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40 Years of Canadian Studies at Brock University

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Back in March of this year, I had a conversation with Joan Nicks, a former Film Studies professor at Brock University. Nicks is now retired—she retired well before I joined the Film Studies program with the Department of Communication, Popular Culture & Film at Brock eleven years ago, so I never had the pleasure of working side-by-side with her—but she was one of the founding members of our department and a legend of Film Studies at our school, and she has continued to be an exemplary scholar and colleague over the years. I had reached out because I wanted to invite Nicks to attend the latest edition of Two Days of Canada, a conference the Centre for Canadian Studies at Brock had been sponsoring for decades. For reasons that should be clear, our topic for 2026 was Two Days of Canadian Sovereignty. We had put together a strong conference lineup, and I was sure Nicks would be interested. I knew Nicks had been affiliated with Canadian Studies at Brock, but I was not sure when, and I was not sure to what extent. I also knew that there had been a Two Days of Canada conference in February 1986, just over 40 years earlier—we have a copy of the poster for this conference in our online Two Days of Canada archive,² and I had admired its scope and its ambition on more than one occasion.

¹ I am extremely thankful to Dr. Jatinder Mann, the Editor-in-chief of this journal for his helpful comments and suggestions on my showcasing piece. I would also like to thank the members of the Faculty Advisory Committee for Canadian Studies for their support and participation, and, especially, Elaine Aldridge-Low, who was instrumental in helping to organize and execute an eventful schedule.

² <https://brocku.ca/humanities/canadian-studies/two-days-of-canada-conference/archive/>

What I did not know until I had that conversation with Nicks, was that that was the very first Two Days of Canada Conference, and that Nicks, along with Patricia Dirks from History and Marilyn Rose from English, had been one of the co-organizers. Somehow this detail had eluded me in the past—neither Nicks, nor Dirks, nor Rose presented at the conference. The only indication that they had organized the conference could be found in the poster's bottom right corner, where it very humbly stated that if you wanted 'further information' you could call one of these women at the telephone number that was provided.

When I found out that Nicks had been one of the co-organizers, I asked her to tell me a little more about how this conference came about. She recounted the following:

The original impetus was driven by the reality that, in the Humanities notably, faculty in certain departments taught courses identifiably Canadian in subject, theme, disciplinary focus: literature, film, history, languages...The idea of organizing that initial Two Days conference was to draw attention to that research and teaching within Brock and make it public, and as it turned out, notable.

As I indicated earlier, there was some incredible material on this inaugural program: presentations, panels, debates, readings, an art exhibition—even a coffee house with live music. The conference's concerns included the state of Canadian publishing, the prospect of free trade between Canada and the United States, the thought of Northrop Frye, the War of 1812, settler-Indigenous relations, and land use and conservation. Strikingly, given our perspective in 2026, one talk by

Mohammed Dore of the Department of Economics was titled 'The Limits of Sovereignty'.

Nicks and her colleagues knew they were onto something—the richness and variety of the program they put together was proof of that. In many ways, they were riding a 'Canadianization' wave that had gotten underway at Canadian universities in the late 1960s, in the wake of Canada's centennial celebrations—one that had started with a focus on hiring practices but had quickly shifted to address curriculum issues. By 1972, a Commission on Canadian Studies had been formed with Thomas H. B. Symons as its chair, and in 1975 this commission released the first two volumes of its landmark study 'To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies' (a.k.a., the Symons Report). This sweeping report offered thousands of recommendations on a wide range of topics, but one of its lasting achievements had to do with encouraging Canadian universities to embrace the study of Canada in all its complexity, from as many perspectives as possible—Canadian universities like Brock University. So, yes, Nicks and company had some wind in their sails when they inaugurated that first Two Days of Canada Conference. They had reason to be optimistic about the prospects of Canadian Studies at Brock. What they did not know—what they could not know at the time—was that the conference would live on, becoming an annual event, an annual tradition. 40 years later, here we are today.

As the title of the Symons Report indicates, the goal of this commission was for Canadians to get 'to know ourselves'—to reach a deeper, nuanced understanding of what Canada is, where Canada came from, what its most pressing and significant issues are today, and where Canada is going. In many ways, it is this

goal — 'to know ourselves' — that continues to drive Canadian Studies at Brock. We believe that Canada will benefit if more people—Canadians and non-Canadians alike—truly understand Canada. We have developed a unique trans-faculty program to achieve this vision. Our program is also highly transdisciplinary—drawing from numerous fields—History, Political Science, English, Geography, Labour Studies, Communication, Music, Sociology, Indigenous Studies, Film, Kinesiology, Women's and Gender Studies, and so on—to provide this well-rounded understanding of Canada.

