Airports as Borderlands: American Preclearance and Transitional Spaces in Canada

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Abstract

Airport preclearance is a unique mechanism in transborder relations between Canada and the United States that allows airline passengers to clear customs and immigration before boarding the aircraft rather than upon arrival at the destination. Preclearance is explained in relation to the changing nature of border security in the context of Canadian-American relations, bilateral air policies, and the structural features of the two societies. However, it is argued that the primary significance of preclearance is that it provides unique evidence of how airports themselves are the new borders of transnational interaction by deterritorializing national boundaries. Preclearance is analyzed in three modes: as a mechanism facilitating both intersocietal integration and symbolic difference concurrently, as a procedure occurring in a building with structural spaces possessing different meanings, and as a subjective experience of travelers and workers within the airport.

The relationship between Canada and the United States has always been filled with many paradoxes, foremost of which is the integration of the two societies at the same time that countervailing forces prompt differentiation and sovereignty. Nowhere is this paradox more clear than at the border between the two societies where the degree of integration is visible in the high volume of traffic in trade and people crossing the boundary, and yet the reality of the border as a barrier has remained firm and become even more pronounced. Most of the discussion of this border has focused on the geographic boundary that separates the two countries and the surrounding region that serves as interactional space. One of the dimensions of the Canada-US relationship that has been ignored pertains to a border far removed from the usual territorial markers at the geographic boundary lines. These borders are found in eight major airports in Canada where the United States government operates preclearance facilities for air passengers destined to the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to explain how airport preclearance is a unique expression of the relationship between these two countries and especially how it contributes to the reality of Canada as a borderlands society. But of greater theoretical significance, this study demonstrates how airports themselves can serve as borderlands. This notion has been hinted at by Salter (2008:9) and Konrad and Nicol (2008:107) but it has not been well-developed. It will be shown how preclearance at the airport plays a significant role in deterritorializing and blurring national boundaries. Consonant with other globalizing pressures, borders then are reinvented and reconfigured with little regard for actual geographic boundaries. In fact, preclearance at the airport demonstrates how bordering is a process (Newman 2006) more than it is fixed line (Migdal 2007). Preclearance leads to the attribution of different symbolic meaning to the physical spaces of airports so that travelers experience the paradoxes of “not having departed—already arrived”. Airports then can be understood structurally as places with different meanings but also experientially as places with different meanings much as Brunet-Jailly (2005) proposes that borders be interpreted as both structure and agency. Thus if preclearance provides a useful study in the unique aspects of transborder relations between Canada and the United States, it goes much farther in contributing to our understanding of the delocalization of international boundaries and the role the airport plays in the differential construction of spaces and identities experienced in those spaces as the forces of globalization collide.

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The current focus on transnationalism and various forms of transnationalist activity is often associated with globalization and notions of a borderless world. While the pressures towards integration and interdependence among nation-states are undeniable, there is no uniform pattern in how these relationships will develop. North America provides a significant contrast in that regard with the European Union. European countries have moved much closer toward integration because they have established a common institutional apparatus for commerce, investment and the movement of people between their member states while yet retaining national identities. On the other hand, agreements made between the three countries of North America have moved more in the opposite direction. As Nicol (2005) has pointed out, the goal of the agreements was not continental integration but market access. While trade between the three countries of Mexico, the United States, and Canada increased as the result of free trade agreements, the borders remained firm as neither of the countries were prepared to give up sovereignty in any other way.

The evidence is clear that free trade between Canada and the United States, particularly as structured by the Free Trade Agreement in 1989 and the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, led to huge increases in commodity flows between these two countries (Brunet-Jailly 2004, 2006). The result was that even when compared to the European Union, Canada and the United States have the highest level of economic integration between large countries in the world. In contrast to the European Union, however, there has been little institution-building across the borders as each country has retained its own jurisdictional controls through multilateral agreements. But free trade has clearly integrated Canada more clearly into the North American (read American) economy so that trade on a north-south axis between some Canadian provinces and American states is more important than trade between provinces in Canada. As Brunet-Jailly (2004:8) notes, the primary characteristic of the US-Canada border is to provide “an environment that facilitates the seamless flow of goods and capital”.

