

# Cultural Grammars of Nation, Diaspora, and Indigeneity in Canada

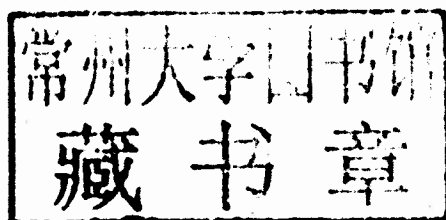
Christine Kim, Sophie McCall, and Melina Baum Singer, editors



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## **Cultural Grammars of Nation, Diaspora, and Indigeneity in Canada**

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## TransCanada Series

The study of Canadian literature can no longer take place in isolation from larger external forces. Pressures of multiculturalism put emphasis upon discourses of citizenship and security, while market-driven factors increasingly shape the publication, dissemination, and reception of Canadian writing. The persistent questioning of the Humanities has invited a rethinking of the disciplinary and curricular structures within which the literature is taught, while the development of area and diaspora studies has raised important questions about the tradition. The goal of the TransCanada series is to publish forward-thinking critical interventions that investigate these paradigm shifts in interdisciplinary ways.

### Series editor:

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*CULTURAL GRAMMARS WAS*, from its very beginnings, conceived at the edge of acceptable grammar. As we struggled for the words that would articulate the present moment in Canadian literary studies, with its conflicted critical conversations about nation, diaspora, and indigeneity, we often found ourselves trailing off into ellipses ... or expletives. But the outstanding papers we received in response to our call for papers amply demonstrated to us that we were taking part in a larger conversation, a conversation that was more comprehensive than we first realized, and more comprehensible when shared among many voices. We are convinced that *Cultural Grammars*, with its inspired and inspiring analyses, will set Canadian cultural criticism on new pathways.

We are deeply grateful, first and foremost, to our contributors, who so thoughtfully engaged with the collection's main questions. Through the din of their wise, insurgent, collaborative voices, the contributors demonstrated so powerfully that the constraints of cultural grammars can become possibilities. We are also thankful to Smaro Kamboureli, Canada Research Chair in Critical Studies in Canadian Literature and director of the TransCanada Institute, for encouraging us to pursue this project with rigour and for supporting it as part of her TransCanada series, and to Lisa Quinn, our editor at Wilfrid Laurier University Press, who was in equal parts supportive and exacting in her efforts to help us produce the best possible book. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous readers of the manuscript for their excellent suggestions for revision; to the entire editorial and publicity team at WLUP, including Rob Kohlmeier and Heather Blain-Yanke; to copy editor Valerie Ahwee; to Dave Gaertner, the indexer; to the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using

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—Christine Kim, Sophie McCall, and Melina Baum Singer, co-editors

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## Introduction

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Christine Kim and Sophie McCall

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS VOLUME comes from a sense that over the past couple of decades, both the tenor of Canadian cultural and literary studies and its terms of critical debate—such as race, nation, difference, and culture—have shifted in significant ways. The chapters in this collection focus on literary and cultural treatments of a wide range of topics pertaining to Canadian history and politics spanning one hundred years. Our contributors explore, for example, the Asian race riots in Vancouver in 1907 (Lee), the cultural memory of the internment and dispersal of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s (Kim), the politics of migrant labour and the “domestic labour scheme” in the 1960s (Mason), the role of foster care in fracturing Aboriginal families and communities in the 1960s and 1970s (Eigenbrod), the politics of the transgendered and transsexual body in queer studies in the late 1980s and 1990s (Capperdoni), and the trial of Robert Pickton in Vancouver in 2007 (Emberley). Our particular interest lies in how diaspora and indigeneity have and continue to contribute to this critical reconfiguration, as well as how conversations about diaspora and indigeneity within the Canadian context have themselves been transformed. *Cultural Grammars* is an attempt to address both the interconnections and the schisms between these multiply fractured critical terms, as well as the larger conceptual shifts that have occurred in response to national and post-national arguments.

The objective of the volume is to examine tensions within and between concepts of indigeneity and diaspora, and to analyze the ways those tensions transform concepts of nation. *Cultural Grammars* is shaped by a number of timely and provocative questions: Whose imagined community is the nation?

