A Canadian Geographer’s Perspective on the Canada-United States Border

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Canadians are the most smug people in the world. Americans are the most arrogant people in the world. That is why the world’s longest undefended border separates them. Canadians secretly like the Americans being so arrogant because it enables them to be so smug.

—FOTHERINGHAM (1989, 84)

Geographers study boundaries both objectively and subjectively for what they reveal about landscape elements of neighbouring states and as part of larger investigations into relationships between those adjacent political units. The scientist classifies and defines while the humanist considers the symbolic meanings of an artificial creation. To the empiricist, the Canadian-American border is understood by pertinent facts: At 8,890 kilometers, it is the longest continuous boundary line in the world; and with 130 crossing stations and more than 100 million people and almost $200 billion in goods and services crossing each year, it is the busiest border on the planet (Colombo 1986; Macdonald 1989). To the humanist, this boundary can only be understood as an interpreted emotional experience, a symbolic marker defining a Canadian community, at least an Anglo-Canadian community.

The border itself is not a living entity, imbued with meaning; it is the people who live along it who give the border symbolic significance. The fact that 75 percent of all Canadians and only 12 percent of Americans live within 160 kilometers of the border explains to some extent its greater influence on the lives of those who live north of the “line” (Colombo 1986, 8). Yet more important than geographical propinquity to a geopolitical boundary is what the border represents to Canadians for the development of a “historically and geographically specific social system” (Pred 1984, 281).

Canada as a “historically contingent society,” developing within the context of its own internal evolution, has always framed its “becoming” in its changing political, economic and cultural relationships with the United States. That the relationship with the United States functions as a barometer by which Anglophone Canadians measure their evolving identity is not surprising given the complex and varied nature of the ties linking various transborder regions. (French Canadians have developed their own cultural boundaries within the country, shields serving to strengthen their own sense of national identity.) Historical geography, distinguished by its concern with understanding data in context and a subsequent focus on places and the processes that create them, a mode of inquiry that combines functional description with structural explanation, and a synthesis of subject and object whereby a humanist perspective provides the skeleton on which the researcher adds the flesh of empirical data, serves as a useful basis upon which to consider Canadian-American relations and the different meanings applied to the border at various spatial and temporal levels. It is from this particular disciplinary viewpoint that I offer the following comments on the symbolic significance of the border in Canadian-American relations.

That different meanings have been offered regarding Canadian-American relations is evident upon examination of metaphors used to describe the border. Canadians, particularly Anglophone Canadians, in their fiction and popular culture have tended to view the border as a dividing line or shield, protecting a fledgling culture from a dominating presence. The metaphor
of the "border as a shield" symbolizes that for Canadians, our relationship with the United States has played a major part in developing what symbols we do have, an important consideration given the reality of living in an environment dominated by American symbols, icons, and myths.

A discontinuous and disjointed settlement experience, combined with the overwhelming American presence, have restricted efforts to create national symbols. Quebec exists largely as a nation because of its unique culture, reinforced by language, and its association with a distinctive historical geography, but Anglophone Canada has always struggled to find its niche within the continent. Anglo-Canadians can draw only on a meagre reservoir of symbols and myths for guidance. Symbols help us to interpret who or what we are and what we can be and myths are particularly important because they transform secular history into sacred legends. Anglophone Canada has had relatively few myths around which emotions, beliefs, memories, and nostalgia have been ritualized, the exceptions being the trek of the Loyalists northward in 1784 and the idea of "Canadian heroes standing up to Yankee bullies" during the War of 1812 (Kilbourn 1988, 18). But even the aggrandizement of the War of 1812 and the myth of the Canadian "David" standing up against the American "Goliath" must be weighted against the reality of Canada's being defended largely by British troops and Indian loyalists and the irony that trade between regions on both sides of the border continued largely unabated even as armies crossed that same line.

