Discourse, Identity, and “Homeland as Other” at the Borderlands

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A critical reading of the relationships between social identity theory and the shifting national identities of immigrants residing in a borderland region illustrates the processes involved in linking identity construction, international migration, and context. This spatially grounded discursive study builds on the notion that identities are constructed not only as attachments to particular places or nations, and an eagerness to grasp and hold onto dominant ideologies, but also as disidentifications with other peoples and places. Canada is now home to the largest number of U.S.-born immigrants in more than two-and-a-half decades. The northward movement of war resisters, draft dodgers, and others from the United States to Canada during the Vietnam War years was the largest politically motivated outmigration of U.S. citizens in history. In more recent years, political and economic migrants (including soldiers avoiding the war in Iraq) continue to leave the United States for permanent residency in Canada. They are attracted by their perceptions of Canada’s more liberal political system, multicultural policies, support of gay and lesbian rights, prosperous real estate market, and universal health care. Using multimodal discourse analysis, this article reads and reports on data from narrative interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended survey questionnaires to analyze identity construction in a borderland region.

Key Words: Canada–U.S. border, discourse, identity, immigration, war resisters.

Una lectura crítica acerca de las relaciones existentes entre la teoría de la identidad social y las cambiantes identidades nacionales de inmigrantes ubicados en una región fronteriza, ilustra los procesos implicados en el eslabonamiento de la construcción de identidad, la migración internacional y el contexto. Este estudio discursivo, orientado espacialmente, trabaja a partir de la noción de que las identidades se construyen no solo por el apego a ciertos lugares o naciones y un anhelo de suscribir y mantenerse fiel a ideologías dominantes, sino también mediante el cese de la identificación con otros pueblos y lugares. Por más de dos y media décadas, Canadá ha sido el país de origen de más inmigrantes nacidos en EE.UU. Durante los años de la Guerra de Vietnam, el desplazamiento de opositores a la guerra, fugitivos del reclutamiento militar y otros, desde Estados Unidos al Canadá, fue la más grande emigración de ciudadanos americanos de la historia, motivada políticamente. En años más recientes, migrantes políticos y económicos (incluyendo soldados desertores de la guerra en Irak), siguen dejando los Estados Unidos por la residencia permanente en Canadá. Estos migrantes son atraídos por percepciones que les hacen ver al Canadá dotado de un sistema político más liberal, con políticas multiculturalas, apoyo a los derechos de homosexuales y lesbianas, próspero mercado de bienes raíces y un servicio de salud universal. Mediante el uso de análisis de discurso multimodal, este artículo lee y reporta con base en datos producidos por entrevistas narrativas, discusiones de grupos focales y levantamientos a partir de cuestionarios de respuesta abierta, para analizar la construcción de identidad en una región fronteriza. Palabras clave: frontera Canadá-EEUU, discurso, identidad, inmigración, opositores de guerra.
Canada should be a refuge from militarism.

—Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1969, as cited in Kutty 2006)

If Canada were ever in armed conflict with the United States, it would be the only instance where I would commit a violent act. I would try and protect this country from a way of life that I left.

—Derr, U.S. immigrant in Canada, as cited in Emerick (1972, 136)

The 49th parallel is both a metaphor and a reality.

—Bruno Ramirez (2001, ix)

It was a sudden, life-changing moment. After attending an antiwar rally in downtown San Diego in 1969, twenty-three-year-old Beth made the decision to leave her home in southern California to relocate to Canada. Although she had a young child at home and her husband was a strong supporter of the military (and had recently returned from active duty in Vietnam), there seemed no other way to reconcile her strong feelings of estrangement from her own country and family. After yet another politically inspired argument with her husband who assumed she would leave and then return home to the United States in a short time, Beth left her four-year-old daughter behind and headed north.

Three days later, Beth crossed the Canadian–U.S. border in a borrowed van. Canadian border guards waved her through after taking a quick look at her California driver's license and asking about her final destination in British Columbia: the small town of Nelson in the Kootenay Mountains, a place she had heard about from a friend in San Diego. Like many of the almost 100,000 other men and women who left their homeland to build a new life north of the Canadian–U.S. border during the Vietnam War years, this hopeful migrant soon thereafter began to identify herself as “100 percent Canadian.”

This U.S. migrant is part of a larger story of an ongoing flow of products, services, money, and bodies in both directions across the Canadian–U.S. border that began more than two centuries ago. The migration of war resisters from the United States to Canada during and immediately after the Vietnam War years was the largest politically motivated outmigration of people in the history of the United States. More recently, the largest number of “Americans” residing in Canada in twenty-six years was recorded in the 2006 Canadian census. Today immigrants make up more than 20 percent of Canada’s total population with more than a million of these new Canadians born in the United States. Although the arrival of war resisters from the United States that began almost four decades ago has been documented by other scholars (e.g., Harvey 1991; Hagan 2000, 2001; Messamore 2004; Jones 2005), to date, very little has been said about the migration of U.S. residents to Canada in more recent years.

The processes involved in shaping the shared national identities of U.S.-born immigrants in Canada have not yet been documented or analyzed in any detail. This is especially surprising because a large literature exists on the importance of defining, analyzing, and questioning the meaning of Canadian identity in general (e.g., Inglehart, Nevitte, and Basanez 1996; Mackey 1999; Manning 2003; Hillmer and Chapnick 2007; Taras, Bakardjieva, and Pannekoek 2007; Cormier 2008). This large body of work on Canadian national identity ranges from generalized commentaries to stereotypical characterizations, but very little actually measures and tests specific aspects of Canadian versus American identities to learn more about (1) the connections between constructions of self and nation, (2) the impact of a “reverse othering” process on migrant identity, or (3) the imagined differences between the two nations.

This article is based on data gathered and analyzed from a provincial-level case study on politically and economically motivated Americans who relocated to Canada from the Vietnam War years to the present. The overarching goal of our work is to help fill two major gaps in the literature to date: documenting and analyzing the processes involved in the identity construction of international immigrants that integrates discursive findings on self, nation, and perceptions of the other; and analyzing the experiences of a primarily white group of immigrants who reside in close proximity to their former homeland, most of whom very rapidly adopt and express the norms, values, and political views of their new place of residence. Our story of the Canadianization of immigrants from the United States in Canada provides a counterpoint to the much larger body of published work that examines the transnational relationships of other North American immigrant groups. Our findings on the very rapid emergence of a strong sense of being Canadian among American immigrants in Canada provide a testing ground related to understanding more about how the formation of a new national identity is speeded up and urged along by a distinctive type of othering process—the “othering of homeland.” We found that, rather than U.S. migrant identities being
constructed as transnational blends of values and identities from their homeland along with the national identity of their new place of residence (as in the case of many transnational immigrant groups), being and becoming Canadian, in contrast, is best understood as no longer perceiving oneself as American.

We are indebted to the large body of prior work on national identity in borderlands regions accomplished by geographers and scholars in other related fields. Although we cannot begin to discuss the entirety of all of this foundational work on national identity in this one short article, what we hope to do here is achieve a reweaving of identity theory within the borderlands context. Therefore, rather than repeating much-used arguments related to supporting or refuting the disappearance of political boundaries in an era of globalization (or, as Agnew argues, the creation of borders as “othering” versus borders as “borrowing”), our aim here is to interrogate the experiences of voluntary migrants who cross an international border long perceived as open and welcoming to the arrival of immigrants from the United States and elsewhere (Agnew 2007, 399). Most of these predominately white immigrants from the United States continue to reside in close proximity to their homeland in towns and cities located just north of the Canadian–U.S. border.

The methods used for this article merge a discursive microscale analysis of comparative identity salience as expressed through migrant stories. We pay particular attention to the borderland context of immigrant resettlement. Key to our approach is revealing and bringing together individual and group plots lines or “master narratives” to illustrate and document how identity is constituted between nuanced textual layers. The use of narrative interviews, in particular, elicited extended verbal accounts of a person’s life, memories of migration, and perceptions about one’s own sense of belonging. Following the lead of McAdams (1993) and other social psychologists, we asked interviewees to think about their lives as a series of chapters in a book and then to identify and tell stories about key events in their migration experiences. Unlike semistructured interviews (whereby people’s storytelling is often considered a distraction), narrative interviews have the capacity to ask ultimate questions related to personal identity. This discursive approach proved more useful than more traditional interview formats, especially when partnered with information gleaned, coded, and analyzed from open-ended survey questionnaires and focus group discussions. Throughout this article, we heed Silvey and Lawson’s (1999, 129) call for the importance of maintaining the inseparability of theorizing our findings, interpretation of our data, and the process of “doing research.”

