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Volume 42, Number 2, 2017

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl42\\_2art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl42_2art04)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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Cite this article

Roberts, K. A. (2017). “The Taste of Wet Steel”: Bordertown Masculinities in Craig Davidson’s Cataract City. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 42(2), 66–90.

# “The Taste of Wet Steel”: Bordertown Masculinities in Craig Davidson’s *Cataract City*

KATHERINE ANN ROBERTS

**A**S THE NARRATOR OF CRAIG DAVIDSON’S *Cataract City* (2013) admits, “In Cataract City everything was a struggle. It knit itself deep inside you. What was the most awful thing about living as an adult on the same streets where you grew up? It’s so easy to remember how perfect it was supposed to be” (267). The narrator reflects on his intense but conflicted relationship with his hometown just before embarking on a cigarette-smuggling run across the Niagara River into Canada. The passage captures the multiple tensions in the text between place and identity, hope and disappointment, past and present, love and resentment. Davidson’s third novel (nominated for the 2013 Scotiabank Giller Prize) is a story of loyalty, friendship, and the importance of place for two boyhood friends who grow up in Niagara Falls and find themselves, in early adulthood, on opposite sides of the law. *Cataract City* is evoked in all of its gritty glory as both industrial wasteland and tacky tourist city. Critics have commended Davidson for “putting Niagara Falls on the map,” so to speak, arguing that the novel offers one of Canadian literature’s most notable portraits of a southern Ontario industrial city in decline (Richler). Yet Niagara Falls is also a bordertown, an aspect of the novel that has received less attention from critics. This article examines the importance of borders in *Cataract City* and the extent to which it shares affinities with other border fictions.

The literary investment in the forty-ninth parallel as a metaphor (some say metonym) for the Canadian condition has a long history in Canadian cultural expression, pre-dating the current resurgence of interest in geopolitical borders in the wake of post-9/11 securitization and ongoing crises in international migration. The Canada–US border in Canadian fiction has traditionally symbolized Canadian efforts to resist American cultural, economic, and political intrusions (Berland; Brown; New). Canadian space in border writing from both Canada and

the United States has also signified possible sanctuary from persecution for African Americans fleeing slavery and political dissenters during the Vietnam War period (Adams; Roberts). Reingard Nischik's recent overview of Canada-US border crossings in Canadian and American short stories (both pre- and post-9/11) confirms the presence of familiar themes.<sup>1</sup> In most stories, Canada remains a "peaceful, more innocent, less politically burdened and economically well-off, direct alternative to the United States" (Nischik 90). Alice Munro's story underlines the danger inherent in making a detour through the United States, whereas American writers such as Tim O'Brien and Joyce Carol Oates write of exile in a benevolent (if somewhat boring) nation. Thomas King mocks the frontier itself as a colonial imposition, as illustrated in his iconic "Borders" (though Nischik's analysis of King's "The Closer You Get to Canada, the More Things Will Eat Your Horses" confirms the pattern of viewing Canada as a safer and more benevolent nation). Nischik's corpus underlines how crossing the border is often paralleled with important developmental and psychological changes in the lives of the characters. "To enter a border region," Nischik argues, "consciously means entering a liminal space and, often in these stories, a liminal state of mind, which is characterized by ambiguity, indeterminacy, and comingling, versus the demarcation, separation, and exclusion traditionally associated with the notion of borders" (74). Nischik's findings follow a pattern emerging in the study of border fiction in general, which charts how border texts often construct a world of shifting boundaries and permeable identities. As Irene Sywenky argues in the context of Polish fiction set on the German border, border novels are postmodern discourses that uncover the "universalism of borderland spaces and the borderland condition," and as such they seek coherence in "the nomadic spaces of unhomeliness and inherent mobility . . . that underlie the all-pervasive state of nonbelonging in today's world" (82).

Other scholars have sought to include fictions of the Canada-US border in a larger framework of border studies that challenges nation-state boundaries and examines border culture from a hemispheric perspective (Adams and Casteel; Siemerling and Casteel). In *Border Fictions: Globalization, Empire, and Writing at the Boundaries of the United States*, Claudia Sadowski-Smith defines border fictions as contemporary texts in North America that "explore the interrelated effects of free trade and border militarization on a variety of border commu-

ities, including Chicana/os, Mexican immigrants, border residents, native people and undocumented immigrants from Asia” (6). For her, the specificity of border literature lies in its articulation of alternatives: “this fiction envisions new forms of oppositional nationalism that take on pan-ethnic and transnational shapes and that are independent of the nation-state” (7). Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup critique the cultural nationalism that tends to inform Canadian border studies and that sometimes misconstrues Canada as a homogeneous and unified space, glossing over the “urgent questions a hardening border raises for Canadian citizenship, for Indigenous rights in Canada and the United States,” and “for the mobility of communities that traditionally straddle the border” (12). In *Discrepant Parallels: Cultural Implications of the Canada–U.S. Border*, Roberts argues “that the 49th parallel has not resonated for ethnic-minority groups in the same way that it has for the white, Anglo, dominant group” (15). She seeks to qualify “the symbolic power of the border to protect Canadian identity and values (problematically universalized for all groups within the nation-state)” (23) by exploring the border’s changing relevance in cultural narratives from Indigenous, African Canadian, and Latin American perspectives.

Much of the research outlined above belies certain normative assumptions about the cultural work of border fiction, specifically how border texts often articulate alternative forms of identity and belonging that are ideally panethnic and transnational and even draw attention to and dissolve national boundaries (Roberts; Sadowski-Smith). Border studies scholars also emphasize the liminality or “unhomeliness” of border texts and/or read them as advocating postnational identities. Given this context, *Cataract City* is of particular interest in the study of Canadian border fiction (and border fiction in general). *Cataract City* does not perform the cultural work of advocating transnationalism and dissolving boundaries. Rather, it addresses questions of cross-border identity and white–Indigenous relations in ways that disrupt and disturb previous representations and reader expectations. The novel does not emphasize placelessness or contest national borders. Davidson’s characters exhibit a clear sense of both place and self. They exploit the geographical context of their city and take advantage of economic opportunities (legal and illegal) provided by living close to the border. Unlike (older) Canadian cultural nationalist texts examined by Brown — Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) is perhaps the best-known

example — *Cataract City* does not posit an “us” and “them” discourse with respect to the United States, nor does it imagine the border as a symbolic last defence against American social and cultural influence. *Cataract City* ultimately shows the United States to be inconsequential to the narrative. The text therefore shores up the limits of previous discussions of border fiction in the Canadian context, given how it offers a compelling portrait of a postindustrial Canadian bordertown without critiquing the nation-state or suggesting the possibility of cross-border identities.

