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Young Borderlanders, Tourism Work, and Anti-Americanism in Canadian Niagara

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This article analyzes local engagements with tourism at the Canadian Niagara border. While regional elites promote cross-border tourism as part of a wider project of economic restructuring, interviews conducted with young Canadian borderlanders reveal critiques of tourism-related work and expressions of anti-Americanism. Young borderlanders' experiences and identities, I argue, have wider implications for regional and continental projects of integration and securitization in a changing North American political economy.

Key Words: Borders, tourism work, anti-Americanism, Niagara

This article analyzes local engagements with tourism as part of a larger investigation of the experience of Canadian Niagara border life in the context of greater North American integration and securitization. While regional elites have promoted cross-border tourism as part of a wider project of economic restructuring for the Niagara region, interviews with young Canadian borderlanders reveal negative accounts of tourism-related employment. Of particular interest here are the links made by young borderlanders between experiences of tourism-related work and anti-Americanism. The divergence between official pro-tourism boosterism and the accounts of young borderlanders demonstrates the need for more analyses focused on the complexity of borderlander experience and identity in a changing North American political economy.

Studies of international borders and border regions are informed by, and contribute to, wider debates about the future of the nation-state in a globalizing world. The interdisciplinary field of border studies has documented how the end of the “Cold War,” the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the European Union (EU) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the so-called War on Terror, are linked to changes in the functions and meanings of state borders rather than the “borderless” world.
predicted by some globalization theorists (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999; Newman 2006).

While much of the work in border studies remains at a macro and/or analytical level, an anthropology of borders has provided ethnographic studies of “border cultures” that illuminate the dynamics of nationalism, the state, and the production and reproduction of “multiple cultural identities, in the midst of great world social, political and economic change” (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 14).

The influential work of Anzaldua (1999) and Rosaldo (1993) on the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, for example, challenged older paradigms of the “binary absoluteness of cultural areas and identities” replacing these with “models of border areas as places of interpenetrating spaces and more complex, nonunitary identities” (Kearney 1995: 557). Subsequent in-depth ethnographic research has documented the coexistence of both hybridized and more exclusionary nationalized identities and how these are linked to other forms of inequality (such as class) in border and former border spaces (e.g., see Berdahl 1999; Durrschmidt 2006; Pelkmans 2006).

In her study of a village at the former border of East and West Germany, Berdahl (1999: 141), for example, describes the community (citing Sahlins) as a “privileged site for the articulation of national distinctions” as well as a “a transitional zone where identity can be particularly fluid.” Moreover, like other scholars, she emphasizes the need for border identity processes to be linked to the material realities of deeply asymmetrical power relations, in this case, between East and West (Berdahl 1999: 9).

Likewise, in Vila’s discussion of his work at the Mexico-U.S. border at Cuidad Juarez and El Paso, he cites Castronovo when he notes how “nationalism, as a force that consolidates, demarcates, and hierarchizes, can also be present at borders, as a response to the permeability and fluidity of border culture” (2003: 318). He suggests that the task for scholars is to “look for this multiple reading of the border situation where different narratives coexist in the same locale” (2003: 322), while also attending to the often unequal power relations of actual borders. Such work emphasizes the need for continued documentation of the historical and spatial specificity of particular border regions to anchor more abstract theoretical discussions of identity that use “the metaphors of borders and borderlands to clarify the deterritorialized aspects of post-modern life” (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 2–3; see also Cunningham and Heyman 2004).

The project on which this article is based interviewed young Canadian Niagara borderlanders who had spent their lives in a major international tourist destination and transportation corridor for the
North American economy. The cohort focused on here grew up with Free Trade (1989) and NAFTA (1994) and were, at the time of most of the interviews, experiencing the aftermath of 9/11 securitization. Drawing inspiration from an anthropology of childhood and youth that seeks to understand young people as both subjects and agents within wider national, transnational, and globalized processes (Stephens 1995; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998), this research contributes to a limited body of work focused on the experiences and identities of young people living at international borders (Lask 1994; Hipfl, Bister, and Strohmaier 2003; Jukarainen 2003; Dunkey 2004).

This article reiterates the familiar finding that localized globalization may be nationalized (Sassen 2007) while also attempting to analyze how this phenomenon is actually produced among young borderlanders. It does so by focusing on the links that young interviewees drew between low paid and contingent tourist-related jobs and expressions of an anti-American Canadian identity. Attention to borderlander experience and perception is important because as Donnan and Wilson (1999: 11) suggest, border cultures are not only “reactive agents” but also have a “proactive” role vis-à-vis “policy formation, representation and reception, at the borders and elsewhere.” With specific reference to the North American borders, Turbeville and Bradbury (2005: 268) have suggested that “as free trade and increased economic integration reconceptualize North America into a continental amalgam, it is in the borderlands where the greatest changes are taking place and where the success or failure of such economic policies will ultimately be determined.” It is important then to listen to young borderlanders in Niagara whose experiences and perspectives may have implications for wider economic and political projects of North American integration and securitization.

**Canada-U.S. border/borderlands/borderlanders**

While most of the research on North American borders focuses on the Mexico-U.S. boundary, there has been increased scholarly attention to the changing meanings and functions of an asymmetric Canada-U.S. border (Sadowski-Smith 2002; Gabriel and MacDonald 2003; Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Pratt 2005; Sparke 2006; Salter 2007).

Until recently, popular and scholarly understandings of the Canada-U.S. border portrayed it as an exemplar of a relatively “friendly” and “undefended” permeable border. As Bhandar (2008) points out, however, this border myth erases histories of racialized (and other) exclusions and is linked to production of national and continental imaginaries of a “white” Canada-U.S. border, linking racially,
culturally, and economically similar populations in contrast to an imagined Mexico-U.S. border “grounded in an absolute difference between the Mexican body and that of the American (writ throughout as the middle-class white body)” (2008: 291).