Social Identity Theory and Othering

To theorize the construction of immigrant identities, it is first necessary to resolve three key theoretical questions. First, how has social identity theory been defined and used by psychologists and other scholars to understand the processes involved in the creation of personal identities as they relate to group identities? Second, how do individual and group identities relate to the construction of national identity in borderland regions? Third, what have scholars, journalists, politicians, and policymakers said about some of the ways that Canadian identity differs from American identity—and how can this list of signifiers best be understood to learn more about the rapid Canadianization of new immigrants? These theoretical questions and issues can all too easily become mired in chaos due to their complexity. As we discuss later, perhaps none is more chaotic (and prone to stereotyping) than attempting to define the differences and similarities between Canadian and American national identities.

The concept of personal and group identity has been discussed at length and overburdened with ambiguity since it first began to appear in the academic literature. According to social psychologists, identities are meanings one attributes to oneself and social products that are formed and maintained through the social processes of naming or locating oneself in recognizable categories (Foote 1951; Stryker 1968; Burke and Reitzes 1981). Naming implies ongoing interaction with others and regular idea exchange (McCall and Simmons 1966). Second, identities are self-meanings that are formed to accommodate particular situations and contexts (Stryker 1968). Third, identities are based on maintaining and defining the similarities and differences of an individual’s perceptions, values, and roles as compared to the related or counterroles of others (Lindesmith and Strauss 1956). Fourth, identities are reflexive and symbolic and, therefore, meanings come to be understood most clearly through performativity during interaction with others. As such, “in order to be (some identity), one must act like (some identity). In order to not be (some other identity), one must not act like (that other identity)” (Burke and Reitzes 1981, 90). At its most basic level, then, identity is how we make sense of ourselves, along with all the subjective
feelings associated with everyday consciousness as they are embedded in wider sets of social relations. Taken as a whole, this view of identity is particularly important in our work because an examination of individual experiences at the microlevel lies at the heart of our discursive analysis of the immigrant experience.

In an effort to learn more about the processes involved in constructing individual and group identities, social identity theory was developed by psychologists in the late 1950s (see especially the work of Tajfel 1959). The basic idea behind social identity theory is that a social category (e.g., gender, race, religion, nationality, political affiliation) “into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is” (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995, 259).

Social identity theory (with its emphasis on social categories such as nationality) proved helpful during our study in understanding more about how national identities emerge out of self-identities. Social identity theorists such as Burke (1980, 1991) consider identities as responsive to differing contexts and thus are constructed and reconstructed by relationships with others in the group, as opposed to those who are located outside the group. In work that mirrors our own in many ways, psychologists Hogg, Terry, and White (1995, 265) found that:

Being Australian in the United States, for instance, can vary in chronic importance from person to person, and the meaning and behavioral prescriptions of this identity can vary as a function of changing intergroup relations between Australia and the United States. Furthermore, immediate contextual factors...will influence what aspect of Australian identity is prescribed.

The importance of a personal sense of insiderness and outsidersness in identity construction permeates the literature on social identity. According to the view of social psychologists adhering to this approach, an individual’s identity is most often defined in contrast to the identity of some other person or place. Rejection of this omnipresent other, they argue, is one of the primary tenets of identity construction. Perceptions of the foreign (and often unacceptable) other have been analyzed by numerous writers who argue that establishing a distinct identity in Western cultures is often more about what one is not rather than what one is (see Said 1978 for one of the earliest discussions of this process). Our work suggests that othering is especially keen for immigrants residing in borderland regions because perceptions of “us” versus “them” frame their everyday lives, experiences, and identities. In a very real sense, then, identities arise because of difference and are relational. Laclau (1990) refers to this immigrant positionality as being perpetually on the “constitutive outside.”

Social identity theory is particularly useful in understanding the immigrant experience because cognitively categorizing the self as a member of various social categories that are either ingroups or outgroups accentuates one’s similarity or dissimilarity from others. According to Hogg, Terry, and White (1995, 261), this “self categorization effectively brings self perception into line with the contextually relevant group prototype, and thus transforms individuals into group members and individuality into group behavior.” Because a prototype is defined by psychologists as the subjective representation of an identity’s defining attributes (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, perceptions of nation), this concept effectively captures the context-dependent aspects of an individual and group’s membership in various social categories such as nationality (see Fiske and Taylor 1991). In addition, because the saliency of social identity rests on individual responses to different contexts, once the perceived differences or similarities with other members of a group are activated, groups organize themselves around contextually relevant prototypes. These are then used to help define the differences and similarities among their own ingroup and other outgroups, maximizing both separateness from other social groups and internal group cohesion.

It is also important to note, as Keith and Pile (1993, 28) remind us, that identity is always an incomplete process and “at times...this process is stopped to reveal an identity that is akin to a freeze-frame photograph of a race horse at full gallop. It may be a true representation of the moment, but, by the very act of freezing, it denies the presence of movement.” Identity construction, therefore, is a constantly changing process rather than a final outcome. In sum, identities are best defined “as process, as performance, and as provisional, and thus are always fractured internally and externally multiple” (Bondi 1993, 97).

National Identity

Geographers and other scholars have been engaged in an ongoing debate for the past two decades or so about the importance of analyzing the impacts of socially constructed political boundaries in today’s rapidly
globalizing world (e.g., Murphy 1994, 1999; Shapiro and Alker 1996; Helliwell 1998; Newman and Paasi 1998; Paasi 1999, 2005; Perkmann and Sum 2002; Newman 2006). This ongoing work arguing for and against the importance of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization brought on by globalization processes has important implications for understanding the construction of national identities in borderland regions. Some viewpoints suggest that distinctive nation states will ultimately disappear because of globalization, thus challenging the whole concept and validity of political boundaries (e.g., Ohmae 1990, 1995). Other scholars argue that although states operate in a global context, they will continue to remain as the central, primary agents of identity for both individuals and groups. This does not mean, however, that political boundaries will remain forevermore as fixed lines on the ground that demarcate difference, but rather that they are contextual phenomena and can “vary from alienated to co-existent, or from independent borderlands to integrated ones” (Paasi 1999, 71). In this view, Paasi continues, “boundaries are not merely divisions shown on a map, but above all, are manifestations of social practice and discourse, shaped by processes that exist in the midst of socio-cultural action and discourses” (75). These fluid border discourses not only shape social practice, they also play important roles in helping shape both individual and national identities. As a result, political boundaries, and the identities they help construct, are best viewed as situational and contextual. As identities take shape, being part of an ingroup and not part of an outgroup becomes particularly critical in expressing and maintaining a new identity, especially at international borders (Kaplan and Herb 1999, 1). Identifying with a particular territory is the most important of various types of social identities and overrides claims of other attachments and allegiances (Emerson 1960). Indeed, identifying with a nation or state helps clarify the mix of other identities based on other attributes such as gender, ethnicity, language, and religion that help link the shared cultures and social bonds among its members.

Kaplan (1994) refers to the connections among the identities of individuals as defined by certain territorial and political allegiances as spatial identities. In this view, territory both situates and bounds national identity, thereby setting it apart from other outsider groups and linking insider members to each other and to their state or nation. Kaplan specifies three distinctive spatial identities based on differing scales of analysis: (1) identity based on the state controlling its territory, (2) identity based on the nation that the occupants most identify with, and (3) a borderland identity generated by both the occupants of the region and the symbolism of the borderland itself. Such borderland identities might evolve into a transnational blending of the characteristics common to territories and nationalities located on one or both sides of a boundary; conversely, they might reflect separate ethnoregional identities unique to a particular borderland.

As compared to the hostilities of borderlands at contested sites in other parts of the world today, the formation of the national identities of immigrants residing near the Canadian–U.S. borderlands would seem to represent a distinct anomaly. This longest peaceful international border in the world (as it often called) separates two nation states that, in general terms, share common languages, religions, ethnicities, races, and ideologies. Perceptions of these cultural, social, economic, and political commonalities have the potential to either encourage or obfuscate the creation of a blended transnational borderland identity among immigrants. A consideration of the individual and group identities of English-speaking, primarily white, U.S.-born migrants who reside near the Canadian border would then, seem an unlikely topic to test processes involved in identity construction. However, despite misconceptions about the perceived similarities of Canadian and U.S. identities, our findings indicate that the majority of U.S.-born migrants in Canada do not claim transnational identities despite the dual citizenship many maintain. Instead, the vast majority declare themselves as “100 percent Canadians” as they seek out and quickly embrace their perceived “Canadian imaginary.”

