

# The History of the Book, Literary History, and Identity Politics in Canada

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Résumé de l'article

National literary histories, like the Literary History of Canada, generally tend to perform exclusions on the basis of class, gender, race, language, and ethnicity; the only way to correct such past hegemonic exclusions is to assert the cultural legitimacy of specific communities' writings by writing new literary histories. Book history can be important for uncovering texts' transmission and reception histories surrounding the engagement of colonized groups with Western textualities, for its concentration on the institutions that mediate our engagement with literature, and for taking into account the institutions and economic forces involved with canonicity. The newly-established History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada project (HbiC/HLIC) has a significant role to play in rethinking Canada's cultural pasts by incorporating work based on identity politics, thereby becoming a truly interdisciplinary and inclusive project.

# The History of the Book, Literary History, and Identity Politics in Canada

TRAVIS DECOOK

FRANCESS G. HALPENNY ends her chapter “From Author to Reader,” from the fourth volume of the *Literary History of Canada* (1990), with the following:

The next decades of Canadian literary history can be, promise to be, most interesting for developments in awareness and knowledge of how and what Canadians publish. Challenges abound in accounting, on the basis of research, for the *histoire* of Canadian books, for the past development and present state of the Canadian book trade, for the place of the book in Canadian society. If they are met, we shall know much more about how the passage from author to reader has occurred in Canada and has created our literary history. (404)

Halpenny's comments here, appropriately among the closing remarks of the most recent instalment of the *Literary History of Canada*, derive from a sense of the importance book history studies can play in literary history. Book history was consolidating itself into a distinct discipline around the time Halpenny was writing, with literary scholars, historians, bibliographers, theorists, and others coming to terms with the disciplinary overlap necessary to address the complex roles print culture plays in society.

This present essay attempts to explore some of the ways that book history can strengthen and enhance our understanding of Canadian literary history. My primary points of reference for this discussion emerge from the debates centred on literary history writing in Canada and elsewhere, which have been based on the interests and concerns of identity politics. These debates emphasize that literary history writing frequently performs exclusions on the basis of class, gender, race, language, and ethnicity. But they have also shown the inevitable appeal of writing literary histories, and that the best way to correct such past hegemonic exclusions is to assert the cultural legitimacy — and sometimes even existence — of specific communities' writings by writing *new* literary histories. Similarly,

efforts to construct anthologies of previously excluded writings have been fundamentally concerned with interventionary, politicized assertions of identity. Examples of interventionary literary histories and anthologies abound, from Bonnie Zimmerman's *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989* to Nellie McKay and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, the latter signifying the attainment of official cultural legitimacy in its very title.

By first discussing some of the main challenges that identity politics have posed to literary history writing in Canada, I wish to situate the newly established History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada project (HBiC/HLIC) as a national, historical narrative of Canadian culture. The HBiC/HLIC is currently hosting open conferences and consulting with potential contributors as part of the planning stage for its proposed volumes, to be published in both French and English. It is thus at a point in its development where the questions and issues surrounding literary history writing can be positive and constructive influences. Such influences are to some extent evident, and if they continue, the HBiC/HLIC could supplement and enhance our understanding of Canadian literary history and our future engagements with it.

## I. Identity Politics and Canadian Literary History

All literary histories, even contemporary interventionary ones, depend upon assumptions of identity and shared connections that are often highly contentious. For instance, an Asian-American literary history may imply a homogeneous group when the reality is a multitude of identities resulting from factors such as different relationships to countries of ancestral origin, the extent to which one considers oneself an American citizen, and what part of Asia one is identified with (Geok-lin Lim 151, 155-56). But in order for the existence of these writings to be asserted, at certain times and in certain circumstances such homogenizations are necessary, although it is always imperative that self-consciousness about this constructed identity be registered so as not to imply a specious coherence where a multiplicity exists.<sup>1</sup>

The first two editions of the *Literary History of Canada* (LHC), published in 1965 and 1976, contain articulations of national and cultural unity which may have been similarly necessary. Just as interventionary literary histories must construct a more or less unified identity to ground them, the writing of Canadian literary history in the 1950s and 1960s was likely made possible only through assumptions about a "Canadian iden-

tity.” During this time, Canadian culture was typically perceived as inferior in relation to that of Britain and the U.S., to the extent that Carl F. Klinck, the *LHC*’s original general editor, had deep doubts about the project’s viability (“Giving” 103).

