

## Performing the Nation in Thomas King's Short Fiction

---

### Résumé

*La remilitarisation des relations frontalières entre le Canada et les États-Unis suscite une attention toujours plus accrue sur la manière, souvent violente, dont les ordres politiques se manifestent dans les expériences de certains frontaliers. En tant que construction coloniale, la frontière canado-américaine continue d'avoir un impact sévère sur les peuples indigènes, en particulier sur les nations autochtones et amérindiennes transfrontalières, et son traitement dans la littérature se prête à un examen de l'état de la nation - ou plutôt des nations. Dans cet article, je pars du principe que les littératures indigènes compliquent les postulats coloniaux qui présument de la frontière comme d'un objet matériel et discursif soi-disant naturel, incontestable. Je propose que les nouvelles « Borders » et « Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre », par l'écrivain Tsalagi/Cherokee Thomas King, négocient la spatialité de la frontière telle qu'elle émerge à travers les pratiques performatives des contrôles frontaliers, ainsi que la théâtralité des transgressions de la frontière, qui positionnent le Canada et les États-Unis en tant qu'espaces imaginaires et imaginés. En m'appuyant sur des études littéraires, théâtrales et de performance, ainsi que sur des border studies, je combine deux espaces de représentation publique narrativisés : la frontière canado-américaine et la scène, afin d'examiner la théâtralisation des rencontres frontalières en tant que luttes de pouvoir sur la représentation, l'interprétation, et enfin, sur le statut ontologique de la frontière.*

### Abstract

*The re-militarization of Canadian-US border relations has generated increased attention towards the ways in which political orders manifest in oftentimes violent ways in the experiences of certain border-crossers. As a colonial construct that severely impacts Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous cross-border nations, the Canadian-US border and its treatment in literature lend themselves to an examination of the state of the nation – or rather, nations. In this paper, I start from the premise that Indigenous literatures complicate assumptions about the border's appearance as a seemingly pre-existent material and discursive given. I argue that Tsalagi/Cherokee author Thomas King's short stories "Borders" and "Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre" negotiate the border's spatiality as emerging through performative practices of border policing as well as border transgressions that position Canada and the US as spatial and theatrical imaginaries. Drawing on literary, performance and theatre studies as well as border*

*studies, I bring together an analysis of two literary public performance spaces – the Canadian-US border and the stage – in order to examine the theatricalized character of border encounters as power struggles over representation, interpretation and, ultimately, over the border's ontological status.*

---

The nation-state sees the entire territory as its performance area; it organizes the space as a huge enclosure, with definite places of entrance and exit. These exits and entrances are manned by companies of workers they call immigration officials. [...] The nation-state performs its own being relentlessly, through its daily exercise of power over the exits and entrances, by means of passports, visas, and flags. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1997, 21)

The struggle may be land and sovereignty, but it is often reflected, contested, and decided in narrative. (Weaver 1997, 41-42)

### 1. Matters of (In)Visibility<sup>1</sup>

In post-9/11 North America, the increasing visibility, and therefore publicly perceived urgency, of international borders is perhaps most apparent in the geopolitical militarization of the Mexican-US border. Similarly, the previously 'soft' border between Canada and the United States has been visibly hardening, likewise bound up in a national security imperative that has shifted its discourse from the "longest undefended" to the "longest unsecured" (Feghali 2013, 166) border in the world.<sup>2</sup> These borders may otherwise seem less visible to those privileged citizens at the centre of the nations' "horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 2006, 7) who take them for granted because they cross them with relative ease. For many Indigenous peoples occupying positions of marginality within settler society, however, these borders are much more tangible as they impact their mobility and the formation of socio-spatial identities (Newman/Paasi 1998, 194-195): as historically complex divisions, they

---

1 I wish to thank Franz Krause, Léna Remy-Kovach and Michelle Thompson for organising the emerging scholars' panel at the 41<sup>st</sup> annual conference of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries where the ideas of this paper first took shape. A tremendous thank you goes also to Lara Meßbauer, Jesper Reddig, Laura Schmitz-Justen and Marlena Tronicke for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this text. I am also grateful to Astrid Fellner for kindly allowing me to engage with and cite from her forthcoming essay "Drawing the Medicine Line: Bordertextures in Whoop-Up Country."

2 Although tighter border controls and a heightened police and military presence contribute to a re-militarization of the Canadian-US border (Andreas 2005, 449), it is not marked by the same levels of violence targeting border-crossing bodies at the Mexican-US border; hence, there are considerable differences in what is at stake for border-crossers. See Claudia Sadowski-Smith (2014a) for a comparative analysis.

disrupt Indigenous communities – particularly cross-border communities – in terms of their social structure, tribal self-government and identity-constituting connections with their ancestral homelands. Rooted in the colonial history of Indigenous peoples' displacement, dispossession and loss of economic self-reliance, contemporary border politics occupied with security enforcement at the Canadian-US border continue to infringe on Indigenous peoples' distinct and sovereign border-crossing rights as stated in the 1794 Jay Treaty and affirmed in the 1814 Treaty of Ghent.<sup>3</sup> For Indigenous nations, the border thus manifests a hierarchical, recognition-based relationship with the dominant nation-states – a hierarchy institutionalized by Canada's legal system that regards Indigenous nations as non-state political entities and hence complicates the status of Indigenous citizenship, both within the settler nation-state vis-à-vis Canadian citizenship and on its own terms (Sarkowsky 2018, 69-70).<sup>4</sup> The visible hardening of borders may emphasize their material dimension through the regulation of bodily movement. Yet, Indigenous bodies that become visible only in the act of crossing the border, as targets of discursive and material violence, draw attention to the racialized body politics underpinning the border and its narrative mediation in public discourse that relies on markers of (in)visibility.

Indigenous peoples' experiences of the Canadian-US border expose spatial struggles over meaning related to land, citizenship and self-government that remain far less visible to the public eye and less discussed in the dominant discourse on borders. In this sense, literary works by Indigenous authors such as Thomas King (Tsalagi/Cherokee), Leslie Marmon Silko (Ka-waik'meh/Laguna Pueblo) and Joy Harjo (Mvskoke/Creek) present politically urgent perspectives as they lay claim to Indigenous cross-border experiences that challenge the postcolonial dimension of settler states' national self-imaginings, as Benedict Anderson would have it.<sup>5</sup> These works negotiate the paradoxical status of borders as, on the one hand, arbitrary and non-existent within Indigenous worldviews and, on the other hand, as mentioned above, constitutive of their daily lived realities in often violent ways. In foregrounding

---

3 See, for instance, the Real ID Act issued in the US in 2005 and the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative issued in 2007 (Feghali 2013, 154). Stuart Christie argues that the Jay Treaty "ratified plural sovereignties as a necessary and rational, if not exclusive, basis for the indigenous experience of nationality." (2009, 16)

4 In outlining the differences between tribal citizenship, settler-state national citizenship and legal Indigeneity as well as conceptual entanglements of Indigeneity, descent and race within settler laws, Kirsty Gover analyses the "contested legal status" (2017, 454) of Indigenous citizenship within settler nation-states. See also James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson (Chikasha/Chickasaw, Tsétséhéstahese/Cheyenne) on tensions between Canadian concepts of federal citizenship and Indigenous peoples' "constitutional right to a *sui generis* and treaty citizenship." (2002, 423)

