

Borderland Blacks: Two Cities in the Niagara Region during the Final Decades of Slavery

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Review

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Broyld, dann j. *Borderland Blacks: Two Cities in the NIAGARA REGION during the Final Decades of Slavery*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780807177068 pp. 312

Dann J. Broyld's *Borderland Blacks: Two Cities in the NIAGARA REGION during the Final Decades of Slavery* is a pivotal new understanding of the geopolitics and the confluences of the Underground Railroad and Black mobility, identity, and abolitionism on both sides of the American-Canadian border in Western New York. While Niagara Underground Railroad histories overwhelmingly focus on the one-way movement of freedom seekers to Canada West or Western New York, Broyld's book reveals that the *two-way* movement of freedom seekers (and free(d) Blacks) back-and-forth across the American-Canadian partition on the Niagara Peninsula was an intrinsic component of Black life that transformed that region into a borderland community of racial justice activism.

Broyld presents two goals in *Borderland Blacks*. The first is to expand the boundaries of the Niagara district (historically consisting of the Niagara Peninsula on the Canadian side and the Niagara, Erie, and Genesee Counties on the American side in New York) to include Ontario County and "Rochester and the surrounding Monroe County" (2). This rezoning would rightly bring the adopted homeplace of Frederick Douglass, Rochester, New York, into the geographic borderland based on the social networks that connected that city to St. Catherines, Canada West. The second goal is to "elevate the Niagara zone as an equally important place of transnational interface and fill in a needed gap in the borderland historical treatments" (11).

Decades of infrastructural advancements in the frontier environment from the end of the 1790s to the mid-nineteenth century was a critical component of Black transnationalism in the Niagara region. International border-crossing became faster and easier when, in addition to the water access and the power it provided, construction of the canal and railroad systems and suspension bridges offered steady employment opportunities and transformed the travel industry. In tandem with those developments, international dynamics, the Atlantic slave trade, the

Revolutionary War and War of 1812, and the staccato emancipation policies in British colonies and the United States, informed a transboundary socio-cultural formation in the Niagara region that countless Black Abolitionist refugees, including Austin Steward, Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, and White abolitionists, such as Rev. Hiram Wilson and John Brown, cultivated and celebrated. Taken all together, Broyld writes on page 140, a transnational shared consciousness flourished in the Niagara district that “transformed borders intended to be restrictive into flexible borderlands, which allowed for greater political agency” and “signaled to future generations a viable alternative to nationalism.”

By focusing on Black community development in Rochester, New York (chapter 2) and in St. Catherines, Canada (chapter 3) separately, Broyld shows how the differences between the two locations facilitated a regional bond that transcended and superseded nationalism. For example, Blacks in both communities established traditional community-based institutions, such as churches, schools, self-help and mutual aid societies, anti-slavery organizations, Underground Railroad operations, and had direct connections to John Brown’s failed slave insurrection attempt in Harpers Ferry and participated in the Union Army. But despite those similarities, their local-level strategies for racial justice differed. Blacks in Rochester embraced full integration with mainstream white American society while Blacks in St. Catherines, Canada West (where racial bigotry was less oppressive than in America) embraced racial separatism, Black self-determination, and independence (142). As Broyld writes on page 144 in chapter 4 entitled “A Border That Divides But Also Unites,” “their common cause and borderless social connections gave both communities greater strength. Certainly, when Rochester is compared with national counterparts such as Buffalo or Syracuse, it stands out as a dynamic space for Blacks, but when it is placed in a transnational context with St. Catherines, its glaring limitations are illuminated.” Although chapters 2 and 3 are the core sections of the book, chapter 4 traces the “on-the-ground” cross-border social network links and how the “lack of legal freedoms and political rights drove Blacks to Canada, but political change, opportunity, and family pulled them back to the United States, creating the flow and counterflow at the border,” until slavery was abolished in North America (145).

In addition to the pivotal contribution *Borderland Blacks* makes to nineteenth century Black historiography, the book’s Epilogue calls attention to the borderland region’s relevance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From the “Nadir Era” on, Broyld gives a sweeping

account of the ways Blacks have continued to work across the American-Canadian border, using the borderland community to challenge anti-blackness in both nations. Topics range from the Niagara Movement (the precursor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)) and the modern Civil Rights Movement organizations to celebrations, recent border policy changes, and Harriet Tubman on U.S. currency, making the Epilogue's content rushed and choppy. But, like only great scholarship does, it inspires myriad possibilities for future inquiry.

Borderland Blacks is meticulously researched, masterfully structured, and written with such clarity it seamlessly demystifies the complex lives and agency of ordinary Black people determined to exercise autonomy and work toward social change. Those familiar with Broyld's other publications will find that *Borderland Blacks* solidifies his place as a deeply conceptual scholar at the forefront in the fields of Black transnational identity, America-Canada border histories, and Black mobility studies. *Borderland Blacks* delivers what seminal American-centered and Canadian-centered works by Whitney R. Cross (*The Burned Over District*), Milton C. Sernett (*North Star Country*), Eric Foner (*Gateway to Freedom*), and Robin W. Winks (*Blacks in Canada*) do not, the transnational component at the heart of Black activism in the Niagara region that directly contributed to the demise of American slavery.

Jennifer J. Thompson Burns, Ph.D., is a Lecturer at the University at Albany, SUNY. Her research focuses on Black Abolitionism, in particular in Troy, New York, the Black Atlantic, and Black migration studies, and her most recent article, "‘Leaving Her Mark’: Black Women’s Banking at Troy Savings Bank and Their Pursuit of Financial Stability, 1823-1865,” is forthcoming in The Journal of Afro-Americans in New York Life and History.