

A black and white photograph of a city street. Two men are walking across a crosswalk in the foreground. The street is lined with tall, multi-story buildings. In the distance, a church with a tall spire is visible. There are street signs, including one for 'Dundas St E' and a 'NO EXIT' sign. A speed limit sign for '30' is also visible on the right. The overall scene is urban and somewhat desolate.

The Canadians

david smith





“The narratives of national identity are abstract and metaphysical in nature. They lack a voice, a grounding, they seek to find their place in ever more fanciful conjectures. They are made up. They lack substance. They are smoke and mirrors.”



# The Canadians



david smith











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PATTIES

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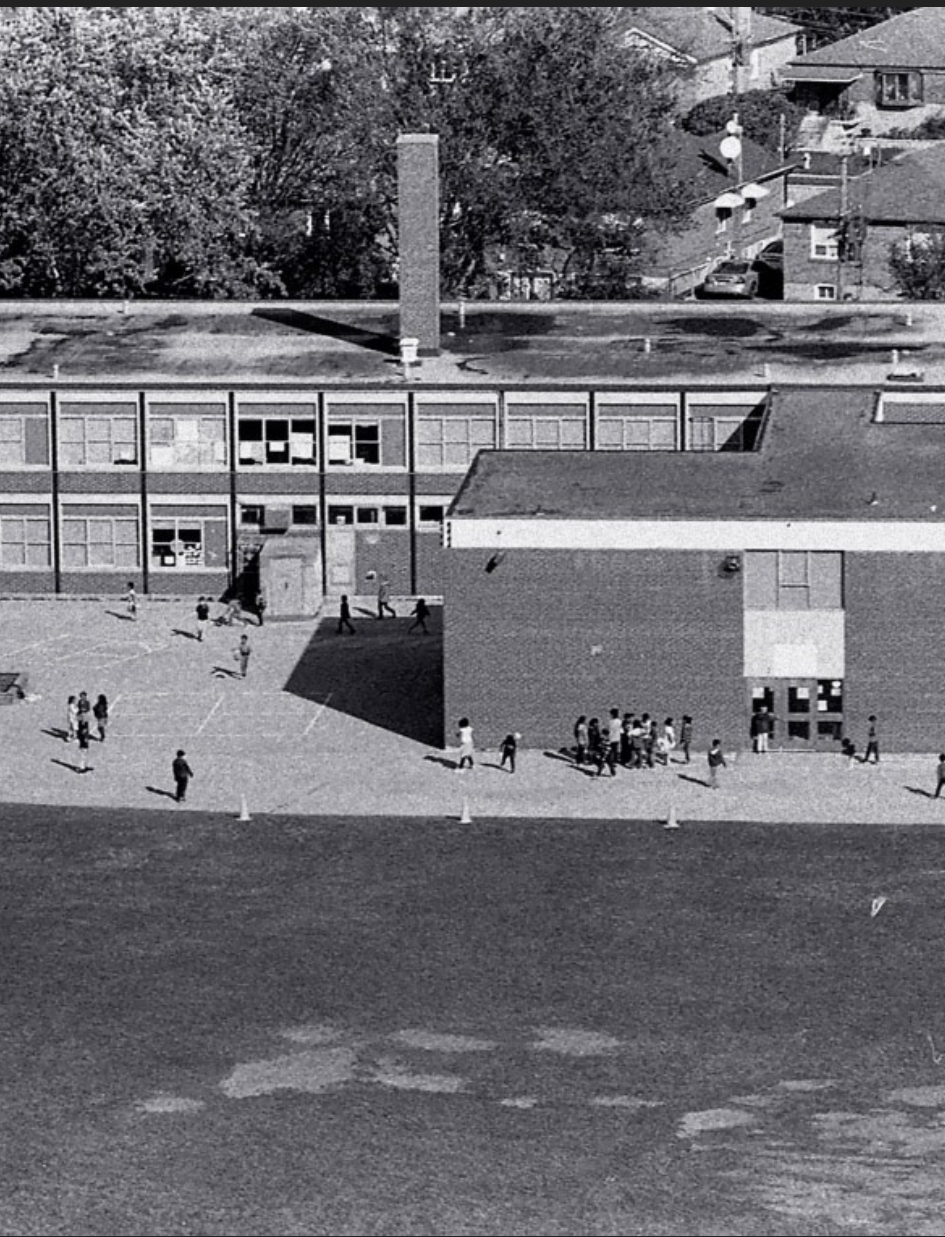




































