

SECTION ONE

TALKING ACROSS BORDERS

THE ESSAYS IN THIS SECTION identify challenges that historians encounter when they step across the borders of national histories. Women's historians have long pushed another set of historical boundaries, the social boundaries of gender that have made women's options and histories different from men's, and those of race, class, and sexualities that have created inequalities among women who share a common citizenship. National and social boundaries have combined to marginalize most people from history. Histories of nations have often focused on the exploits of public leaders and powerful citizens, thus reinforcing social inequalities by making people with less public power historically invisible—among them poor people, workers, women, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered individuals, and colonized peoples. Here, Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus probe a similar process by which people who live outside a known national past become invisible and unconnected.

Both essays originated as plenary addresses at the “Unsettled Pasts” conference. From the different perspectives of Canadian and U.S. history and of two academic generations, they explore the places that women

have occupied in the U.S. and Canadian Wests, and in the histories of each nation. Each essay reflects its author's training in national history; each is informed by similar experiences of border crossing.

Elizabeth Jameson opened the conference. A more senior (or at least older) U.S. historian, her essay draws upon her own research, her experience as an American living and teaching in Canada, and a generation of historical scholarship on women in the (mostly U.S.) West. Sheila McManus led off on the second day. A Canadian, McManus has lived in the United States as the first post-doctoral fellow at Yale University's Howard R. Lamar Center for the Study of Frontiers and Borders. Her article speaks from the perspective of a younger generation of historians who have pioneered in comparative and borderlands scholarship; it draws from her own research on gender in the Alberta-Montana borderlands.¹ Both articles explore the challenges and promises of transnational histories and their potential to disrupt inherited histories. The similarities and differences in the authors' perspectives provide an apt introduction to the subtleties, nuances, and textures of women's histories in the Canadian and U.S. Wests.

Jameson and McManus articulated a number of common assumptions: that women have been marginalized in the national and regional histories of both the United States and Canada; that it is important to investigate western women's experiences in both nations comparatively, without assuming commonalities or differences; that both mundane daily experience and state policies shape women's experiences and histories; and that historians' training and personal experiences affect the histories we record. Recognizing the complexities of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other historically constructed identities, each author probes the difference a national border has made for the many women of the Canadian and U.S. Wests.

Comparing how the West and the international border have operated in Canadian and U.S. imagination, and in separate national historical narratives, Jameson examines the assumptions of national and public histories that have marginalized and isolated women. She examines one source, the diary of Mary Dodge Woodward, a relatively privileged white

widow who worked on a Dakota bonanza farm in the 1880s, to illustrate how the women of the North American West have been isolated from one another and from “mainstream” histories. Woodward’s diary becomes a lens that refracts assumptions about class, race, domesticity, women’s roles, about what history is and who makes it, and about western settlement itself. All of these assumptions separated women of different races, classes, and nations, and separated women from the public world of written history. Woodward’s diary clarifies, too, how national history and nationalist assumptions erected borders among people who lived on opposite sides of the 49th parallel. The challenge, and the promise, is to reimagine history from the lived experiences of women for whom neither nationality nor gender exhausted the complexities of social networks or personal identity.

McManus takes the power of historical imagination as her starting point. “Women’s historians have always unsettled the past,” she begins. “It is what we do.” History becomes more complex and richer as women are added, and particularly as they are added to narratives of the North American West, a region that has long been seen as “quintessentially male.” Acknowledging a generation of scholarship that has emphasized differences of race and class, McManus notes that western women’s historians have been more reluctant to cross the line of the nation state and explore national differences.

McManus does not hesitate to take that step. One of the few historians to date who has examined the Canada-U.S. border from a gendered perspective, she probes what the border meant for women of different races and classes, focusing on the aboriginal, black, and white women of the Alberta-Montana borderlands, and on how assumptions about race and gender were embedded in the process of nation building. McManus concludes that borders matter differently for different women, depending on social status, and on whether women are multiply marginalized by virtue of race, religion, or sexuality. Gender and race become powerful tools to unsettle the assumptions of power and privilege that have been fundamental in national histories and national territorial ambitions. The challenge, McManus cautions, is to be aware of our own nationalist

assumptions. She warns against assuming similarity in women's experiences across social or national borderlines, and against assuming that the history of any nation is unique, or "normal."

Both authors write from personal experiences of border crossing. McManus, a Canadian, spent the 2001–2002 academic year at Yale University. Jameson ends with a personal postscript from the same period, reflecting on the significance of the international border and of national identity for her, as an American living in Canada, during and immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Implicitly and explicitly, both authors' personal experiences of border crossing have informed their historical analyses, and their awareness of the barriers borders have erected. They suggest, too, how powerfully history can transform the meanings of national and social boundaries, and how fragile and contingent those meanings can be.

NOTE

1. Sheila McManus, "Mapping the Alberta-Montana Borderlands: Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (2001): 71–87; "'Their Own Country': Race, Gender, Landscape, and Colonization Around the 49th Parallel, 1862–1900," *Agricultural History* 73 (1999): 168–82; *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).