Thomas King's "Borders": The Difficulty of U.S./Canada Crossings

Dr. Alexandra Pett

ABSTRACT

Thomas King's short story «Borders» provides readers with a key situation for postmodern culture: how to cross national boundaries in a potentially borderless world. In this fiction a First Nations/Native mother and her son experience difficulty in crossing from Canada to the United States when they refuse to identify citizenship of either country, instead maintaining their identity as Blackfoot.

key words: Canada/United States Borders, Thomas King, postmodern culture.

RESUMO

O conto "Borders" de Thomas King proporciona aos leitores uma situação limite na cultura pós-moderna: como cruzar as fronteiras nacionais num mundo potencialmente sem fronteiras. Nesta peça narrativa uma mãe índia e seu filho experimentam dificuldades em cruzar a fronteira Canadá/EUA quando eles recusam adotar a cidadania dos países envolvidos, mantendo a sua identidade como Blackfoot.

Palavras-chave: *Fronteiras Estados Unidos/Canadá*, Thomas King, cultura pós-moderna.

Border crossings are potentially places of anxiety; for example, when I was on a bus tour in Central Europe last year, I found waiting for everyone's passport to be approved highly stressful. The wait on the border of Germany and Poland was especially anxious because we had seen a lot of World War II historical sites and anticipated other tours in Warsaw as well as a trip to Auschwitz, and thus carried the baggage of new proof of oppression in the national past of these countries. Later, I heard a lot from those who survived the Hungarian Revolution about the tension of communist rule for those subjected to it on infrequent trips in and out of Hungary. In particular, for our guide in Budapest, a beautiful woman with red hair, enormous eyes, and flamboyant clothes, fear and anxiety were part of her life up to the time that the communists left.

Border crossings were nerve wracking; she was mostly interned in her own city where bureaucratic prohibitions kept many people from close communication. Once the Russian soldiers left, after selling their uniforms for cash to take home to their families, they were visible in their underwear on the departing trains. Her life improved so quickly that she and her daughter had only to make one phone call to have a private telephone installed the following day. In North America, we have often concealed from selves the fact that border crossings between the United States and Canada also have a history of oppression.

Alexandra Pett - professor at Mount Royal College. 4825 Richar Road S. W. Calgary, Alberta. Canada T3E 6K6.

In a book called *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*, Ian Angus sums up the concern of many Canadians to maintain the U.S./Canada border: "All concern with English Canadian identity. . . is engaged in maintaining a border between us and the United States. . . between self and other and between humanity and nature " (47). For Angus, there are a number of key contradictions in the concept of border:

> . . . the border does not separate two distinct spaces, but describes a tension between wilderness and civilization that cannot be erased.
>
> . . . The wildness is not silence, but an unbroken outpouring of sound. Absence, not of sensing, but of meaning—the Other side of the border a madness of unguided sound.
>
> Thus even stronger is the pull back toward convention. Civilization is a kind of madness, wilderness a kind of order. . . Homelessness, as radical incompletion, seems incapable of being overcome (133).

In terms of the psychic process that Angus articulates, Canadians seem to take on qualities of otherness in order to be divested of them, at the same time knowing that to perceive the frontier as the binary opposite of civilization in the same way that Americans do will be self defeating because our relationship to Europe has been different from that of the United States. To sum up, homes and borders become linked in popular imagination because many people today suffer from an incurable feeling of homelessness created by the breakdown of family structures and a sense of global culture that denies the basic security of national boundaries.

In my own case, I visualize this process of bordering as a kind of dance in which two selves leap from one foot to the other, using a line to mark the steps. In such a world, as I see it, children of immigrant families in North America learn more dance steps and are at an advantage in having grown up in an environment where dislocations occurred.

Moreover, many aboriginal peoples, who cannot identify with the colonizers, the Europeans, the Christians, the English style Canadians, or the French style Canadians, do not experience the same sense of border as Ian Angus. Are First Nations families in Canada thus in a better position to deal with border crossings? Would a Blackfoot family, for example, move seamlessly from one country to another whereas an English Canadian family would feel trapped in one country or the other? Certainly, provincial boundaries match up strangely; Newfoundlanders and Nova Scotians inhabit a territory far from Calgary, Alberta, and people on the west coast identify more with Seattle than Montreal.

In my own family, some of whom could be described as Canadian Americans, border crossings from Vermont to Quebec existed positively as the transition from the small town of Montpelier to the big city of Montreal where shopping expeditions would include French wine and crusty bread.

