



BORDER FLOWS: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship
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Crossings

JEREMY MOUAT

One of Alberta's most well-known features is the tar sands outside of Fort McMurray. The controversial resource boom fuelled by the tar sands is not the first to have made outside investors rich. An earlier boom began in the late eighteenth century, when beaver pelts from the region went to distant markets. Anticipating the title of this book, that earlier boom was all about border flows—about the flow of water either side of a continental divide.

For a number of years I lived in Athabasca, Alberta, bordering the river of the same name. The river swings north at the town, flowing up to Fort McMurray and beyond from its source in the Rockies. At Fort McMurray, the Clearwater River joins the Athabasca, coming west from Saskatchewan. The Clearwater was the vital artery that enabled that earlier resource boom.

The river forms part of an Arctic drainage system, a fact that helps to explain its significance. When in 1670 the British king signed a Royal Charter for the Hudson's Bay Company, he gave the company monopoly trading rights over the lands that drained into Hudson Bay. Once traders entered the Arctic Ocean watershed—once they had crossed that continental divide and reached the Clearwater—the company's exclusive rights no longer applied.

Fur traders and voyageurs crossing the divide between the Hudson Bay drainage system and the Arctic system did so via a famous portage: the Methye Portage. It had the same sort of status for voyageurs as the equator did for sailors: newbie voyageurs went from being *mangeurs de lard* (pork eaters) to *hommes du nord* (men of the north) after crossing it. This new status likely reflected the gruelling work involved: the portage was twenty kilometres in length, over which the voyageurs packed loads of more than eighty kilograms. Of course, once I had moved to Athabasca, I wanted to get to the portage and become a man of the north myself.

The Methye Portage is in northwestern Saskatchewan, pretty much due east of Fort McMurray. It begins—if you're approaching from the eastern side—on the northwest side of Lac La Loche, well past the nearest road. To get to it, you either paddle across the lake or fly in.

Although it took a dozen years, a colleague and I organized a trip early this century over the Methye. We were both historians with little back-country experience so we recruited two other friends—a psychologist and a philosopher—as both had done a lot of wilderness canoeing. (It was a group that sounds like the beginning of a bad joke: “What do you get when a”) With backing from a TV production company, we drove up to Fort McMurray with two canoes, left the truck there, and flew over to Lac La Loche with the canoes strapped onto the pontoons. The TV crew filmed us as we each lugged about fifty-five kilograms over the portage. They left once we’d reached the Clearwater River. We slipped the canoes into the river and headed west. We got to Fort McMurray a few days later, relaxed by the days in the wilderness and the beauty of the river. Our calm did not last long, however; we came out of the bush on September 11, 2001.

Western Canada is home to a series of continental divides, although only one is marked: the one that forms the southern half of the border between Alberta and British Columbia. These days you can cross watersheds without even noticing them. Once I drove from Athabasca down to Montana to attend a conference and later realized that I’d crossed three watersheds along the way, from my home overlooking the Athabasca River flowing up to the Arctic, across the North Saskatchewan River flowing east to Hudson Bay, and then to the Upper Missouri River, which flows south to the Gulf of Mexico. The trip was easily done in a day but you have to pay close attention to figure out where the water changes flow.

Like the changing flow of water, history is illusive in the western Canadian landscape. It’s difficult to see the marks that the past has left on the land. We don’t have the cobblestones and castles of Europe. And those marks that we do see—the straight lines of the surveyors that signify so many borders in western North America—seem so commonplace and so obvious that we don’t question them. We need to pay more attention to the border flows and the history that is hidden from view.

Meditations on Ice

COLIN A.M. DUNCAN AND ANDREW MARCILLE

Historians and other ordinary people tend to think of lakes and rivers as liquid. But in central North America, where the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Valley is located, most bodies of water are substantially icebound for several months each year. In this well-watered zone, sailing iceboats were long used (in winter) as the best way to transport people and goods to and from islands and across wide, slow parts of rivers.

Iceboats are fast, often frighteningly so, and quite unencumbered with any braking mechanism. Rather than lolling about, attended by liveried servants, icyachters experience many forms of discomfort when getting ready for their sport, untying frozen knots and assembling fiddly bits of deeply chilled equipment without gloves. When sailing, they commonly feel wind-chill effects around -50 degrees Celsius, often with wet feet. Any ease comes only after the boats are put away for the night.