Attention to multiscalar differences in identity formation is also critically important to our analysis. According to Mlinar (1992), individuals and groups often feel most attached to (identify with, are loyal to) their own small-scale communities or neighborhoods. In addition, they are also greatly influenced by attachments and identification with the most powerful and largest scale system in which they are embedded, the nation state. Although Mlinar’s work has important implications for understanding how individual identities are shaped and (re)shaped from local to national scales, his work fails to document and discuss the precise processes involved in interrelating the formation of new identities at these two scalar extremes. This article helps fill this gap in the literature on identity, scale, and context at the borderlands.
Constructing a Canadian National Identity

As white scholars who were born and reside in the United States, we are well aware that our outsider status makes attempting to define Canadian national identity an especially challenging task. Our goal, therefore, is not to make a significant new contribution to defining a national discourse that is not our own. Rather, we wish to provide a few of the most often cited characteristics of Canadian versus American identity suggested by other scholars, journalists, and politicians to help foreground our analysis of immigrant identity at the borderlands.

An attempt to construct an authentic, differentiated, and bounded Canadian national identity has been central to the project of Canadian nationbuilding in both historic and contemporary time periods. Despite efforts to foster national identity building at the federal level in Canada that began with the “Canada First” movement in the nineteenth century up to the ever more activist efforts at defining what it means to be Canadian that emerged in the 1960s, it has long been difficult to precisely define Canadian national identity (Melnyk 2004). Canada as a nation, in fact, has grappled with this issue to an extent perhaps unequaled in other industrialized democracies. As scholars, policymakers, and the Canadian media have expressed often, many contradictions and ambiguities in the cultural politics of Canadian identity remain today (see, for example, Granatstein and Hillmer 1991; Thompson and Randall 1994; Earl and Worth 1995).

The search for a definition of Canadian national identity has been confounded by the struggle to remain separate from the world power to the south; enormous internal diversity that, from the beginning, included English Canada, French Canada, and diverse First Nations’ peoples; the impact of continuous waves of immigration; and a strong and lingering sense of regionalism with individual provinces each having distinct histories, identities, and economies (Cormier 2008). From the beginning, Canada “had no common language, cultural tradition, or religion, attributes that nationalists the world over have... nor was there a cohesive national history that could be appealed to or reinvented” (Hillmer and Chapnick 2007, 5).

To avoid becoming absorbed in the American sphere or identified by outsiders as being much like the United States, national identity in Canada is primarily shaped by a comparison with (and demonization of) the United States (Widdis 1997; Hart and Dymond 2001). Canadian scholar Eva Mackey (1999), however, found that Canadian perceptions of Americans as flag-waving, law-
federalism involving patriation of the Constitution and
a new Charter of Rights (Guibernau 2006). Trudeau's
vision of Canada was especially defined by his strong
support of multiculturalism (claimed by Québécois as
an attempt to mitigate their nationalist claims and the
bilingual and bicultural Canadian constitution). More
recently, scholars have critiqued Canada's multicultur-
alism as having a negative impact on the consolid-
ation of a pan-Canadian identity, suggesting that it has
(Guibernau 2006):

- Widened the gulf between English Canada and
French Canada.
- Robbed Canadian culture of any real set of core
values.
- Undermined the status of the French language and
French culture because, for many English Canadi-
ans, bilingualism has evolved into multilingualism.
- Added to the notion that multicultural Canada can
best be distinguished from the melting pot model
espoused by the United States.

Immediately after the failure of the Meech Lake ef-
fort in 1990 that sought to recognize Quebec's status in
Canada as a distinct society within a nation, Prime Min-
ister Brian Mulroney commissioned a national study
of Canadian identity. This effort, part of the govern-
ment's Citizen's Forum on Canada's Future, asked more
than a million Canadians (including Québécois, En-
glish Canadians, immigrants, and First Nations' peo-
ple) to define the core values of being Canadian as
follows (Spicer 1991):

- A belief in equality and fairness in a democratic
society—meaning respect for all minorities.
- A belief in consultation and dialogue, both between
government and citizens and among various groups
of citizens.
- A belief in accommodation and tolerance—the leg-
endary Canadian belief in compromise.
- A commitment to diversity—our belief that the more
we emphasize our differences, the more we will feel
united.
- An abiding compassion and generosity—our deep
attachment to Canada's social safety nets of universal
health care and pensions.
- A respect for Canada's natural beauty—embracing
both environmentalism and awe for the grandeur of
our great empty land.
- Canada's world image of being committed to free-
dom, peace, and nonviolent change.

In contrast to these rather utopian views of Canadian
identity, a number of Canadian writers have argued that
Canadian society continues to be internally fractured.
"The threat of disintegration that hangs over Canada by
reason of the 'Quebec problem,' is simply an extreme
instance of other fault lines running throughout the
country. Canada lacks the internal unity that America
has long enjoyed because of its revolutionary beginnings
and its declared commitment to a specific set of self-
evident truths" (Madison, Fairfield, and Harris 2000,
12).

One of the most controversial attempts to compare
Canadian and American identities involves the of-
ten cited ideas of a U.S. sociologist, Seymour Lipset
(1989). His central argument is that Canada differs
from the United States because one nation fought in
a bloody revolution prior to its formation, whereas
the other nation did not. Because of this difference
in their nation-building processes, according to Lipset,
"Canada has been a more class aware, elitist, law-
abiding, statist, collectively-oriented, and particularis-
tic (group oriented) society than the United States"
(1989, 2). A summary list of his other ideas on the
differences between U.S. and Canadian identity in-
cludes the following points: The United States is a
revolutionary nation, whereas Canada is counterrevo-
lutionary; America is based on myths, whereas Canada
has none; and Canadians tend to be self-deprecators,
whereas Americans are boastful and proud (Lipset 1986,
1989). Lipset's ideas aroused considerable controversy,
especially among Canadian scholars (see, for example,
Bell and Tepperman 1979). Most concerns center on
Lipset's failure to document the specific circumstances
that produced these perceived societal differences
and competing judgments other than the American
Revolution.

The distinct differences between the core values and
identities of Canada and the United States continue to
be discussed and debated by scholars, politicians, pol-
cymakers, and the general public. One of the most
often discussed is Canada's ethnic and racial "mosaic"
as compared to the "melting pot" model in the United
States (Porter 1965, 1979; Driedger 1978; Li 1988; Re-
itz and Breton 1994; Curtis and Helmes-Hayes 1998).
A number of key Canadian policies appear to support
the notion that Canada is more of a mosaic than a melt-
ing pot, including, most recently, the Multiculturalism
Act passed in 1988, which granted legal protections
and statutory powers to distinctive minority groups in
Canada. The earlier Charter of Rights and Freedoms
(1982) and Official Languages Act (1969) also
expressed support for diverse linguistic and cultural groups in Canada.

Palmer (1976), Lipset (1989), and others have argued that Canada is more accepting of minority groups than the United States because of the dual ethnic and linguistic nature of Canada’s founding peoples. Grabb and Curtis (2005, 196) also cite compelling economic and political reasons for the greater acceptance of ethnic pluralism in Canada based on the high value placed on immigration over the years, initially to help offset the perceived American incursion and also to add bodies to Canada’s labor force.8

The Canadian response to these challenges and confusions has long been to seek and claim a multiplicity of identities whereby that which is essentialized is diverted by a subversion of the notion of identity itself (Manning 2003, 61). In yet another attempt to sort out the multiplicities of Canadian national identities, Prime Minister Stephen Harper created a new ministerial cabinet entity in 2007 called Canadian Identity and appointed a Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity for the first time in history.

Despite challenges related to mediating the languages and cultures of two distinctive founding nations, a search for new ways to reconcile the needs and identities of a rich diversity of First Nation peoples, ever increasing numbers of new immigrants, and a strong sense of regionalism, there is one primary value, belief, or identity that sets most Canadians apart from the United States: the enduring and all-pervasive sense of not being an American.

