
Katherine Ann Roberts. *West/Border/Road: Nation and Genre in Contemporary Canadian Literature*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2018. Pp. 404. CAD \$95.00.

The border between the United States and Canada has long delineated not only the geographical spaces between the two countries but also Canada's national imaginary. In the wake of ongoing North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiations and a protectionist Donald Trump-led US, new and evolving aesthetic representations of the border will certainly arise and continue to mark Canadian nationalist aesthetics. With this in mind, Katherine Ann Roberts' academic tome *West/Border/Road: Nation and Genre in Contemporary Canadian Narrative* is a welcome contribution to critical border studies. Roberts addresses how the border and American-Canadian relations in varying forms have been taken up in Canadian iterations of the Western, road, and border genres. *West/Border/Road* is a sweeping analysis of (primarily) Canadian literature, cinema, and television associated with the above three genres and a discussion of how these texts differ from their prevailing American counterparts.

Roberts positions herself within critical nation studies, a body of academic texts that are "questioning, critiquing, and analyzing the modalities of Canadian collective belonging *within* the parameters of the nation" (6; emphasis in original). In her words, *West/Border/Road* fills a "gap in scholarship on the Canadian-American cultural relationship by gathering together a body of isolated texts from different disciplines (literature, film studies, culture studies) to form a more substantial tableau" (12). *West/Border/Road* is divided into sections on the Western, border, and road genres, and each section contains two chapters.

The first chapter examines Guy Vanderhaeghe's Western or Frontier trilogy, while the second chapter analyzes some of Aritha van Herk's more recent work. Roberts argues that the texts reframe aspects of the Americanized Western genre while also maintaining an affiliation with its generic conventions; through this process, the texts reveal their Canadian cultural instincts. Vanderhaeghe's Western trilogy, Roberts argues, displaces the masculinized violence of the Western genre for a gentler model while also critically rendering visible Canada's historic (and ongoing) displacement of Indigenous peoples. Van Herk's texts, such as her novel *Restlessness* (1998), aesthetically celebrate local Canadian spaces bypassed in prevailing literary works; she also interrupts the gender norms of the American Western by placing female protagonists at the centre of her narratives.

In the third chapter, Roberts addresses two recent CBC television shows about the governance and policing of the border: *Intelligence* (2006–07) and *The Border* (2014–17). She suggests that both shows represent the Canadian border in a post-9/11 world as dangerously permeable, allowing for infiltration by American surveillance figures and the corruption of Canadian spaces (175). *Intelligence* critiques this governmental corruption by making its moral centre a relationship between the main character, Inspector Spalding (whose outsider status within the policing world, Roberts claims, is concretized by her African-Canadian and female identity), and Jimmy Reardon, a crime-ring, mob-boss type. Similarly, *The Border* contrasts an American-compromised federal Canadian government with the character Major Kessler, who, Roberts suggests, personifies a more ethical version of Canada.

In the fourth chapter, Roberts moves south and engages with two American border novels and an American border film. The novels, Richard Ford's *Canada* (2012) and Jim Lynch's *Border Songs* (2009), and the film, Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008), render Canada as a blank space. According to Roberts, the texts "illustrate the power of genre to inadvertently exacerbate the invisibility of Canada within the Canadian-American cultural dynamic" (230).

The final two chapters of *West/Border/Road* address the road film in Canada. The fifth chapter analyzes Québécois road films while the sixth examines two broadly Canadian road films. Roberts applies a transnational lens to the road narratives in these chapters. She suggests that recent road films in Quebec—such as Louis Bélanger's *Route 132* (2010) and Robin Aubert's *À l'origine d'un cri* (2010)—seek a path forward for the nation by confronting its cultural past and shifting present. This chapter is Roberts' strongest. Her examination of these films is contextual, historical, and specific, and she provides a genuinely new discussion of road films in Canada. In the final chapter, Roberts suggests that contemporary Canadian road films are shaped by the pressures the behemoth American film industry places on Canadian films. She frames Michael McGowan's *One Week* (2008) as an example of the sentimental and branded Canadian nationalism more common in Canada's current formation of transnational capitalist economy; she then claims counter-intuitively that Matthew Bissonnette's *Passenger Side* (2009)—set in Los Angeles with only a few Canadian references—is more aligned with Canada's film tradition.

Roberts' strength lies in her close reading, and she provides sharp and convincing readings of most of the texts under consideration in *West/Border/Road*. While the texts Roberts addresses are primarily contemporary, her analysis could use more discussion of the time in which the texts were

produced. Although she notes some temporal shifts in representation, such as in her chapter on Québécois road films, at other times greater attention to evolving patterns across eras is desired. She occasionally shifts from discussing older texts to newer ones without providing context that could enrich her analysis. For instance, she draws a direct line between Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) and Bissonnette's *Passenger Side* because both main characters have a loser complex, a nationalist syndrome identified in the 1970s by Margaret Atwood and others. While reading this analysis, I found myself asking: Can we really say that *Passenger Side* is markedly Canadian because it is a film about a loser? Perhaps it might be more fruitful to revisit with a critical eye some of these well-worn thematic categorizations that persist in Canadian cultural studies. While Roberts addresses the difficulty of this undertaking, writing that "the challenge has been to find a way to generalize about Canadian cultural 'difference' in a manner that is not reductive" (12), she does not quite accomplish the task.

West/Border/Road, moreover, could use a more specific through-line, as Roberts' central argument is somewhat shrouded. Indeed, she describes her work more as "lines of inquiry" into how American genres are taken up in Canadian culture, how "the power of genre shapes the perception of Canada from south of the border," and how the narratives she analyzes engage "with discourses of contemporary Canadian nationness" (7). She could do more to foreground the uniqueness of her critical lens and develop a specific argument. Further justification for the organization of her chapters would also be helpful. Why, for instance, is there one chapter on American texts, while the rest focus strictly on Canadian texts? Why write a section on Québécois nationalism and the road narrative but give no mention of, say, Indigenous nationalisms in Canada as related to the Western, border, or road genres?

Nevertheless, Roberts' aim in *West/Border/Road* is ambitious: she parallels a wide series of texts to highlight how they overlap and diverge. It is difficult to introduce such a broad approach and maintain a specific argument. Moreover, my suggestion that she could address further topics in this academic tome—which would likely dilute its focus—may actually be a recognition of the subject's breadth and fecundity and the probability that there is, indeed, a lot more that can be written on the subject. This recognition alone is a sign of the success of *West/Border/Road*: it left me with the desire to know more.

Anna Sajecki