It is precisely because iceboats are very fast that they were, however counterintuitively, the safest and most comfortable way to move people across large frozen expanses. The huge area over which an iceboat spreads its weight makes it possible to sail safely on ice too thin for skating or walking—a point freshly proved each year by keen racers. To this day, iceboats retain with ease the speed records for craft not reliant on motors. Though iceboat skates are very heavy, the friction between them and a slightly bumpy hard ice surface is risibly small. But perhaps the most astonishing thing about iceboats is not their top speeds, but their rates of acceleration. That said, global defrosting may explain why the top speed record dates from the first half of the last century. It is difficult now, perhaps impossible, to find good ice of sufficient extent to allow the buildup to speeds around two hundred miles per hour. What eventually restricts the speed of an iceboat is generally its own aerodynamic drag. But we have been skating away from the serious purpose of transportation. It suffices to say that pretty well any iceboat promised vastly shorter travel time than any alternative until the mid-twentieth century. Anybody seated riverside on an express train going



9.1 Iceboating at the very starting point of the St. Lawrence River, 2014. Courtesy of John Curtis.

along the Hudson River when an iceboat challenged the steam engine's driver to an impromptu race could see the speed of solid-water sailing.

The big, heavy iceboats of yore also built up formidable momentum if sailed much distance. Though there is little chance that the captains and crew found their work to be drudgery, they did face one tough task. Not quite as bad as it sounds (as one of the authors, who has experienced this, can attest), it entailed slipping overboard in heavy clothing and then dragging at the end of a rope to help bring the boat to a standstill at voyage's end. Iceboats are creatures of motion: if the wind is strong and the ice surface good, stopping one is far harder than setting it moving. Indeed, and rather amusingly, on a quiet day an iceboat with sail up can be induced to come on command, but only in response to impatience; the sailor stamping his or her feet on the ice can be enough to break the surface tension that was actually keeping the boat fixed. Once the craft is stopped, a kind of pointed metal device can—and should—be activated to serve as a sort

of “parking brake.” The qualifier and scare quotes are serious. If the wind is gusty, changing strength and direction violently, it can cause a pivoted device to become disengaged. Iceboats left untended with sail up and no brake set are notoriously apt to wander off. They have been known to sail aimlessly for miles, going both upwind and down as the forces of lift and drag jostle each other with nobody in charge. It is an inconvenience if this truancy occurs near open water, but luckily, despite the mass of the skates, the buoyant wood of an uncrewed iceboat prevents its sinking even if it does run out of ice. Though the speeds attained by an empty iceboat are not very high, chasing one in heavy clothing is a mug’s game. Having a large number of helpful people spread out on the ice makes it easier to catch a runaway iceboat, but generally, one has to wait until it just happens to stop.

Of necessity, some time was spent every year determining when the ice was “strong” enough to support the craft. While the dangers of ice breakage seem obvious when the ice first grows at the start of any season, they are subtler at its end, as eventually even very thick ice loses its integrity. Indeed, the safest surface is new, clear ice whose thickness can be instantly discerned by looking at the edge of a crack. Changing its elasticity markedly with temperature, thinnish ice is safer on warmer days, other things being equal. Strong currents disturbingly can and do erode ice from below—a dastardly deed when the ice is opaque, which sadly it usually becomes. Near the shore, too, ice can be unsafe. Dark objects absorb immense amounts of heat from sunlight: piers and large rocks can create patches of open water even on cold days. Iceboat skates, thin as they are, absorb so much heat that if left on the ice for even a few minutes of blazing sun, they will drop down into the ice surface. With refreezing at dusk, the boat may become trapped. Prudent iceboaters prop their idle boats up by arranging lumps of wood beneath the skates, which also reduces the chance of an unmanned journey. Even with no sail up, an iceboat on a good surface can move very fast if the wind is strong.

Some physicists and engineers tell us they like to dream of a frictionless world. Iceboaters seem to live the reality—but in fact the noise made by metal moving over ice is considerable. Iceboats roar much like trains when going fast, giving everyone not on board a decent chance of keeping clear even with their ears muffled against the cold. Not surprisingly, many people have been frightened by iceboats. But the primary enemy of the iceboat itself is deep snow. Even the friction of thin, wet snow can “ground”

the craft. The speed of iceboats means that whiteouts from fog or falling snow tell everyone to go home. As ice grows laterally as well as vertically, dangerous pressure deformations develop in restricted places such as harbours and rivers, much complicating navigation. These big cracks often relocate overnight. Iceboaters along the edges of the Great Lakes face one occasional source of huge frustration, most commonly at the start of the season. Massive wave systems generated by gales damage nearshore ice sheets that are not yet very thick, rendering the surface (in the worst cases) a jumbled mass protruding at as many angles as there are fragments. Only a huge thaw plus refreezing can clear that obstacle, with help from heavy snowfall to “fair” the surface. Usually, eventually, a large, moist, warm air mass from the Gulf of Mexico comes to the rescue of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence iceboaters.

