

“To start with, how many here are new to Canada?”

“Oh My! So Many!!!” (to the professor) “So, Professor O’Flynn, this now means I can say absolutely anything, right?”

When I received an invitation to lead this class – What is Canada? – my initial thought was “buggered if I know . . .”

I think I’m a really bad Canadian. Within Canada, I’ve never been east of the east end on Montreal. I’ve never been further north than Gravenhurst in Ontario, but I was in Iqaluit in 1971 to visit a school chum (it felt like I was on Mars), and all I remember of a cross-country road trip when I was 22 was how the skyline of Vancouver looked like a fake theatrical backdrop of snow-capped mountains (but there *was* a lot of dope involved). My French is virtually non-existent, what remains is so bad that I could single-handedly provoke another unity crisis just by asking “bon jour, comme c’est va?” And the final straw is that I couldn’t name five currently active hockey players or even wager a guess at which team won last year’s Stanley Cup if my life depended on it . . .so, I guess I’m a really bad Canadian.

But I was born here – and regardless of all the shitstorms on the horizon (no names are necessary) – I’ll die here.

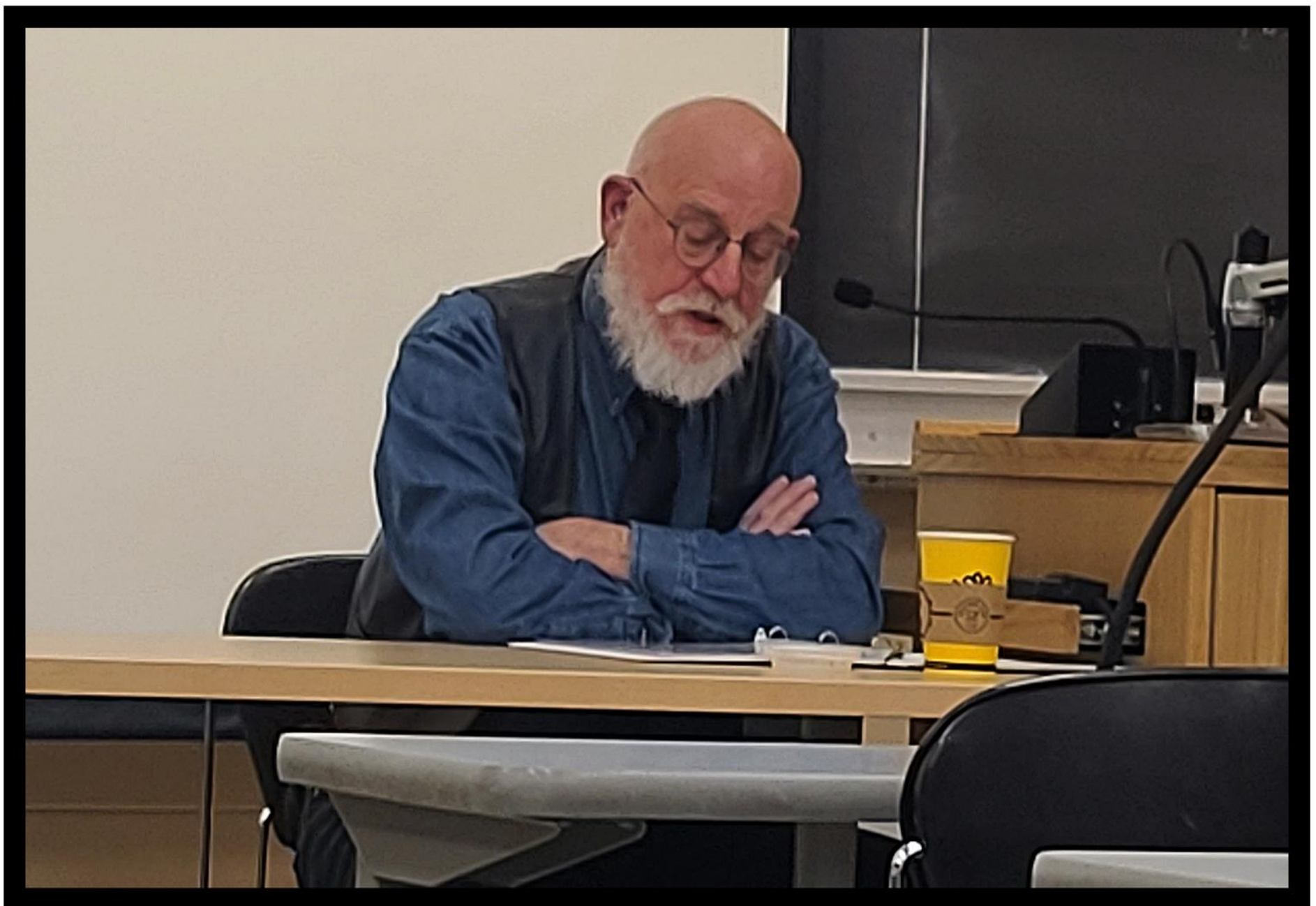
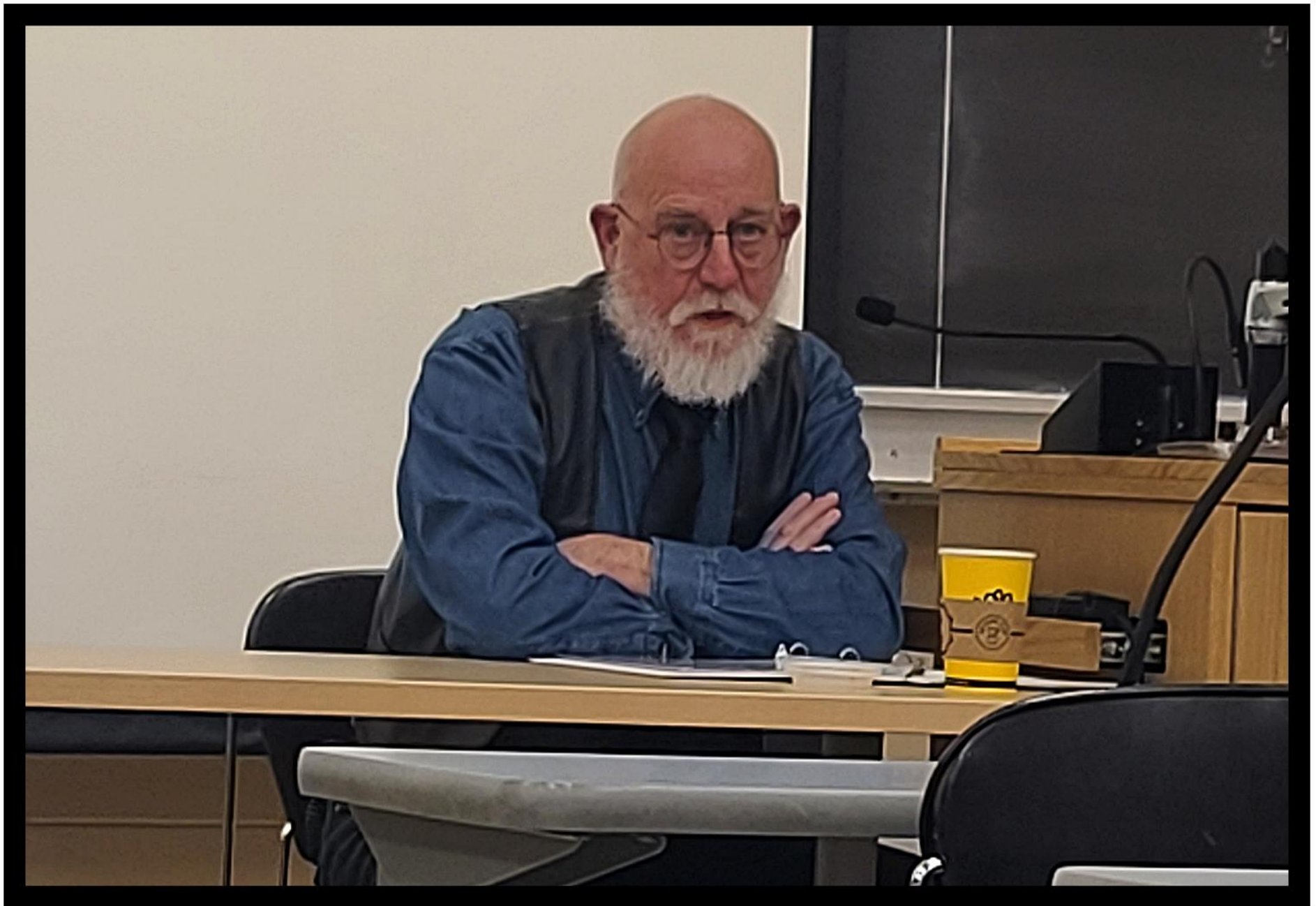
My first trip to a “foreign land” was a trip to England to visit relatives in 1970. I discovered that Brits of a certain age – those who remembered the Second World War and the occupying Yankee G.I.s – had a special loathing for Americans. At one point an older man, on hearing my accent, growled “You’re an American” “I most certainly AM NOT!

