Thanks to Timothy Cole for research assistance, to R. Douglas Francis and Jeanne Perreault for comments on a draft of this article, and to my cousins Nicholas Landau and Janet Berger for help reconstructing details of family history. I particularly thank Katherine Morrissey and Jose Alamillo, co-chairs of the Program Committee for the 2005 PCB-AHA annual conference, and the entire Program Committee, for organizing a terrific program. I am also grateful to Katherine Morrissey for the image “Dancing on the Rim,” a great metaphor that made the work of thinking and writing a lot more fun. Thanks, too, to Janet Brodie, whose work made the entire program come together.
They were not fleeing a pogrom, although my mother’s grandfather, according to family lore, walked across the Urals to Berlin to avoid serving in the czar’s army. He became a rabbi, sailed to New York in 1892, and sent for his fiancée the next year, after Baltimore’s Shearith Israel Congregation hired him. Their journeys, like my dad’s, were part of a worldwide diaspora from 1830 to 1930, when 10 percent of all people moved across national boundaries.

The histories that became U.S. creation stories explained how diverse Europeans forged a common national identity. Frederick Jackson Turner credited the frontier, among other things, with making a “composite nationality” from a nation of immigrants. The Chicago School of sociologists and Oscar Handlin’s school of immigration history judged the “uprooted” by how well they assimilated as Americans.

My dad’s story, though, was not of uprooted flight from poverty or persecution. His parents were British descendants of German Jews, merchants whose trade and families crossed and recrossed the English Channel. One of those ancestors lived awhile in Scotland, where, family legend has it, he changed our name from Baruch to Jameson.

My dad’s mother was born Esther Wechsler in London in 1878. She grew up in a comfortable household that included two cousins and thirteen Wechsler children, twelve of whom went to university. Esther became a social worker, worked with sex workers on the Lon-
don docks, married Jacob Jameson, and, in 1908, bore their eldest
daughter, Ena (Relina). Jacob left for the United States sometime
after that. Esther and Ena joined him in Dayton, Ohio, where my
Aunt Babette was born in 1915, and the twins, David and Henry, two
years later.5

When my dad was very young, the family moved to Montreal
and lived for a while with my grandmother’s brother Moses and
his wife Ray (Rachel), who had emigrated to Canada, and their
children, Margie and Lew, who were born there. Then in 1923
Grandma got a job in Newark as the first director of women’s activi-
ties in the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Associations.6
She crossed the border alone, leaving Jacob to follow with the chil-
dren. The icy river Dad remembered crossing was the St. Lawrence.

This raises a question. The three youngest children were U.S.
citizens; my grandparents and Ena had already entered the United
States. So why the elaborate efforts to evade the border guards? Why
was Dad sneaking into the land of his birth?

The answer lies in the changing legal constructions of borders.
Grandma and Ena first entered the United States in 1913. The
family left for Canada after 1917, when the boys were born, and
when the 1917 Immigration Act added to the list of people barred
from the United States, among others, “all idiots, imbeciles, feeble-
minded persons, epileptics, [and] insane persons” or anyone an
“examining surgeon” found to have a “defect” that might “affect the
ability of such alien to earn a living.”7 My Aunt Ena had Down Syn-
drome. Her parents feared that she would be turned back at the U.S.
border.

My grandparents knew that nations police their borders. His-

5. My grandmother’s father, Joel Barnhardt Wechsler, was born in Schwabach,
Bavaria, in 1845 and, like many Schwabach Jews, apparently worked in the gold leaf trade.
He married Jette (Henrietta) Thalheimer in Rotterdam in 1877. Shortly after that they
moved to London; my grandmother was their second child. “Descendants of David Haen-
lein Wechsler,” private communication from Nicholas Landau, and conversations with
my grandmother.

6. Moses (Mo) was the ninth child in the family; he married Rachel (Ray) Fleisig,
and they immigrated to Montreal sometime before 1916, when Margaret (Margie) was
born. “Descendants of David Haenlein Wechsler.” My grandmother later became the ex-
cutive director of the Essex County Council of Jewish Welfare agencies, a predecessor of
the United Jewish Federation (now the United Jewish Communities of MetroWest). She
retired and moved to Galveston, Texas, in 1947.

7. The law commonly called the 1917 Immigration Act refers to the Act of Febru-
ary 5, 1917, entitled “An Act to regulate the immigration of aliens to, and the residence
of aliens in, the United States.”
History helps create them. History as a discipline developed with the creation of nation states, assumed to be the proper subjects of histories. In state-centered histories, people were important as citizens—as subjects of states, not of histories. Border crossing was important only to get them inside the nation. As historians wrote histories of nations, they not only “imagined communities,” as Benedict Anderson suggested, but also erected the borders of what Sarah Carter has called their “categories and terrains of exclusion.”

