

“What’s New?”

Sheila Giffen and Brendan McCormack

“**W**hat is new in the study of Canadian literature? Quels sont les nouveaux débats et les nouvelles perspectives qui animent les études sur la littérature canadienne?” These are the questions we posed in our call for papers for this special issue of work by emerging/early scholars. We welcomed submissions “on any topic from senior graduate students, postdocs, and those who might consider themselves to be emerging scholars (self-defining, with no time limit on this category).” The idea was to give a space to relatively new scholars to showcase their recent work. The submissions poured in. The call was so successful and the papers were so good, in fact, that in addition to this issue we will publish another one also dedicated to the work of emerging scholars in the new year. It seemed fitting to turn the editorial for the inaugural *Emerging Scholars* issue over to some emerging scholars themselves. Brendan McCormack and Sheila Giffen, doctoral students in the English department at UBC who also work at the journal, have taken the question we posed in the issue’s CFP as an opportunity to ruminate more widely on how they grapple with intricacies of the “new” as emerging scholars. (Laura Moss, editor)

What’s new in Canadian literature? The range of topics explored in this issue is diverse to the point of defying an encompassing answer, inviting a simpler two-word response in this case: a lot. Ariel Kroon (*Oryx and Crake*) and Christina Turner (*The Afterlife of George Cartwright*) read familiar books in new ways, while Christopher Doody (William Arthur Deacon) and Kristina Getz (Earle Birney) offer new interpretations of older

CanLit icons and their work. Dominique Hétu's comparative approach to writing in French and English puts spatial theory and care ethics in conversation to propose a new theory of reading, while the interviewers who converse with Mini Aodla Freeman and her editors illuminate the complexities of giving an old text new life. Both historical and contemporary in interest, a shared investment in reading or revisiting Canadian literature anew is one common ground between the various trajectories of this issue that speak to some of the directions the field is taking.

When we sat down and discussed the simple question "What is new?" we quickly realized how it invites other complex questions concerning novelty that we both find ourselves contending with as we imagine how to position our work as graduate students—Sheila in transnational literature and postcolonial theory, Brendan in Canadian and Indigenous literatures. What are the implications of claiming newness in scholarly work? What past or present conditions give rise to novelty? How might charting the *new* also involve a process of historicization and *return*? As scholars, how can we do the work of situating our current condition within a genealogy of thought that contextualizes critical moments and turns? Reflecting beyond the specific call for this issue led us to speculate more widely on the idea of newness itself as a concept we've broached in our thinking as emerging scholars—what *is* new?

Sheila Giffen

In effect, there is nothing "new" about claims to novelty in critical and aesthetic practice. For many, Ezra Pound's famous statement "Make It New" encapsulates the bold moves of modernist aesthetic innovation—pithy shorthand for an early-twentieth-century artistic movement determined to shed the shackles of past tradition and forge something daringly new. But as Pound scholars acknowledge, this characterization of modernism's guiding ethos is more a product of scholarly discourse than an assessment of a newly emergent artistic practice. According to Michael North, Pound's use of "Make It New" had more to do with recycling ideas from ancient contexts than it did with new forms, and, further, North contends that the credo did not serve as a modernist manifesto in the 1910s, but was retroactively designated by literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s (170). Pound's modernist maxim marks a curious trajectory in claims to newness: the phrase most commonly associated with aesthetic innovation in fact refers to a fraught process of historical return (in this case also bound up in a fascist politic), yet its uptake

by mid-century critics decontextualized its meaning and contributed to a disciplinary definition of modernism centered primarily on newness. The story of “Make It New” has prompted questions in my own thinking: when might a claim to newness rely on a degree of dehistoricization? How and when do we as scholars ascribe novelty to certain artistic moments and critical modalities, and what purpose does such novelty serve within the economies of disciplinary formation and scholarly argumentation?