Free trade as defined by goods and capital is not quite the same thing as the free movement of people. Under the free trade banner, working visas were to be easier to obtain to facilitate a more rapid response to labour needs as defined by employers but the border still remained a barrier for the voluntary movement of citizens searching for employment or relocation for personal reasons. Both governments retained tight controls over the movement of people across borders. The short-term movement of people across the border for tourism or personal purposes was relatively easy with minimum identification for citizens with proper identification until 9/11. Only after the national security crisis which 9/11 presented have passports been required. Passports were first required for persons arriving in the United States by air travel and by 2009 passports were also required for land crossings. No visa was required for entry for leisure purposes. In short, the movement of goods and capital between the two countries faces minimal controls whereas the movement of labour faces much more restrictive control. The War on Terror, however, brought security issues more directly into play in the movement of anything across the border. As a result, Konrad and Nicol (2008:194) have argued that the United States has been rebordered and its relationship with Canada has moved over time from being an open border to a customs border to a law and order border and now to a securitized border.

In order to deal with the security issues that arose as the result of 9/11, a Smart Border Initiative was established between Canada and the United States in December 2001 that aimed to deal with the new realities. While the European Union had established common immigration and security arrangements among their member countries through the Schengen Agreement that made interior borders invisible, the United States and Canada went in a different direction. Instead of minimizing the border by creating a continentalist security perimeter and including Canada, its largest trade partner, the United States preferred to reaffirm its border with Canada but by transforming it into an “intelligent border”. The goal was to utilize the latest
technology to facilitate the high volume of crossings of people and cargo while at the same time screening out anything considered a threat (Brunet-Jailly 2004b:128). This required separate yet cooperating agencies on both sides of the border. The changed focus was best represented by the creation of a new Department of Homeland Security in the United States in 2002 and a reorganization of national security concerns through emphasizing “protecting the border” as evidenced by the new label Customs and Border Protection (CBP) first utilized in 2003. In the same year, Canada established a similar organization but with a slightly nuanced different name called the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) emphasizing border services rather than border protection. Two somewhat contradictory objectives were given priority, that is, making borders barriers but also permeable at the same time. This was done through bilateral agreements between the United States and Canada, and the establishment of programs such as FAST (Free and Secure Trade) which allowed low risk companies to ship goods quickly across the border, and the NEXUS program which made it possible for persons to be pre-screened for travel between the two countries thereby enhancing speedier crossings. The NEXUS program involved both smart cards and iris scanning for travel between the two countries for business or leisure purposes (but not for employment) while at the same time supporting the notion of the border as a real barrier. Thus the Smart Border program reinforced differentiation between the two countries but also cooperation supported by parallel yet separate agencies on both sides of the border to implement its strategies (Smith 2007).

The free trade agreements in North America were clearly of a different order from the economic integration developed in Europe because cooperation in trade was not to be confused with the loss of sovereignty in any way. On its southern borders, the United States had long been concerned about drug cartels and illegal migration that challenged American labour and created immigration chaos. There was less concern about Canada until 9/11 provided new impetus for border controls in the name of national security (Olmedo and Soden 2005). The so-called War on Terror made it clear that even though they were continental trading partners, the United States had different security concerns than Canada. And media reports of terrorists entering the United States through Canada (most of which were either untrue or exaggerated) were enough to justify even more security at all American borders. But here the paradox continues in that while the hardening of the borders is largely the result of American self-interest and its own security concerns, there has always been a concurrent Canadian desire for sovereignty in the face of American domination which has increased the desire for bilateral agreements (Nicol 2005) as an expression of autonomy. Drache (2004), for example, referred to the border as an important “identity line” for the protection of Canadian institutions which facilitated the notion of “friends at a distance”. The outcome is that there are parallel but different reasons for the realities of a firm border between the two countries. While interaction between the two countries is indeed intense, it is facilitated by bilateral agreements which require cooperation and even harmonization but which results in more subtle forms of integration.

A clear illustration of this paradox of firm borders but expedited crossings can be found in the phenomenon of airport preclearance. One of the goals of this paper is to describe and analyze how airport preclearance is an expression of the unique relationship between Canada and the United States, and especially how it removes the border between the two countries from a strict geographic line to locations in airports at considerable distance from the geographic boundary broadening and enlarging the concept of border region (Widdis 1998). But the paper also demonstrates how preclearance contributes to the understanding of airports as places with intersecting and contrasting spatial meanings.

