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Transnationalism or Internationalism? Or, The Pleasures and Perils of Writing in Randolph Bourne's Shadow

Michael D. Behiels and Reginald C. Stuart's *Transnationalism: Canada-United States History into the Twenty-First Century* is a collection of essays that ask the deceptively simple question, do borders matter (p. 4)? The range of topics and approaches that this book covers reveals the inherent complexities of such an inquiry, especially in terms of the historic relations between Canada and the United States. Although not offering a consensus, Behiels and Stuart insist the collection demonstrates how the relationship between Canada and the United States has been fundamentally "bilateral and transnational" (p. 4), one in which "borders have mattered in political terms" but "far less in economic, social and cultural terms" (p. 5).

The book is separated into five parts: "First Nations"; "Identities and Culture"; "Conflict and Cooperation"; "Security in North America"; and "Future Imperfect." The different perspectives, according to Behiels and Stuart, reaffirm a transnational approach which "allows us to better perceive and understand less appreciated dimensions of the shared Canadian and American experience in North America since the late eighteenth century beneath and beside the political relationship" (p. 5). Behiels and Stuart in turn express a commitment to historical specificities, arguing that to determine whether borders matter one must first "decide on what we are talking about, and when and where" (p. 14).

The first section opens with Roger Nichols's "Do Bor-

ders Matter in Native American History? An American Perspective." In this chapter, Nichols compares Canadian and United States policy towards First Nations communities. Whereas the United States adopted a highly militaristic approach in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Canada typically dealt with First Nations communities along more bureaucratic lines. Their arguably less violent stance directly affected how First Nation communities perceived the north in light of the south. As migratory patterns suggest, Canada was viewed as a haven from the brutality of its southern neighbor. But even when the United States became gradually less violent in their dealings, the differences between Canada and the United States persisted, even while their agendas towards acculturation remained essentially the same. Such a review does not lead Nichols to any radical conclusion of fundamental difference in the end, but merely that "for some people, at some times, and in some circumstances the border did, indeed, make a difference" (p. 29).

Robin Fisher follows Nichols with a predominantly Canadian perspective. She begins with a fairly broad historiography of how scholars of First Nations history have perceived the border, which points to the essential conviction that "the distinctions between Canada and the United States have been overdrawn" (p. 32). When differences have been highlighted, scholars have usually cited the fur trade, which extended for a far longer period of time in Canada than in the United States. Scholars have by and large contended that such a state of affairs fre-

quently led to a “reciprocal relationship” between First Nations and Europeans (p. 33). Canadian policy in the years that followed in some respects reflected this more long-standing mutuality. However, when one appraises the consequences of European settlement in North America upon Aboriginal communities, these differences seem much less significant. As Fisher contends, whether in Canada or the United States “First Nations people were removed from their land, marginalized in the new society, and denied political power” (p. 39). Such a conclusion leads Fisher to insist that the border between Canada and the United States should receive far less attention than it does, as it played a much less substantial role in the lives of First Nations than regional differences across the North American continent.

The second section continues to probe the significance of the border to Canada’s and the United States’ historic affiliations, beginning with Reginald C. Stuart’s chapter “Borders and Brows: Mass Culture and National Identity in North America since 1900.” Stuart argues that fears of Americanization are largely misguided, particularly in regards to mass entertainment, which has typically demonstrated “less Americanization than North Americanization” (p. 49). Moreover, insistence upon borders that mark discrete national entities “confuses rather than clarifies the complex and messy nature of relations between Canadians and Americans,” at least in terms of mass entertainment (p. 60).

Stuart’s essay is followed by Jennifer MacLennan’s essay entitled “Dancing with Our Neighbours: English Canadians and the Discourse of ‘Anti-Americanism.’” Her thesis is an interesting one, as she contends that anti-American rhetoric has actually helped forge Canadian identity in a highly effective, even positive sense. While helping to “establish and maintain our sense of difference,” such language also allows Canadians to imagine themselves as a “cultural corrective” to their southern neighbors, whose “excesses” prove “just as poisonous to genuine American culture as it is to us” (p. 79)

This part of the book closes with an article by Ruth Compton Brouwer, who provides a comparison of Canadian and U.S. missionary tactics in Korea from the nineteenth to the twentieth century—connecting them directly to more secular diplomatic policies that took place in Korea following World War II. Although by no means arguing that a “Missionary Mind” drove Canadian and United States political strategies in Korea, Brouwer nevertheless argues that the interactions of Canadian and U.S. missionaries and diplomats looked very similar,

demonstrating “a mixture of idealism and pragmatism on the part of both Canadian sets of actors and an awareness that they had limited room to choose alternative options” (p. 105).