As academics, we’re expected to make original and new contributions to scholarship, but is novelty the same thing as originality when it comes to making an argument? In many respects, the work of building an *original* insight requires a complex engagement with what has come before. Claiming an idea is unprecedented and new might therefore risk turning away from a critical genealogy of thought in order to more decisively clear the way for innovation. This question was in my mind this past semester when I took a graduate seminar with Denise Ferreira da Silva on “Feminist Thought and the Reactionary Turn,” where we considered (among other things) how the emerging philosophical school of speculative realism responds to (reacts to/abandons/dismisses) postmodernism and poststructuralism. Here’s a case where the discourse of novelty seems risky to me. Rather than trace the particular ways in which certain thinkers or ideas falter, the scholars at the forefront of this new school of thought often seem to make claims that clear away the need for engagement with previous scholarship, all in the name of the innovative and the new. The most tenacious claims come from the idea that past currents of critical theory are limited due to their inability to address pressing global crises. What interests me here is the extent to which charting a new critical modality seems to rely on proof of its capacity to resolve social issues. New and innovative work, the argument goes, should have practical and immediate application in today’s world, and further, might benefit from doing away with past scholarly trajectories.

Without disagreeing with the impetus behind a socially engaged research ethic, I want to trouble how it operates within the increasingly neoliberal university. In the context of one of the most insistent promoters of newness—corporatized research institutions (where many of us work)—how does the promotion of novelty influence what forms of critical inquiry are valued? Does funding affect how certain kinds of new and innovative scholarship are validated based on their social utility in our present moment? Applicants for grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) face increasing pressure to not only attest to

their original scholarly contribution, but to outline plans for knowledge mobilization, translation, dissemination, and public engagement. I'm in full support of socially engaged research programs, but I wonder about the pressures placed on researchers to fit within granting agency goals and categories. Can you make a project intelligible to a funding agency when you conduct research questioning the very limits of institutionalized community engagement programs, for example? In response to the financialization of research and increasing pressure to justify the ROI (Return On Investment) of academic endeavors, we may be forced to trade in terms and argumentative logics deeply at odds with our most profound commitments and lines of inquiry. Further, I wonder how the commodification of knowledge and the pressure to publish sooner and more frequently might diminish the potential for sustained and careful engagement with a longer and wider range of thought.

This past year, I took a course with Phaniel Antwi on Black and Indigenous writings across the Americas. Beginning with very recent scholarship addressing how Black studies and Indigenous studies are rarely brought into conversation, the arc of readings we followed showed how literature has in fact attested to these intersecting histories for decades. Reflecting further on this course has prompted me to consider the risks of presuming a particular critical innovation belongs only to a present moment of scholarship. If I position my work in relation to what I perceive to be outmoded criticism as I work to develop an original contribution to scholarship, will I be implicitly operating on an assumption that we now inhabit a more enlightened moment of scholarly innovation? What narratives of progress and enlightenment are active within claims to bold and new scholarship?

In my own work, I am in the process of outlining a comprehensive field list in postcolonial studies and asking myself: how will I position myself within this field? How can I make a contribution and develop original scholarship that emerges from deep engagement with a long history of writing? Here, my commitment to contextualizing and historicizing schools of thought poses a different set of challenges: What does it mean to assemble a series of foundational texts in a field propelled by anti-canonization—a field whose interventions lie, in part, in exposing the discipline of literary studies as a consolidation of imperial power? I want to simultaneously push against canon formation (within a colonial tradition of education) and trace critical genealogies of postcolonial thought. If discourses of novelty and newness are fraught, then the work of a historical return may be as well.

Perhaps the questions we opened this meditation with could be adapted to ask: How might charting the *new* also involve a process of historicization and *return*, as well as visioning for alternative futures beyond the colonial strictures of past thought? In other words, how can we go back to the future in our work?

Brendan McCormack

What is your original contribution to the field of knowledge? This is a benchmark question assumed of most scholarship and made explicit for graduate students in the requirements for doctoral projects. As we attempt to distinguish ourselves as original researchers, however, emerging scholars may interpret expectations of novelty as pressure to position our work in terms of radical departures that might be radically overstated. My personal archive of grad papers and project proposals would reveal rhetorical postures of “groundbreaking,” “subversive,” and “paradigm-shifting” to be idiomatic almost to the point of cliché, and almost always untenable if rigorously historicized. As we enter into disciplines, ignorance of their historical formations can be bliss, liberating and at times uniquely generative. Reinventing the wheel is fun—the prospects of changing the field from the outside with a fresh perspective intellectually exhilarating. And while some fresh scholarship does just that, part of emerging within a field of study is becoming attuned to those historical antecedents, both literary and scholarly, that may turn radical departures into nuanced interventions. The wheel has probably already been reinvented, likely more than once. The gap to be filled is maybe more of a sliver. And the anxiety of influence following such realizations can sometimes be crippling (as it was for me after my comprehensive exams). Emerging as a scholar thus involves negotiating a reflexive politics of novelty with attendant ethical concerns over what constitutes responsible innovation. How do we assert ourselves as new while also being generous in our contentions with the old? How do we “join the ongoing discussion,” as I describe research to my students, without casting previous voices reductively to serve the purposes of our own novelty? How do we maintain critical generosity as we critically, and rigorously, engage past assumptions and assertions?

