



# DRAWING THE MEDICINE LINE: BORDERTEXTURES IN WHOOP-UP COUNTRY

*The West is made up of one long series of necessary and true fill-in-the-blank stories, and sometimes it seems we are doomed to live them cyclically and perpetually, simply because there is no such thing as The Story. As the colonial culture of the West, we have no culture, which is just the same problem as having no story that tells us how we fit in the place.*

—Richard Manning, *Grassland* 92

*I may not know who I am, but I know where I'm from.*

—Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* 23

## INTRODUCTION

Every year in August, the town of Lethbridge, Alberta, celebrates Whoop-Up Days, a festival that includes a parade, a tradeshow, rodeo action, and other fun events. The town is also home to Fort Whoop-Up, a replica of a nineteenth-century trading fort, which, during the heyday of fur trading and whiskey smuggling in the early 1870s, was the most notorious whiskey fortress in the northern Rocky Mountain-Great Plains borderlands area that ranged from the Missouri River to the Bow River Valley. Tourists traveling northward on Interstate 15 from Great Falls, Montana, to Lethbridge, Alberta, are driving through a region once called Whoop-Up Country. The modern highway parallels the Whoop-Up Trail, “a colorful and useful avenue of commerce and a high road of adventure in the years before the railways crossed the western plains” (Sharp 3).

The trail from Fort Benton, the region’s commercial center established on the upper Missouri in 1846,<sup>1</sup> to Fort MacLeod in southwestern Alberta

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1 Fort Benton, also referred to as the “Chicago of the northern plains” (Turner 16), was established as a trading post by the Pennsylvanian fur dealer Alexander

became famous for the northward flow of contraband whiskey during the Whoop-Up era. This trail was an international path, as it was “neatly bisected by the Canadian-American boundary that marches steadily westward along the forty-ninth parallel with the precision of the surveyor’s chain” (Sharp 3). Conspicuously, though, to the pioneering traders and settler colonists, “the trail symbolized the economic, social, and cultural ties that for many years defied a politically inspired division of the northern plains” (Sharp 3). Until the North-West Mounted Police ended the illegal Montana-based whiskey trade in the winter of 1874, the International Boundary Commission finished its survey in 1874, marking “the outside world’s final assault on this last frontier” (Rees 3) and the main line of the Canadian Pacific across the Alberta plains was completed in 1883, the “Whoop-Up Trail symbolized the unity of this northern grassland empire” (Sharp 8).

Like all political borders, the forty-ninth parallel between the western US and Canada in this region was artificially constructed, dividing a vast region of grasslands; the creation of the border, however, has profoundly shaped the region’s development and has contributed significantly to how this borderlands region has come to be understood (Morris, “Fort MacLeod” 151). In fact, the northern Plains are a borderlands<sup>2</sup> of many differently layered and often conflicting claims to territory. In the nineteenth century, these “homelands became a focal point for the struggles between Indigenous peoples and British, American, and Canadian agents over the establishment and control of the territorial limits of the US and Canadian states and the boundaries of belonging within them” (Hogue 5). After the dominant settler nations put in place their national frameworks, “the United States and Canada continued to derive their coherence, to constitute themselves and their territorial imaginaries, out of the efforts to fully incorporate the lands and peoples on these new national peripheries” (5). Like many other borderlands, the northern Rocky Mountain–Great Plains border zone

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Culbertson (Tolton 13). Paul F. Sharp devotes an entire chapter to the “Chicago of the Plains” (157–182).