The dominant construction of an “unremarkable” (Bhandar 2008: 292) Canada-U.S. border has discouraged anthropological attention in comparison with the extensive ethnographic work conducted at the “paradigmatic” U.S.-Mexican border and surrounding borderlands (Alvarez 1995: 449; Vila 2005). Most of the work on the Canada-U.S. border remains at a macro or analytical level with little investigation of daily life in border regions. Greater attention to the everyday experiences and identities of Canada-U.S. borderlanders, I suggest, can broaden the comparative scholarship on international borders and borderlands.

My project is based in just one of many Canada-U.S. border regions. I conducted interviews with young borderlanders on the Canadian side of the Canada-U.S. boundary line that follows the dramatic Niagara River running 55 kilometers from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. The area is a major transborder corridor (with four bridges open to vehicular traffic and three railway bridges spanning the river). The Peace Bridge, which joins the town of Fort Erie, Ontario, to the city of Buffalo, New York, is the second busiest Canada-U.S. border crossing (after the Ambassador Bridge linking Windsor and Detroit). Interviews were conducted from the summer of 2001 to 2004 with young university-recruited Canadians on the subject of border life in Canadian Niagara. Here I draw on a subset of 39 interviews conducted with white working to middle-upper class (17 males and 22 females) ranging in age from 19 to 27.

Canadian Niagara and tourism

While the interviews drawn upon for this article covered many aspects of border life, here I focus on a theme particularly salient in the Niagara context: young people’s experiences of tourism and its significance to their borderland identities. Before turning to the interviews themselves, I first provide some context for their accounts by outlining the political economy of tourism in Canadian Niagara.

Canadian Niagara, and Niagara Falls in particular, has been a premier tourist attraction since the early nineteenth century and remains the number one Canadian destination for American visitors. Because Canadian Niagara suffered from deindustrialization, layoffs, and closures in the manufacturing sector, regional elites in the 1990s moved to position tourism as the linchpin of a postindustrial “new
economy.” Central to the regional development strategy was a concerted effort to broaden the tourist experience beyond the natural wonder of Niagara Falls to the surrounding region, which is now marketed as a wine as well as gaming and golf destination.3

While Canadian Niagara is well established on the global tourist circuit, regional tourism remains heavily reliant on visiting Americans, and different levels of government and the regional tourism industry have worked to cultivate the cross-border tourism market efforts. Indeed, official efforts to increase cross-border tourist flows have included binational cooperation to promote both sides of the Niagara River as a “two-nation vacation” (“Two-Nation Vacation,” Niagara Falls Review, 10 February 2000; “One Vacation in Two Nations,” Niagara Falls Review, 27 June 2001), and just prior to 9/11 the Mayor of Niagara Falls, New York, had articulated a vision of Niagara becoming a borderless international zone for tourists “without the customs booths that clutter the natural beauty” (“A Tale of Two Cities,” Niagara Falls Review 4 September 2001). In 2004 the regions saw the formation of a Bi-national Tourism Alliance representing the tourist industry (along with political leaders of Ontario, New York State, and border communities).

The reliance on visiting Americans has ensured a close linkage between tourism and border management concerns. Those promoting regional cross-border tourism have therefore allied with more powerful interests concerned with cross-border trade to move toward the goal voiced by the Mayor of Buffalo in 1999 of having “the cheapest, fastest border in North America” (“Transportation Woes A ‘National Crisis,’” Niagara Falls Review, 2 November 1999). Facilitating cross-border traffic through investment in roads, bridges, and new “smarter” surveillance technologies has been seen as key to ensuring both Niagara’s competitive position as a major tourist destination and its continued position as an important node in a chief North American transportation corridor (“Linking Of Trade Routes Beneficial to Canada, U.S.,” Niagara Falls Review, 23 June 2000).

The project of promoting and facilitating cross-border tourist mobilities has nonetheless sometimes existed in tension with a securitizing border infrastructure aimed at monitoring and regulating cross-border flows. The way in which local tourist flows were being negatively affected by the “new surveillance” (Morgan and Pritchard 2005) was clear before 9/11. In the summer of 2000, following the New Year arrest of the “Millennium bomber,” for example, a lawyer from the Canadian border town of Fort Erie complained that U.S. clients who usually commuted between work in Buffalo and summer cottages in Fort Erie were being “hassled” by Canadian border guards who were
requiring proof of permanent residence in the United States (“Americans Hassled at the Border,” Niagara Falls Review, 2 March 2000). A local newspaper on the Canadian side, the Niagara Falls Review, responded with an editorial critical of Canadian Customs for turning back “well-heeled Americans” while “all over Niagara, hundreds of people are spending countless hours and millions of dollars devising ways to attract American visitors to Canada” (“Yankee Go Home?” Niagara Falls Review, 3 March 2000).

The tensions between the promotion of cross-border tourism and border securitization became much starker after 9/11 as dramatically increased surveillance measures at Niagara’s border crossings (such as new U.S. Customs exit inspections and alerts) were accompanied by steep declines in visitors to Canadian Niagara. With reports of an immediate one-third to one-half drop in visitors to Niagara Falls, Ontario hotels, and attractions, the Conservative Ontario Minister for Tourism declared that tourism was the “canary in the coal mine” which revealed the need for Canada to join a “North American security perimeter” to ensure that Ontario’s businesses would be “inside the fence” (“Hudak Pushes Harmonized Border Security,” Niagara Falls Review, 2 November 2001). In the post 9/11 period, Canadian governments and the tourism industry responded to the reduced flow of visitors by introducing new campaigns specifically geared toward Americans. One, with the slogan “Come Stay With Friends,” attempted to offer a reassuring message to Americans concerned about traveling beyond their own borders (“Rediscover Ontario, Ad Campaign Urges,” Niagara Falls Review, 7 November 2001; “Everything Can Be Found In ‘The Niagaras,’” Niagara Falls Review, 11 May 2002).