In terms of genre, *Cataract City* borrows aspects of American-style crime fiction, to which can be ascribed the confident, though introspective, tone of the two male narrators. I suggest that the novel is also informed by border genre conventions of a sort different from those examined so far: that is, popular representations of Anglo–Mexican relations in bordertowns along the US–Mexico border. These fictional bordertowns are complex and contested spaces of poverty, pollution, inequality, sexual tension, and racialized masculinities, best known through novels such as Cormac McCarthy’s border trilogy — *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998) — and through classic films such as Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958). These texts are part of America’s national narrative, embedded in more than a century of stereotypical (if not racist and imperialist) portrayals of difference (Fojas; Fregoso). As Katherine Sugg argues with respect to McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* and John Sayles’s film *Lone Star* (1996), border fictions are celebrated tales of American national mythology, manhood, and identity that use the border and the Mexican man as a backdrop to re-enforce and rationalize narratives of Anglo-American superiority and dominant white masculinity (118).

Although Davidson’s portrayal of white working-class masculinity in *Cataract City* is innovative compared with more aggressive border masculinities that demean women (common in popular fictions and films set on the US–Mexico border), Davidson nevertheless relies on stereotyped and negative portrayals of Indigenous men to reinforce the physical strength and moral superiority of the two main protagonists. The most significant border in his text is not between Canada and the United States but between white and Indigenous territories (figured here by the Tuscarora Reservation near Niagara Falls, New York). The author’s exploration of white working-class men and violence juxta-

poses Canadian and Native men in ways that, at first glance, suggest hierarchies of masculinity reminiscent of US–Mexico border fictions. However, the one-dimensional portrait of Tuscarora, centred on the caricatured villain Lemuel (Lemmy) Drinkwater, says much more in the end about white, male, working-class anxieties than about the complexities of Indigenous lives on the border. As I explore in the final section of this article, Davidson renews — perhaps inadvertently — the tendency among white writers of Canadian literature to use “the confrontation of native and non-native heritages” to “explore their own concerns and culture” (Monkman 3). Paradoxically, this one-way mirror, the projection of white problems onto Indigenous spaces, reinforces *Cataract City*’s Canadianness despite its proximity to the American border. As Leslie Monkman concludes, Canadian literature has a long history of figuring “the Indian and his culture” as “vehicles for the definition of the white man’s national, social, or personal identity” (163).

### Niagara Falls: Drowned Kittens and Gasoline Rainbows

Davidson is the author of several short-story collections and novels, notably *Rust and Bone* (2005) — parts of which have been adapted in a critically acclaimed film of the same name, directed by Jacques Audiard (*De rouille et d’os* [2012]) — and *The Fighter* (2007). His fiction engages with themes of masculinity, violence, and the macabre. It is worth noting that Davidson writes horror fiction under the pseudonyms Patrick Lestewka and Nick Cutter. There is indeed something horrific about the setting of *Cataract City*, a place of pollution, waste, and darkness, the veritable underbelly of a Canadian bordertown. The novel tells the story of Owen “Duchie” Stuckey and Duncan “Dunk” Diggs, two working-class Niagara Falls boys who, respectively, narrate long sections of the text constructed around a series of flashbacks. The novel opens with Duncan’s release from Kingston Penitentiary after having served eight years for involuntary manslaughter. It then circles back to significant events in their childhood and young adulthood before arriving at the smuggling plot that results in Duncan’s incarceration. Owen and Duncan come from similar working-class backgrounds. Their fathers are employed at “the Bisk” cookie factory (Nabisco, now Post Foods Canada), though Owen’s dad manages to trade line work for a low-level management position, which enables Owen to attend a better school than Duncan and eventually get an education. At the age

of twelve, the boys bond over a fascination with wrestling. A bizarre Saturday-evening encounter with their hero wrestler Bruiser Mahoney leaves them stranded in the woods. After his untimely death from a heart attack, they make use of their outdoor skills to survive three days in the wilderness before stumbling upon an isolated farmhouse. This near-death experience reinforces their friendship and symbolizes their loss of innocence; they are forced to admit that their idol Mahoney was nothing but a broken-down, middle-aged, pathetic clown.

At the age of fifteen, Duncan and Owen find a pair of identical greyhounds, one of which they race at the local racetrack. They are also both in love with their childhood babysitter, Edwina, a rough-edged girl who first dates Owen before ending up in a long-term relationship with Duncan. Eventually, the two friends drift apart. After his promising career in basketball is cut short by a deliberate hit-and-run car accident, Owen becomes a police officer and lives briefly out west before returning to Niagara Falls. Duncan and Edwina find work at “the Bisk.” Layoffs and general decline in the city’s manufacturing economy limit their economic prospects. Duncan turns to earning money in illegal, bare-knuckled boxing matches on the Tuscarora Reservation on the American side of the border. Eventually, he agrees to transport counterfeit cigarettes across the Niagara River for Drinkwater, a Tuscaroran, the owner of Smokin’ Joes Smoke and Trade Shop and a known smuggler.<sup>2</sup> But unbeknown to Duncan, he is under police surveillance. Owen follows him to the New York side of the river the night of the ill-fated smuggling attempt. His presence alerts Igor Bearfoot, Drinkwater’s accomplice, who then tries to strangle Duncan. Duncan saves himself but inadvertently stabs Igor to death. Owen reluctantly testifies against Duncan at his trial. After his release from the Kingston Penitentiary, Duncan devises a plan with Owen — with the help of Silas Garrow, a Mohawk boxer from Akwesasne and a fellow inmate at the penitentiary — to take revenge on Drinkwater through a rigged boxing match and then to entrap him in a smuggling operation. *Cataract City* ends with a dramatic confrontation between Owen, Duncan, and Drinkwater on the frozen Niagara River.