I’m a CANADIAN!” He was absolutely mortified. According to my Mum, who enlisted early into the war was eventually deployed to England in 1945-46 and worked out of Canada House in London, told me “we all viewed the Yanks as nothing more than boastful, drunken rapists – and any girl [her words] who went out with them were immediately shunned because their “reputations” had been “ruined”.

Those same English relatives first visited Canada sometime in the 1950s and desired in their two weeks stay to see Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, Montreal, Halifax, and Polar Bears in their natural environment. I don’t know if it was pointed out that all of England, Scotland, and Wales could comfortably fit into southern Ontario. This was long before I learned the vital importance of snark but clearly scale eluded them completely. Like I said, the furthest north I’ve been in Ontario is to Gravenhurst – 164 kilometres or 102 miles away. To give a sense of scale, the most northern town in the province is Fort Severn on the southern shore of Hudson’s Bay – 3,587.7 kilometres or 2,229.2 miles from Toronto. By comparison, the distance between Aberdeen in Northern Scotland and Barcelona in southern Spain is 2,340 kilometers or 1,454 miles. In other words, all of Europe could easily fit inside Ontario with lots of room left over.

From what I can recall of a family history put together by a distant cousin, my dad’s forbears were members of a fundamentalist sect of one of the non-conformist churches in northern England and arrived in the “new world” via Ireland and settled in what is now New Jersey in the dying years of the 17th century. This was not some enterprising endeavour. It was (and this sounds completely nutty to me) a means to test their faith by going to a hostile and dangerous and unknown region of the world.

WHAT IS CANADA? (My Story)



The forebears of my paternal grandparents (who were dead long before I was ever a twinkle in anyone's eyes were members of an offshoot of the Quakers, the Children of Peace. As abolitionists and pacifists, they were deemed the enemy and obviously became refugees in 1800 from the (Trumpian-like) after-effects of the American Revolution (the real cause of which was not a tax on tea – a luxury item – but Britain's vow to outlaw slavery according to the most recent biography of George III). In reality, by all accounts, my granddad was quite the fascist.

The result of all of this was my uncles – and there were a lot of them! – were all, to a man, kind and lovely men . . . I wonder if there was such gothic horror from behind closed doors at their very rural childhood farmhouse that they determined to become the opposite. None, as far as I remember, were ever (openly) homophobic, misogynistic, or racist. None of them were church goers.

My Dad always thought of himself as a farmer – in a romantic way, even though it had been decades that he was actually on a farm. An aside to illustrate my point, he was once stopped by the police because he was driving too slowly (assuming he was drunk) – his reason was that he was only looking at the cows!!! At that point he was doing very well selling real estate because he refused to sell properties to people he knew couldn't afford them. He thought of himself as a farmer because his dad was a farmer and his dad was a farmer and on and on back in time to Anglo-Saxon days . . .

My grandmother I know less about beyond carrying 13 children to term; but as a Lundy, (as in The Battle at Lundy's Lane) she links me directly to the earliest history of Canada and the War of 1812 (which we won). Another Lundy was caught up in the 1837 rebellion led by William Lyon Mac-



kenzie and found himself in jail charged with rioting or insurrection or something for trying to unseat the ruling oligarchy (fist bump) . . . (I don't know what his final sentence was) but I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Lundy's – and it just goes to show that when Canadians go bad, we don't fool around!

(As the token Canadian), A fun way to break up boring dinner parties south of the border was to throw out the question "You do you know why the White House is really called that, don't you?" (blank stares and dead silence) "Well, it's because we burned it . . . on August 24, 1814, as a reprisal for you invading and ransacking my hometown. The war ended less than six months later". I remember visiting Fort York soon after moving back to Canada (finally) and there was this loud obnoxious American (sounding exactly like the cartoon character Foghorn Leghorn saying (loudly) "well it

says here that they won that there war!" Hey Dumb Dumb, if you'd won that there war why'd you have to show your passport at the border? Why would there even be a border?

