Reserved Parking: An Analysis of Colonial Spaces in Thomas King's "Borders"

Theodore Oliver*

Abstract

This essay challenges the notion of some critics that "Borders," by Thomas King, ends with the triumphant defeat of racist colonial institutions through the courage and determination of the mother in the story. Instead, I argue that the experience of the boy and mother, as they are stranded in the parking lot of a duty-free store, is an allegory King uses to critique the reserve system in Canada. This essay considers historical scholarship that illuminates the narratives which shaped 19th century reserve policies and juxtaposes these with the attitudes of colonizers and colonial institutions in King's short story.

Keywords: Indigenous Literatures, Canadian Literature, Reserves, Thomas King, Colonialism

*College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan
Correspondence: **t.t.m.oliver@gmail.com**

USURJ
University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal
Volume 10, Issue 1, 2024

Thomas King's "Borders," a short story bursting with social commentary, dynamic family relationships and a bit of dry humour, also contains a seemingly innocuous but powerful metaphor for the plurality of reserves across Canada: a duty-free parking lot. The narrative tension of the story ensues when the first-person narrator accompanies his mother in crossing the Canada-United States border to visit his sister in Salt Lake City. When the unnamed narrator's mother asserts the validity of their Blackfoot citizenship and, therefore, their authority to enter the United States freely[1], the border official's discomfort and subsequent actions demonstrate a malignant institutional agenda to distrust and control Indigenous peoples. At the border crossing, the colonial imagination that created reserves goes to work once more. The banal space of a parking lot seems to become a sort of makeshift reserve, restricting its inhabitant's movements. King's short story shows the family unit being corralled back and forth between the parking lot, the border office, the duty-free shop, and back into the parking lot, putting the broader history of reserve policy on display in this specific encounter. Intertwined with the history of reserves in Canada is the reality of imperialist capitalism, which is instrumental in the coercive actions of the Canadian Government towards Indigenous peoples. The news media are the most prominent manifestation of capitalism in King's narrative, appearing at the end of the story to cover the emerging drama in the parking lot on the Canadian side of the border. While sometimes mistakenly seen as the saviours of this story, the media perpetuate the colonial-capitalist agenda and drown out the true narrative of the mother and her son. King's "Borders" is a compelling and disturbing account of how the structures that created reserves permeate more broadly through Canadian society.

The family car used to travel to and from the border is arguably a more significant space within the story than the border itself or any other geographical marker. The car symbolizes mobility and, therefore, recalls the nomadic culture of the Blackfoot people before colonial contact. However, it also becomes a static outpost for the mother and son when they are refused access to the border. The mother directs the narrative action of this story because she fully grasps the significance of her refusal to comply with the border officials' directives. Moreover, as the older of the two primary characters, the mother is a generation closer to those Indigenous relatives whose movements were historically restricted by colonial power structures. The fear of Indigenous mobility by colonial governments like the Canadian Federation is addressed in Darren Reid's analysis of the British treaty systems in Canada and Australia. Reid examines the pass system in Canada, a shameful relic of history established in 1885 that turned reserves into an institution designed to reduce Indigenous mobility, exacerbate segregation, and reinforce the economic oppression Indigenous communities were already struggling with as a result of colonization (Reid 59). The mother in "Borders" who refuses to conform with the travel restrictions imposed at the border by simply answering "Blackfoot" when repeatedly asked for her citizenship echoes the rightful outrage of Indigenous communities who opposed this isolationist policy. The mother's rejection of the colonial paradigm quickly unnerves and confuses the border guards who insist they "have to be American or Canadian" (King 141). These interactions with border security imply the more general question colonial powers ask: *what place can we put these people that will keep our claims to power and control intact?*

This paper's position on the significance of the transitory third-spaces in this story (i.e., the parking lot and duty-free store) contradicts the analyses of some scholars, particularly Evelyn Mayer's "Beyond Border Binaries." Mayer concludes that "history and politics as well as security, trade and transportation are but individual facets that together with the more elusive concepts of identity and the imagination approximate a more holistic view of the border, where there is a third space beyond border binaries" (Mayer 81). Mayer's assertion that King's story proposes "a more holistic view of the border" undermines the work King has done to highlight the magnitude of importance given to security, trade and

[1] The historical precedent for the rights of the mother and son to move between the United States and Canada is enshrined in the Jay Treaty of 1794 (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Canada).

transportation for colonizers. Moreover, Mayer's claim that the parking lot and duty-free store, the so-called "third spaces," are re-approximated via "imagination" serves only to dismiss the struggle the mother and her son face in these places, which are decidedly unwelcoming to them. Indeed, they are a no-man's land; the mother and son are allowed to occupy only because of their relative insignificance compared to the other border structures. King draws attention to the barrenness of the parking lot through the boy's concern that "there wasn't much food left and that was a problem" (King 143), establishing it as a space where these two characters are not meant to reside sustainably. Indeed, the parking lot and duty-free store quickly become spaces reminiscent of the reserve the mother and son came from because, as "third spaces," they form a partition between colonial and Indigenous spaces while still symbolizing the colonial paradigms of institution and capitalism.

