



Canada Watch

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CRITICAL CANADIAN STUDIES IN ACTION

Introduction

In 1975, Thomas Symons published the *Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, which defined the importance of the field through the adage “to know ourselves.” Fifty years later, in June 2025, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies hosted two distinct graduate student-focused initiatives: a fully online Summer Institute for undergraduate and graduate students and an in-person doctoral Summer School at York University’s Glendon campus. Both week-long activities were intended to assess where the study of Canada stands in the scholarship of emerging scholars and to see how our quest for self-knowledge has evolved, especially for those located and enrolled in universities outside the country, who lack the means to visit Canada during their studies.

More importantly, both the Summer Institute and the Summer School were meant to support student scholarship toward a critical study of Canada, an endeavour we know is, at times, considered controversial, without a core function, and in constant conversations with more patriotic, post-colonial, and anti-nationalistic approaches. Whereas the Summer Institute focused on the themes

BY EVE HAQUE, CAROLYN PODRUCHNY, AND JEAN MICHEL MONTSION

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of decolonization, equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEDI) to examine the various ways in which groups within Canada and especially the Canadian state deploy, conceive, and often fail at DEDI, the Summer School brought together doctoral students from eight different countries to support their own scholarship through a decentred, collaborative, and community-focused approach (the Summer School was made possible thanks to SSHRC funding, grant #890-2021-0076). The success of both events speaks to the appetite for critical studies of Canada, especially amid growing fiscal constraints and the apparent decline in student interest in the humanities and social sciences.

In this issue of *Canada Watch*, we have compiled key insights, reflections, and conversations from these events. They all help us better understand some of the hurdles and potential avenues for rethinking how to conduct a study of Canada

that does not uncritically reify nationalistic preconceptions of the country or centre conventional perspectives or means of scholarship on Canada. Both in content and in form, these pieces show us how a critical study of Canada can be carried out, including through illuminating epistemic asymmetries and injustices among voices associated with a “Canadian” perspective, putting into context the country’s official positioning and use of technologies of innocence in various contexts, opposing strong-border determinism in defining Canada and its study, and reappropriating the histories and valuing the praxis of groups previously marginalized or excluded from the field and repositories like archives.

The first section of this issue is titled “Emerging Conversations,” as it presents the collective reflections of most of the doctoral students who attended the Summer School at Glendon in June 2025. Through these articles, readers will discover the struggles and insights of Summer School participants as they conduct critical examinations of Canada through questions about the infrastructure supporting the field, calls to question the various narratives and scripts supporting Canada’s distinctive features, and fruitful avenues for more localized, answerable, and reflexive academic endeavours. In the second section, titled “Ongoing Scholarship,” three interventions from York University faculty members, which were

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Critical Canadian Studies in action

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presented during the 2025 DEDI Summer Institute, demonstrate how a critical study of Canada is already unfolding in various fields and through a myriad of examinations. These three articles show us how productive investigations can be, by centring specific groups, their praxis and perspectives, rather than the country. Both as an ethical stance and as a generative reclaiming, these pieces demonstrate how possible and insightful a critical study of Canada can be.

At a moment in time when fascist and populist ideologies are rising again in Western liberal democracies and America is

directing threats toward Canada and Canadians, among others in the world, this special issue reminds us that the way forward for Canadian Studies to make a difference is not to return to 19th- and 20th-century ideas of nationalism, but rather to embrace critiques of the Canadian nation, to centre the perspectives and work of historically marginalized and excluded groups in the study of Canada, to open up Canada-focused scholarship to local and transnational solidarities and projects, and to value and support the conversations and struggles the new generations of Canadianists are having. ■

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Symons, T. H. B. (1975). *To know ourselves: The report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

Reframing the archives

From the field of history and the archival practice, we understand critical Canadian Studies as an intervention that aims to address historical events in more inclusive and layered ways, particularly when addressing themes of indigeneity, colonialism, and social justice. A critical mode of inquiry challenges both the traditional assumptions about historical events and the records that document them to assess power dynamics, social inequality, and the entrenched structures that perpetuate injustices. In our view, interpreting history solely through conventional historical records is problematic, particularly when that record is taken as an accurate depiction of Indigenous knowledges and histories.

We argue for the need to reach beyond traditional archives and methodologies to understand the history of this land. Anishinaabe scholar Wendy Geniusz (2009) describes how a reliance on conventional records produces a colonized and distorted version of Indigenous peoples by people who were not part of that culture. While some may find this approach unsettling, including non-traditional sources in historical inquiry inarguably produces a more inclusive, holistic, and accurate account. This approach is also complex, especially to non-Indigenous scholars. It requires relationship building with Indigenous communities through listening, respect, and trust and requires a consultative, collaborative, and reflexive approach. Absolon (2022) says, “Considerable knowledge and stamina are required of Indigenous researchers trailblazing in contexts that lack Indigenous knowledge systems, supports, and supervisors” (p. 262). Although a critical approach to understanding historical events involves time and a learning curve, it is an essential step toward decol-

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onizing the methodologies by which history has been interpreted.

RECONSIDERING HOW AND WHERE HISTORY IS HELD

Conventional methodologies have come under scrutiny for their lack of inclusion of Indigenous knowledges. Renowned Māori scholar and researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes how Western research processes have marginalized Indigenous knowledges (Smith, 2021). Cree author Shawn Wilson (2008) says, “Our knowledge and relationships are based upon empirical data that is observable by the five senses, ... but it also includes other forms of non-empirical data” (p. 111). Wilson highlights the difficulties and paradigms associated with Indigenous research when he writes, “The problem is that we can never truly separate the tools from the beliefs that underpin them. Since these beliefs are not always compatible with our own, we always encounter problems when we try to apply the tools of the dominant system to our own purposes” (p. 13).

In other words, the concept of “research” and the act itself are heavily

burdened by Western thinking. Indigenous archives are held in diverse spaces, including place, land, soil, language, beliefs and values, rituals and ceremonies, dreams and visions, artistic expression, technology, storytelling, and artifacts/articles such as wampum. Keith Basso (1996) describes how Apache wisdom, culture, and history are inextricably intertwined with place. Even glaciers, which appear as actors in *Do Glaciers Listen?*, hold records of local cultural history (Cruikshank, 2014). Anishinaabe scholar Amy Shwanda (2020) describes “Dream Knowledges as a valid source of knowledge for Indigenous students and scholars” (p. 37). These few examples demonstrate the importance of thinking beyond colonial archives to understand Indigenous knowledges.

The challenges of high cost and slow process lead historians to stick to “well-documented” subjects stored in conventional archives. Consequently, events and history, particularly oral tradition, are left out because they do not exist as physical artifacts, paper, or document. Moreover, “in some cases these editors translated documents without including the text in the original language (this is particularly the case for documents written in Indigenous languages). ... In these collections, the archival context of the document—which itself was similarly curated—is often silenced in favour of a document itself” (Peace & Allen, 2019, 218). Translating any Indigenous sources without providing the context is outstandingly dubious. Without this context, meaning is lost in translation, and the resulting documents are merely interpretations. This practice renders the original text unavailable for further researchers, preventing them from considering the original

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cultural meaning. Therefore, the current archive undermines the true nature of memory, highlighting the necessity of redefining and reframing archives as living systems. Absolon emphasizes the need for “re-researchers” to step outside of colonial research methodologies. So how do researchers proceed? Even before access to Indigenous knowledges is granted, establishing community relationships is fundamental (Wilson, 2008, p. 108).

Those who interact with First Nations information and wish to do so respectfully must follow the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP), which “assert that First Nations have control over data collection processes, and that they own and control how this information can be used” (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2025). In addition, leading academic facilities have created processes for Indigenous research oversight, such as York University’s Indigenous Research Ethics Board (IREB), created to decolonize research (YFile, 2023). Maggie Kovach, in conversation with Kathleen Absolon, documents Absolon’s view that “[w]e are all colonized—Indigenous people are colonized” (Kovach, 2009, p. 151). So how can Indigenous researchers and their non-Indigenous allies contribute to decolonizing methodologies? To reframing the concept of archives?

ATTILA’S EXPERIENCE

As an academic based in Central Europe whose research focuses on the North and Inuit Studies, navigating Indigenous issues presented significant complexity due to limited specialized resources. It is notably difficult to source in-depth coursework beyond broad survey modules focusing on Indigenous topics. Consequently, I had to secure specialized university courses abroad, sourcing material from Germany and Canada. My dissertation research focused on the concepts of encounters and legacies, which appear in various forms in contemporary Inuit films. It analyzes the works of Isuma Productions,

A critical mode of inquiry challenges both the traditional assumptions about historical events and the records that document them to assess power dynamics, social inequality, and the entrenched structures that perpetuate injustices.

with particular emphasis on Zacharias Kunuk’s feature-length film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) as well as *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), directed by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, and *Before Tomorrow* (2008), directed by Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu.

One of the biggest challenges of reframing the archive is the so-called radical shift from individual history, which is seen as a static colonial record, to a living dialogue. In Inuit cinema, the archive is no longer just a collection of manuscripts or observations from outsiders, but a living visual memory based on elders’ memories. My experience at the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge resists the rigid structures of Western methodology and that, moreover, there is a tension between traditional research and the need for deep listening and watching. To understand Inuit filmmaking, we must return to the “original archive” of elders, which Kerstin Knopf calls “decolonizing of the lenses” (2008, Kindle 8919–8923). This theoretical framework is not just a methodological obstacle but also the practical obstacle that defined my own fieldwork.

One of my greatest challenges was gaining access to Indigenous communities. Elders often serve as living archives, carefully conserving their traditional knowledge. I was privileged that an academic contact facilitated a visit to the

Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation in Quebec and an opportunity to speak with elders. It was immediately apparent that classical research methods, such as questionnaires and surveys, were irrelevant. Rather, stories told by elders were akin to a flow, necessitating a deep listening rather than direct interrogation to follow the storyline.

I analyzed the narrative and technical strategies that depicted disappearing heritage through the medium of film, with a particular emphasis on Inuit self-representation processes. The research explored how these films shed light on cultural areas that are oppressed, often as a historical and ongoing result of colonization, discrimination, and marginalization. It examined how these films dealt with traditions that are an integral part of minority communities, and how filmmakers use the medium to document or validate these identities before they fade into oblivion. The dissertation examined the role of film as a reflective and corrective force that provides space under the weight of social and political forces, with the aim of preserving cultures. I argued that contemporary Inuit filmmakers serve as cultural activists and cultural mediators for their community, making films that bear the characteristics and functions of traditional film and visual anthropology. This hybrid film genre can best be understood through an interdisciplinary approach that considers the general aesthetic characteristics of traditional

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and documentary film and addresses the methodological and ethical issues raised by anthropology, Indigenous studies, and Inuit studies.

Academia taught me that the first step was to conduct research by visiting Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. I quickly realized that these written colonial sources fell short of informing me of a cultural history reliant on oral tradition rather than written documentation. It became apparent to me that we must reframe our understanding of what constitutes an archive and redefine them as dynamic, living systems with elders serving as the authoritative knowledge repositories. Being physically present among Indigenous communities and engaging directly with the land offered a unique and profound experiential learning component that could not be replicated through remote studies.

ELIZABETH'S EXPERIENCE

When exploring the history of my German-speaking Mennonite ancestors, I examined how the values, beliefs, and experiences they acquired in imperial Russia influenced the way they adapted to other cultures when they arrived in Canada in the 1920s. I had always viewed my ancestors as having a distinct ethnicity, but to the Siksika people in present-day southern Alberta, they were no different from other white, European settlers. European descendants and their Siksika neighbours shared oral histories from that time. Siksika elders relayed stories of their ancestors initiating contact to get to know these newcomers, just as they would have with other white settlers. Mennonites and other colonists described Siksika coming to their yards and most often using the terms "wanting," "asking," or even "begging" for food. Some did refer to "trade." When Mennonites gave Siksika visitors food, this happened in the context of a charitable act. Siksika elders, however, were clear that they were trading or buying, and described reciprocal, balanced transactions. The choice of terminology

portrayed very different perceptions about the power dynamics assumed by each group. Siksika people also combined "trading" with visits, interacting with and getting to know their new neighbours, as the Siksika had for millennia. This history was not recorded in the archives, nor did the oral tradition of my ancestors and their community reflect the perspective of the Siksika people. It is a story not unlike that recounted by Cruikshank (2014), when she describes how different narratives between Dene elders and European explorers portray different perspectives and understanding of the same history.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences underscored the necessity and value of building relationships with Indigenous communities prior to, throughout, and after the research process. We learned how engaging and listening with all of our senses, an approach that is new to many non-Indigenous researchers, revealed facets of history not recorded in traditional archives or scholarly publications. By moving beyond this static understanding of archives, we realized that archives are found within the stories of elders and in interactions of communities. Not only did this understanding prove essential for exposing and unraveling history, but it also demonstrated that reframing the archives is an evolving and essential approach for all researchers who wish to build a sustainable path forward. ■

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Decentring Canada: Inquiries from Poland and India

As two scholars coming from different geographic and historical backgrounds, India and Poland, we cannot but notice that our academic engagement with Canadian Studies is shaped by the contextualized, historical, and socio-economic ties that our home countries have with Canada. Moreover, Canada's centrality within global mobility and capitalist processes makes studying it from abroad sensitive to the subtle differences of where "abroad" is located.

By trying to capture the subtleties of engaging with Canada from Eastern Europe and South Asia, we hope to elicit the localized potential of critical Canadian Studies. Using examples of how historical and current ties between Canada and our respective countries shape the scope and momentum of what is academically feasible and pressing, we argue that underscoring such macro-positionality (as opposed to the individual positionality of a researcher) can result in a more focused inquiry into the existing topics (the legacies of colonialism or the North Atlantic political alliances, for instance) or lead to synergies in others, built on global processes such as transnationalism and diaspora perspectives. In other words, the positionality of "who writes," which adds a level of scrutiny to any academic efforts, in the case of a discipline so heavily intertwined with historical and socio-economic factors as Canadian Studies, could be further enriched by adding "from where" to shed light on the momentum of the relationship of a given locality to Canada and to draw critical insight from the potential or limitations of such dialectic.

BY DOMINIK FORMANOWICZ AND GOKUL KRISHNAN G. S.