The post 9/11 decline in visitors to Canadian Niagara dropped even more precipitously when a 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory System (SARS) outbreak in Toronto led to the worst tourist season for Canadian Niagara since World War II. In the years following, ongoing securitization measures such as the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, a strengthened Canadian dollar, and most recently rising fuel costs have continued to dampen cross-border tourist flows to Canadian Niagara.

Despite the visible vulnerability of the Niagara tourist industry in the post 9/11 period, it has continued to promote itself as an economic savior of a deindustrializing region. In 2002 industry spokespersons claimed, for example, that unlike manufacturing, tourist jobs would “never be moved to Mexico, China, or South Carolina.” It was also suggested that the tourist sector offered good employment opportunities for adults and “entry-level jobs that provide important income for our children as they complete their education” (“Niagara Economy Benefits From Tourism,” Niagara Falls Review, 20 April 2002), a claim repeated
two years later when residents were reminded that tourism jobs ranged from “very senior management” to “summer jobs [that] . . . helped families pay for university and college educations” (“Making Tourism Ambassadors of Residents,” *Niagara Falls Review*, 10 June 2004).⁶

Tourism boosters have also suggested that local border residents take a more active (unpaid) role in attracting and retaining visitors. Dubinsky has noted how in the past the national tourist industry of the 1950s and 1960s encouraged Canadians to take on the task of welcoming American visitors to the country and how such campaigns were greeted with ambivalence by those on the frontline of the tourism boom in Niagara (1999: 179–180). Likewise in the contemporary context, Niagara elites have suggested that locals should be more willing to go the “extra mile” as part of developing more of a “culture” of welcoming tourists. The Mayor of Niagara Falls, Ontario, suggested that this could be facilitated if early in the tourist season, attractions and hotels would “open their doors to the locals,” thereby ensuring that Niagara residents were better informed about industry offerings. “The more residents are able to talk up the services available to visitors” he suggested, “the more they’re in a position to help the area’s main employer thrive” (“Making Tourism Ambassadors of Residents,” *Niagara Falls Review*, 10 June 2004).

Despite such public political support for tourism, the post 9/11 period was accompanied by expressions of local unease with a tourism-based regional development strategy. In 2004 the local *Niagara Falls Review* ran a series on tourism that noted a “backlash” from residents who felt that they were not benefiting sufficiently from “hosting the world.” The series pointed to a widespread concern among Canadian Niagara residents that tourism jobs were limited, being “low paying and seasonal,” that investment in tourism was not flowing back in the form of reduced taxes and/or improved amenities for locals, and that Niagara incomes were falling behind those of other regions of Ontario.⁷

Niagara’s experience has, in fact, been consistent with an anthropology of tourism literature that has demonstrated how the costs and benefits of “development” brought by tourism are often differentially and unequally experienced by local populations (Stronza 2001: 268; Boissevain 1996: 10). Indeed predictions made in 2000 that there would be labor shortages in an expanding tourist industry, were by 2004, replaced by calls for federal support for laid-off tourism workers. The Niagara region as a whole has experienced high youth unemployment rates, out-migration and median household incomes that have remained significantly below the provincial average.⁸
One recent report on tourism employment in Niagara has noted that the tourist industry is unlikely to produce regional prosperity without significant improvement in the wages and working conditions of its employees (Hickey 2008: 7).⁹ At the same time, the claim that Niagara tourism jobs will “never be moved to Mexico, China, or South Carolina” is challenged by evidence that a globalizing tourist industry is restructuring in ways similar to other industries. Hjalager’s study of tourism in Northern Europe, for example, discusses how the industry actively works to reduce its labor costs through globalized sourcing (among other strategies) that may both diminish and further stratify tourism-related employment at local tourism sites (2007: 447).¹⁰

**Young Canadian borderlanders and tourism work**

Local debates over the value and impact of tourism are not new in Canadian Niagara (Dubinsky 1999), but scholarly work has tended to focus on visitor and tourist industry perspectives more than those of local residents, let alone younger residents (e.g., see McGreevy 1994; Healy 2006). Tourism, however, emerged as a major theme in the interviews that I conducted, leading to a focus on these experiences in this article.

The positioning of the cohort of young people interviewed for this project, vis-à-vis tourist mobilities, was complex. Consistent with the experience of many young people in the Global North, several had traveled as tourists to the United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Europe. They were also proud to have grown up in the globally recognized tourist destination of Canadian Niagara and made claims to a higher degree of cosmopolitanism (than those from other communities that did not receive large numbers of international tourists), due to their everyday exposure to global and more localized cross-border tourist flows.

The interviewees also had personal histories of “ordinary” transnationalism (Strüver 2005: 326) in the form of extensive cross-border mobility sometimes due to kinship and/or friendship ties with Americans on the other side of the river (indeed, some were or had parents who were dual citizens), but more often due to cross-border shopping (especially during the years of a relatively strong Canadian dollar in the late 1980s and early 1990s) (Helleiner 2007). Many also had acquaintances who commuted across the border for postsecondary education and/or employment and some anticipated this possibility for themselves.

Despite their own experiences as global and local transnational tourists and “ordinary” transnationalism, the young people interviewed were less than positive about the impact of tourism on Canadian
Niagara. One female respondent from a low-middle-class background, for example, described how locals were often “really annoyed by tourists” who “act like they own the place” (41). Another working-class young woman with relatives on the American side of the border noted that while “Niagara Falls [Ontario] does everything for tourism . . . little is done for the people who live there” (50). The primary source of complaints about tourism, however, related to these young people’s experiences of employment in tourist-related jobs. This cohort (who had been cross-border shoppers as children), found themselves as young teenage workers, in part-time and summer jobs, serving Americans attracted by exchange rates that encouraged a reverse flow of shoppers from the United States to Canada.

