



# THE CANADA-US BORDER

## The International Boundary as Continental Cross-Section

From the northernmost shores of the Arctic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, the combined area of Canada and the United States covers over 7.5 million square miles (or more than 19.5 million square kilometers). To begin to grasp it in any manner, one needs a method that simultaneously considers it as a single landmass while taking seriously the diversity of places in its geographical expanse. One time-tested approach to understanding any landscape is to take a cross-section of it. The east-west orientation of the Canada-US border passes through a variety of terrain, reflecting a great deal of regional variation, from the continental geomorphology to the ecosystems and human cultures that define its surface. In contrast to the east-west border, the basal substrata generally follow north-south orientations, from the Appalachian Highlands to the Canadian Shield to the Interior Plains and all the way to the Western Cordillera, which stretches from Alaska to Southern Mexico. Although grave in its implications, the recent increase in political tension between the US and Canada also offers a renewed opportunity to recognize how these two sovereign countries are linked together in their politics, economics, histories, cultures, environments, and, in a very literal way, their geographies. With that in mind, a study of the Canada-US border as a cross-section can illuminate the many regions of the continent as well as the finer grain of vernacular landscapes that exist along the deceptively simple lines that largely follow the forty-fifth and forty-ninth parallels. These different scales—from large to small, from the continental to the local—would ideally be seen not in competition with one another

*Nathaniel R. Racine*  
Texas A&M  
International University, USA  
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1431-8629>

but from a single prospect wherein their connections reveal something closer to the reality of Northern America as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the goal of this issue of the *Review of International American Studies* (RIAS), the cover of which presents the reader with a photograph depicting the Canada-US border made visible. Maintained by the International Boundary Commission (the “IBC,” or Commission de la frontière internationale), this twenty-foot-wide swath of intentionally deforested land is known as a “cut line” or “vista line,” and more commonly referred to as the “Slash.” The IBC’s website defines their task in remarkably unassuming and plain-spoken language, reading: “we clear and maintain a swath called a vista that extends 3 meters (10 feet) on either side of the line through dense forests, over mountain ranges, across wetlands and highlands and some of the most rugged terrain North America has to offer. We also control all works done within the vista” (IBC). This topography is not easily navigable, but many have tried to trace its route. The narratives resulting from such travels often reveal the border as a geographical cross-section, moving across geographical scales from the local to the regional, from the national to the international, and from the ground-level to the bird’s-eye view. Each of these scales provides a perspective and a unique vantage point.

The ideal prospect, however, presents all these views at once—a sensibility inherent to the methods found in geography as a discipline and one from which other fields of the academy might learn. As Laura Dassow Walls writes in her article, “Literature, Geography, and the Spaces of Interdisciplinarity” (2011), geography reminds us that interdisciplinarity is a skill that must be learned, making it possible to remain “deeply grounded in one locale or discipline while simultaneously thinking about the kinds of things other peoples and disciplines think, and about the larger contexts—spaces—which hold us all in a tensive fellowship” (871). Looking at the cross-section of a landscape will show the complex relationships among scales as mutually reinforcing, helping to reveal what Walls writes of as the “illusion” that “the larger scales, the international or the Internet or the interstate or the interdisciplinary, somehow consume the smaller scales, the local, the regional, the national, the disciplinary; geography suggests how each exists at all only through the other, such that each stands fair to unsettle the other” (871). The Canada-US border (or any international border) provides a space where the international and the local meet

THE “OTHER” BORDER:  
On Canada/US Culture,  
Power, and Politics

RIAS—Vol. 18, Spring–Summer, Nº 1/2025

---

1 A different version of this essay would also include Mexico and the unique border it shares with the US. Given the focus of this issue of *RIAS*, however, the emphasis here will remain on the border with Canada.

and become inextricable from one another. When treated as a cross-section, the border offers one way to see how residents of the border negotiate these dynamics every day.

Within the academy, some of the disciplines implied in this discussion include geology, meteorology, ecology, agriculture, political science, sociology, history, and literature, among others. Although this Ed/Note could serve as an invitation to border studies and the way it intersects with these disciplines and others, the variety of articles in this issue of RIAS provides many examples of how those themes and preoccupations might be approached. Instead, the essay at hand seeks to position these questions on the border itself and, in the spirit of the International American Studies Association (IASA), to think about how this line on the map can—both literally and metaphorically—serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas and information among the many disciplines concerned with the regional, hemispheric, national, and transnational realities that the Canada-US border represents. In doing so, the examples provided here will step across another boundary, the one found between the academy and those works intended for a more general audience. It is an attempt that will, hopefully, provide yet another way to demonstrate the practical implications of these theoretical approaches.

