

## REVIEWS

## Roads Not Yet Taken

*Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. xviii + 233 pp.

*Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* collects the thirteen plenary papers presented in June 2005 in Vancouver at a conference, "TransCanada," intended by its organizers, Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki, to launch a series of conferences and publications that would, as they declared in their call for papers, provide "a complete rethinking of the disciplinary and institutional frameworks within which Canadian literature is produced, studied, and taught."<sup>1</sup> This, then, was at its beginning a Grand Project, characterized by large statements about the current condition of Canadian literature as a field, bold assumptions that the field suffered from crisis and incommensurability, and by not inconsiderable self-confidence.

The origin of the project appears to have been a paper that Miki presented at the 2002 University of Ottawa "Reappraisals" conference on Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature—and one grammatically troubled sentence in that paper in particular: "The crisis in CanLit studies, and the crisis in Canadian studies as a whole, has to do with a substantial disruption of purpose and direction, a disruption that has disabled its narrative function." Nowhere in this paper, however, did Miki offer evidence that there was such a "crisis." Instead, like the TransCanada project, he asserted crisis as a self-evident condition, and with it the ideas that "the narrative of the nation...had unravelled" and that "the crisis opens up the potential for a process of rearticulation through which the nation as such is re-remembered; that is, reconceived..." (95). In the TransCanada CFP this declaration or invention of a crisis was only slightly re-worded as a declaration that "Canada has reached yet another turning point," that "the unraveling of the nation's coherence may have resulted in a loss of purpose," and that "this turning point" represents "a critical moment that invites a complete rethinking."

Exactly what the connections were between the parts of this alleged crisis was obscured in both Miki's essay and the CFP by very slippery syntax. At the Ottawa conference, Miki's difficulties with verb and pronoun agreements in his 'crisis' sentence, which I quoted above, were exacerbated by the vagueness of his phrase "has to do with." What is the connection that

he was purporting between “crisis” and “disruption of purpose and direction”? One “has to do with” the other, the sentence tells us, but not *what* one has to do with which. Similarly, in the CFP the writers, presumably Miki now aided by Kamboureli and other committee members, announced: “We believe that Canada has reached now yet another turning point, trying as it is to negotiate its multicultural phase of the last two decades with the pressures of globalization. While the unravelling of the nation’s coherence may have resulted in a loss of purpose, this loss is not to be lamented.” There appears to be some relationship asserted here among the “turning point,” the “negotiation,” and the “unravelling of the nation’s coherence,” but in fact all that the syntax has done is juxtapose them. Is the “turning point” caused by the “unravelling of...coherence”? Or is it the “negotiation” that has brought Canada to the “turning point.” Who knows? Apparently not the conference organizers. What began as a seemingly bold statement of belief—“We believe”—unravels into an incoherence at least as great as the one that the organizers would like to attribute to the nation.

Whether this vagueness was intended to mask a confusion in the ideas behind the project or was caused by the confusion, the result does not inspire confidence. Nor does the fact that neither Miki nor Kamboureli, the apparent authors of these generalizations about Canada and Canadian literature, have much experience with Canadian literature written before the 1960s. By and large the conference participants, whom Kamboureli describes in her preface to *Trans.Can.Lit* as having given “a resounding ‘yes’” to the CFP, have the same limitation—raising the question of how qualified many of them were to say such a “yes.” The Works Cited to their papers in *Trans.Can.Lit* includes only six literary texts published between 1900 and 1970, and only four published before 1900. If there actually is a crisis in Canadian literature as a field, perhaps it is that so much of its pre-1970s work is being neglected, or that its most outspoken scholars are now specialists in the contemporary.

Kamboureli’s preface to *Trans.Can.Lit*, however, suggests that the organizers to some extent have backed away from the messianic rhetoric of the CFP. In outlining the history of the TransCanada project, she makes no mention of crises, critical moments, or turning points, and no allusion to those parts of the call. She locates the problems that she hopes the project will confront, not in “Canadian literature,” as the CFP did, but in instrumental views of the humanities held by bureaucrats and legislators, and in what she calls “pre-emptive” attempts by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to force humanities scholars “to

perform in ways that support 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 form partnerships; to pursue research the results of which were immediately transparent and useful; and to engage in projects defined as innovative and interdisciplinary” (xi). Rather than appearing to want to deplore and expose “the incommensurable aspects of the study of the study of Canadian literature as a praxis in Canada,” as the CFP announced, she tries to celebrate the incommensurable by transferring it from literary study to the nation itself by remaking the nation—in a play on Benedict Anderson—into the “unimaginable”: “Canada is an unimaginable community, that is, a community constituted in excess of the knowledge of itself, always transitioning” (x). From a nation that was three short years ago “unravelling,” Kamboureli creates a nation that exceeds imagination.

