

Introduction

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Introduction

THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF *ACADIENSIS* COMES AT A WATERSHED moment in Canadian history. As we endure social crises and an ongoing pandemic, historians have grappled with how to respond to the horrific legacies of settler colonialism. In many respects, the statement on genocide issued by the Council of the Canadian Historical Association in July captures where we are as a country and a profession in 2021.¹ As we face a reckoning over the tragedies of colonialism, the anniversary of *Acadiensis* offers us an opportunity to reflect on changes and continuities over the past generation. Like any anniversary, this raises old questions in new contexts: how is the history of the Atlantic region similar to broader national and international trends, and how it is distinctive?

The first question dominated regional scholarship since the turn of the 21st century. If there has been a single metanarrative over the past generation, it has been fitting Atlantic Canada within Atlantic world, imperial, and global frameworks. As the wonderful thematic essays in this forum illustrate in different ways, this process highlighted three concepts: intersectionality, transnationalism, and digitization. Intersectionality deepened our understanding of the regional dimensions of class, gender, and ethnicity.² Drawing on women's history, scholars have placed gender in its varied social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Scholars of racism and enslavement, led by Amani Whitfield, forged a new field that transformed our view of the Atlantic region before and after the arrival of the Black Loyalists.³ Digitization

1 Canada Day Statement: The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of The Word "Genocide" (30 June 2021), <https://cha-shc.ca/news/canada-day-statement-the-history-of-violence-against-indigenous-peoples-fully-warrants-the-use-of-the-word-genocide-2021-06-30>. Thanks to Suzanne Morton and John Reid for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2 On the Black feminist definition and roots of the concept of intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: The Essential Writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw* (New York: New Press, 2014).

3 Harvey Amani Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (Lebanon, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2006); Harvey Amani

facilitated this process by expanding not only the range of available primary sources but also the means through which scholarship is publicly disseminated and debated. New scholarly movements and initiatives, such as the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), brought social media into mainstream regional scholarship and applied interdisciplinary research methods. With its social media initiatives, particularly its blog, *Acadiensis* itself helped to change how we discuss our research and engage with current events.

As regional historians embraced intersectionality and digitization, they drew heavily on global and transnational perspectives. The pressing question in the early 2000s was, as the exchange in *Acadiensis* between John Reid and Luca Codignola put it, how wide our ocean could be.⁴ Led by large American and British universities, Atlantic world historians produced dozens of influential books on topics that crisscrossed the British Isles, Colonial America, and the Caribbean. They offered the promise of an inclusive account of the diverse peoples and cultures of the Atlantic rim. Atlantic and global historians have shared three common traits: they are oriented outwards towards the sea, rather than inwards towards the continent; they view the Atlantic Ocean as a highway that linked peoples together, rather than a barrier that kept them apart; and they focus on events, places, and movements marked by relatively dense populations, dominant empires, or large economies. Despite disagreements within the field, Atlanticists have generally agreed on the imperative to transcend region and locality. While globalization remains contentious as a geopolitical phenomenon, from 2000 it swept regional scholarship as an analytical framework. Evidence of this can be seen today across Canadian universities – from trends in undergraduate curricula, faculty hiring, to student recruitment and funding policies – and internationalization remains, despite Covid-19, the default plan for university leadership across Atlantic Canada.

This trend brought mixed results. Opportunities for expanding our scholarly perspectives brought risks of homogenizing regional distinctiveness to fit American or British models. Promises of genuine transnational conversations too often resulted in demographically smaller regions having a marginalized voice. Whereas the *Acadiensis* generation battled distortions and biases emanating from central Canada, over the past 20 years regional

Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

4 Luca Codignola and John G. Reid, "Forum: How Wide is the Atlantic Ocean?" *Acadiensis* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 74-87.

historians faced pressures to conform to the dominant views of American and British scholars for whom Atlantic Canada is relevant insofar as it played a peripheral part in the larger drama of revolution and imperialism. Despite promises of decentering narratives, the reality is that Atlantic Canada remained in the 2000s as marginalized intellectually as it had been in the 1970s as university history departments across North America embraced transnational trends in staffing and curricula.

However, as *Acadiensis* marks its golden anniversary, there are clear signs of a new emergent era in historical scholarship. The pandemic has coincided with multiple crises and social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter and Indigenous rights movements such as Idle No More. With the rise of critical histories of settler colonialism as an analytical approach in academic scholarship, the intellectual foundations of Canadian history have changed dramatically since the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While these changes embrace aspects of transnational research, they also diverge in important ways from mainstream American and British frameworks. As Mercedes Peters has pointed out, the regional dimensions of settler colonialism and the ongoing impact of genocide precipitate a need to reconsider nation-based histories.⁵ As the essays in this issue attest, transnational perspectives will remain important to this evolving conversation; but they will be considered along with *place*-based approaches that value the Atlantic region qua region, not as merely a conduit to explore larger stories but rather as the story itself. This perspective makes linkages across cultures and borders on its own terms, without the marginalizing languages of periphery and metropole that still mar Atlantic world historiography. And it helps to ensure that historical research can better meet the needs of the communities it studies.

Accompanying place-based history has come a welcome challenge to the orthodoxy of periodization. While Atlantic world and global perspectives support comparative analyses, they favour comparisons across geography far more than comparisons across time. One important impact of Indigenous rights and social justice movements in Atlantic Canada has been a powerful refocusing that considers history across centuries, not decades. Rejecting the rigid chronology of traditional academic scholarship, this approach insists on

5 Mercedes Peters, "The Future is Mi'kmaq: Exploring the Merits of Nation-Based Histories as the Future of Indigenous History in Canada," *Acadiensis* 48, no. 2 (Autumn 2019): 206-16.

seeing the past through an ethical lens and to holding institutions accountable for colonialism. Seen most vividly in the recent debates over statues, this process has transformed public history and heritage in Canada. As illustrated by the work of the Task Force on the Commemoration of Edward Cornwallis and the Recognition and Commemoration of Indigenous History, the Atlantic region has pioneered new public forums for researching and discussing the past.⁶ One result of these developments, in both the Atlantic region and across Canada, has been popular rejection of the outmoded notion that we must avoid judging the past by current standards and instead accept injustices and perpetrators as products of their time. By embracing what I would call a *longitudinal* approach, this perspective allows us to build regional histories that compare as creatively across time as they do across borders, freeing us from valuing a region's history only insofar as it reflects trends outside it.

The anniversary of *Acadiensis* coincides with unprecedented crises for our planet and our societies. As the essays in this forum illustrate, scholarship on Atlantic Canada has reflected broader changes in culture, public life, and technology. Whereas the *Acadiensis* generation grappled with our relationship with the rest of Canada, historians working since 2000 have placed regional history in its varied transnational contexts. The challenge now, for the third generation of regional historians, is to research and teach history that meets our changing understandings of our pasts in the struggle for truth and reconciliation. No one knows for certain how this process will unfold, but my bet is that the new generation will give us regional history less reliant on external stories and more connected to our present. While there remains plenty to be depressed about in 2021, *Acadiensis* is more relevant than ever.

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6 Report of the Task Force on the Commemoration of Edward Cornwallis and the Recognition and Commemoration of Indigenous History, June 2020, <https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/200721rc11110.pdf>.