Given its status as both natural wonder and tourist attraction, Niagara Falls has often served as the setting in literary works as diverse as Jane Urquhart’s historical novel *The Whirlpool* (1997), Howard Engel’s Benny Cooperman detective novels (in particular *A City Called*

*July* [1986]), American writer Joyce Carol Oates's thriller *The Falls: A Novel* (2005), and a series of compelling coming-of-age memoirs by Niagara Falls, New York, native Catherine Gildner: *Too Close to the Falls* (2002) and *After the Falls* (2009). All of these texts evoke in one way or another the power of the rushing water often viewed as sacred or divine. The falls make the city an otherworldly and potentially transformative space typically associated with passion, danger, and death. In "Imagine Niagara," Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shipley recall how transforming the energy of the falls into hydroelectric power brought both expanded industrialization and contamination as factory production waned and jobs moved away from the region (108–10). Davidson builds on these associations in *Cataract City* in his rendering of the rough-at-the-edges, gritty city of rust and pollution set amid the incessant roar of the rushing water. He insists repeatedly on the contamination that poisons the city's residents, notably the "steely alkaline taste of the river" (213), the chemicals that calcify shower heads (230), and the decay that transforms the Port Weller dry dock into "a cathedral of rust" (238). Cataract City is a place where the characters splash through puddles of "gasoline rainbows" near the hydro canal in a former dump site where "poisons were still bubbling up" (196).

Living amidst the toxicity has an effect on the inhabitants of Cataract City, who accept regular power outages, pollution, and an array of disappointments both in their own circumstances and in how others behave toward them. The Niagara River is described in the novel as a tragic dumping ground of waste, lost hope, and cruelty encapsulated in Owen's macabre childhood memory of finding dead kittens and a plastic glow-in-the-dark Jesus stuffed into a trash bag bobbing on the water. The head of the Jesus figure appears to have been bitten off by one of the kittens; the whole thing was the work of someone either "queerly religious" or with a "warped sense of humour" (125). "That's my city in a nutshell — or a trash sack," Owen muses, looking out over the river where people "stuff their problems in a bag" and "huck it in the water" (125). The darker side of this glitzy tourist city is also grotesquely rendered in the boys' discovery one night of the dead bottlenose dolphin Peetka, left in a hole in a field behind the Land of Oceans (no doubt based upon the local Marineland). "Her body was stiffened by rigor mortis," Owen recounts, "a bloody hole in her head eight inches from the crusted blowhole where a veterinarian had excised



a twitching brain nugget. A dusting of quicklime ate into the milky blue of her eyes” (13). Such passages move the novel’s portrait of Niagara Falls away from passion and mesmerizing water to scenes of pollution, contamination, and grotesquerie. Owen and Duncan’s camping ordeal with wrestler Mahoney is a bizarre tale of a “joy ride” with a monstrous, aging, tattooed, and battle-scarred man, given to erratic behaviour and alcohol-induced visions, who kills a racoon and then dies of a drug-induced heart failure in his tent. The Mahoney incident, aside from demonstrating to the boys the trickery of wrestling, is linked thematically to the circus-like atmosphere of Niagara Falls.<sup>3</sup>

Owen and Duncan harbour an intense emotional connection to their city, a central trope of the crime genre in its literary and cinematic versions. As Sarah Matheson writes in the context of televisual crime dramas, the detective hero “is both immersed in and defined by the city space he negotiates” (233). *Cataract City* names specific Niagara Falls neighbourhoods, streets, and landmarks, some only slightly changed. Driving down Clifton Hill, for example, past the Memorial Arena late at night, Owen reflects on “the primitive boyhood sonar” (14) that guided him as a child. He and Duncan know every twist and turn in the road, every secluded spot along the river where they can look back on the distant glimmer of the city lights (on the Canadian side). The first two sections of the novel, narrated in turn by Owen and Duncan, are reminiscences triggered by solo nocturnal wanderings. Both men underline the lack of meaningful employment in the city and an atmosphere that stifles creativity and success. The notion of limits is captured in the metaphor of the *cataract* (Latin for “waterfall”) that can cloud one’s vision.<sup>4</sup> The main characters stumble through life as if partially blind; Duncan, for example, once he becomes involved in smuggling, refuses to see what is coming (despite warnings from Owen). Yet, however much they might dream of escaping, they recognize that they owe their sense of self to their place of birth. “The city makes you,” Owen muses, “in a million little ways it makes you, and you can’t unmake yourself from it” (14). At the end of the novel, he offers a poetic and somewhat clichéd kaleidoscope of images of Cataract City, presented as nuggets of essential wisdom. “We city dwellers know the same things about our home,” he claims. “I know the worn earth along the river’s edge,” “small lawns fenced with green chain-link,” “backyard pools with empty cans of Laker floating on the surface,” “two young boys walking down a secret path

to fish rock bass out of the basin,” “the slow sweet nectar of a Sunday afternoon as it shades into evening, twilight braiding down the streets and across a still river whose waters run deep” (390). Conveyed here is a striking confidence in the evocation of place uncharacteristic of border fiction’s emphasis, described earlier, on ambiguity and indeterminacy. Despite the proximity of the border, the characters are not in a state of liminality, supposedly characteristic of border regions. They do not gaze across the border at the city on the other side (often viewed as “alien,” “distant,” and “unattainable” according to Sywenky [63] in her work on Polish fiction) but exploit the twists and turns in the river to travel toward Fort Erie and gaze back *at their own city*.