So what was the 2005 agenda of TransCanada? To a considerable extent it seems to have been to extend the “is Canada postcolonial” question that was launched by Laura Moss as a conference theme in 2000 and published as an collection of essays by Wilfrid Laurier UP, the publisher of *Trans.CanLit*, in 2003, and then elaborated by Cynthia Sugars in the 2002 Ottawa “Reappraisals” conference and in her two 2004 collections *Unhomoely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism* and *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*. Kamboureli and Miki contribute to both Sugars collections; two of *Trans.CanLit*'s contributors, Diana Brydon and Stephen Slemon, contribute to all three collections. The activity around Moss's question in turn may be connected to the decline internationally of postcolonial studies and its displacement by globalization and diaspora studies (Slemon makes a spirited analysis of the “disciplinary redistribution” of “once-robust” postcolonial studies in his contribution to *Trans.Can.Lit* [76], and Richard Cavell offers a brief requiem to postcoloniality in his [87-88]) and to arguments in the US that ‘invader-settler’ literatures such Canada's cannot be considered postcolonial. That is, these collections may signal an attempted migration of Canadian postcolonial studies into Canadian studies (a sort of last-gasp of what Gary Boire once called “the colonizing drive of postcolonial theory itself” [232]) as an institutionally more secure base for its activities. Certainly, all four volumes have sought to blur distinctions between the two fields, to restate the questions of Canadian literature in postcolonial terms, and to shift scholarship to the post-1960s writing which most Canadian postcolonial scholars prefer to study.

At the second TransCanada conference in October 2007, however, one of members of the original organizing committee, Alessandra Capperdoni, dissented strongly from Kamboureli's conclusion that the CFP had received "a resounding 'yes'." In a paper entitled "Cultural Poetics as Global Poetics," she chided the participants of the first conference for having ignored the CFP and having "repeatedly" returned "to a notion of 'Canadianness' which reifies 'the nation' as the sole ground for cultural and political legitimacy." Consequently, she continued, "the 'trans' of the signifier Canada, which the organizers tried to emphasize, was hardly taken up as a de-constructive category; instead, it was significantly re-contained within the boundaries of the nation-state."<sup>2</sup> The resistance to the CFP that Capperdoni identified is distinctly visible in the papers collected in the volume under review. None are as grandiose in their calls for action as was the CFP, and some openly express their reservations about TransCanada's announced goals. Brydon concludes her paper "TransCanada, as I wish understand the term, can no longer invoke a 'national dream' (Berton) but must find its way toward imagining a renewed federalism within a planetary imaginary" (16). Daniel Coleman takes the national TransCanada highway metaphor of the conference title seriously and, in a paper that is otherwise largely an advertisement for his book *White Civility*, concludes by calling for a new attention to the diversity visited by that highway "with its constant back and forth, its incessant improvisation and exchange, and its state of being, like all roads in this county, always under construction" (43). Winfried Siemmerling concludes his paper by opposing "postnational approaches that disregard national borders" and recommending that scholars "both maintain and reinforce nationally designated fields of cultural and literary inquiry in Canada *and*...engage in relational and comparative perspectives that also highlight local specificity" (140). Ashok Mathur implicitly questions the postcolonializing of Canadian literature that the CFP had appeared to seek, and seems to be defending incommensurability when he asks whether it was a "good thing" that "writers of colour became Canlit" (141). Perhaps the most resistant paper is that of Julia Emberley on the family as a site of coercion and its exploitation by contemporary religious fundamentalism, in which she makes no mention of CanLit, TransCanada, or the unravelling of nations, and provocatively concludes by suggesting the deauthorization of "literature" as a category of analysis (172).

There is also little mention in the papers of urgency or crisis or turning points in Canadian literature. Brydon does write of a "current crisis of English," by which she seems to mean that literature is no longer viewed

as a “replacement for religion” or “an education for citizenship” (6), but she neither expresses dismay nor offers a new role. But in a footnote to a passage about possibilities for change at Canadian universities, she also makes a faintly patronizing reference to the CFP’s rhetoric, writing “while I recognize that discourses of crises and turning points are tropes of literary criticism in the modern era, I am also convinced...that the current period provides an exceptional challenge and opportunity for shifts in culture, economics, and society” (188, n6)—thus effectively disassociating herself from that rhetoric as well as lowering it in intensity. Like many of Brydon’s papers, her “Metamorphoses of a Discipline” in this collection is much less an argument for a position than an aggregate of quotations from other scholars interspersed with statements of her own agreement or dissent, with the apparent aim of preparing a reasonable ground from which “to move forward” (6). Exactly where one might be after moving forward does not seem to concern her. Slemon writes of similar narrowly academic urgencies—of language departments at risk of being closed, of English programs being eliminated or “morphed into training units for writing skills,” of literature programs [being] buried under the monolith of Media and Communications Studies” (82) but has little to suggest except that literature scholars seek to engage creatively with “research institutionalization” (81) by becoming members of faculty committees and senior administration. In addition, he challenges what he sees as the “progressivist” and “disciplinarily insular” assumptions of the CFP that a single field such as CanLit could transform itself while the general field of humanities scholarship continued unaltered (76).