What are the limits of "Indigenous literary nationalism" and how can the movement acknowledge the complexities of its own terminology? What does it mean for subjects to be precariously positioned in relation to one or more nation-states? To what degree are diasporas comparable? On what grounds might Indigenous and diasporic critics converse? *Cultural Grammars* does not offer an overarching narrative or single line in response to any of these questions; rather the volume places side by side chapters that analyze very different discourses and practices. In this sense, the book generates an open field for further research and reading.

## POSTCOLONIAL NATION

In attempting to address the tensions between indigeneity and diaspora, we noted that the term "nation" often impinged upon our discussions. Indeed, we found that theories of diaspora and of indigeneity, while often critical of the discourses associated with modern, industrialized nation-states, silently relied on nation-based imaginings of collectivities. We came to realize that diaspora and nation are interdependent and mutually constituting, just as indigeneity and nation are reciprocally contingent and responsive. This insight echoes critics such as Benedict Anderson (1983), Himani Bannerji (2000), and Sneja Gunew (2004), who draw attention to the persistence of the nation in an age of globalization and of Aboriginal sovereigntist social movements. While the death of the nation has so often been prophesied, with varying degrees of optimism, fear, and ambivalence, it nevertheless continues to shape the language of Canadian cultural and literary studies. How do we understand the mixed feelings that arise in response to the prediction that the nation will disappear, especially when paired with its refusal to do so? This situation compels us to consider the endurance of national discourse and question why the nation is a site we continue to return to in our deliberations of literature, culture, and politics. Such an investigation demands that we consider the historical stakes of conversations about the nation and literature in Canada and how have they been reconfigured in the contemporary moment.

At the same time, such a project reminds us that the study of Canadian literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. In her introduction to *Home-Work*, Cynthia Sugars traces the emergence of Canadian literature as a subject of scholarly study from 1952 with the inclusion of a panel at ACUTE, and dates the teaching of the subject as beginning in the 1960s (1-4). The surprise that A.S.P. Woodhouse voiced at the high degree of interest generated by

this panel on Canadian literature indicates how lingering colonial attitudes toward education, culture, and emerging literatures have shaped the development of the study of Canadian literature. In this way, it can be seen that the push toward a national literature in the Canadian context, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, was tied to a particular kind of decolonization that addressed issues of value (national and aesthetic), tradition, and canonicity. Denis Salter's "The Idea of a National Theatre" speaks to these pressures as they manifested themselves specifically within the sphere of Canadian drama. He describes the process of developing a national theatre as a tense struggle that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and points out that it continued to be waged because of the belief that the production of "the classic Canadian play" would help alleviate the persistent colonial cringe within Canadian theatre (90). A similar debate unfolded in the perpetual search for the great Canadian novel, which was to be both "quintessentially Canadian" and unmarked by particularities that might detract from its acclaim as a "universal" story.

The institutionalization of Canadian literature as part of a growing wave of nationalism and an effort to decolonize Canada is perhaps not surprising given that similar links were being made around the world as various decolonization movements between the end of the Second World War and the 1960s resulted in declarations of independence.<sup>1</sup> The official end of European colonial rule in numerous countries had significant and far-reaching symbolic and material effects, and tied together nationalism and decolonization in complex ways. 1961 also marked the publication of Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (translated into English as *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1963), which in turn inaugurated the rise of postcolonial theory within the academy. Postcolonial theory has been immensely important to critics grappling with matters of power, representation, and empire in Canada, both because it provides a language to discuss these kinds of issues and because the entry of postcolonial concerns politicized the academy in particular ways.<sup>2</sup> As the liberation movements around the world and the growing body of writings about them demonstrated, the project of decolonization needed to address the material realities of colonialism as well as the representation of these political and economic conditions.