The myth of Canadian cultural identity was primarily promulgated by Northrop Frye’s Conclusion to the first edition, which forms the focus for my discussion of Canadian literary history and identity politics. The Conclusion is frequently cited as the most influential part of the *Literary History* (Lecker, “Quest” 284), and was centrally involved with the consolidation of literary studies in Canada. It achieved legendary status by providing a viable fiction of a unifying experience for the nation: early settlers’ engagement with hostile, impersonal nature, resulting in a “garrison mentality” (830). Frye stressed the importance of regionalism in other writings on Canadian culture, yet his Conclusion is predominantly concerned with making essential connections. His emphasis on the importance of nature to the social imagination was also central to his “Preface to an Uncollected Anthology”—a work highly influential to the *LHC*—which depicts the vast unknown of the Canadian wilderness as forming the underlying concern for poetry in Canada (166). While Frye astutely recognizes the dominance of these themes in Canadian literature, his theory has the effect of eliding other possible positions from which literature was and is written.

Today, concepts such as Klinck’s “cultural life of the country” (Introduction xi) and Frye’s “Canadian imagination” (830) are largely perceived as homogenizing, essentializing, and exclusionary. Frye’s underlining of the role of the garrison mentality in shaping the “Canadian imagination” was frequently received and employed by critics as a totalizing explanation of national identity. Moreover, the Conclusion was written at a time when literary study was for the most part divorced from examinations of social and political factors such as gender, class, race relations, colonialism, religion, and ethnicity. While Frye in the Conclusion is ultimately concerned with the social relationships that emerge from a uniquely Canadian situation, he minimizes the influences of many such factors active both in the past and present. The implications and influence of Frye’s ideas in the Conclusion extend far beyond the scope and focus of this paper, which is not primarily intended to be a discussion of Frye’s thought. Instead, what is important to note here in terms of identity politics is that the Conclusion offers a myth of Canadian cultural identity, and asserts that Canadian literature provides insight into this identity (822). As Robert Lecker puts it, for Frye, “Literature becomes a means through which

Canadians can know themselves and verify their national consciousness. The value of Canadian literature is that it reflects the value of the nation” (“Canonization” 662).

The unifying fiction that legitimates the *Literary History* obviously poses significant problems for various forms of identity politics operative in Canada. Frank Davey discusses the homogenizing effect of the *Literary History*’s nationalism, arguing that it paradoxically relies upon both aesthetic and humanist discourses, with the particularity of Canadian cultural identity opening up onto universally human experience (15-16). The thematic criticism that derived in large part from Frye’s theory continued this unifying trend in Canadian criticism, no doubt in part because, as Francesco Loriggio notes, “The concept of theme permits the assembling together of some texts on semantic, rather than stylistic or strictly linguistic terms” (60), useful in a context as internally divided as Canada’s. But in doing this, Loriggio argues, the thematic approach also fosters a critical environment that excludes ethnic writing: “The outlook that [thematic critics] such as [Robert] Sutherland, [D.G.] Jones and [Margaret] Atwood espouse cannot adequately accommodate ethnic texts.” This outlook professes the existence of unity, or at least connections, ultimately founded on exclusion. Loriggio continues: “the key axiom of thematic criticism is the assumption of coherence, ‘total coherence,’ in the words of the Northrop Frye of the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism*” (59). In post-1960s Canada, as Linda Hutcheon discusses, the imaginary viability of such notions of coherence becomes insupportable, owing in large part to such counter discourses as feminism and an increasingly apparent and vocalized multiculturalism (*Canadian* viii-ix).