Of the remaining essays, Lily Cho’s on “Diasporic Citizenship: Contradictions and Possibilities for Canadian Literature,” makes the most conscientious attempt to address the questions of the call. Arguing that Black Canadian, Native Canadian, and Asian Canadian literatures show a paradoxical desire to be considered “*both* within and without the nation” (93), Cho plausibly argues the “incommensurable” thesis of the CFP while theorizing such incommensurability as productive contradiction as well as “uneasy but nonetheless unavoidable relation” (108). Cho’s essay reminds one that many of the writers of these literatures—Pauline Johnson, Joy Kogawa, Fred Wah—were perceived as Canadian long before they became constructed or self-constructed as racially specific. However, her implicit assumptions that “Canadian” is, or has been, a homogenous category that only such racial questions disturb, or that “diasporic” in its increasingly loose contemporary usage cannot apply to nineteenth-century working-class Irish, Scottish, and English immigration to Canada, are troubling

ones. They underline for me the extent to which many of the participants in the TransCanada and similar projects have become blind to class as a site of oppression.

In general, then, the papers are stronger and more nuanced than one might have expected from the language of the CFP. On the other hand, they are also less focussed. Only Brydon's, Slemon's, Cho's, and Cavell's papers seem to look toward the subtitle's goal of "resituating the study of Canadian literature," and none of these has specific suggestions. Siemerling seems opposed. Emberley seems uninterested. Coleman, Mathur, Peter Dickinson, Len Findlay, Lianne Moyes, Rinaldo Walcott, and Lee Maracle have their own preoccupations.

Some readers may be curious about the punctuation of the *Trans.Can.Lit* title, with its apparently abbreviating periods after "Trans" and "Can" but not after "Lit". The period after "Trans" did not appear in the conference program and does not appear on the TransCanada Institute website ([www.transcanadas.ca](http://www.transcanadas.ca)). The plural form "transcanadas" appeared in some early materials in 2005 and is preserved in the website, but in recent printed materials, including the programme for the second conference, the institute's name sports a tilde over the first "n" and a circumflex over the third "a" and prints the "d" in Canada as a thorn. Some statement about multiplicity or variability is apparently being attempted, although the newly introduced accents seem to foreground, if anything, alphabetic Eurocentrism. The circumflex, moreover, suggests much more awareness of francophone-Canadian writing than the 2005 conference or this collection offers. Whatever the meaning of its punctuation, and despite its dominant concern with minority and anomaly, *Trans.Can.Lit* does not transit francophone Canada. Here the collection displays the most serious limitation of postcolonialism as a methodology in Canada: so few of its practitioners have competence in French, or have knowledge of francophone-Canadian literary or cultural history. A methodology that is founded on concern for racially, economically, ethnically and sexually based power disparities has so far had very little to say about the approximately one-quarter of Canada that has its own hyphenations (First Nation, Haitian, Vietnamese, Italian, Greek, etc.), that produced the Papineau and Riel rebellions, the FLQ, and such literature as Pierre Vallières's *White Niggers of America*, Michèle Lalonde's *Speak White*, Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert*, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's *Monsieur Melville*, and Dany Laferrière's *How to Make Love to a Negro*—to list only the most obvious. This limitation, of course, is symptomatic of the disastrous splitting by Canadian universities of Canadian literature between English and French departments,

and of the failure of English departments to require relevant language competence of candidates for advanced “Canadianist” degrees. “We’ve taken a noticeable detour around Quebec,” Dickinson tells TransCanada participants in his paper (46). “The highway runs through a troublesome country,” Slemon advises at the end of his (83). *Trans.Can.Lit* leaves many roads for the project and its organizers to travel—back in time as well as into Jacques Ferron’s “uncertain country.”

## Notes

- 1 This part of the original call for papers is now preserved on the TransCanada Institute website as “TransCanada: a Rationale,” <http://www.transcanadas.ca/transcanada1/rationale.shtml>. Accessed December 30, 2007.
- 2 I am citing the manuscript of Dr. Capperdoni’s paper, “Cultural Poetics as Global Poetics,” of which she has kindly sent me a copy.

## Works Cited

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