5 Astrid Fellner's articulation of bordertexturing – material and discursive practices and structures constituting the border space – is helpful here to understand the relation between text and border as a socio-spatial one. She reads King's short story "Borders" as "a multilayered cartographic text [...] through the lens of bordertextures" that "activate [...] [the border's] deep map" (forthcoming, n.p.) and reveal a network of affective place-based relations.

settler nation-state borders as institutionalized and selectively rather than communally imagined lines – “figment[s] of someone else’s imagination” (King 2003, 103) – that are forcefully inscribed into the land and Indigenous bodies, these works resist borders as a territorial given and shift the focus towards their discursive production founded on hegemonic power structures.<sup>6</sup>

A decentring and rejection of imposed borders and concomitant boundaries is prevalent in most of King’s works, although many remain wary of erasing all boundaries, specifically those that are constitutive of Indigenous peoples’ political rights, e.g., concerning land claims (Davidson et al. 2003, 122).<sup>7</sup> Some of his works, like “Borders” (1993b [1991]), are more explicit in their material and discursive claims to Indigenous self-determination in terms of land and citizenship. Others, such as *Medicine River* (1991) and *Truth & Bright Water* (1999), are more implicitly linked to Indigenous self-determination efforts in their project of deconstructing boundaries of perception and representation, set by literary and photographic realism within a settler-colonial tradition that attempts to lock Indigenous communities in damaging stereotypes of alcoholism, domestic abuse and communal as well as familial neglect. *Medicine River’s* self-reflexive occupation with photographic practices directs the characters’ and readers’ gaze beyond settler frames – pictorial boundary discourses that signify those confining settler frameworks of reference that attempt to determine Indigenous narratives, histories and modes of self-representation – and towards Indigenous narratives of community (Peters 1999, 69-70; Christie 2009, 182, 185). In *Truth & Bright Water*, where the fluidity of the border’s meaning translates into a water boundary between Canada and the US, Indigenous land-centred artistic practices re-imagine the border’s seemingly divisive spatiality as a shared space of belonging as they undo learnt boundaries between physical reality and imagination (Debicki 2015, 111; Christie 2009, 195). *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) extends such a critique of borders in more allegorical terms with a focus on subverting dominant border narratives produced in Western secular, sacred and pop culture discourses (Peters 1999, 70; Walton 1998, 73).<sup>8</sup>

---

6 As a non-Indigenous cultural outsider, I am part of the asymmetrical power dynamics involved in the institutionalization of knowledge and debates on cultural appropriation. It is in recognition of my position of privilege as a white German scholar that I offer a reading of King’s short stories that hopes to problematize and deconstruct some of these power hierarchies.

7 While Indigenous characters in King’s fiction tend to disregard and disavow the Canadian-US border, Fellner notes that “[w]hen Indigenous peoples did recognize the border, it was in its meaning as the Medicine Line” (forthcoming, n.p.) which provided political refuge within a different legal system and “possessed strong medicine” (n.p.) as an “instrument of camouflage, a stay against the erosion of life that had begun decades earlier.” (LaDow 2001, 41) Yet, Arnold Davidson et al. (as well as Fellner elsewhere) caution that “[b]orders may have protected Native Americans who crossed the forty-ninth parallel to escape the wrath of the U.S. military, but who do these lines protect now?” (2003, 154)

8 While transnationality and transculturality are constant components of King’s works (Sarkowsky 2012, 220), his more recent novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) expands the pan-tribal hemispheric

Given the discursively insecure status of borders, Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young pose the following question in light of the Canadian-US border's re-militarization: "Is it, perhaps, the tenuous nature of the border's demarcation that fuels the compulsive, oftentimes violent, performance to uphold it?" (2011, 1-2) What Rivera-Servera and Young suggest is that the military enforcement of the border is not only indicative of the border's material uncertainty as a territorial borderline – contested, for instance, by Indigenous nations' claims to their ancestral homelands – but also of its narrative instability. Whereas the national imaginaries of Canada and the US as postcolonial nation-states depend on unifying narratives,<sup>9</sup> it is precisely these narratives that Indigenous literary works such as King's destabilize as they call into question the inviolability of the border as a material and discursive given (Miner 2013, 171). Following the border's narrative deconstruction, its enforcement, too, must be negotiated in the realm of literature. What comes into focus, then, is the re-militarization not as an enforcement of the border's materiality and visibility – premised on the border as a pre-existent given –, but as an enforcement of the border's indeterminate ontological status (Conway/Pasch 2013, 23).

In the following I want to concentrate on the second suggestion by Rivera-Servera and Young, i.e., that the border space depends on continuous performance. Approaching the border as a concrete place whose overlapping spatialities emerge through performative practices of both border policing and transgressions, I am interested in the ways in which the border is produced as a specifically theatrical performance space and how these theatrical qualities complicate the performative character of border encounters that always entails a positioning of people in the "*discursive landscape* of social power, [colonial] control and governance." (Newman/Paasi 1998, 196, original emphasis)<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I bring together an

---

outlook of his border trilogy (Sadowski-Smith 2008, 90, 96) as it explores the possibility of global communities of survival facing environmental disasters and what Rob Nixon (2011) calls 'slow violence'.

- 9 The border's significance as a symbol of demarcation that draws heavily on the presence of Indigenous characters in Canadian literature is rooted in Canadian anxieties of assimilation into US-American politics and culture as well as the perceived need to delineate the contours of Canada as a self-proclaimed multicultural nation embracing difference (New 1998, 27; Fee 1987, 29-30). Indigenous writers' insistence on the disruptive material and psychic dimensions of borders stand in stark contrast to the common metaphorical usage of border terminology in Canada that "signif[ies] the situation of the entire country in relationship to the much more powerful neighbor to the south." (Sadowski-Smith 2014b, 185-186)
- 10 Scholars such as Mark Salter who draws on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and Peter Andreas who refers to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective in sociology examine the border as a performed and performative space, but they do not focus on its theatricality. Andreas, for instance, conceptualizes border policing as a "ritualistic performance" in the sense of both "actions" and highly symbolic "gestures" (2009, 11) that interpellate the audience into a discourse of state authority and moral resolve on the basis of suspended disbelief, with the border functioning "as a kind of political stage." (9) While his account remains vague as to the theatrical qualities of such ritualistic performances, Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall, in recourse to Butler

analysis of two narrativized public performance spaces – the Canadian-US border in King's short story "Borders" and the stage in his short story "Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre" (1993 [1985]). Reading "Borders" through the theatrical lens of "Joe", I argue, reveals not only the performativity of the border but also what Sophie Nield calls the theatricality of the border as a performance space. This reading practice further foregrounds how the two short stories critique those less overtly visible and more structural forms of violence that sustain the border as they position Canada and the US as spatial and theatrical imaginaries emerging through the performative enactment of not a single national identity but different claims to national belonging. I argue that the short stories thus expose the theatrical character of border encounters as power struggles over presence, representation and, ultimately, over the border's ontological status.

To begin, I examine the theatrical construction of identity and space in "Joe" where the stage, as a traditionally colonial space, serves the imagining of national history and, by extension, the symbolic negotiation of Canada and the US as postcolonial nation-states and their political relations with Indigenous nations. Using this theatrical framework, I then turn to "Borders" where the nation is imagined and performed at the border as a theatrical space. My discussion of a Siksikaitsitapi/Blackfoot family's crossing of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel<sup>11</sup> explores their border interaction as a "theatricalised encounter" (Nield 2006, 67),<sup>12</sup> which operates through similar practices and forms of spatialization as the theatre performance in "Joe" that both relies on and disrupts pre-scripted modes of appearance and representation. The Siksikaitsitapis' border-crossing as a public performance of tribal self-determination, which resists the border's dominant spatiality as reliant on institutionalized rituals of power demonstrating state sovereignty, in turn complicates national performances onstage and leads me to consider possibilities of agency in performance beyond notions of resistance.

