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## **Border Insecurity: Reading Transnational Environments in Jim Lynch's Border Songs**

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# Border Insecurity: Reading Transnational Environments in Jim Lynch's *Border Songs*

Jenny Kerber

**Abstract:** This article applies an eco-critical approach to contemporary American fiction about the Canada-US border, examining Jim Lynch's portrayal of the British Columbia-Washington borderlands in his 2009 novel *Border Songs*. It argues that studying transnational environmental actors in border texts—in this case, marijuana, human migrants, and migratory birds—helps illuminate the contingency of political boundaries, problems of scale, and discourses of risk and security in cross-border regions after 9/11. Further, it suggests that widening the analysis of trans-border activity to include environmental phenomena productively troubles concepts of nature and regional belonging in an era of climate change and economic globalization.

**Keywords:** eco-criticism, Canada, United States, border, migration, 9/11, surveillance, bioregionalism, smuggling, climate change

## I. Scaling the Border

At the beginning of *Border Songs*, Jim Lynch's post-9/11 novel about neighbouring communities along the Canada-US border in the Pacific Northwest, readers are presented with an image that hints at the complexity of national borderlands. As the novel's protagonist, Brandon Vanderkool, drives through northern Washington one evening while working for the US Border Patrol, he edges along a boundary that non-human nature seems to cross with ease:

Brandon wheeled up Northwood past the NO CASINO! yard signs toward the nonchalant border, a geographical handshake heralded here by nothing more than a drainage ditch that turned raucous with horny frogs in the spring and overflowed into both countries every fall. The ditch was one of the few landmarks along the nearly invisible boundary that cleared the Cascades and fell west through lush hills that blurred the line no matter how aggressively it was chainsawed and weed-whacked. (Lynch 4)

As a geographical feature that is changeable and porous, the ditch seems to echo Robert Frost's observation that "[s]omething there is that doesn't love a wall" (39). Yet Brandon's subsequent capture of two immigrants attempting to pass through this same landscape paradoxically affirms that despite its near invisibility, the international boundary still matters in ways both material and symbolic. Whereas local residents who have routinely crossed the border for decades may view the line as "nonchalant," those who attempt to cross it without documentation are acutely aware of its force. Even in places where the border might look unmonitored, tentacles of surveillance in the forms of sensors, cameras, canine patrols, and human eyes and ears extend their reach. The fact that the same landmark can elicit such different interpretations is evidence of how border regions stubbornly resist condensation into a single story. To draw on Lynch's title, there is not one border song but many, and like the waters of the drainage ditch, they rise and subside at different moments into harmony or dissonance.

As numerous border studies theorists have pointed out, borders are much more than lines on maps; they are also places laden with myth, memory, and emotion that can be mobilized for an array of political purposes. When it comes to the Canada-US border,

for example, the border has variously been invoked to stoke Canadian nationalism, to generate feelings of partnership and common interest between Canadians and Americans, and to serve the interests of US hegemony. Over the past several decades, the growth of border studies as an interdisciplinary field has been fuelled by globalization, the War on Terror, cultural theories of hybridity, refugee crises, and the development of supranational agreements like the EU (European Union) and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), all of which demand new conceptualizations of the relationship between states and the everyday lives of individuals. Yet the shape that these emerging geopolitical imaginaries ought to take has also been a matter of debate, with some thinkers insisting upon a trend toward a borderless world, while others have maintained that borders are stretching and proliferating, both within and between nation states (Wilson and Donnan 21; Nicol, *The Fence* 1, 169–70; Konrad and Nicol, *Beyond Walls* 21–2). While the former position seems dubious given the proliferation of state borders as well as their extension into sites like detention centres and databanks, it is also nonetheless true that no country can adopt an entirely isolationist stance; even a nation as powerful as the United States must balance the fear of security failure with the need for trade and other cultural flows.

To study borders thus demands that we look at how their negotiation of different and often competing imperatives—economic openness, sovereignty, and a fear of terrorism, for example—plays out at different scales. Part of this involves considering the ways that neighbourly relations among those who live along the Canada-US border exist in tension with national and international agreements designed to regulate those interactions. The fluctuating character of these relations demands nimbleness on the part

of those who would cross and generates improvisation at formal, practical, and popular levels—whether this involves making sure one has the correct and up-to-date travel documents for legal crossing, enrolling in a pre-clearance program like NEXUS, or developing new means of crossing illegally without detection by authorities.<sup>1</sup> In the case of some of Lynch’s characters, it also sometimes means choosing *not* to cross a border that lies only a few hundred metres from where they live (20). For instance, when the application of enhanced screening techniques turns up an old DUI on Washington farmer Norm Vanderkool, leading Canadian Customs to deny him passage across the border, Norm “promptly vowed never to step foot in Canada again, though he’d grown up playing in it and drove tractors across it to help plow fields” (20).

Simply put, the variability of multi-scalar factors—ranging from federal decisions to local environmental conditions—means that one never crosses the same border in the same way twice, even in regions where national lines bring together neighbours who exist mainly on peaceable terms. Where the BC-Washington border in Lynch’s novel is initially described as a “geographical handshake,” an image that implies cordiality between two parties, the narrator soon observes that in the months following 11 September 2001, the tenor of these relations changed: “You apparently couldn’t bump into Canadians anymore. Spontaneity had up and left the valley” (5–6). Despite the fact that communal memory in the region remains strong and gossip still flows quite freely across the international boundary, there is also a new climate of suspicion between the citizens of these two countries that casts a shadow over their dealings with one another. For instance, one American character insists that his twenty-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty “had been vandalized by Canadians” (3), while the narrator observes that

Canadians no longer make frequent ski trips to Mount Baker, a decline which negatively affects Washington state businesses (5). The fear that many politicians and pundits fomented in the wake of 9/11, which in turn led both to significant delays at land and sea crossings, as well as a resurgence of the metaphor of the Canadian border as *dangerous*, thus has social and material impacts on communities located all the way across the continent from New York City.<sup>2</sup> In Lynch's text, the new era of heightened border security does not wholly eliminate contact between Canadians and Americans, but it does place new constraints on community relations in ways that many locals find unfamiliar and disconcerting.