Although quite a few chapters in the first two sections lean heavily upon political policy, from the third section onward the topics and perspectives covered are much more overtly from a governmental and diplomatic perspective. Philip V. Scarpino begins with an essay describing how Canadian and U.S. governments dealt with a shared crisis of pollution in the Great Lakes, with the aim of illustrating “the dynamic interplay between human and natural history” that “has been refracted through political and cultural boundaries” (p. 128). Bruce Muirhead follows with an analysis of Canadian and U.S. economic agreements and disagreements, specifically in terms of the Auto Pact. From the policies of Lester Pearson to Pierre Trudeau, Muirhead attempts to demonstrate how Canadian government policymakers were actually rather “aggressive and focused on issues of concern to Canada” and did not always bow to U.S. demands (p. 145). Tammy Nemeth concludes the section with an essay on Canada’s policies in regards to exporting oil and gas to the United States. She argues how relations around this particular issue shifted from informal to formal continental arrangements due not only to shifting prices of oil and gas, but also to policy decisions as they pertained to the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States.

The fourth part of the book again relies upon more formal governmental relations in the discussion around state security in both nations. Stéphane Roussel opens the section by analyzing the nature of the peaceful relations that have historically existed between Canada and the United States. He specifically applies the conceptual framework of “democratic peace,” which he defines as “a product of the interaction between democratic states, and notably, of a process of the internationalism of liberal values and norms” (p. 184).

Galen Roger Perras follows Roussel’s chapter with an examination of William Lyon Mackenzie King’s dealings with Canada’s southern neighbor, and specifically U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt. In this essay, Perras challenges the idea that King was simply “Roosevelt’s lapdog” (p. 183), but rather a leader who “placed Canada’s interests first” when negotiating North American and national security issues during World War II (p. 216).

Rachel Lea Heide’s chapter, “The Clayton Knight Committee,” examines how this entity operated during

World War II to recruit U.S. pilots for training of the Canadian air forces, and whose members sometimes even became pilots themselves. She remarks how the United States tolerated and even displayed “covert encouragement” of such actions while Canada attempted to balance U.S. diplomatic concerns with their own ever-growing need for experienced pilot during the war (p. 225).

Greg Donaghy provides the final chapter of the fourth section. In it, he describes Canada’s and United States’ tense collaboration on nuclear armament and deployment. The need for cooperation seemed pressing in light of U.S. desires to construct a continental defense system, which by necessity, the Canadian government insisted, called for the United States to actively consult with its northern neighbour.

The final part of the Behiels and Stuart’s *Transnationalism* again provides a rather distinctly political perspective of the diplomatic relations between Canada and the United States. It begins with Norman Hillmer’s analysis of one government official’s perspective of this relationship—specifically, Canadian chief foreign policy advisor O. D. Skelton. Skelton, according to Hillmer, forcefully advocated his conviction in the merits of “North Americanism”—an ideological concept that proved formative to Skelton’s political perspective. Through the concept of North Americanism, Skelton envisioned a sovereign Canadian state, but in close alliance, albeit not convergence, with the United States.

Stephen J. Randall pursues this line of thought in the essay that follows, but more from an American and contemporary perspective. From World War II onward, Canada and the United States have increasingly collaborated, according to Randall, specifically in regard to military policies. However, such collaboration has not resulted in complete union, as Canada has continued to make decisions in light of its own interests and convictions.

This collection of essays provides a multifaceted, insightful, and historically grounded perspective of the complex relationship that exists between Canada and the United States. Cultural, social, and ethnic factors are most definitely brought to bear in some of the chapters. However, for the most part, these essays reveal an intriguing and at times problematic affiliation between the two North American states through a largely political lens.