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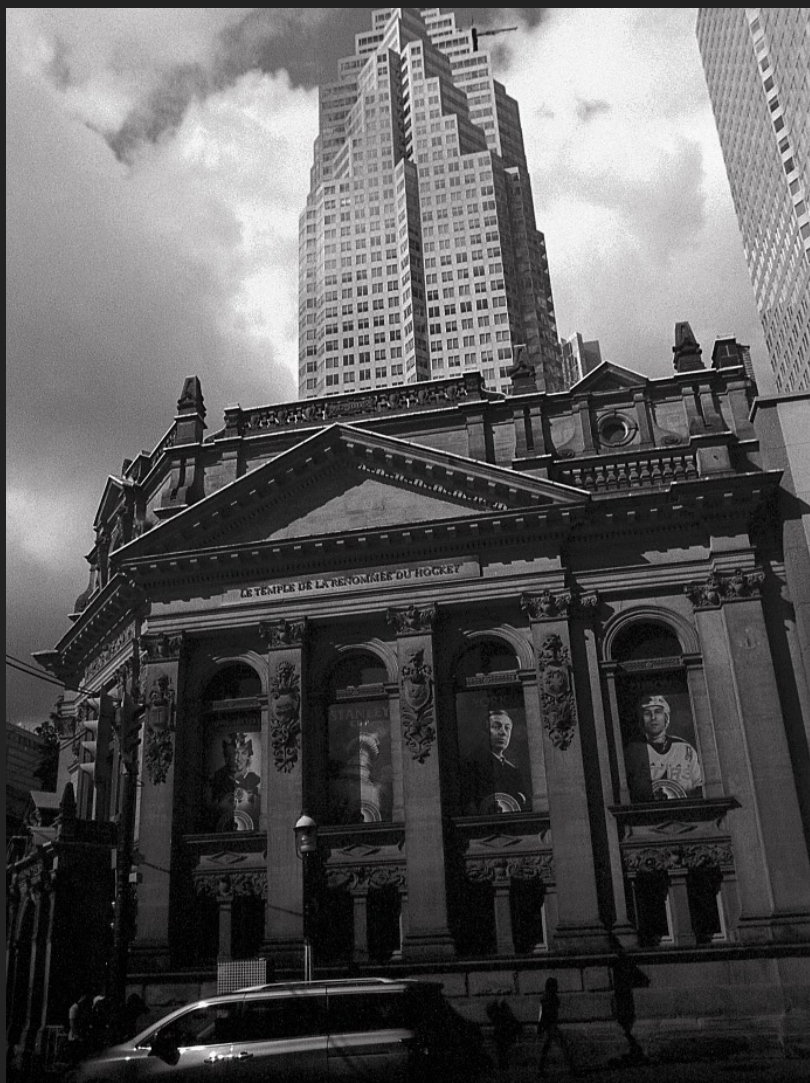




















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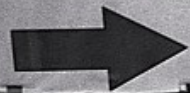