Commenting on North American borders from a European perspective, Hartmut Lutz states that " . . . the United States-Canada border, albeit a more penetrable one, is as unnatural as the former Iron Curtain was in Europe for Finns and Russians in Karelia, for Sami people in the Soviet Union, Finland, Sweden, and Norway, or for Hungarians and Austrians or the Germans on either side" (95). Yet recent fears of terrorists using Canada as a point of departure for easy access to the United States has led to a tightening of restrictions at the borders between the two countries.

Where do national borders begin or end? In writings by Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Sherman Alexie, and Thomas King, the sense of Canadian or American identities fades against the background of destruction of the natural environment and the history of North America as a whole. These and other Native American and First Nations writers have responded to the demand that constructing Native literature is akin to spiritual healing of both whites and non-whites (Moses and Goldie xiv), even when they are also asked, paradoxically, to maintain the wound or split aspects of psychic identity (Moses and Goldie xvii) as well as national division. More importantly for writers, Native literature gives readers new ways of looking at the distinctions between the real and the imaginary, diffusing the tensions of identity checking by looking beyond to wider contexts.

When asked what he found so "compelling" about borders, Thomas King, in a 1999 interview, replied, "The fact that there is one. The fact that right in the middle of this perfectly contiguous landscape someone has drawn a line and on one side it's Canadian and therefore very different from the side that is American. Borders are these very artificial and subjective barriers that we throw up around our lives in all sorts of different ways. National borders are just indicative of the kinds of borders we build around ourselves" (Interview with Jennifer Andrews). He speaks further of the need to keep constructing new borders: "As soon as we get ridof the old ones we construct new ones" (Interview with Jennifer Andrews).

In a short story published in l993, King imagines the frustrations of a Blackfoot mother in crossing the border from Coutts, Alberta to Sweetgrass, Montana, en route to Salt Lake City to visit her daughter. Difficulties emerge as the mother refuses to adopt the national identity of either a Canadian or an American, insisting, instead, on her Blackfoot status as a person who belongs in both countries:

The border guard was an old guy. As he walked to the car, he swayed from side to side, his feet set wide apart, the holster on his hip pitching up and down. He leaned into the window, looked into the back seat, and looked at my mother and me.

"Morning, ma'am."
"Good morning."
"Where are you heading?"
"Salt Lake City."
"Purpose of your visit?"
"Visit my daughter."
"Citizenship?"
"Blackfoot," my mother told him
"Ma'am?"
"Blackfoot," my mother repeated.
"Canadian""
"Blackfoot." (ll65)

This woman, nameless but individualized as a driver who has to put two new tires on her car to drive off the reservation and is much concerned about the loss of clean water to a foreign country, establishes her own personal boundaries in resisting the bullying of border officials. Possessing a certain innocence but also dogged integrity, she becomes marooned in her car when she is sent back from the U.S. border but not accepted back into Canada. In a mysterious way, however, she breaks through the bureaucratic red tape, challenging armed officials, both male and female, friendly and hostile, and makes her way into the United States. From her son's perspective, her border story is all about personal, family, and tribal pride.

The story of this epic journey is told by a naïve narrator, a twelve year old boy who marvels at his mother's determination even as he looks up at the tops of flagpoles and seems to anticipate grandeurs that never emerge in the context of shut down museums.

After returning to Canada, he looks back at the border and ponders the sudden evaporation of national markings: "I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, and then they rolled over a hill and disappeared" (1171). Although he has been described as "an Indian without a country," (1170) he knows that he and his mother live in "a nice house on the reserve" and ride horses to go fishing. He does not see the presence of television cameras to record his mother's stand against racism as anything out of the ordinary but he does tell listeners that he has to sleep in the front seat of the car under the steering wheel because he is smaller than his mother, who sleeps in the back seat.

"Borders" begins with a statement about moving off the reserve and 'crossing the line."

The plural title underscores the multiple ways in which borders signal contrasts. It is assumed that there are borders or boundaries, lines around the reservations in both the United States and Canada. Crossing over these lines is inherently dangerous.

Moreover, moving past the territory of colonial identity, in geographical and psychicterms, is risky.

In this story there are actually two separate but linked accounts of going to the border.

The boy remembers the time when he drove with his mother to take his sister her point of departure when she moved to Salt Lake City. He watched his sister and mother from the steps of the closed museum. The mother speaks in one language whereas her daughter speaks in

another. "'You can still see the mountain from her,' my mother told Laetitia in Blackfoot.' "Lots of mountains in Salt Lake,' Laetitia told her in English." The boy may have played the role of mischief maker in overhearing conversations between his sister and mother and setting one woman against the other. In this way, he is a sort of child coyote, a blossoming trickster figure.

