

*Geoffrey Davis: Interactions with Australia, Its Literature and Its Culture*

*'The intoxicated octopus and the garlic-kissed prawn': Geoffrey Davis in Canada*

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**Abstract:** A celebration of Geoffrey Davis's work in Canadian literature and his great organizational skills

**Keywords:** Geoffrey Davis, Canadian literature, consummate organizer

I have a confession to make. Although I am here representing Geoffrey Davis's influence on Canadian literature, I have been more influenced by his work on South African drama than anything else. *Theatre and Change in South Africa* and *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature* are hugely important books in my library. And he wins for the best article title of all time: "The intoxicated octopus and the garlic-kissed prawn: on South African bibliography." I borrow it here in his honour. That said, what I want to highlight today is the beautiful way that Geoffrey's work has opened countless conversations across space, geography, and time, and that includes both South Africa and Canada.

In his introduction to *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English Canada*, a collection of essays drawn from the 1988 XI Annual Conference on Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in German-speaking countries, Geoffrey Davis writes with nothing short of glee about the *good fortune* the conference organizers had in locating the conference in Aachen, at the borders of Belgium, Germany, and Holland so events could be spread between Aachen and Liege. Effervescently, he continues, "having decided to mount the occasion in two countries, we discovered that this reckless undertaking apparently entitled us to partake of the generosity of *two* Canadian embassies!" (xii). This introduction highlights what I know of Geoffrey Davis—he was

a consummate organizer who took full advantage of the vicissitudes of place and of public funding alike to bring disparate people and ideas together and he seemed to do so with immense joy. I know that good fortune in conference organization is only good fortune if people work really hard to make it so. I admire that.

Looking back at Geoffrey Davis's career in world literature/ commonwealth literature/ and postcolonial studies, I marvel at the way he endeavoured to bring people and ideas together—across borders, cultures, disciplines, languages, and genres. His work was at the forefront of transnational studies long before the term transnational came into vogue. He looked at points of interference, entanglement, and interaction, between knowledges and histories. As an editor, organizer, and collaborator, he had an extraordinary impact on the development of a number of different fields, often because he placed them in conversation with each other.

At the Aachen/ Liege conference in 1988, he notes that he collected “the insights and interest European scholars have to bring to Canadian literature but also something of the intellectual stimulation and the sheer pleasure that Canadian writers and scholars continue to offer us in Europe” (xii). Such structural reciprocity is rare. It is also where Geoffrey excelled. And it is so incredibly valuable.

As a postcolonial comparatist, one of Geoffrey Davis's key contributions to Canadian letters was the very act of taking CanLit seriously in conversation with other anglophone literature from around the world. Doing this in the 1980s and 90s was instrumental in thinking about Canada's history as a settler-invader colony and about systems of displacement and violence, as well a way to highlight voices of resistance and abrogation. Such comparative conversations happened at the gatherings he helped organize. They also happened in his research on a wide range of topics. Steadfast advocate of comparisons within a well-historicized framework, one of his final articles considered Patricia Grace's *Tu* from Aotearoa/ New Zealand and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* from Canada and recovered voices of war. Comparative conversations also seem to have happened in his supervision of a number of graduate theses on a range of canonical and less canonical subjects in Canadian literature, among dozens of other locations. He steered theses on an eclectic mix of the old and the new—including some on the works of Margaret Laurence and Timothy Findley, on immigration and multiculturalism, and even on *Anne of Green Gables*. I love imagining Geoffrey Davis talking to German students about the red-haired orphan from Prince Edward Island.

I first met Geoffrey Davis in 2005 at the German Conference on New Literatures. I remember two things about that conference in Kiel.

1) First, I gave a keynote on Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*. Seconds before I was to speak, the organizer who had invited me to the conference told me that he had been warned that I was pregnant.

2) Second, I met Geoffrey the day after that address and we talked about Krog's book. While walking around a rose garden, we spoke for ages about South African literature, Canadian literature, ACLALS and CACLALS, and many other things. At the end of the

conference, he pressed several of his books on South African theatre into my hands to take home. This gesture seemed like a natural extension of our conversation. He never once mentioned my large belly. I subsequently met Geoffrey on several occasions—in St Lucia, in Montreal, and in Stellenbosch. There were wonderful conversations at each occasion.

In an article called “Doing the Right Thing: ACLALS, Social Change, and Cultural Activism” on the role ACLALS has played in two projects in India and Zimbabwe, Geoffrey Davis wrote: “our function as literary scholars may be seen to have provided us with relevant and usable experience and expertise... demonstrating how literary studies may be profitably reconciled with social and cultural activism” (4). He continued, “in reconciling our literary scholarship with our social conscience we have been able to make a significant contribution to both enterprises” (18). I think the best tribute to Geoffrey Davis would be to continue conversations about the productive and meaningful conjunction of social justice and literary work. I think that *conversation* itself can be a legacy. Who speaks? Who listens? Who benefits? Who profits? How do you hear voices of justice and reason? How do you share cross/ cultures? These are the kinds of questions Geoffrey Davis asked and it is imperative that we continue.

### **Works Cited**

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