While there is considerable literature on young people’s experiences as tourists (e.g., Desforges 1998), there is less attention paid to youth workers in the tourist industry. Adler and Adler (2004) have noted, however, that globally a deeply stratified workforce characterizes the tourist industry where young people tend to occupy the lowest strata. In Ontario the tourist industry is the largest employer of young people in the province (electronic document, http://www.tourism.gov.on.ca), and, as I have indicated, the industry in Niagara publicized its role in providing employment to young people and supporting their pursuit of postsecondary education. Given such claims, the accounts of working in tourism-related employment gathered from the university-recruited borderlanders interviewed for this project, are of particular relevance.

While Niagara has the unique draw of the Falls, many of the other activities and attractions offered to tourists are similar to those typical of border tourist destinations worldwide, including “shopping, prostitution, gambling/casinos, restaurants, bars and nightclubs” (Timothy 2006: 11). In the course of the interviews, most of the young border residents indicated that they had spent some time working in tourism-related jobs, including the parastatal Niagara Parks Commission, private sector attractions, accommodation, dining, and retail outlets. Several interviewees were explicit about how the regional loss of manufacturing jobs had forced them as young workers into what they considered these less attractive forms of service work.

Tourism-related employment was described by these interviewees as part-time, seasonal, low paid, and as having onerous working conditions similar to the social relations of work experienced by young workers in the North American service sector more broadly (Tannock 2001). One lower-middle-class respondent bemoaned the lack of good jobs for young people noting, “If McDonalds and Wendy’s and Burger King doesn’t get you, the [Niagara] Parks [Commission] will.” The Niagara Parks Commission, she went on to claim, was “a Venus fly
trap for students" because it paid only minimum wage and required long hours. Another young woman from a working-class background described how when the first casino opened in Niagara Falls the resulting summer jobs seemed “phenomenal” at first, but that student workers experienced “long hours, late nights . . . and you heard a lot more . . . horror stories [about dealing with tourists].” One young man from a similar class background reported how reduced tourist traffic resulted in a deterioration of working conditions at the campground where he was employed as the owners declared that business survival required “accepting everyone and anyone.”

While some pointed to the ways in which tips could make up for minimum wage jobs at hotels and restaurants, there was general agreement that long-term employment prospects in tourism were limited. One lower-middle-class young woman noted, “It’s great for students . . . but if you are . . . [out] of high school and you are [a] full time [worker], it’s not necessarily good for you . . . because . . . it’s a seasonal industry.” The perception of limited long-term opportunities was linked to a sense for many that their economic future lay outside of the Niagara region. One male respondent from an upper-middle-class family said, “[while] it’s . . . a nice place to retire to . . . there’s no industry to keep the kids here . . . there’s nowhere for me to work.”

The importance of “service” to regional tourism is acknowledged by development planners; for example, the CEO of the Niagara Economic Development Corporation stated, “While the local tourism industry can’t control the value of the dollar, prices at the pump or the confusion from the passport initiative . . . there are things it can control including a level of service which keeps people coming back” (“Tourism Numbers Reflect A Tough Year in Niagara,” Niagara This Week, 30 August 2006). The tourism-related service work available to these young people, however, was characterized by low wages and less than attractive working conditions. As Hjalager (2007) has pointed out, the “good” jobs in a globalizing tourist industry are not only diminishing but are also increasingly filled by a highly educated transnational elite, rather than being available to local populations in particular tourist destinations.

The negative accounts of tourism-related employment offered by border youth diverged from elite projects promoting cross-border tourism as critical to a postindustrial “new economy” in Niagara and thereby made visible some of its contradictions. According to these young people, a tourism-based regional economy offered limited long-term options. These interviewees, already enrolled in university, had occupational and class aspirations that did not include a future in tourism employment, or necessarily Canadian Niagara.
Tourist work and anti-Americanism

I now turn to consider the connections between these young people’s experiences in tourism-related employment and their expressions of border identity. Elsewhere I have discussed how some of these young borderlanders understood the Canadian border region as a binationalized space and themselves as (problematically) Americanized relative to other Canadians by virtue of their borderland upbringing. Such constructions coexisted, however, with constructions of the immediately proximate American “other side” in ways that highlighted nationalized difference and articulated with classed and racialized hierarchies and exclusions (Helleiner 2009).

Attributions of cross-border similarity and difference were linked in complex ways to broader constructions of “America” or “Americans.” While the cohort interviewed here were growing up, for example, a confluence of political and economic factors favored the Canadian side of the Niagara River, producing a sense of relative economic advantage over the immediate American side (in contrast to a wider asymmetrical bilateralism marked by U.S. hegemony).

Of particular interest here is how interviewees made various claims about how their border upbringing affected their views of Americans. A few, for example, suggested that as borderlanders they were less likely to engage in anti-American stereotyping than other Canadians because, as one individual from a lower-middle-class background put it, “[living at the border] you’ve got more of a first-hand experience . . . you always hear jokes about the Americans [but] . . . it’s kind of different when you actually see them and you talk to them.” Others, however, suggested that the immediate presence of Americans might have the opposite effect. As one working-class respondent stated, “It just feels like it’s inside you that you’re supposed to hate Americans. I don’t know if that has to do with living on the border but I think it’s just because you’re confronted with it [American presence] everyday.” The interviewee, who was quoted earlier about work at a campground, suggested that there were “two sides of the coin” when it came to border living and attitudes toward Americans:

Some people who . . . live in the border town . . . are going to go, ‘you know what, we’re [Canadians and Americans] all the same, we’re all alike.’ But . . . there are [also] some people who think Americans are jerks . . . you get cut off [by an American driver and say], ‘Oh you Americans, so typical of you’ and stuff like that.