In what follows, I consider some intersections between border studies and eco-criticism along the Canada-US border, looking at how Lynch's portrayal of a series of transnational environmental actors that operate largely *outside* of the official rules of the state—namely marijuana, undocumented human migrants, and migratory birds—prompt readers to reflect on the uneasy encounters among nature, economy, and politics in the post-9/11 world. The fact that such encounters generate unease even between close allies like Canada and the US testifies to the potency of conversations about the *unnaturalness* of geopolitical boundaries. If borders are places of imagined as well as lived experience, then what can literary representations tell us about how those who live near them imagine their relationships to the nation-state and to human and non-human co-dwellers within the same bioregion? How might such artistic representations not merely reflect consensus about the Canada-US relationship but also create and transform it? Finally, how do environmental phenomena complicate our understanding of political boundaries and ideas of sovereignty and security?

Although borders are often portrayed as fixed lines solemnized by formal treaties, our understandings of frontiers and the phenomena that cross them are culturally contingent on and reproduced daily by ideas and myths (Black 21; Rodríguez 223). Border regions also often play host to shadow economies vital to local communities, but since these stories cannot be easily integrated into national narratives, it is left to other storytellers—including novelists, screenwriters, visual artists and poets—to perform the cultural work of interpreting them. Contemporary border stories are thus a good place to begin to understand larger myths of nature, nation, and ideas of (il)legality to decipher how altered political, economic, and environmental conditions either challenge or reinforce them. Reading such stories within the larger context of globalization also lends nuance to an eco-critical *sense of place*, given that environmental threats often resist confinement to local or even national settings. Looking at the various border songs created by transnational traffic in Lynch’s text thus opens avenues for appreciating these subtleties, even as the text poses broader questions about how and where boundaries are drawn among people and places. The growing presence of eco-cultural works that address Canada-US trans-boundary issues in different regions—for instance, Karsten Heuer’s *Being Caribou* (2006) and Subhankar Banerjee’s *Arctic Voices* (2012) in the North, Thomas King’s *One Good Story, That One* (1993) and *Truth and Bright Water* (2000) in the Great Plains and foothills, and Eric Gansworth’s story “Patriot Act” (2008) and Courtney Hunt’s film *Frozen River* (2008), which are set along the St. Lawrence River—show that the narrativization of such issues is not easily confined to the familiar categories of foreign versus domestic, wild versus native, or licit versus illicit. Instead, what emerges in a study of these works is a mode of trans-boundary reading that attends

to the realities of pre- and post-9/11 security regimes and the looming shadow of climate change, states of being wherein borders prove to be multiple and unstable.

Historically, many of the strongest links forged between border studies and eco-criticism have focused on the shared riparian and desert habitats of the US-Mexico borderlands and the crossings of non-human phenomena within these regions. For instance, in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*, the Rio Grande / Rio Bravo River serves as a powerful emblem of the ever-changing forms of sustenance and division across the Chicano / a homeland of Aztlán. Meanwhile, in Ruben Martínez's and Luis Alberto Urrea's studies of Mexican migration, one witnesses the intimate and sometimes deadly relationship between border-crossing migrants and the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. In the critical field, the work of Joni Adamson, Sarah Jaquette Ray, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, Devon G. Peña, and Hilary Cunningham, among others, has helped illustrate how debates about nature are never far from conversations about geopolitical borders in the United States; indeed, such debates often play an integral role in shaping people's experiences of work, family, and state infrastructure, while also fuelling conversations about environmental justice and what it means to belong to a place. Yet there is also a significant body of scholarship that considers the Canada-US border as a place that affords possibilities for comparison with the US-Mexico line while also demanding a more tailored approach. As early as the 1980s, Canadian and American scholars affiliated with the Borderlands project based at the University of Maine emphasized the value of looking at humanities materials in Canada-US border studies and, subsequently, the work of figures including W.H. New, Laurie Ricou, Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Victor Konrad and Heather Nicol, Jody Berland, Rachel Adams,



Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel, Gillian Roberts, David Stirrup, and Reingard Nischik; the Culture and the Canada-US Border research network based at the University of Kent have collectively given the Canada-US border a more prominent role in discussions about North American border cultures on either side of the line. These scholars emphasize that it is important not only to pay attention to the symbolic *differences* between Canada and the US when it comes to perceptions of the border but also to the ways in which claims to Canada's distinctiveness are eroded by *common* histories and the porousness of the border.

My narrower aim here is to build on this previous literary-cultural scholarship by focusing on aesthetic portrayals of environmental issues and phenomena that cross, trouble, or otherwise negotiate the Canada-US border, especially in the wake of agreements such as the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (1988) and NAFTA (1994).<sup>3</sup> Widening our analysis of trans-border activity to include more-than-human phenomena, I argue, does more than sharpen the visibility of the Canada-US border within North American border studies; it also reveals subtle and often surprising forms of agency in the traffic that crosses the boundaries of the nation-state and invites a deeper consideration of scale in analyzing border issues. From microscopic zoonotic diseases such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) and swine flu to migratory species and trans-boundary waters, as well as the development of the illicit drug trade, a host of contemporary issues challenge the fixity of lines dividing species, nation-states, and different forms of sensory and disciplinary knowledge. In many cases, non-human agents serve not merely as background to narratives of border crossing, but are *integral* to them.

