

Beyond Border Binaries: Borderlines, Borderlands, and In-Betweenness in Thomas King's Short Story "Borders"

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Article abstract

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Abstract

The concerns at the border in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are not so much goods and customs any longer but establishing the identity and citizenship of those crossing the line. This focus increased further after 9/11 with new security concerns and the ensuing thickening of the Canada–US border. With the mother, one of the protagonists in Thomas King's short story "Borders," insisting on her Blackfoot identity, she and her son are stuck in the middle. They can neither go back to Canada nor cross the border into the United States. Quite literally, they are stranded in what Homi K. Bhabha called "third space." The setting of the duty-free store, located "between the two borders" (King 134), thus acquires a new meaning as a place of refuge, hybridity, and third space beyond border binaries.

Résumé

Vers la fin du 20^e siècle et le début du 21^e, l'administration douanière ne se préoccupe plus autant des questions de marchandises que des questions concernant l'identité et la citoyenneté des personnes qui franchissent la frontière. Cet intérêt a encore augmenté après le 11 septembre à cause de nouveaux problèmes de sécurité et du renforcement de la frontière Canada-É.-U. Comme la mère, dans la nouvelle de Thomas King Borders, qui, ayant insisté pour s'identifier comme Pied-noir, reste prise avec son fils entre le Canada et les É.-U. puisqu'elle ne peut ni revenir au Canada, ni traverser la frontière pour passer aux États-Unis. Tous deux sont littéralement « coincés » dans ce que Homi K. Bhabha appelle un « tiers espace ». L'emplacement de la boutique hors taxes, entre les deux frontières (King 134), acquiert ainsi une nouvelle signification comme un lieu de refuge, d'hybridité et de tiers espace au-delà de la double frontière.

So the borderlines construct conceptual edges and the borderlands construct territories of translation. But this distinction misleads; borders can work both ways at once, whereas the distinction suggests that a definitive binary resolution is possible. I resist the simplistic rhetoric of *either/or*, and engage with the more difficult rhetoric of *both/and*. (New 5)

Border concepts, liminality, and identity construction are key issues in times of globalization and simultaneous particularization. Canada–US

borderlands are contextualized within the current discourse of border studies through focusing on Thomas King's short story "Borders." King aptly explores the nexus between borders, citizenship, and identity. Being of mixed heritage and a frequent border crosser between Canada and the United States himself, he illustrates the dignity of Native peoples and the arbitrariness of the border. The Canada–US border bisects the traditional lands of indigenous nations, as is the case for the Blackfoot. Both borderlines as "conceptual edges" (New 5) and borderlands as "territories of translation" (ibid.) in a Canada–US context, together with the encompassing notion of in-betweenness, are the foci of this analysis in relation to "Borders." King, one of the first Native authors to be well known in both Canada and the US (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 3), embodies the "both/and" (New 5), the in-betweenness in need of interpretation, negotiation, and translation. King, through his mixed heritage and his biographical border crossings, is particularly suited to recognize and address the issue of borders and liminal spaces: "As a mixed-blood man, born in the United States but now a Canadian citizen, King is especially sensitive to the power of borders. Yet he is also extremely interested in the spaces 'in-between' those borders, whether they are literal or figurative" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 4). In-betweenness can be seen as an asset, according to King. He "recognizes the possibilities inherent in his position of literal and figurative 'in-betweenness'" (ibid. 9). King's interest and personal experience with borderlines, borderlands, and the spaces in-between are evident in his fiction.

Border Studies and Border Concepts

The new field of border studies is increasingly evolving into an interdisciplinary field theorizing and analyzing borders, borderlands, and borderlands culture requiring comparative research (Konrad and Nicol 21). The geographical focus of border studies in North America has shifted recently from the US–Mexican border to diverse borderlands including the Canada–US border. Native scholar Karl S. Hele describes the added benefit of these borderland studies: "Beyond simply comparing Canadian and American experiences, much can be discovered by examining the ebbs and flows of experiences within borderland regions" (xxiii). These regions differ in their regional cultures depending on their geographic location along the Canada–US border. Much of the fiction of Thomas King is located in the Alberta–Montana borderlands. In this locale, the past, present, and future of Canadians and Americans merge, in particular First Nations in Canada and Native Americans.