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TWO POINTS OF VIEW: NOSTALGIC HISTORY VERSUS SHARED LEGACIES

Polish societal and political ties with Canada are mostly driven by the Cold War narrative and the waves of Polish emigration from the 1970s and 1980s (Drewniak, 2023). The economic, social, and infrastructural progress that Poland made within the span of two generations was remarkable and largely took place because of the integration with the European trade market. At the same time, functional ties between Poland and distant countries formerly symbolizing freedom and democracy, such as Canada, largely became fossilized, confined to nostalgic and historical contexts. The present-day demographics exchange between the two countries, although as seamless as never before due to mostly visa-free tourist movement and political alliances, is marginal and still to a large extent based on the members of the "old" diaspora. To put it in numbers, only 11,000 votes were cast in Canada in the record-breaking Polish parliamentary election in 2023 (Lach, 2023), a relatively small number compared with other dias-

pora communities in Canada. The recent talks between the Polish and Canadian governments about assisting Poland in its nuclear program (Government of Canada, 2025) are a rare example of current socio-political exchange.

The ties between Canada and India are incomparably stronger. They are fuelled by a sustained stream of immigration and shaped by imposed cultural affinities to British imperial legacies (Sharma, 2020; Tharoor, 2018). Canada pursued a "close relationship" with India after the latter's independence in 1947, as India's "size, similar imperial past, common democratic federal systems, and multiethnic cultures" seemed to make it an ideal partner in the Asian Cold War (Rubinoff, 2002, p. 839). However, these early engagements did not guarantee a consistently positive relationship due to their "incompatible interests over such issues as Kashmir," India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998, heightened tensions arising from incidents such as the bombing of Air India Flight 182 (Rubinoff, 2002, p. 828), and, in recent years, the major source of strain posed by the Khalistan movement and its supporters in Canada.

Canada-India diasporic ties are based on Canada's reliance on immigration and, over the past two decades, on the rise of "edugration"—the partial alignment of education and immigration policy that treats international students as prospective migrants (King et al., 2024). Kerala, for instance, has witnessed unprecedented migration to the countries of the global North for higher education, shaping the popular imagination of "locked houses and vacant college seats" showing the impact of the flux (Das, 2003). For them, Canada is not just a location for their studies, but is also perceived as a society that

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The positionality of “who writes,” which adds a level of scrutiny to any academic efforts, in the case of a discipline so heavily intertwined with historical and socio-economic factors as Canadian Studies, could be further enriched by adding “from where” to shed light on the momentum of the relationship of a given locality to Canada and to draw critical insight from the potential or limitations of such dialectic.

promotes inclusivity and offers a more compelling lifestyle, free from social stigmas. Student migration is also a response to a lack of suitable job opportunities and a mismatch between qualifications, skills, and salary in the state (Sebastian, 2024). At the same time, India extends selected rights and privileges to former citizens and persons of Indian origin abroad, affording many former students and other migrants transnational flexibility (Burmeister-Rudolph, 2023).

HOW FAR IS CANADA? THE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

In a political and economic environment such as already described, the discipline of Canadian Studies in Poland often needs to justify its existence. Interestingly, the Polish Association of Canadian Studies is an active member of the global network of Canadianists, in both governance and academic output. The recent survey by Jean Michel Montsion (Montsion et al., 2025) had a strong quantitative contribution from Poland as well as other Central European associations, whereas there was almost no contribution from India. There might be a practical explanation for that. It seems that in the lack of an ongoing

bilateral exchange between the countries, engaging in Canadian Studies in a country like Poland means a deliberate, sharply delineated effort to focus on “all things Canadian”: Canadian literature, Canada’s engagement with Indigenous peoples, Canadian multiculturalism, and so forth. Perhaps because of this focused, uphill effort of reaching out across the ocean while straying from the current flows of diasporic, trade, or political tides, Polish (and many other Eastern European) scholars underscore their academic identity as Canadianists.

In the case of India, with its vivid and current transnational, economic, and educational ties to Canada, the research on Canada may, in many cases, be research on India itself. For instance, the study of Indian diasporas in Canada may fall under more pressing, strategically sound, and better-funded categories in Indian academia than the study of Polish diasporas will in Polish academia. Perhaps the study of Canada in India is, in a way, more ubiquitous than we might notice and much less structured in the way we traditionally associate with Canadian Studies. There are also regional differences to take into account. At Jadavpur University, the Cen-

tre for Canadian Studies’ location within the Department of Comparative Literature shapes its methodological approach, with a strong emphasis on Indigenous and diasporic studies. For someone in Punjab, studying Canada would entail a different perspective, shaped by the region’s history of migration and settlement in Canada and, perhaps, by the impact of the Khalistan movement on collective and personal lives.

BUILDING SYNERGIES FROM LOCALIZED POTENTIALS, LOCALIZED LIMITATIONS

The difference in academic dynamics of localized Canadian Studies is also exemplified by recent Canadian Studies conferences: in Katowice, Poland (September 2025) and in Kolkata, India (February 2026). The topic of the former was “Healing, Well-Being, and Care—Canadian Perspective,” while the latter’s was “Re-storying the Land: Environmental Justice and Cultural Pathways in Canada and India.” The Katowice conference focused mostly on content from Canada and about Canada, with few instances of linking it back to Eastern Europe (such as the overview of Ukrainian immigration to Canada between 2022 and 2024). The Kolkata conference focused on the topics relatable to both India and Canada and built on the proximity of post-colonial struggles as well as the vividness of the current socio-economic exchanges, and the shared urgency of contemporary ecological concerns. In a way, the “Polish gaze” comes almost entirely from the outside, while the “Indian gaze” might increasingly be the one from within. Neither of these approaches is “better”; rather, they are shaped by what is possible. Studying Canada, or its particular aspects such as multiculturalism or political economy, encounters different thresholds and attention—not only financial or organizational but also thematic—contextualized within the historical, political, and cultural currents.

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LOCALIZED MEANING OF CRITICAL CANADIAN STUDIES

Aside from looking at the dynamics of the current socio-economic exchange, which determines how vivid and how functional the study of Canada is from a given location, as emerging scholars writing from different cultures and historic perspectives, in our conversations we discover that the notion of what is considered “critical” differs too, based on where we write from. To study Canada critically as an Indian academic might require moving beyond institutional and diplomatic frameworks and engaging with Canada not as a site of admiration or emulation, but as a complex cultural and historical construct shaped by colonial, migratory, and global power relations, including India’s own. Noticeably, there were attempts to read Indigenous writings in Canada in the context of tribal, Dalit, and subaltern writings in India (Begum, 2014, p. 23). For a researcher from Kerala, where the left-leaning coalitions have been successfully implementing social reforms for decades, the critical inquiry into Canadian urban realities shaped by neoliberal capitalism might bear different meanings from those for a colleague from Poland, where neoliberalism has been pursued since 1989 with almost uncritical affection. At the same time, the Polish researcher might underestimate the societal gravity of race shaping Canada on a systemic scale, functioning quite differently in Eastern Europe. Ironically, the existence of the localized critical lens might have a flip side of a localized lack of critical focus, which poses a challenge to the global Canadian Studies pedagogy.

Based on our conversations in English and broken Hindi, two languages that neither of us considers their own, during Zoom meetings and in the busy cafes of Kolkata, we believe that the “critical” study of Canada is a highly contextualized point of discursive leverage. It is a unique, experience- or history-based uneasiness with Canada, as well as curiosity of it, that we sometimes share, but

often we do not. Academically, it is not only the researcher’s own point of departure but also the geopolitical and institutional environment that determines what is necessary, feasible, and urgent. In other words, the critical inquiry may come from answering “What Canada means to me?” from an abundance of positionalities, informing researchers’ relation with Canada in unique, individual, and independent ways. ■

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Insiders, outsiders, and in between: Negotiating the “I” through reflexivity, relationality, and responsibility in Canadian Studies

Doing research is an inherently political act that is shaped by a host of political choices (Thrupp, 2010), right from the research question and methodology, to how the researcher’s biography and history (Mills, 1959) are mired in the processes they wish to study. This article is an attempt to arrive at a collaborative understanding of what it means not only to reflect on the researcher’s positionalities—some scholars argue that merely reflecting on one’s positionality without any attempt to unpack it is self-indulgent (Bukamal, 2022; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015)—but also to actively work through questions and dilemmas around ethics and responsibility in research from the vantage point of three researchers working on/with three different communities.

Kohl & McCutcheon (2015, p. 748) propose the idea of kitchen table reflexivity, where, through informal conversations, researchers critically and reflexively engage with the fluidity of their positionalities throughout the research process. It demonstrates how relationships with research participants impact perceptions of positionality in the research process. Furthermore, this notion complicates engagements with our identities and addresses critiques of self-reflexivity. We use kitchen table reflexivity as a starting point to critically analyze the relationality between our research participants as well as the process of knowledge production. We approach our respective research through the lens of relationality and answerability and reflect on how our positionalities are situated within the processes we wish to study.

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SHREYASHI’S EXPERIENCE

My research looks at South Asian diasporic stand-up comedy in Toronto and explores how this performative genre highlights the complexities of diasporic belonging, race, and representation. It analyzes the political dimensions of the South Asian diaspora and its situatedness within the broader Canadian public sphere. I envisaged this study of the socio-political dimensions of South Asian diasporic humorous practices as a way to examine how contemporary lived realities of race and identity can contribute to crit-

ical Canadian Studies as well as critical sociological scholarship.

Since humour is intrinsically culturally coded, I decided to design my research as an ethnography that would enable me to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context of the performative genre. During the fieldwork, I observed that some comedians rely on hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality to evoke laughter and a few of the comedic discourses perpetuate dominant norms of sexual morality. I felt conflicted in all instances where I had to make the choice between providing a holistic idea of the comedic landscape, including its problematic aspects, and portraying a sanitized image of the same (Bukamal, 2022).

My dilemma about critiquing the community stems from the racial anxieties surrounding South Asian identities in Canada currently. South Asians in Canada have been facing increased discrimination, and racially motivated hate is on a continuous rise (Statistics Canada, 2025; Kukreja, 2024). My cautiousness about what to write and what to withhold emanates from my anxieties about not causing further harm to a community whose representation in the media is already negatively skewed. This is compounded by my embodied positionality as a South Asian. The repercussions of unfavourable representations impact my everyday existence too.

In trying to work through this conundrum, I turn to the idea of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and

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connectedness between researcher and research participants. In using this as a guiding methodological paradigm, I acknowledge the interpersonal bonds that I have formed with my research participants and take responsibility for my actions and the consequences they might have for the people about whom I write. Relational ethics helps me balance my obligations to the academic community to produce critical scholarship with my responsibility toward my community members to ensure that their representation is not disparaged further. More importantly, it enables me to arrive at an informed decision of what and how I intend to contribute to critical Canadian Studies.

GABRIELA'S EXPERIENCE

My entry into questions of reflexivity came late and somewhat uneasily. Trained within Polish academia, I was taught to remove myself from my work and to treat objectivity as the absence of the "I." Yet my academic interests—particularly in Indigenous health, equity, and intergenerational trauma—were never separate from my own family history, shaped by genocide, war, 123 years of partitions, and forced assimilation. Indigenous studies provided a language for experiences I had previously understood as personal rather than structural, making positionality visible in ways my training had discouraged.

These realizations also sparked a deeper appreciation for my own family history and a stronger sense of cultural identity. Both of these qualities are, in my opinion, essential in navigating the ethically sensitive field of Indigenous health as an outsider researcher, who—though native to my own country—is neither Indigenous nor settler to the lands central to my focus. Though sometimes similar, the histories I carry in my bloodlines do not make me Indigenous in any internationally recognized sense. Indigeneity is tied to collective continuity, relationships to land, and specific forms of belonging

Doing research is an inherently political act that is shaped by a host of political choices, right from the research question and methodology, to how the researcher's biography and history are mired in the processes they wish to study.

that we do not inhabit anymore (Cornassel, 2003).

This produces a layered positionality: although I recognize historical patterns of harm that echo my region's past and impact my present through the legacy of intergenerational trauma, I remain an outsider in the spaces I engage with. This becomes even clearer when considering how Eastern Europeans, though historically often framed as "non-white," have nevertheless been incorporated into whiteness and settler privilege in countries like Canada (Wolff, 1995).

These ambiguities shape how I approach working with historically exploited and misrepresented Indigenous voices. It demands much more than methodological rigour; it requires attentiveness to accountability, meaningful reciprocity, and the limits of my role as a non-Indigenous researcher. Relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), alongside reliance on Indigenous methodological frameworks such as Kaupapa Māori (Smith, 2013), have become essential in navigating these limits. Still, relationality does not resolve tension. Relationships can produce obligations that sit uneasily with academic expectations, and listening does not guarantee that my work will not reproduce harm. Kitchen table reflexivity—especially in conversation with colleagues whose positionalities differ sharply from my own—helps me to constantly renego-

tiate how my experiences impact my work and the other way around. It helps me to slow down and become a familiar face or accept that certain questions may not be mine to pursue, remaining forever cautious not to overstay my welcome.

FAEZEH'S EXPERIENCE

My route into critical Canadian Studies begins with an archive of 10 years of Farsi-language news about Afghan refugees in Iran from 2015 to 2024. These reports depict Afghans as humanitarian responsibility, security threat, economic resource, or demographic danger. Drawing on Stuart Hall's idea of race as a "floating signifier," I treat "the Afghan" as a shifting figure, not a fixed identity (Hall, 1997). Although the archive is located in Iran, Canada appears in official debates on "burden sharing" and in Afghans' imagined futures, tying this work to critical Canadian Studies.

I use reflexive thematic analysis to map patterns across the archive while staying attentive to the violence condensed in each story. When deportations become "data," suffering is easily abstracted and labels like "illegal" and "alien" are normalized. Ahmed's notion of "affective economies" helps me trace how fear, resentment, pity, and compassion "stick" to Afghans and circulate between institutions, media, and publics (Ahmed, 2004).

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My positionality is shaped by asymmetrical proximities: as an Iranian citizen, I share language and many cultural references with Afghan refugees but not their legal precarity. In Canadian academic and public spaces, I am racialized as Middle Eastern and Muslim in ways that echo, but do not replicate, how Afghans are racialized in Iran. Reflexivity means staying with these contradictions: I am both someone who benefits from the same state that produces anti-Afghan policies and a racialized migrant subject to Canadian migration regimes.

These layered locations shape my sense of answerability. Following Spivak (1999), I take my primary answerability as being toward Afghan communities represented in the archive. This pushes me to resist state categories, foreground Afghan agency, and acknowledge the limits of media sources, while remaining answerable to Iranian and Canadian publics when exposing Iranian media violence without turning Iran into an orientalized foil for Canadian innocence.