Although they, like farmers, watch the weather keenly and know its quirks inside out, iceboaters everywhere have no better luck than anybody else at ordering weather à la carte. Most major planned competitions have to be relocated overnight by hundreds of miles. Even the Iron Curtain never prevented ice yacht racers from pursuing clear ice across Europe. The large prewar iceboats that could carry many people and boxes and bags and dogs had skates so large they could cope with a wider range of surface imperfections than can a contemporary vessel, built light to be nimble enough for the many sudden direction changes involved in course racing in a fleet. Let us hope that global warming trends do not proceed so far as to render the trivial joy of iceboating a thing of the past.

Bordering on Significance?

DANIEL MACFARLANE

I was *almost* born in eastern Ontario, an area abundant in water. Instead I ended up growing up in a place that some might consider the inverse: Saskatchewan. It is not as if the Canadian prairies are completely bereft of water, particularly in the northern half, but whenever we went to visit family in Ontario, as we frequently did, I was intrigued by the waters of the St. Lawrence, the locks of the Rideau and Trent Canals, the Great Lakes, and Niagara Falls.

I started writing this piece in Kingston, on Lake Ontario, continued it along the St. Lawrence River, added to it in Canada's capital along its eponymous waterway, and revised it in parts of Michigan astride various Great Lakes. All this moving about, with my family in tow, gives one some perspective on the ways that borders matter, and the ways that they don't. Water flowing naturally doesn't respect human-made boundaries, but in the case of the Niagara and St. Lawrence projects (see chapter 4 in this volume), borders clearly matter. The border has a deep impact on how nations perceive their water and nature. As problematic as it is to generalize about societal views of the environment, crossing borders—province to province, state to state, country to country—has left me with the impression that both similarities and differences exist in these views when it comes to northern North America.

The picture of old Highway 2 running into the St. Lawrence shows another kind of border: a line between past and present, between memory and history. It appears to show a border between built and natural environment. But that is a false distinction—not only here, but probably everywhere. Roads lead somewhere, just like “progress.” But where does this road lead? Where does “progress” on the scale of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project lead?

Other questions about the artificial/natural divide—or lack thereof—can be asked of waters that form the border between Canada and the United States. They are both natural systems and political/cultural/social constructions. Rivers and lakes are bioregions unto themselves, but water



9.2 Old Highway 2. Photo by Daniel Macfarlane.

also divides land; thus, from the perspectives of those carving out political boundaries, bodies of water naturally make good boundaries. While the waters of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence basin serve as convenient and “natural” (or intuitive) borders in a certain sense, the divided political jurisdictions that result make policy actions concerning these waters more fragmented and difficult.

Such dichotomies, or contradictions, certainly apply to Niagara Falls. Consider the pictures of Terrapin Point (Figure 9.3, 9.4). This used to be part of the waterfall until it was “reclaimed,” for two reasons: to mask the scenic impact of water diversions for hydroelectric production by shrinking the Horseshoe Falls, and to give tourists a better view.

In the course of discovering the historical manipulation of Niagara Falls, I went through a sort of progression of emotions: first dismay, then despair, then disillusionment. But somehow, over time, I returned to my childhood fascination with Niagara. I saw through the manipulations and reordering. I once again saw water going over rock, H₂O over granite, the largest freshwater system in the world plunging over a magnificent cliff.



9.3 Terrapin Point. Photo by Daniel Macfarlane.



9.4 Artificial edge of Horseshoe Falls. Photo by Daniel Macfarlane.



9.5 Maple leaf in water. Photo by Daniel Macfarlane.

I've watched these waterscapes from many perspectives, and I've photographed them from many angles. I've watched the St. Lawrence while standing on the remains of long submerged towns, up to my waist in water. I've watched from a dock, from a power dam, from a plane, from a freighter. I've watched Niagara from Terrapin Point and Table Rock; I've watched from on high in a hotel room and from below peering out of a cave, from the *Maid of the Mist* and from a jet boat. The hotel is obviously part of the built environment—but, really, so is Terrapin Point.