These criticisms stem from concerns mirrored by contemporary American commentary on the exclusionary and hegemonic canonicity of mainstream American literary history. Sacvan Bercovitch discusses the dissensus surrounding previous assumptions about the American myth of “frontier initiative” and ideas of the aesthetic as timeless, transcultural, and transcendent of politics — both ideologies being touchstones of earlier American literary histories (637). Bercovitch articulated this notion of dissensus in the mid-1980s, when critiques of the canon were gaining force in the American literary establishment. His concerns echo those of Annette Kolodny, critiquing Moses Coit Tyler’s notions of “shared traditions.” She states that his “evocation of a literature ‘single in its commanding ideas and in its national destinies’ is an illusion sustained only by selective exclusion” (292), a critique which could be made of Klinck’s and Frye’s contributions to the *Literary History of Canada*. Kolodny also

points out that categories and valuations established and enshrined by literary histories have the tendency to become naturalized, and we therefore become unable to engage with marginalized writings without exclusionary preconceptions structuring our reading (296-97).

Indeed, similar attacks have been explicitly levelled against Frye's Conclusion by both Robert Lecker and Diane Bessai. Lecker attacks what he sees as Frye's implicit canonization of Canadian literature in terms of its expression of national social reality ("Canonization" 662). Bessai critiques Frye's environmental and modernist biases which inevitably disparage colonial writers (355-56). In the "Preface to an Uncollected Anthology" and Conclusion to the first *LHC* edition, Frye also espouses the idea that literary discourse transcends the political, and Davey criticizes his reference in the Conclusion to "an 'autonomous world of literature'" (Frye qtd. in Davey 15).

Frye relies on a similar construct when he argues that "no Canadian author pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself" ("Conclusion" 821-22). The "Preface," seemingly in contradiction to this, states that "Culture, like wine, seems to need a specific locality." Yet this local quality must apparently be also apolitical — politics in the "Preface" are essentially impersonal and delocalized: "When cultural developments follow political ones, we get an anonymous international art" (178). Instead, poetry must come from poetry: "the poet's quest is for form, not content. The poet who tries to make content the informing principle of his poetry can write only versified rhetoric" (179). In the Conclusion to the second edition, Frye expresses a similar idea, contrasting "writing from within literature and within its genres, as opposed to the 'I've got something important to say' approach of the amateur" (330). What Frye terms "rhetoric" forms a binary opposition with poetry; it is informed by worldly concerns as opposed to the workings of the creative imagination.

Frye was no aesthete: he was greatly concerned with the role of culture in society, and was actively engaged with political questions and debates. However, his Conclusion and "Preface" — the latter claiming that "It is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets, and poetry can deal only with the imaginative aspect of that environment" (166) — on the whole disparage the role of social concerns for poetry. They generally render writing from a socially conscious perspective less valid, and despite Frye's occasional positive comments regarding politically oriented authors in the Conclusion (833-34), the overall effect of this work is to posit literature's most lofty occupations within the realm of genre and form. These two texts

predominantly privilege literary discourse and sublimate its production to a realm beyond the reach of political struggle and social issues and concerns. Its assumptions, therefore, denigrate writings originating from a fundamentally political standpoint, as is frequently the case for minority literatures. As Loriggio argues, ethnic writing “proclaim[s] the sociocultural or sociolinguistic to be literary,” and “brings into the picture aspects that by official norms are of extraliterary (i.e., documentary or ‘sociological’) relevance and that, rehabilitated, are incommensurable” (62). Indeed, it could be argued that *all* literature involves the “sociocultural or sociolinguistic.” The ideal model of literary creation Frye propounds in the Conclusion, however, for the most part denies this “extraliterary” source of vitality operative in texts.