Reading border texts using the interpretive approaches of eco-criticism thus has the potential to help us better understand biotic movements and the alliances and vulnerabilities they generate across industrial, technological, and transport systems spanning nations and continents.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I suggest that the character at the heart of Lynch's novel, the US Border Patrol agent Brandon Vanderkool, serves as a promising model for the eco-critical interpretation of borders—his mode of reading border regions blends art and science, skilfully detecting patterns in seasonal cycles and species distributions, but it also remains alert to the nomadic, improvisational qualities of both nature and culture in an era of economic flux and global environmental change. Further, Lynch's text wrestles with the question of how to protect nature when nature often ignores the boundaries we set up for its refuge. When faced with a planetary future likely to involve greater levels of climate instability, contemporary border literature like Lynch's novel constitutes an important intervention in debates about how we define security and how we determine who or what belongs in a place and why.

## **II. (Un)Natural Lines and Imagined Regions**

Although the Pacific Northwest setting of *Border Songs* is often portrayed in tourist literature as a bucolic place of mountains, berry farms, and Dutch bakeries, the novel makes clear that the region has also at times been a site of international tension, especially in the period leading up to the signing of the Oregon Treaty between Britain and the US in 1846. In more recent decades, trade disputes over softwood lumber and agricultural subsidies, as well as concerns about illegal migrants, terrorist threats, and

drug trafficking have drawn national attention on both sides of the line.<sup>5</sup> Several of these issues find their way into the novel, and its climax draws explicitly on a 2005 case in which authorities charged three men from British Columbia with conspiracy to import and distribute marijuana through a 110-metre tunnel constructed directly underneath the Canada-US border at Lynden, Washington. Although observers debated the effectiveness of the Lynden Tunnel bust in curbing the cross-border drug trade, both sides agreed that the tunnel symbolized a challenge to the myth of “purification by division” (New 19) often embedded in the use of boundary metaphors. The smugglers’ ability to burrow their way into the continental subterranean became just one more sign of the border’s permeability, even as it highlighted the creativity of those determined to cross it by illegal means.

The idea that nature aids permeability and resists rigid geopolitical divisions has long been a key tenet of bioregionalism, a movement that has enjoyed particular support in the Pacific Northwest and which advocates regional commitment to place and forms of social organization that take into account pre-existing geographical markers such as watersheds and mountain ranges. The region known as Cascadia, which stretches from the coastal slopes of southern Alaska through British Columbia and Washington to the forests of northern California, has served as a powerful form of transnational identity for some westerners, in part because of its seeming rootedness in ecological rather than national unity. Despite the appeal of the bioregional concept, however, critics have argued that a desire to “naturalize” the cross-border region risks foreclosing discussions about politics on either side of a given geopolitical line (Heise, “Ecocriticism” 383; Abbott 203–5). We have seen, for instance, how arguments favouring neoliberal policies

under NAFTA and the now defunct Security and Prosperity Partnership (2005) sought to bolster their claims for the necessary circulation of certain phenomena—such as surveillance information and capital—by using the rhetoric of ecological connection.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, unwanted migrants are frequently categorized as a kind of pollution that threatens to despoil pristine natural settings (Jaquette Ray 715–8). Concerns about the inequities generated by these developments, combined with the persistence of national identification, mean that despite visions of a growing continentalism from both ends of the ideological spectrum, the creation of a common North American culture has proven limited in practice.<sup>7</sup>

Canadian and Mexican critics have tended to take a cautious approach to hemispheric perspectives, and their reluctance needs to be understood within the context of each nation's experiences in the face of American economic and political hegemony. When it comes to border management, claims that everything changed on the continent as of 11 September 11 2001 are not entirely accurate; as Heather Nicol notes, US hegemony in border practices can be traced at least as far back as 1994, when the signing of NAFTA institutionalized arrangements that heightened Canada's economic dependence on the US, in turn driving greater security cooperation after 9/11 (*The Fence* 168). Further, while Canada never ceded large tracts of territory to the US as Mexico did at the end of the Mexican-American War, Canadians have at times fiercely debated how to respond to US threats of military or economic domination, variously using the border as a symbolic site of resistance to the intrusions of a more powerful culture, or as a way to articulate Canada's distinctiveness (Sadowski-Smith, *Border Fictions* 120). In Lynch's novel, the biggest champion for Canadian resistance to US border policy after 9/11 is the retired

political science professor Wayne Rousseau, who in one memorable scene shoots out a US border surveillance camera that peers into his and his neighbours' lives. Along with Wayne, some Canadian critics contend that although the US desire for hegemony has not always played out in direct forms of territorial control, such control has manifested itself in other ways, ranging from the negotiation of defence agreements in the Cold War era and the gradual revamping of legislation designed to protect Canada's comparatively small cultural industries in the 1980s and 1990s, to the erosion of environmental protections (Thompson and Randall; Clarkson; Clarkson and Mildenberger). Heather Nicol concludes that what has often been framed as widespread security cooperation among Canada, the US, and Mexico since 9/11 is a product *not* of common agreement about security issues, per se, but rather is attributable to "Canadian and Mexican concerns about economic security and market access, stemming from their reliance on US markets" ("Building Borders" 269).<sup>8</sup>

When set against this backdrop, the academic conversation about North American relations often stalls between those who desire further development of post-national, hemispheric frameworks and those who insist upon the continuing importance of national sovereignty and local distinctions. Is there a way that examining trans-border regions from an eco-critical perspective might address this divide, attending at once to political difference and the bioregional call for a more thoughtful reinhabitation of place? In particular, what can looking at something very specific like the growth and sale of marijuana—a plant that crosses all kinds of boundaries of nation, culture, and nature—contribute to our understanding of the ways that Canadian *distinctiveness* paradoxically pushes against *and* requires US sanction for its traffic across the border into new

markets? In the next section, I suggest that Lynch's characterization of marijuana in the novel provides an especially good eco-critical object to *think with* because of its ability to draw questions of hemispheric cooperation and local distinctiveness in sharp relief. This is not only because its traditional status as a product affiliated with West Coast hippiedom and an ethos of *getting back to Nature* is now troubled by the rise of industrial-scale cultivation and corporate marketing, whose reach extends across national boundaries; it is also because marijuana's status as a *threatening* border crosser is much debated, with some people linking it to floods of crime, while others see its effects as benign, and even economically and medically beneficial.