Despite the suggestion of varied attitudes toward Americans, when the discussion turned to American tourists in particular, there was
greater consensus. Echoing Dubinsky’s reference to a long history of ambivalence about U.S. tourism in Canadian Niagara Falls (1999: 210), the young people interviewed here referred to widespread negative views of the U.S. visitors who made up almost 40 percent of overnight visitors to Canadian Niagara in 2004 and who, as mentioned, were the targets of government and industry marketing campaigns (Ontario Ministry for Tourism 2007). Many interviewees in fact specifically linked tourist-related service work to the production and/or intensification of anti-Americanism in Canadian Niagara in stark juxtaposition to the official discourse of the “Come Stay With Friends” cross-border tourism campaign.

I now turn to look more closely at the ways in which discussions of tourism-related work focused on the specific challenges of serving Americans. Some, for example, noted how the regional dependence on cross-border tourism meant that U.S. visitors had to be “put up with.” As one working-class interviewee with relatives in the United States explained, she “would complain when an American came in [to the restaurant where she worked as a server], but . . . if they hadn’t come in, then we wouldn’t have a job . . . I wouldn’t be making nearly the money that I did in tips.” Another working-class individual from Niagara Falls suggested critically that the tourist industry seemed to “bend over backwards” to cater to U.S. visitors, but went on to add that when Canadian friends criticized U.S. tourists he felt like reminding them that: “you have some of your jobs because so many of them are coming over and it helps our economy here . . . it’s a give and take, so if you could just put up with it . . . you could benefit.” Among his acquaintances he noted, however, that “distaste for Americans” was common; he attributed this to American visitors’ lack of knowledge about Canada and what was perceived as their attitude of “superiority.”

Discussion of anti-Americanism led many interviewees to acknowledge the dangers of “stereotypes” and to sometimes explicitly try to present themselves as having more nuanced attitudes than those around them. One young woman from a wealthier background suggested that many other workers saw Americans as “a little rough around the edges,” “impatient,” and “rude” but added, “I don’t know, I think you get that with every nationality.” The male respondent quoted earlier, who felt that he had no future in the region, confided “sometimes I catch myself . . . thinking Americans are always rotten, but . . . I mean, no matter where they’re from, you’re always meeting people that are jerks.”

Another working-class male made a similarly more careful argument about the particular challenges of serving tourists, not just American tourists:
I think a lot of people regardless of where you’re from, when you go on vacation, people tend sometimes to be a little bit more rude or demanding . . . a lot of the Americans that come in are on vacation, and sometimes you have to realize that, ‘OK they’re on vacation, they’re a little bit stressed.’

Likewise, another from Niagara Falls (whom I quoted earlier regarding the challenges of casino work) suggested that her own negative views of American visitors might have stemmed less from any inherent characteristics of U.S. tourists than from working in the service industry, which she described as “a tough employment area . . . [where] you are typically not treated very kindly . . . especially during the summer . . . [when you have] tourists coming in and being . . . not exactly the nicest people to you . . . I was tired of being yelled at for things that were not my fault.”

Distinguishing between different sites of work was another way in which interviewees tried to work against “stereotypes.” One, for example, commented on how when she worked in a bed and breakfast, she got to know the American visitors and found them “friendly” but when she entered a retail job she “got a different opinion . . . [because American customers] were rude and demanding.”

Also important were distinctions that were drawn between different categories of U.S. visitors. The speaker above, who described tourism as a “tough employment area,” related how fellow workers perceived those from the “southern states” as “very nice, very pleasant, easy going, good people to get along with” in contrast to those from New York State, who were considered to be “more arrogant, rude, straightforward, to the point, and not so . . . tolerant if somebody were to make a mistake.” Others specified that their own negative views of “Americans” were in fact confined to those who were closer to the border described (variously) as those from Buffalo, Tonawanda, “Western New York,” New York, or even the “northern states.”

The working-class individual who acknowledged that the presence of American tourists meant jobs, in another part of the interview explained that while she and her fellow restaurant workers considered U.S. visitors to be “cheap,” this was not true of “all Americans,” just “the ones right over the border” who “never tipped.” Another working-class interviewee (with U.S. relatives), who was quoted earlier commenting on how little tourism benefited local residents, also described how:

I couldn’t stand talking to the people from . . . [a community on the immediate other side of the border] but I could talk to people who were
Young Borderlanders

from the southern states for hours. They were so nice and they were so pleasant. But the people from . . . [the immediate other side] they . . . had that egotistical ignorance.

As this suggests, the regionalized differentiation of visiting “Americans” was partially classed. It was also racialized; for example, the white respondent quoted above suggested that visiting African Americans who were responsible for guns and “trouble” in the bars while another white dual citizen from a well-off background, described American casino patrons as “minorities” who “basically blow their money and then the States has to support them afterwards.” Classed and racialized distinctions were drawn by this all-white interviewee cohort between poorer black and Hispanic visitors and, for example, wealthy white American cottagers (the latter being further differentiated by one respondent into “old” and “new money” families). Wealthier American tourists were not necessarily more positively received by young workers as was clear in the account of one young working-class woman who commented of her work at a high-end inn, “We have a lot of Americans come in . . . I don’t like dealing with them.”

Just as visiting Americans were racialized and classed, they were also gendered and sexualized. One female respondent, for example, described men from the United States as too “forward.” Two young women from working-class (interestingly both with kinship ties to the American side of the border) shared negative views about cross-border relationships, one claiming that “the American men . . . [at a club in Niagara Falls] have no shame; they’ll just grab you . . . we have a rule . . . don’t date American boys,” whereas the other (previously quoted regarding tips), who had worked in the bars in Niagara Falls, related how her own father told her “you’d better not bring home an American.” A male respondent, by contrast, referred to how his male friends would go “to all [the] ages club . . . where all the Americans come . . . for us that was the appeal . . . [there were] new people and we could kiss them, we could actually do things.”

These comments suggest cross-border relations were often constructed in sexualized ways. Such constructions coexisted with a significant Niagara “adult entertainment”/sex trade industry. While none of the interviewees described working in the commercial sex industry, some shared their annoyance at being repeatedly asked for directions to local strip clubs by visiting Americans (thereby being involuntarily drawn into an association, as unpaid “ambassadors,” with this aspect of cross-border tourism).