One recent and intriguing example is Porter Fox's travelogue, *Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey Along America's Forgotten Border* (2017). There, the reader follows Fox from east to west, traveling by water and by land—whether by canoe, by automobile, on foot, or by whatever means of transport is available and appropriate to the situation. Setting the scene in his introduction, he describes the borderline by writing, “it looks like an accident in many places,” continuing:

It runs along the forty-fifth parallel straight through the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Derby Line, Vermont. Near Cornwall, Ontario, it splits the Akwesasne Mohawk Indian reservation in half, and in Niagara it bisects the largest waterfall on the continent. Homes, businesses, families, golf courses, wood pulp factories, and a natural-gas plant straddle the line. Taverns were purposely built directly on the borderline during Prohibition to welcome Americans on one side and sell them booze on the other. Where the boundary follows the forty-ninth parallel in the West, it cuts straight through obstacles like valleys, watersheds, and eight-thousand-foot peaks—necessitating a chaotic system of rules and easements to determine sovereignty and access. Pan out 50,000 feet above the line and you see the shape of America. Zoom in and you recognize

the timber yards, kettle lakes, tablelands, and two-lane asphalt roads of what locals call the 'northland.' (xiii–xiv)<sup>2</sup>

Fox's book thus documents the lived experience of these places, underscoring how the border operates in the daily lives of the people he meets while simultaneously marking the international political border. Fox adopts a regional sensibility to structure *Northland*, organized into five sections: "The Dawnland," "The Sweet-Water Seas," "Boundary Waters," "Seven Fires," and "The Medicine Line." Unique landscapes unto themselves and far more descriptive in their evocation of geography than the names found on most contemporary maps, Fox borrows much of his phrasing from peoples Indigenous to these regions of the continent, offering a linguistic counterpoint to the Cartesian rationale behind the forty-fifth and forty-ninth parallels. Not only do such lines belie the ecological and cultural realities that existed on the continent long before the arrival of Europeans, but they are also riddled with mistakes that are often, as Fox notes, quite accidental.

To illustrate the complexity of the border and the inherent difficulty of navigating his route, Fox introduces each section of his book with a map, often complementing these maps with descriptions of the landscape from a bird's-eye view. When he considers the "Boundary Waters" along the border of Minnesota and Ontario, for example, he writes: "There are no roads, no towns or airports. There are no people, gas stations, businesses, cars, airplanes, electricity, phone service. There is water. If you're not on it, you're in the woods. [...] Looking down from an airplane, you see a landscape that is marbled blue and green, water and trees" (109). He then writes, "The Holocene created this wilderness" (109), a matter-of-fact statement recognizing the region's geomorphological reality—the literal bedrock of life on the continent—whether or not we choose to be aware of it. In his own way, Fox provides a continental cross-section, following the border through much of the same terrain the IBC regularly maintains

THE "OTHER" BORDER:  
On Canada/US Culture,  
Power, and Politics

RIAS—Vol. 18, Spring–Summer, № 1/2025

---

2 Fox writes in his conclusion that:

It should be said that this book was researched and written from the perspective of an American looking north of the border, and that many Canadian figures and historical events have been omitted. This was not out of bias, but merely because, having grown up in Maine, that was the path I took and the story I chose to tell. The story of America's forgotten border is a tale of early mistakes and more than two centuries of fixes. Which is to say there is no definitive event, treaty, document, or history that sums up the US-Canada border. (229–30)

It is important to remember these perspectives; similarly, it should be noted that the author of this article is also from the US.

along the border vista, better understanding the people and the places he encounters.