Moreover, new paradigms are adopted analyzing "the border not as a barrier but as a crucible where conflicting currents of identity, history, and culture shape local and national communities" (Hele xxiii). The country as a whole is influenced by the periphery and the edges. They have become essential to the centres of power: "Areas once peripheral are now primary zones of

growth and development, crucibles for economic and social transformations that in turn engender changes in the interiors of countries” (Loucky and Alper 19). Borderlands are catalysts for change and laboratories of transformation beyond their immediate surroundings.

National borders seem to be arbitrary and artificial from a Native perspective: “First Nations have resided in their territories, which are referred to geographically as Turtle Island or North America, since time immemorial. For them, the linear borders are but a recent and wholly artificial construct” (Lischke 220). The free movement of First Nations and Native Americans is not halted by political boundaries superimposed on their homelands by newcomers. Hence, Natives started to undermine these boundaries and thwart the negative cultural impact through using key cultural expressions such as storytelling to voice their viewpoints: “Lines drawn both on the water and on the land bisect and serve to divide Native American communities. In response, Native Americans in their stories and literatures have resisted these borders throughout their territories” (ibid. 219). Expressing their voices in literature is empowering and essential in the survival of Native cultures. These “stories of resistance to the lines drawn upon the lands and the waters of Turtle Island” (ibid. 220) feature prominently in King’s work. Creating awareness is one of the main goals, thus “[i]n many of the stories that have been written by Native people, borders are represented as political artifacts that need to be dismantled or subverted, as in King’s ‘Borders,’ in order to overcome cultural ignorance” (ibid. 220). “Borders” is hence a story of resistance promoting a deeper understanding of Native peoples’ situations in the past and present.

Borders do not simply divide peoples, cultures, and countries, but also create a borderland where interaction is possible. People, goods, and ideas cross the border and go beyond binaries: “In many instances, boundaries divide physically and geographically, but they might also help to transcend differences, enable interaction, and generate understanding between cultures, perhaps even serving to establish new identities” (ibid. 221). Borders are challenging yet at the same time emblematic of opportunities. International borders are characterized by a simultaneity of multiple functions: “An international border, once definitive in most aspects of lands and life, today has become at once a barrier, a conduit and a transition zone” (Konrad and Nicol 22). This holds true as well for the Canada–US border. The border is a site of simultaneous convergence and contestation even with enhanced security measures and a current focus on rebordering: “[T]he reality remains that borders are simultaneously sites of nexus and convergence as well as lines of delineation and disjunction. They are alternately flexible and fixed, open and closed zones of transition as much as institutional settings” (Loucky and Alper 12). However, the perceptions of the border can differ regarding the primary functions of the borderline between two nations. Consequently

increased awareness instead of increased security is needed, taking into account regional perspectives from local stakeholders. This approach creates more knowledge and hence more trust, leading to tangible results, such as more trade and better security.

