

WHERE EAST MEETS WEST

How Canadian geography feeds Western alienation

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When Britain's colonialist poet Rudyard Kipling wrote "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," it was the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Europe and Asia he had in mind. Although Kipling's thoughts were of Empire and Kashmir, he could just as easily been prophesizing Canada. That famous line, from his poem "The Ballad of East and West," was written in 1889, the year the Ontario-Manitoba border was finalized. At the time, borders within Canada were largely in flux, constantly being adjusted as surveyors allowed for newly discovered rivers, lakes, and mountain passes. They were contentious for the people too, both the Indigenous groups who were seeing their long-established boundaries ignored, and for the arriving settlers, on whom their new homeland had yet to imprint itself. Whether prairie, mountain, or forest, however, the territory eventually left its mark on those progenitors of modern Canada, a cultural tattoo whose indelible ink

would leak into their blood of their descendants.

I was unaware of that ink-blood within myself until recently. Relaxing in a pub, I was introduced to a travelling couple, one Canadian, one American. Over many years of living abroad and meeting itinerant North Americans, I've noticed that the two nations reveal themselves to the world differently. Whereas Canadians tend to proclaim their nationality, "I'm Canadian," and have maple leaf flags sewn prominently onto their backpacks, Americans jump straight to their state identity. Instead of "I'm an American," they'll say "I'm a Texan," or "I'm from Illinois." I've met travellers from the state of Georgia who see nothing ironic in being taken for their Eurasian counterparts. Canadians, however, usually stop at Canada, our provinces and territories commanding much less international recognition than their American equivalents; it's difficult to say "Saskatchewan" in Europe out without receiving a "Gesundheit!" in

reply. Even Americans usually require some variation on the "It's north of..." prompt. We are, internationally, the emblem of a unified country—Canadian from coast to coast to coast. Only a cohesive people, surely, could maintain unity over such a large geography.

In the pub, the American introduced himself as a Californian, the Canadian as a Canadian. When pressed, she revealed was from Toronto, or not quite, but I wouldn't know the town anyway. When the question was turned on me, I replied that I was from Manitoba. While the Californian's face remained impassive, the Torontonion's distended into a sardonic, pouting frown. "I'm sorry," she said, in the lingering tone usually reserved for the terminally ill. Then, "Manitoba. Really?"

Whether from homesickness, or the ale in my veins, is difficult to say, but her comments stirred a feeling of provincial jingoism in me I'd never before felt. Though I don't consider myself a flag-waver of any kind, nor do I have



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anything against Toronto *per se*, I had to fight hard to swallow the seething retort rising in my throat. Finding my home pressed between unknown and disparaged, not knowing how to react, I did the only thing I could think of: I left.

Canada, despite its outward, international appearance as a country supportive of self-determination, has practiced domestic cultural exclusion since before Confederation. In rebuffing the sovereignty of Canada's Indigenous populations, the Métis, and the Quebecois, the Canadian government has denied those populations the cultural credibility it once extended to the enclaved nationals of Kosovo, Tibet, and South Sudan. Now, some Western Canadians, those placing hopes in the newly minted federal Maverick

in oceans of wheat, poplar bluffs, and endless lakes; who consider mountains the only scenery worth looking at. Perhaps, as Margaret Laurence said, to truly know the West, you have to live there. And so with two-thirds of the population living east of Manitoba, the West has created its own identity, complete with ever-evolving catchphrases, from the "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark" of the 1980s, to the Reform Party's "The West Wants In" to Maverick's "Where Hope Lives" (the party's references to "Make Alberta Great Again" have, of late, fallen by the wayside).

Although the typical Westerner can be considered, by-and-large, as a stereotypically cultural Canadian (insofar as one exists), speaking the majority language, and enjoying all the benefits

Canadian be attributed?

The country's physical landscape is an integral part of our identity as Canadians. We wheel over the land, play and dig in it; occasionally, we're forced to submit to "Nature the Monster," as Margaret Atwood put it. But rarely do we feel the effect landscape has on our separate, regional identities. Tim Marshall, in his book *Prisoners of Geography*, writes that the physical realities of landscape "are too often disregarded in both writing about history and in contemporary reporting of world affairs." By affecting the climate (consider Sheila Watt-Cloutier's *The Right to Be Cold*, about the pivotal relationship between below-freezing temperatures and Inuk culture), the demographics, and the resources of an area, landscape, Marshall argues, is the key factor around which the culture and values of the people living in a particular area is formed.

