

# ACCUTE Newsletter December Edition 2009



ACCUTE's current home in the historic Jackman Building at 170 St. George St



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ACCUTE's Mandate: To promote the interests of those teaching and studying English language and literatures in Canadian colleges and universities by facilitating the dissemination and exchange of research and the exploration of professional issues, by organizing scholarly and professional meetings, by seeking to improve work conditions, by representing the interests of members before provincial and federal decision-making bodies, and by supporting the interests and aspirations of members entering the profession.

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## President's Column

2009: A SSHRC Odyssey



*"I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that"*

There was always something about EAMS, the SSHRC application tracking and management system, that made humanities scholars uneasy, beginning with its name: the Enterprise Award Management System. Developed in the United States and purchased by SSHRC, this system has an uneasy fit to the needs of Canadian humanists, as its entrepreneurial-managerial title would imply, although I've been assured by some colleagues in the sciences and health sciences who apply for their grants through NSERC, which also uses the system, that it works fairly well for their needs. EAMS is also well-known for its erratic opening night behaviour, and seasoned referees have learned never to try to submit anything close to the deadline, when the system is sure to be staging one of its *prima*

*donna* breakdowns, and when it is almost impossible to get through to the overloaded SSHRC technical staff to determine if the problem is at one's own end, or the result of the server going down. (System updates posted to the SSHRC website, by the way, would help.)

But nothing could have predicted the truly HAL 9000- behaviour of the EAMS system during the round of postdoctoral applications last fall. The ACCUTE office started to hear stories of persistent log-in problems as well as multiple crashes in the days before the deadline, and of applicants so frantic they were contemplating self-defenestration. In late October the ACCUTE office sent out an email to the membership requesting information, and offered to provide support to any people whose applications were jeopardized (especially those whose departments were unable to defend them: for example, new sessionals, perhaps without a strong institutional affiliation). SSHRC, to its credit, made sure that all applications were eventually received and processed, although in some cases the snafus took weeks to undo.

In addition to the periodic system meltdowns, with which we were all familiar even before the advent of EAMS, there were persistent log-in problems which seem to have

been especially pernicious in the case of international referees and sponsors. (This problem, too, was not unknown.... we were sent the text of a scathing email, from an institutional nominator in England, detailing maddening days of wasted effort trying to make it through the SSHRC log-in system, back in 2008.) But Canadian doctoral supervisors and assessors also experienced difficulties, we learned. One referee detailed a not-uncommon experience: "I lost an entire version of the letter in trying to save it: the system froze after I hit the 'save' button and there was no way to retrieve my text. I had to start again from scratch." A veteran assessor and grant recipient reported "horrible levels" of stress after the waste of "almost an entire day" that finally culminated with a phone call from a technician – at midnight –advising the creation of a new email account. (While SSHRC had by that point allowed an extension to applicants unable to file, this had not been announced and so nothing had been done to "assuage the anxieties of referees and applicants.") Other problems had plagued this individual when reporting on a conference grant: "if you deleted a single typo the entire line and paragraph were automatically deleted; nor was it possible to type in a four-digit number," surely a handicap in filing a financial report. "Every year the same thing;

every time I draw attention to the problem. Nothing happens."

The experience of the applicants themselves, who felt their careers were on the line, was even more stressful. The EAMS system is baroque in construction, difficult to navigate, and oddly lacking in the relevant instructions. "If something says it will prompt you to attach your document, it should prompt you," one applicant commonsensically observed. "If typing into boxes you can type into is a bad idea, you should be told so or not be able to do that typing in the first place. It boggles the mind." Other applicants found that their submissions could not be accepted due to unspecified "internal server errors," and in some cases it took days to track down the source of the problem. But the greatest difficulty was caused by the knock-on effect of the failed log-ins of assessors and institutional sponsors, since the SSHRC system does not allow the applicant to submit until supporting materials are in place. We heard reports of referees and institutional assessors who refused to try further after multiple failed attempts (and multiple messages left with the technical help desk), requiring strenuous diplomatic efforts on the part of applicants and their departmental administrators, as well as followup work by SSHRC staff.