---

and Sophie Nield, understand the border as an explicitly theatrical and "ritualized space." (2010, 303) They analyse "theatrical rituals of border security" (299) performed at the Mexican-US border that produce a "sheen of security and controllability" (303) but also carry a theatrical potential of liminality since matters of appearance and identity always remain uncertain.

- 11 This phrase is a common metaphorical rather than precise geographical description of the Canadian-US border.
- 12 While Nield's concept of the border's theatricality emerges from her engagement with Etienne Balibar's and Giorgio Agamben's works in the context of Europe's changing borderlands, it is not tied to a certain geographical location. Following Nield, I understand the theatrical as extending beyond the theatre as a specific performance space and its conventions to other social and political performance spaces such as the border where multiple political orders, territorial claims and assertions of sovereignty are in constant rehearsal. Although the border is an artificially constructed and violently imposed division, its theatrical qualities are not to be understood in terms of artificiality, illusion or pretence (Nield 2006, 64).

## 2. Approaching the Theatricality of the Border

King's short story "Joe" provides a point of departure for understanding the representational struggles that both the theatre and the border as performance spaces concerned with matters of theatrical appearance are faced with. The text is set against the backdrop of a Californian town's centennial anniversary celebration, which prompts the settler character Joe to participate in a competition for the best pageant. With the help of his Indigenous acquaintances (the narrator and his friends of Tsalagi and Pomo descent), Joe stages the forgotten massacre of the local Indigenous population after the initially peaceful arrival of European settlers, a massacre that none of the characters in the short story knew of.<sup>13</sup> Their play does not win the grand prize because, as Joe relates, "[t]he mayor [...] said it wasn't apppproooopriate!" (King 1993b, 120) While for Joe, the performance is not a question of appropriateness but of what he presumes to be matter-of-fact historical truth (108), this sanctioning of the play points to what Ngūgī wa Thiong'o (Agikūyū) terms the "politics of the performance space" (1997, 13) that centre on questions concerning the theatrical presence and representation of bodies. As Nield puts it, in the theatre

[t]he presentation of 'character' requires a figure to operate simultaneously as both what they are (the material physical body of the performer) and also what they are representing themselves to be (their 'role' within the performance). This is 'theatrical' appearance. (2006, 64)

King's short story "Joe" demonstrates that such a theatrical production of space and identity relies on and simultaneously compels certain kinds of appearances in order to operate on the suspension of disbelief for the duration of the theatrical event: the audience perceives the performance as inappropriate because the presence of Indigenous bodies onstage re-enacting their own genocide creates a visual paradox. Their bodies' presence contradicts that which they are supposed to represent, i.e., their own absence.

The Indigenous performers' bodies onstage thus reveal the internal contradictions that the settler-colonial imaginary depends on and tries to conceal for the sake of its own continuity. On the level of plot, the play conforms to the settler-colonial narrative that declares colonial violence as justified in light of the settlers' civilizing mission (King 1993b, 118). According to this logic, Indigenous peoples are constructed as the racially present Other in order to establish Western superiority defined against presumed Indigenous primitivism. At the same time, the attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples – both literally through genocide and metaphorically as confined to the trope of the 'Vanishing Indian' – forms the basis for settlers to co-opt a romanticized version of being native to the land (Calderon 2014, 314). As "European

---

13 On historical references, see Timothy Glenn (2010, 248).

settlers thus *become* the original inhabitants," (Razack 2002, 2, original emphasis) the narration of their origin myth necessitates a disavowal of conquest and genocide so as to legitimize manifest destiny and the continued occupation of Indigenous lands, and to maintain a cohesive settler national identity. Put differently, this national settler narrative needs to account not only for Indigenous peoples' presence but also for their absence – a kind of present absence that mirrors the border's status as both non-existent and forcefully present –, which is key to the ideology of *terra nullius*.<sup>14</sup> The staging of Joe's play visualises this "dialectical presence and absence of Indianness" (Calderon 2014, 314) at the heart of the colonial narrative and thereby provokes rather than "soothe[s] settler anxieties in the face of Indigenous presence." (317) In the theatre that serves the "visual construction of the settler state" (Goeman 2011, 16), the appearance of Indigenous bodies re-enacting their own genocide neither allows for the settlers' identification with 'nativeness' nor for a justified belief in the town's, and by extension the nation's, founding on 'empty' land. The incongruence between the onstage presence of racialized bodies and their self-enacted erasure fails to make sense of their presence within a settler-colonial logic of theatrical appearance. Instead, it exposes the fragile link between presence and representation and disrupts the theatrical reproduction of the settler-colonial national imaginary.

This sense of ambivalence inherent in theatrical appearance also structures the encounter at the border between traveller and border guard. Here, too, a certain appearance and socio-spatial negotiations are necessary for a crossing of the border, as a Siksikaititapi family's attempt to enter the US exemplifies in the following dialogue between the Siksikaititapi woman and the US border guard in King's short story "Borders":

"Citizenship?"

"Blackfoot," my mother told him.

"Ma'am?"

"Blackfoot," my mother repeated.

"Canadian?"

"Blackfoot."

[...]

"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?"

---

14 As Percy Walton elaborates, referencing Terry Goldie's analysis of the "semiotic field of the indigene" (Goldie 1989, 17): "the native has no singular presence within this [Canadian cultural and literary] discourse, for s/he functions only as Other, necessary to that signifying system, but denied a presence within it. Native presence is an absence which highlights the white cultural norm because it is different. The native is both a part of the signifying system, and forever excluded from it." (Walton 1990, 78)



[...]

"Blackfoot side," she said. (King 1993b, 137-138)

This dialogue draws attention to the nature of border encounters as routine performances of citizenship, negotiated via speech acts as a discursive and spatial practice through which the border becomes a testing ground for forms of national identity and un/belonging. The border guard's patronizing reference to the nation-states as subsuming the Siksikaitsitapi charts a colonial space that relies on a selective interpretation of national identity: when applied to the Siksikaitsitapi, national identity denotes a purely cultural form of affective tribal belonging, when applied to Canada and the US, a primarily political form of state-national membership (Sarkowsky 2007, 18; Gruber 2007, 356). This discursive positioning, which establishes the nation-state as the border's sole reference point and citizenship as the central marker of un/belonging, relegates the Siksikaitsitapi to an allegedly inferior position within asymmetrical power structures. Furthermore, it places them as "Indian[s] without a country" (King 1993b, 145) entirely outside of the political discourse of nationhood that, in settler-colonial terms, is defined as synonymous with nation-statehood, and consequently denies them any political agency. Such a discursive production of the Canadian-US border as a space of condensed political orders that are mapped onto territory through speech acts allows an analytical shift from the border as a given, institutionalized dividing line to practices of "b/ordering." (van Houtum et al. 2005, 3-4) These b/ordering practices reproduce the normative belief in the existence and continuity of the nation-state's territorial limits through performances of citizenship in order to control and naturalize the border's meaning and thus its appearance (3).<sup>15</sup>

The successful crossing of the border, then, depends on the Siksikaitsitapi woman's declarative enactment of Canadian or US-American citizenship as the only politically viable forms of national belonging. This performative negotiation of the border is also a matter of representation that relies on theatrical appearance: "[t]he question of who exactly is present – actor, performer, character; material body or representational figure – carries precisely the sense of ambivalence that [...] is reproduced in the experience of the border-crosser." (Nield 2006, 64) It is the double presence of a person's physical body and its representation as a citizen required for border-crossing that "echo[es] the simultaneous presence of actor and character" (65) in the theatre.<sup>16</sup>

