**Depiction of the US-CA border as an imaginary symbol for a better life**

Since the great discovery of America made by Cristopher Columbus, this “new world” became a point of interest for generations of settlers and later on migrants. New countries like the United States of America and Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and others were created. The United States built its reputation especially around being the land of possibilities and fulfilled dreams that offers economic stability and opportunities for a better life. For this reason, millions of people not only from Europe but also from Asia and Africa, have taken their chances and traveled across the ocean to arrive here. However, arrival to their new country is only the beginning of all the struggles they must face, and it is not different even today. Some of the immigrants choose their life stories as inspiration and write down what happened to them as a mechanism to cope with the situation, they are in. Many of the contemporary immigrant authors use similar tropes to which other migrants can relate, for example, struggles with learning and usage of the new official language as well as gradually losing competence in their native language, struggles based on cultural differences, the distance between their old life home and their new life and intergenerational problems in the family that can lead to a dysfunctional family.

The life of a migrant is full of borders, not only the geopolitical borders of a better economic life, but also psychological ones embodied in the ever-present duality of the old and new, migrants' origin and the new identity, and willingness to overcome any obstacle to achieve the dream of a better life. On top of that, not all immigrants achieve to arrive in the United States and may end up in Canada which stands in the shadow of its superior neighbor across the border. This causes indignation to many of the immigrants who dream of crossing the border to the promised land and some even risk their lives to achieve it. This trope can be observed in many contemporary works, especially in the short story *Going to the Moon* by Nino Ricci, and the movie *Frozen River* directed by Courtney Hunt. While the short story oscillates around the lack of Canadian identity and the strong influence of a better future in the United States, the movie depicts the real life of the American working class. I argue that in these two particular stories, the immigrants perceive crossing the border from Canada to the United States as an opportunity for a better life and take a negative or no stand on living in Canada. Nevertheless, as the stories develop, we notice the status of the United States is more of a constructed ideology and the reality is the opposite of the ideal. In the essay, I am going to analyze the stories focusing on the meaning of the geopolitical as well as psychological borders, and portray the everyday life presented in them.

The Canadian Longing for Better Life

Nino Ricci’s *Going to the Moon* written in the 1990s tells a story about a working-class immigrant family of Italian origin that only made it to the border with the United States and is highly influenced by its closeness just across the river and at the same time insurmountable distance. The main character is a small boy who fancies life in the United States and in his eyes, it represents a wide range of possibilities, where you can even reach the Moon, and have a prosperous life. Canada, especially the city he lives in, Windsor, represents to him a “purgatory” and a “temporary stop between whatever hell my parents had left behind in Italy and the vague promise of the skyline that opened up beyond the Detroit River.” (Ricci 485) He romanticizes the United States as a “heaven” and something to look up to because he himself did not the “*miseria”* or poverty in Italy. He only sees that his family is “poor in Canada as well, owning thousands of dollars to the bank for our house.” (Ricci, 485). His current life in Canada does not meet his expectations and the reader feels his strong urge to run away from the country. The “vague promise” that represents the skyline of Detroit is “some different, happier life than that which his working-class family leads in Southern Ontario.” (Belcham) At the same time, he develops a strong connection to Apollo I’s mission to do Moon operated by NASA when he learns about it in school. His teacher Miss Johnson teaches him about the astronauts and even creates a play when they pretend to go to the Moon. He sees that with the United States, it is possible to reach as high as one wishes, even to the Moon, and as a result, he romanticizes the country even more.

However, as the story continues, we learn that his family has two kitchens – one private in the basement and one representative for special visits with a big, polished table and a china cabinet. As in any other immigrant family, the trope of trying to fit in the new society and starting to adopt new ways of living is very common. Yet, in this situation, the family deals with shame of who they really are and have doubts about themselves. Even when his uncle Mike, who is the only family member who made it to the United States and found an American wife, comes to visit, they speak only English and put on a different, friendly personalities. Moreover, the main character hates being different than his classmates and rather freezes in the cold weather without a jacket than to show they are poor. According to Belcham, “we see how self-hatred can be extended to familial hatred, which then may transform into hatred of one’s own race, and culture.” By facing the gap and issues of belonging to a different ethnicity than the majority of people of Canadian origin that surrounds him, the boy starts hating not only himself but his family and their whole way of life. All this internal discontent leads to dreaming about a new start and better life that is easily anchored in the United States with its propaganda of being a promised land.

The American Reality

On the other hand, the movie *Frozen River* released in 2008 focuses on the portrayal of two poor working-class women Ray and Lila in the United States who are left alone with their children and struggle to make enough money to support their families. They live in an area of Upstate New York where the borders of the United States, Canada, and the *Akwesasne* Mohawk Reservation intersect. To earn the living necessary for survival, Lila offers Ray an illegal job of smuggling illegal immigrants of various origins from Canada to the United States through a natural border between these two nations – the St. Lawrence River that freezes in winter and becomes a temporary road. Lila and Ray’s characters show how deeply they are economically vulnerable and “their vulnerability is structurally produced and maintained by misogyny and the settler colonial state, as is their criminality.” (Sachiko 123) As single mothers with poorly paid jobs, they have no other choice but to start an illegal activity to be able to survive in their country and have a place to live, even though they are two very different women. Lila as a Native American woman needs Ray due to the “white” color of her skin because the police do not suspect a white American citizen at the borders of illegal activity. This shows the ever-present role of white privilege and racism in “the biopolitical regime of the borderland.” (Dodds 575) Some kind of racism is true to Ray herself when smuggling Pakistani immigrants with a suspiciously looking bag. Ray freaks out at the chance there is a bomb that could explode, but later she finds out there was a baby. This shows that “depending on national circumstances, specific groups of people are branded differently” (Franks 29) and that racism and prejudice are faced not only in a social group but within mobility and personal life as well. (Berrettini 59) Even though she has never met a Pakistani before the smuggling, the post-9/11 fear of a terrorist attack is stronger and leads her to compulsive behavior of almost letting a little innocent baby freeze to death on the frozen river.

