



ESSAY

## Line Dancing in the Borderlands Region of Stanstead, Quebec

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*The activity of line dancing is presented as a metaphor for how the border between Canada and the US at Stanstead, Quebec and Derby Line, Vermont is made real through human enactment, how creative human response transforms it, and at the same time, how identities are also shaped and changed by the collectively imagined border.*

In the fall of 2015 I did fieldwork for my Master of Arts degree in cultural anthropology in Stanstead, Quebec and Derby Line, Vermont (Vandervalk, 2017). These towns, settled in the early 1800s, lie side by side along the Canada US border. At the time, news stories focused on how changes to the border in the aftermath of 9/11 were driving a wedge through the heart of two towns which had formerly functioned as a single, albeit cross-border community. The point of my research was to examine the impacts of processes initiated outside the region on relations within the region. As an anthropologist, I realized that I could only do this by considering what it might mean to live in a perpetually in-between place. What follows is drawn from the introductory chapter of my thesis in which I present the activity of line dancing as a metaphor for how borderlanders creatively respond to situations not of their own making in order to enact and make real a unique borderlands social world.

Stanstead is in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 160 kilometers southeast of Montreal. It's the product of the amalgamation of the three villages of Stanstead Plain, Rock Island and Beebe in 1995, although locals still tend to refer to the historic village names when discussing local happenings. Just south of the Rock Island and Beebe sectors of Stanstead lies the village of Derby Line, Vermont. Although they are in different countries, Stanstead and Derby Line share

well water, sewage treatment, and maintenance of shared roads and firetrucks when necessary. They also share the Haskell Library and Opera House, which is built on the borderline and funded by the governments of both Quebec and Vermont. There are three border crossings between Stanstead and Derby Line—a larger one on the highway just east of the communities, and two smaller ones within the communities. With the exception of one, all roads that have historically crossed the boundary without a port of entry have been blocked by heavy gates in recent years. The one remaining open road is used by patrons of the Haskell Library and Opera House who are allowed to walk on the sidewalk from Canada to get to the building's entrance on the American side. Almost always, either an American Border Patrol or RCMP vehicle idles near the building with officers observing everyone who enters and exits.

During a brief visit to Stanstead in the summer of 2014, I was struck by the evident conflict between the border as enacted by non-local bureaucrats and officials and its very central place in what seemed to be a single cross-border community. I saw the peculiar and particular material characteristics of a port of entry unlike any other Canada-US border crossing that I had seen—this was a crossing intended for use by cars, bicycles and pedestrians. I was also intrigued by how the borderline between Canada and the US is made manifest in public

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locations variously through friendly potted plants, electrical tape stripes across the floor in the public library and opera hall, and yet sometimes also by decidedly unpleasant barricades and angry signs dropped across what were evidently once through streets. This is a borderline that divides homes, yards and streets. It clearly affects the day-to-day lives of everyone who lives near it. My study sought to answer the question, what does it mean to live in such a liminal place—a place that is liminal because it is in-between nations, and a place that is liminal because it is always changing? My research showed me how borderlanders manage to trouble the non-borderlander assumption that the border is a line that divides and separates.

From my field notes:

I'm at the Manoir in the Stanstead Plain sector. This was formerly an Ursuline Convent, but is now a retirement home. Specifically, I'm in the chapel, attending a line dancing class. This is a beautiful, large and airy space, decorated with ornate columns, plaster medallions on the ceiling, large chandeliers, and yellow and clouded-white glass arched windows. It clearly continues to function as a chapel occasionally—something of an altar, and a few old pews remain, albeit pushed to one side of the space. It is also obvious that the chapel serves primarily as a multi-purpose room. On one of the end walls, beneath a remarkable life-sized, carved wooden Christ figure, there is an equally remarkable pool table. At the other end of the room, there are a number of tables littered with an assortment of large-piece jigsaw puzzles and craft supplies. These tables have been pushed back to make an open square, perhaps 20 by 20 feet in size, in which a dozen women have arranged themselves in columns and rows. Most of them are French-Canadian, some are English-Canadian, and two are from the American side. I consider all but two of them to be either late-middle-aged or elderly. A fit and enthusiastic octogenarian stands at the front with her back to the other women.

She begins.

She counts to twelve in French as she maneuvers her way through the sequence of steps that form the base of a line dance with which these women are unfamiliar. She turns to the women and says something that is clearly the equivalent of "Can you get that?"