Kitchen table reflexivity is about building relational checks on how my work travels. Conversations with Afghan colleagues and friends about preliminary findings, and with co-authors embedded in different communities, have led me to rethink moments where my analysis risked collapsing distinct Afghan communities into a single refugee figure. Relationality here is a practice of letting others' concerns reshape my research trajectory and turning critique back on its institutional conditions.

CONCLUSION

Placed alongside one another, our projects reveal both shared commitments and significant tensions. All three of us work in relation to communities that are racialized, marginalized, or routinely misrepresented, and all three grapple with how critique can itself become a form of harm. Yet our positionalities shape these concerns differently. For Shreyashi, critique risks reinforcing racist narratives about

a community to which she belongs and is visibly accountable. For Gabriela, the tension emerges from working in Indigenous spaces where historical over-research and extractive knowledge practices render even well-intentioned scholarship suspect. For Faezeh, the challenge lies in writing about violence produced by a state she is implicated in, while resisting both Iranian and Canadian narratives of innocence.

Rather than offering a model of how to “do” reflexivity correctly, this piece insists on its incompleteness. Critical Canadian Studies, we suggest, is less about occupying the right position and more about remaining answerable to the relationships our work depends on and produces. Kitchen table reflexivity names a practice of staying with discomfort, allowing critique to be reshaped through dialogue, and accepting that some ethical questions remain unresolved. In this sense, reflexivity, relationality, and answerability are not methodological add-ons but ongoing obligations that shape how, why, and for whom critical studies of Canada are undertaken. ■

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Rethinking Canadian Studies: Diasporic and Indigenous perspectives

This article intervenes in debates within critical Canadian Studies by examining how epistemic asymmetries continue to shape the study of Canada. Drawing on our respective research trajectories—engaged with diasporic critiques of multiculturalism and Indigenous analyses of settler colonialism—we reflect on how dominant frameworks of knowledge reproduce tensions between representation and lived realities. Rather than equating historically marginalized voices, we foreground our positionalities as foreign researchers to examine how Canadian Studies remains structured by nation-building logics, cultural diplomacy, and uneven relations of recognition. Through this dialogical intervention, the article highlights the limits of multiculturalism as an organizing framework and points toward relational, reflexive, and decolonizing approaches for rethinking the scope and direction of critical Canadian Studies.

Canadian Studies has long been shaped by nation-building imperatives and its entanglement with settler-colonial frameworks, often leaving intact the colonial and racial hierarchies underpinning the Canadian state. The critical turn in the field has sought to challenge these foundations by exposing the gap between national representations and lived realities, while foregrounding reflexive, relational, and transnational approaches to knowledge production (see Brydon & Coleman, 2009). Situated within this reorientation, this article advances a dialogical intervention grounded in our experiences as foreign researchers working across diasporic and Indigenous-oriented research contexts. Rather than equating distinct historical or political claims, we examine how our respective engagements reveal shared epistemic asymmetries in the framing of Canada—

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particularly through multiculturalism as policy, discourse, and academic framework—and consider how critical Canadian Studies might be reconfigured beyond its nation-centred assumptions. This critique resonates with scholarship that examines how multiculturalism and related language policies structure regimes of recognition and belonging within Canadian Studies (Haque & Patrick, 2015).

CRITICAL CANADIAN STUDIES AND THE QUESTION OF EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRY

Since the consolidation of Canadian Studies as a field in the 1960s and 1970s, it has been broadly rooted in nation-building projects and narratives of cultural distinctiveness, particularly through official bilingualism and multiculturalism (Symons, 1975; Angus, 2013). While often framed as inclusive, these paradigms have historically privileged English and French Canadian experiences as normative foundations of the nation, marginalizing Indigenous, racialized, and migrant forms of knowledge and obscuring ongoing processes

of dispossession, racism, and exclusion (Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007; Coleman, 2006; Bannerji, 2000).

Critical Canadian Studies emerges in response to these limits by interrogating how power, colonialism, and representation structure what can be known about Canada. Rather than reproducing celebratory narratives of tolerance and inclusion, critical approaches foreground epistemic asymmetries embedded in the production of knowledge about the nation, emphasizing reflexivity, relationality, and the situatedness of scholarship.

Our contribution is situated within this critical reconfiguration as a dialogical intervention grounded in our experiences as researchers engaged with different sites of epistemic marginalization. Drawing on diasporic critiques of multiculturalism and Indigenous analyses of settler colonialism, we do not equate historically distinct claims to justice, sovereignty, or belonging. Diasporic demands for inclusion within the nation-state differ fundamentally from Indigenous assertions of prior occupation and sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Thobani, 2007). Instead, by reflecting on how our respective research trajectories encounter shared asymmetries in the framing of Canada, we expose how national narratives of inclusion continue to rely on colonial power structures that remain largely untransformed (Bannerji, 2000).

Our positionality as foreign researchers working outside Canada's state-funded academic structures further sharpens this critique. It allows us to interrogate the field without participating in its nation-building agenda. At the same time, the proximity of Canadian Studies to state structures means that adopting a critical stance may generate institutional friction

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Canadian Studies has long been shaped by nation-building imperatives and its entanglement with settler-colonial frameworks, often leaving intact the colonial and racial hierarchies underpinning the Canadian state. The critical turn in the field has sought to challenge these foundations by exposing the gap between national representations and lived realities, while foregrounding reflexive, relational, and transnational approaches to knowledge production.

or funding constraints (Caldwell et al., 2013). Moving toward a genuinely critical practice therefore requires not the abandonment of Canadian Studies but its reconfiguration—one attentive to epistemic injustice, asymmetry, and the limits of representation as organizing principles of the field. What follows shows how these epistemic injustices are encountered and contested through our respective research engagements.

ENGAGING MULTICULTURALISM CRITICALLY: DIASPORIC RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This section considers diasporic studies as a critical lens through which to examine the tensions between conventional Canadian Studies and its more critical iteration. Multiculturalism—long positioned as a defining feature of Canada’s international self-branding—is examined here not only as state policy, but as a discursive and epistemic framework that structures how diversity is narrated, managed, and studied. From the 1990s onward, crit-

ical currents—including decolonial, post-colonial, feminist, anti-racist, and Indigenous scholarship—have challenged the celebratory narrative of multiculturalism and exposed how it domesticates difference by celebrating diversity as a cultural resource while leaving intact the colonial and racial hierarchies that structure access to citizenship, belonging, and recognition (Bannerji, 2000; Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007). In doing so, it has contributed to legitimizing the Canadian state as an ongoing colonial project, obscuring its structural inequalities.

Diasporic studies have been crucial in exposing these contradictions by critically rereading Canadian history and national identity. Scholars working in this field examine how multiculturalism operates simultaneously as a diplomatic resource and a regulatory framework, even as racialized and migrant communities continue to experience discrimination, segregation, precarity, and forms of non-belonging. The gap between representational politics and material reali-

ties (Bannerji, 2000; Walcott, 2003) thus emerges as a central site of critique within critical Canadian Studies.

In parallel, theoretical frameworks have sought to extend beyond the scope of multiculturalism. Concepts such as *conviviality* (Gilroy, 2004), referring to the everyday negotiation of difference in diverse societies, and solidarity-based approaches (Dei, 2017; Wilson, 2017; Routledge, 2012) emphasize relation building, co-resistance, and shared ethical responsibilities in confronting racism and inequality. These perspectives shift attention away from cultural celebration toward alternative forms of belonging that do not rely on validation from the nation-state, challenging the limits of the “politics of recognition” (Coulthard, 2014) by foregrounding relational autonomy and practices of self-determination.

Together, these diasporic critiques and theoretical reorientations expose how Canada’s multiculturalism is sustained through a myth of inclusion that rarely translates into substantive transformation at a street level. By revealing both the violences concealed by the discourse of tolerance and the possibilities for alternative models of human interaction, diasporic studies contribute to critical Canadian Studies as a project attentive to epistemic asymmetries, justice, relationality, and shared struggle rather than tokenistic diversity.

AS WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE: INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Born out of “colonial unknowing” (Vimallassery et al., 2017), epistemic injustice marginalized othered communities in the study and enrichment of Canadian Studies, rendering it a one-sided field. The resulting hierarchies, while not institutionalized, stem from the sustaining of colonial and racial power dynamics. From an Indigenous research perspective, examining the tensions between critical

Indigenous studies and Canadian Studies uncovers the assumptions underpinning the latter, notably in terms of methodology. Breaking attachment with the presumption of efficiency of the field requires moving away from the compartmentalized, extractive knowledge privileged by Western research modalities. Instead, this section argues for recentring Indigenous storywork, relationality, and land-based ethics, to ensure responsible and community-relevant outcomes in the study of Canada (Archibald, 2008).

Practising reciprocity as a core tenet of ethical research allows for a reconsideration of the relationship between researcher and researched, one based on balance rather than hierarchy. Similarly, it gives affordances for weaving multiple voices into the redefinition of Canadianness.

Reorienting the study of Canada can benefit from the inclusion of the Indigenous stories, yet, in order to move beyond the symbolicity of reconciliation efforts and the risk of being absorbed into dominant narrative (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), critical Canadian Studies illuminates how Canadian Studies has systematically overlooked the country's linguistic diversity by restricting research to the two state languages—English and French—effectively sidelining ethnic and Indigenous languages from recognition, thus shaping what can be known or expressed. In practical terms, seeing the spectrum of Indigenous languages, storywork as a methodology grants the articulation of Indigenous voices through stories as a unified framework, legitimizing their situated knowledges and ensuring accountability and long-lasting impacts on and for these communities.

Although many groups of people compose what we know as “Canada,” a singular sense of belonging is sustained by national policies, further entrenching the country in the colonial matrix. Because of the tapestry of Indigenous sovereignties and their unique views of land, the dominant narrative of “the Canadian nation”

becomes untenable. A unified and capitalistic sense of conceptualization of space is marred by Indigenous spatial knowledges. Rather than focusing on territorial sovereignty and provincialism, critical Canadian Studies would benefit from bringing forth Indigenous peoples' understandings of sovereignty, which centre land as a living relation, thus privileging models of belonging steeped in kinship and relational ties rather than models of regional belonging that reproduce the settlers' false signifier of multiculturalism.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at foregrounding the tensions between Canadian Studies and its more critical configuration by placing diasporic critiques in dialogue with Indigenous perspectives. By approaching these interventions dialogically rather than synthesizing them into a unified framework, we highlight the distinct contributions that each makes to unsettling representational politics and exposing the limits of Canada's self-narration.

As discussed, critical Canadian Studies does not simply reposition Canadian Studies but seeks to produce new modes of relational logics and conditions to be in concert with the reality of the country. Both diasporic and Indigenous studies emphasize relationality, positionality, and accountability—distancing them-

Practising reciprocity as a core tenet of ethical research allows for a reconsideration of the relationship between researcher and researched, one based on balance rather than hierarchy. Similarly, it gives affordances for weaving multiple voices into the redefinition of Canadianness.

selves from nation-building imperatives. In this sense, critical Canadian Studies provides the conditions for reframing the field beyond its foundational assumptions and toward what might be understood as a post-Canadian approach. This shift provides the conditions for decentring the field's nation-centredness and displaces it outside the dominant narrative of the Canadian nation, contributing, thus, to broader global conversations about decoloniality, plurality, and the multiplicity of experiences that constitute “Canada.” ■

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Asian Canadian scholars inside and against the nation

As Asian Canadian scholars, we contribute to critical Canadian Studies by using literature to centre marginalized voices and examine how the nation-state produces forms of racialized belonging and citizenship that are internalized by Asian Canadians, particularly amid rising anti-Indian and anti-international student sentiment (Mosleh, 2025). Emerging from the 1970s through to the 1990s, movements of BIPOC scholars, writers, activists, and critics contesting hegemonic national ideals and narratives, “Asian Canadian” developed as a strategic, collective formation rather than a stable ethnic or civic identity. As Lee (2008) argues, the term names an epistemological position marked by paradoxical belonging and non-belonging within the nation. We employ “Asian Canadian” provisionally and heuristically, acknowledging both the heterogeneity of the diasporas it gathers, and the contradictions embedded in the hyphen. Accordingly, our engagement with Asian Canadian literature does not seek resolution or emancipatory closure but treats its contradictions and diversities as critical resources for interrogating the limits of hegemonic national narratives.

CANADA IN DIASPORAS

Asian Canadian writing presents how “Canada” circulates in diasporas. Studying Canada in diasporas means examining how Canada is imagined, and what those imaginaries conceal, before the nation is ever physically encountered. Informed by media, family networks, and migration policies that promote fantasies of safety, prosperity, and multicultural welcome, Asian diasporic subjects often form attachments to Canada before becoming immigrants. Even forced migrants, such as refugees who flee to Canada, encounter and are influenced by these narratives.

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(Im)migrants enter Canada as labourers, merchants, undocumented migrants, refugees, and international students, with their expectations mediated by a transnationally promoted narrative that casts Canada as benevolent and inclusive (Thobani, 2007, p. 173). Yet, this narrative obscures the unequal, highly stratified conditions of arrival and settlement, as well as the conditional pathways to belonging and citizenship. As Canadian literature scholar Lily Cho asserts, diasporic texts “actively engage with [citizenship] through explicit references to state legislation and through a rigorous outlining of the costs of exclusion and assimilation” (2015, p. 536).

Asian Canadian literature defamiliarizes the exceptionalist narrative underpinning the nation-state, exposing the exclusions and assimilatory pressures beneath its veneer of benevolence. Kim Thúy’s *Ru* (2009), a cornerstone of Asian Canadian writing, exemplifies how Asian refugees confront Canadian exceptionalism. The novel engages directly with Canada’s globally recognized humanitarian narrative that, as critical refugee scholars Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu note, obscures the complex terms on which refuge is granted and how refugee stories are co-

opted to support Canada’s political and cultural goals (2021, p. 4). Although *Ru*’s narrator is grateful for life in Canada, the traumas of the Vietnam War persist in the narrator’s unfamiliar environment. Her arrival in Canada is a disorienting experience marked by “[a] landscape so white, so virginal [it] could only dazzle us, blind us, intoxicate us” (Thúy, 2015, p. 14). The landscape symbolizes the doubleness of the exceptionalist narrative, appearing as purity but signifying white supremacy, which is complicit in her refugeehood but demands her assimilation. Canada was complicit in manufacturing war materials for the United States during the Vietnam War, such as ammunition and Agent Orange (Lazin-Ryder, 2021), fuelling the conflict that conditioned the narrator’s refugeehood in the first place. Foregrounding the uneven emotional textures of displacement, *Ru* unsettles this narrative and calls for a more critical, historically grounded understanding of how national identity is refracted through those who confront it.