The slogan "54.40 or Fight" was popularized during the 1844 presidential campaign of James Polk, and just like Trump, ran on a platform of expansionism. The belief was that the U.S. was destined to expand across the continent, and the phrase became a rallying



cry for those who supported aggressive territorial expansion through military means. It was, of course, a failure.

The dispute was resolved diplomatically, and in 1846, the border was established at the 49th parallel, avoiding military conflict. I'll grant that 54.40 or Fight is a little catchier than the 51st State "joke", but they lost in 1814, and again in 1846, and will again . . . and again. That's the real meaning of Elbows Up.

I think it's revealing that Canada, as an outward-looking country, of all the people I know only one other has a generations-long presence here. All the others are first generation Canucks born to immigrant parents, and there are only two who were born abroad but came here as babies.

My maternal grand-mother was one of those first-generation Canadians as the child of Scottish im-migrants who came here during the latter part of Queen Victoria's reign; while my maternal granddad came from northeast England at the beginning of the last century and rather quickly ended up fighting in World War I (which pretty much bugged up his life). I'd only ever seen one photo of him and, oh my! was he ever a big butch handsome heartthrob! Theirs was another working-class family, this time with *only* eight pregnancies (what was it with those huge families?!)

The many times I roamed around Europe I knew without doubt when I was in France or Germany or Italy . . . when it comes to how we differ from what is to our south it's only partially cultural but mostly it's attitudinal. I wonder if there are not psychological differences between Canadians and Americans. During the SARS outbreak in 2003 my better half, an American, was absolutely amazed that Torontonians, once exposed, would willingly quarantine themselves for the required 21 days. "That would NEVER happen in New York!" he said at the time.

Which is not to say we don't have our own assholes; luckily he never lived to see the trucker convoy turn downtown Ottawa into a living hell during Covid. I was there last month, and if you've never been to Ottawa let me just say that the streets around the Parliamentary precinct are very tight and the friend I was staying with lived a short walk from the scene of the crime and it sounded truly horrible; far worse than what appeared on the news.

Now I know absolutely nothing about sports, but the over-the-top reaction of the entire country to the World Series was something more than sports fans gone wild. I wonder if it wasn't a political reaction to the gross, tacky, vulgar imperialism at its most buffoonish and that a win would completely fuck over Agent Orange. Even though we lost by only one home run, that's still close enough to piss off President Comb-over . . .

Last October the Canadian Studies program was host to an evening presented by the Kensington Market Historical