At Terrapin Point, I'm literally on the border. Does crossing the border change the view? What baggage do I bring that influences my perspective? We go back to where I started this: where I am from. Does being a Canadian—or a western Canadian, a central Canadian, a Michigander, or a central North American—have a perceptible impact on how I conceive of these border waters, or how I view the other side? Does the fact that I now live in the United States alter this view? Does my transnational, environmental historian outlook alter my perspective more than my nationality? Does framing through a camera lens change my gaze in profound ways?

At the very least, it is clear that the border doesn't just shape countries physically; it shapes ideas and perspectives metaphorically. They shape me. Does the border change the river or the waterfall? I think it does. But they also change the nature of the border—pun intended.

To Market, to Market

JOSEPH E. TAYLOR III

I like to believe that my consumer choices are rational decisions, but somewhere deep down inside I know that they are more like prayers. This is partly because of my work on the Salish Sea, which I can gaze upon from my university office, but my doubts have been honed by my relationship to another inland sea: the San Francisco Bay. I have been immersed in salt water since childhood, but my most instructive interactions have happened recently in a Berkeley fish market. The staff recall an era when buyers and sellers knew each other as neighbours. Their open banter conveys information about the fate of local fish and fishing seasons, and their cases confirm the quality they tout. When my turn comes, a mutual interrogation begins:

“How can I help you?”

“The rockfish looks good, but I have a couple questions.”

“Fire away.”

“Where was it caught, and is it fresh or fresh frozen?”

“It came out of Bodega. It’s probably fresh.”

I favour this shop because they handle fish well *and* they openly acknowledge what they do not know. I want to make informed decisions, and nothing irritates me like a seller blowing smoke.

I may be a historian, but I also know fish. Every boyhood summer, my brothers and I feasted on salmon, rockfish, ling cod, crabs, mussels, and clams. We harvested with glee the land and waters around Pacific City, Oregon. We immersed ourselves in the intimate details of nature until our great aunt learned that the Forest Service sprayed the hills with dichlorophenoxyacetic acid and trichlorophenoxyacetic acid, better known as 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. Unlike Vegas, what happened in the forest did not stay there. Herbicides washed into streams, estuaries, and the sea. The following year we stopped picking marionberries, huckleberries, and blackberries for the same reason, and ever since, I have reflexively thought about the ecology of what I eat.

I also fished commercially. In fact, but for one very bad fishing season and a careening drunk driver, I might have captained a boat in the Bering

Sea. At least, that was my vector until the mid-1980s. Thus I have a peculiar understanding of fish, markets, and sellers. I killed and sold more than my fair share of fish; I know how fishers and merchants handle fish and the truth; and I am fascinated by how persistent organic pollutants (POPs) move through food webs. My knowledge and pickiness probably make me a fish monger's nightmare customer.

Learning that the rockfish was offloaded in Bodega, short for Bodega Bay, raises red flags. Bodega Bay is a lovely town in western Sonoma County. The port is modest, the fishing boats small. The seller is surely correct that the rockfish wasn't flash frozen, because that requires larger ships, but Bodega is hours from Berkeley. Best case scenario: the rockfish was caught yesterday afternoon, so it's been on ice at least twenty-four hours. Most fish flesh needs a day to set, but after three days—which is likely, having come out of Bodega—the flesh will get rubbery. Ironically, Salish Sea markets rely on larger, more distant fleets, so the flesh quality of the flash-frozen fish they sell is more consistent.

More concerning is my suspicion that, because the Bodega fleet is small, captains work the San Francisco Bay plume. The bay is scenic but riddled with Superfund sites. Its waters, sediments, flora, and fauna are laced with 150 years of industrial and military wastes. As with the Salish Sea, locavorism is a marker of poverty and a menu of POPs, heavy metals, and other Very Bad Things. And like forest herbicides, pollutants in the bay flow through the Golden Gate and out onto the fishing grounds of boats from Bodega Bay. One perverse appeal of my Berkeley fish market is that it helps me avoid eating too locally. By contrast I know little about the provenience of fish sold in British Columbia, and the average fish counter, staffed by apathetic attendants and labelled in disingenuous ways, is an ecological black box.

With the rockfish eliminated, I shift my interrogation to a higher-priced choice: "I see the salmon is certified. Do you know which port it came from in Alaska?"

"Port? No, but it's from Bristol."

