



Sarah E. K. Smith

*Trading on Art: Cultural Diplomacy and Free Trade in North America*

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2025  
 283 pp., 26 b/w photos, 1 table  
 \$110.00 (hardcover)  
 ISBN 9780774868914  
 \$34.95 (paper)  
 ISBN 9780774868921  
 \$34.95 (EPUB)  
 ISBN 9780774868945

/Emily Cadotte/

The era of North American free trade was neither seamless nor organic. As Sarah E. K. Smith argues in *Trading on Art: Cultural Diplomacy and Free Trade in North America*, the very concept of North America required a concerted leveraging of culture to carve out a coherent identity on which free trade agreements could stand. The book presents a critical analysis of the instrumentalization of visual cultural practices for the promotion, contestation, and complication of the emergence of North American economic integration during and after the implementation of free trade agreements like CUSFTA and NAFTA. A substantial body of scholarship has been established around the economic and cultural implications of free trade with a focus on the US-Mexico border, including William Orme's *Understanding NAFTA* (1996), the edited volume *Mass Media and Free Trade* (1996), and George Yúdice's *The Expediency of Culture* (2003). *Trading on Art* begins to fill the literature gap from a Canadian perspective by tracing the manifold responses to free trade by Canadian artists and cultural institutions.

Smith's main objects of analysis are large-scale touring exhibitions such as

the "Nafta Feminist 3," (Emily Carr, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Frida Kahlo) and *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World* (curated by Gerald McMaster and Joe Baker, 2007), which, she argues, have tended to be the primary cultural conduits of diplomacy and nation building. Her goal is to "explor[e] works of art and exhibitions to illuminate the ways that culture responded to [...] trade rather than the way that trade agreements defined and interacted with culture" (6). Examples such as *Remix*, which traveled to Phoenix, New York, Toronto, and the Canadian-run 49th Parallel gallery in New York underscore how visual culture was mobilized to construct narratives of continental unity, often with uneven attention to Indigenous sovereignty or regional specificity. In light of today's unprecedented US cultural and economic isolationism, the book provides an attentive and coherent historicization of public and artistic reactions to economic integration within the examined case studies, relevant to the disciplines of Canadian history, art history, and cultural diplomacy.

The interdisciplinary relevance of the book's subject extends to Smith's methodology. The author wields the tools of cultural and visual analysis in her examination of ostensibly economic phenomena, resulting in an eminently readable interpretation of transnational economic theory's influence on the cultural production of its time, and vice versa. This unconventional approach takes as its central provocation the paradox of Canada's cultural diplomacy and trade strategies: that culture was used to formulate a coherent vision of the North American continent as the foundation for economic integration, even as official agreements maintained a "cultural exemption" clause specifically for Canadian cultural content. In other words, the Canadian state leveraged culture to establish trade agreements that would go on to protect cultural outputs with radio and television content quotas. US cultural dominance and a distinct Mexican artistic and linguistic tradition gave the question of cultural exemption less urgency to Canada's trade partners; against this backdrop, Smith considers what was left out of trade agreements as much as what was included.

The book is divided into three loosely chronological sections, further subdivided into chapters with case studies varying from major touring exhibitions to

biennials to individual artistic responses. The first section of the book, “Exhibiting Diplomacy,” examines Canadian-Mexican and Canadian-American cultural relations through exhibitions like *Mexican Modern Art* (1999 in Ottawa and 2000 in Montreal) and the Canadian cultural envoy gallery, 49th Parallel, which operated from 1981 to 1992 in New York. These efforts, often diplomatically driven, portrayed carefully curated views of each country. In the case of Mexico-Canada, Smith argues that Canadian initiatives tended to exoticise Mexico on the one hand, while simultaneously asserting an implicit cultural authority over Indigenous art and culture within Canada, projecting it as a natural component of Canadian identity rather than an expression of sovereign Indigenous nations.

The second section, “Picturing North America,” analyses landmark exhibitions such as *Panoramas* (online, 2001–13), *Places of Their Own* (2001–2002) and *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art* (2004–2005) which sought to frame North America as a cohesive cultural land mass. As Smith points out, each of these exhibitions, to varying degrees, participated in the cooptation of Indigenous cultures to build state-sponsored narratives that projected a naturalized claim to the landscape and its resources while Indigenous sovereignty and voices were sidelined. Exhibitions like *First Peoples of Canada* (2008 in Beijing and 2010 in Mexico City) and *Remix* (2007 in Phoenix, 2008 in NYC, and 2009 in Toronto) highlight the tension between official reconciliation agendas and genuine cultural agency, while also revealing how state narratives were adapted in response to specific trade alliances.