The very nature of Fox's narrative suggests the utility of looking at the landscape in cross-section. To place this journalistic travelogue in the academic context, we can draw from the legacy of Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist who, in the 1890s, diagrammed "what he called the 'valley section,' a variation of the geographer's traverse—a traditional learning device for recording a linear experience through new territory," which included cross-sections of both the built and natural environment as "interconnected realms of [...] hunters, shepherds, crofters, vintners, gardeners" as well as the town and its port where goods were exported to the world beyond (Clay 112–113).<sup>3</sup> Geddes' cross-sections were taken up and applied to regional planning in North America in the 1920s and 1930s by the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). In one essay for the RPAA titled simply "Regional Planning" (1931), Lewis Mumford writes about the importance of the regional scale in understanding the culture, economics, politics, and environment of the US. He writes: "The great states of the world, still more their minor administrative districts, are the products of political forces and events which have only accidental relations to the underlying geographic, economic, and social realities" (200).<sup>4</sup> Later, he continues:

While the recognition of the region as a fundamental reality is part of the achievement of modern human geography, the recognition of a closely knit inter-regional life is no less so: indeed, geography wipes away the notion of definite boundary lines as anything but a coarse practical expedient; since such political lines forget not merely one nature of the region itself, but the natural zones of transition and the highways of movement, which tend to break up such formal definitions. (202)

In re-approaching the RPAA and its lost legacy today, Douglas Richert Powell writes that "Mumford's regionalism is not a description of a single autonomous place with an essential character, but an interconnective model" (24). Mumford's "natural zones of transition" are found where

---

3 In the article cited here, Grady Clay begins his discussion with medicine, describing Andreas Vesalius' diagrams of anatomical cross-sections from the European Renaissance.

4 Mumford was writing in the early 1930s, and world events were never far from his mind. Among the passages cited above, he also writes: "It is only in the dangerous theory of the all-powerful and all-sufficing National State that self-sufficiency within political boundaries can be treated, as it now is, as a possibility; and it is only in war time that this mischievous notion can be even momentarily effectuated—albeit with great suffering to the underlying population" (202). It is an observation that, unfortunately, remains relevant today.

one identifiable environment gradually becomes another. This interconnective model of zones is best understood through the cross-section, which geographer Grady Clay refers to as a “learning tool” for this reason, as these transitions provide “explanatory strength by revealing adjacencies and contrasts; they set up juxtapositions that spark our awareness and suggest analyses” (110).

The approach Clay details in his essay was inspired by writer and professor J.B. Jackson, who developed his own version of the cross-section in an essay titled “The Stranger’s Path” (1957), which Clay drew from and expanded upon to understand the functions of growing urban regions across the US (Clay 120–22).<sup>5</sup> Whereas Jackson documented cross-sections of mid-sized US cities on foot, Clay documents cross-sections of different urban regions, making concessions to the automobile as the dominant mode of transport. Furthermore, he gestures toward a national and continental cross-section, emphasizing the importance of context made available in different geographic scales.

The “valley section” of Geddes and the “stranger’s path” documented by Jackson present relatively small and somewhat self-contained cross-sections of distinct regions and cities. Even Clay’s approach to larger, sprawling urban regions made possible by the automobile age is limited in scope. A continental cross-section implies a number of such sections followed linearly, placed end-to-end, for some four thousand miles by Fox’s route. The number of “transition zones” through which one passes, the number of “adjacencies and contrasts” encountered, staggers the mind. A regional awareness becomes an essential “way of describing the relationship among a broad set of places for a particular purpose,” writes Richert Powell, as “the larger identity of a region is not defined by any single definition but emerges from the dynamic, historical relationship of these acts of definition” (65). Paying attention to this rhetorical creation of the region also operates across various scales, and the way an international political committee defines a region along the border will necessarily differ from the way its residents define it on their own terms.

These processes of definition often collide in interesting ways. Perhaps one of the most frequently cited curiosities of North American political geography is the Northwest Angle, the only portion of the contiguous US existing north of the forty-ninth parallel, located on the shores of the Lake of the Woods, on the border of Minnesota and Manitoba. Although the forty-ninth parallel could have been “the longest,

---

5 Foremost among his contributions to critical landscape studies, J.B. Jackson was the founder of *Landscape* magazine (1951–99), which he edited until 1968.

straightest, physical line on earth, it is not perfectly straight, as it was based on surveying practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The accepted boundary, complete with its wanderings of up to a quarter mile from the true 49th, is now fixed, set in a thousand monuments [...] anchored along its path, no matter how mountainous, or monotonous” (CLUI 2014–15). The few residents who live in the Northwest Angle can only travel to the rest of Minnesota by boat or car, and if the latter, they must travel through Manitoba and present a passport at each border crossing, negotiating their daily activities accordingly.