The binational relationship between Canada and the United States is asymmetric in nature, in general Canada being the less powerful of the two partners. However, in certain instances, such as the Cascade Gateway in Washington State and British Columbia, this relationship is reversed. Vancouver is the centre for Western Washington. Canada and the US view the border and related security issues very differently. The United States sees the border to Canada as a weakness in their defence strategy: "The world's longest border between two countries is now often characterized as a potential gateway for terrorists and undocumented immigrants. These concerns draw on the widely held US view of Canada as a safe haven for terrorists and a country with lax immigration laws" (Sadowski-Smith 1). This has led to an erosion of trust between the two countries: "We don't seem to see the world the same way anymore, and as a result there is perceptible erosion in the trust between us. Americans responded to Sept. 11 in ways that most Canadians don't seem to have internalized" (Rosenzweig 34). Canadians underestimate the lasting impact of 9/11 on Americans' need for security. For Canadians, trade, tourism, and sovereignty, as well as identity, trump security concerns. There is a complete disconnect between the two countries regarding border priorities, leading almost to a dismissal of the other country's concerns: "Likewise, in an America where national security concerns are top of mind, Canadian complaints about 'thickening' at the border fall on deaf ears" (Savage 30). Canadians associate a "thickening" of the border with the rebordering and technological build-up along the Canada-US border, which has repercussions for trade, transportation, and border culture: "Increased security has slowed the flow of goods and people and increased frustration of businesses and travelers. These disruptions are serious because they threaten to undermine economic opportunities in border regions, erode social ties, and weaken competitiveness in the highly integrated North American economy" (Alper and Hammond 1). Due to the asymmetry between Canada and the United States, Canada—and by extension the US-Canada border—are marginalized in the American psyche: "From the U.S. perspective, until recently the northern border has been largely inconsequential, a back door which hardly merits attention" (Loucky and Alper 17). Hence, only a sense of perceived security threats can spark the interest of the US media and public or an overhaul of security-related regulations. The focus on the Canada-US border has become very topical after the June 1, 2009, implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) with its passport requirement for land border crossings between Canada and the US, particularly in light of low rates of passport holders in both countries (Konrad and Nicol 14).

Border studies acknowledge that borders as well as border concepts are evolving and in need of review: "A central part of border studies is the recognition that borders are places of reading and interpretation, subject to revision: how we read borders, and who is included and excluded by them are ongoing questions" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 151). These issues are revisited repeatedly and often reflect the cultural moment in history.

The inherent danger is a propensity for wishful thinking. King, however, has a realistic approach to it without being prone to succumb to utopian scenarios: "King's works adapt and reconfigure these concerns without treating the border as space of utopian alterity. His characters actively try to reverse the discursive norms that have been used to entrench Western versions of nationalism and disempower Native peoples. At the same time, however, King's texts also suggest an awareness of the limits of this approach" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 151). Native views of identity and belonging substitute the discourse of the non-Native majority. In "Borders" King's "doubled vision, which is both informed by a postmodern desire to move beyond the confines of nation and national borders, and critical of the limitations of a utopian vision" (*ibid.*) is displayed when the Blackfoot mother is eventually allowed to enter the US after insisting on her Blackfoot identity. This incident, though, does not set a precedent.

King's stories set at the border are unlike other border narratives as he paints a more realistic picture: "By showing the Canadian–U.S. border as a site in process, constantly being reconfigured, King's work revises and subverts the heroism and linear teleology of many border narratives" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 153). Canada's identity and sense of self cannot be separated from the Canada–US border with its powerful symbolic value as a shield against American cultural imperialism. King places Canada in a triangular relationship with the US and First Nations to great effect for decentring preconceived notions:

King exploits uncertainties about Canada's relationship to America in order to develop a sophisticated and ironic treatment of the border, and then uses this frame of ambivalence, at the same time avoiding an assimilation of Native tribal customs and traditions into a discourse of Eurocentric nationhood. His works refashion border studies by looking both within and beyond national borders to consider the legitimacy of internal claims of solidarity. (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 153–54)

Border studies need to take into account internal as well as external relations between all stakeholders involved in vital border relationships.

Identity Construction and Canadian Identity

Borderlands are an important locale for learning more about national identity. Literature specialist Claudia Sadowski-Smith contends that “the Canadian boundary with the United States has traditionally functioned as a stronghold for concepts of Canadian national identity” (12). Identity construction is hence closely associated with the Canada–US border; “the 49th parallel is a powerful cultural trope” (New 11). In the same vein, Lauren McKinsey and Victor Konrad argue that “Canadians tend to see the border as the edge of their culture and the shield of their identity” (20). Hugh Keenleyside once said, “The boundary between Canada and the United States is a typically human creation; it is physically invisible, geographically illogical, militarily indefensible, and emotionally inescapable” (*Canada and the United States*, 1929/qtd. in Konrad vii). This emotional inescapability is the key to understanding. The Canadian–American border has more than one function. Thus the US–Canadian border can take on multiple roles and is in this respect multidimensional. The border as dividing line between Canadians and Americans is clearly a sanctuary line for Canadian culture as understood by Canadians:

