

**Kamboureli, Smaro, and Robert Zacharias, eds., *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012.**

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*Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* is the second in a series of three edited collections to emerge out of the influential TransCanada conferences. *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* is far-reaching in its critique not only of cultural objects but also of the institutional formations that produce literary works and circulate meanings and values about them, which situates the collection, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its origins, at the forefront of current critical moments in our fields. In line with the goals of the TransCanada project, *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* scrutinizes literature as cultural practice, examining critical methodologies and working to broaden the definition of the literary in the face of “shifting pressures” on the “nation-state and its [...] institutional structures” (xi), and as such, it offers an invaluable contribution. One of the many strengths of the collection is its intellectual flexibility both in the range of cultural forms it analyzes and in its commitment to careful examination of the institutional and social relationships within which Canadian literary and cultural works are produced, circulated, and theorized. Without seeking to be comprehensive, it brings together key intersecting debates, examining, for instance, the ways Canadian Literature ‘translates’ across the French-English divide (Mezei), across the Atlantic (Fuller) or the Pacific (Fujimoto). It offers trenchant critiques of the cultures of redress, recognition, and civility (Wakeham, Findlay), explores the crucial shift in the 1990s that Larissa Lai suggests mark an absorption and redeployment of critical antiracist work as writers of

colour gained a slippery foothold in a neoliberalizing nation (172), and maps a growing current desire to decolonize our practices and situate them within critiques both of neoliberal space (Derksen) and the “formative biopolitics of Canadian state-building” (Brodie 88). Most inspiring is the collection’s commitment to self-reflexivity about the university itself and the constraints of scholarship as institutionally practiced, which are touched on here and explored more fully in *Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities* (Chimo Issue 64). Among many excellent pieces, of particular interest to this reviewer are the chapters “Amplifying Threat” on Quebec’s Bouchard-Taylor Commission by Yasmin Jiwani and Monika Kin Gagnon, “Some Great Crisis” by Rob Zacharias, and Peter Kulchyski’s “bush:writing.”

Jiwani and Kin Gagnon analyze newspaper coverage of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, observing the ways in which mediated discourses, which conflated populism with democracy and reinforced racialized and racist discourses, served to amplify the crisis. The piece analyzes coverage during the Commission and examines the representations of women wearing the *hijab* and *niqab* in the context of media reporting. By critiquing the ways in which the Commission situated itself as a response to populist white Quebecois anxieties *vis-à-vis* racialized and gendered otherness, the chapter powerfully challenges the logics of gendered racialization that the Commission’s framing actually amplified and congealed. The chapter thus offers a necessary intervention that should be required reading on the subject of Canadian and Quebecois racism.

Zacharias explores the ways in which the battle of Vimy Ridge is mobilized in national Canadian discourse as an originary crisis. He astutely observes a tension in theorizations of the nation: “if the national narrative operates by effacing the violence of its past, how are we to understand the Battle of Vimy Ridge, unabashedly celebrated as Canada’s triumphant founding moment?” (116). Most intriguing is the move to link the mythologizing of this “originary crisis” to its “function in later national discourse” (113), to which he devotes the latter portion of the article. Analyzing the crisis thesis and drawing it forward to observe the ways in which the “violence at the origin [...] comes to constitute the spectre of force by which the state draws its remarkable authority” (119) is a fascinating and valuable contribution. Its argument, while sharp and useful, could be taken further. The article’s claim that “the unending demand that we remember [Vimy Ridge] nearly a century later runs counter to the myth of national amnesia” (128) creates a logical conundrum: Vimy Ridge, since it took place in Europe and not Turtle Island, can actually be seen as the perfect empty-origins battle, in which everything of import happened elsewhere. The stories that would capture the violence of Canada’s origins--battles to resist colonization--are perfectly erased in the incorporating of a European battle as the ‘founding myth’ of Canada. Zacharias’s paper points towards (but does not substantively address) the crucial observation that Vimy functions not only as a foundational violence, but also as a further displacement of the originary colonial violence upon which Canada is founded. To offer but one available example of these kinds of erased stories, see Lee Maracle’s discussion of resistance to colonization that took place at Khahtsahlano’s village and the subsequent loss of the village and the canoe stop where SFU Harbour Centre now stands (Fee and Gunew 216).

Peter Kulchyski's chapter embodies, in both its form and its content, the kind of turn that *Shifting the Ground* calls for, in which academic writing can be not only critiqued but done differently. Fusing narrative with more conventional theoretical language, Kulchyski offers a powerful, grounded critique, challenging western assumptions about what constitutes the literary or the textual. It is not possible to do justice to the power of the piece in a few short lines; suffice to say that this chapter's "embodied deconstruction" (267) elegantly interweaves the vivid meaning of place with a necessary critique both of Canada and of Euro-western textuality to "disturb the very being of literature" (262) and bring an Indigenous (if necessarily hybrid) way of reading and writing into the collection.

Of course, there is always more work to do if we are to take seriously Lee Maracle's famous call to "move over" (10), discussed by the editors. The introduction offers a strong and self-reflexive critique: "inclusion can become an instance of policing [...] a strategy designed to pre-empt any radical restructuring of the discipline [...] as long as their representational role is guided by the discipline's sense of propriety" (15). Kulchyski's piece opens with an epigraph by Emma Laroque, whose mitigated presence as epigraph rather than chapter points to ways of relating that have yet structurally to transform the discipline in a cultural sense, despite hopeful forays and repeated calls from multiple quarters. As Kamboureli observes, the emergent moment is not, in fact, one moment (11); it occurs in multiple moments and multiple spaces. Institutional constraints, as the book observes, continue to shape our capacity as literature scholars to engage with some of the most clear-eyed and urgent critical analyses of our cultural moment,

especially if such analyses are produced too far outside the known edges of literary studies not only as a conceptual field, but also as a cultural one. Len Findlay's urgent *leitmotif*, to decolonize the academy, is relevant here and also in some ways embodies this tension: *how* we do things in the academy, culturally speaking, is partly a function of *who* does them. In short, the collection offers a powerful tracing of multiple articulations and tensions that have become so productive for Canadian Literature as a field in recent years, while pointing to certain structural limits that remain "beyond the conventional domain of the study of Canadian literature" (10). As such, the collection offers an important contribution that is strengthened when read alongside and in dialogue with other recent works such as, for instance, LaRocque's *When the Other is Me* or Harsha Walia's *Undoing Border Imperialism*. *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* offers a powerful mapping of many of these emergent moments in CanLit in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even as it points to and encapsulates conversations yet to be had and emergences yet to be integrated into the cultural discourse of and about what it means to theorize Canadian Literature with a continuing commitment to understanding the relevance of CanLit even as we engage in ethically "unravelling its sedimentary structure" (11).

#### Works Cited

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