When Ray as an American struggling to make a living fearing homelessness finds out about the price of thousands of dollars that the Asian immigrants have to pay, she answers: “To get here? No fucking way!”. For her, she is only able to achieve her dream through illegal activity. It is important to stress that her current dream is as simple as a new mobile home which she is unable to afford with legal work. The paradox of the situation is stressed even more when the company selling the mobile homes uses the slogan: “Live the Dream!” which associates the American dream with the idea of a contemporary nightmare. (Gonzáles 59) By being part of the working class, there is no such thing as an American dream and even hard work does not always pay off. Both Ray and Lila realize their closeness to the immigrants from India, Pakistan, and China because economically they are all “at the very bottom of their society’s respective social strata”. (Raussert 28) The imaginary unity of people belonging to one nation turns out not to be true. It is irrelevant that Ray has lived her whole life in New York and is a white woman. The connection she can create with the immigrants that are found in the same life-threatening situation of poverty is much more realistic than in the supposed community she lives in the United States because they share similar fears, struggles, and quality of life.

The Importance of Boarders

When talking about Canada and the United States, it is important to mention Benedict Anderson and his theory of nations which defines them as imagined communities because it is impossible to know all fellow members of a nation (6) and “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation…the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship” (7). He states two very important concepts. Firstly, he proclaims that nations are differentiated “by the style in which they are imagined.” (Anderson 6) This theory is of great importance for us to understand the significance of a nation and the impact it has on its members. The image of a nation is the key to how people in the world perceive it and it creates a desire to be part of it or vice versa which is very well seen in these two stories. Canada lacks a defying element to be distinguished from its more successful neighbor and catch the attention of new immigrants because in comparison with the United States is not presented as the nation of possibilities and “the American dream”. Even the immigrants that come to Canada still have to face their desire of crossing the border to the United States because life there must be better. This is applicable both for the boy’s family from *Going to the Moon* where they all blame his uncle for settling in Windsor and being too lazy to try migrating to the United States again, as well as all the migrants who risk their lives hidden in a trunk of Ray’s car with the threat of being found and accused of illegal immigration just to seek a better life in the United States. Secondly, Anderson stresses that every nation is limited because no matter how big it is, it always “has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” and cannot be imagined as “coterminous with mankind” (7). The very existence of borders as some kind of a limitation presents both an obstacle that increases or decreases the prestige of certain countries and an instrument that triggers mental borders. The boy creates a mental barrier that he cannot be happy, rich, and find his way out of poverty if he does not live in the United States. The same applies to Pakistani immigrants for instance. In their mind crossing the border has the promise of having such a good life that they are willing to put their newborn child at risk.

There are three types of borders in the above-presented stories: physical, mental, and social. The physical border is symbolized in many ways. In *Frozen River,* there is the specific border crossing between Canada and the United States shown surrounded by barbed wire fences, police patrols with guns, cameras, and sign informing about leaving the country. Then there is the most relevant border for the plot and that is the St. Lawrence River. A normally fluid river that cannot be crossed easily becomes an easy shortcut for border crossing when frozen. Even though it represents a new opportunity it is also a symbol of perpetual insecurity and uncertainty. (Dodds 564) There is always a doubt about whether the ice is thick enough and does not break. In *Going to the Moon*, the border is also represented by a natural element, the Detroit River. It is both a physical border and a metaphor for a mental border – it is one of “the reasons why he feels he needs to escape from his life.” (Belcham) In his head, he creates the idea of a better life in the United States and a way how to escape from his internal misery. Instead of that vision motivating him to improve his life, he uses it as a limitation. The social border is embodied in interpersonal relations. The boy separates himself from his classmates because he is ashamed of being different and feels like he does not belong. In *Frozen River*, we see how two women from different communities are brought together to help each other to earn some money and take care of their children. The final unifying moment is at the end of the movie, when Ray goes to jail to serve her sentence for a much shorter time than Lila and in the meantime, Lila stays at her house and takes care of her children.

After analyzing the short story *Going to the Moon* and the movie *Frozen River*, it is clear that the relations between the United States and Canada in terms of migration are very complex. The status quo of a successful life in the United States is so strong that immigrants in Canada, who are already seeking a better life there, want to cross the border and fight for a better future in the United States, even though the real life of a working-class family is far away from the “American dream”. A clear example are the lives of Ray and Lila who see no other option but need to cross the physical and their mental border(s) and conduct an illegal activity to earn enough money for their basic needs. According to Hinrichsen, *Frozen River* “examines how the border functions as a site that is not only a paradigm of crossings, intercultural exchanges, and circulations of power, but also as a place of anxieties, resistances, and uneasy negotiations (60),” which is applicable for *Going to the Moon,* too. The border is not only a physical obstacle but at the same time is a mental trigger that challenges and changes the mental perception of their current situation. The United States create an illusion by proper presentation, for instance by a mission to the Moon as a metaphor for achieving anything. However, even at the end of the short story, after the failure of Apollo I’s mission, riots in Detroit and death of his cousin in American army, the narrator realizes the reality of life in the United States and sees, it is not all sunshine and rainbows.

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