“Maintained borders, such as Canada’s with the United States, protect against assimilation” (Blaise 8). Marshall McLuhan depicts Canada as “a land of multiple borderlines, psychic, social, and geographic” (244). Canadians see themselves in contrast to their southern neighbours:

That America has so often served as a useful defining contrast is part of what is meant by Canadians when they say that the border defines them. For this reason, in Canadian writing and in writing about Canada, that border, that literal demarcation of difference between the two countries, often takes on almost allegorical status. (Brown 20)

Roger Gibbins delved deeper into these differing perceptions to conclude that only Canada resembles a borderlands society:

The border penetrates deeply into the Canadian consciousness, identity, economy, and polity to a degree unknown and unimaginable in the United States. Thus, Canadians and Americans do not share the international border in the same way, for Canada alone can be described as a “borderlands society.” (2)

The border is consequently “as much a psychological as a physical one” (Blaise 4). Pertaining to psychological borders, Clark Blaise states that “psychological borders are, by their nature, unequally felt” (9), which might be yet another reason for the differing perceptions of the shared border in both the United States and Canada.

Some scholars label the asymmetric Canada–US relationship as “imperial” due to a very big American cultural influence in Canada: “[T]he imperial relations between Canada and the United States are reflected in the United States’ current economic and cultural involvement in Canada” (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 141). They see a clear link to identity constructions: Foreign trade, the ownership of businesses, and the circulation of television, film, and printed materials produced in ‘America’ and exported north of the border all have an impact on constructions of Canadian national identity” (ibid.). The asymmetry due to the different population distribution in Canada as compared to the United States is particularly felt in Canada as the perceived junior partner in this relationship: “Sixty percent of the Canadian population, currently thirty-two million people, live within one hundred miles of the US boundary and are constantly exposed to US hegemony in the cultural, political, and economic realms” (Sadowski-Smith 12). The term hegemony, indicating neo-imperialist actions, explains Canadians’ impulse to see the Canada–US border as a defence mechanism: “In the metaphorical approach common in Canada, the border often symbolizes Canadian efforts to resist US cultural, economic, and political intrusions. The border thus functions as a bulwark for definitions of Canadian particularities, which are almost always conceptualized as differences from its southern neighbor” (Sadowski-Smith 12). Nevertheless, despite this perceived inferior role with regard to the United States, Canada still needs to assume responsibility for Canadian imperialism: “Canada, in particular, has tended to position itself as historically vulnerable to the controlling whims of Britain and the United States, reinforcing the perception that Canada is not responsible for its own imperializing actions, a notion that is deconstructed in King’s texts, especially through depictions of the border” (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 156). King makes use of that in his stories dealing with the border and what the border means for First Nations, since “Canada is embroiled in its own set of contradictions, especially regarding Native peoples” (ibid. 135). In the Canadian imagination, Natives nevertheless are an essential part of the Canadian mosaic. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit as well as the notion of the North play a prominent role in the Canadian psyche: “Native characters, paradoxically, strengthen Canadians’ conceptions of their own, unique cultural identity” (ibid.). Laura Peters postulates along the same lines:

Yet, the paradox contained within Canadian national identity is that it desires what it attempts to erase. The presence of the indigenous peoples serves as a constant reminder that Canadians are not indigenous in that they are not of the land, while the indigenous—as ‘Borders’ so powerfully reveals—are not Canadians. Thus, one could argue that Canadian citizens are immigrants while the indigenous are not citizens. (Peters 197)

She puts it very directly that “in the Canadian context the “foreigner” is not foreign but indigenous” (Peters 197). Indigenous peoples are, according to Peters, the marginalized other, the foreigners though they were and are the first people present. With this situation, other groups who feel marginalized can also identify due to being non-members of the “two founding nations”: “Thus, the figure of the “Indian” provides a point of identification for other groups who, by virtue of their ethnicity, find themselves marginal in a multi-cultural country that privileges the ‘two founding nations’” (Peters 198).