"Bristol" is Bristol Bay in western Alaska. Local salmon runs are mind-bogglingly large and well managed. These emblems of wild nature mature in the Bering Sea and Alaska gyre and spawn far from industrialization, but they are hardly pure. The mining conglomerate Rio Tinto is proposing a potentially devastating mine near Lake Iliamna, worrying

environmentalists about future pollution, but the fish that spawn in Iliamna and the other lakes and streams of Bristol Bay are already compromised. The problem is mercury. While each salmon bioaccumulates only tiny quantities of the heavy metal during its ocean sojourns, collectively the salmon deposit huge amounts in the sediments of lakes where they spawn and die by the millions each year. This mercury is biotransported from the same seas that also nurture salmon from as far away as the Lena, Amur, Fraser, and Columbia Rivers. And like those other watersheds, Bristol Bay's streams and lakes are *natural* toxic dumps, produced by global ecological chains. I favour markets that help me obtain fish from beyond the Salish Sea and San Francisco Bay, but no place stands outside the POP ecosystem.

Certification labels capture none of this complexity. The buying guides of the Blue Ocean Institute, Marine Stewardship Council, and Monterey Bay Aquarium tell us important things about species and stocks, but their information is coarse-grained and their guides are as much about luring consumers as educating them. Moreover, none of these organizations do quality control well. This I learned the hard way. When our daughter was conceived, her mom and I learned to think of wombs as ecosystems, and when our baby was diagnosed with autism and digestive disorders, we learned to patrol what went into her body. We discovered that consumer guides are less useful than medical journals for understanding how POPs bioaccumulate in adipose tissues, cross the placental barrier, and pass to infants through breast milk. We also learned that research published in chemistry and biology journals is far more useful for understanding the nature of the nature we consume than anything gleaned from a pocket guide or phone app.

All this runs through my head as I ponder the sockeye fillet in the display case. "Nothing is perfect," I tell myself. Then I tell the counterperson, "I'll take the salmon." We do the deal, but even this relatively transparent fish market feels a bit like a postindustrial wilderness. Every fish counter contains nature that is simultaneously from nowhere and everywhere, and no consumer has sufficient knowledge. Even my decades of experience on the water and in libraries feels inadequate to parse all the questions that inhere in fish bodies. Even my purchases are acts of faith that transcend empirical evidence. No label or counterperson can tell us all that we need to know when we head to the market.

Leading Waters

NOAH D. HALL

I was born in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, a beautiful watershed that was cleared out and reshaped to serve New York City with drinking water. Now it is pristine and protected, and the flooded towns at the bottoms of the reservoirs are history. The landscape has been healed with new forests that provide critical habitat and refuge for urban humans, my family included.

We soon moved just a short distance to the neighbouring Hudson River watershed. My childhood home had a nearby lake—really more of a pond by adult standards, but with plenty of water and shoreline for a small boy to explore and escape in. I swam, lay in the sun, and enjoyed my own thoughts. Adult vacations should be so simple.

I roam. The small lake soon gave way to states, countries, and continents. I moved west, first to Michigan, then Minnesota—Colorado was cool but didn't have much water. Along the way I fell in love with Lake Superior. And it brought me back to Michigan.

For many years I lived a short walk through neighbours' woods to the Huron River, a lovely, peaceful, and sustaining presence. The trails along the river were my daily bread. It is beautiful in all seasons, a perfect Michigan river.

I now live on an island in the Detroit River. It's a powerful body of water and the soul of the Great Lakes. Most nights I sleep on my boat and feel the headwater energy of Superior, Michigan, and Huron flow around me. Canada is south and Lake Erie is downstream. It's an intersection of waters, countries, and commerce, but often I have the place to myself.

I always love the water where I live, and never know where that will be. My favourite home is the beaches and forested shorelines of Vancouver, where the Fraser River meets the Pacific Ocean. Reaching the West Coast, starting from the East Coast, built in Detroit on the way—feels like destiny manifested. It may be a false hope, as with the water cycle, there is no end or final destination. It just comes back around and around. Nature is never finished. Enjoy the ride.

On Frames, Perspectives, and Vanishing Points

LYNNE HEASLEY

When past, present, and future intersect so visually—so unexpectedly and mysteriously—as they did in this astonishing scene on the Escanaba River, you can't help but reflect on the histories that might explain such a place. Here are juxtaposed two companion stories from the same spot on the riverbank. The first, a romantic ruin, succumbing to nature's time—a sublime refuge where trees are powerful over concrete and the divine appears luminous through the clouds of a passing storm. The second, three bridges in human time: a rare lattice truss bridge still carrying iron to Great Lakes steel mills, an abandoned concrete highway, and finally, barely visible in iron shadows, pilings from a long-ago wooden frontier road. Story upon story reconciled for a moment in the layers of a place.