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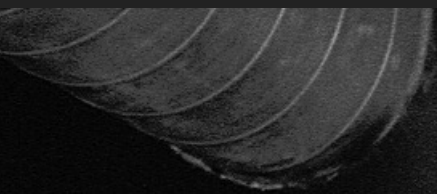
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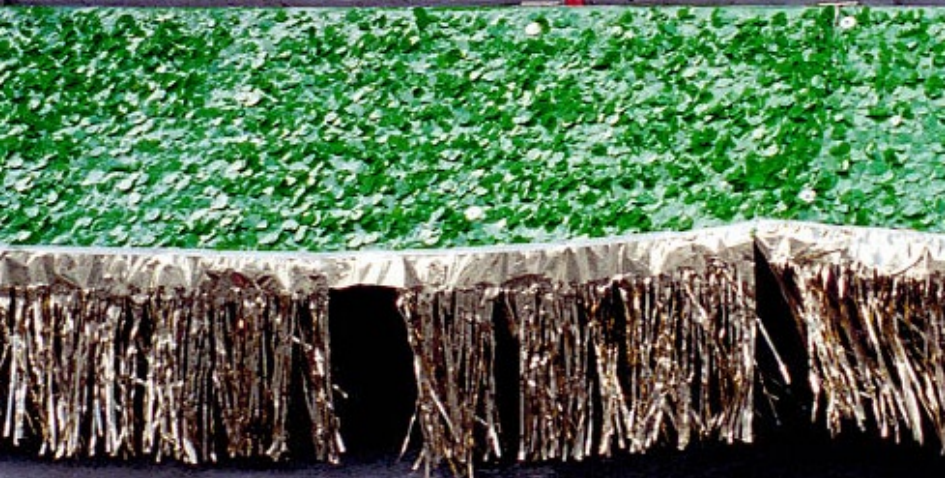


















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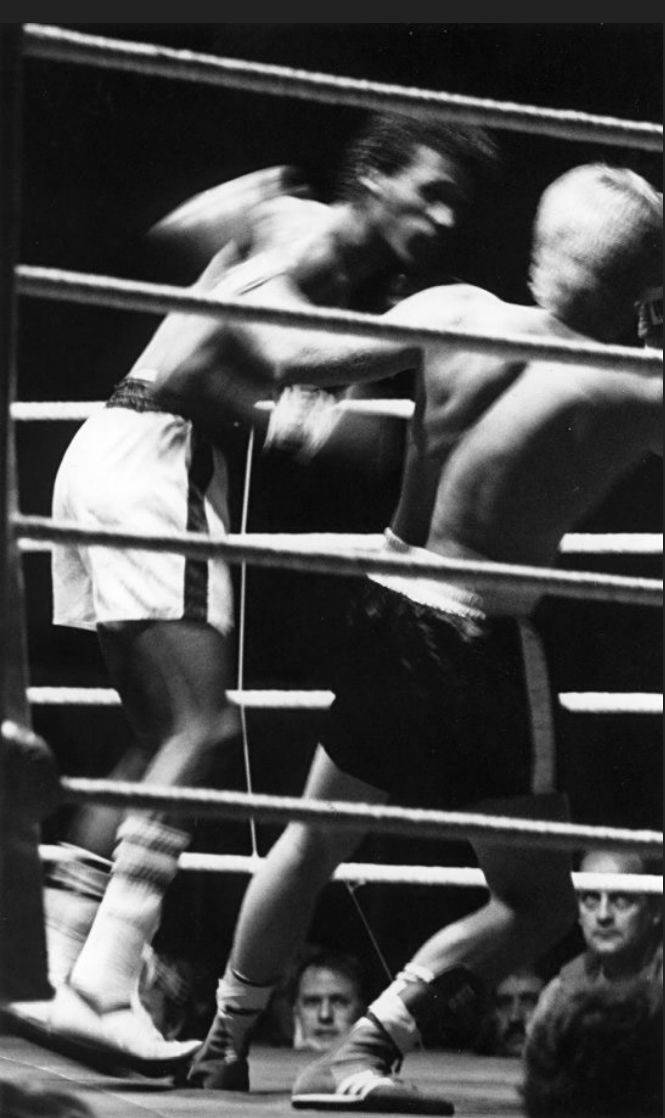
















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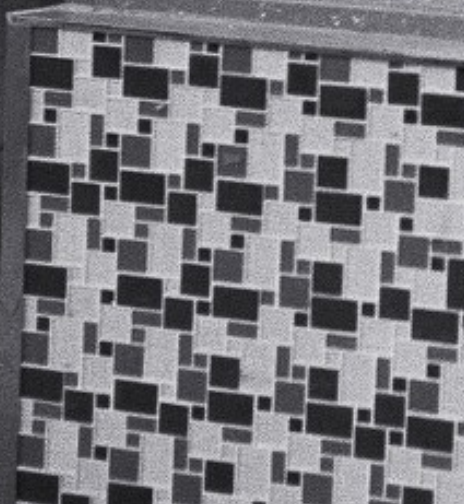
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# THE CANADIANS