---

15 In Amoore and Hall's conceptualization, such b/ordering practices can be understood as "ritualized sequences and calculations to produce the appearance of [the border's] securability." (2010, 303)

16 In this sense, the action at the border itself is not theatrical, but the production of space and identity exhibits a theatrical quality in "some of the ways in which identity, space and appearance work together." (Nield 2006, 64) Theatricalized encounters produce the border as a theatrical space (65) where socio-spatial relations are pre-structured by "a series of recognizable categories – state authorities, illegal aliens, risky travellers, legal crossers – through its [the border's] iterated

In insisting on the "Blackfoot side" (King 1993b, 138) and refusing to position herself in the border's national binary (Davidson et al. 2003, 123), the Siksikaitapipi woman thus disrupts the b/ordering process and causes a "breakdown in presence." (Nield 2006, 68) Her non-compliance with expected declarations of citizenship renders her indescribable – she does not 'appear' as a legal subject assimilated to the imposed settler-colonial discourse of the nation-state, to speak in theatrical terms.

At the same time, as Katja Sarkowsky observes, the performative appropriation of the language of citizenship allows the woman to stake her claim to Siksikaitapipi identity as a form of citizenship in tribal-national, rather than state-national, terms that predate the colonial nation-state (2018, 68-69). Hers is a claim beyond settler concepts of national belonging and relations of dependency that establishes her tribal nation as the primary site of self-determined political membership. As Davidson et al. put it, "the performative becomes a mode of intervention that generates subversive spaces" (2003, 124) precisely because it breaks with theatrical modes of appearance relating to the performative staging of citizenship.<sup>17</sup> The Siksikaitapipi woman refuses not only her assigned position of inferiority, but she also calls the territorial premise of the settler-colonial nation-states into question as she contests both the borderline's inviolable function as a system of dichotomous categorization and the concept of Canada and the US as postcolonial nation-states based on the border's primacy as a source of authority (Andrews/Walton 2006, 609).

Even after several repetitions of the same dialogue, during which the border guards pretend that the previous iterations never happened (King 1993b, 137) and the flawed rehearsal of their script again exposes the interaction as a highly constructed theatricalized encounter, the border guards fail to literally talk the Siksikaitapipi woman into their performative routine. As a result of her "[f]ailure to negotiate this [theatrical] mode of appearing" (Nield 2006, 68), she and her son are neither allowed to cross the border into the US nor return to Canada. Instead, they must stay in the duty-free shop's parking lot between the two border posts for several days. This socio-spatial sanctioning constitutes another performative enactment of state authority: while the duty-free shop supposedly signifies a neutral middle ground – a sentiment embodied by the shop manager Mel who wears both Canadian and US-American national symbols (King 1993b, 142) –, its implicit disavowal of tribal national identity turns it into a space that reifies the same hierarchical power structures as the border

---

sequence of identification." (Amoore/Hall 2010, 303) In my own reading, the border's theatricality concerns both the scripted character of border performances negotiated in dialogue that discursively enacts citizenship – in this regard, the border is indeed "like the theatre" – and theatrical modes of embodied appearance within border-crossing. Consequently, to approach the border in theatrical terms goes beyond a metaphorical "surface likeness to 'theatre'" (Nield 2006, 64).

17 As Christie comments, "the contemporary uses to which indigenous sovereigns and Anglo-Europeans, respectively, put nation and nationality [and narratives thereof] are fundamentally different. Yet both kinds of sovereignty may be put to effective use in the indigenous interest." (2009, 2)

posts do. Standing in for the borderlands at large, the duty-free shop deliberately functions as a space of containment and dispossession where the Siksikaitapí woman is forced into a seemingly powerless liminal position, becoming a “non-person, a border-dweller” who is “made to [...] disappear at the border.” (Nield 2006, 68-69) This theatrical disappearance of Indigenous peoples and simultaneous affirmation of settler-colonial nation-statehood, however, remain ambivalent since the family’s prolonged stay in the borderland also calls attention to the border’s failed function as a clear geopolitical demarcation and controlled theatrical space.

For Canada and the US as nation-states which constantly perform their own territoriality at the border, the border gains a stage-like quality in the effort to organize national space as “a huge enclosure, with definite places of entrance and exit.” (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1997, 21)<sup>18</sup> In both short stories, Indigenous bodies emerge as sites of struggle over representation in the theatre and at the border.<sup>19</sup> Both the Siksikaitapí woman’s performance of national identity in “Borders” and the Indigenous actors’ onstage performance in “Joe” highlight an incongruence between the presence of bodies and that which they are supposed to represent, i.e., their assimilation to the nation-states’ political orders which rest on the performance of a unifying national narrative. This incongruence illustrates a rhetorical and visual slippage in the performative construction and maintenance of the border’s meaning within the theatricalized border encounter: read together, both performances emphasize that, first, the border’s meaning does not derive from its material and visual presence but from its performative enactment, including discourses of citizenship that mark bodies in terms of national un/belonging according to theatrical modes of presence and representation. Second, they illustrate that despite routine performances of power, the border’s meaning is always open to contestation. The struggle over the performance space is thus also the struggle over national history and the border’s ontological status.

### 3. Performing National Stereotypes

King’s short story “Borders” further exposes the precarious constructedness of the border as it mockingly reveals the cultural scripts underlying the theatricalized border encounter. Both border guards perform their nationality in keeping with these scripts by enacting national stereotypes: the US border guard’s behaviour fits the archetypal cowboy officer (King 1993b, 136-137); the Canadian border guard displays model behaviour of politeness and political correctness (140-141). While performing the state’s claim to authority bolsters the border guards’ personal authority in dealing

---

18 The border is both a theatrical space and, as Silko remarks as she comments on material markers of the militarized Mexican-US border (1996, 122), at the same time becomes itself a theatrical prop within the larger self-performance of the two nation-states.

19 While there is of course a difference between the actors’ experience on stage and that of border-crossers’ lived realities, the short stories betray an easy opposition of the imaginary and the physical ‘real’ in the effects of border performances.

with the Siksikaititapi woman, it also allows them to assert two distinct national border spaces – spaces that are rooted in as well as key to upholding a cultural demarcation of US-American and Canadian national identity (Sarkowsky 2007, 19-20). These two clichéd subtexts, that of the western or frontier narrative and that of celebrated multiculturalism (Davidson et al. 2003, 126-127), define national differences between Canada and the US via their seemingly different treatment of Indigenous peoples. Ironically, however, both subtexts perpetuate colonial power asymmetries, one in a more confrontational, the other in a more liberal but still paternalistic way, as they depend on reducing Indigenous peoples to racialized markers of difference based on their exclusion from US-American and Canadian nationality. Consequently, the cultural production of the border through performative enactments of national stereotypes – a practice which Mishuana Goeman (Onondowagah/Seneca), with recourse to Judith Butler's concept of citationality, calls "'cited' practices of power" (2011, 5) – requires the Indigenous body to represent the racialized Other. The short story thus implicates both Canada and the US in the continuous dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Andrews/Walton 2006, 614). Moreover, it exposes the instable racialized foundations of national identity that characterize the Canadian-US relationship, and it exploits these instabilities "in order to develop a[n] [...] ironic treatment of the border." (Davidson et al. 2003, 153)