The most striking aspect of the border as shield metaphor is its oppositional character. As Anthony Cohen (1985, 58) wisely states, "boundaries are relational rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community in relation to other communities." The border serves as the basic reference point for historical, literal, symbolic, and psychological interpretations of an Anglo-Canadian identity. Yet identity is a problematic concept; it is heavily contextual, difficult to measure, and changes over time and according to milieu. What is constant in the Canadian experience is that all groups in different regions and at different times have interpreted their identity vis-à-vis their relationship with the United States. And in this context, the border is the emotional and ideological focal point for the never-ending debate over the nature of these relationships.

This is the basic premise of Patrick McGreevy's recent examination of the contrasting meanings assigned to the Niagara border region by citizens from both countries. McGreevy (1988, 307) metaphorically describes the border as a "wall of mirrors, reflecting back different meanings to Canadians and Americans, meanings that in turn reflect different ideologies of nationalism." Canadians take much better care of their side of this border region in comparison to Americans because Niagara symbolizes the "front entrance to the house," the place where English Canadian nationalism begins; whereas for Americans, this place represents "the back alley where the trash is kept," the place where American's manifest destiny ended with the War of 1812 (McGreevy 1988, 313). Yet as McGreevy readily admits, the meanings assigned to the border by citizens living on both sides are not so clearly distinguishable at other places because of different historical geographical experiences.

There was no similar militaristic conflict along the St. Croix River (despite the antics of the drunken Fenians in 1866) or the 49th parallel. The strong commercial links between the Maritimes and New England and the east-west flow of trade and migration into the west paralleling the transcontinental railway resulted in a different transborder experience for these Canadian regions and generated different interpretations of the significance of the border. Regional separation within Canada resulting from cultural plurality and geographical isolation combined with different kinds of relationships with American border regions to create a variable settlement experience, produce different levels of attachment to the idea of Canada, and elicit different interpretations of the symbolic meaning of the border. This regional dimension of Canadian life has been and continues to be a major factor in the development of Canadian identity, a fact noted by many observers but nowhere more eloquently expressed than by the recently deceased giant of Canadian literary criticism, Northrop Frye.

Through a lifetime of study, Northrop Frye became one of the foremost students and interpreters of Canadian culture and in doing so, it might be argued, he unconsciously adopted a historical geographical approach to the study of Canadian identity. He views the elusive question of identity as nothing more than an expression of culture including the human imagination. Since the imagination—that is, the ideas by which we live—is so shaped by personal experience and perception, Frye maintains that in a country as large and diverse as Canada, identity is not a "Canadian" question but a "regional" question. Frye insists that unity and identity in Canada are quite different concepts but are often confused in the minds of Canadians:

Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in words of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in political feeling (Frye 1971, ii).
The tension between national unity and regional identity, Frye (1971, 220) believes, means that the important question perplexing Canadians is not “Who am I?” but rather “Where is here?” He emphasizes the fact, later elaborated upon by R. C. Harris (1982), that there was no temporally and spatially continuous settlement experience as in the United States. Small communities and regions, geographically isolated from one another, ensured a development of what Frye calls a “garrison mentality” and Harris terms an “island archipelago.”

Both Harris and Frye express their views of the historical geographical essence of Canada in the form of metaphors, the former seeing Canada as a collection of islands in a stormy sea called Confederation and the latter comprehending the country in the form of a cartographical metaphor, that is using the legend and conventions of a map (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1975). To Frye, each voyageur (Canadian) in search of the national image (Here) is involved in a journey that has no arrival; the map is not yet complete. The individual identifies and interprets ideas, events, and experiences largely within a regional frame, which enables him to orient himself in time and space. He is asking himself “Where is here?” but this leads him still into uncharted territory. In this quest the voyageur must recognize that there is a body of cultural assumptions, framed by a regional consciousness, involved in the appreciation of the nature of Canada which acts as a filter through which the imagery passes. Frye reasons that an individual’s Here is neither static nor complete but continually evolves as new ideas, events, and experiences permeate his or her consciousness.

