



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/LPMJ3817>

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To cite this article: Carolyn Podruchny and Jean Michel Montsion, ‘Cultivating Critical Studies of Canada at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University, Toronto, Canada’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 5 (September 2025): 126-133, <https://doi.org/10.52230/ZPEV9576>

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Cultivating Critical Studies of Canada at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University, Toronto, Canada

Carolyn Podruchny and Jean Michel Montsion¹

Founded in 1984, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies (hereafter the Robarts Centre) at York University in Toronto, Canada, acts as a research incubator for critical studies of Canada and “Canada in the World.” Our research interests have evolved over forty years, and today, they emphasize climate change, resource extraction, truth and reconciliation for Indigenous peoples, and diversities of cultural heritage in the Canadian national and international contexts. Areas of expertise in Canadian Studies at York, which has one of the largest concentrations of Canadian specialists globally, include the Arctic and its peoples, the environment, visual and performing arts, cultural studies, migration, and Indigenous Studies. Robarts supports York faculty, post-doctoral fellows, graduate and undergraduate students, adjunct faculty and visiting fellows in critical, diverse and collaborative research, communication, and debate, leading to engaged research partnerships and projects, publications, and policy briefs.

Researching Canada

The interest in mobilizing research on Canada at York University through a research centre has existed since the 1970s. The research priorities of the Centre have slowly developed over the years to foster a timely, historically grounded, community-oriented,

¹ We are extremely thankful to the Editor-in-chief of this journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his helpful suggestions for our showcasing piece.

multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, collaborative, and critical study of Canada. Often determined by key moments in the country's evolution, such as the constitutional crises, Robarts has increasingly welcomed new ways of redefining the study of Canada, notably including transnational and comparative scholarship. Our research priorities are best represented by interdisciplinary research clusters and internal funding opportunities to explore new project and collaboration ideas. Our current clusters are:

- Black Canada (led by Professors Ola Mohammed and Natasha Henry-Dixon);
- Borealis Council on Studies of the North (led by Professor Jennifer Korosi);
- Children and Young People Interdisciplinary Research Network (CYPIRN) (led by Professors Cheryl Cowdy, Gabrielle Moser, Ann Marie Murnaghan, and Kael Reid);
- CIVIS: Urban Governance and Citizenship (led by Professor Patricia Wood);
- Commemoration, Pedagogy, and Historical Trauma (led by Professors Eve Haque, Aparna Mishra-Tarc, and Mario Di Paolantonio);
- Environmental Research Group (led by Professors Jennifer Bonnell and Matt Tegelberg); and
- Diaporas: Migration Memory Research Collective (led by Professors Gilberto Fernandes, Jennifer Bonnell, Abril Liberatori, William Jenkins, and David Koffman).

One of our long-time clusters, “Critical Perspective on Mental Health” (led by Professors Megan Davies and Marina Morrow), has transitioned to a research centre called the Mad Studies Hub.

In addition to supporting internally and externally funded projects, the Robarts Centre encourages and fosters the development of pan-university and interdisciplinary research groups that push the frontiers of what is meant by an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and critical study of Canada, notably by combining traditional research activities with networking, community-building, student training, and public dissemination priorities. Our current research projects include Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Justice (led by Professor Deb McGregor), (Re)Searching for Canadian Studies (CanSearch) (led by Professor Jean Michel Montsion), and Curating Indigenous Circumpolar Cultural Sovereignty (CICCS) (led by Professor Anna Hudson).

Supporting the Field

Since the Inaugural Lecture of the Robarts Centre in May 1984, entitled “Se Connaître: Politics and Culture in Canada,” the Robarts Centre has had a strong and continuous interest in documenting, interrogating, and analyzing Canadian identity and culture. Considering John Robarts’ interest in Canadian unity, the Robarts Centre designed the John P. Robarts Chairs in Canadian Studies program so that experts could share with academic and public audiences in oral and written forms their insights on the state of specific aspects and processes making Canadian society. Running from 1986 to 2001 the Robarts Chairs were an integral part of the significance of the Robarts Centre identity.

Since then, the spirit of the Robarts Chairs has evolved to include the Annual Robarts Lecture, timely conferences to highlight key themes and turning points, such as the Millennial Wisdom Symposium in 2000, and the Robarts Centre Summer Institute,

which ran from 1999 to 2002. Our most recent Robarts Lecture in honour of our 40th anniversary was by the Canadian poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist m. nourbeSe philip, to launch a new edition of her acclaimed book-length poem *Zong!* about the victims of the Zong massacre, when approximately 150 enslaved Africans were murdered for insurance purposes in 1781, reactions to which led to significant momentum in the British abolitionist movement. We have also returned to hosting week-long summer institutes dedicated to undergraduate and graduate students both within Canada and around the world, focusing on providing critical lectures on Canadian Studies and skill-building workshops. With the evolution of the institutional landscape in research, the Robarts Centre has also evolved to support York's institutional Chairs, such as Canada Research Chairs. It has partnered with various academic research units at York, in Canada, and worldwide. It continuously supports key public events and celebrates the work of outstanding Canadian scholars, dignitaries, and experts who have contributed to the study of Canada.