DIASPORAS IN CANADA

Although the boundary between “Canada in diaspora” and “diaspora within Canada” is porous, Asian Canadian literature that depicts diasporic life in Canada expresses diasporic subjectivities through evolving cultural and linguistic forms, in ways that challenge dominant narratives of Canada and Canadian identity. A dominant, romanticized myth holds that the nation was founded by the English and the French, producing a teleological narrative that traces its development from colonial settlement to modern liberal statehood. Earlier Canadian texts such as Philippe Aubert de Gaspé’s *Canadians of Old* (1863) and Hugh MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes* (1945) have helped

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Asian Canadian literature defamiliarizes the exceptionalist narrative underpinning the nation-state, exposing the exclusions and assimilatory pressures beneath its veneer of benevolence.

legitimize this myth, whereas Asian Canadian works such as Sky Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and Rita Wong's poetry collection *Forage* (2007) disrupt the centrality of the French and the English in the national myth by representing Asian voices against the historic backdrop of the Canadian Pacific Railway, showing that Canada is founded on Indigenous peoples' land and built by exploited Asian labourers, even as the nation-state continues to exclude both groups in distinct ways.

The Canadian nation-state sustains the myth of two founding nations through the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) and the *Official Languages Act* (1969; modernized 2023), granting official status to English and French languages and cultures. Receiving limited recognition within this framework, Asian Canadian cultures and languages are positioned as peripheral, reinforcing pressure to assimilate to an English–French cultural and linguistic norm (Bannerji, 2000, p. 11). The framework produces an in-between positionality for Asian Canadians who must navigate their heritage cultures and a state-sanctioned cultural identity. Asian Canadian literary works such as Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), Uma Parameswaran's *Rootless But Green Are the Boulevard Trees* (1987), and M. G. Vasanthi's *No New Land* (1991) centre Asian Canadian perspectives while relegating the state and dominant Anglo-cultures to the periphery. Through multilingual literary praxis, these texts turn the dominant language of English into a creative

and malleable container that could carry Asian languages and cultures while being shaped by them. Although the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* positions Asian Canadian subjectivities at the periphery of the nation's imagination, Asian Canadian literature has shown otherwise.

While Asian Canadian literature has long critiqued the nation's racial exclusions, a growing number of Asian Canadians since 2023 have reproduced exclusionary logics once directed at them, particularly against Indian temporary residents and international students. Historically, the Canadian state and the Canadian Pacific Railway company suppressed Asian labour while fostering anti-Asian sentiment among white labourers, culminating in the *Chinese Immigration Act* (1923), which rendered Chinese Canadians legally and socially marginal. These dynamics re-emerge in the present. For years, the Canadian state and corporations have exploited Indian temporary workers and international students; when the economy declined in 2024, these groups were recast as scapegoats in the national narrative. Rather than recognizing the colonial continuities, some Asian Canadians with citizenship redirect their anger toward these groups, positioning them as racialized "others." As Elcioğlu (2025) notes, more racialized voters, including South Asians and Chinese Canadians, are leaning into nationalistic rhetoric and expressing "exclusionary views, often toward those who arrived more recently." Shaped by histories of exclusion, these citizens assert their belong-

ing within a nation that has long rendered their position conditional under settler colonialism.

The field has long argued that Asian Canadians' conditional inclusion renders them susceptible to state co-optation in the exclusion of new "aliens." Inspired by the arrival of Tamil refugees in British Columbia in 2010, Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018) depicts Grace Nakamura, a third-generation Japanese Canadian adjudicator for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, who must decide whether Tamil refugees like Mahindan and his son constitute refugees or security threats. Despite her family's history of internment as "enemy aliens," Grace's attachments to and privilege within the settler-colonial state implicate her in reproducing similar logics of exclusion once used against her community.

Like Grace, we as scholars are complicit and must remain critical of the nation. As founding figure of Asian Canadian literature Roy Miki observes, when nearly 600 Chinese nationals arrived in British Columbia from Fujian province in 1999, some Chinese Canadians demonized them and called for their expulsion from Canada so as to protect the nation (Miki, 2017, p. 302). He asks, "What was the identity of the nation that was being defended?" (Miki, 2017, p. 302). Reproducing the racist logics once used against them, some Chinese Canadians who called for the expulsion of the Fujianese migrants—figured as an "uncanny double"—understood Canada as belonging exclusively to "deserving" citizens, a category they claimed for themselves in opposition to undesirable outsiders. In doing so, they reflect how fully they have internalized the nation's longstanding disavowal of its reliance on "alien" labour, a category from which they themselves have only recently emerged. As Asian Canadian scholars within the nation, we must persistently echo Miki's question and extend its lines of inquiry to stay critical about who we are and what we

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do. The nation shapes Asian Canadians' desires, self-understanding, and the terms through which the subjects conceptualize the nation itself. How, then, can we read literary representations of the nation without reproducing its settler-colonial logics when we, the texts, and their authors are all implicated within it? And as the nation produces exclusion alongside conditional belonging, to what extent can Asian Canadian literature offer alternatives? While definitive answers remain elusive, these provocations reveal that critically analyzing the Canadian nation is essential to understanding the broader existential, ethical, and epistemological effects of knowledge production within Canada.

CODA

Reading Asian Canadian literature reveals genealogies of exclusion, containment, and conditional inclusion in Canada based on race and other axes of difference. Policies such as official multiculturalism function as technologies of management, absorbing racial difference without transforming the structures that produce racial inequality in the first place. Together, "Canada in diasporas" and "diasporas in Canada" reveal the reciprocal relationship between how the nation is imagined abroad and how diasporic life is managed, lived, and resisted within its borders, foregrounding experiences that exceed official recognition, including language loss, labour exploitation, refugee trauma, and intergenerational silence. The recent surge in anti-immigration and anti-South Asian sentiment, including the scapegoating of migrants for housing and immigration and labour issues (Tasker, 2025), is not a contradiction of multiculturalism but a product of it. Our affective and political investments as scholars of Asian Canadian literature shape the urgency with which we read these works, not as affirmations of diversity but as critical archives that expose and reimagine the nation's racial logics as they are upheld by official policy. ■

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Peacekeeping as technology of innocence: Canada's imperial entanglements from Vietnam to Palestine

Each August, officials gather at Ottawa's Peacekeeping Monument—*The Reconciliation*—to commemorate Canada's role in international peacekeeping, reinforcing a familiar national narrative that casts Canada as a neutral, benevolent, and responsible global actor. This image is echoed in defence discourse, which frames Canada's military engagements as fostering stability, deterring conflict, and upholding an "international rules-based order," shaping both domestic identity and international perceptions of Canada's role in the world (Canadian Armed Forces, 2025). Yet, as scholars have argued, such narratives often obscure the racial, colonial, and imperial dimensions of state power (Razack, 2004; McCullough, 2016; Wegner, 2023).

Building on this scholarship, this article examines peacekeeping not simply as a policy tradition but as a posture of neutrality—a paternalistic performance that casts Canada as a custodian of order while reducing populations within racialized civilizational hierarchies to objects of management rather than political actors with sovereign claims. We argue that this posture functions as a settler-colonial technology of innocence, sustaining Canadian exceptionalism by displacing the responsibility onto racialized others while obscuring Canada's political, military, and economic entanglements within imperial power structures. Through the cases of Canada's involvement in the Vietnam War and its role in Palestine from partition to the present, we demonstrate how peacekeeping discourse provides an adaptive but enduring framework through which recurring contradictions between rhetoric and material alignment are managed.

BY ALANA DUGGAN AND JOHN L. TRAN

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Rather than asking whether Canada lives up to its ideals, critical Canadian Studies here examines how those ideals are produced and mobilized to sustain national innocence amid ongoing entanglements in colonial and imperial power.

VIETNAM: CANADA'S PEACEKEEPING PARADOX

Although Canada was never an official belligerent in the Vietnam War (1955–1975), its foreign policy during this period was shaped by a persistent tension: on the one hand, deep economic and security interdependence with the United States, and on the other, a desire to uphold the international reputation for peacekeeping that it had cultivated during the Cold War (1945–1991). As a result, Canadian involvement in Vietnam took diverse and consequential forms.

Some Canadians participated directly in combat under American command, others contributed through humanitarian and medical missions, and Canadian diplomats moved from failed efforts at war prevention to documenting its human toll. At the same time, Canadian military goods and weapons were distributed across the conflict's terrain, from populated areas to contested terrain. Canadian authorities facilitated US operations through volun-

tary intelligence sharing, reinforcing the integration of Canadian institutions into American military and security planning (Boyko, 2021). Canada's contradictory foreign policy identity during the Vietnam War is an avenue for rethinking that moves beyond the peacekeeping myth and confronts the deeper structures shaping its participation in broader geopolitics.

Canada's formal involvement in Vietnam began with its appointment to the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) following the 1954 Geneva Accords. Charged with supervising ceasefire arrangements and political processes in both North and South Vietnam, the ICSC was deliberately structured to mirror the Cold War's geopolitical divisions. Canada represented the Western, US-aligned bloc; Poland embodied the communist-aligned Warsaw Pact; and India, serving as chair, was meant to stand in for the Non-Aligned Movement. Although formally tasked as an impartial compliance-monitoring body, the tripartite commission operated within a Cold War security architecture (Ross, 1984).

For Canada's part, its work in the ICSC was closely aligned with Western anti-communist counterinsurgency priorities (Levant, 1986). Within this structure, Canada enacted what might be understood as a performance of innocence, casting Vietnamese populations as problems to be managed while cultivating its self-image as a neutral peacekeeper and mediator. This posture was not incidental but embedded in the broader architecture of Pearsonian peacekeeping, which presented Canada as a humanitarian broker even as its foreign policy consistently aligned with Western anti-communist priorities (Engler,

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2012). Far from neutral, this framework helped stabilize and legitimize a US-led Cold War order.

Domestic politics added another layer of contradiction. Canada became a refuge for tens of thousands of American draft resisters, a development that enhanced its global reputation as a humane alternative to US strategic posture. The influx of draft resisters helped reinforce Canada's self-image as a peacekeeping nation at the very moment when the Canadian state was materially and strategically integrated into the American war effort. The result was a foreign policy defined not by neutrality but by the careful management of contradictions between discourse and practice. The Vietnam case thus exposes a recurring pattern: Canada performs neutrality while practising alignment, deploying peacekeeping discourse to legitimize contradictory actions. This pattern reappears today with striking clarity in the context of Gaza.

PERFORMING IMPARTIALITY: CANADA AND PALESTINE

The ongoing genocide in Gaza reveals the persistence of this contradiction.¹ Canada presents itself as a peaceable middle power—calling for aid and a ceasefire (2025), conditionally recognizing the state of Palestine (September 2025), and supporting President Trump's proposed Gaza peace plan. At the same time, analyses and reporting document ongoing Canadian military shipments to Israel between 2023 and 2025, with additional components continuing to reach Israeli supply chains through US re-export channels despite government claims of export restrictions (Arms Embargo Now, 2025a, 2025b; Dyer, 2025; Boudjikanian, 2026). This asymmetry is further reinforced through official counterterrorism language, in which the designation "terrorist" is applied to non-state actors such as Hamas while even more excessive Israeli aggression is framed in neutral terms of security and defence, shaping whose violence is recognized as legitimate. Together, these dynamics illus-

trate how neutrality functions not as impartiality, but as a strategic posture that allows Canada to maintain its global image while remaining materially entangled in the violence it purports to condemn.

This contradiction is not new. The mythos of Canada as a peacekeeping nation can be traced back to the partition of Palestine (1947) and the origins of UN peacekeeping itself. Canada played a leading role through senior diplomat Lester B. Pearson and Justice Ivan Rand, Canada's representative on the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). Rand described the establishment of Israel as a "beacon of light in an otherwise darkened section of humanity," and an "anchorage in the Middle East for ethical values and civilizing influence of the West" (Husseini, 2008, p. 51). The adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), which disproportionately divided the territory in favour of the proposed Jewish state, led to war and the violent dispossession of more than 700,000 Palestinians. The first UN peacekeeping mission—the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), in which Canada was a proud participant—emerged directly from this context, framed as an effort to maintain order through international supervision rather than the colonial condition and international governance regimes that had produced the conflict.

As in Vietnam, a posture of neutrality concealed Canada's position within a geopolitical order structured by colonial

Rather than asking whether Canada lives up to its ideals, critical Canadian Studies here examines how those ideals are produced and mobilized to sustain national innocence amid ongoing entanglements in colonial and imperial power.

histories, racial hierarchies, and Western strategic alignments. Over time, this logic consolidated into a national mythology of Canada as uniquely civilized and peace-oriented middle power—a narrative reiterated in the 2024 parliamentary debate on "Canada's actions to promote peace in the Middle East," when former Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly invoked a longstanding tradition of "peacekeeping and bridge-building" from Pearson to the present (Joly, 2024). Seen from Palestine, however, peacekeeping appears less a humanitarian exception than a durable strategy of self-representation, one that reconciles material alignment with imperial power through the language of civility and mediation.

PEACEKEEPING AS A RACIALIZED TECHNOLOGY OF INNOCENCE

Understanding the persistence of Canada's contradictory foreign policy requires shifting from viewing peacekeeping as a set of policies to recognizing it as a racialized strategic narrative—a discursive technology through which the Canadian state constructs and defends its global identity. Rooted in mid-20th-century diplomacy associated with figures such as Lester B. Pearson—whose Nobel Peace Prize (1957) helped cement Canada's reputation as a global peacekeeping nation—this framework provides a vocabulary of civility, order, and humanitarianism that prioritizes stability over justice (Wegner, 2023, p. 117).

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This narrative is supported by a racialized and paternalistic logic embedded within peacekeeping discourse. Western states are cast as custodians of order, while racialized populations are positioned within hierarchies that frame them as disorderly and in need of management (Wegner, 2023, p. 47). By obscuring violence rooted in colonial dispossession and Cold War militarization, this framing recasts conflict as the product of “unruly” societies. Within this logic, violence is “sheathed in a skin of civility,” and responsibility is displaced onto those deemed to have somehow “asked for it” (Razack, 2004, pp. 46, 50). Peacekeeping thus functions as a technology of innocence: it allows Canada to appear morally distinct from the violence it supports by relocating responsibility onto racialized others and presenting intervention as humanitarianism. As Wegner argues, this attribution of innocence is central to Canada’s peacekeeping myth, enabling the state to exercise international authority while appearing morally disinterested. In doing so, it furnishes the conditions for plausible deniability, allowing Canada to assert neutrality while remaining structurally embedded in the power relations that produce the conflicts it claims to moderate.

