

Then, Now, and Next

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MARJORIE GARSON'S HISTORY of the first twenty-five years of ACUTE ends in 1982 with the conference in Ottawa, with the association about to move on from its home at the University of Toronto and with a cautionary note: "In the present economic situation, when universities are under intense financial pressure, the humanities find themselves in a serious, even dangerous position." Plus ça change, one might be tempted to murmur.

But in the twenty-eight years since Garson's history concluded, much, indeed, has changed. The ACUTE conference at the University of Ottawa had a fairly restricted program, composed of single-paper sessions for the most part, and no more than three concurrently, with some thirty-eight papers in all. The 2009 ACCUTE conference at Carleton evidenced a process of almost exponential growth, with almost seven times as many papers as well as a plethora of social events and meetings. The scholarship in 1982 might be judged traditional by some, although there were the first stirrings of theory: a panel on *Theory in the Classroom* with Jennifer Levine and Paul Smith and another on *Unity of the Text* with Patricia Gordon, Tilottama Rajan, and Gordon Teskey. A glance at the run of issues of *English Studies in Canada* for 1982 shows a similar consolidation of interests, with more

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than one-third of the papers on nineteenth-century literature (if you add eighteenth-century to that number, you get 40 percent of the total), only a few articles on contemporary authors, and two on critical topics. On the other hand, the more recent expansion of the ACCUTE conference and the diversification of the association's membership has led to an explosion of perspectives, topics, and cross-disciplinary connections, while boundary pushing is encouraged by the redesigned and re-envisioned *ESC*. There are other changes too: the addition of the second C in the association's name, the institution of the annual hiring report, the expansion of ACCUTE's professional issues portfolio, and more.

Some things have stayed the same, for better or for worse. For better: ACCUTE continues in its most important task, that of networking teachers and students of English (however we might define that term) across our many research fields and institutional affiliations. For worse: item 8 on the AGM Agenda for 1982—"Report of the Sub-Committee on Professional Concerns (Employment Problems)"—could as well be a discussion topic for next May.

The five contributors to this *ESC* Readers' Forum were asked to take the occasion of the reprinting of Marjorie Garson's history to reflect on the future of ACCUTE and on the idea of "academic association" more generally. While all write from their own academic and personal locations, there are some serendipitous similarities. All describe ACCUTE as a cooperative endeavour, a community, or a collectivity. All focus on ACCUTE's political and professional responsibilities and contemplate the past and future, the possibilities and the limitations, of "activist academe" (in Linda Hutcheon's phrase). For Noreen Golfman (a past-president of ACCUTE and the current president of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences), ACCUTE gains some of its strongest political traction through its role in the Federation; the Federation, in turn, has been shaped by key figures from ACCUTE. For Matt Kavanagh (chair of his department at Okanagan College in British Columbia and a theorist of literary-psychoanalytic relations), ACCUTE has a double function as a national networking organization and as a counterforce to the alienations of academic life. For Linda Hutcheon (a past president of the Modern Language Association), the challenge for ACCUTE today lies in developing new and revitalized ways to combat underemployment and overwork in the humanities, problems that require fresh approaches although they are by now decades old. For Smaro Kamboureli (an expert on the changing conditions of academic work under globalization), ACCUTE could play a crucial role in explicating the overdeterminants of the current humanities

employment crisis and the changing valuations of intellectual production. For T.L. Cowan (a newly-minted PHD and a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow at Calgary) ACCUTE's "social" and "proactive" missions are not always in (dance-floor) step, when membership in the community of scholars is in a disjunctive relationship to membership in the scholarly profession.

There are other challenges for ACCUTE at this juncture. Does an annual late-spring meeting satisfy twenty-first century desires for intellectual interaction, and should new technologies and social networking capabilities be used to make ACCUTE a nexus for ongoing interchange? Should different methods of discussion and decision-making replace the current committee structure and the annual AGM (especially when there is a shifting constituency of conference participants)? Is a nationally overarching organization at all suited to interface with educational systems that are provincially based? Will we continue to do our most effective lobbying work through the Federation, or does the current moment call for more commitment to discipline-specific analysis and activism? Should we continue to maintain the ideal of a generalist conference? Is the conference structure synchronistic—or anachronistic?

These five essays by dedicated ACCUTE members take their bearings from Marjorie Garson's history to look with insight and wit into our third quarter century. They are personal, analytical, comical, critical, and sometimes a combination. Read, enjoy, and respond.