Historians chose the actors and crafted the narratives that told who belonged and who was an outsider, who became part of an imagined collective past and who was marginalized or excluded.

The border, in my father’s story, was the line that separates nations, where they assert their sovereignty by determining who and what to admit or exclude. Turner’s narrative served a similar function: His frontier line excluded indigenous peoples and justified conquest as progress from indigenous “savagery” to the newcomers’ “civilization.” The popular image, “a nation of immigrants,” excluded lots of people: Native North Americans, involuntary immigrants like African Americans, “aliens not eligible for citizenship” like Chinese laborers, and the peoples of what was northern Mexico, who came into the country involuntarily, through warfare. The East-to-West trajectory of U.S. history erased people who arrived at the West Coast from Asia, or north from Mexico, or south from Canada. But it erased them differently. Anglo Canadians were simply absorbed; Mexicans and Chinese were trivialized and demonized; Native peoples were conquered and then pushed to the margins.

The national U.S. narrative moved from Europe to North America. It did not cross the borders of what became three North American nations, or the divide between a pre-colonial North American past and a post-colonial national history. The imagined
national community erased continental connections and wrote a colonized North American history that began only when white people arrived from Europe. The erasures continued within national borders that were supposed to be gateways to the benefits of citizenship. The histories of shared composite nationality detoured around legal and social barriers that selectively denied citizenship rights like voting, suing, testifying in court, and owning property or, sometimes, oneself.

If history helped craft these boundaries, historians have also stretched and breached them as they probed inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality and as they wrote histories that cross national borders. In this essay I distinguish borders (lines that separate or divide), from borderlands (zones—sometimes around borders—where diverse people come together or mingle). In this sense, borders and borderlands can be either national or social categories. National borders separate nations; their borderlands are places where social relationships cross those borders. Social borders erect social barriers, like those of race, for instance, while a parallel social borderland might be a zone or place where people of different races meet. Borders and borderlands can have multiple meanings; their significance usually differs for the various people they divide or connect. A border, for instance, can function both to exclude and to protect. A national border can prevent certain people from entering a country; a social border can prevent people of different races or the same sexes from marrying one another. But borders can also function positively, to protect identity. Canadians, for instance, have often seen the U.S.-Canadian border as a positive line that separates Canada from the United States.12 Or religious institutions—churches, mosques, and synagogues—may provide safe spaces to share valued common identities and practices.

Recently historians have shown increasing interest in transnational, comparative, borderlands, and migration histories that blur the focus on separate national pasts. The Journal of American History devoted two issues to transnational histories in 1999. New migration

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histories have linked migrants’ journeys to political and economic dislocations within nations and across borders, focusing on the journeys rather than the destinations. A number of recent histories stretch geographic, social, and temporal boundaries of national borderlands. Samuel Truett’s and Elliott Young’s recent anthology, *Continental Crossroads*, demonstrates how borderlands can reconnect the continent; the editors’ introduction lights the way into that territory.\(^{13}\)

The borderlands I am exploring here are the borderlands of national memories, where the histories that move across national and social boundaries clarify their categories and terrains of exclusion. I am dancing around the borders of North America and some of their borderlands, especially the ones where I’ve lived. The tune I danced to as I wrote this was Tracy Chapman’s “Telling Stories,” which refers to the “fiction in the space between” the lines of written memory.\(^{14}\)


In history, those spaces are fictions that divide the histories of colonizers and indigenous peoples, private lore and public history. The family story with which I began is a shorthand into the spaces between personal memories and shared ones, and between shared stories and national ones. Whatever private needs pulled my family across the St. Lawrence, they joined a record 200,690 migrants who entered the United States from Canada between July 1923 and June 1924, spurred in part by fears that Canada would be included in new U.S. legislation to restrict immigration. Perhaps that fear pushed Grandma to take her job in Newark; I don’t know. I do know my family was not that different from many others who have crossed and re-crossed North America’s boundaries at least since the first migrants crossed the Bering Land Bridge or emerged from the previous world. We all have such stories. How we connect them to history is something else.

One way to understand my dad’s story was simply that he crossed the border and entered the United States, where his children could claim its history as our own. The reality is messier. My grandparents separated, and my grandfather returned to Montreal. One of my grandmother’s brothers settled in Toronto; another in Melbourne. I have cousins in (at least) the Netherlands, Australia, England, Israel, and the United States. Moses and Ray moved their family to New York. I first met Dad’s cousin Margie in the early 1950s when she and her husband George visited us in Texas. They later told me that while Margie stayed to visit, George went on to Mexico to arrange escape routes for American communists during the McCarthy era. That story introduces borders as gateways to sanctuary, as both the Canadian and Mexican borders had served for runaway slaves, as the 49th parallel served for a time for Sitting Bull and Louis Riel, for devout Mormons and Vietnam War draft resisters—as Canada served Chileans fleeing the overthrow of Salvador Allende, as it may serve gays and lesbians who wish to marry or women seeking legal abortions.