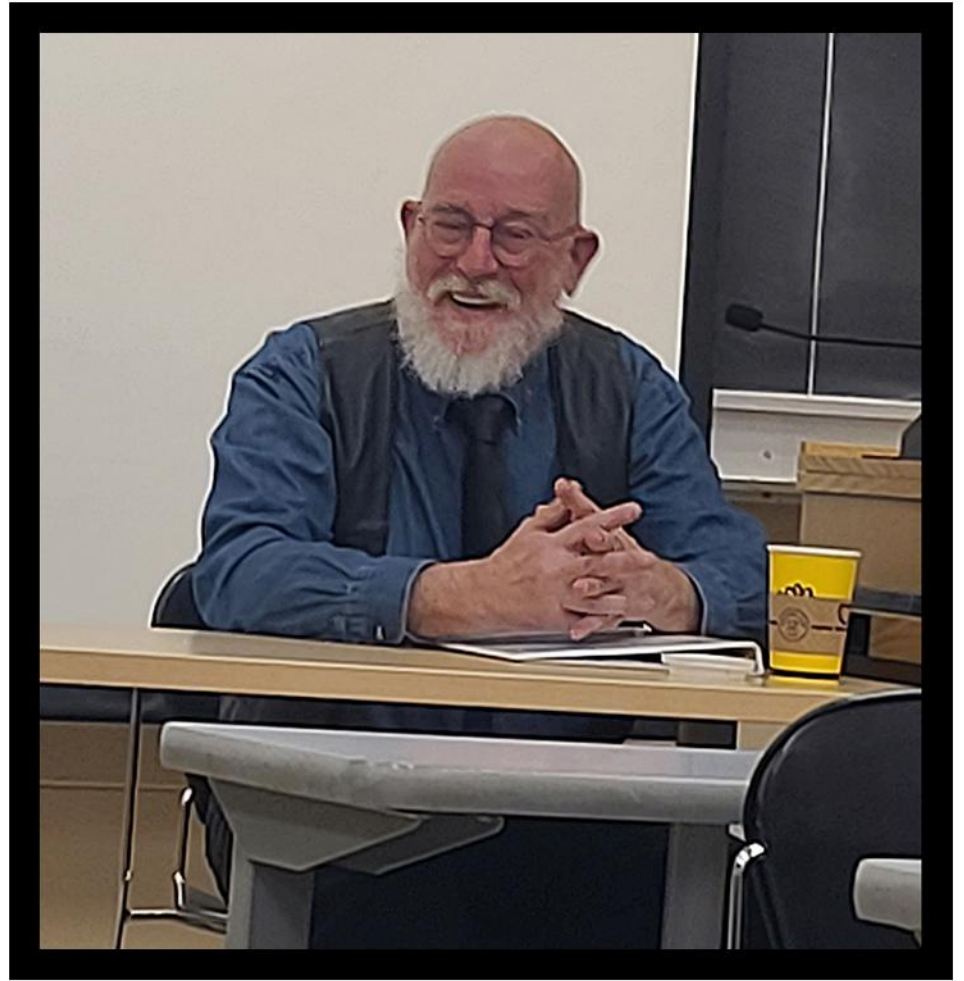
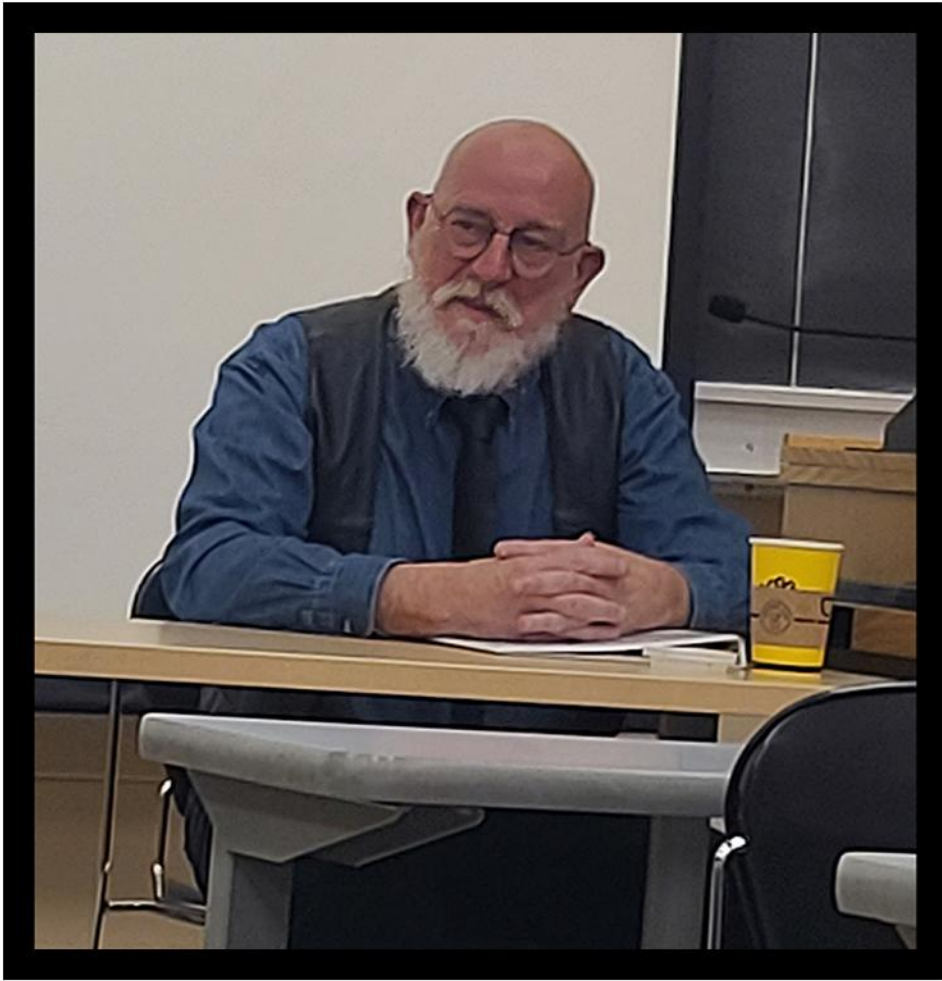
Society and Koffler Arts featuring Andy Fabo and myself giving talks about the downtown art scene in the 1970s and 80s. This was a time when societally we were still pretty Victorian. (Deep down, all across North America, I wonder if we're not still a bit Victorian. In Canada, especially, there is still the annoying vestige that people shouldn't move above their station in life . . . Maybe our habit of constantly apologizing "sorry", "sorry", "sorry" is a symptom of this residual Victorianism.