Due to the asymmetric relationship and yet strong connection between Canada and the US, Canadians are hardly ever indifferent to the US whereas in the US there is a lack of interest in and knowledge about Canada. Both countries have their concerns, but in two diametrically opposed realms: identity and trade for Canada, and security for the US. These differences affect the perceived role of borders as well:

For Canadians the border is central to identity. There is substantial concern over the influence of the United States on virtually every aspect of Canadian life. [...] Thus, the border is viewed somewhat optimistically, as a necessary if insufficient protective shield to help maintain Canadian sovereignty. [...] However, regionalism and continentalism are as much territorial realities as is nationalism. The strong sense of awareness of this reality has for generations helped shape a unique Canadian nationalism. This nationalism is based on Canada as “not the United States.” (Loucky and Alper 17)

The border safeguarding Canadian, particularly English Canadian identity, is of utmost importance in the minds of Canadians. Despite strong regional identities and political inklings of continentalism, Canada as a nation defines itself in negation towards the United States. Historian Sheila McManus highlights the important role borderlands play in comparison to heartlands regarding national identity:

Although “heartlands” are often assumed to be the source of a nation’s identity, the place where common values and beliefs are either forged or preserved, nations are in fact made and unmade at their borders. Heartlands can be heartlands only if the edges around them are already doing the work of defining whatever it is that is seen to separate one nation from another. (xi)

In “Borders,” King addresses the linkage between borders, citizenship, and identity. The story is set in the Alberta–Montana borderlands. Historian McManus, echoing the observations by King’s characters, describes her personal experience of the Alberta–Montana borderlands:

As I crisscrossed the border between Alberta and Montana years later, the imaginary nature of this "international" border was again brought home to me: were it not for the Canada–U.S. Customs building (called "Coutts" on Canadian maps and "Sweetgrass" on American ones), there would be no way to tell when you had crossed the line. Although sections of the border are visible from the air, on the ground the constants in these borderlands are more striking than the differences: mountains to the west, dry prairies to the east, and a big sky always above you. These constants are a powerful reminder that this region was once part of a coherent territory. (xi)

Historically speaking, these borderlands were integrated and the border was superimposed in the nineteenth century: "The land that would become the Alberta–Montana borderlands was home to interconnected communities, economies, and ecologies that could not be divided simply by proclaiming that a linear boundary ran through them" (McManus xii). This was Blackfoot/Blackfeet territory: "American observers in the late nineteenth century referred to these groups collectively as the 'Blackfeet,' while Canadian writers called them the 'Blackfoot'" (McManus xi). Depicting the special situation of indigenous peoples when crossing the Canada–United States boundary, King highlights the role that rules and regulations play and how public opinion and media coverage can create pressure to be more accommodating in implementing those rules and regulations. King shows the dignity and pride of First Nations and Native Americans in asserting their identities independent of the nation-state of which their Native nations became a part.

Native identities do not stop at the Canada–US border. As is the case with Thomas King who has a mixed heritage in more than one way:

As a writer born in the United States, but who considers himself Canadian and holds Canadian citizenship, he embodies two nationalities. On a cultural level, moreover, his status throws those demarcations into question, since as a Cherokee who moved to Canada, he can be read as a Canadian writer and a Native writer, but he cannot be a Canadian Native writer because Cherokees are not 'native' to Canada. (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 13)