Perhaps no telling or retelling of the story of Canadian identity was as emotionally charged as the discourses contained in a recent blog called “I am Canadian. What am I?” (2005) According to one of the participants in this discussion:

Not French, not British, and more importantly, not American is one of the most common things that I hear related to defining Canadian identity. The anti-American sentiment is a big issue because of what we see as a cultural threat. They are close, their media is bigger, and we consume their products, and they have a more strictly defined identity. This is not new. Anti-Americanism has been a patriotic assertion since as early as 1890.

Northward Bound: Immigrant Flows to Canada from the United States

Migration northward across the U.S.–Canadian border has been underway for more than 200 years. Despite increasing antiterrorist restrictions that have resulted in a tightening of border policies as a direct result of legislation in the United States in response to the events of 11 September 2001, these two North American nations continue to share the longest undefended international border in the world (Beach, Green, and Reitz 2003). Canada’s long tradition of welcoming dissenters and other immigrants from the United States began with the arrival of the United Empire Loyalists who remained loyal to England during the Revolutionary War. This receptive attitude and related political policies continued during the Civil War era when Canada welcomed runaway slaves from the United States (Winks 1997; Mensah 2002). Canada did not have a fugitive slave law. Instead, Canadian law was based on the common law doctrine that mandated that “a slave became free upon touching free soil” (Dickerson 1999, 2). This mid-nineteenth-century racialized flow from the United States to Canada became even more pronounced after the U.S. Congress passed a strict fugitive slave law in the Compromise of 1850.

The immigration to Canada of agricultural settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed the next major wave of U.S. migration to Canada. As a result of land boom legislation in Canada, by 1921, there were more Americans living in Canada than in any previous year (Harvey 1991, 247). The majority of these primarily rural newcomers settled on the fertile soils of Canada’s Prairie provinces and southeastern British Columbia after leaving their homes in the Midwestern and Great Plains states. This large U.S.-to-Canada migration stream was followed by waves of settlement by other groups later in the mid- to late twentieth century who came for noneconomic reasons. Harvey (1991) classifies these later groups as: (1) wilderness seekers, trekkers, and adventurers; (2) modern homesteaders; (3) communitarians; and (4) spiritual seekers. An influx of brain drain migrants from the United States who came to staff university teaching positions and to work in other professional-level jobs in the 1970s and 1980s added to the total number of U.S.-born residents in selected places in Canada, especially in cities and towns located in close proximity to the U.S.–Canadian border.9

As mentioned earlier, the largest migration wave from the United States to Canada in the mid-twentieth century during the Vietnam War years was politically motivated. The draft in Canada was terminated at the end of World War II and has never been reinstated. This meant that Canada had no draft laws during the Vietnam War years as did the United States. Therefore,
draft dodgers and soldiers who had escaped from their assigned military bases in the United States and Southeast Asia (who were alleged to have broken laws that did not exist in Canada) were allowed admission into Canada and were not extradited at the end of the war (Dickerson 1999).

Draft dodgers, deserters, and other military resisters first sought sanctuary in Canada after U.S. President Kennedy assigned 16,000 new U.S. “advisors” to Vietnam in 1963. Canada thereafter accepted 1,700 American resisters in 1965 as legal immigrants. In 1965, after President Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin incident as a reason to intensify American involvement in Vietnam, the migration of war resisters to Canada increased exponentially. In May 1969, Canadian Minister of Immigration Alan McEachern (serving as spokesperson for the Trudeau administration) announced to the House of Commons that henceforth, all American Vietnam dodgers and deserters would be admitted to Canada without regard to their draft or military status and that “Our basic position is that the question of an individual’s membership or potential membership in the armed services of his own country is a matter to be settled between the individual and his government and is not a matter in which we should become involved” (Hagan 2000, 609).

The arrival of draft-age migrants from the United States continued to increase during the spring and summer of 1969 as the news of this welcoming Canadian policy reached the media and circulated through underground channels. Overall, at least 50,000 draft-age Americans applied to become landed immigrants in Canada during the Vietnam War years (Kasinsky 1976; Jones 2005). Landed immigrant status made it possible for these political “refugees” from the United States to qualify for national health care, work permits, and other benefits. Thousands of other U.S. war exiles were (and continue to be) undocumented, because it was and is possible to enter Canada first as a visitor or tourist and then secretly remain there for years without securing official government paperwork. As a result, it is estimated that there were as many as 100,000 documented and undocumented war resisters and other Americans in Canada by the end of the Vietnam War.

A number of social service organizations were founded to provide assistance to war resisters and draft dodgers in Canada during these years that first began in British Columbia. The Vancouver Committee to Aid American War Objectors was founded in 1966. This alliance of university professors, student activists, and local attorneys published a fact sheet on American immigration to Canada that was sent to student organizations across Canada and the United States encouraging Americans to relocate north of the border. This organization (along with an overt attitude of tolerance, acceptance, and respect for U.S. war resisters in Canada) served as a model for the formation of the Montreal Council to Aid War Resisters and Toronto’s Committee to Aid Refugees from Militarism (Williams 1971). Newsletter articles, pamphlets, and other publications disseminated by these and other organizations provided additional narrative material for analysis during our study of this particular time period.

The decades following the end of the Vietnam War witnessed a significant drop in the number of U.S.-born residents in Canada after a peak in 1974 when 26,541 Americans became legal residents of Canada. From 1974 up to 1998, the numbers held fairly steady. Then, as shown in Figure 1, beginning in 1999 and continuing up to the present day, the number of Americans migrating to Canada each year has been on the rise from a total of 5,533 Americans in Canada in 1999 to 10,943 in 2006 (the highest number in twenty-six years). This time period corresponds with the years following George W. Bush’s election in 2000 and reelection in late 2004.

Along with an increasing number of hits on the Citizenship and Immigration Canada Web site in recent years by would-be migrants to Canada, other more entrepreneurial sites touting the advantages of life in Canada began to appear before and after the Bush reelection. One example of this among many is a Web site created by a group called “Communicopia” who argued that Canada is a viable alternative for disenfranchised Americans: “We invite you to get to know Canada.
Explore the richness and diversity of our regions. And find out why Canada is the perfect alternative for conscientious, forward-thinking Americans" (Canadian Alternatives 2005).

In addition, Canadian immigration attorneys, for whom soliciting immigrant clients is a lucrative business, have begun to host seminars and workshops in support of potential American immigrants in places such as San Francisco, Seattle, and San Diego. Their goal is to encourage U.S. migration to Canada by providing information about admissions and citizenship requirements north of the border. Many also emphasize to prospective clients that they will be permitted to maintain dual citizenship if they decide to relocate to Canada.

As a result of these efforts, and an increasingly conservative political climate in the United States during the earliest years of the twenty-first century, an exodus of Americans migrating to Canada is now underway. Immigration is also encouraged, as in the past, by the close economic ties shared by these two nations and the ease of travel to Canada from the United States fostered by its close proximity. In addition, these most recent migrants are also drawn north for permanent residence by lingering perceptions of Canada as a place of refuge for political and social exiles—a perception that remains firmly rooted in the American psyche (Lanzendorfer 2004). Along with political dissatisfaction at home, especially opposition to the Iraq War, many of today’s exiles from the United States also come seeking gay and lesbian rights, universal health care, the values of a multicultural society, gun control, safety from a post-9/11 attack on the United States, and escape from a homeland that they perceive as dangerously out of control.

A Focus on Migration and Identity in British Columbia

To accomplish the empirical goal of our study, we limited the focus of our analysis of Americans in Canada to the construction of individual and national identities of U.S. migrants who currently reside in British Columbia. This discursive analysis is based on storylines embedded within the transcripts of narrative interviews and focus group discussions and responses to open-ended questions on survey questionnaires. Of particular importance in our line of inquiry was attention to analyzing what psychologists call “identity salience.” Survey questionnaires asked participants to select one identity over another on a list of comparative identities such as this: Which is more important to the way you think of yourself: (1) Canadian or American? (2) Canadian and American? (3) Californian (or Texan, Alaskan, etc.) or Canadian? (4) British Columbian or Oregonian? The deeper meanings of these identity salience hierarchies were then expanded on and elucidated by two-and-a-half years of intermittent field work and participant observation on site in six towns and cities in British Columbia—Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, Vernon, Nelson, and Castlegar—from June 2005 to January 2009 to learn more about the varying contexts of participants in our study. These particular places were targeted because all have significantly large populations of U.S. immigrants. In addition, heeding Paasi’s (1999) reminder that identities and boundaries are both situational and contextual, each of these six sites provided an opportunity to analyze the relationship between migration and identity formation at different scales, ranging from neighborhoods to small towns to moderately sized cities to large metropolitan areas.