A little more than 260 miles (approximately 420 kilometers) west of the Lake of the Woods, however, residents of Dunseith, North Dakota, and Boissevain, Manitoba, actively chose to incorporate the border as the centerpiece of the more than 3.5 square miles (9.5 square kilometers) set aside for the International Peace Garden. Established and constructed in the 1920s and 1930s as a “celebration of peace, a living monument to the ideals of friendship and cooperation among nations. Acres of uninterrupted prairie, forests, and radiant floral gardens are defined by nature, not borders” (IPG). There is nothing accidental about the forty-ninth parallel there and, at the center of this acreage, following the border line itself is a fountain at the head of a formal, linear garden. It is a distinctive marker of neighborliness, and it provides a counterpoint to the more rough-hewn border vista maintained by the IBC. Many such sites exist (another will be considered below) as physical markers of international political geography and local reminders of the regional character shared on both sides of that same line.

To borrow the words of geographer J. Nicholas Entrikin, “From the decentered vantage point of the theoretical scientist, place becomes either location or a set of generic relations and thereby loses much of its significance for human action. From the centered viewpoint of the subject, place has meaning only in relation to an individual’s or a group’s goals and concerns. Place is best viewed from points in between” (5). Entrikin maintains that “To ignore either aspect of this dualism is to misunderstand the modern experience of place” (134). The examples found in this essay offer glimpses into this “betweenness,” where the objective and generic political space are made into livable places by the subjective interpretation of the landscape by those communities who reside there.

Although unique among modern places, those occupying the Canada-US border are also remarkably ordinary. Yet, they cannot escape their position on the border and exist “between” two countries. Given the nature of the border, however, they are also at the center—metapho-



rically and physically—of Canada-US relations. The “betweenness” of the many localities dotting the border is well-illustrated in a fascinating photo essay titled *United Divide: A Linear Portrait of the USA/Canada Border* (2014–15). Published by The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), it travels from east to west and is divided into six chapters: “Eastern Maine,” “Northern Maine and New Hampshire,” “The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” “The Watery Boundary,” “The 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” and “Washington State.”<sup>6</sup> Although somewhat less poetic than Fox’s section titles, the CLUI’s chapter headings nevertheless point to the same regional qualities characteristic of the Canada-US border. Its accompanying narrative also offers a remarkably detailed observation of local sites along the border. The extensive on-site photography provided by the CLUI team is given even more context through images gathered from Google Earth, modified to include a bright yellow line showing the international political boundary cutting from the bird’s-eye view of the surrounding built and natural landscapes.

In their newsletter, *The Lay of the Land*, the CLUI introduces the project by weighing the implications of borderlines more generally. They write: “An examination of the edge of an object reveals its shape, and the CLUI is often drawn to the periphery in order to understand spaces and places as a whole” (CLUI 2015). In this scenario, the statement also implies that, although serving as an edge for two distinct countries, as a cross-section of the continent’s interior, it simultaneously provides a representation of the whole, as it necessarily considers both countries together and at the same time. The CLUI’s essay continues by describing the border as “an international interpretive corridor, passing through rivers, lakes, islands, bridges, airports, parks, towns, farms, pipelines, backyards, and the occasional living room” (CLUI 2015). The result is as much a “learning tool” as Clay could have ever imagined. The CLUI’s project documents the quotidian reality of the border on the local level, cut through with the physical manifestations of political power—lines and monuments and markers and signage and checkpoints and customs offices—that, while representing two very large countries that share a vast landmass, look small and ordinary (and rather humble) amid the vernacular landscapes built mainly for and occupied by local residents, many of whom cross the borderline as a matter of course in their everyday lives.

THE “OTHER” BORDER:  
On Canada/US Culture,  
Power, and Politics

RIAS—Vol. 18, Spring–Summer, № 1/2025

6 It is an almost comprehensive survey of the Canada-US border, but as they write—and not without a sense of humor—“we left out the Alaska portion, as it is wilderness, mostly, pretty much” (CLUI).



In this way, the local and the regional often and unexpectedly subsume the national—if only temporarily.

The rhetoric of words and images found in the CLUI's *United Divide* project offers this perspective through the everyday, vernacular landscape. One early example from the first chapter is the Aroostook Valley Country Club on the border of the State of Maine and the Province of New Brunswick. With a parking lot in Maine and a clubhouse in New Brunswick, portions of the course straddle the border. The ninth hole has a tee box in the US with the fairway and green in Canada, and, on another hole, the course presents golfers with “perhaps the world’s only international sand trap” (CLUI 2014–15). That entertaining example is one among many illustrating the almost superfluous presence of the border in many places.