No one viewing the images would imagine the humble scenes outside the frame. To my left, a family fishes off the riverbank. Overhead, my teenage son, Jake, scrambles where train trestle meets land. With each lunge, he looses a small avalanche of stones and taconite iron pellets. My husband, Phillip, stands next to me pointing, and pointing again, to make sure I see the details. The old pilings under the bridge are phenomenal.

And there's Lowell. Lowell circles us. Lowell talks. Lowell brings us a big leaf. Do we know what a buckeye tree is? Yes, I grew up in Ohio, the Buckeye State. Lowell says how unusual it is to have a buckeye tree this far north. Lowell marvels at how much time I spend "to take one picture." Lowell asks Phillip if it's hard to wait so long for one picture. Lowell queries me about my lens, my tripod, the places we've been. Lowell talks.

I get klutzy and frazzled when I can't concentrate. My tripod height is wrong; my graduated neutral density filter isn't level with the horizon; my remote shutter release won't release. Why won't it release? How in the world does our friend Conrad, a landscape painter, paint while people talk to him? How does he paint while I talk to him? I am clearly monophasic—one thing at a time, thank you. In my mind I call Lowell "Lull." The wind



9.6 “American Ruins 1,” Escanaba, Michigan, 2011. Concrete remnants of the long-abandoned Bay Shore Road bridge (old U.S. Highway 41 over the Escanaba River). Photo by Lynne Heasley.



9.7 “American Ruins 2,” Escanaba, Michigan, 2011. On the left runs the Canadian National Railway bridge over the Escanaba River, one of only two historical lattice truss bridges in Michigan. The company removed and replaced the bridge in 2015. On the right, ruins of the Bay Shore Road bridge jut into the river. Delta County and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers demolished this bridge in 2015. Photo by Lynne Heasley.

blows the clouds through the scene. They're starting to break. We'll lose this light in minutes. Lowell. Is. Irritating.

But here's the catch: It was Lowell who pointed the way. Lowell, the retiree. Lowell, on his bicycle. Lowell, who saw us driving aimlessly through his remote Escanaba neighbourhood. He pulled beside us and asked if we were lost. No, we were just scouting the Escanaba River. We were looking for industrial history, for maritime history, for hidden waterscapes. (Our son's face at "hidden waterscapes": mute humour perfected.)

"Oh." Lowell paused. Then: "Have you found the fishing spot yet?"

Research, writing, art: capturing data or sentences or scenes sometimes means solitary episodes, blocking out other people. Likewise, no person appears within the frame of these photographs; the visual and intellectual perspectives lead elsewhere. But outside the frame are expanding ripples of "we": a visiting family (us) and their intelligent local guide (Lowell), other families and their fish, and so on, through the relationships that make up a place on the river and a river running into a great lake. Here at the fishing spot is Great Lakes history boiled to an essence. Its stories are our stories, too.

Headwaters of Hope

DAVE DEMPSEY

Growing up in southeast Michigan in the 1960s, I experienced a permeable water border. My parents occasionally chose recreation destinations on the Canadian side of the Detroit River, one day including Point Pelee National Park, jutting into an unexpectedly algae-choked Lake Erie. At age nine, I wasn't thinking about borders that day, but I think I absorbed the notion of a lake bigger than anyone—including nations—in trouble. It wasn't an American or Canadian lake. It was a shared lake.

Even when we didn't cross the boundary, Canada was in our sights. Inexpensive entertainment for a young family subsisting on an assistant professor's salary was watching freighters pass up and down the Detroit River against the backdrop of downtown Windsor, Ontario. You couldn't gaze at those vessels without sensing the role water played in connecting, rather than dividing, nations.

That base in southeast Michigan was also part of a binational cultural ecosystem. At a time when television shaped the world view of many children, I spent countless hours watching Canadian programming. I watched hockey, of course, but also shows aimed at kids. I didn't differentiate these shows from those on American television. I grew up thinking Canadians were friends, people much like us; they just had a few quaint differences like saying "zed" instead of "zee." The border wasn't a technicality, exactly, but it wasn't a fearsome wall—or a moat.

Professionally, the value of those early lessons has persisted. Perhaps the differences between Americans and Canadians are more numerous and subtle than a nine-year-old child can discern, but mutual respect and cooperation spanning the border are real. The water that shapes the border also shapes a shared ethic of water stewardship.

More than water flows along and across the Canada-U.S. border. So does human capital. It is a profound resource and, unlike water, inexhaustible. It is the headwaters of hope for a future of wisely guarded and sustainably used water.

