CANADIAN SNOWBIRDS AS MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

Canadian snowbirds, seasonal migrants wintering in the southern United States and the Caribbean, have been seen by Canada's nationalist elites as signs of Canada's demise as a strong, autonomous nation. This paper outlines a few parameters of that phenomenon, to demonstrate that Canadian snowbirds were and remain strongly attached to their Canadian (or Québécois) identity. What is being said about snowbirds and other Canadians travelling to the United States is more an avatar of nationalist discourse than anything else.

> If the greatest threat to Canadian sovereignty and cultural uniqueness is the American Babylon to the south, then annual dosages of Americanism administered in a beguiling vacation atmosphere must rank with the invasion of American television as one of the chief impediments to the emergence of a Canadian people.[1]

The late Robert Harney, American-born migration historian, thus captured humorously the Canadian intelligentsia's aversion to the Florida Dream—even as millions of Canadians sought a share of that Dream, as tourists, snowbirds, or migrants.

How justified were the fears of Canadian nationalists? First, Canadian tourism and migration to the Sunshine State draw their saliency from sheer numbers. Although it has been taking place since the end of the nineteenth century, their story largely takes place after 1945. By the late 1940s, a sizable French-speaking community was gathering around Miami, mostly fed by fortune-seeking migrants from the Franco-American settlements of New England. The increasing tourist and migrant numbers were the result of rising disposable incomes, increasing vacation time, and improvements in transportation technology and accessibility (such as cheap oil and cheap automobiles, improved highways since the 1940s, the Interstate network since the 1960s, and the democratization of air travel during the 1970s and 80s).

Yet these factors do not explain why *South Florida* itself became the tourist and migration magnet—why not Georgia, why not Texas? Sunshine State historians tell us that generations of canny entrepreneurs constructed and broadcast the Florida Dream, a unique version of the American Dream, by using and re-interpreting the edenic repertoire of Western culture, especially its components about eternal youth and a divinely-ordained, benevolent, bountiful nature.[2] That Dream was the work of Florida-based *dream entrepreneurs*: Florida boosters, real estate investors, businesspeople, civic leaders and the like, who framed this repertoire into enticing evocations of warmth, comfort, and pleasure, and beamed them to the population of the frigid North. Most notorious instances of Florida Broadcasting are when the Flagler and Plant railways connected the Gold Coast and the Tampa Bay to the rest of the continent during the 1880s, when Carl G. Fisher promoted Miami Beach during the 1910s and

1920s, and when Dick Pope broadcast images of water-ski stunts from his Cypress Gardens theme park after the 1930s. Therefore, when Disney World opened near Orlando in the Fall of 1971, Florida had had its own well-known brand of Sun and Fun, different from the Hollywood version, for many decades.

Snowbirds and elderly migrants came with tourists. The implications of such a phenomenon cannot be understated: before the 1950s, elders used to be too poor, too sick, too dependent on their siblings to move very far from "home." Technology, consumerism, social programs, and longer life expectancies fostered a "seismic mindshift"[3] in postwar culture, that allowed the creation of leisurely retirement beyond the upper-class confines of Palm Beach.

In 1960, the United Stated census found that Floridians' median age, at 35 years, was already a good five years higher than the US median, thanks to elderly migrants. By 1962, Canadians contributed annually around 500000 tourists to a total of thirteen million—up from 4.5 million in 1946. By 1980, the annual number of Canadian visits to Florida reached the million mark. The 1980s were banner years for Canadian snowbirds: in 1987, one estimate put the Canadian snowbird total at more than 300,000 in all of Florida, over a total of around 800,000, American snowbirds included.[4] Canadian tourist counts in Florida ballooned as well, to 2.5 million in the early 1990s, then decreased to 1.7 million in 1999, under the repeated blows of rising health insurance costs, high-profile crime against tourists in the Miami area, and a worsening exchange rate between the Canadian and American currencies. In the late 1990s, the Canadian Snowbirds Association estimated the number of Canadian snowbirds in South Florida at between 150,000 and 200,000. Meanwhile the total figure (Americans included) has remained stable from the mid-1990s until now, near the million mark.[5] Canadian patronage of Florida then increased again, to 2.1 million in 2005, a good year for Florida tourism. With these sorts of numbers, English-speaking and bilingual Canadians had a lot of choice when they came to Florida—blend in, stand out, congregate, disperse—and it stood to reason that their snowbird communities were very much an artifact of their own devising. What about French speakers? As geographers Louis Dupont and Remy Tremblay have shown, the language limitations of French-speaking snowbirds fostered their congregation around Hollywood, north of Miami, since the 1960s, where a community of permanent and seasonal migrants thrived on catering to the needs of an unashamedly captive tourist clientele.[6]