Consequently, I am not quite convinced that this book is as much about transnationalism as it is about inter-

nationalism. And indeed, such is not surprising given that several of the contributors are notable experts on international diplomacy and nation-state development and identity, as opposed to transnational theorists. As Eleizer Ben Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg relate in their work *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis) Order*, internationalism refers to “activities setting in contact official bodies—states, universities, associations or parties—belonging to different states.” Transnationalism, in contrast, “focuses on peoples and groups that do not necessarily refer to official bodies.” In contrast, “It conveys, at the difference from ‘international’, an association with a condition of dispersal in different states and societies of social entities and actors that share an allegiance to some common attributes.”[1]

This slippage is not entirely without precedent, and is even to some degree understandable given the “conceptual muddling” that Steven Vertovec claims has plagued the term since its growing popularity in the 1990s. In his work, which also bears the primary title *Transnationalism*, he observes how “the meaning of transnationalism has been variously grounded upon arguably distinct conceptual premises.” This “multi-vocality” may actually retain some advantages, according to Vertovec, in how it can uncover the multiple layers of transnational encounters between “everyday networks” and much larger world systems and structures. Nevertheless, I think it is fairly certain that this does not mean he advocates the term “transnationalism” be applied in a limitless fashion, unbounded by clear definition or direction.[2]

Nevertheless, I do not think Behiels and Stuart’s *Transnationalism* is without merit in how it can help illuminate the meaning of transnationalism in a North American context. Such a conviction is based on the fact that some of the essays do exhibit a fairly indisputable transnational perspective. Fisher’s article is one example that provides a distinctly transnational appraisal of the history of First Nations peoples in North America, who, as she identifies, were not nearly so “fixated” on the forty-ninth parallel as their European counterparts (p. 42). Although I personally would have liked to hear more specifics of the lives of vaudeville performers, Stuart’s essay on mass culture undoubtedly considers the less official and thereby transnational channels of Canadian and North American life as individual entertainers moved to and fro across the border.

Finally, when reading Hillmer’s article on the political ideology of Skelton, I repeatedly recalled Randolph Bourne’s 1916 article “Trans-national America.” Bourne,

the essential founder of the term “transnational,” was notably a contemporary of Skelton. But unlike Skelton and his prestigious political career, Bourne was an intellectual who died fairly isolated and little known during the influenza pandemic in 1918. And like their backgrounds, their ideas also differed in very significant ways, at least if I am interpreting Hillmer’s representation of Skelton correctly. Arguably, Skelton’s conception of North Americanism promoted a degree of isolationism from Europe, whereby Canadian and American nationalities would remain intact, but in close political and economic cooperation with each other. Bourne, in contrast, envisaged a “federation of cultures” by which multiple and diverse European cultures would coexist without violence—“the peaceful living side by side.” America, Bourne insisted, was the site on which such a “miracle of hope” could happen, but only when inflexible and cultural annihilating ideas of “Americanism” were cast aside.[3]

Where Skelton and Bourne intellectually met, however, was in how both envisioned a gathering together of national and social entities without total assimilation. Each viewed absolute convergence as a negative, especially in relation to the United States or “Americanism.” A truly fascinating experiment, in fact, would be to further draw out such a comparison between Skelton and Bourne in light of their mutual historical context. They wrote at a time in which nationhood was being reconsid-

ered during World War I and its aftermath. Both Skelton and Bourne innovatively engaged their milieu, leading to revolutionary conceptions of national and cultural intermingling.

Collaboratively, the essays in Behiels and Stuart’s collection fairly effectively answer the central question, do borders matter? Or more specifically, does the border between Canada and the United States matter? The manner in which all the essays address transnationalism may not be quite so successful. Nevertheless, this collection does compel one to probe the differences between transnationalism and internationalism, which could contribute to a deeper analysis of what both terms entail. In the end, I would argue that rather than *Transnationalism*, a more suitable title for this book would be *North Americanism*.

Notes

[1]. Eleizer Ben Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis) Order* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1.

[2]. Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 2, 4.

[3]. Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97.

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