Snowball sampling methods were used to gather and tabulate answers to survey questions about identity construction. The 135 completed surveys were submitted in person, in the mail, or online by residents of our six target communities in British Columbia. Survey respondents ranged in age from nineteen to seventy-four, with the largest number being between forty-five and sixty-five range due to the relatively large number of Vietnam-era arrivals in our sample (42 percent migrated to Canada between 1964 and 1978), and also the relatively large number of retirees and other equity migrants who completed our surveys (of the remaining 58 percent who completed questionnaires, the majority were over age fifty-five). Slightly more than half (54 percent) were female, with 46 percent male. Overall, the majority were married and had emigrated from the United States with a partner (77 percent) and well over half had children who were born in Canada (71 percent).

Taken as a whole then, our respondents represent people from all age and gender categories, although older migrants and slightly more women than men dominate the sample, and arrivals from different time periods from the mid-1960s to 2007, although 1960s- and 1970s-era migrants and newer arrivals who relocated to Canada since 2000 made up 75 percent of our sample because they are still the largest group of Americans in British Columbia. Overall, the largest number of surveys (sixty-two) was completed by migrants who came from California, Oregon, Washington, and Nevada, no doubt due to the proximity of these states to British Columbia. A summary list of other places of origin included migrants born in New York and Pennsylvania.
many of these common images of British Columbia: in the summer of 2006, images on the screen captured to Canada Canadian director Albert Nerenberg's new film side North America for more than a century. When and tens of thousands of other immigrants from out-"Lotusland" an attractive destination for Americans climate, and "hipper" lifestyle have helped make this apart. Its booming economy, liberal politics, warmer province to make this Canadian province their new home. British Columbia provides an appropriate and compelling case study for analyzing the identities of U.S. immigrants in Canada for several key reasons. This province is located in close proximity to the United States and the two nations share a common border here. British Columbia has a long history of migration of people from the United States to selected places in the province. British Columbia also has more American migrants than any other province in Canada except Ontario and thus has a sufficient number of U.S-born residents for meaningful study. Moreover, British Columbia is viewed by insiders and outsiders alike as part of a Pacific Northwest region known as Cascadia; therefore, it provides a particularly compelling case study of a borderland region that possesses a strong regional identity (see Sparke 2002) 

Finally, significant numbers of immigrants from the United States in this province reside in places located near the Canadian–U.S. border and these study sites represent a variety of scales, ranging from large metropolitan areas to smaller cities and towns to village-scale settlements.

The Government of British Columbia (2006) recently launched one of Canada's most comprehensive Web sites to assist new immigrants in "accessing one-stop information about how to live, work, study, settle, invest, and make the most of life in British Columbia" (http://www.welcomebc.ca). This new site provides yet another example of recent efforts to attract new immigrants from the United States and other parts of the world to make this Canadian province their new home.

British Columbia has long been viewed as a place apart. Its booming economy, liberal politics, warmer climate, and "hipper" lifestyle have helped make this "Lotusland" an attractive destination for Americans and tens of thousands of other immigrants from outside North America for more than a century. When Canadian director Albert Nerenberg's new film Escape to Canada opened at a popular Vancouver film festival in the summer of 2006, images on the screen captured many of these common images of British Columbia: scenes depicting the overall and overt "coolness" of life in the province, as well as its enviable Pacific coast–mountain–forest environmental amenities.

The people of British Columbia joined the Dominion of Canada in 1871 as reluctant Canadians. Most were accustomed to "basking in their own political and cultural isolation on the West Coast" (Taras and Raspornich 1997, 451); however, the decision to become a part of Canada was ultimately made because of the severe economic challenges the new province faced at the time. Today, wealthy British Columbia's national and international connections have encouraged the province's political and economic leaders to look westward to the Pacific Rim and southward to other parts of Cascadia, rather than eastward to Ottawa. Although residents remain staunchly Canadian in their overall claims to a national identity, the roots of a strong and distinctive British Columbian provincial and regional identity continue to run deep (Roy and Thompson 2005).

This distinctive, layered national, provincial, and regional identity has been shaped by British Columbia's geographical isolation from Canada, its unique quality of life, and its more open and liberal political climate as compared to the rest of Canada. The more than 250,000 American immigrants who reside in parts of British Columbia have also made lasting imprints on regional culture, values, and the province's politically liberal climate (J. Scandola, personal communication 2006).

A majority of recent arrivals from the United States who now live in British Columbia report that their primary reason for deciding to move to Canada was their perception that Canada is a safe refuge for liberal thinkers and idealists. Sixty-year-old Eric Sprado, for example, is part of this northward flow of liberal American migrants. After making trips to British Columbia for many years as a tourist, this former Oregon rancher began looking for acreage where he and his family could relocate: "I’m a liberal person and thinking human being . . . and we’re looking to Canada because I would like to get away from the warlike stance of the United States as a whole" (Steves 2004, A11).

Economic factors also play a role in U.S. immigrant decision making. In 2005, two years before the drop in the U.S. real estate market contributed to a national recession, Pamela, a thirty-four-year-old nurse from Los Angeles, discovered that property values in Vancouver were lower than in her southern California neighborhood. Despite the steady decline in the U.S. dollar as compared to the Canadian dollar (and the city of Vancouver featuring some of the most expensive real estate in Canada), Pamela discovered on the Web that a
A typical three-bedroom condominium with a private parking space and access to a swimming pool located on the waterfront in Vancouver cost about $400,000. According to this interviewee, “It definitely sounded like a better investment than anything I could buy in California right now.” She subsequently decided to purchase a condominium in Vancouver even before her application for admission to Canada was cleared for legal residency (Markels 2004).

Along with Pamela, other U.S. migrants have left their homes for Canada based on their desire to make sound real estate investments. According to recent data on home sales in Canada as compared to the United States, the number of home sales transactions in Canada was projected to rise by about 8 percent in 2008 as compared to a 5.7 percent decline in the United States, with the most intense activity in western Canada (Umberger 2007). This boom in Canadian real estate is being fueled by the lowest unemployment rate there in more than twenty years and the outpacing of the Canadian dollar as compared to the U.S. dollar (Umberger 2007).

Census data shown on the map in Figure 2 indicate that the majority of today’s U.S.-born residents in British Columbia cluster in the two cities of

Figure 2. American immigrants in British Columbia, 2001.
Vancouver and Victoria, in small towns located on the coast north of Vancouver, and on Vancouver Island and the smaller islands just offshore. Former Americans also reside in Kootenay Mountain towns in southeastern British Columbia not far from the U.S. border. Many came during the Vietnam War years, settling primarily in the remote town of Nelson. Survey respondents and interviewees for this study cited three primary reasons why they were drawn to this part of Canada: (1) their search for a little known place far removed from the possibility of being discovered by U.S. agents searching for draft dodgers; (2) the desire for a rural, communal lifestyle; and (3) the financial and social support provided by other pacifist groups in the region such as Quakers and Russian Doukhobors. The latter group is a dissident religious group who settled along British Columbia’s Fraser River in the early years of the twentieth century (Hardwick 1993). American Quakers migrated here in search of open land and environmental amenities five decades later.

Southeastern British Columbia has become increasingly attractive to new immigrants from the United States in more recent years as well. Most come for political, economic, or environmental reasons. According to a recent study related to economic expansion and population growth in the city of Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley, this rapidly growing western Canadian city has been reimagined during the past two decades as an amenity-rich playground for vacationers from the United States and other parts of Canada, as well as a high-tech mecca rich in employment opportunities (Aguiar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005). This important study found that primarily white “hinterland cities [such as Kelowna] are invented, sought and lived as geographies cleared from the ‘elements’ that make cities ‘unsafe’” (Aguiar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005, 123), thereby attracting (white) newcomers who wish to escape the congestion of larger cities in British Columbia. Along with these Canadian domestic migrants to the Okanagan Valley are recent immigrants from the United States who are attracted to this borderland location, drawn both by their lingering perceptions of this remote region serving as a safe haven for liberal Vietnam War-era migrants many years ago and by their memories of visits to the mountains and lakes of southeastern British Columbia as tourists in the past.