I’ve lately questioned how we might take up these questions as Canadianists, given an imperative to newness seems stitched into the fabric of the field we enter. Approaching the discipline’s history from the present, I’m often struck by how making it new is practiced as a critical objective in

itself, sometimes in turns that treat the past irascibly. In part because of its relative newness (historically), Canadian literary study has been continually fixated on its own coming into being, and the intensity of such metacritical self-reflexivity has often imagined disciplinary emergence through a tenor of emergency in response to perceived crises of purpose. Cosmopolitanism curbed our romantic nativism; nationalism ascended against our colonialism and garrisoned us from Americanization; formalism remedied thematicism; various posts- and -isms continue to productively unsettle our nationalism. And so our emergence is often narrated. The personal pronouns are intentional here, impossibly consolidating not a nation but a scholarly field, because I've found this history is told less as an iterative flux of critical trends than as a lineage of successive scholarly generations, within which "we," as an emerging community, now conceive our work as a type of inheritance. As is usually the case with family trees (mine certainly), ancestry arouses pride but also blushes with some embarrassments. And thus to emerge against the spectres of untoward tradition, to say "we are not them," seems to require breaks from the past.

A *longue durée* approach to the field's history, beginning well before its more recent institutionalization, might thus chart the new as produced dialectically by a series of shifts and breaks extending into the present. I join a generation of scholars that is, of course, just as restless with the past, emerging more than a decade after the millennium into a field whose energies continue to unfold the discipline following a sustained period of postcolonial critique, pursuing such myriad rubrics as transnational, globalization, cosmopolitan, diaspora, ecocritical, and Indigenous studies, while at the same time scrutinizing with redoubled intensity the institutional and disciplinary frameworks that continue to consolidate (even as they contest) the field itself. The collaborative work of the TransCanada Institute (2007-2013), for example, founded by Smaro Kamboureli and envisioned as a project of significant and serial disciplinary re-evaluation(s), has pushed in vital directions a field continuing to distinguish itself from its pasts. As the opening lines of Kamboureli's introduction to TransCanada's *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* (2012) again herald, "Something has happened to English Canadian literary studies. It has a cast of 'new' characters . . . no longer exclusively concerned with Canadian literature's themes and imagery, its forms and genres, or its linguistic nature and structure" (1). The social and material exigencies of the present continue to insist upon ongoing shifting, transforming, resituating, and reinventing;

conjugating the past into the present progressive. In short, we are now, still, very much searching for methods to articulate ourselves *anew*.

To some, this may sound an overly familiar rendering of CanLit, one that hints at progress of the new too linearly against a reductive historical narrative (were we ever *exclusively* anything?). Yet, I find this narrative important to grapple with as an emerging scholar because it is very much the story of the discipline my formative training as a Canadianist instilled within me, one that continues to be normalized retrospectively. As a student, I cut my CanLit teeth on brilliant authors such as Eden Robinson, Fred Wah, Dionne Brand, and Madeleine Thien; I earned a BA and MA without once reading canonical texts from the likes of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, Mordecai Richler, or Frederick Philip Grove in the classroom, let alone Northrop Frye. I've been a Teaching Assistant for five lower-level undergraduate courses on Canadian literature, of which only half of one surveyed literature now considered historical. I could count on two hands (maybe one) the number of Canadian texts published prior to 1970 I've personally encountered on both sides of the classroom, none of which were criticism. This is not to say that I learned nothing *about* Canadian literary or critical history as a student. Indeed, I learned a great deal, for what usually animated the syllabi I encountered was either an implicit or explicit break from the canons and thematics of a now-outmoded iteration of CanLit—ideas belonging to someone else's past, some other generation's radical departures, so they seemed to me. The received narrative of literary history I encountered was one that had largely “normalize[d] the fierce cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s as [its] point of reference,” as Carole Gerson puts it (29). The irony of my own emergence within CanLit, as it continues to survive what Frank Davey called the paraphrase, is that swaths of literary and intellectual history had effectively been reduced and homogenized—paraphrased—into something against which the present might see itself as distinct. My comprehensive exams began an ongoing project of historicizing that has since invited, demanded even, new understandings of these histories as important antecedents that keep overlapping with the present in the continuing patterns of Canadian cultural production.