A return to the theatrical space in "Joe" makes clear that the irony of the border's performative nature lies not only in its reliance on the constant reproduction of 'the Indian' as a racialized Other but also in the settlers' lack of control over this trope. The makeshift costumes and props that Joe insists on for the sake of authenticity – yarn braids worn under hats as wigs, the swords used due to a lack of guns and ketchup sauce substituting blood – do not turn the Indigenous actors with their crew cuts and modern clothes (King 1993b, 115-117) into examples of Western fantasies of authentic Indigeneity. Instead, they ridicule such notions as caricatures that provide points of recognition at the same time as they distort them. The actors' parodic embodiment of their roles, as for instance through exaggerated singing and dancing (117), heightens a sense of profound mockery (Gruber 2007, 355-356).<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, they play the settlers' roles "with particular relish, simultaneously mocking

---

20 The situational irony clearly works at the expense of the settler audience as the play draws a boundary between those who 'get the joke' and those who do not, including both the audience and the reader. The readers' gaze, however, is not synonymous with that of the audience since they are let into the struggles as well as the irony that characterize the theatrical performance in "Joe" and the border encounter in "Borders." While these insights accord the readers more knowledge and thus distance from the audience and border guards, they are allowed no easy comic relief as they themselves are entangled in the representational politics of the performance. Indeed, their awareness of the border's theatricality is fraught with tension as the short stories complicate the audience's and readers' readiness to suspend their disbelief and accept the determinacy of border performances. Such a reader engagement is part of the short stories' decolonial politics.

colonial acts of aggression, killing off potentially unfavorable depictions of themselves, and reinventing those same depictions.” (Glenn 2010, 242) Such parody comments on the futile attempt of concealing the violence of land theft and genocide as part of the nation-states’ public agenda.<sup>21</sup> The performance of the massacre therefore gains in complexity as relating both to the settler-colonial erasure of Indigenous historical presence and agency and, in metaphorical terms, to the undoing of stereotypical representations. The Indigenous actors’ enactment of their erasure, now at their own hands, constitutes a “comic inversion” (Davidson et al. 2003, 131) precisely because the incongruence between their bodily presence and their representation becomes comically absurd: they claim their representational presence through performing their own vanishing. In thus assuming control over their self-representation within the confines of the performance space and asserting “an active sense of [Indigenous] presence over historical absence” (Vizenor 2009, 1), their performance is a “highly self-aware reenactment of a potentially traumatic past moment in history that enables reevaluation and reinvention in the present moment” (Glenn 2010, 246) in Gerald Vizenor’s (Anishinaabe/Chippewa) sense of Indigenous survivance. Rather than re-inscribe racial Otherness, this complex spatial performance of “playing Indian” (Deloria 1998) mockingly but nonetheless forcefully disrupts the “citational chain” (Butler 1993, 22) of the ‘stereotypical Indian’ on which the power structures of the performance space rest.

Such a disruption onstage has important implications for the “citational politics” (Butler 1993, 21) of the border as a public institutionalized performance space in which theatrical appearance depends on the reproduction of cultural and political conventions. A cross-reading of both short stories exposes the settler-colonial nation-state as a hegemonic discursive construct that relies on the visibility of racial difference in the theatre and at the border in order to reinforce its national narrative: racial differences as intertwined with nationality become “regulatory norms,” which “work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies” (2) and the subjecthood of border-crossers through naturalizing the racialized link between physical presence and representation that is key to theatrical appearance.<sup>22</sup> In this

---

21 As Davidson et al. note, such parody reaches its peak during the staged massacre that “highlight[s] the comic subtext of this pageant” (2003, 132) as both invoking and challenging the US-American tradition of civic commemoration – itself a performative erasure of Indigenous peoples – as well as the longstanding colonial performance history of racial stereotyping through “redface” and settler actors “playing Indian” (Deloria 1998; S. E. Wilmer 2009). See Glenn (2010) who contextualizes “Joe” within settler-colonial nation-building practices of civic commemoration in US dating back to the nineteenth century; see also Jaye T. Darby et al. (2020), specifically chapter 2, on settlers enlisting Indigenous performers for colonial events such as Wild West shows while laws at the same time prohibited Indigenous peoples from passing on their cultural traditions through gatherings, ceremonies, communal dances and songs.

22 According to Butler, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names;” (1993, 2) it is not, however, primarily theatrical (12). I borrow her conceptualization of

regard, the performance of citizenship in border-crossing produces a racialized body politics that is crucial to how Canada and the US stake their claims to nation-statehood in territorial and discursive terms.

What yet makes Indigenous resistance to predetermined performances of 'Indianness' and national un/belonging effective is the way in which both short stories draw attention to and criticize the theatrical politics of representation, visual control and gaze by means of mockery, parody and "vital irony" (Vizenor 2009, 85) through which the border "becomes [both] a space of negotiation *and* potential play." (Davidson et al. 2003, 155, original emphasis) In "Joe" the Indigenous actors mockingly refuse those clichéd roles traditionally assigned to them and invert the audience's colonizing gaze as they upend stereotypes instead of being conditioned by them; in "Borders" the 13-year-old Siksikaitsitapi boy narrator appropriates the pop culture gaze and turns it on the border guards – rather than on Indigenous peoples – as cliché-ridden representatives of their nations. "Borders" "instrumentaliz[es] the narrator's presumed naïvety [sic]" (Gruber 2007, 361) in order to reveal how the boy, as a regular consumer of popular media (King 1993b, 143), is influenced by precisely those stereotypes that underpin the cultural production of distinct settler national identities and the reductive representation of Indigenous peoples.<sup>23</sup> The deceptively playful invocation of stereotypes on- and offstage, both on the level of plot and narration, thus foregrounds their ambivalence as caricatures and, by extension, the ambivalence of scripted performances of citizenship as a form of national belonging that depends on theatrical matters of appearance and representation within a racialized settler-colonial system of signification. Mockery, irony and parody constitute counter-hegemonic performance strategies that claim visual control over self-representation and assert Indigenous presence in defiance of the 'Vanishing Indian' narrative by "deviating the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world." (Butler 1993, 22) The disruptive character of the Siksikaitsitapi woman's performance of nationality links her appropriation of the language of citizenship to the Indigenous actors' cannibalistic appropriation of stereotypes in "Joe" and the reversed gaze of the boy's narration. All of these are performative acts that repeat the dominant discourse but allow the characters to relocate themselves within these power structures and challenge settler-colonial conceptions of agency.<sup>24</sup>

---

performances as citational acts that position people in socio-spatial power structures, but which are themselves never fully predetermined and always open to change in the process of the performance.

23 This is particularly important given that the reporters ignore the boy since his answers to their questions do not satisfy their stereotypes of the Indigenous people living on reserves (Andrews/Walton 2006, 610).

24 There is further irony at work since Joe remains unaware of the power structures of the performance space and his own position within them. It is Joe's ethnic privilege that prompts the enthusiastic jury to assume he will reiterate the dominant national narrative without previewing his script (Davidson et al. 2003, 131). His ignorance leads Joe to unwittingly reproduce cultural

#### 4. Possibilities of Agency

The border and the theatre as unique performance spaces that are both permeated by colonial power structures contextualize the distribution of agency as a highly complex matter. The border guards' reactions and the mayor's reaction to Joe's play exemplify that the agency in appropriating and inverting racialized stereotypes, or the language of citizenship, is still tied to a politics of recognition because it is the audience who judges whether the performer's bodily presentation and their representation align (Nield 2006, 65) – a relationship that is found lacking in both short stories. The colonial and colonizing gaze, whether real or imagined, such as in the case of the reader who is implicated in the politics of recognition on the level of narration, conditions the theatricality of both performance spaces and compels the person at the border, as onstage, to be physically present and represent a certain identity for someone other than themselves.