*Cataract City* features two climactic moments of confrontation on the Niagara River, the first during the smuggling run and the second on the frozen ice. In both instances, the river space is experienced not as dividing or connecting two international communities (as reported frequently in border studies research) but as belonging to the Canadian side. This point is illustrated by Duncan’s important moment of epiphany just before his arrest. After the life-and-death knife fight with Bearfoot, which results in the latter’s death, Duncan speeds half-crazed down the Niagara River in a Zodiac boat pursued by Owen and tracked by a helicopter. “The Falls were lit with red and green spotlights,” Duncan muses, “and a white bowl of mist foamed up from the basin. The sound was loudest here: a pressurized thrum against my eardrums. I thought fleetingly: *You forgot how powerful some things are. You take their beauty for granted. . . .* I screamed into the cold air that wicked off the water, let it fill my mouth with the taste of wet steel. The taste of home” (277). The “home” that Duncan evokes here connects back to Owen’s description of Cataract City’s small lawns and backyard pools; neither appears to be binational. Owen and Duncan yearn to leave Cataract City as much as they romanticize it. In the end, Duncan is the one to go. During the final confrontation with Drinkwater, he falls through the ice of the Niagara River and is swept away, rescued at the last minute by Owen. He suffers some brain damage because of hypothermia and eventually leaves in search of Edwina. The text does not portray his departure as a rejection of Cataract City; rather, he leaves in peace, having settled the score with Drinkwater, whom he held responsible for his prison term. Owen resigns himself to staying behind, finally content with the “forever surge of the Falls that rose with the blood in [his] veins” (390).

## Beatings and Introspection on a Depoliticized Border

Cataract City is nevertheless a bordertown, as Davidson reminds the reader in the opening pages of the novel. Niagara Falls was born, according to an “old geezer” whom Duncan overhears rattling on a bus, when “America swept all its shit north, Canada swept its shit south, and the dregs washed up in a string of diddly-ass border towns, of which Cataract City is undoubtedly the diddliest. Who else takes one of the seven wonders of the world — the *numero uno* wonder, the Grand Canyon can kiss my pimpled ass — and surrounds it with discount T-shirt shops and goddamn waxwork museums?” (18). This description echoes a long-standing concern about how the natural wonder of the falls has been dwarfed and diminished by blight and artificial construction (see McGreevy 84–88 on Niagara Falls as a diamond in the rough). It also builds upon the trope of bordertowns as marginalized places, at the edge, far from each country’s political and economic capitals. In this sense, Davidson refers indirectly to the famous line from Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (set in a fictive bordertown between San Diego and Tijuana): Mexican detective Mike Vargas (played by Charlton Heston in notorious “brownface”) admits to his wife that borders “bring out the worst in a country.” Key to *Cataract City*’s specificity in terms of Canadian border fiction is how the author underlines the presence of the physical border (the Niagara River, the bridges) that creates the city (which grows out of the tourist industry around the falls). Although the city is the central element of the novel, *crossing* the border, legally or otherwise, is *not* the narrative or thematic centre of the text. Aside from the above reference, the country “on the other side” of the river is never explicitly named, nor is there any interaction with American residents in ways that might suggest a cross-border community.<sup>5</sup>

*Cataract City* is not a text about border guards, security checkpoints, or illegal immigrants, as one might expect given the post-9/11 context. It sidesteps the “hardening” of the border at Niagara Falls and elsewhere in the 2000s as increased security measures have discouraged frequent crossings; the border is now seen as a significant obstacle to cross-border relations (Helleiner). It is important to note that the protagonists discuss how to avoid attracting attention when crossing back into Canada as opposed to encountering problems entering the United States (which has become more difficult in the post-9/11 period). For these white men with proper identification, crossing the border is a non-event.

Duncan shows his passport when going through American customs on the Rainbow Bridge. On another occasion, he carefully washes his car of blood — after rescuing one of Drinkwater’s dogs from a dogfight on the Tuscarora Reservation — to avoid arousing suspicion on the bridge, and he pays full duty for the beer that he buys before going back. Later, after his rigged boxing match on the Tuscarora, Duncan spends several weeks in the Red Coach Inn in Niagara Falls, New York, recovering before coming back home. Covered with bruises, his face badly swollen, Duncan is told to wait on the other side since “we couldn’t get you across the border looking like this” (314). The American side of the falls in this context becomes a blank slate, a space of services and anonymity. Duncan’s slow convalescence in the Niagara Falls motel recalls how the US–Mexico border is used in McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005), in which the hero, Llewellyn Moss, recovers in hospital on the Mexican side after being injured in a gunfight with the novel’s villain, Anton Chigurh. In both novels, the space just over the line is outside the main events of the text and thus allows each protagonist to recover in private, no questions asked. The “other side” does not signify in and of itself but functions as a respite from the main events occurring north of the border.

As mentioned, masculinity is a dominant and recurrent theme in Davidson’s fiction. Texts such as *The Fighter* and *Rust and Bone* feature working-class men who often need to prove themselves physically through sports such as boxing, which Davidson equates with a form of self-discovery (“Author Interview”). He is well aware that his male characters defend a sort of old-school masculinity at odds with the idea of men in a modern world (Johnstone). How to be a white, working-class man in a postindustrial Canadian city is indeed the question at the heart of *Cataract City*. It portrays a place that poses a challenge to working-class manhood as defined by certain types of employment on the decline. As Christopher Greig and Susan Holloway argue in an overview of contemporary challenges to Canadian masculinities, “the change in the labour market from manufacturing jobs to service-sector jobs for men has generated an increased concern over male physical fitness and vigour” since men must make the shift from the strong union employee of industrial/manufacturing companies to “the feminized personality the service sector demands” (128). In places such as Windsor and Oshawa, they argue, traditional notions of appropriate

breadwinning manhood are “built solidly on boys and men constructing their identity in conjunction with using their body working in the blue-collar, automotive factories or in other heavy industry” (128). This context is directly applicable to Davidson’s portrait in *Cataract City* of the declining manufacturing sector in Niagara Falls and to Duncan’s dilemma when it comes to employment; it helps us to understand how the novel prioritizes the link between masculinity and the (degraded) male body. When Duncan is laid off from “the Bisk” and fails to find work as a welder, he turns to boxing to earn a living, destroying his body in the process (just like their boyhood hero Mahoney), as if to suggest that the ultimate path to manhood lies through violence and suffering. Duncan’s low-level boxing career is kind at first to his face but not to his hands, “a pair of ugly bust-up mitts” (218) because of his penchant for fighting without gloves. His final fights with three opponents on the Tuscarora Reservation leave Duncan bludgeoned almost beyond recognition: “My eyes were black balls in the bathroom mirror, nose a mangled knob, shattered capillaries threading over both cheeks . . . forehead dark as an eggplant . . . softball-sized contusions on either side of my ribs” (314–15).