As a settler colony, Canada was postcolonial, but it clearly presented a very different postcolonial condition from those countries that had physically struggled to liberate themselves from European rule. The challenge of holding onto the potential that postcolonial discourse offered for Canadian

conversations while working through the imperfect fit of this discourse is two-fold: firstly, the settler colonies and “actual colonies” had different relationships with the colonial empire and, secondly, because Canada as a nation was and continues to be marked by unequal power relations. In other words, part of the problem lies with the fact that in the Canadian context the imperial centre is not singular. While nationalist movements during the 1960s and 1970s equated the emergence of nationalism and decolonization to a certain degree, subsequent critics and groups demanded an interrogation of whose imagined community the nation is. Of the Canadian context, Himani Bannerji critiques notions of national identity as “ideologically homogenous” and exclusive, arguing that a certain

core community is synthesized into a national we, and it decides on the terms of multiculturalism and the degree to which multicultural others should be tolerated or accommodated. This “we” is an essentialized version of a colonial European turned into Canadian and the subject or the agent of Canadian nationalism. It is this essence, extended to the notion of a community, that provides the point of departure for the ideological deployment of diversity. (*The Dark Side* 42)

The dominant vision of the nation is itself a colonizing representation, and multiple constituencies have and continue to express their dissatisfaction with the material and ideological limits of Canada as a nation. Elsewhere in *The Dark Side of the Nation*, Bannerji further examines the ideological basis of the Canadian nation and claims that Canada has long been imagined—in terms of race, history, language, and culture—as a “white” community (64). Interestingly, however, many marginalized groups have chosen to use the language of decolonization as a way to express their frustrations. Rather than abandoning the framework of the nation, there has tended to be a recuperation of it.

Critical race politics in the 1980s, for instance, was deeply invested in creating a place for minorities within the nation. The Writing thru Race conference (1994) is one example of how these sentiments would generate effects into the next decade. While other anti-racist events designed to build coalitions between visible minorities and larger communities such as Telling It (1988), In Visible Colours (1989), About Face, About Frame (1992), ANNPAC conference (1992), and The Appropriate Voice (1992)<sup>3</sup> held during the late 1980s and early 1990s brought together First Nations and people of colour, none received the explosive attention that Writing thru Race did. Much of the public outcry focused on the use of federal funds to hold

a conference whose participation was limited to racialized and Aboriginal writers, and the desire to explore the experiences of racialized writers outside of the centre/margin model that Bannerji critiques above was denounced by many as exclusionary. And while the conference was certainly a moment of community building—indeed, the funds withdrawn by the Department of Canadian Heritage were replaced and exceeded by fundraising efforts—tensions between and within First Nations and visible minority communities and individuals did exist (Lai, “Community Action” 123). Monika Kin Gagnon notes that this dialogue between writers of colour and First Nations writers made evident the “radically different ideological positions” they occupy and emphasized the need to continue to struggle with these issues and for existing cultural politics to “give way to different, if more dramatically effective, crises of representation” (*Other Conundrums* 71).

The difficulty of sustaining these affiliative politics to some extent reflected the radically different arguments the groups had with the Canadian nation-state: while community activists from a range of ethnic minority groups were demanding greater space *within* the nation, Aboriginal social movements were pushing *against* government’s efforts to ever more closely incorporate their nations within institutional structures of citizenship and national belonging. Following Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s proposed White Paper of 1969, which sought the rapid assimilation of Aboriginal groups into mainstream Canadian society, a new era of First Nations activism began, shaped by the goals of self-determination and self-government. First Nations groups across Canada formed political organizations, such as the Indian Brotherhood, the Native Women’s Association of Canada, and the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and launched friendship centres, newspapers, and magazines. Thus, the period of the 1970s and 1980s, key moments in the emergence of post-colonial and nationalist discourse in Canada, was also critically important for the development of Indigenous politics.<sup>4</sup> Feminists, queer and trans communities, Quebec, and regionalists also challenged the exclusivity of the Canadian nation during this time. As the grievances of these multiple communities suggest, the Canadian nation has never been a homogeneous entity, but instead has always been comprised of multiple threads, concerns, and groups, and the locus of much contention precisely because so much is at stake in being represented as part of this imagined community.