The regional frame the voyageur uses to orient himself in territory is bounded east and west by the rest of Canada and north and south by his transborder relationship with neighboring American regions. These contradictory east-west and north-south forces have created in essence a border parallax (Gwyn 1985). A parallax is defined as: “an apparent change in the position of an object resulting from the change in the direction or position from which it is viewed” (Webster’s New World Dictionary 1970, 1030). The ideological position from which the border is viewed plays a major role in its interpretation. This is certainly evident in the recent debate between two noted Canadian historical geographers, Cole Harris (1990a), who maintains that the emergence of Canadian regions and regional identities had more to do with the east-west transcontinental expansion of trade and settlement than proximity to American regions; and Victor Konrad (1990, 127), the major spokesperson for the “borderlands thesis,” who despite claims to ideological neutrality (McKinsey and Konrad 1989, iv), takes an ideologically full position that “North America runs more naturally north and south than east and west” (Konrad 1990, 127).

Regional borders in Canada, Harris insists, are more the result of distinctive European encounters with different Canadian settings than simply being peripheries of American core regions. To Harris, the border is a shield against continentalism and a historical geographical interpretation of the settlement of Canada, he insists, “gives us a particularly clear fix on all of this, situating modern Canada in its own remarkable, if symbolically different past” (1990b, 1). The present situation (that is, free trade, constitutional crisis) leads him to believe that we are in great danger of balkanizing, of becoming “a mosaic of antagonistic regional and ethnic enclaves, sitting ducks for the continental pressures that have always borne on this country, and do so now more than ever” (Harris 1990b, 2).

The “borderlands thesis” views borderlands as regions of cultural synthesis where cross-border flows of people, goods, and ideas acted as integrative elements contributing to a continental dynamic (McKinsey and Konrad 1989, 7-8). Proponents maintain that several distinct borderlands based on regional affinities have developed over time, reflecting different types of interactions taking place across the border, interactions between complementary areas that dovetail (McKinsey and Konrad 1989, 29). In their view, the debate over free trade exaggerates the significance of its economic and political components as the flow of goods and services is mediated by subnational structures rooted in regional cultures which transcend the border, traditional structures ensuring that political and cultural sovereignty continue to exist (McKinsey and Konrad 1989, 15).

It seems to me that this cultural synthesis/east-west perspective debate rests in part upon two dialectically opposed visions of the core-periphery paradigm: the neoclassical perspective that views core-periphery exchanges as mutually beneficial because of the trickle-down mechanisms of the marketplace; and the neo-Marxian view that sees core-periphery relations as unequal and exploitative because of the unequal exchange mechanisms inherent in capitalist markets. Both sides would deny any adherence to such polar ideological positions but the rhetoric of the debate demonstrates that, in spite of their attempt for objectivity, it is impossible for Canadian scholars to consider the symbolism of the border and the question of Canadian-American relations without being political.

My interpretation of history is that Canadians have built a distinct society with which they identify at a number of levels despite regional tensions and con-
continentalist forces. Canada is a fragile but continuously evolving east-west society based on a historical development of staples along the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes axis and the creation of instruments bridging what Harris (1982) calls the island archipelago: an extensive nationalized transportation linkage, a complex of government sustained cultural agencies, and redistributive policies designed to reduce regional and social disparity and "humanize" the marketplace. The fact that the present government is implementing policies that threaten those east-west instruments bridging regional/cultural islands and, by implication, national sovereignty, is a cause of great concern for many Canadians. In short, elements of our historical-geographical development and a different political culture have served to balance the very powerful north-south pull that connects American and Canadian border regions in many ways. Perhaps the best way to examine Canadian-American relations and the significance of the border is to attempt to control one's political ideology as much as possible and take an intermediary position between Harris's east-west and Konrad's north-south arguments; the truth lies somewhere in the middle of this dialectic.

McGreevy is right; the Canadian-American border is a wall of mirrors reflecting different meanings, meanings that in turn reflect different ideologies of nationalism (1988, 307). For Anglophone Canadians in particular, by examining the nature of our relations with America, we in turn see ourselves. What we see in the mirror is largely influenced by what we want to see, because ultimately nationalism, regionalism, and continentalism are territorial ideologies.