It's hard to assess the lost time and person-power chewed up on this one funding competition. And while SSHRC justifiably prides itself on its "blue ribbon" peer review standards, we will soon lose our ability to draw upon non-Canadian assessors, if these sorts of problems persist.

SSHRC is by now well aware of the situation, and a review of the functioning of EAMS was in place even before the debacle of the fall. But the opportunity should be taken to make more than a technical fix. The EAMS system is not well-suited to the assessment of academic projects in the humanities. It requires statistical information that is time-consuming to collate and of uncertain value for reporting or accountability purposes. It encourages "bean counting" when detailing publications and achievements, and the discursive categories can seem oddly duplicative. Rather than EAMS and our shoe-horned applications, we should have a practical, user-friendly, streamlined system, that reflects the protocols and practices of humanities work in Canada.

Time to pull the plug on EAMS.

*Daisy, daisy...*

- Heather Murray

[A digest of these emails – maintaining the confidentiality of the informants – has been

sent to Chad Gaffield at SSHRC, in a letter urging immediate improvements. Many thanks to those who took the time to share their experiences and suggestions.]

## **(Re) Introducing the Professional Concerns Committee**

As many ACCUTE members will recall, for some years ACCUTE had a separate Professional Concerns Committee (PCC) that took on board specific projects and also helped to design the professional issues and skills workshops featured at the annual conference. A few years ago the committee fizzled out, but it was a recent decision of the current ACCUTE executive to get it up and running again.

In part, this decision was motivated by the many events of last fall. The slashing of sessional and part-time teaching positions, the sharp decline in advertisements for tenure-track jobs, the deep cuts to the base budgets of the granting councils, several instances of attempted government interference with the peer review process, the possibility of another round of copyright consultations – not to mention the high drama of the 2009 post-doc applications, as detailed above – convinced the executive of the wisdom of

having a standing committee. (The executive of course continues to respond on policy questions, and ACCUTE is represented on both the Council and the Board of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.) Even in less-turbulent times, the PCC has a valuable role to play, as an association “think tank” on important questions. Following past practice, this committee is chaired by a member of the executive, has a representative from the Canadian Association of Chairs of English to keep the lines of communication open on professional questions, and will report directly to the membership at the AGM and periodically in the Newsletter.

So, many thanks to its chair, Jason Haslam for his wonderful efforts in helping to get the PCC re-established, and welcome to its members Veronica Austen, Michael Brisbois, Clint Burnham, Kit Dobson, Smaro Kamboureli, and Doug Thorpe (representing CACE). You will find a report from Jason elsewhere in this issue.

### **Report of the Member of the Board of Directors for the Federation**

There are a number of items to report on in this, my last report as an ACCUTE

presence on the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. My term on the Board of Directors ends at the Federation’s AGM on March 27-28, at which point Heather Murray will take up a position on the Board representing large institutions. I’m sure that ACCUTE will be strongly represented by having Heather there.

Internal workings at the Federation have undergone some changes of late. In June 2009 Nathalie Des Rosiers stepped down as president of the Federation to take on the position of General Counsel of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. Thanks both to Federation protocol and to Noreen Golfman’s tireless commitment, Noreen resumed the presidency of the Federation. I’ll leave you to imagine the demand this has made upon her and to calculate what we all owe her by way of thanks. Later in the summer, Executive Director Jody Ciufo also resigned to pursue other interests. To her we also owe thanks for hard work in promoting a strong and effective presence for the Humanities and Social Sciences in Canada. The search for both the new president and the new ED is underway, and I will pass along information when it is available. Finally, the Federation office will be moving on Friday January 22nd. The new address will be: 275 Bank

St, Suite 300 Ottawa ON K2P 2L6. All phone numbers and email addresses will remain the same. The Federation will remain operational for normal office hours during the move; however, there may be some delayed response while the phone and internet services are being transferred to the new location. Normal activities will resume on Monday January 25.

