Narratives of Citizenship: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples Unsettle the Nation-State
edited by Aloys N.M. Fleischmann, Nancy Van Styvendale and Cody McCarroll
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The inhabitants of the New Hebrides were rendered stateless by the condominium imposed on them by the British and French: citizenship was only achieved when the condominium ended. The peculiarities of New Hebridean citizenship, which illustrates some of the oddities of official citizenship, do not figure in this interesting and at times illuminating collection but they might have. The authors and editors are a mix of doctoral candidates and established scholars. They are mainly Canadian and the issues raised by the Canadian multiculturalist approach to citizenship as well as those posed by the various treaties with the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the Canadian state provide most of the examples.

The broad division, as the sub-title states, is between studies of the original inhabitants of a territory and immigrant peoples. The first set deals with the Indigenous people of Canada and of Hawaii, the second set with different immigrant groups. Two really fall outside both categories: one a study of the effects of Newfoundland joining the Canadian Federation and another of youth gangs in Nigeria. The editors’ introduction and some of the essays make various theoretical gestures: Giorgio Agamben figures largely but not even those who cite him respectfully are totally convinced. A few essays suffer from theoretical overload (understandable in young scholars forced to show mastery of secondary material and fashionable theories) but even these concentrate on closely examining the works of individual artists or situations to tease out the ambiguities obscured by the concept of citizenship. What unites the essays is a recognition that citizenship involves both legal definitions and emotional responses.

The complexities of Newfoundland identity are the theme of Jennifer Bowering Delisle’s study of Wayne Johnston’s memoir. Joining the Canadian Federation in 1949 was highly controversial. Usually seen as Canadians by outsiders, the inhabitants of Newfoundland had, and tenaciously maintain, a distinctive identity. They often had to migrate but, despite, or perhaps due to, this mobility, remained attached to Newfoundland and the decision to join the Federation divided families, as Johnston’s memoir shows. Emotional response plainly was to the fore here. The complexities of being Nigerian in the case of the youth gangs examined by Paul Ugor may well have had an emotional component but more clearly had to do with a state that failed to provide law and order, allowing militarised youth to step in and ultimately be used and abused by those they defended in their own way. Unhonoured, they were at least remembered in a film. Neither of these essays deals with indigenous or diasporic people in the sense used by other contributors. What they do show is either end of the spectrum as the Newfoundlanders lie at the emotional, the Nigerians at the legal/political end.

Lying at the legal, political and, constitutional end of the spectrum are the essays on Canadian and Hawaiian indigenous people. Daniel Coleman’s essay on the consequences of the treaty between the Six Nations and the Canadian government and Carmen Robertson’s on the Canadian 1969 White Paper on the status of Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples both deal with contemporary legal issues affecting land (Coleman) or attempts at constitutional change. Both deal with issues of different interpretations (readings if you will) of documents and history. Sydney L. Laukea treats the same sort of issues through examining how photographs

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are used to recreate the history of Hawaiians in the interest of the US official version of their relations with Hawaii and its history. David Chariandy examines the status of Black Canadians. Black Canadians might of course be inhabitants of many generations standing or immigrants more recently arrived, especially after the end in 1966 of a White Canadian immigration preference. Here legality figures largely but so too does the emotional response to neglect and rejection in the experiences of different sorts of Black Canadians. Nineteenth-century missionary – and wider – attitudes to women of mixed Aboriginal Canadian and European ancestry in British Columbia are treated by Aloys N.M. Fleischmann: a familiarly depressing tale of the cruelties of intentions as often good as bad.

The other essays lie towards the emotional side of the spectrum. Lindy Ledohowski’s discussion of a Ukrainian-Canadian’s travel memoir provides a link between essays that focus on either emotional responses or legal issues. The discussion reveals much about Ukrainian-Canadians’ attitudes towards Canada and the Ukraine and their significant role in formulating Canadian multi-cultural policies. Two novels by and about Asia-Canadians are analysed by Robert Zacharias, one about the Second World War internment of Japanese-Canadians, the other moving between the past and an imagined future. Dorothy Woodman analyses a 1936 Italian novel about a terminally ill Bedouin-Italian woman living in Sicily. The novel provides a critique of Mussolini’s policies towards women and North Africa. Lily Cho uses a short story about the clash of generations in a Chinese family in Canada to explore the melancholia of immigrants. Laura Schechter deals with a Korean-American experimental novel about the Japanese occupation of Korea. Like one of the novelists discussed by Zacharias, that novelist found that history by itself provides no liberation, hence the use of experimental techniques. Marco Katz examines the way in which attempts to settle in Japan, after the Japanese government began to invite the children, grand-children, and great-grand-children of Japanese emigrants to settle in Japan, worked successfully for a Peruvian-Japanese musician and not at all for a writer of similar origins. In this group of essays the nation-state is hardly ever unsettled by the stories’ protagonists: indeed they seem to be the unsettled ones. The writers’ success is to demonstrate the inadequacy of the state’s official narratives; the differing fates of the two Japanese-Peruvian artists might show the mixed success of government policies as well as the differences between music and musicians on the one hand and literature and writers on the other. They may well have reacted the same way had they both gone to England.

It is clear that some of the states here are sovereign rather than nation-states, ones where a number of different nationalities co-exist rather than the ideal of each nation having its own state. The Austro-Marxists had tried to solve the problem of the multi-national(in more modern dress the multi-cultural) state, by positing a portable nationality: citizens would have had various cultural rights (education in their own language for example) wherever they were within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The political difficulties of implementing such a policy inspired much criticism and scorn but it was a bold attempt to solve a problem which has persisted in the successor states (consider the dissolution of Czechoslovakia). The Austro-Marxists recognised more clearly and earlier than their critics that the movement towards uniformity in the modern world was neither an unstoppable nor an unambiguous process. Nationalisms would unsettle the nation-state as well as the old multi-national dynastic states. The end result would not, except in a few cases, be nation-states but sovereign states that claimed to be nation-states, often at great cost to the people who lived in them. The Austro-Marxists’ attempt to deal with these issues deserves attention and respect.

This collection reminds us how complex citizenship is, but citizenship at an individual level always is or was. Artists remind us that individuals are not chips off a block; what we can lose sight of when responding to their work is how similar the chips often are. It is not clear that any of the examples here ‘unsettle’ the nation-state in any profound or even playful sense. Successful, i.e. strong, nation-states can tolerate or suppress or simply ignore differences fairly easily. At moments of crisis when they are weakened they can do none of those things as successfully. Perhaps this is the difference in perspective between disciplines which look at the individual and those which look at the collective. The anguish that historians have caused literary critics by their use of literature surely far exceeds that caused historians by the excursions of literary critics into history. (Despite the editors claiming a wider disciplinary focus than literature, the contributors do seem to belong to literary studies almost exclusively.) Both disciplines are united, however, by a bias towards the particular rather than the general. What remains true is that this collection has encouraged at least this reader (a historian) to seek out novels, look at photographs or listen to music that he was ignorant of, and has reminded him that broad generalisations obscure many individual differences. If only for that reason, with luck not merely an individual response, it deserves to be read and reflected upon. Artists and events may sometimes unsettle the nation-state but examined closely they almost always unsettle theories.

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