Earlier in that same chapter, the narrative begins as follows: “The eastern end of the international boundary between the USA and Canada begins with uncertainty, ten miles off the coast, at Machias Seal Island, a 20-acre treeless outcrop which is still claimed by both nations” (CLUI 2014–15). They trace this pattern through all six chapters, the borderline characterized as much by ambiguity and subjectivity on the ground as it is by certainty and objectivity from the air, all the way to the border between the State of Washington and the Province of British Columbia, just south of Vancouver. There, they conclude the written narrative with the following words: “Though not visible anymore, the line continues over the water, passing a light tower on the Canadian side that guides the ferries to port, then, after another eight miles, it abruptly turns south, leaving the Forty-ninth Parallel, and zig-zags its way between islands, and out the Strait of Juan de Fuca, into the Pacific Ocean, where it dissolves completely into the sea” (CLUI 2014–15). It is a fitting end to their chronicle as the boundary, a bright yellow line the reader has followed all the way from the coast of Maine, becomes just as ephemeral as the electronic pixels used to create those same maps.

The symbols of international treaties and politics are never absent on the border, even if they can sometimes be reduced to minor inconveniences by local residents. Nevertheless, the towns that occupy these regions are always in an area between—and such areas gain their character, or their “sense of place,” both because of and despite the presence of the border. The relationship between periphery and shape identified by the CLUI is one way of articulating this experience. Such places are always between the seemingly objective reality of international political systems found on maps and the subjective reality of human beings living in those places that no cartographic line can ever represent.

Despite being the result of international agreement and political decree maintained by governmental actors and commissions, the border vista maintained by the IBC is a very simple and very human intervention in the landscape, and one that could easily disappear should nature be allowed to take its course. The same can be said for any number of border crossings in the vicinity. One such example is the abandoned crossing in Noyes, Minnesota, closed in 2006, shortly after its counterpart in Emerson, Manitoba, closed in 2003 with the opening of a new port of entry on US Interstate 29. Both sit vacant, cracks forming in the pavement with the usual weeds and grasses growing through. The border and its infrastructure are, in this way, as humble as any other local building that dots this cross-section—and just as mutable, over time, as the waves on the Great Lakes or in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Whatever interventions that humankind might make on the landscape, the earth abides.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer an example from my own experience in Northern Vermont, on the border of Quebec, where I was born and raised (and, wherever I go, the place I still call home). It is its own region with its own complex geology and complicated cultural history. In the case of the former, it is where the Canadian Shield and the Appalachian Highlands meet as they both gradually give way to the Saint Lawrence Lowlands. In the case of the latter, it is where the English and the French encountered the Eastern Iroquois and the Western Abenaki peoples, reshaping the regional cultures through colonial violence in ways that still resonate today. Marked by the forty-fifth parallel, the borderline there does not signify any geography other than the political. When the boundary line is visible, it is either in more remote areas where one will see the “Slash” maintained by the IBC or when passing through the more highly trafficked routes and formal border crossings. These political markers are not always what holds one’s attention, however, as the cultural differences found in daily life are far more interesting, whether the shift from English to bilingual signage (or to French as the primary language spoken), to architectural styles and details, to commercial brand names—the list could go on. One cannot—and should not—ignore those differences. Nevertheless, one often finds a shared sense of place here as well.

At the time of publication, one specific site mentioned by both Fox and the CLUI recently made international news far beyond Canada and the US.<sup>7</sup> The Haskell Free Library and Opera House (Bibliothèque

7 The story found its way to the pages of at least two international periodicals, *The Guardian* (headquartered in London, England) and *Al Jazeera* (headquartered in Doha, Qatar).

et salle d'opéra Haskell) has two addresses, one in Derby Line, Vermont, and one in Stanstead, Quebec. Identifying itself as an anchor of public life in both towns, its website describes its role in “support[ing] the cultural needs of the community on both sides of the Canada-US border, in both English and French, through access to information, reading material, a broad range of library services, and programming, as well as the visual and performing arts” (*HFLOH*). The description continues, “As a heritage building and cultural centre, the Haskell Free Library & Opera House plays a critical role in enriching the lives of its members and the community” (*HFLOH*). While housed in an architecturally noteworthy building on a unique plot of land, it is, in short, an ordinary library. The CLUI notes that, over the years, this has made the library even more distinctive in its appearance, for example, when

two separate fire escapes had to be built, one in the US, and one for Canada. Many such redundancies and building code complexities have to be tolerated by the building managers. After repairing the roof a few years ago, the building's owners were sued for not hiring a Canadian contractor to work on the Canadian portion of the roof. (CLUI 2014–2015)