What remains of my report is highlights of the most recent Board meeting in November, which I shamelessly plagiarize from the Federation's communiqué to Board members:

In her president's report, Noreen Golfman updated the Board on the meetings that took place with the Minister of State (Science & Technology) and other MPs. She indicated a small but positive shift in the government's attitude towards our community. This shift is also being noticed in the broader research community notably in the comments of CIHR President, Alain Beaudet, and participants at the Science Policy Conference.

Representatives from Concordia University gave a presentation on the facilities and services that will be available at Congress 2010. A dynamic program featuring guest speakers such as philosopher Mark Kingwell,

writer Lawrence Hill and the Director of Harvard Library, Robert Darnton, is already in place as well as special exhibits. In addition, Concordia will be organizing various events and activities that build on the Congress theme: Connected understanding – le savoir branché.

Gisèle Yasmeen, Vice-President, Partnerships and Brent Herbert-Copley, Vice-President, Grants and Fellowships presented SSHRC's Renewed Program Architecture to the members of the Board. The objective of the new Program is to simplify and to create a more flexible and effective system of application and assessment. Instead of thirty different competitions each year, there will be three "umbrella" program activities with the following broad goals: Developing Talent; Building Understanding and Knowledge; and Mobilizing Knowledge. Questions raised by Board members included SSHRC's plans to respond to the difference between humanities and social sciences research with regard to the question of student training and how this is dealt with in the adjudication process; the implications of the shift from SSHRC to CIHR for health research done by researchers in the social sciences and humanities; the impact on new scholars of having a single point of entry to SSHRC programs; and a simpler adjudication process for researchers requiring

small grants.

Further to a presentation by Linda Kealey, Academic Convenor for the 2011 Congress at UNB, the Board approved the proposed theme “Coasts and Continents: Exploring People and Places.” Following a review of the report of the site visit committee, the Board also approved awarding Congress 2014 to Brock University.

All that remains, then, is for me to remind you of the ACCUTE conference dates—28-31 May 2010—and to express my hope that I see you there. It’s been a great pleasure to serve ACCUTE as a member of the General Assembly and of the Board of Directors of the Federation. Those Ottawa meetings always left me feeling that we are not merely voices crying in the wilderness; we do, through the Federation, make a difference to how the big boys in Ottawa understand what we do.

-Steven Bruhm

### **Sessional Representative’s Report**

I had planned to conduct a survey nationwide that would have been akin to a survey of sessional workers that the *Chronicle of Higher*

*Education* published in the fall. I felt that we needed a specifically Canadian survey that would compile stats on Canadian contingent faculty. But now I wonder if the survey is necessary since, as John Hess writes, “I have to admit I am tired of the incessant statistical approach to the situation of contingent faculty. I know the percentages and the numbers” (“The Entrepreneurial Adjunct,” *Academe*, Vol. 90, No. 1). Perhaps a survey will help in the long run, but I agree with Hess: we all know the numbers.

Over the course of my term as the sessional representative, I have received almost no input from the sessional membership. It is this silence that I would like to address in this column. I have concluded that sessional workers cannot unite and create a strong voice. At one time, I thought this might be the answer, but the fact is that many of us are scared and exhausted. We have kids, mortgages, car payments, aging parents, and other responsibilities. We cannot be asked to fight the battle for academic freedom, fair wages, recognition, work load, and so forth. Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen and Pauline Kaurin conclude that the permanent liminality of contingent faculty causes physical illness and mental instability (from “And Justice for All: Advocacy, Obligation and the Employ of Contingent Faculty,” a conference paper given at

the American Association of University Professors AAUP). That is, many contract faculty must continually portray themselves as able to, for example, prepare a full semester course in one week or less; work below the poverty line yet present themselves as professionals to their students; and apply for work continually while working full time. As Cary Nelson so eloquently puts it, “casualized labor in the academy...*destroys lives and breaks the human spirit*, as the ruthless, long term exploitation of contingent faculty exacts a huge cost” (“From the President: Manifesto Against Contingency,” *Academe Online* [www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org)). Are department administrators ruthless? Not in my experience, in fact, I have rarely heard my peers complain about the *people* in their respective departments but the *academic system* is another matter. It is a system that demands a permanent underclass of academic labour. In response to the current state of academe in the US and Canada, John Carlos Rowe, Chair of Humanities at the University of Southern California, calls for tenured faculty to fight on behalf of contract faculty.