King draws attention to the undercurrents of capitalism throughout the story with the boy frequently mentioning various snacks and food. The naming of products such as Orange Crush, Coke, and Lemon Drops, contributes to the overarching presence of capitalism in the story. The narration given by the boy identifies the space "between the two borders" as a centre of capitalist exchange, "a duty-free shop where you could buy cigarettes and liquor and flags" (King 136). The significance of these three commodities should not be lost on a careful reader who will recognize that tobacco is a sacred plant in many Indigenous spiritual traditions, liquor represents the epidemic of addiction introduced to Indigenous communities through colonization, and flags are an immediate symbol for the colonial mentality of imperial conquest. In his research on the structure of reserves in the British colonies, Darren Reid concludes that "imperial Indigenous policy was an extension of liberal humanitarianism's duty to spread enlightenment coupled with imperial capitalism's financial interests" (Reid 67). Reid details the instances where colonial governments used reserves to coerce their residents into supporting imperial capitalism, the Canadian example being how the pass system was created partially in response to the government's fear that agricultural profits would suffer if Indigenous farmers began "abandoning their crops" (61). The parking lot in King's story mimics this arrangement, as the mother and son can only access food if they buy into the capitalist system at the duty-free store. The two of them begin wandering through the aisles but are made to feel unwelcome by the store owner, who tells them that they "should buy something or leave" (King 142). Once again failing to conform to colonial expectations of the space they are in, the mother and son are sent back into the parking lot. Mayer points out how "the mother uses the involuntary exile in no-man's land to transmit some traditional values to her son" (Mayer 79), via oral story-telling. We can infer that the stories the mother tells her son here would also be told on reserve, making the parking lot the only other place where their culture has room to surface in the story. Ultimately, the mother and son leave the store and return to their car, later befitting from the guilt-motivated charity of the store owner, Mel, and a member of the media who offers the boy food designated for the news crew (King 145).

Mayer's critique of "Borders" positions the media's arrival to the parking lot as a triumphant moment, as if to say they are the cavalry coming over the hill to save the day. Reading the media as a rescue force, a democratizing event resulting from public outcry, Mayer writes, "through the powerful presence of the media and public opinion … the situation was turned around" (Mayer 80). This reading is suspicious as the text has no direct evidence to support it. It is more reasonable to view the media's use of public opinion as a tool for their own financial gain. Indeed, the wealth of the media personnel is put on full display, particularly with the arrival of "a good-looking guy in a dark blue suit and orange tie with little ducks on it [who] drove up in a fancy car" (King 145). The journalists' presence is far from a rescue mission and is instead an example of another facet of the colonial structures seen at the border. There is little difference, aesthetically speaking, between the man in the fancy car, a businessman in Toronto, or a politician in Ottawa. The media companies on the scene are likely motivated to find a story of spectacular injustice that would tug at viewers' heartstrings and bring them notable profit. The site for this business venture is the parking lot and the only place of refuge for the mother and her son. Therefore, when reading this parking lot as a surrogate for their reserve, it becomes another site exploited by imperial capitalism.

Thomas King's "Borders" is a powerful illustration of how the institution of the "Indian" Reserve is inferred within other colonial spaces. This analysis clearly shows the flaws in any optimistic or generous reading that would characterize the colonizers of this story as altruistic or charitable. The colonizers in this story are both paranoid about the implications of Indigenous mobility and prioritize the interests of capitalism above all else. These expressions of oppression are reinforced by a history of systemic and structural austerity leveraged against Indigenous peoples by the Canadian government. Darren Reid's paper makes an excellent supplement to this project as it poignantly illustrates the history of exploitation and mistrust shown by colonizers towards Indigenous peoples on reserve, with their residency often being leveraged for the capital growth of the country. The media presence in the story, along with the primary character's interactions with Mel, the store clerk, certifies King's engagement with the issue of capitalist enterprise taking advantage of Indigenous strife. Indeed, this paper shows that the most compelling reading of the media in this story starts by taking their financial motivations into account before considering any notions of their altruistic intentions. "Borders" is a rich example of decolonizing fiction that works as a platform for further discussion of the prevalence of colonial spaces in Canadian and Western society. Indeed, as this essay has shown, many of these spaces are disguised as inconsequential and otherwise usual trademarks of the Western world. The task of decolonization is gradually unfolding, and I hope that this paper will contribute to our understanding of how King's work shows that public spaces are shaped and created by colonial ideology.

References

King, Thomas. "Borders," *One Good Story, That One,* 1993, pg. 133-147.

Mayer, Evelyn P. "Beyond Border Binaries: Borderlines, Borderlands, and In-Betweenness in Thomas King's Short Story 'Borders,'" *International Journal of Canadian Studies,* Vol. 43, 2011.1, pg. 67–82.

Reid, Darren. "Imperial or Settler Imperative? Indigenous Reserves as a Case Study for a Transcolonial Analysis of British Imperial Indigenous Policy," *The Arbutus Review,* Vol. 8, No. 1, pg. 55–71. http://dx.doi.org/10.18357/tar81201716801

U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Canada. "First Nations and Native Americans." *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Canada*, https://ca.usembassy.gov/visas/first-nations-and-native-americans/. Accessed 6 Sept. 2024.