I often feel this within myself. Every advance I've made over the last twenty years – from being the subject of a documentary film by Peter Dudar, to receiving the Governor-General's Award, to getting a quite large Canada Council grant with the assistance of Josh Heuman, to European exposure over the last few months, even to being here today, has been accompanied by this nagging inner voice that continues to tell me that I'm not worthy.

Of course, that internal argument is totally bullshit.

The first time I visited continental Europe was as part of a performance art tour in 1977 and frankly I felt like a provincial hayseed – the five countries visited had everything that North America lacked; style, sophistication, generally multilingual, sexually liberated, and with a real sense of their own histories. One particular anecdote illustrates my provincialism and naivete – the Galleria Labirynt in the eastern Polish city of Lublin occupied the basement of an ancient historic house in the (then) Jewish quarter, a house famous for being wall to wall frescos from top to bottom. The gallery is now long gone, and the current custodians don't talk about the basement, because it was the site of a 17th century brothel, and the walls are still covered with the filthiest murals I'd ever seen in my life (up to that point) depicting naked men with big lace ruffs butt-fucking the sex workers . . . this was the site of our performance piece. We were SO outperformed by the walls!!!! Years later I wrote to custodians (of the now museum) wondering if they had any photographs of the basement, because I remembered it had "all of these *really interesting* murals . . ." I, um, never received a reply.

Within the Canadian art world, I see a lack of ambition – the only effort seems to be about meeting the next arts council funding deadline. It seems to me that such a heavy reliance on government funding breeds caution, and inculcates a lack of daring . . . Years ago, when I was living in the States there was an annual outrage-fest over arts funding being a waste of tax dollars, in that case, to the "pornographer" Robert Mapplethorpe. After things calmed down for a bit, the National Endowment for the Arts quietly dropped funding for the visual arts to concentrate on writing and publishing – cynically, in my opinion, because they knew Americans didn't read. The visual has much more power than



the word. It had been widely reported (outside the U.S.) that around half the American population reads at or below a fifth grade reading level. That was in the 1980s and look where they are now!

I did have one encounter with that agency; I once looked into NEA funding but threw away the application because it included a mandatory signed declaration that the successful applicant wouldn't use the money to buy drugs . . . I'm not kidding.

Jump forward to today's Alberta and we see the same pattern. After the UCP's bumpy book-banning rollout turned into an unexpected bonfire of the wrong sort, the Tories backtracked and all that is banned now are visual representations of "explicit sexual material". Education minister Demetrios Nicolaides has been quoted as saying "An image can be understood and conveyed at any grade level with any degree of comprehension. Whereas, of course, vocabulary and understanding progresses and develops throughout the school year." But I still wonder at the homo/hetero breakdown of the offending material in question. My guess is that the censorship is mostly homo-focussed.

But the Victorians among us find an outlet against non-binary/trans/pronouns/equal marriage (twenty years later) and choice (thirty-seven years later) by continually trying to ban books that touch on any icky gooey things like s.e.x. . .

Book-banners don't read, so what are they talking about? "We're not (fill in the blank) _____ or anti-gay! This is about the children!!!" No, it's not – it's about the adults warped moral worldview . . . keep 'em stupid and our jobs are safe.

Now I'm going to say something a bit controversial – my 1985 first edition of *"The Handmaid's Tale"* had a dramatic confrontation between the title character (the soon-to-be Offred) and her lesbian-separatist mother. "You wanted a woman's culture? Well, here it is!" The mid-80s was a time when Women Against Pornography was at their most visible and had at the same time made an alliance with the Moral Majority. (An alliance that would have led to the real-life founding of Gilead.) That first edition went off to the New York Public Library along with the International Gay History Archive that the library acquired from me and my partner in 1988. (More on this in a bit.) Years later after my return to Canada in 2001 I bought a later edition of the Atwood novel and (to my dismay!) I discovered that the passage described above had been deleted . . . one can only wonder about the motives for this. Given that the Moral Majority is no more and Women Against Pornography is a spent force, their odious ideologies and hypocrisies linger on with the authors of the Project 2025. That genesis and timeline should not be forgotten.