Is it fair, then, for me to expect my fellow sessional labourers to take time out from their 60 hour work week to address issues pertaining to their employment? As Ihssen, Kaurin, and Nelson note, it is not fair to expect ex-

hausted labourers who already feel beaten down by the system to organize and appeal for better treatment and working conditions. The only answer, in my opinion, is for tenured faculty to help to change a system that will eventually eradicate academic job security, and, therefore, academic freedom permanently.

In closing, I would like to thank Heather Murray and the ACCUTE executive for their support and concern regarding these difficult issues. I would also like to thank Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen and Pauline Kaurin for supplying their paper and research.

- Sara Humphreys

### **Report from the CACE President**

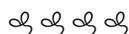
The Canadian Association of Chairs of English (CACE) is a national organization representing university and college departments of English across Canada. With over seventy-five members, CACE provides a broad forum for promoting dialogue, exchange of academic and administrative information, and professional interaction. Members are active on a listserv throughout the year and at an annual general meeting held at Congress the day before ACCUTE meetings begin. The

listserv provides on-going discussion of issues as they come up. The annual meeting offers a series of panels on topics of interest to Chairs and Heads of English in Canada, helping us learn from each other's successes and brainstorm around the problems that face us as administrators. Topics are designed to address issues of concern for both colleges and universities, for research and teaching intensive institutions. CACE also conducts an annual Hiring Survey that collates information about the number of hires – tenure-stream and limited contract – in our departments, a survey that is then presented to ACCUTE. The Association has a website at: <http://www.chairsofenglish.ca> where you can consult the results of the Survey, as well as the May 2009 meeting agenda, when CACE met at Carleton in Ottawa with 35 chairs and heads in attendance, as well as the ACCUTE president, who is an ex-officio member of CACE. At that meeting we held four sessions on: 1. the evolution of English and our curriculum, as we integrate such fields as film or cultural studies and more generally as we globalize our curriculum to meet the needs of our students and the reality of current literary production (Paul Keen, Carleton; Mary O'Connor, McMaster; Alan Bewell, Toronto); 2. shrinking budgets: priorities, difficult decisions and strategies for survival in

the face of the major financial challenges universities are facing (Neta Gordon, Brock; Mark Lovewell, Ryerson; Dennis Danielson, UBC); 3. sustaining an intellectual life in a teaching intensive institution, where there is less time and fewer institutional rewards for research. Paul Tyndall (Kwantlen), Deborah Bowen (Redeemer) and Corinne Davies (Huron) conveyed the very real challenges they face, but also their creative solutions to integrating research and teaching; 4. "best advice I have/received as Chair": Christina Luckyj (Dalhousie) and Tom Grieve (Simon Fraser) offered both poignant and humorous, insightful and wise lists of do's and don'ts, from open-door policies to getting a dog! Some of the topics that we will be pursuing at our 2010 annual meeting in Montreal will be: 1. our responsibility to our sessional faculty; 2. how to balance the needs of graduate and undergraduate programs; 3. how to represent our departments to the university administration. In Ottawa the members of CACE also voted in new members to the executive: Douglas Thorpe (University of Saskatchewan) as Vice-President, and Paul Tyndall as college representative. Patricia Rigg (Acadia) continues as Secretary-Treasurer and I thank her for her extensive and efficient work for CACE. I also thank Eleanor Ty (Wilfrid Laurier), out-going president, for all

her work last year, and Lee Easton (Mount Royal), who also served last year. We look forward to the 2010 Congress in Montreal. I look forward to meeting all chairs and heads in Montreal on May 27 for another productive day of panels and discussion. If you have any comments, please contact me at moconnor@mcmaster.ca

- Mary O'Connor



## Report of the Professional Concerns Committee

Over the past year, several issues of interest--and concern--have arisen in relation to the professional side of all of our academic lives. From recent hiring freezes, to difficult contract negotiations, to debates surrounding the relation between new copyright laws and academics as critics, educators, and producers, these issues are fraught, and they are also pressing on our daily work as professionals.