I was born in northwest Arkansas to Canadian parents. I felt vaguely privileged to be a Canadian child in America, and had an even vaguer notion of what Canada was really like. My mother often spoke of her life in Canada, and of the differences between Canadian and American cultures. Suffice to say, she never relinquished her 'Green Card' (U.S. alien residence permit).

On a visit to relatives in New Brunswick, I saw deep and pervasive poverty. It made quite an impression. I began to believe America was a pretty swell country. This led to some arguments.

My grandfather served in World War I with New Brunswick's "Fighting 26<sup>th</sup>" Battalion – shock troops for the British empire. He considered the war a stupendous waste. He also declared 'hippies' who protested the Vietnam War ought to be machine-gunned. I wore long hair in those days, and had gone to protests. Maybe it was a joke.

On my father's side, things were more complicated, exposing deep class divisions in Canadian society. Under his and (later) friends' influence, I developed a political awareness incompatible with prevailing and historic American values. I decided to move to Canada.

I began my new life in Halifax, where I met my wife Inez Caldwell at the Nova Scotia Photo Co-op, a cooperative darkroom and photo gallery. Chasing gainful employment, we moved to Sydney and back, then Saint John, and finally went 'down the road' to Toronto. There are a lot of Maritimers here, along with economic migrants from all parts of Canada.

**The title of this book** is in reference to Robert Frank's seminal work, *The Americans*, re-published in the US without the original, 'un-American' text in 1959 – he would have begun shooting the pictures for it around the time I was born. He died recently. After reading the obituaries, I conceived this project both as homage, and an exploration of differences.

Frank's book showed the festering underbelly of America; its boiler-plate inequality, and the triumphalist bluster that infests nearly every corner with an efficacy that would make Stalin blush. Mine is a very different sort of project (no Guggenheims were harmed, etc.). Despite my quasi-parallel circumstance of being a stranger in a strange





land, I didn't approach Canada as an alien culture – I'll venture it is, on the surface, a lot more like America than Frank's postwar Switzerland.

Canada has its problems, and plenty of others have photographed them. I see it not as a tourist or documentarist, but as someone with a deep background in visual art and crafts; these are my overarching concerns.

**We found a place to live** in Scarborough, also known as 'Scarberia' and 'Scartown' because of its distance from downtown Toronto and history of gang violence. In our first years here, we would occasionally hear gunfire. People were shot in front of our building, and across the street. Things have quieted down since, at least in our neighborhood; thanks to concerted police action the gangs and violence spread to other locales. Scarborough is very interesting to photograph, for its toney suburbs cheek-by-jowl with subsidized apartment blocks, sprawling industrial estates, strip malls, and expansive parks.

**Toronto** is sometimes scorned for its supposed solipsism and obliviousness to the rest of Canada. Perhaps this book will add fuel to the fire. It has been described as a city of neighborhoods, and as such offers a tremendous variety of cultures and languages. This is something I sought to photograph, though not in any systematic way.

Many of these neighborhoods have been gutted by an onslaught of cookie-cutter condos and chain stores. They are rapidly becoming indistinguishable from generic North American urban developments, vernacular character methodically razed, lower and middle class inhabitants squeezed out.

**My photographs of Canadians** span the thirty years since I arrived to the present, with the caveat some regions are substantially under-represented, due to the negatives not having been digitized. The pictures used here were shot in the Maritimes, Hamilton, Kingston, London, Montréal, smaller towns in southwestern Ontario, assorted Toronto neighborhoods, and at the CNE. The last picture is of a sulky at the Charlottetown Driving Park, Prince Edward Island in 1987. I won \$64 on a \$2 bet, lost \$15 on the next and called her quits.

David Smith





A Québécois summer enclave in America— Old Orchard Beach, Maine, 1985.





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