In fact, beatings and brawls punctuate this text from beginning to end. Owen and Duncan become friends at the age of ten when Duncan helps Owen fend off a beating by local thugs Clyde and Adam. The boys are kidnapped by Mahoney while their fathers are engaged in a fistfight with Clyde and Adam’s fathers outside the wrestling arena. Childhood skirmishes soon escalate in brutality: Adam and Clyde ruin Owen’s left leg in a hit and run and are savagely beaten by Duncan and Edwina in retaliation. When policing in Calgary, Owen beats a neighbour with an iron pipe as punishment for accidentally killing his dog in a traffic incident. Davidson tempers this somewhat tired script of working-class masculinity — a loyalty to “codes” of payback and an emphasis on physical strength (the capacity of the body to withstand punishment) — with moments of tenderness, self-awareness, and regret. Owen expresses his fear of “not being the man you thought you’d become” (100). Duncan, wandering near the Derby Lane racetrack after being released from prison, is conscious of all that has been lost since he was a Cataract City youth: “This was a vital part of my life, right here. And it was gone now. I felt sick with nostalgia. Memory like a sickness, memory like a drug. I stood in the lengthening shadow of the lane, swallowed up by the black

hole of my past” (136). Both narrators are aware of the limits of a rigid, conventional, heterosexual masculinity that necessitates “payback,” but they seem to be unable to imagine meaningful alternatives. Restrictive codes of male violence are presented as an inevitability that defines their socioeconomic context: “My own toughness wasn’t something I’d had cause to question,” Duncan muses his first day in prison. “It was an aspect of my makeup, same as my black hair and the cleft in my chin” (283). Owen echoes these sentiments: “My dad said that Cataract City was a pressure chamber: living was hard, so boys were forced to become men much faster. That pressure ingrained itself in bodies and faces” (42). Resorting to violence is to engage in a never-ending process of regret, as when Duncan kills Bearfoot. He remains haunted by this act, a recurring nightmare of “moon-silvered steel and blood the colour of tar” (284).

Davidson’s working-class masculinity takes on another dimension in the context of recent analyses of border masculinities. In her work on cross-border tourism in Hollywood films, Dominique Brégent-Heald argues that both Tijuana and Niagara are depicted as “locations of consumption and sexual exchange” (“Tourism” 202). In the Canadian bordertown, sexual affairs are “marital-based and homogeneous in nature” (203) because of the city’s popularity with honeymooners (unlike in Mexico, where on-screen romances tend to be interracial and transcultural). Niagara Falls, like many Mexican bordertowns, is an “other-directed” environment (199), meaning a place of spectacle designed for foreign consumption (see also Brégent-Heald, “Dark Limbo”). Brégent-Heald’s work opens up avenues for examining how bordertown circuits of exchange contribute to the sense of alienation in Davidson’s novel and how these circuits shape the portrayal of gender and gender relations in it. *Cataract City* has its share of seedy bars and strip clubs that allow Americans to indulge in vices outside their country. Although the novel does not deal directly with prostitution, a common theme in US–Mexico-border texts, it recounts how Edwina, the narrators’ former babysitter and shared love interest, sells her sexualized body at the infamous Sundowner strip club. Discovering that their sexy babysitter “moonlights” as an erotic dancer is an important moment of loss of innocence for the two main characters. When she catches the boys in the club, she has them thrown out and then confronts them, teary-eyed and ashamed, in the parking lot clad “in a spangly G-string,

a dental-floss bikini and teetery stripper heels. Tourists ambling down the strip stared pop-eyed” (168). She grudgingly explains her decision to become an erotic dancer, citing layoffs at “the Bisk” (at that time, she was the “lowest on the totem pole” [169]). This passage captures the dehumanization and humiliation of Edwina, a tough, smart, and otherwise powerful character in the novel reduced here to an erotic body exposed and “consumed” by the gaze of tourists.

It is important to underline that Davidson’s narrators do not glorify male violence or use it to demean women (aside from Edwina, women are largely absent from this text). His take on white working-class masculinity in *Cataract City* is an innovation of sorts with respect to gender and conventional American bordertown masculinities. Popular American fictions and films set on the US–Mexico border often depict the bordertown as a place of hierarchies of masculinity, exaggerated and aggressive male heroes, and violence toward women. The border region is where gender identities become vulnerable and where “services” are provided for those on “the other side” — hence the plethora of smugglers, con artists, and prostitutes in these texts. In *Cities of the Plain*, the final instalment of McCarthy’s border trilogy, for example, a young American cowboy engages in a deadly knife fight with a Mexican pimp in Juarez to avenge the killing of his love interest, a teenage prostitute. On the other side of the border in the trilogy lies a lawless, archaic, timeless Mexico on which the characters turn their passionate colonial gaze. Davidson’s narrators in *Cataract City*, in contrast, do not politicize the border; they take for granted the existence of the country on the other side of it and do not use the Canadian–American comparison to assert their masculinity or engage in international romance. Rather than projecting fascination and desire onto the exoticized “other,” Duncan and Owen acknowledge passion as contained within themselves aptly metaphorized on several occasions in the text by the water of the Niagara River/Falls rushing through their veins or “rumbling” inside their bones (193).

### The Tuscarora Nation: Roughing the Rez

Duncan’s and Owen’s troubled masculinities stands in opposition to that of the other male characters: their disappointingly conformist fathers, the bizarre wrestler Bruiser Mahoney, and finally the novel’s villain, the sly, formidable, yet sadistic Lemmy Drinkwater, whose

presence dominates the final two-thirds of the novel. His terrain is the Tuscarora Reservation on the American side of the border. Where crossing the bridge border into the United States is rendered banal in *Cataract City*, entering the Tuscarora Reservation is not. The text emphasizes the change in spatial environment as if to mark a transgression. When Duncan and his friend and cutman Finn turn off Saunders Settlement Road on the New York side onto Indigenous land and park in front of the Smokin' Joes warehouse, they seem to enter a world of almost immeasurable hardness. In one instance, Duncan imagines his Indigenous boxing opponent as someone who "probably grew up in a tarpaper shack, sleeping on the floor with eight or ten brothers and sisters, and had a dog in the yard chained to a radial tire" (223). On the reservation, "chain-smoking Natives" work a cigarette-making machine, picking "fresh cigs out of the hoppers and lighting them off the stumps of their last" (245); the surrounding houses are little "more than huts held fast by L-clamps and the grace of God" (246). Closed-circuit TV broadcasts of dog fights bring together a crowd of Indigenous and white roughnecks that for Duncan is the apex of this repugnant world: "I hated having anything to do with these ugly men," he muses, "whose stomachs were falling through the shiny denim of their jackets and whose skin hung like wet laundry off the warped dowels of their bones" (253). Unlike in border fictions such as Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993) or Richard Wagamese's *Keeper'n Me* (1994), in which the space of the reservation is one of cultural integrity, or a place of possible Indigenous cultural renewal (Aurylaite), the Tuscarora Reservation in Davidson's novel is synonymous with cruelty, misery, and poverty.