Close psychic spaces lead to disorientation, even insanity. In the ambiguous space between Canada and the United States, the boy and his mother become aware of racial identities of the past. Since the mother seems to defy the border officials in part to teach her son a lesson about his Blackfoot identity, she takes the opportunity to tell him stories of Coyote. Together, they study the patterns of the stars. This, becomes a lesson in what has been described as 'coyote pedagogy' (Fee and Flick). Where the actual line exists between the realist setting of the short story, which readers have termed "moving and disturbing" (Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 89) and the magical transformation implied in the mother's transition to her daughter's apartment in Salt Lake City, we are not told. Perhaps the subtext of the mother's story, what she might tell Native readers, is simply unavailable to mainstream white readers.

What is clear is that a mythological world matches the historical and geographical context. Thus, the trickster figure of Coyote orchestrates the arrival of television cameras and changes the ending of the narrative from humiliation to personal triumph. The mother is a careful story teller; after she is allowed to proceed to Salt Lake City, she repeats the story of her success in evading the official prescription that she must be either Canadian or American. She moves beyond national borders to devise a new space in which she is neither victim or victor, becoming the subject of a postmodern statement about the need for "both/and" rather than "either/or". She acquires courage and significant identity as she is empowered to consider herself Blackfoot, a category of experience that transcends national distinctions. She grows as a character, changing from the rejected parent of a runaway kid to the visiting mother who is proudly escorted on a tourist journey of the cultural sites of Salt Lake City.

King's metafiction works to show readers that characterization in short fiction often represents writers' need for symbolic figures. The mother is a symbol of the matriarchal quality of Blackfoot culture. When the boy recalls that he is not lost because he has a home on the reservation, the irony is clear, but so also is the comfort of that space. He knows that, as his mother tells her friend, his sister has not left home because she wants to avoid the humiliation of unwanted pregnancy; she has acted by choice, not necessity, and that is as much an occasion for family pride as is his mother's act of resistance. The past may be a closed book, as the closed museum seems to suggest, but the task of living in the present is to invent new borders.

It is a tribute to King's skill as a story teller that readers interact with the bare bones of the tale to fill in the gaps, to make meaning in the spaces between events. In my own case, I initially decided that the narrator was a young girl, the youngest daughter, and that the intent of the narrative was to contrast the outcome of one who left Canada with one who stayed. But I soon realized that the gender boundary was part of a series of analogies. To be an Indian in Canada is akin to being a Canadian in North America; the power rests with Americans. To be a Native woman is akin to being an endangered animal; the power rests with white, middle class human beings. The focus in this text on between the acts experience, what happens in the spaces, is an important comment about how people overcome victimization. What is felt most deeply is experience that dominant culture ignores or erases. You have to pick a side in order to survive in mainstream culture. But what if you don't want to? What if, for example, for you there are no winners or losers, only survivors? In this story, Stella, the guard with the silver gun that has her name on it, tries to get the Blackfoot mother to tell her privately about citizenship, so that nothing will be noted in an official form. This is the crisis that leads to a lengthy stalemate in which mother and son become caught in the no man's land between the two countries. Being caught becomes an analogy for the entrapment of feeling silenced between two points of view that are both unacceptable.

From the boy's perspective, Canadians are well dressed, concerned about appearances, especially of natural surroundings" "Just

hearing the names of those 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".

He sees Americans like his father as moving easily from one country to another, but Canadians like his mother must be more cautious. He thinks back to his sister's relationship with her boyfriend, Lester, who has maps and brochures of Salt Lake City.

For Lester, the U.S. is a place of many blond haired women; such overt privileging of white women causes the Blackfoot girl to break up with him. The boy recalls drinking Orange crush en route to the border; in this obvious pun on "crush" King rather humorously suggests the way he will be "crushed under the steering wheel of the car," that is, oppressed in his need to steer or chart his own course. (In many ways, the boy is a younger version of the character, Lionel, from *Green Grass, Running Water,* who is deadended selling televisions but mysteriously transformed by the Sun Dance rituals.)

Just as Canadians are stereotypically modest and concerned for appropriate behaviour, so also Native peoples are stereotypically concerned to live connected to the land. The discrepancy between Natives and mainstream culture runs parallel to that between Canadians and Americans. The absurdity of these distinctions is the basis for looking at Coyote fishing in the stars. It's time to start a new planetary system. The apprentice story teller must learn about past theories of creation and then listen carefully to each aspect of all stories, past and present.