Housed within the Faculty of Humanities, but drawing its membership and its approach from across multiple faculties, the Centre for Canadian Studies is a small unit that has consistently held its own at Brock. For years, the program's flagship has been 'CANA 1F91: Introduction to Canadian Studies', a course that explores the history, symbols, myths, and cultures that define Canadian identity, as well as how this identity has been articulated across a wide variety of texts. CANA 1F91 has always been a large course, year after year, and its innovative, creative, and thought-provoking approach has made it a popular course, one that frequently attracts students to our co-major and minor options.

Second-year offerings, like 'CANA 2P91: Diversity in Action: Canada's Cultural Communities' and 'CANA 2P92: Canada's Institutions and Icons', pick up on material that was first introduced in CANA 1F91 and expand upon it. The same holds true for a new course that was created this year, 'CANA 2P11: Elbows Up?: Sports and Canadian Culture'. This is a course that is very much a product of Canada-United States relations in the Trump 2.0 era, and the tariffs, threats, and boycotts that came with it, as well as the sports metaphors that were used to rally

Canadians, motivate voters, and respond to these changed conditions. Developed by our distinguished colleague Maureen Connolly from the Department of Kinesiology, who just recently received the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's (STLHE) Christopher Knapper Lifetime Achievement Award for her pedagogy, CANA 2P11 is notable for its thoughtful, challenging take on sports and Canadian culture, one that addresses both its 'disorienting dilemmas' and its 'celebratory narratives', and one that features a series of clever, well-designed assignments (Face-Off, Power Play, Hat Trick, Breakaway) to keep students engaged with the course material.

Among upper-year courses offered by the Canadian Studies program, 'CANA 3P40 The New Niagara' has been a standout. Cross-listed with the Department of Geography, and developed by our colleague Jeff Boggs, this course uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the highly dynamic nature of the Niagara region in terms of its culture, its demographics, its economics, and its physical geography.

Since its beginnings, and as evidenced by the inaugural 1986 edition of the Two Days of Canada conference, Canadian Studies at Brock has prided itself on its public-facing events. 2025-2026 was an exemplary year in this regard. We launched a lecture series called 'Canada Talks' that was designed to showcase new and recent research in the field of Canadian Studies and bring it to an audience that included students, faculty, and the public. This year's series featured three lectures spanning the realms of Political Science, Film & Media Studies, and Literary History.

'Canada Talks' got underway in October at the St. Catharines Public Library with a lecture by Dr. Blayne Haggart (Political Science, Brock University) titled

‘Canadian Sovereignty in 2026: Promises and Perils’ that analyzed the first six months of Mark Carney’s term as Prime Minister and that initiated a year-long focus on the issue of sovereignty. In November, Dr. Michael Brendan Baker (Film Studies, Sheridan College) presented a lecture at Brock University that drew from his recent co-edited book *The Interactive Documentary in Canada* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2024) and that highlighted the leading role played by organizations like the National Film Board of Canada in the development of the ‘i-doc’ in the first two decades of the 21st century. Finally, in February our Canadian Studies colleague Dr. Gregory Betts (English, Brock University) gave a presentation at the St. Catharines Public Library that explored the unique literary history of 19th-century St. Catharines and the Niagara Region more generally. Dr. Betts’s provocative talk was titled ‘Unerasing Ourselves: St. Catharines, Canadian Literature, and the Past.’

In January, in collaboration with the Brock University Film Society (BUFS) and the department of Communication, Popular Culture & Film, the Centre for Canadian Studies held the first in a series of screenings highlighting Canadian Film Classics. BUFS had been celebrating its 50th anniversary by screening notable films from 1975, the year of its inception, so the Centre for Canadian Studies decided to team up with their colleagues to show two significant Canadian films from that same year. The first of these screenings was David Cronenberg’s notorious *Shivers* (1975), a film so controversial that it was debated on Parliament Hill and widely discussed in the press. Of course, *Shivers* also has the distinction of having launched Cronenberg’s career as a horror specialist, setting him on a path to becoming one of the great auteur filmmakers of the last half century. *Shivers* was screened at the Niagara Artists Centre in Downtown St. Catharines, and it was

introduced and contextualized by Dr. Barry Grant, Professor Emeritus of Film Studies (Brock University). The second screening in this series was Denys Arcand's *Gina* (1975), the third film in the Québécois cinéaste's 1970s crime trilogy, and another example of the importance of Canuxploitation when it came to establishing a commercial filmmaking industry in Canada. This screening of *Gina* took place at the Niagara Artists Centre, once again, and the film was introduced by myself, as much of my recent work has focused on Quebec cinema, and Arcand is a particular favourite of mine.