### III. The Making and Unmaking of Illicitness

While *Border Songs* illustrates how the marijuana industry operates on a hemispheric, and even a global, scale, readers at the same time also see that the drug's growers and transporters rely heavily on local knowledge. Such knowledge must cover everything from understanding electrical utilities and their tracking of kilowatt use to hiring discreet horticulturists and monitoring traffic in and around grow-op and transport sites. For instance, one of Lynch's marijuana smugglers explains that much of his success stems from driving along a small stretch of the border "ten times a week," talking with local "hunters, hikers, and tugboat captains," and knowing "the names and habits of at least half the residents—their dogs too" (54). In another example, a grower finds that ducks make for cheap warning bells around grow-ops located in rental houses: "The ducks were Fisher's brainstorm. A dog they'd have to feed, train, and walk, but if they

built a shallow pond and planted barley and buckwheat, the mallards would come. And there was no more delicate or reliable alarm system, he insisted, than nervous mallards” (49). The traffickers’ and growers’ success thus depends on knowing something of human and non-human patterns of activity in the cross-border region, for without such knowledge, the industry risks losing a lot of its product before it can reach its intended markets.

This focus on the movement of drugs across the northern border provides a counterpoint to the dominant twentieth-century story of drug flows in North America, wherein US concerns were overwhelmingly directed southward. While officials acknowledged that the negative effects of drugs were internal to the United States, the drugs themselves were usually deemed creatures of elsewhere. Yet, while Mexico continues to be a focal point for political and media scrutiny of North American border security, over the last decade, the Canada-US border has become a site of increased attention concerning illicit activity. *Border Songs* specifically explores the roles played by nature in the discourse of licit and illicit flows, beginning with an examination of how claims of naturalness have long been bound up with arguments favouring the open cultivation, sale, and use of marijuana. Early in the novel, Wayne Rousseau, the aforementioned former university professor and multiple sclerosis patient who lives on the Canadian side of the border, mocks the prudishness of his US neighbours when it comes to his use of medical marijuana. Flicking an expired roach across the forty-ninth parallel, he declares to his American neighbour: “It’s organic, for God’s sake. An or-gan-ic weed growing wild in every single one of your states” (21; original emphasis).

Similarly, the smugglers for whom Wayne’s daughter Madeline works as a marijuana

cultivator regularly defend their practices by invoking the naturalness of their product. One of them insists that while certain “hillbilly” drugs licensed by the pharmaceutical industry such as Vioxx and OxyContin are “killing people faster than any natural drug ever has or will,” marijuana is a “sacred plant” that continues to be unfairly demonized (137).

There are a series of paradoxes that underlie such claims. Cannabis is continentally endemic, as Wayne points out (it is “in every single one of your states” [21]), and yet the branding of “BC Bud” by the marijuana industry has historically relied on the maintenance of national borders for its high prices and successful marketing.<sup>9</sup> As a growing number of states in the US legalize marijuana for medical or recreational purposes, partly as a way to generate much-needed tax revenues, many industry observers suggest the British Columbia marijuana trade is likely slated for tougher times (Dhillon). Free trade dynamics, then, apply not only to licit goods but to illicit ones, too, with effects that are not always thoroughly considered by governmental authorities concerned with simple definitions of law and order.

When it comes to marijuana, *Border Songs* further troubles concepts of illicitness by rhetorically linking the industry’s practices to those of legal industrial agriculture. For example, Wayne Rousseau’s daughter Madeline describes one of the massive British Columbia grow-ops she tends as a place where “they grew these pumped-up clones that maximized speed and potency” (50–1). Meanwhile, down the road in Washington, licit forms of agriculture similarly attempt to reduce nature to its most economically efficient terms. Wayne’s Washington State neighbour, dairyman Norm Vanderkool, echoes the conditions favoured by marijuana growers to the north when he surveys his own herd of



Jerseys: “gentle cows were one upside to a closed herd, as was not having to mess with bulls” (109). In each case, feminized nature is encouraged to produce a commodity under secure conditions that strictly regulate acts of reproduction. As long as a female marijuana plant remains unpollinated, it will continue to produce new calyxes and large quantities of THC-rich resins.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, most indoor grow-ops are now “seas of green” composed almost entirely of female clones boosted by sizeable inputs of pesticides and fertilizers (Pollan 135). Meanwhile, in the dairy barn, reproduction is permitted, but it is usually carried out via the invisible human hand of artificial insemination in order to maximize milk production.<sup>11</sup> Further, in the dairy barn, as in the grow-op, increases in scale and productivity tend to spawn unanticipated forms of risk that can overspill the boundaries of farm and region. High concentrations of plants and animals in confined spaces increase the likelihood of widespread insect damage or disease, for example, while water usage and disposal of excess wastes must be addressed without attracting unwanted attention.

