocrisy of a professed globality" in the field, which often "falls back on an anxious defence of national essence" ("National" 98), to appreciate its most regressive elements. In a more basic but also more foundational sense, however, the inescapability of the nation can be attributed to a simple but powerful tautology that can be found in all conversations about literary nationalism: to the extent that a given field is defined by its association with a particular concept — as something called *Canadian* literature, for example — to succeed in moving beyond that concept will be to move outside the field itself. This tautology helps to explain why so much of the recent CanLit criticism that engages the transnational turn begins by unapologetically returning to the nation, forcefully asserting the Canadian context as a meaningful location within it. Perhaps the most compelling challenge to this tautological return is to be found in work that seeks to directly address the conceit of Canadian sovereignty itself, as in some contemporary Indigenous literatures.<sup>17</sup> But

even these critiques risk being recuperated by the nationalizing discourse of the field whenever they are engaged under the banner of “CanLit.”

From a spatial perspective, however, the endurance of the nation within the recent proliferation of space-based critiques is better read as reflecting the fact that there is no natural, neutral positioning for the field. To the contrary, as Szeman rightly insists, the literary is “constituted within the circuits of ideological operations of which the belief in the ahistorical autonomy of literature is itself one of the chief and most powerful examples” (32). Another of the “chief and most powerful examples” of this ideological operation, I am arguing, and the one which lies behind not the persistence of the nation but the persistent critical fantasy of leaving the nation behind, is the belief in the *spatial* autonomy of literature — the dream that entire bodies of literature can be fully separated from their defining spatial parameters, as if they were distinct objects that could be removed unscathed from abstract national boxes and plopped into what Cameron and Dixon called the “autonomous world of literature.” In this sense, at least, it is a mistake to imagine postnational critiques to be liberating literary studies from their entrapment within the national frame, or to celebrate the transnational as a decisive step toward this end. Perhaps especially within the context of CanLit, the postnational and transnational are better recognized as the products of the field’s formation within the national frame than as harbingers of its demise.

It is tempting, when watching the nation endure even as the field of Canadian literary studies is refracted into an ever-widening range of spatial registers, to reiterate the claim with which Sandra Djwa closed her 1976 essay: that to look back on the past several decades of the field is “to discover the essential continuity of our literary past and present.” And yet as we look forward to the field’s next forty years, we need not accept that the expanding scales of critique will be forever and fully contained by the national frame, or resign ourselves to collectively becoming, as it were, postnational all across Canada. Nor does the return to the nation in Canadian literary studies need to be a melancholic repetition of its underlying regressive politics, so that, as Kamboureli puts it, CanLit gets positioned in “a cul-de-sac” where its politicized gaps and racialized occlusions are imagined as inevitable or even recuperated as its animating force (“Introduction” 12). No, the transnational return — defined here as the return to the nation even where critics

are self-consciously engaging ostensibly trans- or postnational critical paradigms, but also as yet another round of critical re-engagement with the international contexts of Canadian literary production — can be read otherwise. Through a spatial perspective, the transnational return in Canadian literary criticism can be recognized as welcome evidence that the nation is no longer something to be naively celebrated or triumphantly transcended, but rather a foundational concern that rightly continues to be examined within the swiftly shifting set of spatial registers that make up our turbulent present.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Early material from this paper was presented on the occasion of the fortieth anniversaries of the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures (ACQL) and *Studies in Canadian Literature*, at a joint ACQL and Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies panel at the University of Ottawa (2015), and at the 2014 ACQL conference at Brock University. This research was undertaken with the support of a Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship, held in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of Waterloo, and as a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. My thanks to SCL's anonymous peer reviewers, whose feedback strengthened the essay.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nine years before Confederation, for example, Thomas D'Arcy McGee called for "Protection for Canadian Literature," insisting it was required for the country-to-be to "preserve a distinct individuality from other nations" (21).

<sup>2</sup> I am gesturing here to Jonathan Kertzer's study, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> I am quoting from Davey's later book of this same title, *Surviving the Paraphrase*.

<sup>4</sup> This is a point made by Smaro Kamboureli, "Introduction," *Shifting* (24), Szeman, *Zones* (157), and Robert Lecker, who summarizes Davey's 1974 ACQL presentation by suggesting that its caustic critique effectively established thematics as a primary critical mode by overstating its import: "you may not have known that thematic criticism is sacred," Lecker imagines Davey thinking, "but now, through this attack, it will become sacred."

<sup>5</sup> Here I am gesturing to Kamboureli's reading of what she calls the "Paradigm of Canadian thematic criticism" in her introduction to *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Criticism*. See especially 19-24.

<sup>6</sup> I am using "CanLit" as the common shorthand for Canadian literary studies that "names it as an established formation" (Brydon, "Metamorphoses" 2) and that "has, more or less, always functioned as a referent to Canadian literature in English" (Kamboureli,

“Preface” ix). Even as this essay similarly focuses on English Canadian literature and criticism, it is worth noting this convention as part of the field’s exclusionary spatial politics.

<sup>7</sup> See Nick Mount’s study, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005). See also Gerson, especially 36-51.

<sup>8</sup> I’m quoting here from the slides of Findlay’s 2015 ACQL presentation, “Fracking Canada or Refining it?” University of Ottawa, 1 June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see also Kit Dobson and Smaro Kamboureli, *Producing Canadian Literature: Authors Speak on the Literary Marketplace* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Notably, Joseph Bauerkemper reports that a “‘nationalist turn’ in American Indian literary studies” has been unfolding against the backdrop of the larger transnational turn, suggesting that “literary nationalism has become the dominant paradigm of American Indian literary studies” (397).

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/2013/10/canada-reads-2014-which-novel-can-change-the-nation.html>

<sup>12</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I benefited greatly from doing my PhD under the auspices of the TransCanada Institute — home of the MCRI-funded TransCanada Project — at the University of Guelph. In fact, the TransCanada Institute is perhaps especially notable in this context, for while it explicitly set out to grapple with the nation, it did so self-consciously, making its “primary goal” to “initiate, foster, facilitate, and produce collaborative research on the methodologies, pedagogies, institutional structures, and contexts that inform and shape the production, dissemination, teaching, and study of Canadian literature and culture in Canada, as well as globally” ([transcanadas.ca](http://transcanadas.ca)).

<sup>13</sup> Fox makes this point in reference to the contents of a special issue she is introducing, but it holds true for much of the field as a whole.

<sup>14</sup> Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Sherrie Malisch, “In Praise of the Garrison Mentality: Why Fear and Retreat May be Useful Responses in an Era of Climate Change,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 39.4 (2014): 177-98.

<sup>16</sup> I’ve made a fuller version of this argument elsewhere. See Zacharias.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Heath Justice’s insistence upon the value of the nation as a conceptual category is so significant within the context of CanLit studies precisely because Indigenous nationhood levels a direct challenge at the settler-colonial logic implicit in the field’s topocentrism. Canadian literary studies may be inescapably tied to the Canadian nation, but it is the very sovereignty or authority of that ordering principle that is challenged by what Sa’ke’j Henderson outlines as the *sui generis* (“self-generating”) rights of Aboriginal peoples, rights that are founded on their legal, cultural, and historical primacy on the part of Turtle Island that has come to be called Canada.

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