As suggested earlier, the signature event of the Centre for Canadian Studies' 2025-2026 calendar, as it has been for decades, was this year's edition of Two Days of Canada: Two Days of Canadian Sovereignty. Not surprisingly, given the topic and its timeliness, Two Days of Canada 2026 attracted a lot of interest and a great deal of talent, including three keynote addresses. The conference was set in motion by Dr. Blayne Haggart who returned to the kind of fine-grained analysis of the Carney administration that he had first presented as part of Canada Talks, delivering an insightful post-Davos study of Canada in the 'Elbows Up' era titled 'Sovereignty and the US Threat: Is Canada On the Right Path.' Later that same day, Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North at Trent University, delivered the conference's second keynote address: 'Canada's Arctic Sovereignty: Historical and Contemporary Insights.' Lackenbauer's presentation was a sweeping and fascinating account of shifts and changes in Northern Affairs and Crown-Indigenous relations from the perspective of a time when Canada's arctic sovereignty is increasingly threatened and circumpolar relations are increasingly fraught.

Day One of Two Days of Canada 2026 finished with a reception at the Niagara Artists Centre (NAC). This reception took advantage of the NAC's Microcinema, once again, to stage a screening of sovereignty-related Canadian films: a few short films produced by the National Film Board of Canada in the 1960s, such as Gilles Groulx's iconic *Le Chat dans le sac* (1964), followed by David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). Cronenberg's film has long been considered a classic of postmodern cinema, with its ruminations on media theory and the work of media gurus like Marshall McLuhan, as well as a widely recognized classic of body horror. However, *Videodrome* also has a great deal to say about Canadian media policy and Canadian media sovereignty. Our screening of *Videodrome* was introduced by Dr. Barry Grant, our resident Cronenberg expert, and an internationally renowned authority on the horror film.

Our final keynote speaker for Two Days of Canada—Dr. Liam Midzain-Gobin (Political Science, Brock University)—doubled as the keynote speaker for Comparative Borders 2026, which got underway on Friday 28 March and continued Saturday 29 March 2026. Midzain-Gobin's lecture was titled 'Unsettling Sovereignty's Hegemonologue' and it was drawn from his rich and probing book *Settler Colonial Sovereignty: Visions of Improvement and Indigenous Erasure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025). This lecture acted as a perfect bridge between Two Days of Canada and Comparative Borders, a conference formerly known as Crossing Borders. In its earlier incarnation, this conference had been focused quite specifically on Canada-United States relations, but this year, by popular demand, we decided to expand our scope and address border issues around the globe. This shift in name and focus resulted in our most dynamic edition

yet, and one which continued to return to Canada and Canadian Studies repeatedly, albeit within a much more international perspective. Not only did Comparative Borders attract more proposals than ever before, but the quality of the work was truly outstanding. Students and faculty travelled from as far afield as Maine to the east and Washington to the west to join us, and partnerships with our colleagues at Niagara University, University of Western Ontario, Canisius University, Daemen University, Western Washington University, and Bridgewater State University were reinvigorated.

One of the proudest traditions of the Crossing Borders conference was the essay prize that we awarded to a talented student every year. This tradition was carried over when we created the latest version of this conference and the winner of our inaugural Comparative Borders Best Essay Prize was Danil Huriev, a third-year undergraduate student from Brock's Political Science department. Huriev beat out a very talented group of young scholars, including Masters students and PhD students. His paper was titled 'Indigenous Autonomy within Canada: Balancing Indigenous Rights in s. 35 of the Constitution with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Analysis of s. 25 and Canada's Supreme Court's Decision in *Dickson v. Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation* (2024).' The judges's report noted that the paper explores the ways that modern settler colonialism still shapes indigenous life through the Canadian courts system, and that it was exhaustively researched, and carefully and eloquently articulated.

These conferences—Two Days of Canadian Sovereignty and Comparative Borders 2026—speak to the importance of Canadian Studies in the present moment, but they also speak to the vitality of the discipline. Canadian Studies has come a

long way since it was first established as an academic field in the 1970s and early 1980s. It has expanded its vision and broadened its concerns, and in many ways, it is our students—our undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students—who are pointing the way forward today, showing us how Canadian Studies will continue to develop in the future, how it will continue to thrive.