The criticisms of the *LHC* by Lecker, Bessai, Davey, and Loriggio are part of what Kolodny saw as a general shift in the academy regarding literary history, noting that “the new scholarship asserts as its central critical category not commonality but *difference*” (293). In Canada, this “new scholarship” (perhaps a somewhat unifying term itself) has been evident in the more recent literary histories, such as the fourth volume of the second edition of the *Literary History of Canada*, published in 1990, and *A History of Canadian Literature*, published in 1989 (the former edited by W.H. New and the latter written by him). These literary histories mark a substantial break from the first two editions of the *LHC*. New’s introduction to Volume 4 makes readily apparent the influence of identity politics, as well as poststructuralist and postmodern theory. He points out the need to acknowledge indeterminacy in regards to evaluation (xi), consider “minority views about power and marginality” (xii), and, above all, assert a sense of plurality in our idea of Canadian literature. New mentions francophone and indigenous literatures and cultures, apologizing for not having the space to deal with these writings at length (xii). *A History of Canadian Literature* registers many of the same concerns as the fourth volume of the *LHC*, and also includes a section on Native literatures, asserts cultural plurality throughout, and describes the emergence of multiculturalism in Canada (which gives New the opportunity to contrast it with the U.S. [221]).<sup>2</sup>

One of the major changes in Canadian literary history writing from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s is the shift in attention from defining national identity and establishing its academic validity to questioning the possibility of any unified sense of Canadian culture. This shift arises primarily from the influence of contemporary theory; increased concerns of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities; and the legitimization of these identities by the academy. Examining the new national historiographic

project, the History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada, in light of these changes to literary history, we can see how its different methodologies and disciplinary foci address these concerns. In order to consider some of the potential approaches this project could take, I will discuss the discipline of book history in relation to identity politics. From there, I examine how the issues of identity politics have been dealt with by the HBiC/HLIC.

## II. Book History in Canada

It should be mentioned initially that a national history of the book is not at all the same as a literary history. The national book histories currently underway — such as those for Britain, Scotland, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Germany — are not based on analyses of the formal developments and thematic motifs of literature. National literary histories typically chart the development of a uniquely native literature, often culminating in a proclamation of full-blown national identity. On the other hand, these national histories of the book, emerging from the recently amalgamated field of book history, focus on the material aspects of all kinds of printed (and manuscript) culture — both literary and non-literary, “high” and “low” culture — including their conditions of production, publication history, transmission, and reception.

SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing), founded in 1991 as the major professional association devoted to book history, defines the discipline as follows on their Website:

It concerns the creation, dissemination, and reception of script and print, including newspapers, periodicals, and ephemera. Book historians study the social, cultural, and economic history of authorship; the history of the book trade, copyright, censorship, and underground publishing; the publishing histories of particular literary works, authors, editors, imprints, and literary agents; the spread of literacy and book distribution; canon formation and the politics of literary criticism; libraries, reading habits, and reader response.

(qtd. in Clegg 222-23)

All of these social, cultural, and economic forces, institutions, and discourses shape literary history and can extend its focus.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1980s, around the time when book history was forming its disciplinary identity, D.F. McKenzie powerfully argued for the illusory nature of “the border between bibliography and textual criticism on the one hand and literary criti-



cism and literary history on the other” (23), alluding to the tendency for these two general branches of literary study to remain isolated from each other.

Francess Halpenny’s comments on the need for literary history to incorporate research into the institutions surrounding literature’s production and dissemination demonstrate how the goals of literary history overlap with the concerns of book history. Her chapter in the fourth volume of the *LHC*, and the chapters on early publishing by H. Pearson Gundy in the first and second editions, are examples of how these approaches have directly interacted. Halpenny discusses the role of Canadian publishers and cultural institutions, providing important information for situating many of the previous chapters of the literary history within economic, social, and cultural contexts. In Halpenny’s words, “A significant part of [books] ‘history’ . . . has to do with how they fit into the complex action of what can be called the ‘book trade’” (385). She goes on to mention the importance of the “new field of scholarly inquiry” examining such questions, and laments that, “For Canada, little as yet belongs formally to this field of study or connects with it” (388).<sup>4</sup> This comment expresses the relative dearth in Canada at the time of this kind of study, pointing to the significance of book history for literary history in Canada, and to the gulf that is currently being filled by the History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l’imprimé au Canada project.

