

Teaching History Across Borders: The Collaboration Between York and Arizona State Universities

by Susan Gray and Colin Coates

Our story begins in the spring of 2006, when Adrian Shubert, then Associate Vice- President International and a member of the History Department at York University, arrived in the then ASU History Department looking, Diogenes-like, for faculty interested in Canada.¹ Adrian was visiting Arizona as part of a collaboration involving ASU, York, and the University of Mexico through NACTS, the North American Center for Transborder Studies at ASU, and he wanted to explore the possibility of the two history departments working together on comparative North American and transborder Canadian/U.S. projects. Because Susan Gray's work has long focused on the Great Lakes region and has a transborder dimension, she was delighted to meet with Adrian over a long lunch, at the end of which he invited her to York later in the spring to meet faculty who might share her newly-aroused interest in collaboration. After several days of intense conversation at York with a number of faculty, Gray brought back to ASU a list of potential recruits to the project and the notion that teams from the two universities might together create a year-long seminar on the U.S./Canadian borderlands for faculty and graduate students that would be offered for graduate credit.

Over the fall of 2006, Team ASU (Don Fixico, Paul Hirt, Dirk Hoerder, the late Chris Harzig, and Gray) drafted a proposal for a team-taught graduate seminar, to be taught over the 2007-08 academic year, on the Canadian/U.S. border and borderlands as representation and experience, organized around such topics as relations between Aboriginal and non-Native peoples, migration, environment, women and gender, and policy and politics. The team envisioned a variety of pedagogical settings, including shared electronic platforms, videoconferences, at least two face-to-face meetings, and the invention of Alexander Graham Bell. The ASU faculty had little notion of the logistics of such an ambitious plan — not even how the academic calendars of the two universities differed from one another — and no idea how to pay for the scheme. Of course, they ignored all of these details, and sent off their proposal to Adrian and Marcel Martel, then Director of the Graduate Program in History at York. In January of 2007, York came back to Team ASU, applauding their initiative, but arguing strenuously for a pilot course for the fall semester of 2007. Colin Coates of Glendon College, whom Gray had met the previous spring, would be teaching for the first time a seminar on North American environmental history. Could an ASU faculty member teach this course with him? For a number of reasons, that someone turned out to be Susan Gray. Gray makes no claims to being an environmental historian, but does have expertise in the area of cultural landscapes, the very approach that Coates had intended to take in his seminar.

There then began one of the longest and most intense periods of course preparation that either Coates or Gray had ever experienced. We did not know each other; we had no financial support, although plenty of good will, from York and ASU; and we were clueless about a myriad of institutional incompatibilities. These last ranged from serious discrepancies between academic calendars; a three-hour difference in time zones that changed to a two-hour difference midway through the semester, making fraught the scheduling of the course in real time; a polite, but deadly, competition between ASU and York IT; and reconciling the budgets we were awarded by our respective universities, which did not pay for the same things. With regard to this last, we do not wish to protest too much. It must be here stated that without the generous support of Adrian Shubert at York, and then Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at ASU, Alan Artibise, the pilot course would have died without having lived. Adrian encouraged our collaboration from the beginning, and Alan, himself a Canadian, needed no persuading that studying the U.S. border with Canada was as worthy an endeavor as examining its southern counterpart with Mexico.

Despite this administrative support, the complications involved in mounting the pilot course proved real and hugely time-consuming. Preparing the actual substance of the course, in contrast, proved easy, fun, and wholly engrossing. The dialogue that Coates and Gray began with a phone call back in February 2007 carried right into the classroom that fall, where we greeted ten remarkable students, who simply plunged into a well-established conversation.

In organization, our course was straightforward, moving chronologically from aboriginal landscapes and the environmental exchange between Europe and North America, to the environmental impact of non-aboriginal settlers on the continent. Along with biological changes arising from population growth and resource use, we also considered attitudes towards certain kinds of landscape, such as "wilderness" and rural and urban areas. Our rule of thumb for choosing readings was a ruthless egalitarianism; each week we considered pairs of Canadian and U.S. readings that addressed common themes in relation to different parts of the continent. Thus, for a week devoted to Aboriginal landscapes, we paired Julie Cruikshank's *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters and Social Imagination* with Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*.

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¹ The ASU History Department has since become part of the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies.

Just as the greatest reward for Coates and Gray proved to be our shared intellectual engagement in constructing the syllabus and co-teaching, so for the students the excitement came from working together. For we not only shared a virtual classroom, but we paired ASU and York students together to write papers, telling them to use any medium at their disposal to communicate with one another. By the time we met face-to-face in Arizona for a field trip to the Grand Canyon (led by Paul Hirt, one of whose research interests is the Grand Canyon as a cultural landscape), the conversation was in full flow. By the time ASU visited York and Niagara Falls the following month, we were old friends, who could not be shut up. In retrospect, Coates and Gray suppose that what they did in the pilot course of the ASU/York collaboration constituted high risk pedagogy, but it did not feel that way at the time. Instead, the pilot course felt like something worth our best efforts.