The vision I see reflected in the mirror disturbs me profoundly. The islands are shrouded in the fog of indifference and intolerance and the bridges are in danger of collapsing under the weight of constitutional and economic troubles. Or, as was the case of the Mercier Bridge, the bridges are closing because of indifference rather than from collapsing because of too little structural support. And the voyageurs grow more weary with each passing day.

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Urban Expressions of Cultural Duality

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Despite global tendencies toward homogeneity in the “advanced” market economies, Canada and the United States are not on the same path to a similar social condition. Rather, as S. M. Lipset (1990) aptly observes, the two societies are more like a pair of trains traveling along parallel railway tracks. Many kilometers (and some centuries) later, they are far from their origins but still separate. This is most evident in a comparison of American and Canadian cities. Three quarters of the population in both countries live in cities that constitute a most crucial set of points within North America. I contend that there are two distinct urban systems in North America, two highly differentiated sets of cities bounded by the border. These cities are the products of two differing cultural contexts; the cultural motifs of the societies are embedded in their urban forms and in the lives of their urban populations. Equally, the cities, some certainly more important than others, have been significant in socio-economic and political terms in the organization of the two distinct cultural contexts (Goldberg and Mercer 1986). One of the most basic yet concrete representations of the border’s division of North America lies in the nature of urban places in Canada and in the United States. The urban landscapes, urban forms, social geographies, and urban local governments all bear witness to the power and significance of this division, symbolized in the international border.

While the border demarcates and defines the territorial edge of two societies, Canada and the United States do share certain basic characteristics. They are both capitalist, with private ownership of the means of production dominant and the institution of private property reflected in high levels of home ownership, private markets in rental housing, and low levels of public-sector housing. As a result, social relations are, broadly speaking, capitalist in nature, and struggles over working conditions and the distribution of surplus value created in the labor process have been widespread in both countries. Both societies also have federal systems of governance and adhere strongly to the principles and practices of representative democracy.

That said, one can immediately recognize that important differences exist even with respect to these commonalities. Canada has a level of state ownership in many industrial, utility, and transportation sectors that differentiates it from the United States. Many commentators have argued, J. B. Cullingworth (1987) perhaps most convincingly, that private property and land use are more strictly regulated by local governments in Canada than in the United States. The federal systems of government are differentiated sharply by contrasting divisions of powers between federal and state or provincial authorities, by a greater role accorded the judiciary in the United States, and by an enduring commitment to different forms of government—one congressional, the other parliamentary in nature. Each country’s urban areas are governed within federal frameworks but there the similarity ends. Central-local relations for Canadian cities mean relations with the provinces, the federal government being of lesser importance. In contrast, the federal relationship with cities in the United States has been paramount; city-state relations have been highly variable and generally of lesser importance, despite attempts to increase the states’ roles and reduce that of federal authority, especially during the Reagan presidency.

The cultural context for urban development possesses two other important features in addition to capitalist and inter-governmental relations. The countries differ sharply in their social composition, captured in two fundamental dualities—one, American, is principally
expressed in racial terms; the other, Canadian, is chiefly encountered in socio-linguistic terms. A full detailing is beyond the scope of this essay. There is little doubt however that a hallmark of American cities is the remarkable persistence still of a high level of racially based residential segregation. Because of the particular geographical location of the francophone and anglophone groups, residential segregation in metropolitan areas is less the concern (except in Montreal) than are regional tensions and inter-provincial relations, and relations between Quebec and the government of Canada. Nevertheless, given the location of highly urbanized southern Quebec in the urban-centered core of the Canadian space economy, this is a critical element in understanding Canadian society and urban structure in Maurice Yeates' heartland region, Main Street (Yeates 1975). These long established dualities are being challenged by the outcome of an important geographic and social process. Immigration from regions beyond the traditional European sources is altering the composition of labor forces and urban populations although a notable cross-national difference again emerges, there being a far higher proportion of foreign-born persons resident in Canadian cities than in American ones. Indeed, the noted travel writer Jan Morris has dubbed Toronto as "the emblematic immigrant destination of the late twentieth century" (Morris 1984, 44).