While constructions of Americans could be differentiated in ways that were regionalized, classed, racialized, gendered, and sexualized,
and while expressions of anti-Americanism were hedged in various ways, there was nonetheless, general agreement that visiting Americans were perceived to share nationalized traits that make them more difficult to deal with than other international visitors.

A Canadian-U.S. dual citizen, who had worked at a major attraction in Niagara Falls, for example, stated, “we always had the stereotypical joke about the pushy American customer and . . . the bad thing was, it was true.” Working in tourism, this interviewee added, meant encountering “a lot of different cultures” but while “you deal with people from everywhere . . . [Americans] are the most ignorant and the most disrespectful.” One lower-middle-class respondent, quoted earlier describing employment at the Niagara Parks Commission as a “Venus fly trap,” put the link between tourism-related employment and anti-Americanism starkly when she claimed that those who worked at the Niagara Parks Commission “really start to hate Americans after awhile.” Likewise, another male from a working-class background claimed that:

To grow up in Niagara Falls means that you worked in the tourism service sector which I think contributed to your hatred of Americans . . . surprisingly not other cultures, it was just Americans.

According to many of the accounts that linked tourist-related service employment to anti-Americanism, a central source of frustration revolved around money. An intensely narrated subtheme was that of monetary friction as interviewees described themselves and others that they knew bearing the brunt of tensions that resulted from U.S. visitors allegedly contesting exchange rates and resisting Canadian currency as change. As one working-class respondent, quoted earlier distinguishing between her experience of working in a bed and breakfast and retail, explained “It would be very stressful . . . you’d post a sign on the door . . . saying what the dollar’s at and it didn’t matter. They’d [American visitors] still want to change it [the posted exchange rate].” Another from an upper-middle-class background commented on how American visitors were “always asking, ‘If I give you American, will you give me American back?’ and how they got “ticked off” if they did not get U.S. currency back.

Interviewees objected to American visitors’ descriptions of Canadian currency as “monopoly” or “funny” money. One respondent, who elsewhere had distinguished between those from the southern states and those right across the border (where she herself had relatives), related her visceral reaction to being approached by American customers because, she claimed, she knew she would “have to sit there and listen
to them say things like ‘I don’t know what this funny toonie loonie [Canadian nickname for two and one-dollar coins] thing is.’” She added that she knew that she would have to “argue with them about their change . . . and why prices aren’t in American” and claimed “that’s from living around here and growing up around here.” This particular respondent expressed regret at her increased tendency to stereotype as a result (as she saw it) of her work experiences.

Stories of monetarized conflict point to what Zelizer calls “the intimate interplay between monetary transactions and the construction of social relations and meaning systems” (1998: 1376), and as Donnan and Wilson (1999: 119) note more specifically, cross-border shopping goes beyond interpersonal exchange to “group economic, political and social relations.”

The reported monetary behaviors of American visitors were described by interviewees as indicating a broader lack of appreciation of the significance of having crossed an international border rather than a pragmatic tourist economic strategy (e.g., resisting unfavorable exchange rates and attempting to reduce double exchange processes).

One respondent (with relatives on the other side and earlier quoted regarding not dating American boys) described her frustration with American visitors asking whether prices were “in American,” explaining how she wanted to say in reply, “You must have been sleeping at the border, didn’t they ask for your citizenship?” (a comment that problematizes American border crossers but also a Canadian border that apparently does not “wake them up”). The dual citizen from a professional family (quoted earlier regarding the “pushy” American stereotype) recalled how (at one major tourist attraction) “we would always have Americans very angry . . . that you couldn’t give them their own money back . . . I would always think ‘did they not think about this before they came over [the river]?’”

While there were monetary advantages to accepting American currency in the context of the lower Canadian dollar of the late 1990s and early 2000s (and some described their pleasure in receiving U.S. dollars in restaurant or room service tips because it was a “world currency” like “gold”), resentment was nonetheless expressed about a perceived lack of monetary reciprocity on the other side of the border. The interviewee who referred to American visitors “sleeping” at the border, complained that in New York state “they won’t even accept a Canadian penny, whereas we’ll take anything that’s American” (while the respondent who complained about U.S. references to the “toonie loonie thing” added, “[Americans] think they can just cross the border and use their money . . . but we can’t do it to them . . . they won’t even take Canadian pennies.”
“Monetary meanings,” Maurer points out, need to be located within both local and “wider transactional orders” (2006: 22). For these young people, regional and North American integration manifested itself most concretely in everyday transnationalism that included histories of extensive cross-border shopping as well as the experience of serving the flows of U.S. tourists coming the other way. The two were interconnected as low-paid employment in tourism-related jobs on the Canadian side led to efforts to stretch limited income, when possible, through selective purchasing on the U.S. side.

In this context, while U.S. visitors were critiqued for allegedly not respecting an ideal congruence between national territory and currency, “Americans” were also paradoxically faulted for precisely such congruence in allegedly not accepting Canadian currency in American territory. A perceived monetary asymmetry in transnational space was moreover invoked in ways that supported constructions of American visitors as arrogant and/or ignorant relative to Canadians, as interviewees portrayed the reluctance of U.S. visitors to accept Canadian currency as evidence of a nationalized tendency to disregard or not comprehend the reality of Canadian national space and sovereignty.13 American visitors “would insist on getting American change and not even realize they were in another country” said a working-class interviewee from Niagara Falls, “we just thought that they were brain dead or something.” Constructions of relative ignorance were further reinforced through the circulation of stories about Americans asking “where’s the snow” in the summer and/or inquiring about when the Falls were “turned off.”