There is, however, a pan-Native heritage. Similar situations persist regarding claims for sovereignty, land, and cultural identities. King succeeds in pointing out the role of the imagination in Native relations with the majority. Natives are often marginalized and victimized yet acknowledging their own cultures and redefining the border superimposed on their territories can be empowering. They can in turn take hold of their imaginations regarding the border. King makes it clear in his work that the border is merely an illusion: "His texts, by writing and transgressing the border that divides Canada from the United States, show the forty-ninth parallel to be precisely that: a figment

of someone else's imagination" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 13). This "figment" is a driving force to make Natives' own voices heard. They acknowledge the fluidity and shifting nature of borders with its consequences: "And if a border is, in fact, inherently unstable and elastic, it follows that that which it demarcates is also flexible and rooted in particular historical and cultural moments. Consequently, national borders alter and what they delineate shifts" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 15–16). European and Native perspectives on borders are diametrically opposed: "From a European cultural perspective, borders mark differences; from a Native view, borders are and always were in flux, signifying territorial space that was mutable and open to change. The borders that presently exist ignore the Native peoples, who are often cut off from one another as a result of a line that has been drawn through their lands" (ibid. 16). National borders are not only important for the Native presence, but also for the nation-state delineated by it: "Just as national borders separate First Nations people by ignoring (and erasing) their presence, so do those borders also obscure the acknowledged Nations they outline" (ibid.).

Canada and the United States need one another, or the *other* "somewhere else," to define themselves. This is put in a very compelling way by scholars Davidson, Walton, and Andrews: "Undoubtedly, for Canada and the United States, the where of there is inevitably defined by somewhere else" (16). It is essential to keep the notion of an imaginary line in mind, because

borders exist only to the degree that they are defended and ... this imaginary line is especially defended by the way that each side imagines an identity *in relation to* the other across it—but differently. The asymmetrical working of the imaginary border is especially evident in the way Canadians tend, somewhat dubiously, to view Americans as the rampant example of what they do not want to become, whereas the American tendency is to see, just as dubiously, Canada as already so much like the United States (except less interesting) that it is hardly there at all. (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 16)

The liminal space in-between national borders such as Native lands and the stories associated with them are empowering and help transform interaction from that viewpoint: "[I]t suggests that from in-between, one can view either side, perhaps rejecting both, at the same time that those sides influence one's spatial position. Telling stories is one way to explore and reconfigure such complex relations from a position of in-betweenness" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 17–18). In-betweenness is a strength, as is the fluidity of the border: "That the border is giddy becomes cause for celebration, not regret. [...] In King's stories, fields can alter with changes in the frame of reference, lines can move, and edges and extremities can turn into thresholds,

especially for the next generation" (New 29). In "Borders," borderlines and borderlands are transcended to go beyond limits and limitations.

"Borders": Beyond Borderlines and Borderlands

There are two main characters in "Borders." One is the unnamed narrator, who is the younger brother of Laetitia, who is the catalyst for the plot. She had left the reserve in Canada to start a new life in Salt Lake City. Her father was American. The other protagonist is the mother, who embodies the tradition and pride of the Blackfoot nation. She addresses Laetitia in Blackfoot, whereas Laetitia responds in English. The use of the Native language as opposed to English strongly underlines the identity and sense of belonging these two individuals embrace. The mother identifies as Blackfoot, whereas her daughter sees herself as English-speaking mainstream Canadian or even American: "You can still see the mountain from here," my mother told Laetitia in Blackfoot. "Lots of mountains in Salt Lake," Laetitia told her in English' (King 133). King emphasizes traditional culture in his story.

Blackfoot is the core cultural identity of the mother as is evident in her cultural practices and language. There is a subtle critique of Americans as well, thus indirectly placing the Blackfoot mother on the Canadian side of the line. She adheres to the Canadian phenomenon of defining as non-American and espousing an air of superiority regarding the neighbours to the South. King emphasizes the distinct identity of the protagonists and their desire to differentiate themselves from the Americans. The narrator, the son, reports that he had to dress up as well as his mother "for my mother did not want us crossing the border looking like Americans" (135). The port of entry the mother and son use is at Coutts, Canada and Sweetgrass, US. The son associates positive things with Canada and negative ones with the United States: "Just hearing the names of these towns, you would expect that Sweetgrass, which is a nice name and sounds like it is related to other places such as Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw and Kicking Horse Pass, would be on the Canadian side, and that Coutts, which sounds abrupt and rude, would be on the American side" (136).