A second crucial feature of the cultural context for urban development is that constellation of values and beliefs in a society that defines appropriate ways of doing things (including the making of cities). There are several key differences here. Although complex, the notion of an American individualism and Canadian collectivism captures the essential difference. This distinction can only be sketched here. American political philosophy is grounded in universalistic norms, sustaining notions like liberty and equality. Liberal philosophy reaching its apogee in America is strongly connected to the privileging of the individual, competition, and free enterprise. Other intellectual and philosophical traditions molded Canadian ideologies, as did a more modest liberalism. A conservative tradition sustains the maintenance of community order and the public peace over individual rights (only recently constitutionally guaranteed). An important socialist tradition emphasizes social justice, public sector intervention for the common weal, and cooperative enterprises. Not surprisingly then, there is an acceptance and willingness by many Canadians of having governments and their agents act directly in various market contexts in the provision of goods and services. Though not viewed universally as beneficial, the support in Canada for public enterprise is much higher than in the United States where greater skepticism and doubt over the desirability and efficacy of public authorities exists.

**Private Cities versus Public Cities**

I assert that Canadian cities are more public in their nature and American ones more private. These are not sharply drawn polarities but should be thought of as overlapping zones on a public-private continuum. The conception of the American city as "private" is not entirely original, following as it does S. B. Warner (1968). It expresses a strong commitment to individualism and individual freedoms; to the protection of private property rights under the Constitution; to the use of private mechanisms and individual user fees in the provision of infrastructures and goods and services; to homeownership, especially of the single detached residence; and to the concept of autonomy in local government. In a privatized society, problems are solved in a highly personalized fashion, withdrawal being prominent. In America, conditions of life in many cities have led to withdrawal to the safer ground of suburban jurisdictions with the power to exclude. It is equally necessary to recognize an active federal government in urban affairs, a full panoply of land-use powers in the hands of local governments, and a wide range of public authorities delivering services such as education, housing, and transportation. A central question is this: Whose interests are best served by these public agents? A popular and much encouraged view is that government serves all the people in given jurisdictions; but a more caustic view suggests that special interests have captured federal administrations (Greenstone 1982). The land-use powers of local governments, especially in the suburban domain, have often been exercised causally in exclusionary practices to benefit the interests of existing residents who may constitute a community or simply be an aggregation of private interests seeing their dwellings as commodities. In short, the private city is an expression of power relationships within urban areas.

The public city is more attuned to Canadian values, ideologies, and current practices. It expresses a stronger commitment to variously defined collectivities; to the maintenance of social order rather than individual freedoms; to the preservation of ethnic identities; to a greater trust and belief in the competence of government and its bureaucracies; and to the idea of active intervention in the form of urban planning by city, suburban, and innovative forms of metropolitan governments. The public city exhibits a higher quality of urban development consistent with high servicing standards set by local authorities: a well-developed
and high-quality public transportation system; an extensive system of community and recreation centers with quality parks and open spaces; all publicly provided; and a public school system that is not seen as having virtually collapsed in its central jurisdiction. There is in Canadian cities a multifaceted presence of a more extensive welfare state, of health care and hospital services, of policing, and of a wide array of Crown corporations. There is, however, a private counterweight to the public city and its equation with a Canadian identity. Privatism exists in Canada, expressed in housing and urban development as plainly as in other walks of life. The commitment to homeownership and the use and exchange values associated with private property are on a par with those in the United States. Canadian municipalities reveal exclusionary practices. Residential covenants and individual discrimination in urban housing markets were and are not unknown. While government has been an important actor in Canadian economic development, the private sector remains the driving force. More narrowly, the driving force for Canadian urban development is essentially private, as in the United States. This does not discount the development activities of public agents but it recognizes that theirs is not generally the primary role (Logan and Molotch 1987).

**Conclusion**

The Canada–United States border sets apart two distinct cultural contexts, creating divided ground. The expression of these different contexts can be clearly seen in the distinct landscapes of the public and private cities and, equally importantly, in the “landscapes of the mind” of those who occupy a powerful continental duality—Americans and Canadians.

**References**