Stronza has pointed out for other tourist settings how such “ethnic [in this case nationally]-based based humour” may be used “to ridicule tourists” allowing local residents to feel “empowered by interactions with outsiders” in ways that allow them “to redefine who they are and what aspects of their identity they wish to highlight or down-play”(2001: 272–273). Here stories about tourism-related employment constructed a symbolic boundary between negative American Others and an imagined more positive individual and collectivized Canadian Self. The interviewee quoted earlier who suggested that American visitors were the most “ignorant” and “disrespectful” recounted how “dealing with stupid questions [from American visitors] makes your ego go up a little bit more . . . I have a lot more [Canadian] patriotism than . . . when I was younger.” These young workers then partially countered the more challenging aspects of service work through an anti-Americanism that constructed boundaries of nationalized (but also regionalized, classed, racialized, gendered, and sexualized) difference and superiority in the context of asymmetrical host-guest as well as broader asymmetrical bilateral Canada-U.S. relations.
The politics of anti-Americanism

The interview accounts analyzed here show how in this particular borderland site, as Mackey has described more generally, Canadian national identity was “often shaped through comparison with, and demonization of, the United States” (Mackey 1999: 145), a phenomenon that appeared to be intensifying nation-wide during the period of 2001-2004 when the interviews were conducted.14 “Anti-Americanism” was in fact a potent political issue in the post 9/11 period and again surrounding the U.S. launch of the war on Iraq as right-wing opposition politicians decried the “anti-Americanism” of the governing liberals. In Niagara, a speech by Stephen Harper, then leader of the Canadian Alliance Party (later to be Conservative Prime Minister), attacked the liberals for “pandering to rank anti-Americanism . . . [that]. . .does not serve the interests of the Niagara peninsula” (“Relationship With U.S. Key Political Issue,” Niagara Falls Review, 13 September 2003).

The issue of anti-Americanism was also raised more in the context of tourism in Ontario government-sponsored Travel Intentions Studies, which began in 2003 with the goal of addressing the decline in visitors. A June 2004 report, for example, noted that the barriers to visiting Canada mentioned by the minority of surveyed Americans (who mentioned any issues at all), were, in descending order of importance, SARS, difficulty/delays at the border, terrorists (in Canada), and anti-Americanism (Ennamorato 2004: 33). “Anti-Americanism” reappeared in the spring 2005 report as the top issue prompting the author to comment, “There is growing sentiment in the U.S. that anti-Americanism is on the rise in Canada. This perception may, in fact, have supplanted SARS as the main impediment to growth in the U.S. source markets” (Ennamorato 2005: 77). By the summer of 2005 “anti-Americanism” was listed second (after border crossing concerns) in a finding that received some publicity being mentioned in an article in The Economist (“The Unfriendly Border,” The Economist, 27 August 2005).

The kind of everyday anti-Americanism highlighted by the young borderlanders interviewed here was less related to domestic or U.S. politics or policy (although there was some of this discussion elsewhere in the interviews) and more directly attributed by them to everyday encounters with visiting Americans in the specific context of tourism-related work. While the finding that a Canadian identity is linked to anti-Americanism is already well documented and critiqued (Granastein 1996), its everyday production and expression (including important articulating regionalized, classed, racialized, gendered,
sexualized exclusions and stratifications) have received less analytical attention. What this discussion offers is a closer examination of its expression in a specific time and place that provides insight into its production and reproduction among a particular stratum of young borderlanders.

The analysis offered here has followed the suggestion of many of the interviewees themselves, in linking the social relations of work experienced by young people in low-end cross-border tourism-linked employment, with the production and/or reproduction of a regional anti-American Canadianism. These subjectivities diverged from the pro-tourism boosterism of regional elites and were more specifically antithetical to the tourist industry’s “Come Stay With Friends” campaign. As such they posed a potential challenge to elite projects promoting cross-border tourism and regional integration.

The experiences and perceptions of these young people are of interest in light of wider debates about the Canadian economy, sovereignty, identity, and culture in the context of wider continental bi- and trilateral deep integration and securitization. Some Canadian nationalists may see in these young borderlander experiences and expressions potential support for efforts aimed at mobilizing a nationalist challenge to the supposedly “inevitable” further bi- and trilateral North American integration advocated by local, national, and continental elites (Gilbert 2005).

A more critical approach, however, could consider how the forms of anti-American Canadian nationalism uncovered here may work against recognition of and challenges to wider economic contradictions and (regional, classed/raced/gendered) inequalities of the Niagara borderland. More specifically, it may work against recognition of common positionings and interests that could support progressive cross-border and/or transnational movements “from below,” including those pertinent to tourism workers (e.g., the efforts of the union UNITE HERE to support hotel workers on both sides of the border in the context of a restructuring and globalizing industry; see www.unitehere.ca). One male respondent who explicitly linked border life, service work, and anti-Americanism described how his involvement in union activism and subsequent political education meant that while as a service worker he used to say “I hate Americans,” he now emphasized a “working class” rather than national identity but, he correctly suggested, his views would be “atypical” of my interviews.

Indeed, most interviewees demonstrated through their accounts, how their positioning as service workers in cross-border tourism produced and strengthened an exclusionary and essentialized nationalism that was articulated with axes of regionalism, class, race, gender,
and sexuality in ways that legitimized and reproduced exclusions and stratifications and obscured pan-border commonalities. Such subjectivities, while working against elite projects on the one hand, did not necessarily support alternative visions that might mobilize young people in support of alliances aimed at challenging the stratified securitizing borders or other inequalities of neoliberalizing capitalism in North America.

Conclusion

The interviews analyzed here reveal how young peoples’ positioning within a border economy increasingly reliant on tourism led them to articulate alternative narratives from the pro-tourism boosterism of regional elites. Their accounts are important insofar as they make visible differentiated experiences of the so-called “new economy” in Canadian Niagara. Their accounts also linked contingent tourism work to widespread anti-Americanism in Canadian Niagara. The strength of anti-American Canadian nationalism (as opposed to an incipient “North Americanness”) among young people who grew up with Free Trade and NAFTA, in a borderland that serves as a premier tourist destination and major trade and transportation corridor for North America (and a site for their own everyday forms of local transnationalism), demonstrates how localized globalization may be nationalized in ways that challenge simplistic claims of a “borderless” world. The accounts of these young borderlanders illuminate the need for more grounded studies that can begin to map out the complexity of the lived material realities and politics of border life and identity within an integrating and securitizing North America.