In the summers of 2006 and 2007, the first-ever reunions of U.S. war resisters in Canada were held at the Russian Doukhobor Cultural Centre in Castlegar, British Columbia, located on the Columbia River in the Kootenay Mountains. These “Our Way Home” events were founded and organized by a recent American immigrant to the small town of Nelson. Issac Romano was initially inspired to create these reunion events by anti-Canadian protests reported in the U.S. media that were spearheaded by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion in the United States. Their concerns centered on the creation of an “anti-American, unpatriotic sculpture” rendered by a Nelson artist. His bronze sculpture depicted Canadians welcoming a young hippie couple from the United States to British Columbia. Dubbing the town of Nelson “Resistorville,” prominent protestors in the United States encouraged tourists to boycott the Okanagan and Kootenay regions to show their support for the current Iraq War and the soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War many years ago. Soon thereafter, the first Our Way Home reunion’s opening ceremony provided a venue for displaying this controversial sculpture and calling attention to the importance of “Canada as refuge” in this borderland region of British Columbia.

### Appropriating a Canadian Identity

By analyzing the identity construction of this relatively invisible group of voluntary migrants who relocated to a new territory that closely resembles their homeland in many ways, our findings lend evidence to other theorists who suggest that identities must be studied as multidimensional, fluid constructs that are embedded in particular spatial and political discourses and contexts. Overall, as compared to the evolution of the national identities of other North American immigrant groups, our findings indicate that Americans in Canada lay claim to their new national identity as reimagined Canadians extremely rapidly. For most of the participants in our study, becoming Canadian occurred at one of three distinct locations along the migration circuit including: (1) prior to arrival in Canada (after the decision to leave the United States had been made); (2) immediately upon crossing the Canadian–U.S. border; or (3) within a few months following resettlement in Canada.

This rapid Canadianization of new immigrants from the United States is compelling because, for many other immigrant groups, feeling part of their new nation might take many years or might fail to occur at all. This strong and often emotion-laden sense of wanting to be or become Canadian was the most frequently mentioned storyline in almost all the narrative interview responses gathered for this project. Analyzing the meanings and
motivations of these responses, especially in the borderlands context, provides new opportunities to examine current discourses and debates on identity construction in as yet uncharted waters.

Our data revealed strong and consistent commonalities related to the adoption of a distinctively non-American Canadian identity by newcomers from the United States no matter when they migrated north or where they settled. There were literally no differences in responses to questions about the shifting identities of Vietnam War resisters and more recent migrants who left their homeland to find a more liberal political climate and others who stated that they were seeking universal health care, affordable property, safety and security, or environmental amenities in British Columbia. There were not any significant differences between immigrants from the United States who reside in urban, suburban, small-town, or more rural places in British Columbia. Likewise, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age played very minor roles in differing responses to our questions about the adoption of a Canadian national identity. Due to the unexpected commonalities we found across all populations queried for this study, the following analysis of responses to the identity questions on our survey questionnaires and interview and focus group responses are grouped together and presented as a whole.

This analysis of how U.S. immigrants in Canada define and perceive their identities draws primarily on responses to two of the questions on our survey questionnaire: (1) Do you identify yourself as Canadian, American, or both? (2) Are you an American citizen, a Canadian citizen, or both?

Do You Identity Yourself as Canadian, American, or Both?

All but 4 of the 135 survey respondents of all genders, ages, dates of arrival, and places of origin claimed a Canadian identity. Some of these new Canadians also claimed a dual American identity (twenty-seven), but the majority defined themselves as Canadian and only Canadian. “I say ‘Canadian’ because it just feels right” according to Russ. Mary feels Canadian because “this is where I live, work, and vote.” Karen feels “completely Canadian with pride because it’s our chosen home,” and Hardy reported that “I always say I’m a Canadian. If someone asks about my accent, I typically say that I’m an ex-American.” The oldest respondent to our survey arrived in Vancouver in 1949. He reported:

I identify only as Canadian. I considered myself entirely Canadian the day I crossed the border even though I delayed taking out citizenship for much too long.

In contrast, only four of the participants in our study reported their identities in a more transnational way, although even in their cases, their blended U.S.–Canadian mixed identities seemed to favor Canada. According to Rob, “Sometimes I still feel American, sometimes both. I always say I’m Canadian though.” Similarly, Jim reported that he’s “a Canadian with extensive American experience but I usually just say that I’m a Canadian from Texas.” A university professor who has lived in Vancouver by choice since the 1960s insisted, “I always say I’m a Canadian or a Californian but I never ever say ‘American.’ ” His neighbor, American-born Roberta, a resident of Vancouver for the past forty years, admitted:

I always found being an American in Canada tough, but I still feel that leaving was warranted. I feel physically but not emotionally rooted in Canada, yet I don’t feel in sync with other Americans and I do not wish to return.

Only one survey respondent claimed a singular American identity. According to Rosie, who came to Canada two years ago to sell real estate, “I’m American. That’s my country of origin, where my political allegiance lies.”

Are You an American Citizen, a Canadian Citizen, or Both?

Answers to this question varied considerably. Many respondents (48 percent) retained dual citizenship despite often intense emotional attachments to their new Canadian identity (and a lack of attachment to being a former American). Others, especially war resister migrants, renounced their allegiance and citizenship to the United States soon after immigrating to Canada (31 percent). Others never became Canadian citizens (21 percent), despite most claiming to have moderate to strong feelings of having a Canadian identity. Interestingly, some of the dual citizens retained their American citizenship only because the U.S. government made it too difficult to renounce. According to one respondent:

I became a Canadian citizen in 1977. I assumed that I had given up my U.S. citizenship at the time. But the U.S. Treasury Department still considers me to be a U.S. citizen.
One of the most provocative and informative moments in our research on identity was a focus group discussion in downtown Vancouver in late 2006. Feelings ran high as two people in the group shared memories of their migration to Canada during the Vietnam War years. Three others recalled their feelings of both fear and relief when they crossed the Canadian border a few days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Some admitted that they had “never really talked about these feelings out loud before” because they still felt that it was a risk to expose their politicized (and often hidden) pasts. “We didn’t just come here because of the Vietnam War,” a man in his early sixties reported, “It was because we were against so many policies of the U.S. government at the time including lack of support for minorities and lack of aid for the poor and education.” Another focus group respondent shared his story of leaving the United States during those same years:

When I finally made it to British Columbia from my home in Michigan (after hitching a ride west in someone’s van in Toronto where I first went), I realized just how cut off from the rest of the world I had always been as an American. I mean, the moment I crossed the Canadian border, I felt like a global citizen and like I was free.

A twenty-six-year-old male participant in our focus group in Vancouver reported on his recent escape to Toronto (and onto Vancouver) as an ex-Marine seeking sanctuary in Canada after fighting in the Iraq War. Reporting his strong desire to become a new Canadian rather than an American due to his wartime experiences, this focus group respondent reported:

I felt really scared when I first left the barracks and headed north. I guess I have to admit that I didn’t really know much about Canada. But some of my friends told me that this country welcomed people who went AWOL and so would protect me. I haven’t called or written to my parents yet because I’m really scared of getting caught. But one thing I do know for sure: If Canada allows me to stay, all I ever want to be for the rest of my life is live in Nelson and be a Canadian.

The image of Nelson, British Columbia, as a place of refuge for war resisters has once again gained prominence as this small town has become a mecca for resisters from the Iraq War in recent years. A former U.S. soldier, twenty-three-year-old Robin Long, for example, deserted his infantry group as it was being deployed to Iraq. Following his arrest last year, Long was released on a $5,000 bond and is now staying with Canadian American friends in a Vancouver suburb; however, he has little hope of being allowed to remain in Canada. “I’ll probably be deported in two to five months . . . and then I’ll probably be going to prison.” Long was the second U.S. deserter apprehended in Nelson recently. Last year, Private Kyle Snyder was arrested after police allegedly forced their way into the home where he was residing. The report on CNN that followed this arrest gave Nelson its new name: Resistorville (for more information, see Hutchinson 2007).