After the collapse of the CEAC (the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication) in 1978, at which I was the assistant programming director, it was definitely time to leave behind the Toronto art world. I had two choices, go to Europe or go to New York. That was a point in time when in most of Europe English had not yet become universal and so I faced serious linguistic challenges. I could have gone to Britain, but I knew no one there.

There was quite a lot of back and forth between Toronto and New York City in the mid- to late '70s; the trips were very brief, so I never had any sense of what the place was really like . . . The longer I was there it became obvious

to me that I was NOT them. Being an “alien” was so insulting, so derogatory, and frankly, so unwelcoming.

I opted for New York City . . . what a mistake. I thought I was going to the place where all the smart people went. Wrong. I knew a few people through CEAC encounters, but now that CEAC was no more I was of no use to them. I quickly realized people there didn’t have friends; they had contacts. Galleries were hurtling toward the hyper-commercial hellscape of today, and there was no interest in anything from outside the NYC orbit. It was the most provincial place I had ever been, and it was the most racist place I’d ever been. I simply hated it there and would have come home after six months except I’d met someone . . . so I waited to see where things went.

It wasn’t until I received my green card that I knew I had made a terrible mistake. Not only did I lose my right to vote, I lost all of my Ontario Health Care benefits. For twenty-one years (and all through the worst of the AIDS epidemic) I had no health insurance – because I couldn’t afford it!

It became, to me, very pointless to continue making art in the old way; and very soon (against the background of the AIDS crisis) it would feel decadent when all of your friends and colleagues were dropping like flies. It wasn’t a matter of turning ones back on art; it was a matter of redefining it.

As an adjunct to my day-and-a-half job art-directing a weekly newspaper I assumed the roles of artist-as-curator,

artist-as-historian, and artist-as-archivist in 1980 as co-founder of the International Gay History Archive – by the end (in

1988 when the New York Public Library’s Rare Book and Manuscript division assumed control) the project was the largest collection in private hands of gay male archival material in North America. One cannot even begin to describe the daily horror of that period, except by saying that once in awhile there was good news . . . when someone died from something else! The archive should be viewed, like my previous involvements, through the prism of an institutional critique by taking control of history. Throughout this period, I embarked on a thoughtful exploration of my own medical and psychological history, and this was the first intimation that perhaps something might be made from grief. That I might fashion artistic assertions from my own lived experiences echoed what the philosopher Mary Warnock would insist “operates under perpetual tension: the only way

to cope with life is to learn what to forget; the only way to feel one has an identity is to remember.”

Twenty years later my man (my life) my husband-to-be John Hammond came around to my way of thinking that his hometown was an overrated hellhole and it’s time to leave. He’d been to Canada a few times before we met (in fact he nearly moved north in the mid-1970s because he’d fallen for a guy from Smiths Falls (he seemed to have a thing for Canadians). He’d met my mother, who adored him. He was 15 years my senior and wanted to wait until he reached pension age the following year because he didn’t trust his own government. We arrived at the Niagara Falls crossing on June 30, 2001 – to the delight of the Border Services (Wow! A Returning Canadian! – they were all young, and I suspected they had pot parties after work.)

What prompted my hatred, that final nail in the coffin, was on a return visit from Canada before our exodus an ICE agent at Pearson Airport declared mine was the “oldest green card he had ever seen . . .” I expected to be interrogated with questions like why I hadn’t become an American or such other insults, knowing he had the power not only to turn me back but tear up a (supposed) legal document . . .

Shortly before his landing ceremony my husband began sporting a maple leaf in his lapel . . . and I thought, oh please don’t. However, Trump has provoked me to start wearing John’s maple leaf (and I’m no longer embarrassed about wearing my heart in public). At the 2018 Governor-

General Awards at Rideau Hall, where I was recognized for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual and Media Arts, the

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ceremony ended with this marvellous baritone’s rendition of the National anthem but my reaction was of embarrassment as us awardees mumbled through what we remembered of the words, (the French verse, forget about it), me staring at my feet hoping it would end soon. The kinds of loud outward shows of patriotism shown elsewhere I think are generally considered by us to be vulgar, fake, and hollow.