What is Airport Preclearance?

Airport preclearance refers to an agreement between Canada and the United States that allows customs and immigration officials to be located at select airports in each other’s countries for the
purpose of clearing air passengers before departure for admission into the destination country. While preclearance began in Toronto in 1952, the practice was first formalized in 1974, updated in 1999 with the agreement taking force in 2003, and is currently undergoing a five year review (Government of Canada 2009). While the Agreement allows for preclearance to occur in both countries, preclearance only takes place in Canadian airports, i.e. American officials are located in Canada and preclear air passengers for destinations in the United States. The advantage of this arrangement is that passengers do not have to go through immigration and customs at their American arrival airport and connecting passengers to other destinations in the United States can proceed quickly to their flights rather than having the time of their trip extended by lengthy immigration formalities. However, preclearance adds to the cost of the trip for the passenger. In contrast to land crossings where there are no charges, a U.S. Immigration Fee and a U.S. Agricultural Fee is added to the airline ticket charge to offset the costs of preclearance operations by the U.S. government.

The United States has preclearance arrangements with Bermuda, Bahamas, Aruba, and Ireland but its arrangements with Canada are of the greatest importance and highest volume. Preclearance facilities have been established at eight Canadian airports across the country. In 2007, 17 million people travelled in both directions between Canada and the United States on transborder scheduled flights (Statistics Canada 2007). For flights entering the United States, 11.7 million passengers utilized preclearance (2007-2008). 36% of all Canada originating passengers were cleared in Toronto, 27% in Vancouver, 14% in Montreal, 11% in Calgary, with much smaller numbers cleared in Edmonton (4.2%), Ottawa (3.7%), Winnipeg (2.1%) and Halifax (1.8%).

![Figure 1. Number of U.S. Preclearances by Canadian Airport, 2008](image)


It is not surprising that Canada’s largest city (Toronto) would have the highest preclearance volume because it also serves the largest number of American destinations (89 in 2008). As Canada’s largest carrier, Air Canada, brings considerable domestic traffic to this hub serving approximately 50 American non-stop destinations from Toronto. Vancouver airport has been the location of a pilot project for intransit clearance meaning that inbound passengers from
a third country travelling through Canada on the way to an American destination can also clear US customs and immigration there without first going through Canadian customs and immigration. Vancouver’s volume is greater, then, due to the fact that non-Canadians travel through Vancouver from foreign places of origin on their way to the United States.

Preclearance must be understood in the context of international protocol established as the result of the Chicago Convention (1944) and the Bermuda Formula (1946) which reaffirmed the sovereignty of air space for individual countries and established air service agreements as the bilateral mechanism whereby air access could occur. These agreements restricted the number and size of aircraft flying between countries, the points to be served, and the tariffs which had to be negotiated through bilateral agreements. For example, as it applied to Canada-US aviation policies in the past, flights to the US from Canada on some routes, even by an American carrier, required a touchdown at the nearest American airport once across the border. This was cumbersome at best. However, these arrangements were consistent with other international air travel agreements in that they were the result of a negotiated process deemed suitable to both parties.

In 1995, an Open Skies agreement was negotiated between Canada and the United States which transformed these old practices (Dresner 1997). All restrictions were removed and flights were operated according to market demand and airline business plans. Clearly indicative of a new level of economic integration, nonstop routes began to proliferate to a variety of destinations. While preclearance had a relatively long history in Canada, it was previously limited to one city- Toronto where the practice was begun in 1952 at the request of American Airlines. Open Skies intensified demand for preclearance as the number of flights and passengers handled increased. From an airline point of view, without preclearance, destinations in the United States had to be selected that had immigration facilities. The establishment of preclearance made it possible for airlines to fly to any destination in the United States if there was sufficient market demand because immigration facilities were not needed. For example, LaGuardia Airport in New York had no immigration facilities but was the preferred airport for landings from Canada (particularly Toronto and Montreal) in that city subject only to the availability of landing slots. Furthermore, preclearance meant that connecting passengers experienced more rapid transfer to their destinations as baggage did not have to be retrieved and cleared upon arrival in the United States. Preclearance also facilitated code-shared flights between affiliated carriers with no transfer issues. The Open Skies agreement thus facilitated the growth of more routes between the two countries and led to an increase in the passenger flow. As a result of the Open Skies agreement, air traffic to the United States was distinguished from other international air traffic with the new label “transborder”. Figure 2 demonstrates that the number of transborder passengers increased significantly in 1995 more than doubling the passenger traffic in the following twelve years. At the Calgary International Airport, for example, the number of transborder air carrier landings increased by 93% from 1995 to 2008, and the number of enplaning and deplaning transborder passengers increased by 111% over the same time period.