Iraq War migrants to Canada are also the focus of the documentary Breaking Ranks (2006), produced by Vancouver filmmaker Michelle Mason. U.S. migration stories as told in Breaking Ranks are based on long-term interviews with four former U.S. soldiers seeking sanctuary in Canada. Their strong desire to become Canadians amidst a sea of legal challenges and economic survival provides yet another powerful testimony to the importance of documenting the often painful individual process of claiming new identities while renouncing old ones. To date, American soldiers escaping the Iraq War who are hoping to seek protection in Canada will continue to be turned back at the border based on a decision rejecting their request for sanctuary in Canada made by the Federal Court of Appeals in Ottawa in early 2008. Until the courts declare that the United States is an unsafe place for asylum seekers, denial of American “refugees” from the war in Iraq will continue to be based on the Safe Third Country agreement passed in 2004. This legislation denies refugees who landed first in the United States the right to claims in Canada and vice versa—and requires that Canada and the United States recognize each other as safe places to seek protection. According to Appeal Chief Justice John Richard, “The judgment is under appeal and the presumption of public interest remains pending complete constitutional review.” As further testimony to the potential movement of ever larger numbers of migrants from the United States to Canada, following this most recent decision, Ottawa argued that ending the 2004 agreement would lead to a flood of people claiming asylum from the United States, “placing undue pressure on Canada’s social and refugee systems” (Keung 2008).

Many of the other U.S. immigrants who were interviewed in British Columbia reported similar memories of a migration experience filled with drama, fear, and an eagerness for a new life. Their feelings of persecution in their homeland, and their search for a new identity in Canada, make the findings of our case study sound a great deal like the experiences of other international migrants in today’s world in motion. According to Ivy, a 46-year-old U.S. migrant from California:
After 9/11 happened, and Bush started the war in Iraq, and then all those drive-by shootings happened near my neighborhood. I just didn’t feel safe in the U.S. anymore. Being a resident of Canada feels incredibly safe and secure. It’s a place I hope to live for the rest of my life.

There are also dramatic differences in the migration stories and identity constructions of U.S.-born migrants in Canada as compared to other groups of immigrants. Unlike political or environmental refugees or economic migrants who are forced to leave their homeland, the majority of these new Canadians (re-)created their new lives in new places by choice. Choosing to leave home and move to another country could result in a more rapid adoption of a new “identity by choice” and more intense and rapid attachments to new places of residence.

Another reason why the majority of American immigrants in Canada have the power and ability to assert their new Canadian identity so quickly on arrival in Canada is the dominant whiteness of most of this group. Along with their fluency in English, one of the two official languages of Canada, and the relative affluence and advanced educations of many of these “migrants by choice,” their whiteness is a racially driven body marker that still denotes more rapid acceptance and power in the North American context for the vast majority of U.S. immigrants in Canada.

A third reason for the rapid Canadianization of the migrant identities of Americans in Canada is the political antagonisms about their own country that many felt when they left the United States (and continue to feel in Canada). Because many chose to leave the United States during or immediately following the Vietnam War and most recently during a period of extreme conservatism in the U.S. government, as well as the nation’s war in Iraq, letting go of attachments to home has occurred more rapidly than with many other international migrant groups. Overt feelings and expressions of anti-Americanism are common in Canada as they are in much of the rest of the world, especially during this time in history. In sum, the majority of American immigrants’ choices to assume a Canadian identity can be explained by a combination of racial, political, cultural, social, and economic factors related to the time, place, and international context of their migration decision-making.

Immigrants from the United States are drawn to Canada today, much as they have been in the past, by their constructed, somewhat bucolic image of what it means to be a Canadian. One typical stereotype of life in Canada can be labeled “Canada as America Idealized” (Gecelovsky 2007, 519). Images of pristine wilderness as portrayed in travel brochures and Jack London novels set in the Yukon, along with the “peaceful nation” image that many people in the world think of when they think of Canada, holds great appeal. During times of war, increased public and political discourse about environmental challenges, crime, and congestion in the United States, this Canadian imaginary seems to hold even greater appeal for Americans. These “Canada is good, America is bad” images recently were portrayed in the movie Bowling for Columbine (2002). In this U.S. film, director Michael Moore first talks with residents of Windsor, Ontario, about race relations and then compares their views to the much more negative views of interviewees in nearby Detroit. Although the film presents Canadian life in a selective, overly romanticized way, this depiction of Canadian versus American identity represents one of many stories reported by the media that is predicted to continue to attract U.S. immigrants to Canada.

This perception first took shape during the Vietnam War years when an unpopular war abroad and the challenges of poverty, the violence of race relations, and the failure of the U.S. government’s Great Society legislation of the 1960s attracted liberals to the north. It lingers today as the conservative politics, war in Iraq, environmental challenges, and failing economy in the United States are, once again, encouraging Americans to migrate to Canada in ever larger numbers. Most recently, an international Gallup poll found that Canada consistently ranked at the top of American attitudes toward foreign countries in every year but one between 1996 and 2006. A number of other international and Canadian surveys reported similar pro-Canadian attitudes among American respondents. In sum, “the prevailing image of Canada held by Americans is that of a rather quaint, somewhat backward and Old World place, a place lacking the vitality, energy, and individualism of America and Americans. Canada and Canadians are regarded as being just like America and Americans of a stylized past” (Gecelovsky 2007, 520).

Conclusions

The processes involved in shaping the transnational identities of immigrants in North America and elsewhere in the world have received a great deal of attention in recent years. Much less has been said, however, about international migrants who very rapidly identify
with their new place of residence while equally rapidly letting go of former attachments and allegiances to their homeland. Embracing feelings of what it means to belong to “here” versus “there” defines and divides groups based on their race, sexuality, class, and bodies. These perceptions of difference then feed into the construction of new identities based on who immigrants were, who they are now, and who they are becoming.

Voluntary migrants who blend in with the majority population in their new place of residence due to their skin color and common language are especially likely to exhibit this type of identity formation. These white-on-white international migrants can live in close proximity to their homeland and thus are able to easily travel back and forth between their old and new lives. Most also have the ability to remain in close contact with family and friends back home via regular e-mail messages and cell phone conversations. However, these ongoing contacts between here and there do not ensure that these kinds of migrants by choice always craft transnational identities. Many choose instead to very rapidly adopt and identify with the values, meanings, politics, and national identities of their new lives and nations.

Canada has long held utopian appeal for people in the United States. Its universal health care system, supportive gay and lesbian policies, abortion rights, antigun laws, drug laws, opposition to the Iraq War and the war in Vietnam in the past, ban on capital punishment, and support for multicultural policies mirror many of the values of liberals in the United States who are unsatisfied with political, social, and economic systems in their homeland. Some of these reasons for deciding to immigrate to Canada were summarized as follows by a fifty-year-old resident of Portland, Oregon (Johnson 2004, C5): “Canada’s basic population is much more intelligent, polite, and civilized. I like their way of government a lot better. Their tax dollars go to helping those who need it instead of funneling money back up to the wealthy and feeding this huge military-industrial machine.”

Despite the common perception that Canada’s borders are open and welcoming to any and all Americans who decide to seek permanent residency there, however, it is increasingly difficult for immigrants to cross this international boundary. Economic agreements that were purported to make U.S.—Canada border crossings easier such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the more recent Security, Prosperity, Partnership of North America legislation signed by Canada, Mexico, and the United States in 2005, and political agreements that are designed to keep terrorists from crossing the border illegally, have reshaped Canadian—U.S. border in recent years (see Olmedo and Soden 2005; Gilbert 2007).

As a result, despite the enthusiastic support of immigration attorneys who specialize in encouraging immigration from the United States to Canada, and a long list of new Web sites that provide detailed information about the process of migrating north of the border, a majority of participants in our study who moved to Canada in recent years expressed surprise at the challenges of becoming a legal immigrant there.

In 2009, it takes an average of about twenty-five months to be accepted as a permanent Canadian resident. Not everyone from the United States is qualified for admission because Canadian immigration policies are based on a point system. Applicants must take a test that assesses whether they meet minimum qualifications to enter the country with a score of sixty-seven or above required for admission to Canada. Among a long list of other factors, prospective immigrants must have a bachelor’s degree or equivalent education, be fluent in English or French, have a minimum of four years of work experience, and possess sufficient financial resources to support themselves in Canada during their first six months of residency (Tran and Chui 2005). The results of this restrictive system mean that the majority of new immigrants in Canada come from at least a middle-class, well-educated background. Becoming a Canadian citizen is at least a five-year process.