In "Joe" as in "Borders" the Indigenous characters' awareness and disavowal of the audience's colonizing gaze, and that of literature and popular culture at large, reveals and critiques the ways in which this gaze organizes hierarchical power structures in performance. As Tuulikki Kurki claims,

the idea of gaze includes a power relationship between the looker and the object of the look, where the looker seeks to create unifying and homogeneous representations of the object, such as the people and cultures which feature in territorial and metaphorical borderlands. (2014, 1065)

While the Indigenous actors and the Siksikaitsitapi boy narrator challenge, subvert and in part reverse the hierarchical relationship between observer and observed, narrator and narrated, the ambiguous power of the colonial gaze as both disapproving and enabling becomes clear as the Siksikaitsitapi family is allowed to cross the border under the eyes of the public media and national TV audiences, with their tribal citizenship temporarily acknowledged (Sarkowsky 2018, 68-69). Although the border "sometimes function[s] differently under scrutiny," (Davidson et al. 2003, 122) the Siksikaitsitapi family's staged border-crossing nevertheless remains an enactment of the media narrative that repeats the nation-state discourse by framing their border experience as that of "Indian[s] without a country" (King 1993b, 145) and thereby performatively polices the border (Andrews/Walton 2006, 610). The moment of border-crossing as a theatricalized encounter (Nield 2006, 65), staged for a certain

---

stereotypes and a racialized performance space but also, again unwittingly and thus all the more comically, to partake in their inversion. Furthermore, Bud Hirsch (2004, 161-163) reads Joe as a trickster figure who invokes negatively connoted cliché character traits and racist attitudes of white settler men but simultaneously troubles these, given his brutally honest manner and his clumsy but genuine respect for Indigenous peoples that level political hierarchies between Joe and the Indigenous performers to a certain degree (Glenn 2010, 236).

audience and particular purpose, illustrates perhaps most clearly the unequally distributed agency at the border as a theatrical performance space.

Arguably, the agency that the Indigenous actors and the Siksikaitapí woman do have in their performances is limited in that it is tied to the performance space and the duration of the performative event. The effect of Joe's play, i.e., the audience's indignation, lasts only for brief moments onstage with the play being visible solely to the audience present. Similarly, the Siksikaitapí woman's performance at the border may be just temporarily effective – yet, I argue that it is in full awareness of the momentary efficacy of such performances that the short stories nonetheless point to how “[n]ational borders [...] are constantly under stress from that which at once exceeds and defines them.” (Rivera-Servera/Young 2011, 1) Indeed, to contend that the Siksikaitapí woman resists those predetermined modes of presence and theatrical appearance at the risk of complete disappearance or invisibility, as mentioned above, is to neglect the importance of the point of reference – which, as she clearly establishes, is not the settler-colonial nation-state. The argument that agency performance is predetermined by discursive positions within the performance space's power structures only holds for as long as the primary point of reference is the audience. Neither the actors in Joe's play nor the Siksikaitapí family at the border, however, consent to audience-oriented settler-colonial frameworks of recognition and required performances of national identity, racial Otherness and accepted forms of citizenship.

To understand Indigenous agency not in a utopian sense but in the sense of exploring its possibilities in the production of theatrical space and identity both on the level of plot and narration, “Joe” suggests moving entirely away from a settler-colonial framework. As the Indigenous actors capitalize on the audience's expectations – telling “pretty bad joke[s]” in their Native languages “so that the crowd didn't know” (King 1993b, 117) –, they create a space of private entertainment within the public performance. Glenn emphasizes that the power of their performance “is a direct result of its entertainment value, for the play entertains the narrator's family, not the white audience of the mayor and the city council.” (2010, 243) This does not take away from the political nature of their performance; the actors' control over their visual self-representation is bound up with their control over whom they perform for and who benefits from such performance. Importantly, their inversive inhabiting of stereotypes and their experiences onstage are validated by their own community, not the audience and, in more abstract terms, settler expectations and racist constructs.

From an Indigenous, community-based standpoint, performances are not only a “mode of public being” but also a “[mode of] belonging that responds to distinct historical and geopolitical factors.” (Gilbert 2017, 10) If place itself is key to performance because of the expectations it engenders as well as its symbolic value for the performance (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1997, 13, 28), then in “Joe” it is significant that the play takes place outdoors on Deer Island where the massacre had happened. Though directly linked to colonial land theft and genocide, this location is also crucial



to a reclamation and resignification of the performance space. For the time of the rehearsals, the Indigenous actors camp on the island where they hold community gatherings with storytelling and singing (King 1993b, 111). These identity-constituting practices transform the island into a private performance space of lived, place-based community experience that stands in contrast to understanding theatrical performances solely in terms of signifying citational practices.<sup>25</sup> Rooted in kinship networks among the actors and with the land (Magowan/Neuenfeldt 2005, 1), their performative embodiment of cultural heritage mocks the conventions of theatrical performance as relying on culturally scripted interactions and enactments of stereotypical behaviour. Neither affirmative of national settler history nor merely resistant, their participation in the theatrical production of the play thus becomes a community-strengthening practice (Glenn 2010, 239) that allows them to re-appropriate the space and its mechanisms of identity production for their own purposes in a profoundly political manner. While their public performance is an “expression of Indigenous agency, however circumscribed, and [...] a possible means to self-determination” (Gilbert 2017, 5), it is their private performance that constitutes the locus of their agency and moves beyond a politics of recognition.

The same is true for “Borders”, in which the Siksikaitstapi woman’s storytelling complicates questions of agency as related to authentic performances of national identity that are validated by an external audience. During their last night in the duty-free shop’s parking lot, she tells her son a traditional trickster story as they sit outside of their car looking at the stars. The story about coyote is not explicated content-wise,<sup>26</sup> but the act of storytelling gains significance as part of the narrative structure: the trickster story directly transitions into a media crew miraculously arriving the next morning, staging their official border-crossing into the US (King 1993b, 145-146). Though the proceedings remain deliberately ambivalent on the level of plot, this unmediated narrative transition suggests that the trickster coyote, as a narrative device and language game (Vizenor 2005, x), brings about the solution to the border dilemma (Sarkowsky 2007, 20-21). What is more, this transition directly juxtaposes the trickster story with the media’s story. While the media ultimately generates representational visibility in the temporary public acknowledgement of Siksikaitstapi citizenship, the narrative juxtaposition frames this as a tokenistic gesture that might expose the flawed function of the border as a geopolitical demarcation but that nevertheless operates within a framework of recognition and reproduces a settler-colonial spatial understanding of the border. Although the

---

25 While Joe is part of their community in some ways, it remains unclear whether he participates in this particular private space as well. Despite his walking a very fine line between ignorance and latent racism, his ambiguous position does not, however, foreclose notions of community.

26 This can be read, on the one hand, as a gesture towards realms of cultural untranslatability and, on the other hand, as drawing a boundary between those who know this story and those who do not.

media highlight the narrative mediation of the theatricalized border encounter, they do not challenge the border as a theatrically performed and performative construct.