**Structural Factors in the Importance of Preclearance: Societal Comparisons**

As has already been noted, one of the striking things about preclearance is that while it is the result of a bilateral agreement that allows for preclearance to occur in both countries, it occurs only in Canada and is not likely to occur in the United States. There are a variety of structural reasons to explain this outcome and which in the end serve as a significant commentary on the nature of the dyadic relationship between the two countries. The key is to be found in the geographic and demographic character of Canada. The border between the contiguous 48 states and Canada is over 6,500 kilometres long. Canada is the second largest country in the world
in terms of land size but with one-tenth the population of the United States. Most of Canada’s population and its industries are located in a relatively small area known as the Windsor (Ontario)-Quebec City urban axis making up only 4% of the land surface of the country. This area is directly adjacent to the American border in the Great Lakes region with Toronto as its dominant hub. The remaining population of Canada is primarily dispersed around urban nodes also relatively close to the border across the rest of the country with the exception of the Western Interior where settlement is more northerly but coalesced around the cities of Edmonton and Saskatoon. Overall, about two-thirds of the population of Canada is located within 150 kilometers of the American border meaning that most Canadians have relatively easy access to the United States by car which facilitates interaction in a north-south direction rather than east-west ties across the sprawling country (Hiller 2006). The boundary then is a much more prominent feature of Canadian life because so many Canadians live relatively close to it in comparison to most American cities (other than Buffalo and Detroit) which are at a considerable distance from the northern border. Canadians also only share a border with one country whereas the United States shares a border with two countries (Canada and Mexico) and, in many ways, the Mexican border has been a more dominant issue in American life than the Canadian border. As Gibbins (2005) has argued, Canadians are more likely to face the border because of its proximity whereas Americans are more likely to have their backs to the border since the dynamics of that society occur at considerable distance from the border. It is not surprising then that Canadians are more than twice as likely to cross the border as Americans who live in border states and more than eleven times more likely to cross the border than all Americans (Merrit 1991). In that sense, the border is a much more common element in Canadian life.

The proximity factor in conjunction with the difference in the size of the economies and population means that there are a wider range of reasons for Canadians to travel to the United States than vice versa. Transportation corridors in a north-south direction do not only include roadways but also air service such as Halifax-Boston, Montreal-New York, Toronto-Detroit/Chicago, Winnipeg-Minneapolis, Calgary-Denver, and Vancouver-San Francisco/Seattle. Air services often utilize these US cities as gateway cities for connecting passengers to other

![Figure 2. Growth of Transborder Scheduled Passenger Traffic, 1990-2007](image)

American destinations. Because of the multiplicity of American air destinations in comparison to the much smaller number of Canadian air destinations, it made more sense to have preclearance facilities in Canada rather than the United States. Canadian traffic to the United States had more destination options in the US whereas American traffic to Canada was much more likely to be to the destination of first landing. This provides at least a partial explanation for why the Canadian government has not established preclearance in the United States. Since flights operated by American carriers have not been allowed to carry passengers between Canadian cities (known as cabotage), establishing preclearance in Canada suited the interests of American carriers and was more convenient for travelers to the United States regardless of the nationality of the carrier. In addition, Air Canada in particular has been very aggressive in seeking new second tier nonstop destination cities from Toronto such as Harrisburg, PA, Albany, NY, Columbus, OH, and Hartford, CN where no immigration facilities are available. These flights are perhaps the clearest illustrations of the integration of the two countries from what is often called the Canadian heartland. However, non-stop flights from Canada’s larger airports now occur to much more distant cities such as Dallas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Miami among others.