While this essay primarily examines the ways the HBiC/HLIC has incorporated the interests and concerns of identity politics into its focus, and how its disciplinary concerns make it well suited to such an engagement, it should be pointed out that doing so is not without obstacles. Any project of this magnitude must draw on the work of scholars who frequently have minimal contact with each other, and while open conferences of the kind HBiC/HLIC hosts offer a certain amount of interdisciplinary communication, limitations remain evident. For instance, many of the contributions to these conferences, while thoroughly researched, have lacked consideration of how their own highly specific concerns relate to the roles of print culture within the broader context of Canada’s social, economic, political, and cultural life. Specialized studies are of course necessary, but unless they are guided by reflection on the HBiC/HLIC project as a whole, they can easily degenerate into academic isolationism. It is imperative that fields such as library history and descriptive bibliography connect themselves to the larger questions of culture so their genuine worth and relevance can be asserted.

These potential problems aside, the HBiC/HLIC does show promise to contribute to our understanding of Canadian cultural history, and

could help fulfill Carl Klinck's desires, expressed in his Introduction (ix), for a comparative study between English and French Canadian culture. The HBiC/HLIC will result in three corresponding volumes in English and French, and each volume has an anglophone and francophone editor.<sup>5</sup> In this way, studies of anglophone Canada will be presented alongside studies of francophone Canada, enabling important insights into shared histories and differences between the two linguistic groups.

However, this bilingual project is contained within a national framework that brings with it certain questions that, while different from those of nation-based literary histories, nonetheless have something in common with them. Robert A. Gross outlines a few of these problems in his essay "Books, Nationalism, and History," which was presented as the keynote address to the HBiC/HLIC's founding conference in 1997. He critiques Benedict Anderson for exaggerating "the national imaginary" in popular consciousness," by pointing out that the American "expansion of antebellum printing" did not cause the north and south to grow closer, but actually deepened their rift (110). He goes on: "All over the Western world, scholars are organizing large, collaborative projects in this field on national grounds, according a priority to distinct political formations, born of the last two centuries, that may not coincide with the currents of social and cultural history.... We need ... to acknowledge ... the permeability of national borders in the realm of culture" (110). Gross rightly points out the inherent problems of not only national histories of the book, but also national literary histories: there is a tendency to reify nation-centred relationships and transmissions and ignore those that defy national borders. This is particularly problematic for those writers who cannot be adequately discussed without reference to international influences and exchanges.

One way to avoid the problems of a nation-based model is to relate national formations to international ones. Klinck, who emphatically affirms that Canadian literature has not developed in a vacuum, assures his readers that the *LHC* will engage with these international influences: "Our writers have recognized no embargo upon foreign subject-matter, no restriction upon intellectual trade. 'Canadian' culture has concerned itself, for example, with the classics, Freud, and international affairs as well as with Huron Indians or Montreal's social problems. The report given here has tried to show how the best writing in this country has reflected local, national, and universal matters which have engaged our serious thought" (x-xi). Part of Klinck's emphasis is no doubt designed to forestall suppositions of Canadian cultural provincialism, but by putting "Canadian" in quotation marks, he gestures towards the constructedness of nationhood and the

importance of recognizing what Gross calls “the permeability of national borders in the realm of culture.” Yet while Klinck tends to consider this permeability only in terms of (Eurocentric) international influence, problematizing the nation-based focus can also stress Canadian cultural plurality.

The HBiC/HLIC has also committed itself to an international contextualization. Its proposal to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council<sup>6</sup> claims that the project’s “Scope is national within an international context, a history of the book in Canada rather than a history of the Canadian book. A central theme will be the place of Canada’s authors, readers, book trade workers, and publishers in an international community” (A9.0). The project’s focus is on print culture within Canada, as opposed to the literary histories’ focus on Canadian writing. Of course, both concentrations are completely necessary, and can richly complement the other. The HBiC/HLIC also proposes to develop partnerships with “international, historical GIS projects, such as the Great Britain historical GIS Programme” (A9.7), and the founding 1997 conference included a contribution from Bill Bell, head of the History of the Book in Scotland project, hopefully indicating a conviction to explore transnational relationships. Appropriately, Bell’s paper was titled “Books Across Borders: The National Press in an International Context.”