The women register some confusion. The instructor turns her back to them and resumes counting off steps, this time in what seems to be an endless series of 12s:

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze. Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze. Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

She moves continuously through each repetition of the twelve steps. By the time she gets to "douze", the sequence of steps has her finishing ninety degrees from the direction she started in. At "Un" she begins to repeat the sequence of steps in the new direction. Each sequence of steps turns her ninety degrees. After a few sequences, some of the women begin to imitate her moves.

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

Two or three of the women can do the dance now.

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

Over and over she counts, and they follow her. After a while, most can do some of it, some can do all of it, and a few still cannot follow at all.

The instructor stops, and moves to a tape player. It's time to add music. She finds the song she wants and returns to her position, cuing the beginning of the sequence of steps with her right index finger.

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

Over and over and over she counts. After two complete runs through the song, I cannot see much difference in the performance of the students.

She returns to the tape player, and finds a new song. She cues the beginning, and

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

The song is a French-Canadian ballad, with a beautiful, slow, lilting melody line.

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

After a few moments, I watch one by one, as the women surrender their bodies to the music, their eyes looking forward, but no longer fixed on the instructor. By the end of the song, the women are moving together, like a single organism—each

one dances the steps in unison with the others, all of them dance oriented in the same direction. And yet each dances her own dance.

"Un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit-neuf, dix-onze-douze."

I found myself at this line dancing class towards the end of my first two weeks in my field site. Somehow, in spite of my dislike for country and western music, this was actually the third line dancing event that I had attended in my short time in the area. While I cannot argue with certainty that line dancing is more popular in this area than it might be in other parts of Canada or the United States (although perhaps it is), I can say that it was a very important part of social life for several of my informants. Each of these women, regardless of language, culture, or citizenship was in the room as a member of a social group whose purpose was to learn and perform in unison the intricate steps of a new line dance.

Stanley Tambiah notes Radcliffe-Brown's perception that rhythm in music motivates people to yield to its form, and by doing so facilitates the creation of unity among people in collective performance (1979, p.113). It is unpleasant to move in a way that does not rhythmically conform to the music, and at the same time, by agreeing to yield, to collaborate with the music, the dancer experiences the "pleasure of self-surrender" (p.113). Dance in ritual is a force that brings embodied selves together into a particular kind of conformity. It acts out meaning while also creating that meaning. At the same time, the possibility for innovation is never excluded. New meanings may always be introduced, created, enacted within the framework of rules that constrain the dance. Tambiah argues that these characteristics of dance can be attributed to most collective rituals as well.

While my line dancing anecdote is not necessarily an instance of ritual dancing, it is nonetheless an activity in which a group of performers work within a set of "rules" to enact, or create a particular reality. Watching the women engage in the process of learning the changing steps, watching them work together within a complicated framework of mutually understood rules, and yet also watching each woman move with her own unique style—I was very quickly struck by the aptness of line dancing as metaphor for the way the people of my fieldwork site navigate and negotiate their bodies, lives and identities in the shadow of the international border. But it also became a metaphor for how the border itself is constructed out of the interlocking performances of the many people who interact along, and across, and around its collectively imagined length. The border exists on paper and in legal documents—passports and permits, rules and regulations, economic and

security policy documents—it has been cut through forests, and marked by cameras, but really, it is a thing that is brought to life only in the performative acts of people who enforce it, come up against it, sneak past it, or move through it. The border is created, enacted and transformed moment by moment through the communications and practices of people in many different ways, and through many different channels—corporally, verbally and institutionally—and it becomes a reality which in turn has an impact on the identities of those who enact it.

When I arrived in Stanstead, I intended to explore impacts on the community resulting from the increasing security at the border in the aftermath of 9/11. While I have no intention of arguing that the tightening of the border has not negatively affected the communities of Stanstead and Derby Line, I would like to qualify my position with one little statement: Living at the edge of a country is complicated. Living at the bridge between them is complicated. I would argue that while the project of increasing security at the border has undoubtedly increased the gulf between the two sides of the line, the border has always been central to existence, to the ways of being in the world of those who live in proximity to it. The border is a bizarre human production and enactment, and the borderlanders are participants in this enactment—they define its presence, they challenge and redefine the rules of engagement with it, and at the same time, it shapes their identities—as border people. The border is central to their life-world, its enactment is written into their bodies, and they willingly share it with those who truly understand its life-making and affirming capacities. As I found out over the course of my time in the region, new line-dancers are always welcome to the class.

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