Preclearance, then, is a direct response to the role of air traffic as an expression of bilateral continentalism. Contiguous space and an integrated economy demanded adaptations to territorialism. The volume and location of preclearance operations is a consequence of the unique geography, economic centre, and demographic distribution of the Canadian population. But it is also symbolic of the role which the United States plays in Canadian life. Travel for business and conferences are an important segment of the traffic (approximately 20%) but so also are friendship and family ties (20%) that cross borders. Of most importance is travel for leisure, tourism, and recreation (50%). The heaviest traffic to individual states from Canada is to the vacation destinations in Florida and California by a considerable margin (Statistics Canada 2007). Las Vegas has also been a growing destination for leisure consumption as, for example, Westjet recently inaugurated regular nonstop service from most Canadian cities. Thus, from the Canadian perspective, preclearance is an important access tool to an economically stronger country with a wider range of options on a variety of measures from business to tourism than is available in Canada. Perhaps of particular significance is the fact that tourism is more important than business as the explanation for Canadian travel to the United States. Whatever the reason, instead of minimizing or erasing the border, preclearance accentuates its existence.

The Airport as Borderlands

Each airport offering preclearance must have permanent and secure space for preclearance operations. The preclearance area in the airport must be provided by the airport for which they receive no rent. It must be dedicated space exclusively available to preclearance officers. Security, however, is provided by Canadian law enforcement officers. Screening technologies such as computers and scanning devices are utilized on Canadian soil by American authorities but in a restricted area within the airport. Hours of service and preclearance congestion issues requires consultation between the airlines, the airport, and government officials from both countries. This kind of cooperation and consultation between various parties is a unique aspect of the airport as a borderland.

American preclearance officers are posted in Canada to screen passengers flying into the United States and to carry out whatever inspections for customs and agricultural purposes are necessary. The screening is similar to what occurs at boundary inspections with the most important difference being that the geographic boundary is at a considerable distance from the airport. Thus the airport becomes a border in the real sense of being the place in which Americans and Canadians symbolically encounter one another. Signs at the entrance to the preclearance area “welcome” the passenger to the “United States Customs and Border Protection” though they
do not welcome passengers to the United States. In the Calgary Airport preclearance area, for example, there are large murals depicting American life for passenger’s visual enjoyment while they often wait in long lines especially at times of numerous aircraft departures. There is ample space for both primary and secondary inspection of both passengers and their luggage. The uniforms and badges worn by the officers give passengers the distinct feel of entering the United States in a partial way while yet still being in Canada. After being cleared by the preclearance officers, passengers proceed to their departure gates which are all located in a section of the airport separated from passengers going to non-American destinations. Passengers who proceed to this area then have been admitted into the United States but have not yet left Canada.

The Preclearance Act allows for an interesting mixture of the administration of Canadian and American laws in the preclearance area of the airport. United States preclearance officers in Canada screen passengers and their accompanying baggage by applying American laws in relation to immigration, customs, public health, and food inspection as well as matters dealing with plant and animal health. However, these activities must respect the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Canadian human rights codes. In essence this means that preclearance officers can enforce American laws only in terms of the admissibility of passengers (and their goods) into the United States but that criminal matters must be dealt with by Canadian officers under Canadian law. So for example, preclearance officers can detain and search but they cannot arrest. They can bring criminal matters to the attention of Canadian police who operate within Canadian airports or they can allow a traveler to proceed to the United States for further criminal review there. Preclearance officers may establish monetary penalties on travelers but cannot proceed if the grounds for the penalty would be considered criminal under Canadian law. More difficult matters of jurisdiction arise around issues such as whether preclearance officers are obligated to report persons suspected of legal violations to Canadian law officials, whether Canadian officials are obligated to act based on information provided by preclearance officers, and the implications of traveler’s rights to leave a preclearance area if they choose to do so. In practice, there is considerable cooperation and sharing of information between both Canadian and American officials at the airport although the ultimate power of preclearance officers is to deny entry into the United States. It is this power that creates some tension with passengers who may miss their flight because of a lengthy interview or who feel that they have been detained due to misidentification or denied boarding for reasons considered unfair. The preclearance agreement which came into effect in 2003 acknowledges that preclearance must be carried out in a manner “consistent with the laws and constitutions of both parties” but that there can be no appeals in Canadian law over American decisions to refuse admission to the United States. Many legal questions arise in preclearance which impinge on the issue of sovereignty (Karas 2000) that are not easily settled. For example, when a traveler has violated US law, will their rights be protected under US or Canadian law? To date, these matters have been settled through jurisdictional negotiations. Another illustration of the cooperation that is required between authorities of both countries at the airport is that preclearance officers work with Canadian police as they are not allowed to carry arms (like American border agents do at the territorial borders) nor do they have powers to arrest.