The language of “Canadian values” further reinforces this dynamic. Such discourse functions as racial coding, mobilizing implicitly white, Western norms to determine who is seen as moral, rational, and fit for global authority. This narrative operates relationally: Canadian identity has long been constructed through disidentification with the United States, whose overt militarism and racial politics serve as a comparative foil. By positioning itself as less aggressive and more multicultural, Canada appears moderate and morally superior by contrast, limiting sustained scrutiny of its own entanglements in imperial and settler-colonial power. Coupled with peacekeeping rhetoric and the “export” of Canadian values, this relational distinction reinforces

national innocence while legitimizing intervention abroad.

Taken together, the Vietnam and Gaza cases reveal not episodic inconsistency but a structural reliance on racialized narratives of civility and disorder. Peacekeeping operates as the ideological framework through which Canada reconciles its material alignment with US-led imperial power and its aspiration to moral distinction from that very power—a technology of innocence through which Canada sustains its global position while displacing the responsibility for the violence it helps enable. ■

NOTE

1. This article employs the term “genocide” in accordance with determinations by genocide scholars and international human rights organizations, including the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B’Tselem, and the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, as well as findings of the UN Independent International Commission Inquiry. See United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025).

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Interpreting public spaces in Toronto with the Black presence in mind¹

BY NATASHA HENRY-DIXON

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People of African descent—enslaved and free—have resided in the Town of York (Toronto) since the late 1790s when it was established as the capital of Upper Canada. However, the history and heritage of the city up to its incorporation in 1834 have been interpreted primarily from a Eurocentric perspective, and these Black inhabitants have been effectively erased from interpretations of the early colonial space and, consequently, public memory. This article offers an interpretation of public spaces in Toronto that counters the ways that Black people, their stories, and their experiences have been sidelined. I situate them in the city landscape and make them visible, particularly those who were enslaved, to model ways of creating an awareness and acknowledgement of the Black women, men, and children who were held as chattel. Through these approaches, I emphasize how studying the history of slavery in Toronto can enrich, challenge, further, and/or complicate the field of urban history, the study of this major Canadian city, and Canadian history more broadly. To conclude, I offer considerations for reinterpreting public spaces that honour the city's longstanding Black presence.

Over the past 20 years, in response to advocacy from Black community members, scholars, and heritage experts, the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario, and some heritage organizations have sought to be more inclusive of Toronto's Black history. The historical presence of freedom seekers during the era of the Underground Railroad movement has been embraced in the city's public history, as seen with the Mary Ann Shadd Cary municipal plaque and the recent heritage interpretation in and around the new Toronto Courthouse. By and large,

the history of welcoming Black refugees places Canada in a positive light and reinforces narratives of white benevolence. Conversely, very little attention has been paid to the Black population in the Town of York between 1797 and 1834, some of whom were free/d but the majority of whom were enslaved and held as property by some of the colony's ruling elite. I have been contemplating this as I work on my manuscript on the lives and experiences of Black folks who were enslaved in Upper Canada. I am thinking through how my work can and should amplify their stories and place them in public spaces where their memories and existence have faded over time.

A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe designated York as the temporary capital of the colony on August 27, 1793, one month after the passage of the *An Act to Prevent the Further Introduction of Slaves and to Limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude* ("the 1793 Act to Limit Slavery"). This bill confirmed slavery and that those enslaved at the time were "slaves for life," while also introducing gradual abolition. When politicians and business leaders moved from Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake today) to York, those who were enslavers brought the people they kept as chattel with them. The town's population grew steadily within the 10-block

radius from the shores of Lake Ontario on the south to Adelaide Street on the north and George and Berkeley streets on the west and east, respectively. In June 1795, there were only 14 houses in York.² Five years later, in 1800, York had a population of 403, and in 1803, 456 residents were counted (Firth, 1962, p. lxxvi; O'Donohue, 2005, p. 251). Among the enumerated residents between 1798 and 1810, at least 15 Black persons were held as property in this compact space (Mosser, 1984). They were classified as slaves or were placed in the servant category. Many others would have frequented the new capital, accompanying their enslavers on their business. They were part of the approximately 650 Black persons enslaved in Upper Canada identified in my project, *One Too Many: Black People Enslaved in Upper Canada, 1760–1834*. The Black population also included 10 free Black men. A Black woman named Thérèse moved to York from Sandwich in 1815 with James/Jacques Bâby, who relocated after being appointed inspector general and serving as the speaker of the Legislative Council of Upper Canada. Thérèse was a mulatto (or biracial) woman. Sometime after 1790, Bâby purchased Thérèse from his brother François, who had inherited Thérèse, her daughter Rose, and Rose's infant son Léon from their father, Jacques Bâby dit Dupéron.³

Evidence of the early enslaved Black presence in Toronto has been lost, misinterpreted, obscured, and outright ignored by historians, heritage professionals, and archaeologists who focused on the emerging town centre. For example, most would not have known that those categorized as "servants" in the Town of York census were in fact enslaved. Many artifacts

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Evidence of the early enslaved Black presence in Toronto has been lost, misinterpreted, obscured, and outright ignored by historians, heritage professionals, and archaeologists who focused on the emerging town centre.

uncovered in archaeological assessments were not interpreted to acknowledge potential connections to the enslaved, and further, all the built history of that era is gone, leaving no trace of their presence. Why has the historical record of racial chattel slavery in Toronto and colonial Canada been omitted and marginalized from academic knowledge production of Canadian history and from the collective Canadian memory? Several reasons can be given. For one, the enslaved Black population was much smaller relative to slave societies in the southern Atlantic and, consequently, is often discounted. Second, because the manifestation of the institution of slavery was different from the plantation economies in the southern United States and Caribbean, slavery in British North America is viewed as insignificant. Third, acknowledging the slaveholding of historical figures lauded as founders of the province is perceived as tainting the images of these enslavers and their locales of influence. And fourth, there are deliberate efforts to disassociate Canada from the history of slavery. Collectively, these factors work to play down the historical presence of the enslaved, which minimizes and erases their oppression, displacement, and dispossession, and contributes to the sanitization of Canada's colonial past. The traditional practices of public commemoration have resulted in Black erasure and raise pertinent questions about the ways that slavery and the enslaved are dis/remembered and silenced.

Memorials to Black individuals who were enslaved in what is now called Canada are recent. A plaque was installed in honour of Marie Joseph Angélique by the Province of Quebec in Montreal in 2004. In 2025, Angélique was designated as a national historic person by Parks Canada. The Ontario Heritage Trust dedicated a plaque to Chloe Cooley in 2007 for the bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament. Marie Marguerite Rose was recognized with a national plaque at Fortress Louisbourg in 2008 and was designated as a national historic person that same year. A community memorial plaque to honour John Baker, created by the Cornwall Community Museum and the UEL Bridge Annex Branch, was installed in 2021.⁴ More recently, Peggy was recognized with a Heritage Toronto plaque that was installed in 2023. In an anomalous example, the 1990 memorial installation of the Meyers family to Loyalist John Meyers, who settled in Belleville, acknowledges the Black people he enslaved. It seems to be the only such instance of a descendant family of an enslaving Loyalist to do so. In 2022, Parks Canada recognized the Enslavement of African People in Canada (c. 1629–1834) as a national historic event. These examples represent a handful of the at least 4,500 Black men, women, and children held in hereditary bondage in British North America. To a large extent, the history of slavery and the enslaved is not well integrated into public history and traditional interpretations of Canadian history.

Public misconceptions and outright racist denial of the historical truth of racial chattel slavery can be seen in the vitriolic public responses on social media to any statement that “Canada had slavery” and in the white-centred, apologist framing of Canada's history of chattel slavery in recent news articles. The premise of their opposition is that Canada, as a dominion, did not exist until 1867 and therefore did not have slavery, yet in the same breath, they say that Canada, the same place that purportedly did not exist, welcomed freedom seekers. They refuse the continuum of Canada and are selective about which history they ascribe to the nation-state. The reality is that the conceptualization of Canada in its early colonial iteration included the development of a state that employed the forced labour of enslaved Black and Indigenous people. Efforts to erase the history of slavery and thereby the enslaved from the collective Canadian consciousness are common in the play-book of historical silencing and denial, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) explains. It is a familiar way to silence conversation on slavery in Canada. It serves to discredit the scholarship of often Black scholars and the voices of descendants of enslaved Africans who have asserted that Canada has a history of the enslavement of Black people that must be acknowledged and atoned for.

Enslaved Black children, women, and men are the core focus of my research interest, to better understand their lives and experiences, to share how they experienced Upper Canada, including Toronto, in much different ways than most of the city's early residents, and to insert them into the landscape. I will return to them shortly. What of the enslavers? Contemporary streets and neighbourhoods are imprinted with the names of enslaving settlers and their descendants, with plaques, statues, cemetery memorials, and landmarks in their honour acknowledging their lives and contributions.

In Toronto, there are Jarvis Street, Peter Street, Russell Street (name change in 2020), Russell Hill Road, Baby Point Road, Brant Street, and Brant Place, to name a few. These individuals who held power and privilege were and still are viewed as influential and as builders, a stark contrast to the enslaved, who were dispossessed and disenfranchised. Many of the enslavers in Upper Canada, whom I have identified in my research, are remembered in some way, and the people they enslaved are nowhere in sight.

A RECKONING OF PAST NAMING PRACTICES

During the summer of 2020 and into 2021, calls for racial and social justice led to a great deal of media coverage on street names pertaining to enslaving settlers and settlers who supported the brutal colonization of Indigenous peoples. In response, the City of Toronto, under senior Black leadership, took the initiative to increase the focus on Black history and heritage stemming from complex connections to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. The city's Confronting Anti-Black Racism unit, in keeping with the extended international Decade for People of African Descent, launched a public education campaign called "Confront the Past, Change the Future: Legacies of Resistance," and began to animate initiatives designed to educate the public and address anti-Black racism. The social uprisings of 2020 also influenced the City of Toronto's Commemorative Framework for Public Spaces, which outlined new policies and practices for naming public spaces, streets, and monuments.⁵ At that time, grassroots interventions raised public awareness about residential school history, Canada's links to slavery through the British empire, and the history of slavery in Toronto. Two statutes tied to the residential school system were pulled down in Toronto—Egerton Ryerson's in 2021 and Alexander Wood's in 2022. In response, Ryerson University formed a task force to investigate the school's

namesake's connections to the history and legacy of the establishment of Ontario's colonial education system, which included residential schools for Indigenous children and segregated schools for Black children. After developing principles to guide commemoration at the university, Ryerson University was subsequently renamed Toronto Metropolitan University in response to these protests.⁶

In June 2020, a petition was signed by 14,000 people calling for the name of Dundas Street, named after Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for Home Affairs and War, to be changed because he was instrumental in delaying the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean in the late 18th century.⁷ The public debate on the proposed renaming of Dundas Street is not Black history in the discrete sense; it is about empire and colonialism. But the contentious discussion brings to the fore the history of the Black Atlantic (more specifically, the transatlantic slave trade), its manifestation in this city and province, and the connected legacies of the afterlives of slavery to the contemporary Black population in the city and country. Henry Dundas's amendments to the 1792 proposal to end overseas trafficking delayed its implementation by 15 years. His modifications ensured that enslavers had continued access to slave labour through pro-natalism, that is, increasing

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the importation of young people, especially women and young girls, so that slavery could survive by natural increase rather than slave trading (Newton, 2020). Dundas's advocacy prioritized plantation operators and enslavers rather than the Black people under the brutal chains of hereditary bondage. For these reasons, many scholars and activists have argued against memorializing Dundas as an abolitionist. In connecting the relevance of this debate to my research, the outright end of racial chattel slavery throughout British colonies, including Upper Canada, was not on the table for Dundas; Black people in the Town of York and Upper Canada remained enslaved and chattel slavery continued.

Pro-Dundas proponents, scholars, and descendants put forth several arguments for saving Dundas Street. They argued that Dundas appointed Simcoe, which led to the first anti-slavery legislation, or wrongly say that Simcoe's 1793 Act to Limit Slavery abolished slavery at the time of its passage; it did not. This is attribution by proxy, because Dundas did not appoint Simcoe to abolish slavery in Upper Canada. As has been established in this article, the 1793 Act to Limit Slavery confirmed that slavery could continue. The forced labour regime would be gradually phased out over two generations to appease half

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Biographical writing as a historical method is an effective way to retrieve the stories of enslaved Black people, achieving the goal of injecting them into public memory and onto the landscape.

of the members of Parliament who held property in slaves. A second argument they proffered, using Black people to bolster Dundas's historical significance, was that Dundas wanted to ensure that Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia received the land they were promised.⁸ Honouring the promises made to Black Loyalists by the British government is a very low bar to measure moral values.⁹

Two months later, in August 2020, temporary guerrilla plaques began to appear across the city to expose the history of slavery and the prominent families memorialized by street names who were enslavers.¹⁰ William Jarvis, Peter Russell, and James Bâby and his family were profiled as well as the Black people whom they held in hereditary captivity.¹¹ Non-sanctioned commemorations arising from protest play an important role in raising awareness, often challenging colonial practices, disrupting spaces, and sparking the creation of new forms of memorialization, authorized and informal.

Through my research, I have initiated two strategic interventions to date. These respond to the dearth of memorials to the enslaved and the history of slavery in Upper Canada, aiming to locate them in the built environment. The first is a curated walking tour, "Brought in Bondage: Black People Enslaved in the Town of York." The enslaved walked the muddy streets of the Town of York as they went about their daily labour, like running errands for their enslavers and travelling to their enslavers' farms on York's outskirts to perform all manner of backbreak-

ing agricultural work. On occasion, they may have been given some "free" time or reclaimed their time, carving out periods away from the intense surveillance and control of their enslavers. This digital humanities project maps their presence to create a digital footprint. The second intervention is a series of seven biographical narratives of Black people enslaved in Upper Canada, in collaboration with the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. The subjects of the historical stories include Chloe Cooley, Henry Lewis, Peter Martin, George Martin, Peggy, John Baker, and an entry devoted to the approximately 50 Black persons enslaved by Matthew Elliott in Fort Malden (Amherstburg), most of whose names are unknown. These biographies were composed by weaving together archival fragments and stretching the archives, that is, drawing on other sources to build context. Most of the stories are linked to Toronto in various ways.