The very nature and history of the building and its deliberate construction as an intentionally permeable structure on the borderline has functioned, since 1904, as “a symbol of the close relationship between the two nations” (Sabet), whatever complications might arise. Although sited at an angle on the border between Vermont and Quebec, inside the building, the only marker is a diagonal line painted on the floor, running through the lobby and reading room of the library and along the floor of the theater upstairs—a rather unremarkable recognition of the border, a vernacular concession to the seeming permanence of political power.

In March 2025, the US decided to use the symbolic quality of the Haskell Library and Opera House for its own purposes with cruel intentions and rather grave implications. It was then that the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) indicated its intention “to restrict Canadians’ access to a library that straddles the international border due to ‘a continued rise in illicit cross border activity’” (Giles). Nonetheless, such “illicit activity” is rare, and administration officials—apparently immune to irony—seem to be referring to two incidents of arms smuggling in 2010 and 2011 when, notably, the weapons were being moved from the US to Canada. It is a rather blatant example of how a national government might co-opt an otherwise harmless community center to, in the words of news reporters, “stoke tensions”

(Heintz) in what was clearly “a provocation” (Wilson).<sup>8</sup> In a different world, the library might have instead continued in its role as a local example of good neighborliness.

Nevertheless, as *VT Digger*, a local daily online newspaper, reported, “Within the library, it would be ‘business as usual,’ [...] and there are no plans to restrict patrons’ movement within the library, which is bisected by a line of tape representing the international border” (Sabet). Later, the same article quotes Stanstead Mayor Jody Stone as saying, “No matter what this administration does, it will not change the fact that Stanstead and Derby Line are friends and partners forever [...] Without borders you wouldn’t even know that we are two separate communities” (Sabet).

To make sense of all this, we might join Grady Clay in finding inspiration through the writings of J.B. Jackson. In the final essay from his collection, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984), he writes that “underneath those symbols of permanent political power” are the vernacular landscapes,

organizing and using spaces in their traditional way and living in communities governed by custom, held together by personal relationships. We learn something about them by investigating the topographical and technological and social factors which determined their economy and their way of life, but in the long run I suspect no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves who owns or uses the spaces, how they were created and how they change. (150)

While the Haskell Library and Opera House may have momentarily been the most famous structure spanning the Canada-US border, it—and the community it serves—remains emblematic of how, despite the boundary, the people have organized and used the area. Within the space of the border, the Stanstead/Derby Line community maintains a sense of place “governed by custom, held together by personal relationships.” Who is it that “owns or uses” the Haskell Library and Opera House? Who was it that created it, deliberately, on the borderline? How did its role as an institution change the towns and the community there? These questions are not rhetorical, and the answer to each is simple: Any sense of place found in Stanstead and Derby Line belongs

8 These phrasings are quoted from headlines in *The Boston Globe* and *Montréal Gazette*, respectively. Both articles directly reference a visit on 30 January 2025 by the current US Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in which the CBP is housed. During that visit, the secretary walked back and forth over the line within the library, repeating the phrase “USA number 1” and referring to Canada as “the fifty-first state.”

to the community of residents who actively foster it. So many of those places where the border “looks like an accident” are always deliberately negotiating the boundary in profound but quotidian ways. The border stations and customs offices exist within the community as much as the community exists within the political geography of the boundary line. Each exists simultaneously in and through the other, and, at least for the time being, it cannot be otherwise.

*Abstract:* This Editor’s Note opens the present issue of RIAS through a meditation on the Canada-US border not simply as a line of division but as a dynamic cross-section—one that can reveal the entangled geographies, cultures, and histories of North America. Drawing insight from across the disciplines of geography, literature, history, and environmental studies, it proposes the east-west border as a methodological lens through which to apprehend regional continuities and local specificities alike. Exploring a number of examples, the essay considers the border as simultaneously separating and connecting the two countries, paying special attention to vernacular landscapes that defy simplistic geopolitical readings. The essay further considers the symbolic and contested role of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Vermont, recently politicized by US authorities, as a lived space of permeability and intercommunity resilience. Ultimately, the border emerges here as a site where the global and the local, the political and the personal, intersect—offering a uniquely instructive vantage point on the interdependent realities of modern North America.