The final section, “Creating Resistance,” shifts toward critical art practices and looks first to Canadian video artists. Smith highlights how many early adopters of the medium, such as Clive Robertson and Eva Manly, were following in the Canadian artistic tradition of anti-American imperialism, sometimes making ham-fisted comparisons between colonial violence and contemporary free trade. Yet video (both art and independent documentary) was a uniquely responsive medium for current events—readily available to record and critique the drafting of free trade policy and the public outcry against it, such as the protests surrounding Quebec City’s Third Summit of

the Americas as seen in the films of Rebeka Tabobondung and Adrian Kahgee or video artist Malcolm Rogge. At the San Diego-Tijuana border, various iterations of the inSite biennial are examined for their grassroots artistic forms of resistance. Smith demonstrates how festival organizers were less than keen to openly address the border as the biennial’s explicit theme, leaving artists to take up the charge by both mirroring and critiquing NAFTA’s ambiguous border politics.

For its theoretical underpinning, much of the text draws on Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, arguing that North American free trade required the creation of a “North American imaginary,” a sense of cultural unity manufactured and sustained by shared media, language, historical myth, and state institutions to support economic integration. As Anderson suggests, imagined communities often depend on obscuring their own constructedness. Smith reveals numerous instances where cultural diplomacy served to naturalize a continental identity while concealing its strategic aims, as in projects like the 49th Parallel—a pseudo-commercial gallery representing Canadian artists in New York City and supported by the Canadian embassy—or the Mexican iteration of *First Peoples of Canada*, described by officials as a gift from Canadians to Mexicans to celebrate the centennial of their revolution.

Several decolonial theories are also enlisted to analyze each nation’s celebration and disavowal of their shared settler-colonial projects. Drawing on scholars like Eve Tuck (Unangax ), K. Wayne Yang, and Dylan Robinson, Smith demonstrates how state-led cultural initiatives such as *Panoramas*, *Places of Their Own*, and *Baja to Vancouver* often projected a shared Indigenous heritage that ignored the sovereignty and specificity of distinct Indigenous nations, many of which transcend contemporary borders. This was a prominent theme taken up by *Remix*, but much of the work done to highlight the artificiality of contemporary borders echoed the rhetoric of the state-sponsored exhibitions, which tended to reinscribe settler entitlement by folding Indigenous cultures into the myth of a unified North America. This tension is further underscored by discussion around the 1994 anti-NAFTA Zapatista uprising, which challenged both the economic and cultural logics

of continental integration as well as globalism more broadly, seen by many as a form of neocolonialism.

*Trading on Art* engages with and extends existing scholarship on cultural diplomacy and economic integration, introducing a decolonial lens that highlights how Indigenous-led art and curatorial practice disrupted homogenizing narratives of North American unity. This angle complements prevailing scholarship that recognizes the historic role of cultural production in Canada as both a soft power tool and a site of contestation. In doing so, Smith builds on the work of Canadian scholars like Jeffrey Brison, Lynda Jessup, Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup, and Kirsty Robertson, while also extending her own prior research. Smith's earlier edited volume, *Museum Diplomacy* (2023), focused on the work of museum professionals in the realm of cultural diplomacy; *Trading on Art* continues this line of inquiry while sharpening its focus, demonstrating how artists, cultural workers, and institutions responded to economic integration.

Even though NAFTA was intended to inaugurate a new era of continental unity, the fact that major exhibitions and cultural efforts to define "North America" emerged after its 1994 ratification highlight how this unity was neither organic nor inevitable. Instead, Smith argues, it had to be actively manufactured, promoted, and sustained—particularly through shared visual cultures. The book compellingly demonstrates how state-sponsored exhibitions and artistic responses played a key role in shaping and contesting this identity in the post-NAFTA period. However, aside from two iterations of inSite, which were hosted between the USA (San Diego) and Mexico (Tijuana), and 49th Parallel shuttering its doors in 1992, there is no discussion of cultural production between 1992–98, the years immediately preceding and following NAFTA's ratification. Based on the literature, including Smith's, it appears that no major transnational North American exhibitions took place during this period. Acknowledging this absence could have opened a productive inquiry into whether the Canadian state's cultural institutions were recalibrating their strategies, or whether public skepticism toward free trade created a pause in cultural programming. Framing this dearth as part of a broader historic shift in cultural policy or

public sentiment could have added analytical depth to an already panoramic overview to illuminate how moments of silence or retreat are as revealing as periods of activity.

Smith's book makes a timely and compelling contribution to several current scholarly conversations—particularly those surrounding international trade, the globalization of culture, and the decolonization of cultural institutions in North America. Moreover, it is an excellent teaching resource: clearly written, well-structured, and accessible to both upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. For advanced scholars, particularly those exploring cultural policy or the intersection of art and governance, the book offers rich case studies with contributions of original research from the archives of the *Panoramas* and *First Peoples of Canada* exhibitions, and the inSite Biennial. The book's significant achievements are its integration of cultural analysis with economic history, its foregrounding of Indigenous scholarship, and its careful demonstration of state instrumentalization of culture to naturalize trade and territorial entitlement. By situating these concerns within decolonial discourse, Smith challenges readers to consider how deeply art is implicated in geopolitical processes. Ultimately, the book offers a lasting framework for understanding how Canada—long invested in defining itself through culture—relied on the same strategy to shape its role in a North American trade bloc.

*Emily Cadotte is a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Ontario and a visiting lecturer at l'Université d'Aix-Marseille.*  
— *ecadotte@uwo.ca*