Notes

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1. This article is based on interviews gathered as part of a larger project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant 410-2001-0894. Earlier versions were presented at the 2007 American Sociological Association Meetings, 2007 American Anthropological Meetings, and at Brock University’s Child and Youth Studies Department colloquium 2008. The article has benefited greatly from the comments of the editors and anonymous reviewers for Identities. I thank research assistants, Katie Sutton, Jessica Craig

2. A total of 51 interviews were conducted from May 2001 to August 2004. Most were recruited through announcements in first- and second-year undergraduate courses and through signs posted on a university campus. Signs posted in community libraries were less successful as recruitment tools. This article is based on a subset of 39 interviews conducted with white working- to upper-middle-class university students who grew up on the Canadian side of the border and who were born between 1976 and 1985. For this cohort the inception of the Canada-U.S.1989 Free Trade Agreement coincided with their middle childhood to early teen years, and the 1994 adoption of NAFTA paralleled their late childhood to late teen years and by September 2001 they were in their late teens to mid-twenties. Of the 39 interviewees, 17 had grown up in Niagara Falls, 6 in Port Erie, and 8 in either Niagara-on-the-Lake, Queenston, or Chippawa. The remaining eight were from communities a little farther away from the border such as Port Colborne, Welland, Thorold, Fenwick, and St. Catharines. All were Canadian (and in some cases dual) citizens. Two of the 39 were interviewed prior to 11 September 2001. Respondents are described here as being from an upper-middle-class background if at least one parent was described as having university education and/or occupation that required such a credential. Those described as being from a lower-middle-class background reported at least one parent as having some form of postsecondary education or training or occupation requiring such education or training. Respondents described here as being from a working-class background reported parents with partial college, completed high school or partial high school education, and/or corresponding occupations. The interviews analyzed here are numbered as follows: 3, 5, 7–9, 11–13, 15–16, 18–19, 22, 24–29, 31–37, 39–51.

3. In the 1990s the then NDP provincial government responded to a loss of manufacturing jobs and cross-border shopping in the United States by launching the Niagara Gateway Project aimed at facilitating “the development of a tourism development strategy which would position the Niagara Region as a high-yielding, year-round, world-class tourist destination” (Jackson 2003: 441).


Critics, however, point out how reconciling an apparent contradiction between integration and securitization through investment in surveillance practices and technologies is producing deeply stratified cross-border mobilities; for example, creating a “fast track” for some who find their cross-border mobility facilitated and a “gated globe” for others who find new barriers placed in their path (Cunningham 2004; Sparke 2006). Such insights link up with broader questions of how changing North American borders are linked to a politics of differentiated and unequal citizenship (see Gilbert 2007; Sharma 2006; Bhandar 2004).

6. The claims to be supporting postsecondary education were important in a region that is well below the provincial average of residents with university degrees (see http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/economy/demographics/census/cenhi06-10.pdf [accessed 30 May 2008]).


9. Hickey’s study conducted in conjunction with the union UNITE HERE! documents the Niagara hotel workers experience of “low wages, intense productivity pressures, seasonal work, and serious risks of occupational injuries” (2008: 4). He suggests, however, that tourism can be organized in such a way that workers and communities receive greater benefits. He uses the example of Las Vegas to argue for “cooperative union-management relations, human resource practices that invest in training of front line workers, and broader community efforts to address problems related to transportation and affordable housing” (2008: 4).

10. Hjalager’s (uncritical) discussion (2007) challenges claims by the industry that “tourism is an exception, an industry where global mechanisms and consequences do not come fully into play” (2007: 439). She quotes Danish industry spokespersons who use this argument to leverage public money for tourism promotion (2007: 439) but demonstrates how, as with many other globalizing industries, “one of the main driving forces for the fragmentation of the value chain is the substitution of costly labor inputs” especially in First World tourist sites (2007: 447).

11. The strength of a negative nationalized construction of Americans, however, was clear when this same interviewee told a story about his experiences working in retail that distinguished one American customer from other Americans on the basis of this customer’s praise for Canada and Canadians: “Alot of Americans come in [to a retail outlet] and they’re jerks, [but] one will come in. . .[like] this one old guy came in and said, ‘Oh, I love your country, you guys are the best’ and all those things. ‘Well, thank you very much.’ I told him ‘it’s nice to have a good person come in and say that.”’

12. The suggestion of general proscriptions against cross-border dating relations was belied by the presence of many dual citizens with American parents in the Canadian border region. Nationalized and gendered constructions of sexuality have been documented in many tourist as well as border settings (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 91–5, 143–8; Vila 2005; Campbell 2007). Dubinsky’s (1999) history of the honeymoon industry at Niagara Falls offers a good analysis of constructions of heterosexuality at this site though she says little about the significance of the border setting.
13. See Helleiner (2006) on Canadian currency and nationalism. Timothy (2006: 13) comments on how some borders act as transit sites and may (in ways similar to airports) be constructed by those passing through, as “non-places” or “place-less spaces.” His further comment that “many Americans visiting Mexican border towns would be unlikely to claim that they have been to Mexico” (ibid) may have parallels for American tourists experiences of Canadian Niagara. The Canadian borderlanders interviewed constructed their home (not transit) border space as nationalized.

14. A wider context for the findings of this article is offered by surveys of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which noted that “Among America’s traditional allies, the one whose opinion of this country and its foreign policy has declined most markedly in the past three years is Canada. In addition, Canadians have a generally more negative view of American character traits than do the publics of other traditional U.S. allies” (Pew Research Center 2005: 15).

References