After a set of tightly controlled agreements were put into place at the Canadian—U.S. border in early 2007 that were based on post-9/11 antiterrorism legislation in both countries, officials are required to examine background information for every person who crosses this international border in either direction. This tightened process at border crossings and in airport security areas has made it even more difficult to be admitted to Canada as a legal immigrant in recent years. Members of current inadmissible classes include those who have been convicted of minor offenses such as shoplifting, theft, assault, dangerous driving, unauthorized possession of a firearm, and possession of illegal substances; or of indictable criminal offenses including assault with a deadly weapon or manslaughter. U.S. residents who have been convicted of drunk driving are also inadmissible under current regulations. These classifications of nonadmissible visitors are not new, but they are now more strictly enforced now due to the advent of new technology that makes it possible for officials to more
carefully screen applicants for admission or a temporary visit to Canada.

A number of useful findings have emerged from this study that provide a foundation for continued research on the experiences, patterns, and shifting identities of international migrants in the years ahead. First, it is predicted that the presidential election in the United States in late 2008 may result in the tide of Americans relocating north of the Canadian–U.S. border to slow considerably in the coming years. This anticipated shift in the United States toward a more liberal government and the related promise of more supportive political, social, and economic American policies in the years to come may result in a drop in the number of U.S. immigrants to Canada and other places. As with the fluidity of identity construction of individuals and nations, the patterns and related processes shaping U.S.-to-Canada migration remain complex and unsettled terrains of study for geographers and other scholars.

Second, despite a large body of work on transnationalism and immigration in today’s globalizing world, our findings serve as a reminder that becoming transnational is only one of the many ways that immigrant identities may emerge. We found little evidence of the construction of transnational identities among U.S. migrants in British Columbia despite the province’s borderland location. This is in keeping with Nicol’s (2005) findings that the nature and structure of transnational integration remains limited at the Canadian–U.S. border despite the impacts of globalization and the interdependent economic relationships shared by these two North American nations such as NAFTA. To date, the values, relationships, politics, feelings of groupness, and sense of self of many American immigrants in Canada are in keeping with Nicol’s findings. Most claim and exhibit a distinct sense of Canadian-ness rather than transnational identities.

Third, almost all of the American immigrants in British Columbia who participated in our study (no matter when they left the United States or where they settled in the province) perceive their homeland as “other” in a myriad of ways. Like most of their Canadian-born compatriots, the central defining aspect of the national identities of U.S. immigrants in British Columbia is not being American. Although much of the prior literature on the “us” and “them” feelings of borderland residents emphasizes the ways that new immigrants might feel like outsiders in their new places of residence for many years after resettlement (and continue to perceive themselves as insiders related to their homelands), our findings documented a new type of “reverse othering” process for many of the U.S. immigrants in western Canada.

Findings reported on in this article lay a foundation for pursuing other related projects and research questions in the future. Does the Canadian context and the
timing of our study make the outcomes of this analysis unique—or do other groups of international migrants in other places adopt new identities and “other” their homeland as rapidly as do many of the U.S. immigrants in Canada? What processes are involved in shaping the national identities of other groups of white migrants who relocate to white-dominated places? Do British, Canadian, or U.S. immigrants in Australia, for example, just as quickly embrace a new Australian identity and begin to “other” their homeland as Americans do in Canada? Or does the context of a shared border and a long history of shared economic and political relationships and structures linking these two North American nation states make this case unique? Will second-generation Canadian Americans (as shown in Figure 3) reconnect with their parents’ original homeland or embrace and celebrate being “100 percent Canadian” much as their parents did upon their arrival in Canada? As the processes of identity construction, globalization, international migration, and the changing nature of place and space continue to transform North America and other parts of the world, further study of migrants who view their own homeland as other might hold the key to learning more about the related experiences and expressions of local and national identities at the borderlands. The rapid acquisition and deep feelings that U.S. immigrants in Canada associate with being and becoming Canadian, fed and fostered by equally deep feelings of resistance against their former American identities, might herald a new form of immigrant identity construction in the North American context and beyond.

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Notes

1. In this article, the terms U.S. immigrant and American immigrant are synonymous. We acknowledge that the term American encompasses all residents of the Americas, including Latin America, but because U.S.-born immigrants are referred to as Americans in Canada, in this article the term is used to refer only to people from the United States (due to its popular usage as such). In addition, to provide the closest estimate of how many people from the United States resided in Canada based on the Canadian Census of Population, we base our analysis on the category of U.S.-born, although fully aware that census tabulations do not include undocumented immigrants and others who are not included in data compiled by Statistics Canada.

2. A notable exception to this dearth in the literature on American immigrants in Canada is a Web-based article by Kobayashi and Ray (2005). This analysis, conducted for the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, DC, provides a look at the potential migration from the United States to Canada that was predicted after George Bush was reelected as president in November 2004, a period of time when conservative policies and attitudes in the United States made the more liberal policies and attitudes in Canada (especially as they related to social issues such as rights for gays and lesbians) more appealing for many Americans—thereby encouraging some to consider emigrating to Canada. The foundational data and provocative questions posed in this article were one of the primary motivations for our study. We also gained valuable insights from Waters (2003) about the relationship between the transnationalism and citizenship of economic migrants in Vancouver.

3. Whether discussing transnationalism and the changing role and relevance of the state (Appadurai 1991), transnational social fields and transmigrants (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995), transnational communities (Fortes 1996; Hyndman and Walton-Roberts, 2000; Bailey et al. 2002), transnational global ethnoscapes (Appadurai 1991), methods and theories useful in studying transnationalism (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec 2001; Kivisto 2001), or studying the economic, social, cultural, or symbolic ties between places of origin and new sites of residence (Faist 2000), transnational theory (and all its interrelated ramifications) clearly has emerged as the buzzword of the new millennium in migration research. Transnational relationships and linkages hold particular fascination for immigration scholars because migration flows are located at the convergence of a series of global processes.

4. Political geographers, in particular, have made many important contributions to the literature on national identity. See, for instance, Newman (1999), Paasi (1996), Murphy (1999), and numerous other publications on borderlands and national identity in the European Union. Perhaps the most comprehensive examination of national identity is Herb and Kaplan (2008).

5. Migration scholars in geography have continued to emphasize the importance of using personal stories, biographies, and life histories as key methodologies for studies of the migration experience. Calls for including the voices of immigrants in research projects reached
a peak in the late 1990s and continue today. Of particular note have been the contributions of early
humanistic geographers such as Tuan (1974), Lowenthal (1985), and Butttimer (1985) and the more recent
contributions of feminist and postcolonial researchers such as Rose (1993), Massey (1994), Cant (1997), Halfacree
and Boyle (1995), and Silvey and Lawson (1999).
6. Social psychologists Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe (2006) discuss and defend several useful approaches for
using narrative biographic interviews framed within a critical discursive perspective to analyze the discourses
surrounding identity construction. An important distinguishing feature of narrative identity approaches and
theories, according to these authors, is the notion that “local stories we tell about ourselves are connected in
some way to wider cultural stories (or master narratives, cultural plotlines, discourses, interpretive repertoires”
(139). We found that “reading” the data we gathered and coded from narrative and biographic interviews and
open-ended survey questions made it possible for us to more deeply understand and analyze the deeper mean-
ings and connections participants in our project associated with the formation of their own identities, es-
pecially their newly constructed national identities as a Canadian. A third useful source on using narrative
interviews to study identity is Summers (1994).
7. A tremendous amount of confusion and complexity surrounding the use of the term identity runs through the
published literature, especially in psychology and sociology. Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) critique, for example,
emphasizes the importance of carefully considering the deeper meanings and uses of this overused concept and
its “essentialist connotations and constructivist quali-
fiers” (2). This concern also holds true for disentangling
the meanings of personal and collective identities and
recognizing the serious theoretical problems debated
by Rouse (1995) and others about self, personhood,
collectivity, and identity. Also of note are the concerns
about power and identity as discussed by Manning
(2003).
8. Multiculturalism is one of the major tenets of Canadian national identity. The concept and legislation that
surrounds it, however, “also carries the contradictions inher-
ten in cultural processes in general, and in Canadian
culture in particular [since] within the population, dif-
ference is socially constructed, geographically diverse,
and unequal” (Kobayashi 1993, 224). For other criti-
tiques of multiculturalism and multicultural policies in
Canada, among many, see Keohane (1997) and Manning
(2003).
9. This distribution pattern is not surprising because the vast majority of Canada’s total population resides within
close proximity to the Canada–U.S. border.

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