Conversely, the Siksikaitisipi woman's storytelling calls the border's theatrical constructedness into question by establishing a tribal-national framework of reference. Within a Siksikaitisipi cosmological worldview (Bastien 2004, 82, 87) the land is a vital part of tribal identities and stories. Storytelling, in this sense, embodies the relation between the people and the land. Read in this context, the mother's storytelling revitalizes her and her son's personal relations with the land and, furthermore, asserts her political claims to the border as ancestral Siksikaitisipi homeland. In so doing, she dismantles the colonial logic of territoriality and land ownership that the settler performance of the border is based on (Davidson et al. 2003, 141). As a performance of tribal self-determination, the Siksikaitisipi woman's storytelling posits not state-issued citizenship as generating national bonds of belonging but the ancient relationship of living on and with the land (Miner 2013, 180, 184).<sup>27</sup> She thereby claims her own subject position not as a border-crosser but as a borderland inhabitant. Her storytelling thus shifts the spatial legitimization processes of the border from a theatrical performative affiliation with one of the settler-colonial states to the embodied performance of relations through traditional stories that operates outside of a politics of recognition.

Storytelling draws attention to the border as a space marked by the narrative coexistence, rather than hegemony, of settler-colonial and Indigenous worldviews, of the space of trickster and the space of mass media (Sarkowsky 2007, 21). And with this coexistence, the power structures of the performance space shift in favour of a Siksikaitisipi worldview: what the narrator in "Joe" only dreams of, a space not defined by a colonial centre, narratively manifests in the ending of "Borders." On the drive back to their reserve town in Canada, the boy narrator "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." (King 1993b, 147) Although the mother's performative undoing of the border is only a temporary interruption that intervenes in the border's dominant spatiality without permanently changing it, the spatial focus that shifts away from the border privileges the boy's and thus a Siksikaitisipi perspective of the border's absence (Sadowski-Smith 2008, 90). What becomes clear in this closing narrative performance of the border's disappearance, as in the border encounter as a whole, is that performances of the border constitute not only the identity of the border guards and the border-crosser but the border itself (Nield 2006, 69). The border appears, in theatrical terms, only in

---

27 Carrie Dawson draws on Henderson's concept of 'terrestrial consciousness' as she reads the coyote story as a "citizenship stor[y]" that lays claim to the land based on an "an ecological form of belonging rooted in an understanding of kinship, history and culture." (2009, 26) This "alternative vision of society and citizenship [...] accentuates relationships", thereby "de-emphasiz[ing] citizenship for ecological belonging and responsibilities." (Henderson 2002, 425, 433)

performance and in narration; and while it is produced through the border encounter, it can also disappear through the boy's and the reader's implied gaze.

The theatrical as a mode of perception – an awareness attuned to power struggles over representation and appearance that are carried out on bodies in performance – thus allows a questioning of the directionality of the gaze. Indeed, considering questions of gaze and positionality through the entanglements of presentation, representation and forms of presencing reveals different sources of validation as key to understanding agency in performance. The Siksikaitisitapi family's position between the two border posts allows them a unique perspective that is at once influenced by the settler-colonial states as points of reference and rejects such influence by bringing into sharper focus an alternative framework rooted in their own tribal ways of knowing. In turning the gaze inwards toward a private, family- and community-oriented framework that remains inaccessible to the public, both short stories position Indigenous epistemologies as a locus of self-determined performances that move beyond yardsticks of appearance, authenticity and appropriateness, which are so crucial to the theatricalized encounter. As performances that presence Indigenous identities, they do away with the separate realms of presentation and representation, and they thereby expand the notion of performance as a theatricalized encounter between performers and audience to embodied cultural and political actions grounded in relations to place and to one another (Gilbert 2017, 11). Storytelling as one such socio-spatial practice transcends performative declarations of national identity and instead constitutes a self-affirmative praxis of tribal-national identity. In this regard, storytelling produces the border not only as a space of resistance but also as a space of Siksikaitisitapi self-determination. In both short stories, assuming control over Indigenous self-representation within the confines of different theatrical performance spaces is an act of survivance that reclaims these performance spaces independent of external validation.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the role of the audience, too, changes from validating the performance to witnessing both injustices and acts of agency.

While these power struggles underlying the politics of the performance space first become visible in the incongruence between presence and representation in the theatre, they turn out to similarly permeate the border as a theatrical performance space. These are struggles over representation much more than visibility, but they render visible asymmetrical power relations that underpin the nation-states'

---

28 Whether the theatrical performance in "Joe" is an example of "performative sovereignty" – a theatrical praxis flowing from Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies that works towards the reclamation of Indigenous cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, political and intellectual grounds (Darby et al. 2020, 3) – remains open to debate throughout the short story. Given the limits of the stage as a colonial space, "Joe" situates a sense of community that allows for self-determined Indigenous presencing, which is at the heart of Indigenous performative sovereignty (156), in a private rather than public performance space. Furthermore, the degree to which settler characters advance Indigenous performative sovereignty is limited to Joe's ambiguous position.

relentless performance of their own authority at the border and of the border itself. Thinking through the theatricality of performances that produces space and identity in the encounter at the border in similar ways as in the theatre offers insights into the performative and specifically theatrical constructedness of the border that is easily obscured by its militaristic performances, which try to solidify claims to state territory and naturalize the border's presumed materiality. Read through the theatrical lens of "Joe", King's short story "Borders" illustrates the much less visible violence of routine performances of national identity but also, and perhaps more importantly, points to the continuous leaking of the border in the constant re-negotiation of its meaning. A theatrical reading problematizes assumptions about presence not only in terms of the border-crosser's theatrical appearance (Amoore/Hall 2010, 303) but similarly so regarding the appearance of the border. Indigenous claims to their own forms of cultural and political national belonging contest homogenous notions of settler nation-statehood in that they contradict the dominant interpretation of the border as the material manifestation of the nation-state's territorial presence. Given the short stories' disavowal of the settler states as the primary point of reference, the Siksikaitsitapi family's "decolonizing border crossing" (Andrews/Walton 2006, 609) is a socio-spatial practice that produces the border in the act of crossing while simultaneously exposing and challenging the ontological status of the border as a theatrical one. In as much as this instability inherent to processes of b/ordering locates the border in a continuous history of border enforcements that are supposed to uphold its ontological status, it also allows for alternative performances and resignifications of the border's meaning that affirm Indigenous socio-spatial presence in cultural and political terms.

Indigenous literatures, such as King's short stories that create spaces and subject positions from which Indigenous peoples speak, perform and defy a position of victimhood, partake in the textual charting of space on the levels of narration and plot. In offering alternative ways of thinking about the border as in the process of being "redrawn, and even undrawn," they engage in political acts of "indigenous narrative cartography." (Miner 2013, 177) In this sense, as Joshua D. Miner argues, "[b]orders *can* have good medicine, especially when disarticulated from their Eurowestern sociopolitical contexts." (177, original emphasis) In contextualizing the border's interpretation, Indigenous literatures participate in the mediation of border politics as part of cultural national imaginaries without necessarily claiming to provide concrete solutions, legal or otherwise. These texts perform discursive interventions by raising questions about power relations at the border and by negotiating the complexities of border interactions as theatricalized encounters in ways that actively involve the reader to critically reflect on the power of gaze, familiar frames of reference and their own positionality, and thus, ultimately, to deconstruct persistent colonial power structures.