In fact, Owen and Duncan derive physical strength and moral superiority from comparing themselves to the residents of Tuscarora. The space of the reservation serves as a useful backdrop or field of difference against which Canadian white (post-manufacturing) masculinity can be measured. For Duncan, Tuscarora becomes a "proving ground" in ways that echo Mexican territory as a "proving ground" for Anglo masculinities in US-Mexico border fiction. Two dog-fighting scenes, one in McCarthy's *The Crossing* and one in *Cataract City*, help to illustrate this point. In the American text, set in 1940s New Mexico, sixteen-year-old Billy Parnham captures a wolf and proceeds to take it back to Mexico (supposedly its native territory). The wolf is seized from Billy on the Mexican side and used to fight a series of dogs



for profit. Knowing that the wolf will eventually be mauled to death, Billy steps into the dog-fighting ring in front of an enormous, raucous crowd, stops the fight, and shoots the wolf (for him, this is a mercy killing). Miraculously, the lone Anglo cowboy walks out of the barn unharmed, having put an end to this cruelty-for-profit scheme associated with a savage, primitive Mexico. In *Cataract City*, Duncan has a similar impulse the first time that he witnesses dog fights at Tuscarora: “It was an involuntary reaction, like breathing or blinking an eye” (254). He steps into the pen to rescue a dog almost shredded to death by the fighting. The crowd is silenced. When Drinkwater puts a knife to his throat, Duncan reminds him that there are witnesses and finally calls attention to his race: “People know where I am. It’s a whole lot easier to make a dog disappear than a man. White man, especially” (255). Again, against incredible odds, Duncan manages to leave Tuscarora unscathed with the dog, which he takes to the vet before crossing back over the border. The significance of the passage is clear: the disenfranchised, unemployed white man (whom Duncan embodies) shows himself to be ethically and morally superior to the residents of Tuscarora.

Although several key passages of *Cataract City* take place on the reservation, I argue that the novel is invested less in offering a portrait of Indigenous life on the Canada–US border than in exploring the dramatic potential of its villain, Drinkwater, a well-known smuggler, gambler, and general criminal (the novel, after all, paints a portrait of the underbelly of a border town). In a novel with several (somewhat contrived) set pieces and a fascination with the macabre, it is not surprising that Drinkwater remains an enigma. At first glance, the Tuscaroran is reminiscent of the “Indian Antagonists” that Monkman chronicles in his study of Indigenous characters in Canadian literature (7–27). Such characters rarely offer insights into Indigenous society; rather, they uphold a false dichotomy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds or in some cases offer insights on the “savage potential of all men” (27). I argue that in *Cataract City* Drinkwater echoes this tendency: he is a vehicle for an exploration of the concerns of white men.<sup>6</sup> Duncan first encounters him at the dog-racing track on the Canadian side of the border. When his dog loses to Duncan’s Dolly, Drinkwater proposes a high-stakes, after-hours bet that seals Duncan’s fate. In a tragic turn of events, Dolly loses the race and her front leg, while Duncan loses twenty thousand dollars and is pushed toward a life of gambling

and criminality to recoup his losses. In this cross-border Niagara underworld, all roads lead back to Drinkwater. To the young Duncan, he is clearly a menacing figure, clad in jeans and cowboy boots, with a bone-handled knife sticking out of one boot. Davidson's first description of Drinkwater shows a playful awareness of the stereotype of the Indigenous villain, "his red-brown face shadowed by the brim of an Australian outbacker hat; fake crocodile teeth were strung around the brim like bullets in a bandolier" (190). He reminds Duncan of Billy Jack, the star of "those seventies action flicks" (190). The reference here is ironic since Drinkwater is a far cry from the part-Indigenous enforcer who became a cult hero for the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. Drinkwater's alliances are entirely mercantile, exploiting both man and beast for profit.<sup>7</sup>

At second glance, however, Drinkwater is a much more complex character who serves several functions in the novel. His movements and discourse invite a critique of nation-state borders and a reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty. He functions as a reminder of the consequences of settler colonialism and acts as a foil for Duncan and Owen's anxieties about being men in a postindustrial city. In terms of borders, Drinkwater is a disruptive and potentially empowering figure. As mentioned, border fiction by Indigenous writers in both Canada and the United States and related scholarship have dealt critically with the forty-ninth parallel as a reminder of colonial history (McCall 205). For some, the movements and attitudes of Indigenous characters offer a critique of borders (Mayer; Roberts). The Tuscarora Nation is part of the Iroquois Confederacy, which includes the Six Nations of southern Ontario, and their history predates the Canada-US border. Indigenous legal scholar Audra Simpson interprets the Iroquois Confederacy or Haudenosaunee, of which the Tuscarora Nation is a part, as being in a state of nested sovereignty, "enframed by the settler states" (10). Recognizing the sovereignty of the Indigenous territory calls into question the boundaries and lawfulness of both the United States and Canada. Contestation of nation-state borders becomes, in this sense, a political and ethical stance of "refusal" of the legitimacy of the colonial nation-state (26). Cigarette smuggling across the Niagara River, a central plot element in *Cataract City*, is not only transgressive but also shows a differential understanding of place and territory. From this angle, Drinkwater's border-crossing practices and transport of tobacco can be seen as a political act in the

name of Indigenous rights. As Simpson notes, the Jay Treaty gave the right to settler societies to decide who is Indigenous, who has the right to pass, and whether current tobacco transport is commensurate with past tribal practices (158). Therefore, by engaging in trade (or smuggling), Indigenous tribes can be said to represent a failure to consent to colonial mapping.