While the nation-based model of the HBiC/HLIC will no doubt present some challenges, its incorporation of book history’s focus on production, reception, and consumption has important implications for work in identity politics. D.F. McKenzie insists upon the importance of bibliography when practiced not as a “hermetic” discipline, corresponding to aesthetic formalism, but as a “secular” practice — the “sociology of texts” — concerned with uncovering the social and material bases that enable and structure signification (28). He goes on to argue that bibliography must shift its focus from trying to establish authorial intention to trying to uncover “historical use” (29), and this new focus has been important for the more politically engaged forms of book history study.

One recent example of this is Priya Joshi’s essay, “Culture and Consumption: Fiction, the Reading Public, and the British Novel in Colonial India,” which examines Indian readers in the nineteenth century who were avid consumers of British sensationalist fiction. Joshi’s argument relies on Michel de Certeau’s theory of consumption, regarding the appropriation of cultural products in unprecedented, potentially politically enabling ways. She also incorporates a study of publishing statistics and evidence of reader responses, thus utilizing some of book history’s major areas of focus. Her

essay exemplifies how book history, when combined with cultural and postcolonial theory, can help to provide an alternative to the top-down model of cultural consumption, which represents consumption as a passive act always already contained by a monolithic cultural hegemony. One of Aijaz Ahmad's criticisms of Edward Said's *Orientalism* is that "it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite in isolation from how these textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries" (172). Book history approaches can be important for uncovering the transmission and reception histories, as well as the material conditions, surrounding the engagement of colonized groups with Western (and other) textualities. By analyzing the reception, as well as the literary production, of marginalized groups, modes of consumption that are themselves productive can be reclaimed and asserted.

Another important aspect of book history for understanding reception is its concentration on the institutions that mediate our engagement with literature. Generally speaking, any understanding of literary history should take into account the institutions and economic forces involved with canonicity. Lecker states, "the ideal examination of any canon would include an analysis of market forces, of the publishing and bookselling industry; of curriculum development in schools and universities; of government attempts to patronize a national literature and its supporters; of the dissemination of literary value in newspapers, magazines, scholarly journals, and books" ("Introduction" 4). Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon address a similar consideration: "What has come to be called the 'literary institution' — the field in which literary experience occurs — is therefore as much a part of [literary history] as is the development of genres or thematic motifs" (2). Annette Kolodny insists that historicization, rather than evaluation, should be the touchstone of literary history: "instead of grading works as good or bad or denominating authors as major or minor, we are better advised to follow [Jane] Tompkins' lead in trying to understand how and why specific texts 'have power in the world' (or do not attain power, as the case may be) at any given moment" (304). In order for literary historians to accomplish this, they must be self-aware at all times, not falling into complacent assumptions of value, and one of the major sources of this self-awareness can come from book history. The institutions and economic forces that it studies are directly involved with enabling texts to "have power in the world" or constraining texts' transmission and signification, whether in a case of government censorship or of ECW Press canonizing a group of authors.

Kolodny could almost be referring to book history directly when she expands upon Raymond Williams's recommendation that "literary history comprise a 'restoration of the whole social material process, and specifically of cultural production as social *and* material'.... By taking a cue from Williams, we manage to go beyond simple authorial influence studies to a thorough examination of who, at any given time, controls the economics of publishing and what group or community, at any given moment, monitors the gateways of popular and elite culture" (305). Book history studies, I would argue, offer some of the methodological tools to accomplish this, and therefore have implications for both national book histories and literary histories.