## References

- Amoore, Louise/Alexandra Hall, 2010, "Border Theatre: On the Arts of Security and Resistance", *Cultural Geographies*, 17.3, 299-319.
- Anderson, Benedict, 2006 [1983], *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
- Andreas, Peter, 2009 [2000], *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- , 2005, "The Mexicanization of the US-Canada Border: Asymmetric Interdependence in a Changing Security Context", *International Journal*, 60.2, 449-462.
- Andrews, Jennifer/Priscilla L. Walton, 2006, "Rethinking Canadian and American Nationality: Indigeneity and the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel in Thomas King", *American Literary History*, 18.3, 600-617.
- Bastien, Betty, 2004, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitapi*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Butler, Judith, 1993, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York: Routledge.
- Calderon, Dolores, 2014, "Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum", *Educational Studies*, 50.4, 313-338.
- Christie, Stuart, 2009, *Plural Sovereignties and Contemporary Indigenous Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Conway, Kyle/Timothy Pasch, 2013, "Introduction: Paradoxes of the Border", in: Kyle Conway/Timothy Pasch (eds.), *Beyond the Border: Tensions across the Forty-Ninth Parallel in the Great Plains and Prairies*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 3-26.
- Darby, Jaye T./Courtney Elkin Mohler/Christy Stanlake, 2020, *A Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces*, London: Methuen.
- Davidson, Arnold E./Priscilla L. Walton/Jennifer Andrews, 2003, *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dawson, Carrie, 2009, "An Indian without a Country", *Australian Literary Studies*, 24.2, 21-32.
- Debicki, Kaitlin, 2015, "Returning to the Kaswéntah River: A Trans-Indigenous Reading of Land-Centred Citizenship in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 40.2, 108-127.
- Deloria, Philip J., 1998, *Playing Indian*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fee, Margery, 1987, "Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People in Contemporary English-Canadian Literature", in: Thomas King/Cheryl Dawnan Calver/Helen Hoy (eds.), *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspective*, Oakville: ECW Press, 15-33.
- Feghali, Zalfa, 2013, "Border Studies and Indigenous Peoples: Reconsidering Our Approach", in: Kyle Conway/Timothy Pasch (eds.), *Beyond the Border: Tensions across the Forty-Ninth Parallel in the Great Plains and Prairies*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 153-169.
- Fellner, Astrid, forthcoming, "Drawing the Medicine Line: Bordertextures in Whoop-Up Country", in: Jane Desmond/Jasmin Habib (eds.), *The Other Border*, n.p.
- Gilbert, Helen, 2017, "Introduction", in: Helen Gilbert/J. D. Phillipson/Michelle H. Raheja (eds.), *In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1-23.
- Glenn, Timothy, 2010, "Cultural Resistance and 'Playing Indian' in Thomas King's Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre", *Western American Literature*, 45.3, 229-251.
- Goeman, Mishuana, 2011, "Introduction to Indigenous Performances: Upsetting the Terrains of Settler Colonialism", *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 35.4, 3-18.
- Goldie, Terry, 1989, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Gover, Kirsty, 2017, "Indigenous Citizenship in Settler States", in: Ayelet Shachar/Rainer Bauböck/Irene Bloemraad/Maarten Vink (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 453-477.

- Gruber, Eva, 2007, "Nativity as Third Space: Thomas King, 'Borders' (1991)", in: Reingard M. Nischik (ed.), *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, New York: Camden House, 353-364.
- Henderson, James Sákéj Youngblood, 2002, "Sui Generis and Treaty Citizenship", *Citizenship Studies*, 6.4, 415-440.
- Hirsch, Bud, 2004, "Stay Calm, Be Brave, Wait for the Signs: Sign-Offs and Send-Ups in the Fiction of Thomas King", *Western American Literature*, 39.2, 145-176.
- Johnson, Corey/Reece Jones/Anssi Paasi/Louise Amoore/Alison Mountz/Mark Salter/Chris Rumford, 2011, "Interventions on Rethinking 'the Border' in Border Studies", *Political Geography*, 30, 61-69.
- King, Thomas, 2014, *The Back of the Turtle*, Toronto: Harper Perennial
- , 2003, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- , 1999, *Truth & Bright Water*, New York: Grove Press.
- , 1993a, *Green Grass, Running Water*, New York: Bantam Books.
- , 1993b, *One Good Story, That One*, Toronto: Harper Perennial Canada.
- , 1991, *Medicine River*, Toronto: Penguin.
- Kurki, Tuulikki, 2014, "Borders from the Cultural Point of View: An Introduction to *Writing at Borders*", *Culture Unbound*, 6, 1055-1070.
- LaDow, Beth, 2001, *From the Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland*, New York: Routledge.
- Magowan, Fiona/Karl Neuenfeldt, 2005, "Introduction", in: Fiona Magowan/Karl Neuenfeldt (eds.), *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, Song and Dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1-11.
- Miner, Joshua D., 2013, "Navigating the 'Erotic Conversion': Transgression and Sovereignty in Native Literatures of the Northern Plains", in: Kyle Conway/Timothy Pasch (eds.), *Beyond the Border: Tensions across the Forty-Ninth Parallel in the Great Plains and Prairies*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 170-198.
- New, W. H., 1998, *Borderlands: How We Talk about Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Newman, David/Anssi Paasi, 1998, "Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography", *Progress in Human Geography*, 22.2, 186-207.
- Nield, Sophie, 2006, "On the Border as Theatrical Space: Appearance, Dis-Location and the Production of the Refugee", in: Joe Kelleher/Nicholas Ridout (eds.), *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion*, London: Routledge, 61-72.
- Nixon, Rob, 2011, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1997, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space", *MIT Press*, 41.3, 11-30.
- Peters, Darrell Jesse, 1999, "Beyond the Frame: Tom King's Narratives of Resistance", *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 11.2, 66-78.
- Razack, Sherene H., 2002, "When Place Becomes Race", in: Sherene H. Razack (ed.), *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1-20.
- Rivera-Servera, Ramón H./Harvey Young, 2011, "Introduction: Border Moves", in: Ramón H. Rivera-Servera/Harvey Young (eds.), *Performance in the Borderlands*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-16.
- Sadowski-Smith, Claudia, 2014a, "The Centrality of the Canada-US Border for Hemispheric Studies of the Americas", *FIAR*, 7.3, 20-40.
- , 2014b, "The Literatures of the Mexico-US and Canada-US Borders", in: Reingard M. Nischik (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 185-197.
- , 2008, *Border Fictions: Globalization, Empire, and Writing at the Boundaries of the United States*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Sarkowsky, Katja, 2018, *Narrating Citizenship and Belonging in Anglophone Canadian Literature*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- , 2012, "Maps, Borders, and Cultural Citizenship: Cartographic Negotiations in Thomas King's Work", in Eva Gruber (ed.), *Thomas King: Works and Impacts*, Rochester: Camden House, 210-223.
- , 2007, *AlterNative Spaces: Constructions of Space in Native American and First Nations' Literatures*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon, 1996, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Van Houtum, Henk/Oliver Kramersch/Wolfgang Zierhofer, 2005, "Prologue: B/ordering Space", in: Henk van Houtum/Oliver Kramersch/Wolfgang Zierhofer (eds.), *B/ordering Space*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1-13.
- Vizenor, Gerald, 2009, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- , 2005 [1988], *The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Walton, Percy, 1990, "'Tell Our Own Stories': Politics and Fiction of Thomas King", *World Literature Written in English*, 30. 2, 77-84.
- Walton, Priscilla, 1998, "Border Crossings: Alterna(rra)tives in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*", *GENRE*, 30.1-2, 73-85.
- Weaver, Jace, 1997, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilmer, S. E., 2009, "Introduction", in: S. E. Wilmer (ed.), *Native American Performance and Representation*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1-16.