

Director's 40th Anniversary Statement

Being director of an organization such as the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University (SFU) requires vision, dedication, passion, and hard work. But this is more than offset by the numerous satisfactions of the position. It is particularly gratifying to be able to lead the Institute through not one but two significant milestones: its 30th anniversary in 2013 and now its 40th anniversary this year.

At these moments, one is given an opportunity to cast a glance back over the years and decades of the Institute's activities. It is at such times that one realizes not only the important achievements of an institution dedicated to illuminating—through an engagement with the rich tradition of the humanities—the difficult economic, social, political, and spiritual problems of the day, but also the way in which such achievements constitute a shared endeavour, a truly collective project.

So, I would like to start by saluting, firstly and foremostly, staff members—past and present—such as Trish Graham, Sandra Zink, Wallis Hartley, and Huyen Pham. I would also like to tip my hat to former directors, from the Institute's founding director, Jerry Zaslove, to the late Don Grayston and my direct predecessor, Anne-Marie Feenberg. Stephen Duguid also played a critical role in the early life of the Institute. Ian Angus has been there almost since the Institute's inception and has also provided vital institutional memory, inspiration, and guidance. We have also had some rather illustrious J. S. Woodsworth Chairs and Resident Scholars, such as Ellie Stebner, Ed Broadbent, Alan Whitehorn, and Svend Robinson. Past Grace MacInnis Scholars include Joy Kogawa, Myrna Kostash, Linda McQuaig, Libby Davies, Gail Davidson,

Ratna Omidvar, and Jody Wilson-Raybould. Thanks are due, as well, to the Associates and Steering Committee members, and, of course, speakers and the thousands of audience members—many of whom were and are students—who have attended and actively participated in our events over the years and decades.

We have worked with many more partners than is possible to exhaustively mention, but special thanks are due to Am Johal and SFU's Vancity Office for Community Engagement, the late Chinmoy Banerjee, Harinder Mahil of the Hari Sharma Foundation (HSF), SANSAD, Sid Shniad of Independent Jewish Voices, and SFU's Centre for Comparative Muslim Studies under the leadership of several directors, currently Tamir Moustafa.

We have more recently begun to work closely with the West Coast Coalition Against Racism, with which, along with HSF and SANSAD, we cosponsor the recently inaugurated Chinmoy Banerjee Memorial Lecture in Anti-Racism with a brilliant presentation by Robyn Maynard.

We have also worked for many years with the Thakore Family on the Gandhi Jayanti, as well as with Jai Birdi and the Chetna Association—an organization working assiduously to dismantle caste discrimination in India and in the diaspora alike—to sponsor programming that honours the anti-caste legacy of Dalit jurist, historian, and political philosopher B. R. Ambedkar. In September, the institutional home of the Institute, the Department of Humanities, underwent a name change. It is now known as the Department of Global Humanities. Accordingly, the Institute continues to build its global profile with a series of partnerships, including the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Vienna University of Applied Sciences, Università di Bologna, and Institute for the Social Sciences and the Arts at the Benemértita Universidad Autónoma de

Puebla in Mexico.

One way in which such partnerships are bearing fruit is the *Journal of Adorno Studies*, which will be hosted at the Institute, as a joint venture between the Institute, Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and Università di Bologna. Along with our established journal, *Contours*, the *Journal of Adorno Studies* will enable us to continue to make important interdisciplinary research contributions in the humanities while also providing opportunities for graduate students to participate in the publishing process in various capacities.

A generous grant by the late social worker Joanne Brown has enabled us to mount conferences on the extremely timely topic of “Violence and its Alternatives.” This year’s symposium will be devoted to the theme of “Apocalyptic Anxieties.”

Finally, a very warm and special thanks to Dr. Jennifer Simons, whose initial bequest got the Institute off the ground and generous on-going financial and moral support has been invaluable to our programming. Her sponsorship has enabled us to make our programming almost entirely free and accessible to the public. The importance of this cannot be overstated in a period when virtually everything at the university and beyond is commodified out of the reach of increasing numbers of people.

It was 40 years ago that I entered SFU as an undergraduate. Sadly, I did not know about the Institute, nor its charismatic and beloved founding Director, Jerry Zaslove. I was, however, very much aware of the context that formed the spirit of the Institute. I believe this spirit remains alive and well even as the university succumbs to the logic of corporatization, which has only accelerated and deepened under neo-liberalism.