## INDIGENOUS AND DIASPORIC INTERVENTIONS

Our interest here is in the ways in which diaspora and indigeneity put pressure on discourses of nation and the potential transformations they make possible. Along with paradigms of globalization and transnationalism, diaspora and indigeneity have supplemented, and in some cases even replaced, discourses of postcoloniality, perhaps suggesting that the broader project of decolonization requires multiple kinds of tools and strategies, including reimagining nation and community. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that each of these theoretical frameworks has undergone a series of transformations and that tensions exist between the postcolonial, diasporic, and Indigenous. For example, Daniel Heath Justice points out that while Aboriginal peoples might sympathize with the challenges immigrants face, they must still remember that "the opportunities for non-Natives in Canada come as a consequence of the land loss, resource expropriation, social upheaval, and political repression of Aboriginal peoples" ("The Necessity" 145). Furthermore, as Sophie McCall argues in her contribution to this volume, First Nations studies has long had a troubled relationship with postcolonial studies, the most well-known airing of this tension perhaps being Thomas King's article, "Godzilla vs. the Post-colonial." That colonialism is far from over is evident in contemporary legal struggles over matters such as land claims and residential schools.

Diasporic and Indigenous scholarship is often critical of Canadian national discourses and the practices of the state, yet both critical streams maintain certain investments in the language of nations. For instance, the discourses of sovereignty and nation-to-nation relations have become key words in Indigenous literary studies. This is a crucial shift for, as critics have argued, nationalism is problematic not just because it excludes certain constituencies, but also because of the colonial assumptions that are inherent in nation as a discourse itself. It is particularly significant then that the language of nation continues to be taken up by Aboriginal critics and activists interested in matters of sovereignty. First Nations critics' discussions of literary sovereignty rework the language of nationalism in order to promote a linking together of politics and literature and advocate historicizing and politicizing Indigenous writing to avoid the reduction of literature to ethnography (Womack, "A Single Decade" 78).<sup>5</sup> Such an approach locates Aboriginal literature within specific tribal contexts as well as within the broader category of indigeneity as a way to guide interpretive practices (Justice, "The Necessity" 151). At the same time, it must be noted that Indigenous literary nationalism is also undeniably



“a political act” as it effectively denies “the power of the State to claim either historical or moral inheritance of the land or its memories” (Justice, “The Necessity” 146).

Different but related pressures are placed upon the language of nation by diaspora in the Canadian context as it provides a vocabulary for working through national displacement and the condition of (un)belonging. In Canada, diaspora studies has largely moved away from its initial affiliation with Jews and Jewish experiences and increasingly has drawn upon the language of critical race theory, as Melina Baum Singer argues in this volume. The displacement and migration that are part of diaspora, as well as visible in the history of diaspora studies, open up new ways of thinking about identification, nation, and community. Paul Gilroy, for instance, moves away from national identities in order to consider the “processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents” (*The Black Atlantic* 2). In so doing, Gilroy recognizes that structures of domination and cultural practices and identities, among other things, exceed national borders (7). Gayatri Gopinath interrogates the connection between diaspora and nation through queer diasporas, arguing that it asks us to “reimagine and reconstitute their particular, fraught relation to multiple national sites, and demands a rethinking of the very notions of ‘home’ and nostalgia.... a queer diasporic subject prompts a different understanding of the mechanisms by which national belonging is internalized in the constitution of ‘modern’ national subjects” (“Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora” 264). While neither Gilroy nor Gopinath argue for an abandonment of the nation, both throw it into question by focusing on diaspora as a source of culture and identity. That said, while diaspora is a useful tool for exposing the limitations of national identity and interrogating the notion of national belonging, we recognize that a potential pitfall of the term lies precisely in its seemingly infinite applicability. As the editors of *Theorizing Diaspora* note in their introduction, diaspora “is often used as a catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements, however privileged, and for all dislocations, even symbolic ones” (Brazier and Mannur 3). Diana Brydon voices similar concerns about current deployments of diaspora while also noting that it has much in common with globalization as both promote an emphasis on mobility rather than on a state or society and operate as “totalizing explanation[s] for contemporary experience” (“Postcolonialism” 700). While it is not our intention to limit conversations about diaspora, we hope that future debates might maintain sight of the political spirit in which the term has tended to be used in earlier discussions.