In 1999, for less dramatic reasons, I moved to Calgary. I was asked at my job interview how I felt about moving across a border. I answered too glibly, “I’ve been crossing them all my life.” I had spent most of my life in the territory that Herbert Eugene Bolton called the Spanish Borderlands. My borderlands, though, were social and cultural. They involved race, religion, and gender: being a blonde Jew with a Scottish name, a woman in a male-dominated profession; wrestling with nationalist, androcentric, and Eurocentric histories.

I learned that history in the public schools of Galveston, Texas, once a major port of entry that called itself the Ellis Island of Texas. It became an entry to another borderland when, in November 1528, two makeshift boats landed the first Spaniards on its sandy beaches. Karankawa Indians enslaved them, but four survivors—Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo, Andrés Dorantes, and Esteban, his African Moorish slave—began in 1534 to wander westerly across the continent. When Cabeza de Vaca published his reminiscences in 1542, his references to emeralds and towns “of great population and great houses” inspired claims to what became the northern frontiers of New Spain.

I learned Cabeza de Vaca’s name but not Esteban’s, and little else about those complex borderlands, in segregated public schools that taught me almost nothing of the history of race that I lived on an island where boundaries of power separated European Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and African Americans. Before the Civil War, free blacks had to register with the mayor and were not allowed on the streets after 10 p.m. Only white men who owned at least $500 in property could vote. Germans were the largest foreign-born group; by 1880 there were also many Italians, Greeks, Belgians, Danes, Mexicans, Portuguese, Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Spaniards, Swedes, Welsh, and Canadians. Established German Jews and their British-born rabbi founded the Galveston Movement in 1907 to deal with an influx of Russian Jews. They met their ships and sent them to towns that wanted their skills, thus aiding their settlement while simultaneously keeping them off the island and often isolating

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them from Jewish community.\textsuperscript{21} I grew up in a selectively diverse Galveston, attending Greek Easter fairs and Irish Catholic weddings, teen dances at the Episcopal Church but not the LULAC Hall, and not the local Juneteenth or Cinco de Mayo celebrations.\textsuperscript{22}

The two main industries were the port and the University of Texas Medical School. Married white women did not work outside their homes; African American women were maids. In a town where you were a doctor’s kid or a longshoreman’s kid, the overlapping inequalities of class, race, and gender were inescapable. My parents crossed those boundaries as Civil Rights advocates and as my mother graduated from medical school and practiced medicine, which made us something like the children of cross-dressers in the gender-conscious Galveston of the 1950s.

White children in Galveston attended schools named Alamo, Travis, Crockett, Bowie, Goliad, San Jacinto, and Stephen F. Austin. Mexican kids went to the same schools but were seldom tracked into college-bound classes. Black children attended Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. We all used the same textbooks in wretched Texas history classes that did not teach us that Stephen F. Austin owned slaves or that slavery was an issue in what we learned to call the War for Texas Independence. The only character in our textbooks who was not an Anglo man was Antonio López de Santa Anna—and he made it only as the losing general in the battle we pronounced Sayan Djuhssintow (San Jacinto).

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 80–82; Natalie Ornish, \textit{Pioneer Jewish Texans: Their Impact on Texas and American History for Four Hundred Years, 1590–1990} (Dallas, 1989), 119–130; Ruthe Weingarten and Cathy Schechter, \textit{Deep in the Heart: The Lives & Legends of Texas Jews: A Photographic History} (Austin, Tex., 1990), 84–85. Funded by New York financier Jacob Schiff, the Galveston Movement existed largely due to the leadership and commitment of Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston’s Congregation B’nai Israel. The goal of dispersing the new arrivals was partly humanitarian, to avoid an impoverished urban ghetto, but it also achieved distance between the largely Russian and Orthodox newcomers and the German Reform Jews of Galveston. Rabbi Cohen arrived in Galveston in 1888 and stayed in Texas until his death in 1952; he was a renowned humanitarian. In the interest of full disclosure, in 1962 I won the annual essay contest that honors his memory. For more on Rabbi Cohen, see Anne Nathan and Harry I. Cohen, \textit{The Man Who Stayed in Texas} (New York, 1941).

\textsuperscript{22} Juneteenth, which commemorates the emancipation of Texas slaves, has particular resonance for the Galveston African American community. On June 19, 1865, Union troops landed at Galveston and issued General Order No. 3, which ended slavery in Texas. See Quintard Taylor, \textit{In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West} (New York, 1997), 61. As a child, I noticed gatherings of African Americans along the Galveston beachfront each June, but I was an adult before I had any idea why they had gathered or what they were celebrating.
Perceptive readers might notice that I am now ten pages into this essay and have not really gotten out of U.S. history. Readers who are not from the United States may have noticed I’ve been using symbols and stories that exclude you—using Stephen F. Austin, Booker T. Washington, Juneteenth, and Cinco de Mayo, for instance, to represent larger histories. Readers who live outside the United States are more likely, however, to know these references than most Americans are to recognize the resonances of Vimy Ridge, Batoche, Acoma, the Cypress Hills, Obregón, or la Malinche. One huge challenge of the borderlands is recognizing the categories and terrains of exclusion within national histories and between them.