In fact, the very year I registered as an undergraduate—the year that the Institute was born—saw a massive protest movement against the inauguration of neo-liberalism in BC under the Social Credit Government. It was called “Restraint” and entailed massive cut-backs to social spending. The province was consequently energized by the opposition movement called “Operation Solidarity,” which brought together the labour movement, community organizations, multifaith groups, and a powerful and confident students’ movement to challenge this regressive agenda.

Looking back at the 40-year legacy of the Institute, its grounding in solidarity with organized labour and social democratic politics is clear, particularly through the J. S. Woodsworth Program, as well as the Grace MacInnis Memorial Lecture.

Early on, the Institute was on the vanguard of prison studies through the efforts of people like Stephen Duguid and Wayne Knights. The timeliness of such work hardly needs to be underlined in our era of growing opposition to what Angela Y. Davis has called the “prison-industrial complex” and the rising tide of police abolitionism, which is closely tied to a transformative, socialist agenda. In fact, two years ago, I was invited to make a submission before a Special Committee of the BC Legislature tasked with police reform.

The Institute has also, since its inception, foregrounded Indigenous voices, as well as those of people of colour. For example, we have hosted Lawrence-Paul Xuweluptun, Pam Palmater, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Annie Ross, Rueben George, Smogelgem, Freda Huson, Patricia Barkaskas, and Sarah Hunt, among many others. Glen Coulthard has spoken several times at the Institute and is an Institute Associate.

Not only was the Institute founded in the crucible of protest and struggle, but also in the critical and interdisciplinary spirit of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Accordingly, so much of our work has been critical and independent of any specific political orientation. Over the years, we have had visiting scholars and speakers such as Nancy Fraser, Allan Sekula, Russell Jacoby, Robert Hullot-Kentor, Martin Jay, Laura Kipnis, Amy Allen, Kevin Anderson, Vivek Chibber, Wolf-Dieter Narr, Anselm Jappe, and Surti Singh, amongst many others.

Relatedly, another area of concentration for us has been the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics that dates back to the inception of the Institute. So, for the past several years we have mounted a Polis and Psyche lecture series, a collaboration with the Lacan Salon and the Western Branch Psychoanalytic Society, which has featured speakers such as Jay Frankel, Lene Auestad, John Abromeit, Claudia Leeb, Jonathan Sklar, and Hilda Fernandez, among others. Prior to his election, we hosted under the aegis of Polis and Psyche a very well-attended panel discussion on “The Trump Phenomenon.”

Over the past thirteen years since I have been director and the eighteen years that I have served on the Institute’s Steering Committee, I would say that I am particularly proud of the following events: a 2005 Roundtable on the Danish Cartoon Controversy, which involved a number of faith-based organization, that explored the relation between religious and artistic freedoms; our 2014 conference on the “State of Extraction,” which sought to confront the federal government’s attempt to turn the country into an “energy super-power” against the express wishes of many First nations across the country; and our 2017–2018 Free School on Spectres of Fascism, which included a major international conference on the 50th anniversary of the publication of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *Revolution of Everyday Life*.

Is there room for improvement? Always! And we will continue to consult and work with members of diverse communities to ensure that we engage in the widest range of critical and challenging programming as possible.

Over the past decade and a half, it seems clear that the academic and political landscape has changed enormously. While academic freedom and the freedom of expression has always been under fire from various groups and organizations in society, this pressure is being felt ever more keenly today. This has been, for me as director, a rather eye-opening experience insofar as significant pressures have been brought to bear on the Institute to desist from certain kinds of programming from all points of the political spectrum.

This only redoubles our resolve to keep precious space open for challenging and difficult dialogues. The kinds of discussion that we host will not be palatable to every member of our university community, nor every member of the various communities served by it. *Nor should they be!* Abiding with intellectual disagreement and contradiction is simply the condition of living in a democratic society. It needs to be reiterated forcefully that such disagreement and contradiction may well generate *offence*, but this does not necessarily amount to *harm*. Without such an open space for *dissensus*, it is simply not possible for us to fulfill our mission of engaging in a robust way with the rich tradition of humanistic inquiry and questioning.

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