How did Canadian snowbirds get to Florida? Our research showed that a surprisingly high proportion of them drove their cars all the way down south, years into the so-called Jet Age. Statistics Canada and the Florida Development Commission reported in the 1980s and 1990s that 31 to 48 percent of Canadians going to Florida chose to drive. And in 1999, the Canadian Snowbirds Association estimated that 88 percent of its members drove their own cars to the US South and Southwest.[7]

How did snowbirds chose their destinations? Robert Harney and other scholars found that most of them had previously visited as tourists, and had friends or kin who vacationed or wintered in or near their chosen destination. In the words of migration scholarship, snowbirds migrated through network recruitment, channels, and nodes. Migrants put to work social networks to facilitate their information-gathering and movement. Entrepreneurs specialized in migration brokerage; in Florida's case, motel owners, real estate agents, transportation companies and others have competed for, and prospered in, the Canadian "migrant market."[8] When they got South, snowbirds tended to congregate by places of origin, just like other migrant communities.

Did snowbirds really justify the Canadian nationalist intelligentsia's fears about American influence? Apparently not. Canadian snowbirds seem to have remained faithfully Canadian, even when larking about in Florida. An Orillia snowbird declared in 1986 "If there was a place in Canada with this climate, most of us would be there. We're Canadians and we don't want to forget it, but we're in heaven down here."[9] In 1999, a report of the Canadian Snowbird Association trumpeted the attachment of its members to their nationality:

> Snowbirds have been around for a long time, and are exceptionally proud to be Canadian.... We know how to work and how to play and are willing to fight for the wonderful country we have helped build. We may be retired from our professions, but not from our love of Canada and all it stands for.[10]

Sure, talk was cheap during the patriotic 1990s. But obviously, wintering in Florida does not require a complete repression of one's Canadian—or Northern—identity. Yet something changes during the sojourn, albeit slightly.

In the 1980s, Robert Harney suggested that Canadian snowbirds in Florida experience, not so much a demise, but a *regression* of their Canadian identity. As they become less Canadian, they become more "hyphenated," more ethnically characterized. Thus most Ontarians seem more Anglo-Celtic: they introduced lawn bowling in Florida and members of the Canadian Club of the Palm Beaches drink tea at four o'clock. Similarly

Québécois have become more French Canadian when down South: they play *pétanque,* they patronize restaurants and retailers that offer traditional Québécois dishes and staples, they exhibit a *joie de vivre* and a noticeable lack of inhibition in dress and beach behavior.[11] This regression is also illustrated—and encouraged—by the relative lack of contact between the two linguistic groups when in Florida. In 1990, a Toronto journalist noted that "the French and English Canadians seldom mix except for watching NHL games on huge screens in places such as the Penalty Box in Fort Lauderdale. ... 'We see Anglos at the flea markets .... We sure don't see them in our neighborhoods'," commented a French-speaking snowbird.[12]

The geographic clustering of snowbirds by region of origin is a likely cause of ethnic regression: in the process of finding and joining snowbird communities through social networks and north-south roads one is likely to seek and find kindred spirits, reinforcing ethnic traits in the process. Snowbirds, and the people catering to them, are agents in their own clustering, by displaying signs of their regional and ethnic identity. Hence the display and assertion of one's mores and origins become a useful way to identify and join a group, thereby creating communitarian bonds and asserting inter-communitarian *distinctions*. The need for friendship and belonging while spending the winter in Florida commanded a hyphen, an overstatement of one's background and peculiarities. Hence the flag-waving of the Canadian Snowbirds Association and of many Canadian snowbirds played a part in their clustering, but did not mean a shift in their Canadian nationalism.

Atavistic hyphenation was a coping strategy already known to Floridians, for New York Jews had become more ethnically Jewish after they reached Miami Beach. Meanwhile, other Americans had joined snowbird affinity groups that had effectively created a state or regional "ethnicity" for them. Consequently, Canadians were both typical in becoming simultaneously more hyphenated, while standing out as they paraded their somewhat visible "Canadian" identity. As all the snowbirds "put their roots on display," Canadians mounted distinctive displays as they built distinctive communities in Florida.