These and many other concerns have been raised with and discussed by the ACCUTE executive. Because of the significance and challenges posed by recent economic and other events, the Executive decided to reinstate a full Professional Concerns

Committee (PCC). The committee currently stands with seven members, some representing specific constituencies within ACCUTE, with others serving as members at large. Including myself, as chair, the committee members are:

- Veronica Austen (Wilfrid Laurier)  
member-at-large, sessional concerns
- Michael Brisbois (Calgary)  
member-at-large, graduate student concerns
- Clint Burnham (Simon Fraser)  
member-at-large
- Kit Dobson (Mount Royal)  
member-at-large
- Smaro Kamboureli (Guelph)  
member-at-large
- Doug Thorpe (Saskatchewan)  
vice-president CACE

In an effort to kick-start, so to speak, an energized engagement with many of the professional matters at hand, the PCC has decided to run a series of panels and roundtables at the 2010 conference, all grouped around the theme of professionalism itself. We are aiming to have a slate of three sessions: one being an historical and theoretical analysis of “professionalism” and its implications; one on the various states of transition in our professional academic lives; and one on our academic work as labour. These ses-

sions are still in their formative stage, but we hope that they will help to stimulate a lively exchange on these and other professional issues as ACCUTE and its members move into the next decade and beyond.

I will close with the suggestion that it's not too early for people to consider topics that the PCC may consider for the 2011 conference. Please feel free to send any ideas or queries to me, at Jason.Haslam@dal.ca

- Jason Haslam

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## Notes for Conference 2010



It's difficult to believe, given the permanent deep-freeze that has settled over Canada, that a few months from now ACCUTE members will be talking about their latest book projects in chic sidewalk cafes, chatting on the patio at the annual wine and cheese/disco extravaganza, and (of course) attending sessions and

giving papers despite the temptations of late-May weather and of glamorous Montréal.

Many arrangements remain to be finalized both by the ACCUTE office and by the Congress organizers, but here are some notes to help ACCUTE members look ahead.

Two websites to bookmark. The Federation has a specific website for the Congress at [www.congress2010.ca/](http://www.congress2010.ca/)

which will be your main source of information about the larger Congress within which the ACCUTE conference is situated. It is also here that you will access the on-line delegate registration and accommodation systems. Go to the "Program" section to sign-up for e-mail updates about Congress events.

Concordia has thrown its resources into hosting the Congress, and we've found it a pleasure to work with the organizers so far. (And special thanks to our local arrangements convenor Kevin Pask, as well as to Jason Camlot, Concordia's English department chair.) Concordia is developing its own programming, some of which is designed to interface conference delegates with the city (and to connect the community to the Congress). Given its prominent fine arts department,

look for exciting exhibits, installations, and performances. Check out [www.concordia.ca/congress2010/](http://www.concordia.ca/congress2010/) for Concordia programming and campus information.

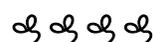
Fairly soon, most ACCUTE members will be receiving printed delegate registration guides from the Federation offices. The ACCUTE office sends its member mailing lists to the Federation at the end of October, so if you joined ACCUTE after that time you'll need to rely on the Congress website for registration and housing information.

An item about conference accommodation. All of the Congress events will be held on the downtown (Sir George Williams) campus of Concordia, which has limited residence space. If you want a residence room, act quickly when the Congress booking system comes on-line. If you have a favourite Montreal hotel or bed and breakfast, and the price is right, you may want to book now even without the special Congress rates. Remember that the Congress office books preferential rates with some, but not all, of a city's hotels.

Would you like to host an informal workshop or discussion group at the conference? The lunch-time slots in the program are used for

meetings of ACCUTE's committees and affiliated groups, but it is also possible to get classroom space for informal meetings, workshops, or brown bag sessions. Contact the ACCUTE office if you'd like to reserve some space.