No landscape affects the entire nation more than the country's bedrock, the Canadian Shield. With its granite chokehold around Hudson's Bay, the Shield is a natural border, a pinch-point squeezing Canada's population East and West, into two disparate expanses that, over the past hundred and fifty years, have bloomed their own distinct cultures. The threadwork of rails and roads that carve through the Shield are too narrow to create the sense of shared culture necessary to keep a country the size of Canada feeling united. Separated from the country's capital, its financial core, and (as some Easterners feel), its cultural nucleus, the West has become Canada's *Over There*. Quite where the feeling of *Over There* begins is difficult to say. Attitudes of political isolation and abandonment have dogged Northern Ontario, with the occasional uprising—as recently as 2015—calling for either the area's separation or a merger with Manitoba.

None of this has been lost on physical geographers. Joel Garreau, while editor at the *Washington Post*, observed that North Americans living in similar bioregions tend to share cultural values beyond the borders of their state

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Party (formerly Wexit Canada), aim to have themselves added to that list of repressed identities. For them, *Canadian* is an adjective, not a noun.

While a desire for sovereignty has a logical clarity when drawn along lines of race, religion, or language, the emotions that feed Western Alienation are pumped from a deeper, cooler well, one based more in the natural world than on human constructs.

Canadian national pride has often relied on rhetoric to overcome the breadth of our geography, but slogans can do little against physical separation. "Sea to Sea to Sea" is as toothless an aphorism as Molson's "I am Canadian"; both fall flat when Alexander Keith's Pale Ale is found in the imported beer section of every bar west of Kenora.

I've had it said to me that driving across Canada is a wonderful way to fully experience the nation, except for the flat, "flyover" stretch between Ontario and the Rockies. It's hard to argue with those who find no beauty

of modern life, many have nevertheless acquired a sense of inequality. A 2019 poll conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research entitled "Canada: Pulling Together or Drifting Apart?," suggests that material equality has not led to a sense of cultural equality in the West. When citizens across the country were asked about where they felt their province or territory fit into the fabric of a greater Canada, eight in ten Western Canadians responded that the West is ignored in national politics because political parties only need Quebec and Ontario's votes to get elected. Close to half of Western respondents agreed that Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of the nation that they might as well go it on their own. According to the tenets of sovereignty, *We*, a group of people who identify with a particular identity, must not be ruled by *They*; *We* must rule ourselves. If, despite all outward appearances, Maverick are *We*, and Canada *They*, to what can this schism within

or province. In his 1981 book *The Nine Nations of North America*, Garreau conceived of a new North American landscape in which new “nations” could be crafted from these bioregions, each commanding “a certain emotional allegiance from its citizens.” In Canada he found six different areas of cultural values, reasoning that each of these areas, save Quebec, could be culturally amalgamated with some part of the United States. The Maritimes, plus Newfoundland and Labrador, could merge with the American eastern seaboard to form New England. “The Foundry,” formed of Southern Ontario plus the area stretching from New York to Chicago, Garreau described as “declining industrial areas...that tend to view the other eight nations as subservient, tribute-paying colonies, shrugging off their inexorable slide of population and ambition to other places as temporary aberrations, susceptible to some quick fix.” Quebec happily remained Quebec, while the “Breadbasket” region lumped the prairies of southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan with America’s agricultural heartland from North Dakota down to Texas. On the West Coast, a sliver of land suggestive of Chile, running from California to Alaska, became Ecotopia.

By far the largest region in Canada was what Garreau called the Empty Quarter: a combination of the Western United States, the BC Interior, Alberta, most of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the North, and the Canadian Shield. The name wasn’t derisive, but a reference to the Rub’ al Khali desert (“Empty Quarter” in Arabic), the font of Saudi Arabia’s oil. It was the tying of that resource to far-flung capitals (Ottawa and Washington) over three areas of different cultural value that made the region, in Garreau’s view “politically powerless,” essentially a colony.