If Canadians in Florida did not lose their soul, why all the fuss? In our view, the Canadian "counterdiscourse" on tourism and migration to Florida said more about fears of American influence *in Canada* than about the actual loyalties of sun-seeking Canadians. As this country was built on shared understandings of shared institutions (e.g. the federal state), history (e.g. ethnoracial conflict and empire), and geography (e.g. northernness), the looming modernization of Canadian culture, when mediated by a growing American influence, appeared to threaten the building of a strong, autonomous Canadian nation.[13]

In this sense, Florida was seen as a sign of the declining significance of winter or northernness. In Canada, the embrace of winter as an opportunity to wear woollens draws most of its potency from the belief—widespread amongst the Canadian chattering class—that winters are an essential part of national identity. It worries defenders of the "True North Strong and Free" whenever winter is lamented by the media, avoided in heated rinks and malls, or escaped outright. Geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin thus complained that,

> Some social ideas have hindered a better acknowledgement of winter.... Meteorological agencies and the media are prone to alarmism on the topic of winter storms: Alert! Don't go out! Leave at once for the tropics...! However useful, these dramatized news reveal an aversion toward, if not a hatred of winter.[14]

Some commentators blamed the un-Canadian aversion to winter to urbanization:

> Tanning studios sent out the lure of endless summer. Radio and television stations issue the siren song of free trips to Florida. Revisionists are hard at work constructing, in our large cities, indoor streets, complete with glass walls, high ceilings and real trees.... It is the dream of such people that Canadians abandon their obsession with the outdoors, the loon, the lake, the snow, the cold, and get on with the important business of moving indoors and becoming truly cosmopolitan.[15]

The reference to "becoming truly cosmopolitan" hued to the dominant frame of historical explanation—the metanarrative—of postwar Canadian history, namely that—take your pick—urbanization or modernization or the technological imperative was, in a context of American hegemony, making Canadian nation-building ever more problematic. As winter faded from significance, intellectuals and politicos feared, the Canadian nation-state might shrink or melt away entirely. To be sure, the Canadian alarm about the declining significance of winter was a local version of concerns shared by other Westerners: the same threat to nation and tradition brought about by technology was noted by American historian Daniel Boorstin, and French philosopher Jacques Ellul.[16] Boorstin wrote, in *Hidden History*,

> Technology is the natural foe of nationalism. With crushing inevitability, the advance of technology brings nations together and narrows the differences between the experiences of their people.… Each forward step in modern technology tends to reduce the difference between the older categories of experience… Technology aims to insulate and immunize us against the peculiar chances, perils, and opportunities of our natural climate, our raw landscape.[17]

The popularity of winter travel to Florida was used as an illustration of this crisis in Canada's nation-building. Robert Harney, when studying the snowbird phenomenon, noticed that there was a Canadian counter-discourse on Florida, and likened it to other counter-discourses found in all places experiencing an important emigration. What was being said and written about Florida had been written, for instance, in Ireland about the United States in the 19th century and in Québec about New England in the early 20th century.[18] This version of Florida is an iconic, somewhat caricatured symbol of the American menace to Canada's existence. Specifically, it is an encompassing metaphor for the seductions of modernity and technology: comfort, geographic mobility, leisure, and consumerism. Florida embodies, for many Canadian and Quebec nationalists a subtropical version of the American Dream or even worse, a pseudo-place (as defined by Boorstin) where technology uproots culture from nature, nation, and tradition. In one set of instances, throughout the 1960s-1980s period, the popularity of Florida amongst Canadians was often evoked to illustrate the imbalance of payments between Canada and the US, especially between 1976 and 78, when the Canada-US balance of payments worsened only slightly faster than Canadian travel to Florida increased.[19]

Florida was also used in a similar fashion by representatives of the Canadian tourist industry to frame their demands for lower taxes, less stringent labor regulations, and improved roads—Sunshine State's tourism thrived, they argued, because it was a right-to-work state, with lower business and consumer taxes, and better roads. Occasionally, similar arguments were used in Canadian legislative bodies, federal and provincial, and in the press.[20] Tourism and migration to Florida—including a much-debated "brain drain" of health workers[21]—illustrated, to some right-of-center commentators, the defects of the Canadian model of economic regulation and state involvement in social and economic affairs. Conversely, the left-wing side of the debate used the example of Florida to outline the defects of the American Dream, and stake their position as critics of the right-wing drift of the 1980s and 90s. For them, Florida was the epitome of what was undesirable in the United States. In Florida, there were instances, often extreme ones, of crass commercialism[22], environmental degradation[23], poorly funded public services, and the dog-eat-dog economic liberalism that they rejected for Canada and Québec.[24]

