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Cover: Jameel Hassan
Citizen’s Arrest, 1993.
Photo by William W. Wilson.

Inside front cover: Jameel Hassan

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Borders and Fragments

As the Canadian state lurches through intensifying crises, this collection of fifty-nine short essays, on the cusp of politics and cultural studies, covers some of the more neglected strands of thought on identity, place, community, and collectivity. This is an anthology about the margins of Canada, but the vision of loosely connected fragments begins to suggest one of the more democratic futures that may still be possible.

Unfortunately, Canada's more a map of the disintegration of the monocultural state and cultural apparatus with few clues to the authentic, “empowerment” of local communities and artists. Canada is a bumpy ride and its uneven articulations remind us that the only thing that came close to replacing, outright, the “continuity” of colonialism was the welfare state, which is now being dismantled. The “oppressed” are still struggling to communicate with each other. Unfortunately, the rhetorical and almost “tribal” nature of many of the perspectives in Canada does much to explain why what remains of the anticolonial Left and even the environmental movements has been so weak in advancing new visions of what is for today, at least, still called Canada.

Canada is an extremely important book and should be key reading for the coming year. It is the first anthology in years that considers the future of the country, both culturally and politically, from the radical margins. After this read, it will be more difficult to use the adjective “Canadian,” without a few additional qualifications.

Canada is carefully organized with a progression of sectors entitled: “stations,” “tracks,” “switches,” “monitors,” and “signs.” In “stations,” Canada is first defined in terms of federal borders and then broken down by particular landscapes and cultures. Just about everyone’s experience, therefore, is on multiple edges. This inherent fragmentation, a far cry from Ian Clark’s deceivingly cheery “community of communities,” becomes a device for unravelling myths of place, culture, and relationships to the Canadian state. The ineffectuality and contentiousness of the state’s controls become one of the few unifying themes in Canada. Lorne Folk seems the paradox of living in southern Canada and on the edges of divergent communities and produces:

"Border culture includes a deep fear, the fear of being seen / caught / asked for identification. It also creates a space for resistance to this fear... Border culture is a strategy, a strategy for facing the fear... the border prism represents the symbolic vision of a territorialized world..."

Joyce deGrafton deconstructs the use of satellite imagery of Canada and its role in supporting the myth of a “universally shared experience.” Tony Hall’s “Many Nations, Few States” examines the state, technology, and the control of aboriginal peoples through genocide in the guise of “standardization.” Anthony Wilden then provides a powerful framework for identifying the mechanisms of white, and in particular Anglo-French, supremacy. Pierre Vallières, of CIJO days and the author of Nègres blancs d'Amérique, then replicates some of the more simplistic forms of Quebec nationalism. Unfortunately, the overall discussion of Quebec and related francophone questions is the weakest of the book’s central narratives. The editors symmetrically reduce Quebec nationalism to a branch of white domination, thus conveniently leaving it, at a time when more lucid perspectives are desperately needed.

It is in the “tracks” section that the specific linkages among colonialism, assaults on aboriginal communities, and environmental destruction begin to be articulated. Scott Watson’s “Race, Wilderness, Territory and the Origins of Modern Canadian Landscape Painting” on the Group of Seven, is, unfortunately, only a recap of twenty years of discussion of the notion of wilderness as monocultural device. But what follows are some exceptionally well-crafted essays such as that by Lon Cahoway which powerfully describes the destructive impacts of clearcut logging on the central mountains of the British Columbia coast. Lorraine Gilbert's beautifully stark photographs of clearcuts, remnants of forest fires, and tree planters pro-
video crucial visual evidence. But the credibility of the environmentalist strand falls down with the chilling psychobabble of "In Defense of Tree-Spiking" by "Captain Paul Watson" with his pathetic rationalizing for a highly dangerous and divisive practice that has been roundly denounced by activists. Similarly, Jon Campbell's chronicle of the 1982-83 escapades of the Vancouver-based Direct Action, including the bombing of Litton Systems in Toronto, is disturbingly revisionist given the lack of actual support that there was from activist groups for that violence. The almost obligatory rap on ecocentrism by Tom Allen fails to provide a basis for situating either that "critique" or the resulting activism in the context of anywhere in Canada.

Canada is most powerful in considering the ongoing implications of genocide against First Nations and in looking at gender. Marc Dozière offers the beginning of a framework for analyzing the "power politics" of Hydro-Quebec: in James Bay and there is an interview with Alberta "militant" Milton Born With a Tooth. What follows are two disappointingly brief accounts of the struggles at Oka. The articles on sexuality and censorship are some of the most compelling in Canada, particularly Jacques Babin's account of the Butler Decision and Canada Customs seizures, Manika Gagnon's examination of public narratives of violence against women, Thomas Haig's thoughtful look at queerness in the CBC television program, "Kids in the Hall," and Julienne Filous's chronicle of the formation of "anarchist" "newwave-queer" alliances in Montreal.

The final section of Canada is scattered, but contains good pieces on language and minority cultures by Susanne du Lothaire-Harwood and Herménégilde Chiasson. There is a whimsical account of the post-nationalist tactics of "La Patata Global." The last word from the editors is an imaginary and somewhat cynical "message from the CIA concerning the possible breakup of Canada," ending with "everything is going to work out just fine." In Canada we are left with a bleak ideological and cultural landscape littered with disintegrating artifacts. Hopefully, these classics can lead us to something far more authentic and sustainable than a neocolonial federation and phony government-manipulated versions of multiculturalism. But Canada will show that the persistent contradictions and conflicts, indeed the obstacles to articulate points of collectivity, run as deep as the possibilities for new forms of cultural and political alliances.

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An Alternative View

Look at it this way: It's the American counter-culture's equivalent of "Playboy" presents the 'girls' of Ontario" or The Wall Street Journal nosed around in Canada's wallet. Or, a bit more flatteringly, it's Peter Jennings or Lorne Greene doing American TV; ditto Kids in the Hall and k.d. lang. Like it or not we're going international in one of a series of (anti)national texts (e.g. Soviet文本, Sozialtexte, U.S.A, etc.) brought to them (mostly "them," the readers out there beyond our borders) by the gang out of 322 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, N.Y., N.Y. "U.S.A., the Evil Empire." Does that final self-indulgent disclaimer allay our anxieties? It's O.K., those of us suspicious of American packaging reassure ourselves: the editor of Canada planted trees for us, got cold hanging out on our terrain. He goes Northrop Frye his curtain call to be read as "I grow old, I grow old, I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled (above my Oxford shoes made perhaps by Bata Canada)." He also gives us our major cultural spokespersons: Joyce Nelson, Arthur Kroeker, Anthony Widen, Jody Berland. We're written as the many-faceted refusal of monolithic nationalism. We're queer, native and multi-lingual. We're pathophysicians, Lucarians and activists. Canada is a mirror in which borders line and Border/Lines people will more or less recognize themselves. Very good... except we've seen the images before: in Canada's alternative magazines.

Stan Fopol