Henry Lewis was enslaved by provincial secretary and registrar of Upper Canada William Jarvis in Niagara (present-day Niagara-on-the-Lake) before the Jarvises moved to the new capital, bringing the six other Black individuals they enslaved with them. Peggy and her three children, Jupiter, Milly, and Amy, were enslaved by provincial administrator Peter Russell. They resided on the Russell property at Sherbourne and Front streets. Peter Russell tried to broker the sale of Peggy and Jupiter to Mohawk chief Joseph Brant through Indian Department official Matthew Elliott in Fort Malden. After

purchasing his son George's freedom from Lieutenant Thomas Butler in Niagara, Peter Martin and his son moved to the Town of York. They became part of the free Black population there. John Baker and his older brother Simon, both enslaved by Robert I. D. Gray, the province's first solicitor general in Cornwall, were forced to accompany Gray to the capital city in their personal service to him. They resided with Gray at a home on York and Wellington streets. Biographical writing as a historical method is an effective way to retrieve the stories of enslaved Black people, achieving the goal of injecting them into public memory and onto the landscape.¹²

THE CASE OF KITTY

One of the personal stories of much interest to those studying the Town of York is that of a young woman named Kitty. Kitty was one of the six Black persons enslaved by William and Hannah Jarvis. The Jarvises enslaved three males and three females of various ages—Moses and his wife Phoebe, Sussex, two youths, Kitty and Prince (also known as Henry), and an unnamed female. The Jarvises brought the people they enslaved from Newark to the new capital to labour on the Jarvis homestead located on the southeast corner of Sherbourne and Adelaide. Their house was one of the largest in the town (Robertson, 1894, p. 128). As an enslaved labourer, Kitty would have been forced to undertake a myriad of common chores—all kinds of domestic work, farm labour, and helping to take care of the six Jarvis children. I first learned about Kitty while combing through court records for the Court of Quarter Sessions of the Peace for the Home District.¹³ In January 1801, she was committed to jail by Jarvis, charged with assaulting him. Kitty was brought before five justices of the peace, one of whom was her own enslaver, and ordered to be held in jail until her sentencing after an initial plea of guilt. The Old Log Gaol, where she was held, was built in 1798 just

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on the outskirts of town. Today, the location is King Street East and Leader Lane, the site of the King Edward Hotel.

Two days later, Jarvis requested that her charges be dismissed, that her punishment of whipping be rescinded, and that she be ordered to return to her duties in his home. However, Kitty replied to the charges levied against her and to Jarvis's demand that she be released and return to the Jarvis household. She stated that "she was not guilty, and saying she would not return to her Master, the court remanded her back to prison."¹⁴ Kitty's case was put over until the next day, but no further information is documented in the court minutes. We don't know if Kitty received a whipping since she refused to return to Jarvis. However, she was forced to return to Jarvis's home soon after. The court record of Kitty's case reveals the material conditions of her enslavement, if even just a sliver. Some kind of confrontation took place between the enslaved and the enslaver for Jarvis to allege assault. Was there an actual physical altercation between the two? Did she refuse his orders to work or sexual advances? Was there a conflict between Kitty and Hannah, her mistress? It also hints at how Kitty was treated: that she would rather be held in a freezing-cold log jail during the harsh winter weather and possibly whipped than return immediately to the Jarvis homestead.

In a second incarceration 10 years later, on March 11, 1811, Jarvis accused Prince and an unnamed young woman, most likely Kitty, of stealing gold and silver from his desk and running away the previous evening. Jarvis had them committed to jail under charges of theft. Prince was ordered remanded in custody until his court date, while the young, unnamed woman, presumably Kitty, was instructed to return to the service of her master. Jarvis was not serving as a magistrate during this case.¹⁵ Curiously, Jarvis wanted Kitty to return to the Jarvis property immediately, even though he had sent her to jail, while he wanted Prince to remain in custody.

Because there is such a narrow understanding of chattel slavery, what is often missed and disregarded is that chattel slavery was so entrenched in imperialism and colonization that the system was adapted to various environments and conditions and was implemented to suit the demand, including Canada.

Jarvis used the legal system to discipline Kitty and some of the other Black people he enslaved. It was common practice by some enslavers living in urban spaces in different jurisdictions in the United States to abuse the use of public jails as a form of social control against their slaves (Wood, 1987). They used the criminal justice system and its agents, such as police constables and jailers, as surrogates to extend control over the individuals they enslaved and to maintain the oppression they inflicted upon them. Jarvis's use of the courts and the jail was especially egregious and an overreach of his power and influence, given that he was an officer of the court.

Not much more is known about Kitty's life. How long did she live? How was she treated after her second release from jail? Did she get to taste freedom? It appears that those enslaved by Jarvis who remained alive continued to be enslaved until Jarvis's death in 1817. He died without a will, and the remaining enslaved people would have been passed on to his son, the eldest, Samuel, if Jarvis had not manumitted them before his death.¹⁶ Kitty's incomplete story briefly illuminates a fragment of her life and what chattel slavery was like for her and others enslaved in the Town of York. Her story also challenges the ways that slavery in Canada has been represented as a more

benign institution and provides another perspective on what it resembled.

REMEMBERING THE ENSLAVED

Recognizing enslaved Black people as part of Toronto's public history illustrates that people of African descent are not new arrivals and that they are part of the city's contested colonial past. Additionally, reinterpreting Toronto's colonial history with the enslaved in mind challenges white-centric interpretations and persistent colonial naming practices. The efforts to decolonize and diversify longstanding naming practices, inclusive of the enslaved, have been welcomed in some schools of thought and bemoaned in others. Debates can foster critical conversations; however, very anti-Black responses to the Dundas renaming efforts have surfaced—anti-Blackness toward Black scholars and city officials that has threatened their safety. Many have faced attacks because of Black ideological dissent from traditional, Eurocentric interpretations. These attacks are attempts to delegitimize Black thought. Anti-Blackness is also evident in the ways enslaved Black lives are minimized and are utilized to bolster Henry Dundas's legacy to give him accolades, contributing to their dehumanization. One question to consider: Can those who want to make the

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The creation of more public memorials of various kinds to the enslaved can enrich, challenge, further, and complicate the field of Canadian history and the study of cities born out of colonial settlement.

argument for Dundas's historical significance establish their case without using enslaved Black people to prop him up?

The paucity of the interpretation of the lives of the enslaved and the institution of slavery at public history sites in Toronto and in Ontario more broadly is reflective of the pervasive denial of the historical reality of slavery, because it looked different in regions in the south. Because there is such a narrow understanding of chattel slavery, what is often missed and disregarded is that chattel slavery was so entrenched in imperialism and colonization that the system was adapted to various environments and conditions and was implemented to suit the demand, including Canada. The walking tour and biographies I developed through my research project raise critical questions about what it means to remember the enslaved and slavery with the space itself and position their existence against our sanitized national memory. Memorializing the enslaved in Toronto and Upper Canada in various forms, including permanent, public, and physical markers and digital markers, is a critical intervention and catalyst for public memory making and community building. These public history projects are designed to honour the memories of enslaved Black people, integrate their historical experiences into the public history interpretation of Toronto's past, which in turn contests their erasure from public consciousness.

This article calls for the public history interpretation of the City of Toronto and other places in southwestern Ontario

to be more inclusive of the Black men, women, and children who were enslaved in these geographical territories. How this is accomplished requires informed and purposeful approaches that are true to the historical account, consider the sensitivities of diverse audiences, and honour the humanity of the enslaved subjects. Black communities, including Black scholars and heritage leaders, should be engaged at all stages of the process. It also urges public historians and heritage practitioners to consider the potential of digital history to disrupt and insert enslaved historical subjects into the built environment, and to extend the reach and engagement of that history.

The creation of more public memorials of various kinds to the enslaved can enrich, challenge, further, and complicate the field of Canadian history and the study of cities born out of colonial settlement. The public can better understand the historical processes to which Toronto is connected and implicated, which contributed to the city's development. Public history that integrates the lived experiences of enslaved Black people can create a wider public awareness of their lives and the material conditions they endured. Such initiatives have the potential to reclaim a small measure of their humanity by intentionally situating them as people with families and kin who were teenagers, brothers, sisters, parents, spouses, women, men, and disabled. They reposition these individuals from obscurity in Canadian history to central historical actors. ■

NOTES

1. This article was presented at the 2025 Canadian Historical Association annual meeting at George Brown College in Toronto on the panel "Naming Power: White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism, and the Politics of Place Names in Ontario."
2. See Craig Heron, "Miles (Mighells), Abner," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5, 2003, University of Toronto/Université Laval, https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/miles_abner_5E.html.
3. Jacques Bâby dit Dupéron enslaved at least 18 Black and Indigenous people in Detroit. James had also purchased and enslaved a young boy named Frank in 1793. See Natasha Henry, "Beyond the Underground Railroad: A Guide for Teachers on the Histories and Legacies of Slavery in Ontario" (2021), for *House of Bâby Exhibit*, Camal & Camille, <https://www.camalandcamille.com/house-of-baby>. It is not clear what Thérèse's status was when she moved to York, whether she was still enslaved or was a free wage labourer.
4. I had to honour to write the plaque text to recognize John Baker.
5. City of Toronto, *Commemorative Framework for Public Spaces* (2022).
6. Toronto Metropolitan University, *Standing Strong Task Force Report and Recommendations* (2021). I was a member of the task force.
7. "Let's Rename Dundas Street," <https://www.renamedundasstreet.ca/>. There were several counterpetitions launched to save the Dundas Street name that received thousands of signatures.
8. Henry Dundas Committee for Public Education on Historic Scotland, *Henry Dundas and Abolition—The Missing Pieces* (February 1, 2022).
9. In February 2025, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted to rename three schools that commemorated historical figures

who perpetuated systemic oppression—Egerton Ryerson, John A. MacDonald, and Henry Dundas. As of the time of submission of this article, the ministry-appointed supervisor of the TDSB axed the plan. Bryann Aguilar, “TDSB Supervisor Scraps Plan to Rename Three Toronto Schools,” *CTV News* (September 11, 2025), <https://www.ctvnews.ca/toronto/article/tdsb-supervisor-scraps-plan-to-rename-three-toronto-schools/>.

10. “Clandestine plaques inform public about Toronto’s slave owning history,” *Toronto Star* (August 26, 2020), https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/clangdestine-plaques-inform-public-about-toronto-s-history-of-enslavement/article_e925545c-4657-5ede-9f92-1bc02e85065c.html.
11. My work was cited on these temporary markers.
12. See John Wood Sweet and Lisa A. Lindsay, *Biography and the Black Atlantic*, University of Pennsylvania Press (2014).
13. A special thanks to researcher Guylaine Petrin for sharing this case.

14. Ontario Legislative Assembly, “Minutes of the Court of Quarter Sessions of the Peace for the Home District, 13th March 1800–28th December 1811,” *Ontario Sessional Papers*, 1933, No. 30, at 10, 14, <https://archive.org/details/n06ontariosession65ontauoft>.
15. Ontario Legislative Assembly, “Minutes of the Court of Quarter Sessions of the Peace for the Home District, 13th March 1800–28th December 1811,” *Ontario Sessional Papers*, 1933, No. 30, at 174, <https://archive.org/details/n06ontariosession65ontauoft>.
16. *Affidavit signed by Samuel Jarvis*, October 20, 1817, accession no. 1996.18.1.5, Toronto History Museums and Artifact Collection.

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Designing and conducting ethical research with minoritized populations

Several graduate students are interested in conducting research ethically and responsibly with minoritized populations. Mid-career and senior researchers sometimes choose to charter a new direction in their research program by initiating an inquiry with a contemporaneously excluded or historically marginalized population, such as Indigenous peoples, Black diasporas, women, or individuals with a disability. Existing ethical guidelines are monitored by post-secondary institutions and hospitals and provide a solid starting point to devise ethical research. The core ethical research principles, which are respect for persons, concern for welfare, and social justice, undergird national ethics approval procedures (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). Yet, several scholars highlight the importance of acknowledging additional considerations when conducting research with minoritized populations (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022; Pidgeon, 2019; Small, 2015; Smith, 2022).

This article presents recommendations that expand our interpretation of existing core research ethical principles to design and conduct ethical inquiries with minoritized populations. These propositions are relevant to anticipate context-dependent demands throughout the research process, while reinforcing our commitment to respect the individuals and communities that entrust us with information. Furthermore, although some researchers find institutional review boards' procedures tedious, this article can foster a renewed appreciation of ethical review processes by delving into the possibilities of their foundational principles. The content of this article was presented primarily to graduate students during a 2025 Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies Summer Institute workshop.

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SITUATING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH WITH MINORITIZED POPULATIONS

The word "research" is increasingly used by several public figures with widely different meanings, and given that our work is often public facing, it has become essential to specify what is meant by the term. In this article, social science research is a scientific process informed by theory, empirical data, reflexivity, and ethical guidelines with the goal of exploring an emerging social issue, describing a social phenomenon, explaining a social problem, or evaluating an intervention (Bamberger & Mabry, 2020; Bell et al., 2023; Berger, 2015). Social science research involves a dialogical process between theory and empirical data, a process that is not always the case in other occupations. Other professionals engage in research that may involve techniques similar to those used by some academics, but they have different goals, regulated by their respective deontological codes. A journalistic investigation involves researching the facts of a current issue without mobilizing a conceptual or theoretical framework. A police investigation aims to find the truth about a crime and establish a narrative demonstrating the suspect's guilt, while applying fundamental rules of evidence. Although social media influencers are increasingly influential and employ techniques similar to those of journalists and law enforcement officers, such as interviews, they do not

abide by a deontological code of conduct and do not necessarily employ systematic procedures. Yet, they often assert that their positions are informed by "research." In sum, "research" does not always refer to a systematic set of procedures involving established ethical guidelines, theories, and concepts from an existing body of literature. Social scientists systematically mobilize theories and research methods, determined by disciplinary conventions, to assemble, analyze, and interpret data while engaging in reflexivity.

Whether implicit or explicit, social research projects are strengthened by reflexivity (Hamilton, 2019; Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2022; Reich, 2021) and are grounded in ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions (Bell et al., 2023; Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b). Ontology refers to the assumptions that underlie the nature and elements of reality and is expressed in a particular worldview (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b). Axiology refers to the beliefs and values that inform all the phases of the research process (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b; Kovach, 2021). Epistemology is defined as the nature and origin of knowledge and often evokes the question of how we know what we know (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b; Smith, 2022). For instance, some researchers assume that reality exists independent of human consciousness and adopt a pragmatic set of assumptions, while others assume that reality is the product of human consciousness and adopt a social constructionist set of assumptions (Bell et al., 2023).