Although Washington’s dairy industry has a different relationship to the law than the marijuana industry, its relationship to the international border is similarly fraught with contradictions: while the forty-ninth parallel protects the state’s dairy farms from a flood of Canadian imports, the farmers themselves often have little control over the price charged for their product. It is a system, Norm reflects, that favours economies of scale, where old cows are sent off for early rendering and the gangrenous teats of diseased animals are pruned like trees (or, one might say, like marijuana plants; 32). Norm ponders the fact that he might have avoided a great deal of stress while saving enough for

a comfortable retirement if he had accepted the proffered government buyout of his dairy back in the 1980s:

Could have sold his herd at fourteen dollars per hundredweight, then converted his fields into raspberries, hired himself a few illegals and taken winters off—as long as he could bend his morality and patriotism around all that. But what pissed Norm off even more than dairies turning into berry farms was dairies turning into cul-de-sacs or toy ranches for the rich. And worst of all was when the rich left the barns and silos standing out of some do-gooder nostalgia for an America they never knew. (33)

Every day, Norm confronts the material remnants of a mode of existence now put in the service of maintaining a pastoral illusion. Even as Norm's wife struggles with dementia, a disease of forgetting on an *individual* scale, the conversion of rural architecture into little more than aesthetic props suggests that collective amnesia accompanies the radical transformation of a whole material way of life into a model, whereby quarterly profits trump all other considerations.

Lynch's survey of West Coast cultivation in both licit and illicit forms, then, shows the limits of confining border stories within strictly national frameworks. Norm's contemplations about "hir[ing] himself a few illegals" (33), for instance, hint at some of the ways that ecological and economic pressures in different parts of the globe create new forms of contact between formerly distant people and places. As Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords demonstrate in their study of migrant workers in the US and Canada, the current consumption level of the North American population now rests solidly (though not exclusively) on the backs of Mexican immigrant labour, much of it undocumented. While

the systematic recruitment of migrant workers in North America can be traced back as far as World War I, the implementation of NAFTA has exacerbated a scenario whereby nation is pitted against nation in selling their citizens' labour to the lowest bidder.<sup>12</sup>

While the economic bottom line of agricultural producers and manufacturers in the Pacific Northwest is improved by the injection of undocumented labour, marijuana grow-ops scattered throughout the region also pump money into local economies by providing work for everyone from carpenters and electricians to lawyers, hydroponics salespeople, and real estate agents.<sup>13</sup> Given this scenario, drawing boundaries around what constitutes illicit activity is not always easy, since such activities are often deeply embedded within legitimate commercial transactions. In *Border Songs*, Madeline Rousseau is one character among many who risks involvement in the marijuana industry in order to supplement what is otherwise a modest salary working at a nursery. In other cases, rural property owners along either side of the border are paid to ignore the jumpers that regularly transport marijuana across their land. Much as Norm Vanderkool despises the way smuggling has become a naturalized activity, he cannot resist checking his mailbox for envelopes of illegal cash after a smuggler offers to informally rent his land as part of a marijuana pipeline to the United States. Taken together, these activities suggest that what it means to be a "good neighbour" at the national level does not always coincide with local priorities against the backdrop of economic turbulence (109).<sup>14</sup>

## **IV. Migrancy, Taxonomy, and Sensing Change along the Border**

In the midst of this complex borderland works the gentle giant Brandon Vanderkool, Norm's son and a recent hire for the Washington State Border Patrol. At a height of six feet eight inches, one would not consider Brandon a figure capable of merging easily into the landscape, but the isolation caused by a lifetime of social awkwardness and severe dyslexia have led him to develop an unusual rapport with local flora and fauna. As the novel quickly makes clear, his skills in detection and observation as a Border Patrol officer owe much to his mother's early encouragement of Brandon's interest in natural history. In particular, Brandon demonstrates a gift for ornithology, counting and identifying birds by their calls on his daily border patrols:

He pattered past the Moffats' farm before pulling up for a closer look at icicles dangling from their roadside shed. [...] He heard the *rat-a-tat* of a downy woodpecker, *twenty-nine*, and the nervous *chip* of a dark-eyed junco, *thirty*. Brandon could identify birds a mile away by their size and flight and many of their voices by a single note. [...] Most birders kept life lists of the species they'd seen, and the more intense kept annual counts. Brandon kept day lists in his head, whether he intended to or not. (6; original emphasis)

From one perspective, Brandon's identification of birds can be read as a data-gathering exercise that relies on a semiotics of difference to make sense of new information. The way he makes sense of the world thus parallels the Border Patrol's reliance on databases to monitor, scan and identify human travellers. However, just as humans are periodically wrongly categorized and detained or placed on watch-lists, nature in the novel also exceeds the ability to be known categorically. For instance,

Brandon's designation of "dark-eyed junco" to identify one of the birds he hears seems to be a clear label, but it in fact refers to a highly variable species whose differently-coloured subspecies interbreed with one another in areas of contact. The song Brandon hears, then, does not necessarily match up with any singular image of a junco in the reader's mind. Further, the taxonomic name he chooses conjures a particular linguistic origin and significance (*junco* is a Spanish word) that simultaneously leaves out other names for sites and species that existed in this place long before the arrival of Europeans. His knowledge of place and species is therefore stubbornly partial. Indeed, one could argue that this sense of incompleteness extends into the very structure of the novel, for though its setting includes several Native place names (for instance, Semiahmoo Bay and the Nooksack River), there is no inclusion of Indigenous characters or the particular knowledge of places or species they might possess.<sup>15</sup>

As Brandon's border work carries him into the region's forests and along its beaches and streams, he responds to Darwin's "endless forms most beautiful" (396) via tactile means, creating sculptural works such as leaf chains and driftwood nests that call to mind the land art of Andy Goldsworthy and Robert Smithson. The degree of empathy and attention that Brandon devotes to non-human things—from night crawlers and trees to birds and his father's cows—prompts some locals to designate him "a freak of nature" (41); yet it is his lifelong habit of careful observation and physical immersion in his surroundings that also makes him extraordinarily adept at detecting individuals and objects that seem out of place. As his BP trainer Dionne advises, "[a]lways look for what doesn't belong" (30).