The HBiC/HLIC promises to take up these questions, proposing to study "The spectrum of publishing in Canada: regional, national, and multinational; general publishing: utilitarian (directories), educational, local interest (local history, guidebooks), mass market" (A9.11). Findings yielded from these areas could greatly contribute to an understanding of the social and material forces that structure the cultural production referred to by Williams and Kolodny. Also important here are the cultural institutions that condition reception. The HBiC/HLIC promises to "further the analysis and understanding of ... the emergence of cultural industries, and the formation of cultural policies" (A9.2). It also proposes to examine the "Roles of the daily press, cultural journals, other media (radio, television) in promoting books and reading; literary canons and academic interests; literary prizes (national and regional). Censorship: church and government. Education and literacy" (A9.11). All of these institutions play crucial roles in reception, and examinations of their operations can enrich our understanding of literary history by situating it within its institutional and discursive frameworks. Such a contextualization could be involved with interventionary literary histories to decentre assumptions about cultural value and shed light on its construction.

Clearly, then, the HBiC/HLIC has potential, due to its disciplinary interests, to accommodate many of the critiques and recommendations pointed towards literary history. There is reason to hope, I believe, for at least some attention to these possibilities. The extent to which these issues become reflected in the final published volumes of course remains to be seen, but there is already an encouraging awareness expressed by the HBiC/HLIC of marginality associated with class, race, gender, and ethnicity. The project proposal mentions an engagement with "labour studies ... women's studies, ... ethnic and multicultural studies" (A9.0), and case studies that will examine "lesser known authors especially those

who wrote a) for regional markets, b) in languages other than English or French, and c) for other special markets" (A9.9).

Numerous HBiC/HLIC conference contributions testify to the compatibility between book history as a mode of inquiry and scholarship inflected by the interests of identity politics.<sup>7</sup> Participants at the Volume One open conference, held in November 2000, considered the role of print in colonization, while the March 2001 Prairie Print Colloquium and the May 2001 Volume Two conference had an even greater focus on the relationships between book culture, oppression, and identities in Canada's colonial context. Papers examined missionary printing and the politics of Native textual literacy, and how the book was involved in the assimilation of immigrants. The Volume Three conference, held in November 2001, involved the most extensive consideration of issues of identity and marginality, with participants considering the role of multiculturalism in children's books, the publishing by minority groups in Quebec (race newspapers, Yiddish writing), how francophone communities in British Columbia used print to consolidate their identities, and the relationship between aboriginal writing and the politics of Canadian publishing. Such work as this is absolutely crucial for the HBiC/HLIC's inclusion of minority cultural histories.

The section of the HBiC/HLIC proposal detailing authorship topics to be undertaken refers to this inclusion, mentioning "writers from specific communities (ethnic and First Nations)" (A9.10). The HBiC/HLIC will also examine early printing in Native languages (A9.8) and reception by Native peoples (A9.10). Several papers presented at the Volume Three Conference considered the cultural politics of the relationship of First Nations writing to Canada's mainstream literary institutions. These areas of research examine questions related to identity politics such as subject formation, colonial power relations, consumption, cultural appropriation, and hybridity.

The inclusion of First Nations materials has raised some important questions about the project, notably from editorial committee member Germaine Warkentin. In her essay "In Search of 'The Word of the Other': Aboriginal Sign Systems and the History of the Book in Canada," Warkentin argues that the project should consider what she sees as the three main sign systems of early Canada: European manuscript culture, print culture, and aboriginal sign systems, such as those represented by the Mohawk wampum. Warkentin argues that a history of the book in Canada must take into account these non-phonetic, non-pictograph forms of "writing" which operate in highly complex ways; they are significant not only for an understanding of Native cultures, but also for insights into colonial

encounters and relationships. Such sign systems could be accommodated if the project examines “bookishness” as opposed to simply “books”: for Warkentin, “The choice is not between objects that are books and those that are not; rather, it is the much more interesting difference between cultures that exhibit ‘bookishness’ and those that don’t.” The idea of “bookishness” relies upon a functional view of the book that Warkentin sees as crucial to *any* such history (18). Extending this important argument to the field of identity politics, it is obvious that Warkentin’s recommendation that books be defined functionally is very important for avoiding Eurocentric biases which exclude a multitude of cultures from the historical field. The cultures of the First Nations were frequently entirely absent from the early literary histories of the U.S. and Canada; Warkentin’s appeal is crucial if the HBiC/HLIC is to avoid further exclusions.<sup>8</sup>