I have, in fact, as I fear Canadian readers may perceive, been writing a very American essay: egocentric, self-referential, and self-revealing. That judgment, by the way, would be very Canadian. Borderlands histories demand that we risk learning how our nations and our comfort zones of behavior appear from the other side of a border.

I began with my dad’s story for several reasons. The first was rhetorical: I used it to claim my family’s ties to Canada, although in truth they became important to me only after I began to wrestle with my links to two nations. My identities were learned, not encoded in genetic maps of my ancestors’ migrations. The second reason is partly personal: Since I crossed the border, I’ve thought a lot about my grandmother, about what it meant to her to live and work and raise her kids so far from England. I’ve thought about the subtle processes by which we learn another culture, history, maybe a more multi-valent identity; about how crossing borders changes how we see the past. And I used this story to play with how people and their stories can be connected to histories, or separated from them.

My family crossed national borders. So did the people whose histories I recorded in Cripple Creek, like May Wing, whose family odyssey led from Ireland to Wales, to Wisconsin, Colorado, British Columbia, and back to Colorado. So did Rachel Calof, whose memoir has engaged me for some time, who moved from Russia to North Dakota in 1894. Some of the extended Calof clan moved to Winnipeg; I know some of their descendants in Calgary. As they


moved, people built movements and institutions: Labor unions, religious organizations, agrarian movements, and fraternal lodges, for instance, all crossed the 49th parallel. Mutualistas and some of the same labor unions crossed the United States-Mexico border.25

Yet for much of my life I lost focus at the U.S. border: People moved to the margins of my attention as they left the history I knew. I don’t know if this is particular to me or particularly American. I suspect it may be similar to how some of my colleagues lose focus on women or people of color as their stories cross over the boundaries of regional or national histories or the categories of public and political power that those histories privilege. It is costly not to cross those borders. Without crossing them, I cannot connect Coxey’s Army and the On to Ottawa Band; nor Western Federation of Miners’ locals in Cripple Creek, Rossland, Cananea, and Anaconda; nor the Seattle and Winnipeg general strikes; Ludlow and Mackenzie King; Coronado, David Thompson, and Lewis and Clark, much less Sacagawea, Charlotte Thompson, and Malintzin Tenépal, who played similar roles in three national histories.26 Without crossing borders, I can’t connect my story with my grandfather’s.

If my childhood history classes did not prepare me for the racialized complexities of the social borderlands I inhabited, if they did not prepare me to locate my Mexican or African American neighbors in history, or myself for that matter, they prepared me even less to cross the border into Canada. For that, my best preparation was a joke.27 It begins with a question:

25. Which organizations and associations do and do not cross borders is a subtle matter. For instance, the Western Federation of Miners (1893–1916), later the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (1916–1967), had local unions in Mexico, the United States, and Canada, but different ethnic groups were admitted to or excluded from local unions in different localities. The Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Knights of Columbus were more common sites of Irish association in the United States, while the Orange Order was more common in Canada; as in Ireland, the Orange Order is primarily Protestant.

26. This is an admittedly idiosyncratic set of examples, rooted in my own research interests. It is clear that people and ideas crossed borders to connect the social movements and strikes listed. William Lion Mackenzie King, later the Prime Minister of Canada, advised John D. Rockefeller and helped devise the plan for company unions implemented following the Ludlow strike. Sacagawea (who guided Lewis and Clark on their westward journey), Charlotte Thompson (wife of explorer David Thompson), and Malintzin Tenépal (Hernán Cortes’s interpreter and the mother of his son) all occupy similar places in their respective national histories, as Native women who assisted European/European American explorers and ultimately helped them claim Native territory.

27. I am grateful to my colleague Jeremy Mouat for teaching me this joke and much else about the subtleties of cross-border communication.
Question: What is the difference between an American and a Canadian?

Answer: The Canadian knows there is a difference.