Brandon's seemingly uncanny ability to foil the plans of terrorists, illegal migrants, and drug traffickers earns him the admiration of his border patrol colleagues as a "shit magnet" (92), and senior officials working for the Department of Homeland Security eagerly put him to work in hopes of advancing their own careers. However, in many respects, Brandon's capture of illicit traffic is also *incidental* to his deeper acts of sensing. For example, when he detains a string of human migrants attempting to cross into Washington from Canada, his attempts to classify them arises less from juridical than aesthetic impulses. Brandon reflects that "[t]hey were illegal—by definition, right?—but they didn't look like criminals. Most of them struck [him] as exotic, even beautiful, though they weren't always endearing" (102). Brandon's interest in identifying different kinds of human migrants calls to mind the same thrill he experiences at seeing a tufted puffin pass over the shoreline of Bellingham Bay, a bird that has flown beyond the borders of its normal range (161). Where the Border Patrol actively discourages human vagrants from crossing from one territory to another, fewer restrictions are placed on avian vagrants that have strayed from their usual migratory routes. The former are framed as a "security problem," but the latter trigger considerable excitement among bird-watchers like Brandon. His enthusiasm at seeing the puffin shows that his perceptions of the world still rely on borders, but the borders he values are not necessarily contiguous with geopolitical ones.

Even as plants and animals regularly cross borders in the novel, spreading seeds and tripping patrol sensors, Brandon also recognizes that humans exercise power over the biotic movements of other species. For instance, trade agreements delineate the acceptability or unacceptability of species in different locations, while climate change is

now altering the normal habitat ranges and migratory and seasonal patterns of some creatures. Because he is sensitive to such patterns, Brandon starts to worry when the beginning of autumn does not bring the usual flocks of migratory waterfowl he is used to seeing: “What, [he wonders,] if all the brants, wigeons, scoters, buffleheads, mergansers and trumpeters decided to forgo the exhausting flight and winter up north? Then what?” (270). Warmer winters in Canada and Alaska mean that some bird species once seen only in the summer-time in these territories can now be seen year round, a development that generates unanticipated ripple effects for other species. Meanwhile, Homeland Security drones flying above the Washington-British Columbia boundary can reportedly “read a cereal box from fifteen thousand feet” and resemble “high-altitude bird[s]” (208), but for Brandon, mere resemblance cannot compensate for the potential loss of the avian life that has patrolled West Coast skies for centuries. The inadequacy of metaphor here illustrates the dangers of reducing the material to the linguistic, since a bird’s engagement with the landscape involves much more than sight and flight. Finally, while the drone is said to “read,” the verb registers a semantic slippage: where the act of reading requires an ability to make connections and an appreciation of context, the aircraft can offer only simple recording and playback features. Rote data collection is not to be confused with reading, and without reliable interpreters, the nation-state is a long way from understanding the complex spectrum of interests that makes life in the borderlands tick.

Brandon’s detection of subtle alterations in his environment makes him a different kind of reader, one who employs a range of skills to make sense of the world and his place in it. His method of embodied knowing also opens up space to contemplate how bodies in border zones might serve as “researchable legac[ies] of sensation” that archive

specific forms of environmental change, loss, and adaptation (Parr, “Our Bodies” 29). Such legacies are carried not only by a character like Brandon but also by those migrant bodies that regularly cross provincial, state, and national borders in search of a living. Although the “illegals” who Norm contemplates hiring lack the kind of permanent residency status often presumed to be a prerequisite to developing a sense of place, their labour frequently brings them into more intimate contact with the soil, plants, livestock, and weather of the region than that experienced by many more ostensibly local residents. Finally, although environmental rhetoric has traditionally emphasized the ecological value of remaining rooted in one place, Libby Robin points out that in some ecosystems, “dwelling paradoxically demands mobility” in order to take advantage of rainfall and ripening times (288). Indeed, one might argue that in an era of climate change, seasonal migration could become the new norm in many parts of the globe as the variability of seasons, precipitation, and weather increases. Lynch’s attention to mobile human and avian migrant bodies thus presciently illustrates that “no place is merely local” (Parr, *Sensing* 3); while environmental effects linger in place, their causes and cures may lie well beyond the immediate purview of *secure* border spaces, thus demanding that any bioregional reading of place must also be cosmopolitan in outlook (Heise, *Sense of Place* 10; Thomashow 121–32). The result is an approach to place that appreciates the role of scale in allowing us to see different forms of ecological connection and to tailor our approaches to conservation and social justice accordingly.

## **V. Narratives without Guarantees**



In the end, Brandon Vanderkool remains hopeful about the seasonal return of migratory birds, and the value of his mode of perception is also formally recognized in a community exhibition of his artwork, which includes photography of his land art as well as his paintings of birds, human migrants, and friends and neighbours from the local cross-border community:

Several sequences showed him building cones in the river and on the flats, or his thorn-stitched structures getting ripped apart by currents, or the rainbows he created by swinging a club off the water. There were shots of many columns on riverbanks, in trees and ravines. Then still more action photos of him, throwing sticks into the sky or hanging see-through tapestries of leaves that he'd completely forgotten about.” (283–4)

Brandon's art blends nature and *techne* in ways that draw attention to the contiguities between, and the limits of, different kinds of surveillance in border zones. While the Border Patrol, the Environmental Protection Agency, and even drug traffickers aspire to “collect all the details” (54) of human and non-human patterns either to better exploit or reduce the permeability of borders, Brandon's work takes the notion of surveillance and directs it toward a different end: that of paying homage to nature itself as a work of art. His goal is not to capture or fix things in a form of total recall (as he tells his neighbour Sophie, “I'm not trying to be a camera” [247]); rather, it is to render the world in imaginative terms that allow the viewer to see something wondrous in routine lives and fleeting moments. The mode of observation that Brandon employs still relies on categorization, but it resists linearity and allows room for surprise. One might say that his gaze is less that of the policeman than the field naturalist, the latter whose achievement,

as Isabelle Stengers says, “does not have the power of a definition in terms of well-determined variables. It is rather a narrative with no guarantees that it will keep its relevance in other apparently similar cases” (11). Whether Brandon is catching drug smugglers or identifying wildlife, his mode of perception combines environmental concern for local places and species with respect for those forms of life that unsettle presumptions about what ought to belong in a given location.