So worthwhile, indeed, that we determined to pursue an even more ambitious scheme for teaching across borders. During the 2008-09 academic year, Gray and Dirk Hoerder at ASU worked with Coates and his York colleague, Carolyn Podruchny, to mount in 2009-10 a year-long seminar on the Canadian/U.S. borderlands. In preparing this seminar, Canadian and American perspectives came into play in ways they had not done during the run-up to the pilot course. For example, it very much mattered for what we taught and how we taught it, that ASU is located near the border with Mexico. Indeed, the U.S./Mexico border proved a constant presence in our considerations of the Canadian/U.S. borderlands.

Once we realized that this would be the case, we decided to bring the border with Mexico explicitly into the course through assigned readings and a field trip to southern Arizona that included the Tohono O'odham nation, which is bisected by the U.S./Mexico border. (On the ASU trip to Ontario, we visited the Six Nations near Brantford, where historian Keith Jamieson discussed the contemporary implications of Jay's Treaty for First Nations people wishing to cross the border.)

At ASU we found ourselves faced with any number of queries of varying degrees of explicitness about *why* we were bothering with the Canadian/U.S. borderlands when we *could* be studying the equivalent in the Southwest. "Your course is great," Hoerder and Gray frequently heard, "but why don't you . . ."? Pragmatic or parochial considerations explain only some, but far from all, of these inquiries. For Americans, we came quickly to understand, the border with Mexico is *the* problem, while the border with Canada is, well, just "there"; just as Canada is, well, just an extension of "us." To our dismay, we found this attitude flourishing among the American students in the seminar, the several hailing from Michigan being especially forceful on this point.

From the perspective of the ASU faculty (one of whom is also from Michigan!), one of the most engaging aspects of the borderlands seminar was in blowing up this complacency. To paraphrase Sheila McManus: a border divides, but it may or may not separate, and the extent to which it does so changes with

people, politics, and material circumstances over time. Thus, one of the central questions of the seminar became: when and why do borders matter? This consideration took us far beyond the geopolitical history of the physical boundary between Canada and the United States.

Thinking about when and why borders matter necessarily engages national historiographies in provocative ways. Borderlands courses are not only transnational; they are inherently comparative, and therefore they encourage us to strive toward a truly continental understanding of North American history. Potentially, in other words, they force U.S. historians out of their tendency to equate the history of the nation-state with that of the continent. Such an attitude is as institutional as is it reflexive. At ASU, Gray and Hoerder are members of the North American Field Committee in the Graduate Program in History. But except for the two seminars with our York colleagues, ASU offers no "North American" graduate courses that are truly continental in scope.

To find their national historiographies so foundational and problematic came as something of a surprise to both ASU and York faculty and students. The York students, of course, had read more U.S. history than their ASU counterparts had read Canadian history. At the outset, however, all of the students were quite confident that they both knew their own histories and that they had a good idea about history on the other side of the border. Thinking about the Canadian/U.S. borderlands forced them, again and again throughout the year, to reevaluate what they thought they knew about their respective national histories. It did for the faculty as well.

To engage in the study of borderlands is to enter into a lively historiographical and theoretical debate over the importance of liminal geographies and interstitial inventiveness. Our students were apt to remind us that we professors used the concept of borderlands in a number of different ways — reflecting in part a historiography which often engages with borderlands concepts more by implication than directly. Indeed, the course raised issues about why borderlands is not a common theme in Canadian history. As Canadian historians all know, about one-fifth of the Canadian population in 1901 lived in the United States. The links between the two countries were through the force of sheer numbers cultural, economic and genealogical, as they had been long before and remain to this day.

If one takes a narrow view of borderlands as the area in fairly close proximity to the international boundary — let's say 100 km — the vast majority of the Canadian people are borderland populations. Does this nearness mean that much of Canadian history can be understood as having taken place in an interstitial space, with escape, or markets, or inspirations, or fears only a short trip away? This is not normally the way that Canadian historians approach their subject matter. And what does it mean that so much of the American population is not located in the same borderlands space? As Steven High's study of deindustrialization in the Great Lakes region during the 1970s and early

1980s so eloquently points out, American workers had a much harder time capturing the imagination of government elites, while Canadian workers were much more successful, with dramatically different consequences for working conditions on either side of the border.

Challenging students and faculty to think beyond the nation-state forces us all to consider the moments when the nation-state matters and the times when it has little significance. More practically, it requires some familiarity with both national histories and geographies. And it requires a good bit of financing, if we wish to take students from one location to the other. In the case of the second iteration of the course, the International Council for Canadian Studies generously supported the initiative. Along

with support from York University's International Office and from the Dean's office at ASU, the ICCS funds made the two field trips possible, and allowed the students on both sides of the border to establish a deep connection to their colleagues in the other institution. From the student feedback, among the key achievements of the course were that it forced them "out of their comfort zone" and gave them an added sense of responsibility. As faculty, we like to think that a cross-border course, similar to borderlands themselves, is a creative and inspiring place for engaging the history of two countries.



The Prize Ceremonies drew a large crowd.

La remise des prix a attiré une foule nombreuse



*John Lutz chairing the session
"Telling our Stories: Indigenous
Narratives"*

*John Lutz animant la séance « Raconter
nos histoires : Narrations indigènes »*