What really made me decide to come home was a couple of (in retrospect) silly, teeny events in Toronto on a whirlwind visit in the very late 1990s. The first was passing a sidewalk vendor in Spadina Avenue right next to the old Victory Burlesque Theatre (where, incidentally, Mae West toured one of her scandalous plays in the early ‘20s and didn’t get arrested) I saw a metre tall porcelain polychrome statue of Chairman Mao surrounded by about a dozen fat, naked,

pink, happy babies each holding up in the air their own copies of the Red Book! It was really expensive – but Communist Camp of that quality is priceless. The other event was the announcement of an upcoming Patsy Stone Look-a-Like contest hosted by Woodies on Church Street two days after my departure – me thinking these would NEVER happen in NYC . . .



house with an abusive father. Some suffer the violence, others come up with justifications in order to survive.

“There is a broader problem here for Canadian domestic politics. Since the trade war with the United States and the struggle to preserve our sovereignty dwarfs any other political consideration, it is how we must judge our political class,

After all my years south of the border the only thing that Americans knew about Canada was that health care was free. But, I think by that, they meant the kind of substandard care for poor people delivered by the drug-addled Simpsons hack doctor cartoon character. When I returned I was young and healthy and in no need of care until my big giant dog Wulfgang barged past me on the stairs causing me to fall . . . nothing was seriously wrong – no broken bones – but I needed crutches. This was when I really felt put out. I was charged TWENTY!! FIVE!!! DOLLARS!!!! . . . isn’t out system suppose-ed to be free and universal?

How Canadian to bitch about \$25. I think that us Canucks are a pretty tightfisted bunch.

Aside from the tiny dispensing fees at the pharmacy, that was the most I’m ever paid for care in the last two decades back in Canada.

After being back in Canada for good, I quickly realized that in a single week I would have heard and learned more about Indigenous affairs than I had during the entire twenty-one years down south. And that’s just pathetic. Aside from killing, the only thing American are expert at is bullshit. I have a theory: Maybe the reason Americans are so dumb is because they really believe the steady diet of bullshit they’ve been fed all their lives . . . like, anyone can become President – only a psychopath would believe such nonsense). After about six months in Canada, my (now late) husband declared two things to me . . . 1) “I wish I had been born Canadian”, and 2) “Now I realized that *everything* I’ve been told about my own country had been a lie!”

There was a marvelous opinion piece by Stephen Marche in last week’s Toronto Star about where we stand and the way forward. It’s worth quoting at length. “American democracy may well be too far gone [for appeals to common sense]. The Supreme Court no longer asks itself about law and facts, only about force and loyalty. Bit by bit, piece by piece, the economic and political and even the academic elites are making peace with their unfreedom. America resembles a

and yet there’s no way to tell if what they’re doing is correct. And it doesn’t matter if it’s a Liberal like Prime Minister Mark Carney or a Conservative like [Premier Doug] Ford. The wilderness of American negotiation is dark.

“There may be no correct tactics, but there is a correct strategy. What to do with America is unclear, but what to do with ourselves could not be clearer: Get out of the way. Diversify trade, create a halfway plausible security apparatus and expand our military presence in the Arctic. To the elite running our institutions: Do. It. Now. The less we think about America, the more we focus on ourselves, the better. The interior struggle, not the reaction from the south, is the only basis for judging political success or failure in Canada today.”

Recently I’ve re-read “1984” by George Orwell after many decades. It was published in the 1940s and was obviously a critique of Stalin. But reading it today it could very well be a critique of the U.S. today.

Like I said at the beginning, when I received an invitation to lead this class – What is Canada? – my initial thought was “buggered if I know . . .”

I would be a fool to say out loud that Canada is a paradise, but my Canada is a place where two people of the same gender can get married and know that that human right is written in stone. My Canada is a place where women have choice, and every faith is protected. My Canada is outward looking and everyone is welcome, and maybe more importantly, My Canada no longer covers up its past crimes . . . We’re collectively living in existential times and it’s going to be tough; but I want to end by paraphrasing a joke by Rick Mercer about our plight directed at the bullies down south – “Don’t forget, We’re Bigger! We’re Colder! And We’re on Top!”

Bruce Eves (November 9, 2025)

“What Is Canada? (My Story)” was presented before a live audience as part of the Canadian Studies programme under the leadership of Professor Siobhan O’Flynn at the University of Toronto on November 12, 2025.