The border itself, that is the American border crossing, is described with a sense of foreboding and danger: "My mother [...] drove all the way to the border in first gear, slowly, as if she were trying to see through a bad storm or riding high on black ice" (King 136). Since the boy's father is from the US and the sister lives there, it is surprising to read about this sense of foreboding. This ultimately proves almost a self-fulfilling prophecy when the mother and son are neither allowed to re-enter Canada nor to proceed to the United States and are momentarily an actual example of "an Indian without a country" (King 145). After the television crews and cameras arrive, the mother and son can finally cross the border to visit Laetitia.

The border guards are described as gun-crazy cowboys: “They were talking as they came, both men swaying back and forth like two cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight” (King 134). Additionally that description draws attention to American border guards being armed in contrast to their Canadian counterparts, a situation only recently changing with the rebordering and thickening of the Canada–US border after 9/11. The motif of guns runs through the story, the narrator also mentioning that the female border guard, Inspector Pratt, has a gun. Later on, he describes her gun in more detail: “Her gun was silver. There were several chips in the wood handle and the name ‘Stella’ was scratched into the metal butt” (King 136).

The following dialogue between the mother and the US border guard shows the main emphasis being the answer to the citizenship and identity question:

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Cecil tells me you and the boy are Blackfoot.”

“That’s right.”

“Now, I know that we got Blackfeet on the American side and the Canadians got Blackfeet on their side. Just so we can keep our records straight, what side do you come from?” [...] “Canadian side or American side?” asked the guard.

“Blackfoot side,” she said. (King 135–36)

The concerns at the border are not so much goods and customs any longer but establishing the identity and citizenship of people crossing the line. This focus increased further after 9/11 with the “thickening” of the Canada–US border. With the Jay Treaty, indigenous peoples have special border crossing rights. The border bisects tribes, bands, and indigenous nations, as is the case for the Blackfoot as shown in the quote above.

With the mother insisting on her Blackfoot identity, she and her son are stuck in the middle. They can neither go back to Canada nor cross the border into the United States. Quite literally they are stranded in what Homi K. Bhabha called “third space”: “By refusing to locate herself within the discourse of ‘nation,’ as defined by Canada and the United States, King’s female protagonist offers a third term that predates the creation of these two political entities” (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 123). The setting of the duty-free store, located “between the two borders” (King 134), thus acquires a new meaning as a place of refuge, hybridity, and third space:

Most of that day, we wandered around the duty-free store, which wasn’t very large. The manager had a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other. His name was Mel. Towards evening, he began suggesting that we should be on our way. I told him we had nowhere to go, that neither the Americans nor

the Canadians would let us in. (King 140)

The boy and his mother are in-between and cannot escape that duality for the time being and they have to go back and forth between the Canadian and American borders. They end up once again for a second night in the duty-free parking lot: "The woman and her son are relegated to the in-between space of the Duty Free store until sufficient media attention forces the Canadian officials to allow them to return to Canada" (Peters 195). Furthermore, the post-modern notion of glorifying the modern being as nomadic and decentred is criticized by King:

"By relegating his protagonists to the Duty Free zone between Canada and the US, King challenges the post-modern celebration of Western identities as decentered and nomadic" (ibid. 196).

