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# The GSA and Canada

James Retallack

Every year in late September or early October, usually on a Thursday morning, old friends and new colleagues exchange hugs, handshakes, nods, or knowing glances in boarding lounges of Canada's bigger airports. Without saying a word they know they are bound on the same flight to the GSA's annual meeting. The process is repeated the following Sunday, though with less concentration of minds and bodies: the weekend's activities have been too disparate—or dissipating—for that.

These nodal moments in time and space mean a great deal to those of us in Canada because the Great White North is so vast (and it must not be developed, as a federal minister once quipped, in a half-vast way). Without a geographically compact Ivy League or UC system, scholars at Canadian universities are dispersed even more widely than their American counterparts: many of them see each other *only* at the GSA. Like the rest of Canada's population, they generally live within 200 miles of the 49th parallel, belying one-third of the country's updated motto "From sea to sea to sea." Yet even for those who must travel south from Edmonton or Nipissing or Sudbury, fleeting airport encounters remind us that we belong in the GSA and the GSA belongs in us.

The GSA almost "belonged to Canada" in a literal way in the mid-1980s. Gerry Kleinfeld flew from Arizona to Edmonton to explore whether the annual meeting might be hosted by the University of Alberta. I had recently had my sanity questioned when I voluntarily moved from Stanford to Edmonton in 1985, but I hoped Gerry's mission would succeed, and others hoped so too. Alas, no deal was struck, for reasons I never discovered, and GSA members did not have to be warned that snow can arrive in Alberta's capital in late September. Instead, I was warmed by the glow of Gerry's boundless energy for forty-eight hours.

Canadian membership has hovered at between 4 and 5 percent of total GSA membership since at least the mid-1990s. It now numbers just shy of one hundred. Given the distances they travel to attend the annual meeting and the increasingly onerous airport security measures to which they must submit at least twice and perhaps four or six times, Canadian members are probably overrepresented on the program. (Two of my most pleasant journeys to the GSA were road trips from Toronto with faculty

colleagues and student colleagues, to Pittsburgh one year and to Louisville another, precisely to avoid airport delays and other indignities). Canadians are also overrepresented in terms of their close association with one of the GSA's most important partners, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Like the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, the DAAD and its directors in New York have taken special pains to support German and European studies in Canada, albeit with shifting emphases and levels of support. For example, my own university has the DAAD–University of Toronto Joint Initiative in German and European Studies, which provides a home to the Hannah Arendt Visiting Chair for German and European Studies each year as it rotates among the departments of history, sociology, and political science. All the visiting chairs enjoy traveling to the GSA a month or two after they have landed in Toronto: the historians I have known often remark how different it is from the German *Historikertag*: more *gemütlich* (even too *gemütlich* for some of them). Often they strike up friendships and collaborations at the GSA that are realized the next spring when they host a workshop or conference in Toronto. For better or worse, those meetings help make Canada seem less distant, or at least differently exotic, than it might appear otherwise.

Meanwhile the Canadian Centre for German and European Studies at York University (Toronto) and the Université de Montréal helps ensure that Canadian, German, and Francophone perspectives on Europe and the rest of the world penetrate the GSA's activities. As on so many US campuses, these initiatives have helped Canadian departments of Germanic languages and literatures adapt over the last three decades to the more inclusive German studies model.

Let me register three last points. Canada's colonial pasts provide particularly strong ties to Britain and France. Hence the "European" in German and European studies is arguably more pronounced in our scholarly networks than in those south of the 49th parallel. Second, "Europe" is not as strongly represented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Historical Association as it is at the American Historical Association (AHA): the GSA thus provides a vital alternative forum for discussing Europe's past (and present) from a distinctively Canadian perspective. Third and last, Canadians are allegedly very polite and self-effacing. (Q: How do you get twenty Canadians out of a swimming pool? A: "Would everyone please get out of the swimming pool?") Be that as it may, I have never doubted that the GSA's annual meeting, not the AHA's, is where my own PhD supervisees should begin what I hope will be a long record of conference attendance. I now insist that they sign up for a GSA panel or seminar no later than their fourth year of studies, and even the shy ones invariably thank me (after the fact) for pushing them out of their comfort zone. For none of them is this the first time they have presented their archival findings to non-Canadian audiences, but the mix of edgy scholarly rigor and supportive personal engagement they find at the GSA is unique. My supervisees "get that" right away, just as I did over thirty years ago when I attended my first meeting. I hope the same will be true when the GSA turns eighty.