Further, I would suggest that Brandon’s idiosyncratic mode of looking offers an alternative to the kinds of surveillance pursued by either the border patrol or the marijuana industry. Where the drug smuggler’s aspiration is to be wholly absent (Lynch 237), leaving no tracks in order to avoid detection, and where the implicit message of the surveillance society is to “remain unobtrusive and politically quiescent by appearing more devout, regular, and patriotic than the next guy” (Connolly 75), Brandon’s aspiration is to be fully present to the world, interacting with it through all of his senses and encouraging others to do likewise. This vision of worldly engagement necessarily involves the imagination, as Brandon periodically adopts a bird’s eye view to picture “what it all might look like from above” (161), but it also means seeking the knowledge that comes from intimacy in both exhilarating and unsettling forms. As one of his Border Patrol colleagues comments, “It’s like he expects something to happen at every moment, no matter where he is or what he’s doing” (Lynch 93).

Where the border cameras looking down on the forty-ninth parallel try to draw clear lines between humans and nature, distinguishing who and what *belongs* from what does not, Brandon’s paintings and earthworks frequently do the opposite, destabilizing the boundary lines presumed to divide nature from culture, and local from foreign. Even

his trips into the Washington woods, which at first might seem like retreats into the simplicity of nature, become encounters with a world of technologies that modulate nature and are modulated by it in turn.<sup>16</sup> As Lynch's narrator observes, "[Brandon had] seen magpies weave nails, tin, tape, glass, rags, and even barbed wire into their nests, and he'd happened upon an indignant robin incubating a Top-Flite golf ball and a dizzy cormorant sitting on a seventy-five watt Sylvania lightbulb" (103). In these scenarios, agency is not solely ascribed to cultural artefacts, but rather is located in the complex warp and weft of humans and multiple non-human actants.<sup>17</sup> Just because we throw away a given piece of matter, then, does not mean that it disappears or passes beyond utility. As the burnt-out light bulb and the scuffed Top Flite illustrate, the discarded artefact can go on to play other roles in the ongoing drama of existence, demonstrating what Jane Bennett describes as "*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6; original emphasis). The unpredictability of such processes also reopens the question of ethics, for while a bird sitting on a golf ball instead of an egg is humorous, there is surely something disturbing about it too. At what point do such artefacts become supplements to nature, at once adding to the avian world even as they highlight its diminishing ability to produce viable offspring? Scenes such as this reveal our implication in non-humanity, even as they refuse to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge (Bennett 3; Khan 100). Thus, the borders between the technological and the organic may be blurry, but this does not mean they are entirely without significance. Brandon's earthworks constitute one mode of ethical response to *thing-power*, for they ready the mind to perceive the vitality of matter while at the same

time rendering themselves vulnerable to natural elements of earth, wind, heat, and water that are poised to reclaim them at any instant.

## IV. Conclusion

Like Brandon's art, the Canada-US border is at once rigid and permeable, familiar and strange. By drawing attention to a series of human and nonhuman actors that cross this boundary line, Lynch's novel shows that borders are not simply given, but rather they are contingent, hybrid spaces conceived, perceived, and narrated in ways that naturalize some phenomena and denaturalize others. For instance, water, diseases, migratory birds, and other non-human species cross the border with no regard for human wishes, yet national policies regarding things like wildlife protection, invasive species, pollution regulation, and land use must also be taken into account when considering the socioecological effects of these movements. *Border Songs*' portrayal of these crossings is also haunted by anxiety that ecological boundaries are now shifting in a warming world, with consequences that can be modelled but not conclusively known. The problem of anticipating scale effects, as well as the fact that environmental problems often manifest themselves over long periods of time that far exceed standard two- or four-year election cycles, presents profound challenges when it comes to communicating and acting upon environmental problems.<sup>18</sup>

Exploring literary portrayals of border crossings from an environmental perspective opens a unique window into relationships between species, climates, and territories, demanding that we take a wider view of the security that considers human

welfare and autonomy within the context of environmental well-being. At a formal level, Lynch's multiple border songs illustrate the need to read differently when it comes to border zones and boundary crossings against the back-drop of contemporary environmental change. Such reading resists the temptation to condense the multiplicity of borderlands into a single narrative, provides space to recognize border agents that do not easily fit into national narratives, and refuses to submit to blind faith in technological solutions to provide security. As Simon Dalby observes, "humanity is changing what was once understood as an external environment, and in the process is changing its circumstances of life in ways that make what is being secured increasingly artificial" (4). In such a context, visions of security focused on making things (including our liberal consumer society) stay the same are clearly limited, for they are often sustained at the cost of increased insecurity for others. Instead, living amidst twenty-first century environmental decline means that we will have to learn some new songs about what it means to be secure, in registers that include health, sustainable livelihoods, and respect for the environment as a site of agency rather than passive ground.

