

Canadian Literature 6.0

Laura Moss

What kind of talk do you bring to the table?

—Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *He Manawa Whenua Indigenous Research Conference*

In September 2015, I became the sixth editor of *Canadian Literature*, following Margery Fee, Laurie Ricou, Eva-Marie Kröller, W. H. New, and George Woodcock. Daunting. Each editor has left a mark on the journal and the field: Margery ushered in the digital humanities and conceived of the open-access educational resource *CanLit Guides*; Laurie brought ecocritical awareness and academic creativity; Eva-Marie formalized the peer-review process, made the journal international in readership, and extended the francophone content; Bill placed Canadian literature within the field of Commonwealth studies and emphasized the work of minority and Indigenous writers; and Woodcock (it feels presumptuous to call a man I never met by his first name) began it all with a goal of critical eclecticism. As I said, daunting.

Before I began as editor, I was asked to craft a vision statement for the journal. Generally, I am more inclined towards creating “To Do” lists than vision statements. I tend to approach manifestos with incredulity. Still, I was asked. My vision is straightforward, albeit aspirational: publish important work on Canadian literature and culture; support the teaching of Canadian writing through the continued development of *CanLit Guides*; maintain multidisciplinary; circulate criticism that counts; steer clear of theme-spotting; value literary history; pay attention to a diversity of voices and perspectives; read broadly and deeply; review equitably; imagine communities; think in planetary terms; honour the place we stand and the territories we are in; never be seared by the beauty of crocuses; take on ethical debates and issues of social justice; think intersectionally; continue to make connections across generations between scholars, readers, and writers; share knowledge; avoid siloes; fight fiercely for the humanities; care about the state of the profession; acknowledge precarity; nourish generosity; recognize originality; appreciate creativity; question generic expectations; welcome radical play;

experiment with ideas; surprise people; enjoy intellectual arguments; remember that no language is neutral; harness the power of speech; stimulate conversation; speak with a loud voice; listen well; sustain interest; and empower through learning. In short, my goal is to ensure that the journal continues to be vital to a wide readership.

Since *Canadian Literature* was launched in 1959, Canada, Canadian writing, and literary criticism have changed dramatically. What hasn't changed is the journal's commitment to creative critical engagement. In his first editorial, Woodcock announced that the journal "seeks to establish no clan, little or large. It will not adopt a narrowly academic approach, nor will it try to restrict its pages to any school of criticism or any class of writers" (4). While the schools keep convocating, the desire not to promulgate any single one has not. For Woodcock and now for me, "good writing, writing that says something fresh and valuable on literature in Canada is what we seek, no matter where it originates" (4). That's it: *fresh and valuable takes on literature in Canada*. *Fresh* relies on surprise, originality, and unpredictability. In 1977, Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon edited an issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* in which they pointed "to an ultimate goal: the consistent practice of a critical craft in Canada that is equivalent and responsive, in range and discipline, to the literature it treats" (138). The calibre of critical practice today corresponds well with the calibre of literary works, but I think we can keep pushing criticism creatively to unsettle expectation and read anew, building productively on the foundations already well-established.

Canadian Literature is concerned with the study of writing in Canada. This is sometimes about Canada but more often it is not. There has been a good deal of discussion focused on the limitations of national designations because, it is argued, they act as catchalls for a disparate array of cultures that cross time, space, histories, and genres. Indeed, other meritorious categories are used elsewhere: transnational studies, hemispheric studies, diasporic studies, border studies, Indigenous studies, fiction studies, poetry studies, theatre studies, and genre studies, as well as studies of critical race, gender, class, the environment, and language, among others. It is no longer possible to say, as Hugh MacLennan did following the Second World War, that "literature is not an international activity in any sense, and though new visions and new techniques can flow across borders, the substance of any living literature must come out of a society to which the writer belongs" (138). Contemporary institutions of culture are predominantly global in scope, particularly in the Internet society to which we belong. Some writers cross borders regularly

and belong to multiple communities. Others write within, beyond, and back to local literary traditions and, sometimes, to dispiriting legislation. I see the benefits and continuing relevance of national groupings—mainly because I think it is important to recognize the specificities of historical, political, and social contexts in the production and reception of the culture we study. Context contains memory. Contextual knowledge is necessary to help us remember what is or what has been done in the name of the nation and within the specific laws of the polity. National groupings, however, neither provide us with a map of how to read nor a hierarchy of criteria.

