

JUSTINE LLOYD

## cultural politics on the nation's **fault** lines

CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH (ED.)

*Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital and  
Citizenship at US Borders*

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Here in Australia, busily going about our electronically enhanced lives, happily participating in the transnational knowledge economy, there's this odd thing that other people keep bumping into. It's sticky and slow like flypaper, and it's apparently very far away to our north. It needs much attention from our defence and immigration agencies, yet we have excised it from our national territory. As a nation coextensive with an island continent, Australia has an easily identifiable geographic border, but the political and economic aspects of national territory are often literally at sea (or up in the air). Borders materialise in our lives at the most banal moments: passing through the 'nothing to declare' aisle at airport customs control, showing your passport at the duty-free bottle shop, and filling out the immigration card while watching the in-flight video about keeping out suspect fruit and vegetables. As Indian media activist Shuddhabrata Sengupta has written, 'It doesn't matter in which city, continent or country you are in, the border seeks you out in the end.'<sup>1</sup>

Working within a sub-discipline that might be termed 'Border studies after NAFTA',<sup>2</sup> *Globalization on the Line* takes the trope of the border into interesting new territory. Rather than abandoning borders as a sign of repressive state policies (as has been the tendency in Australian responses to 'border protection') the collection as a whole engages with the material facts of the border as marker of social and political differences that have not disappeared in the wake of free trade. Sadowski-Smith's editorial introduction, titled 'Border Studies, Diaspora and Theories of Globalization', deftly sets up the questions that the essays traverse. She locates

the essays as moving 'beyond [a] view of globalization and nation-states as two separate and opposed domains of theorization and politics, which has been essential to the neo-liberal, predictive rhetoric about globalization'. (3) She has assembled a salient collection of essays that, from a US perspective, perceive 'borderlands as sites where conflicts between oppressive structures of the nation-state and globalization, on the one hand, and emerging alternative notions of societal membership, on the other, are currently being re-articulated in a variety of oppositional forms and strategies'. All the essays temper this optimistic focus on the resistant possibilities of border subjects by refusing to invoke 'borderlessness' and cultural hybridity as forms of transgression.

The collection lives up to its title, successfully integrating analysis of diasporic flows and cultural production with precisely argued and accessible histories of US trade and immigration policy. The usual site of border studies, the US–Mexico border, is taken as the starting point for a comparative project, particularly of encounters between USA and Canada. As Sadowski-Smith comments, however, the US–Canada border was relatively unmarked until it was used as an entry point by the prospective terrorists of September 11, and (apart from three other essays, including her own, in this collection) has not been a site of critical interest to cultural studies scholars.

Starting off the first section titled 'Border Theories', and one of the few essays on the USA's border 'above', rather than 'below', Bryce Traister's 'Border Shopping: American Studies and the Anti-Nation' opens up the question of how US economic policy affects and effects forms

of consumption across and through the US–Canada border. In a phrase that resonates with our antipodean situation, he holds out for an understanding of 'national identity that is distinct from the emptied versions of the nation urged by post-nationalist and globalist ideologies alike'. (46) Noting that sixty per cent of Canada's population lives within two hundred kilometres of the USA—therefore 'the entire nation of Canada may be regarded as "borderland"' (36)—Traister's article unpacks the many ways that the Canadian citizenry are constructed as 'American subjects' when they seek out tax-free goods and services across this deregulated border, including, most recently, health care. This 'imitative or iterative' identity sits uneasily with claims from within America to be 'post-national', (39) that is, to dispense with national sovereignty precisely because such an identity articulates a distinctively US legal and political system. He finds that this phenomenon challenges the recent exhortations of American cultural studies to 'give up' the nation, and therefore the border 'as a site of national differentiation'. Instead, he argues for keeping the border as a way of 'containing the United States within the limits of its own boundaries and of forcing the expanding and increasingly corporate US imperialism to stand in the light of recognition'. (43) He describes this 'other' of the nation as a 'post-nationalist borderlands sublime'. (45)

Manuel Luis Martinez's essay 'Telling the Difference between the Border and Borderlands: Materiality and Theoretical Practice' and Sadowski-Smith's 'Reading across Diaspora: Chinese and Mexican Undocumented Immigration across US Land Borders' both relativise the post-national

obsession with border transgression. Martinez demonstrates how Hispanic 'guest workers' seek to 'arrive' at a place of stability and 'deploy their full civil rights within a responsive public sphere' in the act of migration. (54) Sadowski-Smith provides a history of 'illegal' migration into the USA across both its northern and southern borders in the context of 'contradictory conditions of border enforcement and border-free economics'. (88) Also unravelling this sublime 'beyond' of national identity with visible and tangible elements, Ursula Biemann's account of her video essay 'Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies and Technology', is a fascinating take on the social and physical location of women's bodies in the transnational economy. The subject of her provocative and self-reflexive essay is how the figure of the *maquila* (a female worker in assembly plants which serve US-based companies) is imbricated within the global communications economy and within the *maquiladora* town of Ciudad Juárez, just across the Rio Grande from El Paso. Since 1993, more than three hundred of these women, mostly internal migrants living in shantytowns without basic services or public transport, have been raped and murdered in Juárez, and Biemann provides a reading of this tragedy by linking it to shifts in global capitalism and industrialisation. (She does not mention one important connection between the killings and such changes, however, which is the possible common thread of labour activism among the murdered women.)

Similarly, the other two sections of the book, titled 'Border Communities' and 'Border Alliances', provide case studies of the US–Mexico border as instances of 'globalization from be-

low', with articles on the distribution and reception of US-originated cinema in Mexico and of Hispanic TV in the USA, public art projects in squatter communities in Tijuana, and eco-cultural movements on the borderlands between Mexico and Arizona/New Mexico. Donald A. Grinde Jr's (Yamasee) chronicle of past and continued negotiations and transgressions of the US–Canada border by Native peoples in the Iroquois homelands around Lake Ontario further complicates any understanding of teleological movement of globalisation from first-national to post-national subjects.

All the essays are ultimately humanist in their aims; their arguments affirm the intensification of communal and civil society against evacuations of the state from the social contract (as discussed by Traister). They demonstrate a sense of the multiplicity of the ways in which the border persistently finds its way into our lives. Taken together, the collection is a demonstration of the significance and potential of cultural studies and its practice if it looks at the category of the national in an extroverted way: despite all efforts to the contrary, ideas, thoughts, stories and images can and do cross the most well-policed border and in ways unpredictable and uncanny.

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<<http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au>>

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1. Shuddhabrata Sengupta, 'Borders: Walking Across, as Opposed to Flying Above', in C. Plate (ed.), *Borderpanic Reader*, ANAT in association with the Performance Space, Sydney, 2002, p. 18. Sengupta was a participant in a recent meeting of border activists in Sydney, which is documented in this reader. See also <<http://www.borderpanic.org>>.
2. The 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement did away with trade tariffs between Mexico, the USA and Canada.