Storytelling and humour are important aspects of Native culture. Using stories infused with humorous elements, a sense of community is created while at the same time subverting the status-quo as maintained by the majority:

Stories create a sense of belonging and facilitate the exchange of ideas. But these narratives also become spaces of debate and potential subversion, spaces to claim and refashion knowledge to reflect a past, present, and future otherwise elided by the dominance of national borders and a long-standing colonial rhetoric, in which Natives—and their stories—have been marginalized. (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 11)

Native sovereignty is essential to maintaining the distinct cultural identities as individual nations, often reasserted in land claims to rewrite their colonial past: "Yet King also takes issue with the forty-ninth parallel, a political dividing line that systematically has erased prior tribal relationships and Native land claims" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 12). In "Borders," the situation of First Nations finding themselves barred from living in their entire homeland through a superimposed dividing line is illustrated very concretely:

"Borders" encapsulates the dilemma faced by the indigenous peoples of North America who have seen colonial borders/frontiers eclipse their longer-standing affiliations. Part of the central issue in the story is that the U.S./Canadian border has split the Blackfoot population nominally into Americans and Canadians; their ethnic affiliation as a group has been placed under erasure. (Peters 195)

The very identity and sense of belonging is dismissed. In King's story, the mother uses the involuntary exile in no-man's land to transmit some traditional values to her son. Though the young boy is preoccupied with food and possibly getting hamburgers from the manager at the duty free store, his mother begins with traditional storytelling. She looks at the starry sky with

her son and points out the constellation of stars that look like a fish. This is her starting point to talk about Coyote and indigenous creation stories: "Coyote went fishing, one day. That's how it all started" (King 142). Claudia Sadowski-Smith argues that "the trickster-coyote signifies the dissolution of boundaries and a state of transition and change" (9). Most likely, it is the mother's way to solve their border dilemma, by telling her son about Coyote. Her son realizes that his mother cares deeply about these stories by telling them slowly and repeating parts to facilitate him remembering them. This scene is a turning point in the short story, a breakthrough in their border dilemma as if the Coyote trickster did his magic. The question arises as to whether King places his short story "Borders" in the tradition of trickster border narratives by the mother's evocation of Coyote and creation myths (144). In "Borders," the trickster is explicitly mentioned in the plot and indeed sorts out the protagonists' border issues: "Trickster border narratives portray the second coming of Trickster, who returns with the potential to reorder the chaos of the frontier for Native Americans" (Lape 15). The telling of the trickster story is juxtaposed with the arrival of the media and the eventual solution of their dilemma. It is like trickster's second coming. At the same time, for once, the mother's Blackfoot identity is valued and recognized as sufficient proof of citizenship and identity: "For a moment, 'Blackfoot' is publicly acknowledged as citizenship, the borderlands are thus briefly recognized as Blackfoot country spanning and overwriting the national border between Canada and the U.S." (Sarkowsky 20). The Blackfoot homeland stretching beyond the Canada-US border is momentarily reinstated on its own cultural terms. The media arrives on the scene and covers the story. Through the powerful presence of the media and public opinion in this "standoff" (King 138) of "an Indian without a country" (142) the US border guard "was all smiles" (143) and the situation was turned around. Upon asking about the mother and son's citizenship, despite her replying "Blackfoot," he saluted them and let them pass:

"Citizenship?"

"Blackfoot."

The guard rocked back on his heels and jammed his thumbs into his gun belt.

"Thank you," he said, his fingers patting the butt of the revolver.

"Have a pleasant trip." (King 143-44)

Awareness, persistence and a strong sense of cultural identity are essential in claiming the original place in society. The mother could not change the rules permanently, but King shows that marginalized people can reclaim their original dignity and pride and reassume their roles: "Even though the mother's courageous act only challenges rather than changes official border crossing rules, the story's ending confirms the Blackfoot view of international borders. 'Borders' leaves us with the final image of a disappearing international

boundary, marked by flags as the obligatory symbols of nations, when the mother and son cross back into Coutts" (Sadowski-Smith 90).

The border is based on political will and public opinion, which in turn is also based on perceptions of each other, the issues at stake meeting at the border, and the significance of the border in the imagination of the people. History and politics as well as security, trade and transportation are but individual facets that together with the more elusive concepts of identity and the imagination approximate a more holistic view of the border, where there is a third space beyond border binaries.

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