STAY TUNED! RESTEZ À L'ÉCOUTE!



### **From the ACCUTE Archives**

#### **Theory at ACUTE in 1988**

The ACUTE Theory Group had been existence for several years before the 1988 conference at the University of Windsor, but there is particularly good documentation for that particular year. The group reflected the utopian aims which were often attached to "Theory" in the heady intellectual milieu of the 1980s. It was designed to provide a forum where literary theory could be debated and advanced, since the ACUTE conference was viewed as "anti-theoretical" although the situation had softened by 1988. In addition, the Theory Group wanted to introduce a non-hierarchical forum for inquiry: no papers, no experts, but faculty and graduate students as equal discussants. More than that, the The-

ory Group provided a sort of intellectual support group for theory-minded faculty and graduate students who felt themselves marginalized (even beleaguered) within the contexts of their own departments.

The ACUTE Newsletter of March 1988 announced the readings to be discussed: Samuel Weber's "Texts/Contexts: Closure and Exclusion" from Institution and Interpretation, and Teresa de Lauretis' "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender" from Technologies of Gender, both cutting-edge pieces in the day. People whose universities lacked these newly-published books could get copies of the readings from Ian Sowton at York or Ann Wilson at Guelph. The two evening discussions took place in the context of a conference program quite altered from the protocols of five years before. In the early 1980s, there were no concurrent sessions, so audience choice was limited. Now sessions ran three abreast, and theoretical offerings were on the agenda: Tony Dawson on "gender bending" in Shakespeare, Kim Michasiw on post-modernism and the sublime, Gary Kelly on romantic orientalism, Michael Keefer on the tragic "subject," Peter Schwenger on nuclear criticism, and feminist textual analyses from Bina Freiwald and Nicola Nixon, along with more

traditional scholarly fare. (The existence of graduate students on the program marks another departure.) There was a separate session titled "Critical Theory," as well as Toril Moi's address as the invited international speaker. In what may have been ACUTE's first foray into gay theory, Robert Martin gave the opening plenary on "Art, Life, and the Massachusetts Vice Squad: Newton Arvin and the Creation of an American Canon." The Theory Group had been instrumental in "theorizing" ACUTE. Or, depending on one's point of view, it had "hijacked" the organization – this term was used bitterly, by some, at the time.

The environment elsewhere was less congenial to theory, at least in 1988. The group had seen the need for discussion, information-sharing, and solidarity on a more-than-annual basis, and the ACUTE Theory Group Newsletter filled the gap. Issue number eleven, edited by Barry Rutland at Carleton, a four-page gestetnered production, came out in May of 1988 just before (what were then called) the Learned's. Barry Rutland saw the new direction of the annual program as the inevitable result of generational change, although the number of theory papers for Windsor was not as pronounced as the year before, at McMaster. ("Plenty for you, bugger-

all for me,” was a Carleton colleague’s rueful observation then.) But there was more to be done, he editorialized. “A war over curriculum is shaping up as departmental establishments attempt to preserve programmes in the face of expanding intakes of new appointees working with post-structuralist and allied modes of criticism.” It is therefore “vital that courses on/and grounded in theory be introduced as quickly as possible at all levels of undergraduate and graduate programmes at all institutions...” and readers of the Newsletter were encouraged to “help the domino effect.” The advances at York were held up as a model. Norman Feltes had described the “Aspects of Literature” course in issue number eight, and in this issue Barbara Godard provided an overarching analysis of “Theory at York,” and described her experiences introducing theory to the undergraduate classroom. The Newsletter also marked the new state of CanLit studies with a review of the proceedings of the University of Ottawa’s Future Indicative conference. With hindsight, the Newsletter is interesting for its own indications of the future, which did and did not come true. While Barry Rutland was, sadly, wrong to predict that theorists were preparing a cohort of English scholars for the “flood” of new hirings in the 1990s, he was on the mark in his prognosis that Canadians

would make a distinctive contribution to literary theory, by innovatively accommodating the “nation” as a category for analysis, in non-essentialist terms.