My childhood taught me about social boundaries that marked inequalities of race or class. These were less apparent to me as I crossed the Canadian border, but other boundaries and differences emerged, as the joke suggests. Ninety percent of Canadians live within 200 miles of the border; the United States looms larger there than Canada does in the U.S. imagination. Canadian televisions are saturated with U.S. programming. In Calgary my basic cable package includes the local Spokane and Coeur d'Alene stations. I get CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, CNN, TSN, and ESPN, as well as Canadian networks. When I asked colleagues who live in the Canada-United States borderlands about their television coverage, an interesting—if predictable—pattern emerged. I watch Canadian, U.S., and British newscasts. Susan Armitage, however, whose nightly local newscasts beam into my living room, does not get Canadian television in Pullman, Washington; Howard Shorr does not get it in Portland, Oregon. According to Chris Friday and Cecilia Danysk, Bellingham, Washington, just south of the border, seems to be a minor exception: Cable coverage from Seattle does not include Canadian stations, but local radio gets Vancouver and Victoria stations that carry English, French, and Cantonese programming. On local TV, without cable, they “ONLY get Canadian stations and one local station which always gives the weather in BC in centigrade!” Jean Barman reports that in Vancouver, just north of the border, she gets ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS from Seattle; UPN and FOX from Tacoma; the local Bellingham station; and that with cable it is also possible to get Detroit PBS, A&E, CNN, and WTBS from Atlanta. Catherine Cavanaugh notes that Edmonton gets the same stations as Calgary, plus Detroit PBS.28

If the U.S. airwaves erase Canada, Canadians get a distorted

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28. Quote from Chris Friday, private communication. Thanks to Sheila McManus (Lethbridge, Alberta), Catherine Cavanaugh (Edmonton, Alberta), Jean Barman (Vancouver, British Columbia), Cecilia Danysk and Chris Friday (Bellingham, Washington), Susan Armitage (Pullman, Washington), and Howard Shorr (Portland, Oregon) for private communications regarding their respective local TV stations. Based on this limited sample, it appears that U.S. viewers get Canadian television only if they live within range of Canadian stations, a relatively rare situation, but Canadian cable packages regularly include U.S. networks.
picture of the United States—according-to-CNN. And if U.S. airwaves regularly cross national borders, U.S. histories do so mostly to cover wars—mostly those in which the United States has participated. It has been even easier for American histories to erase Canada than Mexico, perhaps because the Mexican border was secured by warfare and the Canadian border through treaties. From a U.S. perspective, the Mexican border became a racialized line that drew differences in skin color and language; the Canadian border became an imagined zone of similarity, touted as the longest undefended border in the world. My grandparents’ fears notwithstanding, the United States did not deploy a border patrol along the St. Lawrence in 1924 to keep out an imagined invasion of illegal immigrants as it did along the Mexican border. It did not deport Canadians in the 1930s, as it did Mexicans and their American-born children.29

Yet from 1850 into 1970, Canadians outnumbered Mexicanos among foreign-born people living in the United States. Mexican-born migrants did not pass them until 1980.30 My point here is not whose group was bigger but that size does not matter. Perceptions of threat were economic, racialized, and historically constructed; they had little to do with numbers. Anglo Canadians, by virtue of race and language, “pass” in the United States—far better than Americans do in Canada. Few U.S. viewers have marked the nationality of journalists like Peter Jennings, Morley Safer, John Roberts, or


30. Canada’s rank among the foreign-born population in the United States as reported on the decennial U.S. census varied between third and fourth from 1850–1980; Mexico ranked roughly seventh or eighth numerically until 1970, when it moved to fourth (Canada was third); in 1980 Mexico moved to first place and stayed there through 2000. Canada’s third-fourth place ranking held until 2000, when an influx of Chinese, Filipinos, Indians, Cubans, Vietnamese, Salvadorans, Koreans, and Dominicans reconfigured the foreign-born population and dropped Canada to tenth place. The “Mexican” ranking among the foreign-born, however, from 1850 through much of the nineteenth century, discounts many ethnic Mexicans born in Mexico, whose birthplaces became “United States” after the Mexican-American War. See “Countries of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population, 1850–2000 (resident population),” http://infoplease.com/ipa/A09900547.html.
Kevin Newman, nor have they feared the foreign slant they may give the news.\textsuperscript{31} Few have feared the cultural imperialism of William Shatner, Mary Pickford, Kiefer Sutherland, Faye Wray, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Celine Dion, Dan Ackroyd, Norman Jewison, or Michael J. Fox. But Canadians do notice that the border that was supposed to contain U.S. imperial designs has been less successful keeping Canadians in. As Charles Dickie, the Member of Parliament from Nanaimo, moaned in 1928: “we are losing the cream of our population.”\textsuperscript{32} The song for this dance comes from the late Canadian singer and songwriter, Stan Rogers:

California! My friends all call you home,
And if you take away another, I’ll be that much more alone . . . .
But can I once taste Northern waters, then forsake them for the South
To feel California’s ashes in my mouth\textsuperscript{33}