One of the thorny areas within preclearance is the large number of Canadian workers that “contaminate” the area of precleared passengers. For example, security operations which involve many workers takes place after preclearance and staff is required to operate retail and food and beverage facilities in the area around the gates before departure. Travelers already admitted to the US then mingle with workers who have not been precleared.

Another significant aspect of the airport as a borderlands focuses on the preclearance officers themselves. Preclearance officers live in Canada, their children attend school there, and their families are part of local communities. They are paid in US funds but do not pay income tax in Canada. They do not have diplomatic status and have a narrow range of immunities such
as the ability to bring personal goods into Canada tax-free. They do, however, pay retail taxes in Canada. When preclearance officers leave the preclearance area of the airport, they interact with other airport workers including Canadian customs and immigration officers who handle passengers from international flights entering Canada, including from the United States. When they leave the preclearance area or leave the airport, they enter territory that is clearly Canadian where they use Canadian currency rather than American currency and participate in Canadian life, establish friendships with Canadians, and in many ways act as though they just worked at the airport like so many other Canadians.

From the traveler’s point of view, and taking a dramaturgical perspective, the airport is the setting for an important rite of passage that marks a border whereby a shifting of place occurs from one entity or country to another.4 Passengers enter the preclearance area aware that they are now subject to the authority of another state. This requires them to take this ritual seriously without joking or other banter. They are expected to carry with them important documents which convince the officer that they are admissible and answer questions put to them being aware that how they answer could affect the outcome of the officer’s decision to admit them. Passengers also need to be aware of what they are allowed to bring into the destination country. Uniforms of officers, stamps on passports, and interrogation are part of the process of clearance to enter. The presence of the American flag, officers with patches on their shoulders indicating their authority, the tone of voice in which they speak, and symbols on the wall create a sense of entering another place that is not to be taken lightly. For the Canadian traveler, the process accentuates the fact that the airport preclearance area is a real border in which they are a foreigner. Conversely, on the return trip, at the same airport, they pass through Canadian customs and immigration - only in different spaces. In a very real sense, then, these airports contain spaces that play an important role in reinforcing different national identities (compare Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyjou 2005) and therefore are true borderlands.

When a person crosses a border which is a physical boundary, there is a clear sense of entering a different space. This consciousness arises from a sense of being admitted and literally being in a different territory. In the case of the airport, the boundary is only symbolic because a threshold of admission to a new space has occurred and yet the traveler has not really left or is not in a new territory. An airport is not cyberspace but neither is it a non-place; it is a place of transition (Konrad 1995) or a third place (Konrad and Nicol 2008). Preclearance puts the traveler into an interstitial position of having already arrived at the same time that the traveler has not yet arrived. Or, it is as though travellers had already departed at the same time that they had really not done so. In this interstitial state, the traveler uses Canadian currency at the same time that Canadian fast food franchises are patronized such as Tim Hortons and Harvey’s. The airport is an artificial boundary that is a social construction of spaces designated with specific meaning. Outgoing travelers to the United States processed by American authorities share the same building as incoming international travelers who are processed by Canadian authorities- but in different spaces with different meanings. The primary distinction is that incoming travelers have already arrived at the destination to which they want access whereas the outgoing transborder traveler has not yet departed but in a curious way has already arrived. Later, at some point in the flight in mid-air, a technical boundary may be crossed but there is no announcement and therefore flying itself conveys a sense of being suspended in space. On arrival at the US destination city, there is no rite of passage on arrival that suggests entrance into a foreign country and travellers are treated like domestic passengers. Airports and air traffic then blur the sense of boundaries, and borders become social constructions wherever they are created- whether at the airport of arrival or, in the case of preclearance in Canada, at the airport of departure. Canadian airports, then, are hybrid spaces (Sparke 2007; Newman 2006) because they contain symbolic spaces with different social meanings and boundaries are mental constructs. In this sense, Canadian airports demonstrate both the sense of integration between Canada and the United States and also the sense of difference between the two countries.
Conclusion