Drinkwater appears to cross the border seamlessly, exploiting the logistics of the river and the limits of police intervention on the reservation itself. Recent research on Indigenous masculinities (Innes and Anderson; McKegney) provides a context for analyzing the policing, controlling, and regulating of Indigenous men and their movements. Scott Morgensen, for example, argues that one of the goals of settler-imposed colonial masculinity was the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from spaces redefined as proper to white settlers and the confinement of the former to reserve lands marginal to settler capitalism. In this spatial regime, Indigenous peoples become perpetually “out of place” in white society (49). In *Cataract City*, Drinkwater’s sudden appearance at the dog-racing track on the Canadian side, his knowledge of the river in all seasons and weather conditions, and his reputation on both sides of the border become a form of protest against the settler nation-state: Drinkwater is consistently “in place,” challenging the circumscribing of Indigenous male bodies. Davidson also makes him keenly aware of Indigenous marginalization on reserve lands. “What bounty you’ve given us, paleface,” Drinkwater taunts Duncan as they drive through the poverty and squalor of the reservation, planning the smuggling operation, “what beauty to behold. I guess you’d like it if we were gone — yeah? Sure. We give you heap big headaches. But the ol-typhoid-infested blanket trick didn’t work, did it? The firewater, though. *That* was a smart move. . . . But you let us hang around, you white devils with your white devil guilt, and now we’re dug in deep” (246).

Closer examination of the novel points to how Drinkwater does not serve to disparage or discredit tribal communities (a portrait of Indigenous peoples is not the main interest of this text); rather, he offers a way for Duncan and Owen to be confronted by their own moral limits and physical decay and decline. For example, there is something of the abject or horrifying in Duncan’s rapport with Drinkwater. Abjection is a powerful theoretical concept, reformulated most notably by French theorist Julia Kristeva, who argues for abjection as a vital and deter-

minative process in the formation of the subject. As Rina Arya explains in a recent overview, “‘abjection’ refers to an impulse or operation to reject that which disturbs or threatens the stability of the self” and to the impoverished condition of being in “‘an abject state,’ when one has experienced the abject or has been rendered abject”(3). The abject is both that which must be discarded and that which comes from within: “The borders of the self are neither fixed nor unshakeable. Once expelled, the ‘other,’ or the abject, does not disappear but hovers and challenges the boundaries of selfhood” (6). In *Cataract City*, Duncan’s description of the poverty and misery on the Tuscarora Reservation in the boxing scenes is best understood in this context. Duncan is quick to set up a boundary between himself and these men, reduced to “another level of hardness” (223) by poverty and exclusion. At the same time, he is haunted by the realization that he is no better than them; he willingly exposes his body to violence through boxing because, as he admits, “there were a million better ways to turn a buck with your hands but [he, like the Tuscarora,] wasn’t good at any of those” (222).

Fascination and repulsion, characteristic of abjection, dominate both Duncan’s and Owen’s rapports with Drinkwater. Duncan qualifies him as a sort of “scientist.” “His field of study was suffering,” he muses, reflecting on his slide into low-level boxing. “And now I’d made myself part of that, too. I was another one of his lab rats” (250). But despite himself Duncan admires Drinkwater. Caught in his gaze, Duncan recounts that “I felt I was being measured for some future possibility, and in that instant I desperately wanted to show Drinkwater whatever it was he hoped to find. It sickened me, my *need*” (226). Owen and Duncan might well want to find a way out of the trap of working-class codes of “payback” (which no longer serve them) by appearing better than, or actually bettering, men such as Drinkwater. But the novel constantly underlines the similarities between the two white male protagonists and their Indigenous villain/nemesis. The three characters first come together at the Derby Lane racetrack, a place that “only attracted the saddest of the sad” in *Cataract City* (156). All three are physically broken and scarred men. Duncan is fascinated by Drinkwater’s “raised pink scar that fish-hooked from his hairline to his ear” (242). At this point in his life, Duncan’s own body is mangled by boxing, and Owen still limps from the deliberate hit-and-run.

The power of horror is a central element of abjection, the attraction

to something abject not outside the self. From the first meeting at the racetrack and his commanding presence at the dogfighting and boxing matches to the final cat-and-mouse chase through the frozen woods, where Drinkwater uses tracks, traps, and animal calls to terrorize Owen and Duncan, he embodies elements of the horrific (it is worth recalling that Davidson is prolific in the horror genre). In this sense, perhaps Lemmy Drinkwater should be read as Duncan's abject double: his name — "let me drink water" — suggests that he is more symbol than adversary, a conduit of water, someone who, like Duncan, is stuck in the cycle of violence, pulled toward but not under the water (Duncan's nickname is Dunk) rushing through all of their veins. Cataract City and the Tuscarora Nation (thus) become parallel sites of abjection for both white and Native masculinities. All three men fight to survive in a "drowning" bordertown, reduced by postindustrial capital and white colonialist superiority to a toxic wasteland hardly of their own making.<sup>8</sup>

Introduction of the Mohawk Silas Garrow, the third Indigenous character, provides balance in the text against the negativity associated with Drinkwater and the Tuscarora Nation. Silas allies himself with Duncan and Owen and the Canadian nation-state, not with Drinkwater, negating the idea of transnational pantribalism supposedly characteristic of border texts. Silas and Duncan train together in the Kingston Penitentiary and eventually become friends. The usual nature of this Native–white relationship is not lost on Silas: "Can't believe I'm actually *friends* with a paleface. This is going to fuck my cred all to shit if they ever find out on the rez" (288). Silas is (also) a smuggler caught on the frozen Saint Lawrence River when his truck sinks in the broken ice. Yet, when he hears Duncan's story, he feels no solidarity with Drinkwater. "I know all about the 'Tuscarora'" (287). Lemmy Drinkwater is a "Raven — the Trickster" and Igor Bearfoot, Duncan's victim, an "apple": "Not a real Indian, man. Red on the outside, white on the inside" (287). Once released from prison, Duncan devises a plan to take revenge on Drinkwater and recoup the money that he lost in the dog-racing bet by agreeing to fight three boxers in a row. Since the residents of Tuscarora think that he killed Bearfoot from behind, in a cowardly way, and not out of self-defence, he tells Drinkwater to make it three Indigenous fighters. This is part of the plan, of course, since Duncan will make sure that Silas is the third, rigging the fight in his own favour (Silas allows himself to be knocked out). Thus, the Kingston

Penitentiary alliance of the two boxing men is what helps Duncan to redeem himself and make enough money to start a new life. Silas not only helps him to win but also forces Drinkwater to pay the full amount of the bet (\$400,000), threatening to shame him on the Akwesasne if he does not comply. Clearly, his reputation among other Indigenous communities is more important to Drinkwater than his reputation in white society.