A sense of being politically manipulated was common enough in the West at that time. Pierre Elliott Trudeau had formed his fourth government the year before, despite not winning a seat west of Manitoba. His introduction of the National Energy Program, which spread profits from the West’s oil and gas

industry over the entirety of the nation, was seen as taxation without representation, and thus boiled Western blood. Ted Byfield, the rabid newshound who founded the now defunct but once popular *Alberta Report*, saw in the East’s treatment of the West, “the hatred of the socialist for the individualist, the cold fear of the high-born for the self-made, the aversion of the theorist for the pragmatist, the derision of the urbanist for the peasant, the disdain of the intellectual for the uncouth, the contempt of the Gaul for the Slav.”

If Westerners have, as Byfield believed, spent the past forty years thinking of themselves as self-made, pragmatic, individualist, uncouth Slavic peasants—and there’s nothing in Maverick’s guiding principles to say they haven’t—it’s little wonder any debate over pipelines takes on the mood of an international endeavor. For the West, the East has become an imperiling force, a *They* governing from the remove and idealism only great distances can generate.

When Colin Woodard updated Garreau’s idea in his 2011 book *American Nations*, he found the cultural variances within Canada similar to how Garreau had drawn them. He made only minor adjustments, dropping the north from the Empty Quarter (which Woodard remained the kinder “Far West”), and stretching to include the entirety of the Canadian prairies. In the East, the GTA still clung to the industry around the Great Lakes region. Despite thirty years of national growth and development, the Canadian Shield was still too insurmountable a physical barrier for culture to penetrate. The arc of history is long, but the arc of geography is longer. Even as the world becomes more connected, Ottawa remains far from Edmonton.

That Garreau’s and Woodard’s maps follow more or less the physical geography of North America most of us were taught in the classroom is no coincidence. In these imagined nations, the differences between the Western Cordillera, Interior Plains, Canadian Shield, St. Lawrence Lowlands, and

the northern tip of the Appalachian Mountains are enough to give rise to their own distinct cultures.

Logically, these cultures would align north-south, with the natural orientation of North America’s geography, rather than the political east-west. And it’s clear from both Garreau’s and Woodard’s books that all parts of Canada (again, excepting Quebec), look south rather than laterally for their cultural cues. Just as Vancouver and Seattle share a broad-minded coastal breeze, so Maine and New Brunswick have their salty fisher-kin. Lined against the 49th parallel like ribbon farms along the St. Lawrence, the Western Provinces have been influenced by their American neighbours, crafting their culture over the same sweep of mountain and plain.

Take the cowboy, the bodily manifestation of the North American West, and a persistent cultural symbol of Western Canada despite barbed wire, which brought to an end the cowboys in their truest, most idealized form, being invented six years before the first European settled near present-day Calgary. *Don’t fence me in*, the ethos behind Maverick’s navel-gazing, was fifty years out of date before the province was even established.

The Maverick Party is not the only current political manifestation of Garreau’s geographical imaginings. His “nation” of Ecotopia (what Woodard called The Left Coast), which in 1981 was already “developing industries of the 21st century,” and whose “natural markets and its lessons about living [were] in Asia,” is presently championed by several independence movements, including the Cascadia Party, CascadiaNow!, and Yes Cascadia, whose platforms are based in bio-regionalism and government decentralization. The Cascadia Party, which advocates for the unification and sovereignty of the Cascadia region (British Columbia, Washington state, and Oregon), was formed, like the Maverick Party, on the premise that Canada is broken, and no longer suits the needs of those living in the nation’s distant outposts.