Some minoritized communities' world views can differ from dominant groups' understanding of reality; hence, before initiating a research project, scholars should delve into the world view of the population under study. In terms of axiology, several minoritized communities insist that, as

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we conduct research with them, research outputs and outcomes are valuable if they are relevant to addressing immediate needs and fostering positive change (Boatswain et al., 2022; Rice et al., 2019). Certain research methods are preferred by some minoritized communities because they align with their world views and epistemological traditions, thereby producing knowledge they deem relevant. Ontology, axiology, and epistemology inform implicitly or explicitly the theories and research methods of an inquiry while also mediating the relationship between a researcher and participants. Reflexivity is a continuous process that begins at the onset of a research project and continues through to the end. “Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (Berger, 2015, p. 220). The reflexive dimension refers to scholars’ critical self-awareness during research design, data collection, data analysis, writing of main findings, and dissemination (Reich, 2021).

It is also relevant to specify what is meant by a “minoritized population” in this article. It does not refer to a small proportion or percentage of the general population. A minoritized population refers to a social group that shares a common history of marginalization, persecution, or exclusion, which affects their status within a social hierarchy and their differential access to power and resources. Minoritized populations’ voices are sometimes dismissed or devalued (Kogen, 2024), undermining government and institutional efforts to develop programs and interventions that address emerging and lingering social problems effectively. Social science researchers do not seek to “speak for” minoritized populations, but rather to ethically describe and interpret a breadth of perspectives in depth. Academics who work with minoritized populations conduct empir-

Conducting social science research with minoritized populations involves exploring, describing, explaining, evaluating, and interpreting to build on the existing scholarship, while also striving to contribute tangibly to social change with the outcomes and outputs of an inquiry.

ical research to advance knowledge on a specific topic, to develop and adapt theories and research methods, or to redevelop course curricula and pedagogy. In addition to those objectives, scholars who conduct research with minoritized populations aim to articulate how main findings and conclusions can inform how authorities, stakeholders, policy-makers, and practitioners plan or modify policies and interventions. Conducting social science research with minoritized populations involves exploring, describing, explaining, evaluating, and interpreting to build on the existing scholarship, while also striving to contribute tangibly to social change with the outcomes and outputs of an inquiry.

EXPANDING THE INTERPRETATION OF CORE PRINCIPLES OF RESEARCH ETHICS TO BETTER SERVE MINORITIZED POPULATIONS

In Canada, the three national research agencies—the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)—establish, monitor and enforce ethical guidelines through institutional review boards (IRBs). Core research ethics principles and ethics review requirements are summarized in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research with Humans—TCPS 2* (Secretariat on

Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). Researchers are familiar with the submission of a research protocol that requires, among other components, transparent letters of information and consent forms, disclosure of potential risks, harms, and benefits, and inclusion criteria for participation. IRBs require detailed research protocols to ensure that researchers uphold the core research ethics principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and social justice (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022).

Social scientists should respect individuals and communities, value local knowledge and strengths, and contend with heterogeneity by adopting, for example, an intersectional framework. The principle of *respect for persons* emphasizes the researcher’s responsibility to uphold each participant’s autonomy and agency throughout the research process. “It encompasses the treatment of persons involved in research directly as participants and those who are participants because their data or human biological materials (which, for the purposes of this Policy, include materials related to human reproduction) are used in research. Respect for Persons incorporates the dual moral obligations to respect autonomy and to protect those with developing, impaired or diminished autonomy” (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022).

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Working within existing time and budgetary constraints, researchers should build relationships to mitigate potential risks and harm, compensate participants fairly, and build capacity for future research projects.

Respect for persons is usually discussed in the context of ensuring that informed consent is obtained at the outset and throughout a project. Often, scholars are encouraged to write a letter of information in plain language, to communicate the information pertaining to the research project orally and to ask whether prospective participants have questions. To move forward, scholars can use creative media, like a video, to present the content of an information letter (Truscott & Benton, 2024). Furthermore, expanding the interpretation of this principle implies that scholars' practices align not only with respect for persons but also with respect for communities (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025a). Scholars can organize virtual and in-person community meetings to introduce a research project and present the content of a letter of information in detail. If the project takes place in a multilingual community, it is also wise to provide letters of information and consent forms in more than one language. During the research design phase, researchers should seek to include minoritized communities' inputs, to move away from deficit-oriented assumptions, and to recognize the complex and heterogeneous nature of minoritized communities with possibly an intersectional framework (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b; Rice et al., 2019).

Working within existing time and budgetary constraints, researchers should build relationships to mitigate poten-

tial risks and harm, compensate participants fairly, and build capacity for future research projects. The principle of *concern for welfare* emphasizes scholars' obligation to uphold all aspects of the quality of life of participants, such as their social or economic well-being and physical, mental, or spiritual health (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). "Concern for Welfare means that researchers and REBs [research ethics boards] should aim to protect the welfare of participants, and, in some circumstances, to promote that welfare in view of any foreseeable risks associated with the research" (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). Researchers ought to ensure the welfare of individual participants as well as groups that could experience stigmatization, discrimination, or damage to their reputations because of perceived or actual engagement with a research team (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). This principle shapes scholars' actions to maintain participants' confidentiality by using encrypted storage, assigning pseudonyms to participants in publications, and removing identifiers. When scholars work with minoritized populations, they must rethink the design and procedures of a research project if research-related harm occurred in the past. To anticipate potential risks, it is important to learn the history of the minoritized population and the legacy of interactions with previous

researchers (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025a). This also involves listening to the concerns of minoritized populations while respecting their norms and boundaries.

The ability of researchers to engage the community to address potential harm and risks can be achieved by fostering relationships, implementing accountability measures, and including members of that community on the research team (Boatswain et al., 2025; Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b). These relationships are instrumental to deliberately avoid an extractive research approach, which involves collecting data in a community with minimal preliminary contact or follow-up regarding the outputs and outcomes. Along with developing relationships to foster trust and reciprocity, it is pertinent to build research capacity by training and mentoring youth from minoritized communities (Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2022). Although the promotion of relationships and capacity building expands the interpretation of the principle of concern for welfare, graduate students, like faculty, must contend with feasibility. There are time and budgetary constraints when we conduct research, and relationships require both. Graduate students should be particularly pragmatic and adapt the suggestions above to the context of their research project (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025b). In fact, some gestures can go a long way to recognizing the value of participants' knowledge and time. It is a good idea to consider applying for funding to compensate participants from minoritized populations equitably with a meaningful honorarium, reimbursement for transportation expenses, refreshments, or even child care, if this facilitates parents' participation.

The principle of *social justice* refers to researchers' obligation to treat everyone fairly and equitably, ensuring that everyone benefits from research outputs while no one is overburdened by research participation-related harms. "Equity requires distributing the benefits and burdens of

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research participation in such a way that no segment of the population is unduly burdened by the harms of research or denied the benefits of the knowledge generated from it" (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, 2022). IRBs require that researchers specify their inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation to uphold this principle. Inclusion and exclusion criteria must align with the research questions and objectives stated in an equitable fashion. We can expand this principle by applying a human development approach, meaning ensuring that the outcomes and outputs of a research project benefit the minoritized population from which research participants originated, thereby remedying their social problems (Yearby, 2017). As researchers develop relationships, they can also ensure that they include questions, concerns, and dissemination strategies recommended by community members that they can incorporate in the research process.

Ultimately, it is challenging to uphold the social justice principle if the project's objectives are not relevant to minoritized communities with immediate needs and persistent social problems that require attention (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025a). When it is possible, it is relevant to examine how to incorporate the community members' concerns that can be incorporated in the project realistically within time and budgetary constraints, while also thinking about steps and initiatives that will be undertaken to affect change. Sometimes, simply presenting the main conclusions at a public forum and academic venues may be insufficient. Some researchers write newspaper columns, some help not-for-profit organizations apply for funding, and some even meet with elected officials (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025a). None of the strategies mentioned guarantees change, but they illustrate the necessity of including the notion of "dissemination for social change" in our expansion of the research ethics core principle of social justice.

When scholars work with minoritized populations, they must rethink the design and procedures of a research project if research-related harm occurred in the past. To anticipate potential risks, it is important to learn the history of the minoritized population and the legacy of interactions with previous researchers.

CONCLUSION

It is an honour and a privilege to be welcomed in settings and communities to conduct research. People who may not know us at all entrust us with their views, their aspirations, and their knowledge. Researchers should never take this openness for granted, and our IRBs circumscribe the minimal steps that we must take to respect and protect prospective participants. Yet when we work with minoritized populations with histories of marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation, we are more likely to design better research projects by expanding our understanding of the core principles of research ethics. Like the workshop, this brief article does not purport to discuss all the possible ways we can engage in ethical research, but it encourages graduate students to deepen their familiarity with the scholarship on their population of study and with research methods broadly. Hopefully, the suggestions can generate initial questions to plan an inquiry, engage in reflexivity, and conduct ethical, responsible, and transformative research. ■

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Remembrance and refusal: Combatting Islamophobia and the politics of erasure

Islamophobia in Canada touches on a range of lived experiences, systems of oppression, and violence. This article juxtaposes stories of Islamophobia through four sites: the courtroom, the workplace, schools, and campuses. Each of these, in its own way, raises questions and interventions about the interplay of how Islamophobia manifests structurally and shows up in everyday life.

This past summer, on June 6, 2025, we marked four years since the Islamophobic white supremacist terrorist attack in London, Ontario that killed four members of the Afzaal family and left the remaining sole survivor, a nine-year-old boy, seriously injured. Earlier this year, on January 29, we marked the designated “National Day of Remembrance of the Quebec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia,” on the eighth anniversary of the Islamophobic attack on the Quebec City mosque that took the lives of six congregants and injured numerous others.

What does it mean to remember those whose lives were taken by Islamophobic violence, and what does it mean to mark a federally designated day of remembrance and action in a context where Islamophobia and interlocking forms of oppression are on the rise? Acts of remembrance are important for many reasons. But, in some ways, it seems as though we are engaging in acts of remembrance while simultaneously not being heard or being actively silenced. This is the contradictory and disorienting sentiment that animates this article.

This disorientation, unfortunately, is not new.

In the lead-up to the Quebec City mosque attack, a lot happened that signalled the heightening of Islamophobia in Quebec City, and the systemic failure to act against it. I would like to read to

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you a translated excerpt from an open letter to Quebec Premier François Legault from Boufeldjah Benabdallah, then president of the Quebec City mosque, in response to the premier's assertions in January 2019 that Islamophobia is not a problem in Quebec. In the letter, Benabdallah says:

[A]llow me to give you a non-exhaustive list of Islamophobic acts that we have unjustly suffered here in Quebec, starting with the insulting pamphlets that were distributed in neighbourhoods surrounding the mosque and being continued by the numerous incitements of the public by trash talk radio hosts, the huge swastikas painted on the walls of the Grand Mosque, the freshly sliced pig's head with a note wishing Muslims “bon appetit,” the offensive referendum in Saint-Apollinaire after Muslims took steps to create a cemetery, leaflets placarded on our walls showing pigs wallowing in their stinking manure and inviting us to find the burial of deceased Muslims, the burning of the car of the president of the office of the CCIQ, and the human feces thrown on the entry door of the Grand Mosque.¹

Benabdallah goes on to say:

And that, Mr. Premier, culminated in the assassinations of six heads of families, all great, beautiful and skilled Quebecois Muslim cit-

izens, leaving behind 6 widows and 17 orphans, many with serious injuries leaving 5 other people in a coma, of which one is confined to a wheelchair for life, having sustained 7 bullet injuries to his body, of which one is still stuck in his neck, and it is by fortune that the assassin wasn't able to reach 35 survivors and miraculously, one in particular, who draped their body over a young girl to protect her from the fate that befell the adults.

Should we deny all of this just so that we can say there is no Islamophobia in Quebec? There is danger in the house, Mr. Premier, a danger that obliterates memory, establishes and reinforces extremism, and unties forked tongues.

In this impassioned plea, Benabdallah's words are a stark reminder not only of the gravity of the Islamophobic attack on the Quebec City mosque and the historical context in which it occurred, but also of the lengths the Quebec City Muslim community must go to prove their pain and their humanity. In addition to the experience of having to fight for their right to bury their dead in a Muslim cemetery, he reminds us that the Quebec City mosque community had been the target of numerous Islamophobic attacks before January 29, 2017. And that it was the underestimation of the voracity of Islamophobia and the silencing of what impacted communities knew to be true that is the real danger in the house.

Building on Benabdallah's interventions, this article explores silencing and erasure as tactics that uphold Islamophobic structures and permit the continued rise of Islamophobia and intersecting forms of oppression such as

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What does it mean to remember those whose lives were taken by Islamophobic violence, and what does it mean to mark a federally designated day of remembrance and action in a context where Islamophobia and interlocking forms of oppression are on the rise?

anti-Black, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism. I invite readers to think through the immensely taxing practices of vulnerability of showcasing grief, death, pain, and oppression—and the simultaneous experience of still not being heard or believed in entirety.

SITE 1: THE COURTROOM

In December 2019, I was sitting in the Quebec Court of Appeal awaiting the panel of three judges to deliver their decision on a legal challenge to *An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State*, commonly known as Bill 21—a Quebec law that bans those who wear religious symbols such as the hijab, turban, and kippah from being employed in several public sector jobs. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), and Ichrak Nourel Hak, a teacher affected by the law, were in court that day seeking an emergency injunction to suspend Bill 21 until its constitutionality was tested. The courtroom was packed with Muslim women, allies, scholars, and activists. We all sat and listened anxiously as the judges, one by one, read their decisions on whether they agreed with the request to suspend Bill 21. Ultimately, the majority opinion (2–1) was that the law would not be suspended, with two judges citing the Quebec government's use of the “notwithstanding clause” as the primary reason for letting the law stand.²

In many ways, this decision was expected because of the unprecedented

use of the notwithstanding clause by the Quebec government. However, in that moment, what struck me most was part of one of the judge's decisions.

One of the arguments put forward by the CCLA and NCCM for suspending the law was that it would cause irreparable harm because it violated gender equality rights—a part of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to which the notwithstanding clause does not apply. This argument against Bill 21 was based on the anticipated disproportionate impact on Muslim women who wear the hijab—in fact, lawyers representing CCLA, NCCM, and Hak filed dozens of affidavits by Quebec Muslim women who wear the hijab, most of whom were pursuing careers as teachers, all of whom stated that wearing the hijab was part of their chosen religious beliefs and that this law impinged on their freedom by preventing them from working as teachers.