Ashes of another kind stuck in my throat the morning of September 12, 2001, as I scanned my lecture notes for a class I co-taught with Sarah Carter on the “Comparative History of the U.S. and Canadian Wests.” On September 12 I was to talk about “Mythic Wests and National Histories.” I had intended to contrast Turner with Harold Innis, who located change not on the edges of advancing frontiers but in distant metropoles that developed staple resources like furs, lumber, minerals, and fish, and with George F. G. Stanley, whose mythic Canadian narrative of western settlement separated a peaceful and orderly Canadian West from the violent individualism of U.S. frontiers. Stanley’s kinder, gentler West arrived as the North West Mounted Police marched west from Manitoba in 1874 to protect the prairies from the Métis, First Nations, and lawless U.S. whiskey traders.\textsuperscript{34} I intended, too, much as I have here, to talk about how the United States racialized its border with Mexico but imag-

\textsuperscript{32} Lines, British and Canadian Immigration to the United States, 58–59, 57–69.
\textsuperscript{33} Stan Rogers, “California,” Northwest Passage, copyright 1980, Fogarty’s Cove Music, PROC. Thanks to Ariel Rogers for permission to quote.
ined whiteness and sameness along the 49th parallel. As I distractedly reviewed my notes, a CNN newscaster speculated that the flights that leveled the Twin Towers originated in Boston and Portland, Maine, because dark-skinned terrorists could sneak across the border from Canada. I somehow got through a shaky lecture, ending with the implications of that newscast: Borders and borderlands are historically constructed; their meanings change. Whatever I thought I knew about borders and their meanings was shifting around us as I spoke.

The fault lines had long been evident, as a brief perusal of the *Calgary Herald* revealed. For six months before 9/11 and a year afterwards, most border-related stories concerned security and business. The constant lurking subtext pulled tensely between Canadian sovereignty and economic ties to the United States. And already before 9/11 the news had begun to racialize the border. Pre-9/11 coverage of border security dealt with terrorism, political protest, and immigration. Terrorist coverage focused on Ahmed Ressam, who had been denied Canadian refugee status and was arrested in Port Angeles, Washington, on December 14, 1999, trying to smuggle explosives into the United States. Convicted of terrorist conspiracy, Ressam’s case resonated even more ominously after 9/11.

The threat of illegal immigrants was doubly racialized: in terms of the immigrants themselves and in terms of potential points of entry. Amid U.S. charges that illegal aliens were sneaking in through Canada, the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) insisted that the traffic worked both ways, that humans “surpassed tobacco and alcohol as the contraband of choice being smuggled into Canada from the United States,” and that East Asians preferred the United States while most Pakistanis and Middle Easterners chose Canada. The RCMP suggested that the Mohawk reserve spanning Quebec, Ontario, and New York was a prime smuggling site.

35. This discussion is based on ninety-five articles in the *Calgary Herald* from March 11, 2001, through September 11, 2002, that mentioned the U.S.-Canada border. I am grateful to Timothy J. G. Cole for assistance with the newspaper research.

36. Of the ninety-five articles, forty-five dealt with border security, twelve with cross-border political protest, and thirty-one with business and trade.


The main security issue immediately before 9/11, however, was protesters from the United States bound for the April Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec. Again, it was feared that “native communities on the Canada-U.S. border support the smuggling of summit protesters,” 300 of whom, trying to enter Canada at the Seaway International Bridge in Mohawk territory, met “a gauntlet of more than 100 law enforcement officers.” At the Peace Arch crossing south of Vancouver, however, far from Quebec and still racialized as white and open, U.S. and Canadian police closed the border to ensure “the safe movement” of some 2,000 protesters.

One other pre-9/11 story briefly illuminated the equally racialized borderland that divided the Blackfoot Confederacy into Montana and Alberta tribes when Britain and the United States drew the border in 1818. Claiming that Canadian and U.S. customs officials defiled their sacred bundles, seized sacred objects, and mistook sweetgrass for marijuana, Piegan spokesman Edwin Small Legs said, “We want our own border crossing and our people working there from both sides of the nation.” Canada Customs and Revenue replied that officials were trained to respect Native religious artifacts “when conducting routine inspections.”

In these contexts, U.S. Ambassador Paul Celucci advocated immigration “harmonization” to create a continental security perimeter, a “NAFTA plus” approach to “harmonize trade, immigration, and security policies between Canada and the U.S., and perhaps eventually Mexico.” This raised predictable fears, expressed in one op-ed headline: “Erasing borders with U.S. will erase Canada from map.” This piece invoked a long history of Canadian resistance to U.S. hegemony, dating from Confederation in 1867, the defeat of “the Liberal push for commercial union with the U.S. in 1891,” and the “proposed Canada-U.S. free trade agreement in 1911.”

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As luck would have it, Ambassador Celucci addressed the Tri-Lateral Business Leaders Conference at the Calgary Chamber of Commerce the night of September 10, 2001. The headline on September 11 announced, “Ambassador urges more open border.” The same day, the Herald’s Ottawa correspondent predicted:

Entire forests will fall to document the ramifications of this day on U.S. economic and political relations, but it’s clear Canada’s interconnected economy will suffer as the U.S. shrinkwraps into an angry, protective shell in response to the attack.