Although both Garreau and Woodard failed to recognize Indigenous nations

as having their own cultural regions or even existing within another (Woodard's conceiving of Canada's north as "First Nation" reeks too heavily of a colonialist "out of sight, out of mind" mentality to count), many Indigenous disputes with the Canadian government at both the regional and national level have centered on issues of geography. As early colonists divided North America along linear gridlines, Indigenous groups found themselves forced from their naturally boundaried traditional territories and onto squared-off sections of sub-marginal land. Many groups, including the Blackfoot, Cree, Iroquois, Algonquin, Crow, Sioux, Ojibwe, and Assiniboine peoples, to name only a few, can lay claim to territory that extends outside of modern political borders. In the United States, the Lakota, via their Republic of Lakotah movement, have sought to reclaim their historical, cross-border geographic territories. The Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Nation have for almost one hundred years issued their own passports. Although considered illegitimate by the Canadian and American governments for the purposes of crossing between the two countries, these bespoke documents have gained Haudenosaunee "nationals" entry to Sweden, Switzerland, and Israel (far from the world's most lenient countries regarding immigration).

The North American political establishment's objections to this passport's worth is not only petty, but cruelly ironic given that one of its objectives—to harmonize the Haudenosaunee population separated by the Canada-US border—has been written into law for over two hundred years.

In 1794, fresh with the ecstasy of victory in the War of Independence, the newly established American government signed into law the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, allowing "the Indians dwelling on either side of the boundary line" to cross the (then) British-American border "for the purpose of employment, study, retirement, investing, and/or immigration." The legitimacy of cohesive Indigenous group on either side of an arbitrary border was acknowledged, setting a legal, if

not cultural, precedent for the acknowledgment of cross-border kinship. US Chief Justice John Jay, the treaty's architect, knew that physically dissecting Aboriginal communities along a largely invisible border would prove disruptive, even to the genocidal goals of Manifest Destiny.

Known more commonly as the Jay (or Jay's) Treaty, the agreement, which is still in force, allows Canadian-born people with at least 50 percent Indigenous blood to enter, live in, and work in the United States without immigration restrictions. They cannot be deported for any reason. For reasons that remain opaque, Canada never ratified the treaty, denying reciprocal rights to American-born Indigenous people. But were that to change, that shift of cultural geography would ultimately be accepted into our world view. Whatever the change, we tend to be comfortable—permissive even—with what whatever becomes incorporated into the body politic.

Garreau and Woodard had no illusions that their insights would lead to a redrawing of the North American map. They knew it was too late for the radical reforms they proposed; the die of the nations' borders was already too solidly cast. Rather, they wanted to draw attention to how we approach the differences within our continent: what can we do to reconnect with our compatriots? How can we bridge cultural divides between regions?

Supporters of a "wexit" want to live in a country that reflects the will of the people, and for that reason the cause will fail. Not for lack of a geographically based culture, but for the same reason a Catalonia free of Spain, a Scotland free from Britain, or a Quebec free from Canada have failed; namely, that the people, that is, the majority of the country is against it.

Geography was Canada's original impediment to national cohesion, but our mastery over it did not prevent today's misunderstanding of it. The emotions behind Western alienation will continue to plague the West—and Canada at large—so long as the area

continues to feel physically isolated. Those advocating for a Western Exit haven't ceased feeling Canadian—rather, they feel themselves to be as true to the nation's spirit as one ought to be. More than economics, race, or religion, the quarrel at the heart of Western alienation is the belief that it must mean something to stand on the Great Plains of North America; to know that the world can happen there too, that the Plains are not what separates Toronto from Vancouver, but what connects them.

John A Macdonald believed the nation needed a railway to become whole. Deaf to the protests of Indigenous and Métis groups, he blasted through whatever was in his way to see his vision realized. We are not so barbaric now: bridging the Canadian Shield is challenging, but not impossible, and would go a long way to removing the ideological chock wedged between East and West. Rail could be the solution again—the national line restored to its past glory and beyond to carry both passenger and cargo, goods and resources from Coast to Coast to Coast.

Physical connection can never be overvalued, as Kipling knew; it's the end of *The Ballad of East and West*, not its beginning, which must ultimately be Canada's ambition:

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently
at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West,
Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
though they come from the ends
of the earth!

When Canadian founding-father Thomas D'Arcy McGee dreamed of a "great new northern nation," he imagined a country nationalist in its preference, but universal in its sympathies. "There is room enough in this country for one great free people," he said, "but there is not room enough, under the same flag and the same laws, for two or three angry, suspicious, obstructive nationalities." ✪