Certainly, a great deal of dynamic research continues in historical periods, particularly areas like modernism and print culture studies, and I don't imagine my own training is representative of an entire generation's. But my bet is that it may be closer to the rule than the exception in the asymmetry

of its historical lines of inquiry that privileged the new above the old. There are many explanations for this, not least of which being the sheer volume of diverse literature and invaluable criticism produced in the period we loosely define as contemporary. Moreover, for scholars in a field still defined in curricula by a monolithically unperiodized and capacious national category, the demands of teaching as generalists while researching as specialists are daunting. Yet as emerging scholars, particularly those of us working in contemporary areas, I believe we need to think carefully about received narratives of disciplinary history and how they may cultivate a critical culture of perpetual novelty. What assumptions are taken as truths when history is (re)produced second-handedly? Has literature in Canada ever been as parochially nationalist as some have deemed it? If not, what was (is still) left out of the discussions? If so, what do we do with this past, if it is a past we find troubling? For me, going back to literary history has offered answers to some of these questions, though new ones keep arising.

In a 2010 *Globe and Mail* column on “Why Mordecai Richler isn’t being studied in Canadian universities,” Sam Solecki is quoted as saying that Canadianists suffer from “terminal ‘presentism’” (qtd. in Barber n. pag.). While I wouldn’t go so far as to diagnose a terminal condition, I do worry about the pitfalls of presentism, both in my own work and more widely. Presentism can be strategic for emerging scholars facing pressure to publish—I once received a reader’s report that accepted an article as a significant scholarly contribution in part because it would likely be the first thing published on a new primary text. But, as George Elliott Clarke suggests, losing sight of the past in appeals to the new can also lead to a type of “‘false consciousness’ that ‘new’ thought is being produced” (179). Critiquing a notion that the questions Canadianists broach in the present are merely contemporary—the relationship between literature and colonial nation, nation and world, local and global, assimilation and exclusion, for example—Clarke answers: “No, ‘CanLit’ remains the expression of an imperially implanted, (progressive) conservative, European monarchy wedded culturally and economically to a libertarian, radical republic. Wherever ‘here’ is, it begins here, in this *essential* contradiction of our existence. (As such, our ‘ancestors’—Frye, George Grant, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, etc., remain *embarrassingly* pertinent)” (179). Appealing not for nostalgic returns to restrictive nationalism but recognition of its pervasive hold in a present that attempts to imagine otherwise, Clarke’s reminder of CanLit’s contradictory temporalities implies risks in claims to both newness

and historicizing. How do we advocate cultural history as pertinent without advancing history's canons and modalities? When does making it new involve precarious acts of forgetting? Is the wheel truly reinvented if it still rolls the rut of colonial history? How does the discipline now see itself in its past?

In my own attempts to imagine the ongoing work of decolonization as a settler scholar working in both Canadian and Indigenous studies, I hesitate over quick claims to temporal breaks. "Not my literary history" is simply too close to "not my history." For an English still coming to grips with its colonialism, the literary side of a wider project Margery Fee calls "critical anthropology with settler culture thrown into the mix" (197)—one that maintains an ongoing interrogation of the past as it opens to new directions in the present and future alternatives—is nowhere near finished. And I see returns to literary history that keep unsettling and reading beyond the prominent critical idioms mobilized by prior generations as part of this forward-looking project for emerging scholarship. On one hand, we still have much to learn about what we were that continues to saturate who and where we are. On the other, we may have much to unlearn about what received narratives assume Canadian literature to have been.

At a recent pedagogy workshop hosted by *CanLit Guides*, I found myself discussing with a senior faculty member why it was that I never had to read Frye as a student. He genially dubbed my generation of scholars the "children of postmodernism" (a label I feel somehow both too old and too young for). For Jean-François Lyotard, though, the "post" was not a break from history but a return to the past and what had been forgotten or suspended in the emergence of the new—the paradoxical back-to-the-future logic of a *future anterior*. The insights from contributors to this special issue show us how new research can emerge with precisely such attention. As emerging Canadianists, whether we see our work as contemporary or historical, I hope we continue moving forward into the past as we keep making it new.

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