I teach both Canadian and African literatures, sometimes comparatively. I recently came across a pertinent discussion of critical expectation by Malawian novelist Shadreck Chikoti. Out of frustration at the persistence of expectations of certain themes dominating writing from the many communities across the continent of Africa and the diminishment of works that do not meet such narrow expectations, Chikoti recently wrote, “We are still describing African literature by content, so, an African writer becomes somebody who writes about Africa, while an American writer is simply a writer from America. One is defined by content while the other is defined by descent” (n. pag.). I have heard a similar complaint from a friend in New Zealand. The shift from content to author—“about” to “from”—happened in Canadian studies as critics and writers realized that a dystopian feminist novel was just as Canadian as a story about surviving a loveless marriage on a prairie farm, that a poetry collection that probed climate change was not only warning about dangers to the immediate environment, and that a novel by a Canadian writer set in a Bombay apartment community deserved to be applauded for the magnificence of its prose with a national literary award even if Canada was never even mentioned in its pages. The question of “descent,” itself, has garnered much debate (see M. G. Vassanji’s 2006 editorial in this journal, for instance). For me, the “Canadian” of this journal’s title, *Canadian Literature*, refers not to expectations in content or form, but rather to the author—Canadian by birth, by choice, or by circumstance.

The “Literature” in the journal’s title refers to the study of fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction, and criticism, but it also encompasses more expansive cultural concerns and broader questions raised at the intersections of art and community. Furthermore, it embraces a consideration of the paradigms through which we encounter the literary itself in the contexts of Canadian cultural production. Literature can serve as an umbrella under which we can productively study the conjunction of such things as radio, film, and fiction.

What is *valuable* writing? Instead of quantifying impact or commodifying writing here, I think instead of social utility. The space of this journal as a space to speak freely, debate passionately, think safely, question vigorously, argue vehemently, and express contentious opinion can't be taken for granted. The world today is uneven. In some places, freedom of expression is severely compromised. Some writers work in a climate of censorship. Some are fighting for the right to speak openly. Some people are discriminated against because of who they are or what they believe, and they are anxious about the reprisals of speech. Some lack the ability to associate freely or dissent without fear. There are millions of displaced persons, fleeing war and terror for unknown futures, who have little access to safety, let alone venues of self-expression. Sometimes poets' words are used against them in court. Mobility rights are curtailed for some, while others fly freely to meet and discuss ideas at conferences and symposia. Still others risk everything to share knowledge. Valuable writing, then, is criticism that recognizes the inequitable world in which it is produced: art in global, national, and local environments. There is an onus on a publication like this one to take notice of the communities in which we live. This is not a call to perform collectivity or the encouragement of solidarity criticism. We need to recognize the responsibilities we carry as citizens with the freedom to speak and an audience who listen. When we write about books and culture, through whatever methodological apparatus we choose, we must remember what a privilege it is to be able to do so and to make sure that our words count.

WORKS CITED

- Chikoti, Shadreck. "I Am Not Done with African Immigrant Literature." *Africa in Words*. 18 Feb. 2016. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.
- Cameron, Barry, and Michael Dixon. "Mandatory Subversive Manifesto: Canadian Criticism vs. Literary Criticism." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 2.2 (1977): 137-45. Print.
- MacLennan, Hugh. "Literature in a New Country." *Scotchman's Return and Other Essays*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1960. 137-41. Print.
- Vassanji, M. G. "Am I a Canadian Writer?" *Canadian Literature* 190 (2006): 7-13. Print.
- Woodcock, George. "Editorial." *Canadian Literature* 1 (1959): 3-4. Print.

Erratum:

We regret that an error was introduced to Shannon Maguire's article "Parasite Poetics: Noise and Queer Hospitality in Erin Moure's *O CIDADÃO*" (issue 224) by editorial staff at *Canadian Literature*. The spelling of the name of the poet who wrote *Sheep's Vigil By A Fervent Person* should read "Eirin Moure" instead of "Erin Mouré" on page 53. Our apologies to the author of the article and to the poet.