Recent talk of relaxing or eliminating our border suddenly sounds a lot more farfetched.

In the immediate aftermath, the United States reported that five terrorists had entered the country from Quebec and Nova Scotia. North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan complained that nothing but orange traffic cones stopped people after 10 p.m. at fifteen border crossings into his state. Washington Senator Patty Murray claimed that some of the nineteen terrorists the FBI connected to the attacks entered the United States from Canada. Fear and blame reverberated along the 49th parallel long after we knew that the terrorists entered through the United States.

As the border was reconstructed, officials struggled to contain a racialized threat but still promote trade. That economic border,

too, was only selectively permeable: the United States fenced out Canadian softwood lumber, Alberta beef, and Prince Edward Island potatoes; the Canada Wheat Board prosecuted prairie farmers for selling grain across the border at U.S. prices. As the National Guard patrolled the U.S. side, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services announced: “U.S. border officials are cracking down harder than their Canadian counterparts, but that’s because the United States has far more enemies than Canada.”

As I write this, latter-day rogue Minutemen patrol the Arizona desert and are expanding into California, Texas, and New Mexico. The Minutemen predict that “Historians will write about how a lax America let its unique and coveted form of government and society sink into a quagmire of mutual acrimony among the variant sub-nations that will comprise the new self-destructing America.” And the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps has announced on its website that “activated volunteers on the northern border with Canada—Maine, Vermont, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Idaho, and Washington State” are “creating new operations, this is truly an exciting time for Patriots!” From Mexico, La Jornada simply called these “patriots” “la organización racista.”


Challenges and Promises of Borderlands

I tell this to suggest the very real challenges of today’s borderlands. One urgent pull to imagine transnational histories is that we do not have histories to help us grapple with the transnational present. Terrorists may attack nations, but they are not contained within them. Nor are greenhouse gases, NAFTA, CAFTA, the EU, capital flight, hurricanes, global warming, job outsourcing, or AIDS. It is hard to deal with issues that we cannot locate in recognizable frameworks and narratives. Without stories that cross national and social divides, it is hard to recognize humanity across those borders or to imagine a connected future. Histories that patrol national borders serve us no better than my childhood histories that drew color lines.

A second reason to pursue transnational histories is to connect ourselves both to our pasts and to futures in which we embody multiple identities. I left Canada to attend the PCB-AHA conference through the U.S. Department of Customs and Border Security; I entered on my U.S. passport. I returned to Canada on my permanent resident card. My roots reach to Russia, Poland, Germany, England, and the United States. I could, if I wished, hold citizenship in the United States, Canada, Israel, and England. The same hungers that drew me to women’s histories and the histories of the people I grew up with pull me to the borderlands of North America and to a North American history that began long before European empires.

Colonial and nationalist roots shaped the frontiers and borders of the national histories I learned in school, and those frameworks affected the efforts to imagine more inclusive frontiers and borderlands. Herbert Eugene Bolton, who founded the U.S. school of borderlands history, defined his Spanish borderland in 1921 as the U.S. territory that had once been colonial New Spain. Bolton’s borderland did not cross the Mexican border. Turner’s frontiers marked the westward edges of what he called “the colonization of the Great West.” Addressing the racist assumptions of those frontiers in comparative contexts, Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson reconceived frontiers in 1981 as multiracial encounters between indigenous people and intruders. Rather than a line or boundary, a frontier became “a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies.” But it began when “the first representatives of the intrusive society” arrived and ended “when a single political authority... established hegemony over the zone.”

The boundaries of the nation receded in new social histories that foregrounded relationships of race and gender, focused on intimacy and the agency of Native people, and that sometimes crossed the divides between colonial and national timelines. Sylvia Van Kirk, Sarah Deutsch, Peggy Pascoe, Albert Hurtado, Sarah Carter, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, all opened the human meanings of these borderlands for me: the relationships that reveal human agency and its limits, the private arenas where cultures are transformed, the intimate borderlands where new people were born who embodied difference in new ways. It has proved difficult to maintain the focus on agency, intimacy, private life, and human exchange after national borders were drawn and the narratives shifted to state-focused histories. The difference between seeing these borderlands in human terms and nationalizing ones is summed in a brief contrast. Anzaldúa, wrestling with her embodied legacy, wrote:

To survive in the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.

Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, in contrast, writing within national and imperial frameworks, projected borderlands that ended in the nineteenth century with the formation of nation states that turned “borderlands into bordered lands.” These borderlands


could not bridge colonial and national histories or embrace the post-colonial agency of people born there of brutal and tender intimacies, who, in borderland-to-nation frameworks, became one of the “hybrid residuals” of frontier encounters.55

* * *

My urgent hope is that our borderlands may help us imagine histories to ground more inclusive, egalitarian, and mutually respectful futures. The borders we patrol and the borderlands of national identities are in enormous flux. This moment contains both intense nationalisms and fragile recognitions of interdependent global economies, ecologies, migrations, and politics, of connections to honor and differences to respect.