Airport preclearance is a clear example of how the cross-border economies of Canada and the United States are linked through policy parallelism (Brunet-Jailly 2008). Preclearance is the result of a bilateral agreement between the two countries. Even though Canada has not elected to pursue a similar program in the United States, the option is there. And furthermore, the existence of American preclearance officials in Canada facilitates considerable interaction with Canadian authorities which brings the two countries into closer agency interaction as Brunet-Jailly has argued. However, in contrast to Brunet-Jailly who argues that economic interdependence drives much of the cross-border interaction and cooperation, and especially in the Great Lakes region and the Pacific Northwest, airport preclearance provides evidence of how in some sense all of Canada has become a cross-border region. Clearly regions with larger populations adjacent to the border have the heaviest flows of cross-border air traffic.

Preclearance in itself is a mechanism that facilitates integration as well as serving as a symbol of difference that integrates the two countries. The fact that this integration is rooted in pleasure travel more than in business travel adds an interesting dimension to the usual analyses of transborder interaction that focuses on trade. But the analysis of preclearance also allows us to understand airports from the inside as both traveler and airport workers experience the modalities of space and mobility streaming (Adey 2008). Preclearance creates a unique borderland at Canadian airports that goes beyond the type of borderlands found at most international airports or seaports.

Fuller and Harley (2004) have argued that airports are non-places that specialize in connecting people through anonymous processes to facilitate mobility that breach previous logics of space. They use the term aviopolis to express the fact that airports are “a networked and dispersed city of the air” that combine an increasing amount of services and functions that formerly were scattered around the city but are now concentrated in airports that are constantly expanding and adapting. Above all, they argue that jet travel collides with the remnants of geo-politics by providing alternative ways of thinking about global relationships and creating new borders. Airports, then, are the locus for understanding the pressures of globalization while borders are still maintained but reinvented. Preclearance in Canadian airports illustrates this deterritorialization of borders (Salter 2007). Checkpoints at borders far removed from territorial boundaries may be one way in which members from one group differentiate themselves from others but preclearance also confuses the mental maps (Migdal 2004) which people have of spatial configurations which borders assume. If boundaries are important symbolic and institutional expressions of territoriality (Paasi 2005), then the airport which has both preclearance officers of the destination state and customs and immigration officers of the host state becomes the place where political states confront each other, or better yet, engage in parallel activities in the same place. The end result is that the international airport is clearly a socially constructed border where social and cultural meanings of belonging are extremely complex and intertwined, but also concrete and artificial at the same time. Above all, this border must be understood as both structurally conditioned and subjectively experienced (Brunet-Jailly 2005). While airport security screens for dangerous objects (Salter 2007), it is the social construction of borders at these airports that screens individuals and creates spaces not only of safety but of national identity and belonging. In a mobile world, airports then are the new borders in transnational interaction.

Endnotes

1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Border Regions in Transition Conference 2009, Arica, Chile. Gratitude is expressed to Victor Konrad for his comments and suggestions.
There are relatively few transborder scheduled flights that do not use preclearance. One example is daily scheduled flights from Saskatoon and Regina to Minneapolis where no preclearance facilities are available in these Canadian cities. It should also be noted that preclearance is available in Vancouver for rail passengers to Seattle and for cruise ship passengers to Alaska.

This is not to imply that domestic routes were less important. Hazledine (2009) found that borders do indeed matter in the Canadian case and that about six times more seats were offered on domestic routes than on cross-border destinations.

The interpretation proposed here is similar to Newman’s (2006) proposal that we must understand borders not just from a top-down perspective that focuses on institutions but also from a bottom-up perspective that focuses on how people experience the border.

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