

Whither ACCUTE?

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AN ARCHIVE OF THE LIFE OF A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION that has been seminal to English scholars in Canada, Marjorie Garson's history of ACCUTE's first twenty-five years is a document that was due to be reprinted. A record of personal and collective memories, it is a narrative that brings into relief the theatre of English as a discipline in Canada—its development in fits and starts, by means of crises and challenges, via the diverse visions, determination, and commitment of a large number of colleagues. It illustrates, too, that ACCUTE has evolved, and continues to do so, out of the very tensions that characterize the different perspectives of what constitutes English literature and the critical act but also out of the need to address how to profess being academics in a continuously changing political and academic environment. If in the late 1950s the arguments were about whether literature belonged to the rhetorical tradition or not, and if criticism itself should be a legitimate object of study, today cultural studies and different kinds of interdisciplinary work have changed (forever?) what goes under the rubric of literary studies. And we can only read with a hefty sense of irony the late 1970s ACCUTE's one-man (!) commission's report (albeit written by two) that called for a steadfast adherence to "the traditional course of study" as opposed to embracing, let alone encourag-

ing, what the report refers to as “the development of ‘luxury’ or ‘gimmick’ courses designed to compete for students in a marketplace atmosphere”; these days it is usually media reports on the ACCUTE conferences that tend to view with derision what represents major advances both in what constitutes the object of English studies—the concept and practice of culture—and the ways in which we approach it. As Annette Kolodny says, “In too many cases, *unfamiliarity breeds contempt* (or, even worse, suspicion and devaluation)” (85). Not to mention (with a different sense of irony) that today it is the logic of the marketplace that influences institutional determinations.

In some respects, reading Garson’s history of ACCUTE today produces the uncanny feeling that very little has changed in the nature of the challenges that confront the profession. This is not to say that it has been going around in circles or reached a stalemate, although it is disheartening to see that the foci of much of ACCUTE’s efforts in the past, for example, the role of sessionals and their work conditions, continue to demand solutions; rather, it is to acknowledge that much of what menaces the discipline of English, as well as the humanities at large, today revolves around our “public image”¹ as a community of academics, an image which, more often than not, operates as a summons to contest the relevance and value of pursuing literary studies, let alone the need to fund it.

Which brings me to the task at hand, thinking about the future of ACCUTE and, more precisely, its role as an association and as a community of scholars. There is no doubt in my mind that some of the large issues our peers in the past agonized about—What should the political role of the association be? What “networks of cooperation” should it strive to establish? How “to communicate the importance of [its ...] function to the public”?—remain paramount today. They may be inflected differently in the present moment as a consequence of the particular social, economic, and institutional changes we have borne witness to in recent years but also because of the fact that the main focus of what we study as humanists, culture, has changed irrevocably both in terms of how it is produced and circulates today and in terms of how we understand the history of its

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¹ The scare quotes here are not meant to suggest that all the important issues of concern to ACCUTE and the humanities at large can be reduced to just a matter of image but rather that what constitutes this public image is to be understood in all its contingencies, an issue I take on, along with Daniel Coleman, in our co-authored introduction to *The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities: Literary Scholars on the Retooling of the Humanities* (University of Alberta Press, forthcoming autumn 2010).

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production and value,² but they are no less crucial. ACCUTE could play a more active—if not activist—role in addressing these questions in a concerted fashion. Critical to my understanding of things is that it does not do so driven merely by a sense of self-preservation or instrumentalism, or the righteous view that we always already know better. Instead, keeping in mind Adorno’s notion of the “dialectic of non-simultaneity,” that we can “thrive” (121) best when we acknowledge that we are embedded within the very reality that both spurns our object of study and which we study as an object, we could engage with planes of action with which we have been mostly absent or ineffectual.

From co-ordinating collaborative research on the topic of the perceived irrelevance of what we do through, say, an MCRI or CURA grant, to persuading institutional administrations that what they expect us to do, that is, be visible and useful in the public domain, requires certain realignments and a multilateral approach, to being there when things happen—ACCUTE could adopt as an association both a *longue durée* approach and an approach responsive to short-term events. By harnessing its membership through especially designated committees or task forces, it could develop, too, a stronger external relations’ voice that could help pave the way toward, for example, having a larger number of its members participate in policy making endeavours or work as public intellectuals. At a more practical level, if ACCUTE members can teach judges and medical researchers how to write, they too can learn to write in a manner that does not suffer from the jargon of their presumed authenticity³ in ACCUTE-sponsored sessions (through the participation of non-academic writers and editors), thus increasing the chances of getting published in non-academic venues. Circulating a couple of times a year a free newsletter for general consumption (perhaps as an insert in existing publications) with members’ opinions on current cultural issues and books may also be a way of demonstrating that the humanities is not in ruins in the facile sense of the term. Along the same lines, I can’t imagine it would be too difficult for ACCUTE to hold, in collaboration with local groups, sessions and panels of public interest off the university campus where its annual conference is held that would be open to the general public, and there is no reason why such talks or panels could not involve non-members from targeted communities as special guests.

2 See, for example, Imre Szeman’s “Culture and Globalization, or, the Humanities in Ruins,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 2 (2003): 91–115.

3 I’m (mis)using here Adorno’s notion of the jargon of authenticity. See his *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

To make such efforts viable and effective, we have to see them as integral to what we are expected to do as academics, and not only as events and actions that come under the categories of “other” or “service to the community,” categories that, as we know, don’t hold much weight within the university assessment system, an issue of particular concern to younger colleagues. Rather than seeing this venturing outward as compromise, a capitulation to external pressures, or what Adorno calls “the mechanics of supply and demand” (130), we should view it as an opportunity to practise and further explore what we are trained and employed to do.

In the meantime, let’s not forget that not only has ACCUTE survived the many not-so-good (at least in my view) recent changes in the profession but has also maintained and re-affirmed, time and time again, the fundamental role it plays in the professional lives of graduate students and postsecondary teachers of English alike. ACCUTE’s *raison d’être* is not simply to work together with the CFHSS, remain vigilant to what happens at SSHRC, or create a forum for its members to disseminate their research but also to maintain, and when necessary to re-envision, the sense of community it has created. This is something ACCUTE has always performed well, and it is not a role it should ever consider relinquishing.

Works Cited

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