Kit Dobson’s book presents itself as a riddle: Transnational Canadas. The adjective insists on movement beyond the nation-state; the noun anchors the adjective in the nation; the pluralizing “s” refracts the phrase as through a prism. Dobson states that the book “recontextualizes literature written in Canada since the period of cultural nationalism surrounding the 1967 centennial and examines its relationship to global politics as a means of unpacking problems of belonging and subjectivity.”

He seeks to reveal how cultural production in Canada relates to national and transnational issues of identity, representation, and social change. Transnational Canadas is tightly organized into three parts. The first chapter in each part stakes the theoretical ground, and the next three chapters each consider a focal text. He deploys Marx (by way of Derrida), postcolonial theory and Spivak, and Hardt and Negri. He reads cultural nationalism in Atwood, Dennis Lee’s Civil Elegies, and Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers. He considers the limits and opportunities of multicultural and indigenous writing in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion, and Jeannette Armstrong’s Slash. He examines cultural production, identity and (be)longing in Vincent Lam’s Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures, Roy Miki’s Surrender, and Dionne Brand’s What We All Long For. Dobson’s inquiry could have attempted a longer reach back to historicize the issues of the nation and the transnational. Earlier writers such as Harold Innis, Howard O’Hagan, and Sara Jeannette Duncan, to name three, interrogated the connections between global capital and Canadian experience, albeit through a white gaze. But that, perhaps, is another book.

The heart of Transnational Canadas is the reading and interpretation of the focal texts. Some may see that Dobson’s strategy of using nine texts to focalize his analysis skews the conception of writing in Canada (it leaves no room for consideration of environmental writing, or regionality, or formally experimental writing, for example), and his historicization operates to privilege recent writing of resistance; but what he does present is thoughtful. Dobson builds momentum as he goes along, and the discussions in the last half of the book, of Armstrong, Miki, and Brand, are particularly strong. In his reading of Slash, he makes distinctions between indigeneity and multiculturalism, citizenship and community, pushing “readers to recognize the limitations of how the label of Canadian might be applied.”

The chapter about Brand’s novel is the longest in the book, and in it Dobson gives a sustained close reading. Here he is clearly in his element, as issues of identity, urban community, global citizenship, race and radicalization operate in the novel, and open up opportunities for insightful analysis.

To ground this analysis, Dobson deftly handles notoriously slippery theoretical texts, effectively digesting key arguments. He carefully presents conclusions without overstatement, and includes contesting views. For example, he does not swallow Hardt and Negri holus-bolus, but
includes a range of critical responses. This allows him to state that “their work remains useful, as a result, for the arguments they provoke, rather than only for the answers that they propose.” Dobson seems at times overly meticulous as he parses his arguments. Although he states that “the political valence of writing is important for this book’s analysis,” and that he wants “to rethink, rework, and resist what global capitalism has meant for those excluded from the dominant,” the careful modulation of his rhetoric constrains his ability to provoke. Curiously, the book contains only a fleeting mention of Marshall McLuhan (however Canadian and transnational McLuhan’s writing, it may be too slippery for even Dobson to recuperate); but some McLuhanesque probes would liven the text.

Dobson does not answer the riddle of transnational Canadas with a punch line. Making productive use of Brand’s notion of “struggle work” as a process of unfinishing, Dobson asserts that a “politics of purity” is “unlikely”: “literary work that challenges the values of global capital also implicates such work in its structures.” In the multiplicity of today’s “thought and lived Canadas,” writers “look toward transnational flows . . . beyond the borders of Canada” in an effort to interrogate and negotiate subjectivity. For those interested in the connections of Canadian writing, cultural production and citizenship (global or otherwise), Transnational Canadas offers a sustained and nuanced meditation on the riddle of its title.

Notes

2 Ibid., 131.
3 Ibid., 150.
4 Ibid., 207, xviii.
5 Ibid., 207.
6 Ibid., 208-209.