The boy regards this experience as an adventure but his mother would likely view it as stressful. Her solution to her problem is to focus on the mythic, the archetypal, the universal. Thus, thinking about the trickster Coyote saves her. In a sense, she rewrites her life's story to create pride that quality which her son recognizes and decides he needs for himself. As in the case of a fatal disease, the mother does not see herself as personally responsible for bringing on this catastrophe; instead, she looks to a wider spiritual context to provide answers and appreciates that she is not alone. What King does not construct is the image of an alcoholic woman reaching for the bottles of the duty free shop.

King's mother and son go through a transforming experience together; their bonding provides a human context. But on the borders, their presence is less important than the business of the duty free shop; if they do not spend money, they have no identity. Even though fishing and riding horses on the reservation establish their entitlement to the bounties of nature, at the borders their needs are not met. Interrogated for not providing the right answers to the questions posed at the intersection of one ideological space and another, they are admired for their courage and ignored for their innocence.

When asked if she has plants or fruit, the mother replies, "'Not any more'" (ll70) There is no response from the officials about her statement concerning the depletion of national resources. She is further silenced in a terrifying exchange about "Standoff," a place that she can no longer clearly identify. Silenced further by the verdict of her homelessness, she becomes a symbol of pain. When she tries to tell her son about the myths of each star and cluster of stars, he does not listen; instead he speaks of his need for a hamburger, that menu symbolic of global capitalism. He wants to be part of the consumer world, but his mother knows that he needs the signposts of the past. All the brochures, the propaganda from that world, that enticed his sister, Laetitia, suggest that what he will find in the United States will be bigger and better than in Canada. For his mother, going to the border, as in the journey Laetitia made when she felt her mother was too controlling in her life, suggests partaking of forbidden experience. Ironically, the mother seems to benefit, if only temporarily, by confronting the unknown. The known world, as found between the covers of Saturday Night and Alberta Report, two Canadian magazines which the boy reads while waiting for his mother, do not provide the answers to anyone's questions. The boy is comfortable flipping through these pages but they do not help him.

In this allegory of postmodern life, knowledge is recursive. A journey of self discovery has a point of departure and separation; it involves new experiences, and then a return. In a sense, King underscores the

coming of age of First Nations culture, with the assumption that stereotypes about the way Native peoples live on this continent need to be revised. Who needs to do the revising? Those in the academy, the seekers and learners, need to adopt a new position of humility, appreciating that their search for knowledge is as artificial in some ways as the construction of boundaries around nationally defined territories.

Could there also be a message here for Canadian/American relations at the border this winter? As soon as the boy leaves the two borders villages behind, they disappear. As long as we think in terms of specific differences between countries, we are divided and cannot solve any problems. If we think of being united to deal with a common enemy, we are similarly defeated. The mentality of taking one side or the other leaves many people confused and defeated. But if we empty the duty free shops and open the museums, each border crossing is a lesson in extending personal boundaries and identifying new selves.

King makes this clear using the analogy of food. When the boy tells the store owner that he and his mother are running out of ham sandwiches, he expects to be offered provisions, maybe even hamburgers. No offer of food is made, however. In a better world, identifying oneself as a hungry person in need of food would be reason enough to pass from one country or region to another. The boy develops a degree of insight as his mother repeats her mantra; he knows what the guards do not, that she will not change her story to suit their needs. Two border guards, "swaying back and forth like two cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight" quickly lose patience with a Blackfoot woman who identifies with a new position, the "Blackfoot side." Perhaps King wants to show that new political alignments will make the positions of the past seem naïve.

As W. H. New states in *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada*, the border has become unstable, but interpreting the world through narrative opens up new possibilities:

"That the border is giddy becomes cause for celebration, not regret" (29).

The mother of "Borders" locates a whole cheering section of media folk: "My mother rolled the car forward, and the television people had to scramble out of the way. They ran alongside the car as we pulled away from the border, and when they couldn't run any farther, they stood in the middle of the highway and waved and waved and waved" (1170). The manager of the duty free shop, Mel, tells her that she is an inspiration for others; still, he does not give her anything but peanut brittle and kicks her out of the shop when she lingers without purchasing. Mysteriously empowered by the telling of stories, she travels across the border and then back, with the hope that her daughter will return to Canada with her at some later date.

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