Against this backdrop, nations and national literatures assume an ambivalent role. Even as North American states have strengthened their borders in the wake of 9/11, we have conversely seen a weakening of state control in other areas. For example, protections for citizens that the democratic sovereign state has traditionally assumed responsibility for ensuring, such as social equality, environmental regulation, and protection for minority cultures, have in some cases been ceded to preserve and expand economic relationships. And, while one can blame a generalized *globalization* or external forces for these trends, Stephen Clarkson and Matto Mildemberger point out that the

publics of Canada, the United States, and Mexico also bear some responsibility for passively condoning the policy decisions of their governments (265). Canada's struggle over the last decade to take concrete measures to fulfil its obligations under international climate change agreements, for example, shows the continuing importance of national leadership even as growing water and energy demands, invasive species, and species-jumping diseases collectively remind us of the shifting material ground underlying geopolitical boundaries and their representation. The challenge lies in maintaining those borders that ensure the resilience of distinct cultures and ecological systems without indiscriminately invoking nature to justify decisions that exacerbate inequality. Indeed, knowing where the lines are when making claims about continuities between nature and culture at different scales is fundamental to practicing a form of eco-critical reading that is as respectful of science as it is of culture and the arts. *Border Songs* expresses many of the paradoxes that characterize boundary spaces, but, in the figure of Brandon, it also offers a model for negotiating them, presenting forms of interpretation attuned to consistency and pattern in nature while also remaining flexible enough to appreciate improvisation and unorthodox minglings of human and non-human presences. In our talk of geopolitical borders and hemispheric integration, it is sometimes tempting to envision a future wherein nature finally grows over the "open wounds" of state lines (Anzaldúa 25). But for now, North American borders are perhaps best summarized by the visual metaphors of Brandon's sculpted stacks of sticks, leaves, and stones, structures that exist in a liminal state, "creaking but holding" (Lynch 160).

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<sup>1</sup> On the connection between borders and performance, see Salter 66–7.

<sup>2</sup> On border delays and the resurgent trope of threat surrounding the Canadian border after 9/11, see Stirrup and Clarke (1); Konrad and Nicol, "Border Culture" (83); and Nicol, *The Fence* (204–8).

<sup>3</sup> Literary and cultural texts that take an environmentally-focused approach to Canada-US borderlands are less plentiful than those dealing with the US-Mexico line, but key works include Cruikshank's *Do Glaciers Listen?*, Ricou's *Arbutus / Madrone Files* and *Salal*, Gayton's *Kokanee*, Heuer's *Being Caribou*, Evans' *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests*, and Roberts and Stirrup's *Parallel Encounters*.

<sup>4</sup> For a few examples from the burgeoning body of research that explores these issues in relation to the interconnections between human and animal bodies, see Blue and Rock's "Trans-Biopolitics," Shukin's *Animal Capital*, Smart and Smart's "Biosecurity," Haraway's *When Species Meet*, Franklin's *Dolly Mixtures*, and Lakoff and Collier's edited collection *Biosecurity Interventions*.

<sup>5</sup> Note, however, Heather Nicol's important point that US mistrust of the world beyond its borders far predates 9/11, stretching back to at least the early nineteenth century (*The Fence* 5).

<sup>6</sup> On the limitations of bioregional rhetoric, see Sparke 67–9; Newman 401–2; Heise, *Sense of Place* 28–49; and Diener and Hagen 7. The work of Mitchell Thomashow, as well as the collection *The Bioregional Imagination* (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster), helpfully address critiques of bioregionalism by exploring how principles of reinhabitation might be integrated within global frameworks.

<sup>7</sup> See Clarkson, *Does North America Exist?* 454; and Adams 246. A notable exception relevant to this essay was the 1916 signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty between Canada and the US. See Wilson's *Seeking Refuge*.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussions about the cautious Canadian reception of hemispheric studies, see Stephen Clarkson's trilogy of books on North American relations, as well as Braz, New, Traister, Roberts ("Navigating"), Sugars, and Wyle, as well as Nicol's latest book on the Canada-US border, *The Fence and the Bridge*.

<sup>9</sup> On the smuggler's need of the state, see Andreas 89; see also Clarkson and Mildemberger 156–7.

<sup>10</sup> THC refers to tetrahydrocannabinol, the primary psychoactive substance in the cannabis plant.

<sup>11</sup> The case of human labour involved in agricultural production and processing in the US and Canada presents yet another case of gendered reproductive regulation, for a variety of informal practices are used to discourage pregnancy among migrant farm workers (Mize and Swords 166).

<sup>12</sup> In the US, these dynamics are now also playing out at the state level, as a number of states including Alabama, Georgia, and Indiana have proposed tough immigration laws that prompt migrant workers who are in the US illegally to move to states where it is less likely they will be stopped and asked for identification papers (Minor, Dial, and Brooke,).

<sup>13</sup> Brett Harvey's 2007 documentary *The Union* presents an informative look at how the British Columbia marijuana industry underwrites legitimate modes of profit generation and taxation.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham and van Schendel point out that there is no clear line between illicitness and the laws of states, noting that activities which state officials view as illegal may be considered within the bounds of acceptable behaviour by those communities in which they are carried out (25).

<sup>15</sup> An important exception is the 2010 official recognition by Canada and the United States of the coastal waterways surrounding southern Vancouver Island and Puget Sound as the Salish Sea. The name recognizes Indigenous peoples who have lived in southwest British Columbia and northwest Washington since at least 8,000 BCE and who share linguistic and cultural ties. The hope is that this binational designation will foster greater cooperation to protect these waters and the species that live there (Groc 23).

<sup>16</sup> On the political value of recognizing technicity as originary to what it means to be human (and, I'd argue, also *non-human*), see Braun and Whatmore (xvii), as well as the work of materialist critics including Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, and Donna Haraway.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Latour defines an actant as “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial” (237).

<sup>18</sup> On the challenges of narrativizing environmental problems that play out on temporal scales that precede and far outlast us, see the writings of Nixon, Clark, and Callicott.