Richard White recently asked rhetorically, “Is There a North American History?”56 He answered that, “Ultimately, it is difficult to write a history of North America if there is no common North American identity” as there is in Europe.57 To the extent that there is a shared European identity, historians helped construct it. However difficult, the challenge of borderlands histories is not just to find identity and connection, but to explain difference, distrust, and disconnection. There is no particular reason that histories must tell stories of composite identities. They can chronicle relationships of domination and inequality and can illuminate cataclysmic disconnects, like those between the histories of Native North Americans and those of European conquest. Transnational histories will not serve us well if we simply debate whether to draw our borders at the Rio Grande and 49th parallel, or around the continental perimeter, if they erase social and national boundaries rather than illuminate them.

It is challenging to write histories that connect people who know each other so little—challenging both conceptually and practically. States, after all, fund history programs, and the furor over the new social history in both the United States and Canada is sobering


57. Ibid., 24.
for the resistance transnational histories will face. Yet transnational histories are not non-national histories. As my father’s border crossing, the Blackfoot Confederacy’s religious objects, and the Minutemen all testify, national histories patrol real borders that construct real power.

So what may help us on these intriguing journeys? Let me borrow the wonderful image from the 2005 program theme to suggest some steps that might help us dance on these rims. We might imagine the dance hall, a stage where lots of people are dancing, but the spotlight has been on one national dance and only on the folks who lead it. Our task is to refocus and to imagine dancing in the same space with the indigenous people on stage left, the nations dancing next to us, the women in the corner, the newcomers waiting shyly by themselves—to combine fandangos, waltzes, jigs, horas, tangos, polkas, jitterbug, and hip hop, all without stepping on one another’s toes. As a beginning, I offer eight not-so-easy rules for dancing in the borderlands:

1. Dance the first dance with the ones that brung you (as we’d say in Texas). Root yourself in the histories of where you stand and where you come from. Notice who is not there and whose stories are missing.

2. Learn the tunes before you dance. Ground yourself in the histories of all sides of the borders you’re crossing. Don’t assume that the same notes, scales, or rhythms work on both sides of a border.

3. Dance where they do the dance you want to learn. To borrow from Matt Garcia’s A World of Its Own, we might dance at the Rainbow Gardens to learn Latino dances, or go to the El Monte American Legion Dance Hall to learn how a shared teen culture connected white, Mexican American, black, and Asian Pacific Islanders. The borders we cross and the arenas we dance in should fit our questions.


4. *Not everyone dances to the national anthem.* Dancing to a bagpipe or to the Marine Corps band may not be the best way to approach borderlands where people move to salsa, blues, hip hop, or a sacred Sun Dance.

5. *Evade the chaperones*—the ones who tell you that you’ll betray the family if you dance with a stranger, that you’re too old to learn new steps or new stories, that you can’t cross disciplinary boundaries or use non-traditional sources. You know who they are. Give them the slip.

6. *Just because you dance with someone doesn’t mean you’ll go home with them.* People may work or dance in the borderlands, but few people live there or intermarry. If 10 percent of the world’s people crossed national borders between 1830 and 1930, 90 percent did not, and border crossing itself is hard to measure in a century when many borders were drawn, including those that divided North America into nation states. A danger of multicultural histories has been seeing people of color as important only in relationship to white people. Don’t repeat the same mistake with people of other nations.

7. *If you usually lead, try following.* People whose job in the dance is to follow often know all the parts better than those who lead—they have to psych what the leaders are going to do if they don’t want to get trampled. To really enter the borderlands is to give up histories based in imperial, national, or public power, in androcentric or racialized categories—to imagine, as Susan Johnson eloquently urged us, a history in which we can disconnect difference from domination.

8. *Dance with a buddy.* Better yet, dance with lots of buddies. The only way to learn when your steps are invading someone else’s comfort zone is to risk dancing with them. And for those of us trained in national histories, there is too much to learn to do it alone. The borderlands are about relationships and conversations, some not yet begun. They are best explored collaboratively.

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61. I have learned the value of collaborative work from some class collaborators. I thank the Learned Society of Calgary for making the dance fun; Lori Lahlum for sharing her Norwegian expertise and sources; and Sheila McManus, Sarah Carter, Sue Armitage, and Jeremy Mouat for being great dance partners.
We are dancing into unfamiliar territory. Most of our ancestors
did, too, and for similar reasons: so that their children might have
better futures. Dance lightly. There are lots of unmined stories in
the spaces between our rims, and lots of minefields as well: mine-
fields of national frameworks, national borders that constrict our
vision, unexamined assumptions, unfamiliar languages, unequal
power, and unshared memories. Let’s dance through them. We
could learn new ways to move as we dance these rims together.