One of the judges on the panel did not accept either the argument or the testimony of the affiants. Instead, he cited two works with similar arguments about the hijab. The following is one of the quotations, from an article by Frances Radney, that he read out in court as we sat and listened:

“[...] A mandatory policy that rejects veiling in state educational institutions may provide a crucial opportunity for girls to choose the feminist freedom of state education over the patriarchal dominance of

their families. Also, for the families, such a policy may send a clear message that the benefits of state education are tied to the obligation to respect women's and girls' rights to equality and freedom.” ... It therefore appears that the issue of sexual equality with respect to the Islamic headscarf does not lead to straightforward or obvious answers. (*Hac*, 2019, para. 126)

These parts of his decision rehearse tired Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim women, their families, their aspirations, and supposedly limited horizons—as well as stereotypes of white western liberalism as the saviour and safety that Muslim girls need (Razack, 2022). But, I argue that these sections also speak volumes about the status of Muslim women and their religious practices in the eyes of the judicial system, not least of which is the abject effacement of Muslim women's agency.

First, it is important to note that the case in front of Judge Mainville required a decision on whether Bill 21 was a violation of gender equality—the scope of the litigation did not ask him to adjudicate whether the hijab was a violation of gender equality. His choice to engage in this discourse indicates something that folks in the community already thought—that Bill 21 is about the hijab, not about its stated claims of neutrality and secularism. In addition to saying that the hijab is not compatible with gender equality—which of course is highly problematic—he went on to assert that Muslim women need to be saved—from their backward patriarchal families, no less—by our public education system.

Second, it was especially concerning that Judge Mainville chose to cite two seemingly arbitrary books from Europe—ignoring the rich body of literature on the hijab in Canada³—while saying little about the dozens of affidavits by courageous Muslim women that were entered into

the evidence before him. We were truly aghast, not just at the content of what he said, but that he went on to say it while the very bodies implicated in his rationale for his decision to uphold Bill 21 were sitting right in front of him. The violence of this act of erasure is indicative of the power of heteropatriarchal secularism, where ideals of gender equality can be decided on behalf of Muslim women, while suppressing Muslim women's voices.

SITE 2: THE WORKPLACE

The second site I want to talk about is a workplace where an Islamophobic incident was caught on video (Rubertucci, 2022). Zainab (pseudonym), a young Muslim woman who wears a hijab, was going about her duties at a mall kiosk in Quebec when a man approached her and, unprovoked, proceeded to unrelentingly verbally assault her, telling her that she should not be working there because she wears a hijab and Bill 21 is now the law. He became extremely agitated as she spoke back, telling him he was misinformed. He continued his Islamophobic attack until he was removed by mall security.

This incident stands out to me for two reasons. First, obviously, was the demonstration of the extrajudicial impact of Bill 21 in the verbal assault by a random man, who was not her employer, or her customer for that matter, who had charged himself with the responsibility of regulating the public space and Muslim women's bodies in accordance with his understanding of the law. And second, I was intrigued by Zainab's experience of speaking back to a white Quebecois man whose aggression was noticeably escalating.

As Zainab explained to her attacker that he was wrong and that Bill 21 did not mean she could not work at the mall, he got even more upset, presumably by the audacity of a young hijab-wearing woman telling him about Quebec. He started to hurl Islamophobic slurs at her, alongside the predictable commands of white supremacy, such as demanding that she

go back to where she came from. But she went on to assert her right to be there, her Quebec identity, her right to take up employment, and her right to be in a public space, which agitated the attacker so much that she had to hide behind the kiosk because of the threat of physical violence.

With the attacker's visceral response to his gaze landing on a Muslim woman in a hijab in a public space after Bill 21 became law—his face turning red, his chest puffing out, his one hand in a fist, his other hand flailing in the air as though his words were physical objects he was throwing at this young woman's head—in that moment that man was the very embodiment of Islamophobia, steeped in the authority invested in him by white supremacist conceptualizations of Quebec nationalism, emboldened by Bill 21.

This incident exemplifies how white supremacy seeks to erase visibly Muslim women from public spaces. Beyond silencing, we see Islamophobia escalating to the point of needing to efface Muslim women from public spaces altogether.

SITE 3: SCHOOLS

The third site I want to talk about is schools—a site that is perhaps most heavily impacted by Bill 21. Merium (pseudonym) was fired from her job as an elementary school teacher at an English-language public school in Quebec for wearing a hijab. She participated in a study I co-conducted (Hasan et al., 2024) on Bill 21's impact on Quebec Muslim women. Merium has a master's degree in education, but her experience has derailed her career in teaching, and she is now returning to school to retrain. Speaking to us about her experience of being hired and fired in the context of Bill 21, she said:

HR didn't know what I looked like and my employer didn't know the law applied to English schools because he had seen something on the news ... so I was working there

for a while before somehow it came to their attention that giving me a job as a teacher was not allowed.

The funny thing is, I didn't even apply for the job! They emailed me to ask me if I wanted to apply for it because I had TA'd for that course before and then I got the job!

Merium's account of how she was hired—that HR hired her because she was qualified and experienced but didn't know that she wore a hijab—busts the myth of colour-blind neoliberal meritocracy, but I argue that it also illustrates the tension between secularisms in Canada that many colloquially describe as the difference between “freedom of religion” (multiculturalism) and “freedom from religion” (laicity)—both of which claim jurisdiction over Muslim women's bodies in different ways.

I want to provide a bit of contextual background on what Merium is talking about in this quotation to explore how this tension plays out on Muslim women's bodies. Quebec was/is facing a teacher shortage. Although at this point Bill 21 seems like a bit of cognitive dissonance when you have a readily available pool of qualified Muslim teachers who could easily ameliorate the teacher shortage, the reality of the political maneuvering of the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government became quite clear shortly after. Quebec's premier announced that to fill the labour shortage in the province, he would champion immigration from France and Europe (read: white) while cutting immigration overall,⁴ betraying the racialization of the secular project in Quebec. White bodies would now fill the positions that women like Merium were cast out of.

At the same time, the fourth round of the legal challenge against Bill 21 began in court. At this point, several other stakeholders, including the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), had joined in challenging the constitutionality of Bill 21,

Again and again, Muslim, Palestinian, and racialized communities have laid bare their pain and asked the world to bear witness to injustice—and again and again, they face violence, reprisal, discipline, and erasure.

adding novel legal arguments from their perspectives. The EMSB's central argument was that Bill 21 did not apply to English schools because of constitutionally protected minority language rights that were outside the reach of the notwithstanding clause—this is the context of the confusion Merium described about her employer. The school was confused about who had jurisdiction over this Muslim woman's body.

This was the immediate context within which Merium was hired and fired. Merium's story is not the only one about a school trying to fill a teacher shortage by recruiting qualified Muslim women, despite Bill 21. I argue that this phenomenon illuminates not only the absurdity of the law but also the cracks in the armour of the state's secular project.

Merium went on to share her sentiments about the significance of exclusion. She said:

As long as this law exists, there will never be a public school where a teacher with a hijab will walk in the hallways ... there will never be a public school where the principal wears a hijab. There will never be a court of law where the judge will be wearing a hijab. I just think that just feeds into the misconceptions that exist about us, and we're fighting so hard to erase those. There's going to be generations of kids who will get all of their information about Muslims through the media ... it'll be a

never ending cycle as long as this law exists. (Hasan et al., 2024, p. 59)

What is at stake for Merium is not just her livelihood or career path; she sees Bill 21 as entrenching Islamophobia in public discourse and posing an intergenerational threat to Muslim women who wear a hijab. She saw her employment, her ability to take up space and power, as critical to resisting Islamophobic tropes that have plagued Muslim communities. For many women, Bill 21 felt like a major defeat in the long-fought, ongoing struggle against Islamophobia in this country.

SITE 4: CAMPUSES

It was on January 29, 2024—on the anniversary of the Quebec City mosque attack—when six-year-old Hind Rajab, a child fleeing Gaza City with her family, was killed by the IDF. The image of Hind's lifeless body in the arms of her loving grandfather started to surface on social media—an image that is seared in many of our minds, like those of so many children killed in Gaza—it made no sense. But it strengthened the resolve of so many people around the world, including right here in Canada.

It was in the spring of that year that students across the United States and Canada began setting up encampments as a form of non-violent protest. They courageously committed to doing something about the depravity they were witnessing in Gaza as the civilian toll and the toll of children killed was climbing with no end in sight.

On June 6, 2024—on the anniversary of the London, Ontario attack—we saw a student encampment set up right here at York in this pivotal moment to protest these injustices, which was promptly taken down by York security and police.

The stated central aims of these protests were divestment and disclosure of their institution's financial ties to corporate and government interests that they allege are complicit in the persecution and oppression of Palestinians. These encampments have been met with a heavy-handed approach by many university administrators, including seeking injunctions to stop or remove encampments in court and calling in police officers to forcibly remove student protestors. While encampments on campuses as a form of peaceful protest are not unprecedented, the treatment of these encampments has been particularly concerning.

Some universities engaged student protestors productively and reached somewhat amicable resolutions. Others called the police right away to forcibly remove student protestors and dismantle the encampments. And some turned to the courts for injunctions to forcibly remove the encampments, citing concerns for safety, anti-Semitism, and private property, with varying degrees of success.

Many civil liberties and human rights groups, such as the CCLA,⁵ NCCM, the Legal Centre for Palestine, and numerous others,⁶ have intervened in some of these court cases to protect the right to protest and shed light on underlying biases against those who criticize the Israeli government's actions against Palestinians.

As the story of the student encampments in Canada—and university and college administrations' responses to them—evolves, there is concern that long-valued rights and freedoms on university campuses are at stake. There are concerns that when it comes to Palestine, spaces for academic freedom, critical

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thinking, and the free exchange of ideas are rapidly shrinking. This curtailment of democratic rights and freedoms on campuses, and the policing and surveillance of students, is being primarily justified through university claims to private property rights and safety, and the related Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian vilification of students who are standing against the oppression of Palestinians.

These trends raise concerns about the rise in hate and racism and the curtailment of civil liberties in Canada against the backdrop of unspeakable state-sponsored violence meted out on Palestinian civilians in Gaza. Beyond the encampments, there has also been a broader intensification and rise in several forms of Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism, including:

1. **hate-motivated crimes** such as assaults, vandalism, and arson;
2. **discrimination, doxing, and black-listing** as it relates to Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab Canadians and those speaking out against the persecution of Palestinians; this includes cases of institutionalized discrimination, employment discrimination, and discrimination in the provision of services, including immigration services;
3. cases of **defamation and disinformation**, including foreign interference, fake news, and unfounded accusations;
4. **academic freedom and student safety** in post-secondary institutions and in elementary and secondary educational settings; these include cases of censure, overly punitive sanctions on students, stifling the exchange of ideas, and identity-based vilification of Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students, faculty, and staff; and
5. **shrinking of civil liberties and civic space** for protests and dissent, including the policing of protests and protestors, and punitive and

dehumanizing approaches to non-violent student encampment protests (Islamophobia Research Hub, 2025).

Community organizations on the front lines of this work report staggering increases of Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism, and anti-Arab racism, for example (Islamophobia Research Hub, 2025, p. 11):

- The NCCM reported a 1,300 percent increase in Islamophobia cases in the month following October 7, 2023 and an 1,800 percent increase in the following year.
- The Muslim Legal Support Centre (MLSC) reported receiving 474 cases of human rights complaints between October 7, 2023 and March 5, 2024.
- In the six months following October 7, 2023, MLSC reported that 345 individuals had experienced job losses or forced leaves because of their support of Palestine.
- The Legal Centre for Palestine (LCPal) reported a 600 percent increase in cases they received of anti-Palestinian racism in the eight months following October 7, 2023.

These figures reported by community organizations echo reports of broader trends in increases in Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism, and anti-Arab racism, including:

- The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found a 422 percent increase in the use of keywords associated with anti-Muslim hate speech across global X (formerly Twitter) usage between October 7 and October 29, 2023.⁷
- According to Statistics Canada's data on police-reported hate-motivated crimes, there was a 94 percent increase in hate-motivated crimes against Muslims and a 52 percent increase in hate-motivated crimes against Arab and West Asians in Canada in 2023.⁸

What is deeply painful for many is the erasure of the horrific reality of victims like Hind Rajab and the silencing of those who seek to exercise their most basic democratic rights to make it visible. For many, the mere acknowledgment of Palestinian identity, the loss of Palestinian lives, and the pain of Palestinian communities is mired with fears and experiences of reprisal and threats to safety—a justifiable anxiety in any context.

CONCLUSION

I know these acts of erasure are painful to think about all at once. But I raise them to work against the tendency to box up the grief of Muslim communities impacted by Islamophobia in scripted and depoliticized acts of remembrance. To be given parameters within which to grieve seems antithetical to progress and healing—as though the massacre in Quebec City and the London terrorist attack are not interconnected with the rise in anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia in the last two years.

Again and again, Muslim, Palestinian, and racialized communities have laid bare their pain and asked the world to bear witness to injustice—and again and again, they face violence, reprisal, discipline, and erasure. I take some comfort in witnessing how the Quebec City mosque community, Muslim women impacted by Bill 21, and students standing up for Palestinian human rights continue to resist these impositions in courageous and admirable ways—sometimes against all odds and despite attempts to erase them from these spaces. ■

NOTES

1. See the original letter at <https://bulletinaylmer.com/lettre-ouverte-au-premier-ministre-legault>. Translated by Omme Salma-Rahemtullah.
2. *Hak c. Procureure générale du Québec*, 2019 QCCA 2145, <https://www.canlii.org/en/qc/qcca/doc/2019/2019qcca2145/2019qcca2145.html>.

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3. Among many others, see Hasan (2021); Hoodfar (1992); Bakht (2022); Zine (2012, 2022); Razack (2004, 2008); Selby et al. (2022); Jahangeer (2020); Taher (2021); and Benhadjoudja (2018).
4. See “Quebec Cuts Immigration, Premier Calls for More Newcomers from Europe,” *CBC News*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-immigration-legault-paris-1.4987843>.
5. See <https://ccla.org/fundamental-freedoms/free-speech-and-protest-rights-ccla-seeks-leave-to-intervene-in-mcgill-universitys-injunction-proceedings-against-the-encampment-on-its-campus/>.
6. See <http://www.litigate.com/UofTinjunction>.
7. See https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/use-of-words-phrases-and-hashtags-associated-with-anti-muslim-mobilisation-surges-amid-israel-gaza-conflict/.
8. See <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240725/t006b-eng.htm>.

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