Due to its focus on supporting and mobilizing research in the study of Canada for the York community, the Robarts Centre has led various institutional projects and initiatives in support of broader Canadian Studies networks, whether at home or internationally. Asked by York to manage international students and scholars' exchanges in the 1980s and 1990s, it has also been York's key link to the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, and, through Polar Knowledge Canada's Northern Scientific Training Program, it manages funding for undergraduate and graduate students conducting fieldwork in the North. Whether through its Visiting Professorship program or its contribution to the Canadian Studies Network, the Robarts Centre views

these relationships to connect York scholars with opportunities to strengthen their scholarship, make their work more visible and impactful, and situate York researchers at the centre of the study of Canada.

Regarding local connections, Robarts is a proud supporter of the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario (MHSO), which recently moved its headquarters and archives to the Keele campus of York University. Established in 1976 by Robert F. Harney, a renowned scholar in the field of migration and ethnic studies, the MHSO is a not-for-profit organization with a dual mandate. As a steward of heritage resources, it collects, preserves and makes available records documenting immigrant, ethnic, and Indigenous experiences. It undertakes programming, often online, illuminating histories of migration, ethnicity, and Indigeneity. Our new research cluster, Diaxporas, which studies migration and memory, is based on the MHSO collection.

Our international connections are growing as well. The Robarts Centre hosts the International Council of Canadian Studies (ICCS), founded in 1981, which is a registered not-for-profit corporation committed to the study of Canada. They promote scholarly activities, maintain an international community of Canadianists, communicate research, promote public awareness of the study of Canada, and encourage student engagement. Through their network of 29 associations for Canadian Studies (approximately 3,000 members), the ICCS supports the study of Canada in 31 countries across Europe, North America, Asia-Pacific, Central/South America, and Africa. Robarts organizes an annual Keynote Lecture for the ICCS, highlighting new trends in Canadian Studies research, for their annual meetings. The 2024 lecture was given by Professor Natasha Henry, who spoke on the growth of African-Canadian Studies.

Publishing History

As a publishing house, the Robarts Centre has constantly published various materials to disseminate cutting-edge research in the study of Canada. Besides the lectures from Robarts Chairs and publishing some books and booklets, our Centre launched its flagship journal, *Canada Watch*, in 1992. This was a joint venture with York's Centre for Public Law and Public Policy until 2004 and continues to be published to this day. This freely available resource has provided a practical analysis of key thematic issues relevant to understanding Canada. Written by experts in accessible language and now fully available online, *Canada Watch* acts as a pedagogical resource. Two issues celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Centre explore the development of both the Robarts Centre and the field of Canadian Studies.

Since moving its publications online in the 2000s, Robarts has expanded its types of publications, including the most recent "Reflections on Research," which presents work conducted by our researchers and provides the recordings of various lectures from visiting and guest speakers, all of which make for an essential source of public engagement and pedagogical resources. We have also started a journal for undergraduate students, called *Contemporary Kanata*, which just published its second and third issues. Combining forces with Canadian Studies programs at Brock University, Mount Allison University, and Trent University, Robarts launched a series called "Dispatchers in Canadian Studies," made up of blog posts by undergraduate students who attend events related to the study of Canada and report on what they witness and learn.

Supporting the Next Generation

Since its inception in 1984, one of the key goals of our Centre has been to support postdoctoral fellows working on various aspects of the study of Canada. Over the years, this support has continued and multiplied to match an increasing number of requests for resident and visiting post-doctoral scholar positions based on available funding programs, faculty associates' requests, and York academic units. In addition to the development of graduate programs at York over the last forty years, the Robarts Centre is seen as a key addition to supporting postdoctoral fellows at York, notably in developing contacts, networks, and various professional opportunities.

Throughout the 2000s, the support of the Robarts Centre to the next generation evolved more systematically to include opportunities and initiatives for graduate students, notably through the Annual Robarts Graduate Conference, support for undergraduate certificates (such as in Black Canadian Studies), and student prizes. We recently created a small grants program for graduate students to support their research trips and conference presentations. For many years, the Robarts Centre has awarded the Odessa Prize for the Study of Canada to an undergraduate essay prize. This year, we have launched two new undergraduate awards: the Annual Warren E. Crichlow Awards in Critical Canadian Studies, one for a traditional essay and one for a multi-media class project. These awards are designed to reflect Dr. Crichlow's academic approach to advancing civicism in Canada through fostering a culture of understanding, writing and thinking that is thoughtful, persuasive, critical, insightful and, at times, edgy. Inherently interdisciplinary, community-oriented and multi-scalar (from the local to the

global), these awards are meant to celebrate contemporary interrogations of civiness in Canada amid fundamental political divides, social polarization, and technological transformation. We award the Leslie Sanders Prize for the Study of Canada to a continuing Master's student whose Master-level dissertation, major research paper, or equivalent on a Canadian topic best advances the knowledge of Canada. We also award the Barbara Godard Prize for the Best York University Dissertation in Canadian Studies. The Robarts Centre has supported undergraduate students with Robarts Centre Fellowships and the journal *Contemporary Kanata*. We are always looking for ways to consolidate our support and train the next generation in critical, collaborative, and interdisciplinary ways.

After forty years of cultivating the critical study of Canada, the preoccupations of the Robarts Centre have shifted over time, reflecting the concerns and interests of scholars, students, and the broader public. Our current focus on Indigenous Studies, the North, the environment, and cultural diversity reflects a 21st-century perspective on the changing mosaic that is Canada. An interdisciplinary research centre must serve all its constituents, including undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, professors, visiting scholars, educators, and artists, the Robarts Centre supports this broad platform to cultivate new ideas and visions for what it means to be Canadian.