In other words, the Canadian and Québécois fascination with Florida and the United States is best understood as a peculiarly Canadian way of making sense of modernity; discussions of Florida thus fit into metanarratives of national construction –or deconstruction.[25] Recent scholarship on Canada-US borderlands[26] and on perceptions of the United States in Canada have proposed less dichotomous, more ambivalent, polysemous interpretations, that contend that Canadians did have the power to construct their own meanings of what it meant to be Canadian, meanings that were grounded in their actual experience of North America, more than in the nation-building metanarratives. This empowerment tapped on their traditions and worldviews, and on the ongoing collective conversation that constructed a folk knowledge about life in North America. Paradoxically, the repertoire of popular culture beamed from the United States as well played a part in Canadians' empowerment, for instance on the many occasions where American images were folklorized into some foreign Other; from Florida, images such as Walt Disney World, Cape Canaveral, cocaine cowboys, or roaming alligators, however fascinating, were understood by Canadians to understand themselves as *not American*. Snowbirds themselves, as we have shown, were using Canadian symbols and in a less dichotomous and defensive fashion than academic nationalists supposed. In combination with gestures of appreciation for the American Good Life, they congregated with their compatriots in the southlands even as they reached out to their American neighbors.

In this way they reached their own conclusions about Canadian identity, remaining surprisingly Canadian. By this enduring Canadian character, they put into question the view common to borderlands scholarship that liminal places foster multinational "blends."[27] Snowbirds were not exactly *blending*. They were mingling, to be sure, but mostly so that they could experience their own, unique version of the Good Life. This finding supports the "people's agency" interpretation of North American popular culture, an interpretation that allows persons and groups to find meaning outside of metanarratives and other top-down discourse.[28]

Today, Canadian snowbirds still migrate each year in large numbers—if the exchange rate between the Canadian and US dollars may have slowed them down *circa* the year 2000, currency is no longer a factor in 2009. Yet snowbirds and other Canadian sun-seekers have

arguably become less visible. This may be a vindication of modernization theory: Canadian nationalism may have become less strident, less defensive, less likely to lament the declining prospect of an autonomous Canada. This transformation is all the more counterintuitive to the nationalist standpoint considering the number of ongoing, simmering controversies around the meaning of the Canada-US relationship, and given the sorry legacy of the Bush years.

Part of the snowbirds new toned-down look is a result of their own agency: they became, like most denizens of late modernity, much harder to encapsulate with simple labels. For instance, other states—and a number of Latin American and Caribbean nations—have become snowbird havens, albeit on a smaller scale. And Floridians themselves have changed a lot. Since the 1960s, the Sunshine State has slowly, haltingly moved away from its origins as a fast-growth tourist magnet. In the state with the fourth-largest population, Floridians have to cope with issues typical of a populous, cosmopolitan, modern (shall we say "mature") polity: international migration; interracial strife involving African-Americans, American Indians, Cubans and Whites; housing shortages; environmental degradation; traffic gridlock, and the like. If, for a moment during the 1980s and 90s, these changes were addressed by using tourists and snowbirds as scapegoats to denounce the Florida model of growth-at-all-costs, nowadays tourists and snowbirds seem to be increasingly treated with benign indifference. If Florida is indeed a "countermodel" to the Canadian counterdiscourse on the United States, it is nonetheless a social laboratory where one can see the future at work. And in both cases, in both Florida-the-dystopia and Florida-the-model, Canadian snowbirds and tourists have played a part on their own terms.

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[25] See for instance Joseph Yvon Thériault, *Critique de l'américanité* (Montréal, 2002), 165-261; see also media scholar's G. Stuart Adam's version of Canadian history, "Broadcasting and Canadian Culture: A Commentary," in *The Beaver Bites Back: American Popular Culture in Canada*, eds. David H. Flaherty and Frank E Manning (Montreal, 1993), 81-84; see also Bernard Ostry, "American Culture in a Changing World," and Paul Rutherford, "Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada," in The *Beaver Bites Back*, 33-41, 260-280; George Parkin Grant's *Lament for a Nation* is another illustration of this narrative strategy (*Lament for a Nation: the Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1965).

[26] Elizabeth Jameson, "Dancing on the Rim, Tiptoeing Through Minefields: Challenges and Promises of Borderlands," *Pacific Historical Review* 75 (2006): 1-24; Stephen T. Moore, "Defining the "Undefended": Canadians, Americans, and the Multiple Meanings of Border During Prohibition," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 34 (2004): 3-32; Sheila McManus et al., "Challenging the Boundaries of Geography: A Roundtable on Comparative History," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 33 (2003): 139-160; W.H. *New, Borderlands: How We Talk about Canada* (Vancouver, 1998); Randy William Widdis, "Borders, Borderlands and Canadian Identity: A Canadian Perspective," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 15 (1997): 49-66.

[27] Allan Smith, "Review of Robert Lecker, ed., *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*," Canadian Historical Review 74 (1993): 305.

[28] On the uneasy cohabitation of academic nationalism with postmodern scholarship in Canada, see John H. Wadland, "Voices in Search of a Conversation: An Unfinished Project," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 35 (Spring 2000): 52.