Finally, *Cataract City* deconstructs the notion of any possible pan-tribal, cross-border alliance through the final entrapment scheme. It is Silas who suggests that the police keep an eye on Drinkwater since the rigged fight has left him “bust” and in a “desperate frame of mind” (316). Months after the boxing match, Silas, after consulting the band elders on Akwesasne, agrees to cooperate with the police in trapping Drinkwater over the sale of his cigarette machines. Ultimately, Silas risks his life, for Drinkwater sees the police-issue shotgun that he is wearing during the meeting on the river and fires. Silas is shot in the arm but then urges Duncan and Owen to go after Drinkwater rather than tend to him. He will be fine, he claims, since “I have people nearby. We Injuns have people *everywhere*” (336). The rest of the novel is devoted to Duncan and Owen’s pursuit of Drinkwater in the woods; he is eventually apprehended, and the men are rescued but not before Duncan falls through the ice after a struggle on the river. Silas, whose wound was only superficial, survives and is “more than pleased to point a finger at Drinkwater” (391), who goes to prison in Buffalo for attempted murder. Duncan and Owen thus receive help from a Mohawk resident encountered in a Canadian correctional facility who agrees to help them entrap and convict a fellow Native.

*Cataract City* is a novel about loyalty between friends, about small class differences, missed opportunities, and poor choices. Perhaps the most poignant border in the text is the line between law and order that divides the two friends once Duncan decides to turn to smuggling. Both Owen and Duncan exhibit a strong emotional attachment to their Canadian bordertown that belies critics’ emphasis on the placelessness and state of “unbelonging” that supposedly characterize border literature. Owen knows that he belongs with Duncan in Cataract City. Although he helps to send his friend to jail, he then spends the rest of the novel trying to make it up to him. Such is the power of loyalty and place, of a “town like a steel trap” (172). Border fiction, if

Davidson's novel is any indication, ignores the extranational "other" (the United States), depoliticizes the border, and naturalizes national loyalties to one's own town and one's own nation-state (Owen, after all, is a police officer who collaborates with the RCMP). Where the novel's white working-class protagonists' attitude to and movement across the Canada-US border suggest a naturalization of national loyalties, Drinkwater adds a different dimension as he serves to disrupt state sovereignty and reassert, through smuggling, the territoriality of the Six Nations. At the same time, he turns the white man's gaze back onto himself. In his eyes, Duncan and Owen are forced to confront their own moral failings, physical limits, and marginal socioeconomic status. The fearless, crafty Drinkwater, master of his time and protector of his dignity, is in part the man whom Duncan and Owen would like to be. He is the ultimate fictional nemesis, the other half without which the two male heroes are not whole, a fact poignantly illustrated by the novel's final scene. Owen drives alone to the Atticus Correctional Facility in Buffalo and watches at a distance while Drinkwater exercises in the prison yard. Their eyes lock: "Drinkwater spread his arms wide," Owen recounts, "a crucifixion pose, and gave me a smile as wide as the sky. . . . 'I'm still here, baby,' he mouths. Spreading my own arms, I gave him that smile right back. So am I, baby. So am I" (394).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The stories that Nischik analyzes are as follows: Tim O'Brien, "Winnipeg"; Joyce Carol Oates, "Crossing the Border"; Thomas King, "The Closer You Get to Canada, the More Things Will Eat Your Horses"; Miriam Waddington, "I'm Lonesome for Harrisburg"; Alice Munro, "Miles City, Montana"; and Laurie Gough, "The Border Crosser."

<sup>2</sup> "Smokin' Joes" probably refers to Smokin' Joes Trading Post on the Tuscarora Reservation. Smokin' Joes was the first American Indian-owned and -operated tobacco manufacturer to be fully licensed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, now known as the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Smokin' Joes manufactures a cigarette known as Bogar.

<sup>3</sup> As Patrick McGreevy explains, when nineteenth-century Niagara Falls became an idealized pilgrimage site outside ordinary human pursuits, a carnival atmosphere of exotic markets, horror museums, and stunts also rose to prominence. This extraordinary human parallel to the fall's natural wonder was outside the realm of ordinary life (36-37).

<sup>4</sup> Owen's mother (a nurse) claims that Cataract City residents have "an above-average rate of actual cataracts" (17). This is no doubt untrue, but the assertion links the novel's setting around a hole made by water (cataract) and a limited (moral) vision that compromises each character's judgment.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan and Edwina make two road trips to the United States, recounted in two lines about downmarket, nondescript diners and motels on the way to New Orleans (they make it as far as Kansas before the car engine blows). Otherwise, for Cataract City residents, crossing to the other side is motivated by legal (discount warehouses and outlet malls) and illegal consumption habits (cigarette and alcohol smuggling).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Owen and Duncan, Drinkwater is not afforded a first-person narrative voice and is therefore known to the reader only through Duncan's and Owen's impressions of him.

<sup>7</sup> Sugg's analysis of masculinities on the US–Mexico border is once again useful for understanding Duncan's rapport with Drinkwater. In McCarthy's border trilogy, the two main protagonists, John Grady and Billy Parnham, young and Anglo, often find themselves in confrontations with "some Mexican man's sadistic character and opaque bloodlust" (141). This juxtaposition is part of how the border text opposes the "violence and chaos in Mexico" and the "bleak civility" of the Texas ranches and towns to which the boys have fled (141). In the Niagara Falls novel, Drinkwater is portrayed as an equally mysterious, older, moralizing, yet sadistic figure. For example, he mistreats his racing dogs by inserting hot peppers into their rectums in order to get better results.

<sup>8</sup> I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this aspect of Drinkwater's character to my attention.

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