*Keywords:* Canada-US Border, Cultural Geography, Regionalism, Landscapes

*Bio:* Nathaniel R. Racine, RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief, is an assistant professor of English in the Department of Humanities at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas. He holds a PhD in English from Temple University in Philadelphia and a professionally-accredited Master’s degree in Urban Planning from McGill University in Montréal, Canada. From 2018 to 2019, he was a Fulbright Postdoctoral Scholar in Mexico. His recent work draws from the fields of geography and urbanism to understand the cultural exchange between the US and Mexico from the interwar period through the mid-century.

## WORKS CITED

Clay, Grady. “Crossing the American Grain with Vesalius, Geddes, and Jackson: The Cross Section as a Learning Tool.” *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B. Jackson*. Eds. C. Wilson and P. Groth. U of California P, 2003, pp. 109–129.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation. “United Divide: The CLUI Looks at the USA/Canada Border.” *The Lay of the Land: The Center for Land Use Interpretation Newsletter*, no. 38, 2015. <https://clui.org/newsletter/winter-2015/united-divide>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

---. *United Divide: A Linear Portrait of the USA/Canada Border*. The Center

for *Land Use Interpretation: Programs & Projects*, 2014–15. <https://clui.org/projects/united-divide>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

Entrikin, J. Nicholas. *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.

Fox, Porter. *Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey Along America's Forgotten Border*. W. W. Norton, 2018.

Giles, Abagael. "Locals Decry Plan to Limit Canadian Access to Border-Straddling Haskell Library." 21 Mar. 2025. *Vermont Public*. <https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2025-03-21/locals-decry-plan-limit-canadian-access-haskell-library-border>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

*Haskell Free Library and Opera House*. <https://www.haskelloperahouse.org/>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

Heintz, Paul. "The Vermont-Quebec Border Runs Right Through this Library. Trump Officials Used it to Stoke Tensions." *The Boston Globe*. 27 Feb. 2025. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/02/27/nation/rising-border-tensions-threaten-library-straddling-vermont-quebec-line/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.

International Boundary Commission. "About Us: The Boundary." 2015. <https://internationalboundarycommission.org/en/about/the-boundary.php>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

*International Peace Garden*. 2025. <https://peacegarden.com/discover/history/>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

Jackson, John Brinkerhoff. "Concluding with Landscapes." *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. Yale UP, 1984, pp. 145–157.

Kestler-D'Amours, Jillian. "US Blocking Canadian Access to Historical Library on Quebec-Vermont Border." *Al Jazeera*. 21 Mar. 2025. <https://aje.io/cqpuyw>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

Mumford, Lewis. "Regional Planning" 1931. *Planning the Fourth Migration: The Neglected Vision of the Regional Planning Association of America*, edited by Carl Sussman. The MIT Press, 1976, pp. 199–208.

Reichert Powell, Douglas. *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*. U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Sabet, Habib. "US to Restrict Canadian Access to Historic Vermont Library Straddling Northern Border." *VT Digger* [Montpelier, VT]. 21 Mar. 2025. <https://vtdigger.org/2025/03/21/u-s-to-restrict-canadian-access-to-historic-vermont-library-straddling-northern-border/>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

"US Blocks Canadian Access to Cross-Border Library, Sparking Outcry." *The Guardian*. 21 Mar. 2025. [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/21/canada-cross-border-library?CMP=share\\_btn\\_url](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/21/canada-cross-border-library?CMP=share_btn_url). Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

Walls, Laura Dassow. "Literature, Geography, and the Spaces of Interdisciplinarity." *American Literary History*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2011, pp. 860–872. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41329618>

Wilson, Jack. “‘A Provocation’: U.S. Homeland Security Chief Calls Canada ‘The 51st State’ in Library Straddling Quebec-Vermont Border.” *Montréal Gazette*. 06 Mar. 2025. <https://www.montrealgazette.com/news/provincial-news/article794964.html>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2025.

*Review of International American Studies*

*Nathaniel R. Racine  
Texas A&M  
International University, USA  
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief*



