
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the PMLA authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981 (fax: 212 533-0680).

Canadian Literary Culture

To the Editor:

Borrowing a joke from Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Linda Hutcheon discusses the fate of Canadian academics in the MLA in terms of the relations between mice and elephants (Guest Column, "Academic Free Trade? One Canadian's View of the MLA," 114 [1999]: 311–17). Although her column begins with a sympathetic summary of Canadian resistance to the rhetoric and the ideology of free trade, it ends by endorsing the academic equivalent: "Mice have always had a few things to teach elephants (often, though not only, about mobility and self-preservation), and a friendly elephant's imposing presence can sometimes be more comforting than threatening." Perhaps this conclusion is inevitable from a Canadian vice president of the MLA, but it is hardly a sound one for a "Canadian cultural nationalist," as Hutcheon describes herself (314). Part of the problem emerges when Hutcheon writes that there are "over twelve hundred Canada-based members of the MLA" (315). The Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE, of whose executive I am a member at large), which Hutcheon describes in a note, has a total membership of 860 (as of January 1999). Although I fully support both the MLA and ACCUTE, it grieves me to find that so many of my colleagues support the former and not the latter.

Thus I am suspicious of Hutcheon's general optimism, especially her claim that "[t]he conscious creation of a Canadian literary culture was successful" because of such events as the founding of the National Library in 1953 and the creation of the Canada Council in 1957. For Hutcheon, the publishing grants of the Canada Council "made materially possible the existence of Canadian literature," and thus "Canadian cultural nationalism was born." The problem with such Whiggish assertions is that they cast all earlier Canadian writers into a prenatal limbo. When Hutcheon argues that "[n]ow our writers are known the world over," she obscures the considerable international reputations achieved, under very adverse circumstances, by such earlier writers as Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Charles G. D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Sara Jeanette Duncan, and Morley Callaghan (313–14). But then Hutcheon does not take early Canadian literature seriously, or she could never argue that "the early history of Canada's literature is familiar to those who study the imperial legacy in other parts of the world" (312). If national differences do not matter to Hutcheon, then she is no "cultural nationalist."

I regret to say that the situation Hutcheon encountered as a young academic, when her colleagues were indifferent or hostile to Canadian literature, is still recognizable, and it is by no means as unusual as she implies for our English students to graduate without taking a course in Canadian literature. If Hutcheon learned that “in Canada *literature* meant British literature first and American literature second,” today’s students might revise that lesson by putting postcolonial literature third (313). For all these reasons, I cannot agree with Hutcheon that it is “churlish” for Canadian academics “to complain about the lack of national representation [in *PMLA*] when the solution to that lack is under our own control” (315). Such voluntarist rhetoric is incongruous with Hutcheon’s earlier analysis of Canadian culture as “trapped” in “economic and cultural” colonialism (312). So I would turn to a politician to the left of Trudeau for a different view of elephants. As the late Tommy Douglas, the socialist premier of Saskatchewan, used to say, “Every man for himself, as the elephant said while dancing among the chickens.”

TRACY WARE
Queen’s University

Reply:

It is a pleasure to respond to Tracy Ware, the member at large of the executive of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, in part because that position is one I too held (in 1979–81) and one that helped form me as a *Canadian professional* early in my career. My cautious and somewhat ironic endorsing of intellectual free trade between Canada and the United States, therefore, was based on my dual experience on the executives of ACCUTE and the MLA but also on my experience as a teacher and scholar of Canadian literature.

My remarks about the institutionalization of that literature since the 1970s were concerned with the reception and recognition of Canadian writing *as* Canadian inside and outside Canada; they were not intended as comments about the quality of that writing before or after institutionalization in the publishing industry and in the schools and universities. It is a clear fact of literary history that some Canadian writers had “international reputations” before this, but many more do today, and that is a matter not of chance but, at least in part, of institutional support.

Placing early Canadian literature in the context of its settler-colony history in no way denigrates that writing or indicates that I (or my many colleagues who do likewise) do not take it seriously. As I have always argued in my writing on this topic, the literary as well as political experience of empire was manifestly different in each

colony, settler or invaded. National differences obviously do matter. From the start, however, what Canada has shared with other settler colonies is a special and especially fraught relation with imperial literary culture. Cultural nationalism means taking into account the realities of history, not just succumbing to boosterism in the name of patriotism. Ware seems upset at student interest today in postcolonial literature, but surely settler-colony literature like that of Canada can be as fruitfully read within that framework as within any national(ist) one. Indeed, the more comparative focus might make particular sense in our current diasporic world.

I should point out that the twelve hundred Canada-based members of the MLA include many ACCUTE members but also many from modern language and literature disciplines other than English, so it is not at all a matter of there being fewer ACCUTE than MLA members working in Canada. As I acknowledge in my piece, many Canadians choose to belong only to their own national organizations. However, there is more logic than “voluntarist rhetoric” to my remark that those who do not choose to participate in and contribute to *PMLA*, for instance, have little credibility when they then complain about the lack of Canadian representation in that forum. Nonetheless, their electing not to participate is an ideological position I fully respect and understand.

I discovered that writing a piece from a Canadian perspective for both the Canadian and the non-Canadian (United States and international) readership of *PMLA* proved a difficult task, as my self-consciousness about mice and elephants no doubt made evident. However, as the former MLA president Northrop Frye knew well, being part of the broader North American academic context that the MLA represents has never meant giving up one’s Canadian nationality or cultural nationalism. It is as a Canadian that I remain convinced of two things: that in our globalized, transnational world much is to be learned on both sides by intellectual free trade and that elephantine paranoia has never been anything but paralyzing for mice. Informed caution, on the other hand, is essential.

LINDA HUTCHEON
University of Toronto

Regeneration in the Humanities

To the Editor:

I hope that Elaine Showalter’s Presidential Address of 1998, “Regeneration” (114 [1999]: 318–28), will launch a serious debate about the crisis in our profession. While I