Warkentin’s essay also indicates how book history’s disciplinary interests can aid literary history. For while aboriginal sign systems were excluded from H.M. Green’s *History of Australian Literature* and First Nations sign systems from the early North American literary histories, book history’s emphasis on the materiality of all sign systems can place attention on cultures that may be excluded by a completely historically and culturally specific notion of “literature.” Gross reminds us that “‘book’ and ‘print culture’ resist fixed definition” (118), and book history has the potential to engage with these considerations and thus broaden our sense of culture, obviously important for marginalized groups such as the indigenous peoples of North America.

The unitary national identity propounded by Canada’s early forms of literary history have been called into question and addressed in more recent literary histories and critical debates, and book history in Canada can have an important role in this ongoing discussion, providing new approaches and opportunities for rethinking Canada’s cultural pasts. The broadly defined, interdisciplinary approach of book history promises to be an important fixture in humanities scholarship, but it can easily regress into the “hermetic” scholarship, to use McKenzie’s term, of elitist antiquarianism. Literary history has generated an explosion of questions and critiques with implications for national identity, multiculturalism, and historiography. The *History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l’imprimé au Canada* can profit from these critical debates, becoming a truly interdisciplinary and inclusive project by incorporating work based in identity politics.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In "Interventionist Literary Histories: Nostalgic, Pragmatic, or Utopian?" Linda Hutcheon argues that the strategic employment of teleological and evolutionary national models can be highly useful to interventionary literary histories as a practical way of asserting marginalized writings and identities.

<sup>2</sup> For an examination of how recent Canadian and Australian literary histories have acknowledged issues of postcoloniality, see Brydon and Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions*, 60-62; see Goldie's "Fresh Canons: The Native Canadian Example" for a discussion of the problems of Canadian literary canonization *vis-à-vis* aboriginal literature.

<sup>3</sup> These considerations are currently being taken up by some contemporary literary histories, such as the *Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* (see Collaborative Historiography: A Comparative Literary History of Latin America" by Djelal Kadir, Linda Hutcheon, and Mario J. Valdés).

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions included the preliminary studies on publishing, the book trade, and censorship in Canada by the CANLIT research organization, *Paper Phoenix: A History of Book Publishing in English Canada* and *Studies in the Book Trade* by Delores Broten, and *Mind War: Book Censorship in English Canada* by Peter Birdsall.

<sup>5</sup> The HBiC/HLIC editorial team consists of Patricia Fleming and Gilles Gallichan for Volume One (Beginnings-1840), Fiona Black and Yvan Lamonde for Volume Two (1840-1914), and Carole Gerson and Jacques Michon for Volume Three (1914-1980). Bertrum MacDonald is the editor of electronic resources. The project director is Patricia Fleming, and the general editors are Patricia Fleming and Yvan Lamonde.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to the director of the History of the Book in Canada/Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada project, Patricia Fleming, for kindly providing me with a copy of the HBiC/HLIC SSHRC proposal.

<sup>7</sup> Abstracts of all open conference contributions can be found on the HBiC/HLIC Website, <<http://www.hbic.library.utoronto.ca>>.

<sup>8</sup> L.M. Findlay's paper, "Rethinking the Prairie Page in Print Culture," presented at the History of the Book in Canada Prairie Print Culture Colloquium, also provides some highly provocative challenges to the HBiC/HLIC regarding aboriginal cultures. He argues for the importance of examining indigenous interactions with print culture — sites of both resistance and oppression — as a way of exposing print culture's implications within imperialism and capitalism.

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