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Abstract to the PhD project:

*Towards a Canadian “Littérature Engagée”? – Cultural, Ecological and Political
Commitment in Contemporary Canadian Literature*

In the middle of the 20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of a “Littérature Engagée” was a contribution to literary criticism which aimed at offering new perspectives on both political reality of his time and the cultural dimension of literature. As a result, Sartre’s literary criticism focused tremendously on the value of literary activity which, according to Sartre, was determined decisively by its degree of political confrontation. Following his idea of existentialism, an unpolitical approach towards literature, hence a non-engaged literature, cannot be considered literature. True literature in the Sartrian sense should therefore always be concerned with the political and historical situation of its author and reader. Following this definition, other kinds of literary activity may exist but cannot be named literature.

During the 1960’s, existentialist approaches and theories spread not uniquely across France but also Canada. The theories then influenced philosophers’ minds but also manifested in nationalist tendencies of the political left. These tendencies, however, are opposed to Sartre’s approach. Indeed, Sartre was at first a convinced communist and member of the Communist Party in France. However, he soon realized that his hopes for a more liberate society and the liberty of the individual could not be fulfilled. Moreover, Sartre strictly denied nationalist tendencies due to his aforementioned liberal ideals and personal experiences during World War II.

It cannot be denied that Sartre’s narrow concept of literature is considered to be very controversial. The limitation and narrowness might be explained by taking in account his personal experiences with political reality before and during World War II, namely nationalist and totalitarian movements and regimes. Therefore literature, like all other areas of human existence, can never be detached from political fields of tension and needs to contribute to the maintaining and protection of freedom.

Despite his extreme positions and the partly outdated definition of literature, Sartre’s criticism still contains two essential aspects:

1. The ideal of freedom, realized through an engaged literature
2. The process of creating liberty via the triangle of author, reader and literary work

In regards to the nationalist tendencies of the political left of Canada, the question arises which similarities and differences one can point out by comparing Canadian left existentialist ideals with Sartre's existentialism. Furthermore, a close look has to be taken at how Canada's political left of this time understood and defined nationalism in contrast to European definitions.

By taking in account current developments in English speaking literatures, dealing with the creation of identity, global and local political change as well as ecological questions, a modern concept of a "Littérature Engagée" could be a starting point for a contemporary engaged literary criticism of Canadian literature. In order to do so, one would not only have to describe differences between a Canadian engaged literature and its French counterpart but also investigate to which degree Canadian existentialist influenced or still influence current literary developments.

It is therefore crucial for this PhD-project to look into Sartre's "Littérature Engagée" and to take a look at different Canadian authors who deal and dealt with Existentialism as well as with current cultural, ecological and political changes. Moreover, the literary works of contemporary Canadian authors shall be used as examples of use. The central questions to this project will hence be:

- What is literature according to Sartre and what does his "Littérature Engagée" offer contemporary literary research?
- Are there similarities between Sartre's "Littérature Engagée" and a possible Canadian counterpart?
- Could one already speak of a Canadian "Littérature Engagée"?
- If yes, what are its characteristics?
- How could a Canadian "Littérature Engagée" take part in the ongoing process of scientific argument and literary criticism?
- What does a Canadian "Littérature Engagée" offer for the aforementioned purpose?
- What are the chances and limits of a Canadian "Littérature Engagée"?
- How do contemporary Canadian authors and their works contribute to this?

To achieve this project's aim, it is necessary to also include the effects of globalization and multiculturalism. This is of particular interest for Sartre denied the author's ability to write for another readership than his own. In doing so, Sartre interconnects the reader's membership to an author with a commonly shared historic dimension. By taking in account proceeding globalization and the diversity of Canadian cultures, such an analysis offers great potential for interesting insights into its underlying dynamics. Especially since the Canadian Multiculturalism Act underlined the importance of cultural diversity, whereas problems, e.g. the reconciliation with Canadian Native peoples, still remains unsolved.

This PhD-project is intended to add new findings to the ongoing scientific research in the field of Canadian literary studies and to not only analyze Canadian characteristics but to involve them in the process of finding answers to the above-mentioned questions.