2 While historian Herbert Eugene Bolton coined the term ‘borderlands’ in the 1920s, his concept never gained much influence beyond historical scholarship. It was not until Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/La Frontera* appeared in 1987 that the concept became foundational for Border Studies in the humanities. Anzaldúa’s concept emerged from the historical specificity of the boundary region of *la frontera*, the border culture between the United States and Mexico. My use of the term borderlands also draws on Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aaron, who have used the term in order to refer to “contested boundaries between colonial domains” (816), which allows for a linking of intercolonial and transatlantic imperial histories to local transcultural histories.

is “a paradoxical zone of resistance, agency, and rogue embodiment” (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr ix), a space which is “reified by a kaleidoscope of indigenous and non-indigenous cultural practices, complicated by competing constructs like *state/province/territory*, *reservation/reserve*, *Indian*, *Métis*, and *frontier*, which continue to frame the lived experience of their residents” (Miner 171).<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will explore these multiple dimensions of the forty-ninth parallel in Whoop-Up Country.<sup>4</sup> Carving out the interwoven histories of labor and violence, I want to retrace the US-Canada border’s function in forming and consolidating the two North American nations. The meaning of the Whoop-Up Trail may have faded into obscurity. However, as I will show, this border zone’s the hidden histories, geographies, and knowledges have survived and continue to resurface in the cultural imaginary. A series of writers have engaged in “deep mapping the Plains,”<sup>5</sup> capturing “within their narrative structures a complex web of information, interpretation, and storytelling” (Naramore Maher 7). For instance, Paul F. Sharp, Wallace Stegner, and most recently, Thomas King constitute heterogeneous border voices who have charted multi-dimensional (hi)stories of the northern Plains. Analyzing these multi-layered cartographic texts through the lens of bordertextures, I want to propose a view of borders that allows for an analysis of what Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks call the “details of memory,” that is “anecdotal, fragmentary, speculative . . . all those things which we might never regard as authentic history but which go to make up the deep map of the locale” (Pearson and Shanks 144).

3 The complicated historical situation is mirrored in the difficult act of naming groups of people in North American borderlands. The international boundary has also contributed to different naming practices. While terms like “Aboriginal” or “First Nations” are common in Canada, the term “Native American” is instead used in the US. I use the term “Indigenous,” a term which is used on both sides of the border, to refer to all peoples whose ancestors lived in North America prior to colonization. I sometimes use the term “Indigenous” interchangeably with “Natives.” Whenever I refer to the constructed, stereotyped, and objectified image of Indigenous peoples in North America, I use the term “Indian.”

4 Parts of this article have appeared in French in Fellner’s “Contre parallèles et méridiens.”

5 The concept of the deep map was put forth by William Least Heat-Moon, an American writer of English, Irish, and Osage ancestry. His book *PrairieErth: A Deep Map* (1991) is an intensive exploration of place, which gives more information than a two-dimensional map of places, names, and topography by including composite, multi-layered multimedia methodologies to investigate the cultural and historical geographies of Chase County, Kansas.

Bordertexturing<sup>6</sup> activates the deep map, laying bare a place's connection with other places and drawing attention to how its inhabitants have perceived these places and how these affective discourses have, in turn, created personal, social, and imaginary networks. Drawing attention to the formation of territories and bodies that are inherently interwoven, the act of bordertexturing turns the Canada-US border into a texture whose analysis necessarily requires a theorization of socioeconomic structures, institutions, and flows that have shaped this border as an instrument of colonial fantasies of nation building. My analysis of Paul F. Sharp's *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865–1885*, Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, and Thomas King's short story "Borders" then wants to proceed in a decolonial mode, attempting to look beyond the fixation on European settlers to include the knowledge systems of people constitutively erased from narratives of nations, territories, bodies, and borders.

#### THE CANADA-US AND THE US-MEXICO BORDERLANDS

While the US-Mexico border is often seen as the 'birthplace' of the field of Border Studies (Michaelson and Johnson 1) and has consequently been the subject of many critical analyses, the investigation of the Canada-US border, the 'other border,' has received less critical attention and is a relatively recent phenomenon (Konrad and Nicol 34–37). As many historians, geographers, and cultural studies critics have observed, there are crucial differences between the US-Mexico and the Canada-US borders as markers of national identifications. Where, as Bryce Traister has said, the history of the Southwest is a contested history that "has now become a unilaterally militarized struggle," the northern US border has a "history of economic exchange (and, in the nineteenth century, military conflict) which [...] has proceeded more or less peacefully and within the 'friendly' universe of modern and late capitalist social exchange-relations" (Traister 33). As he puts it:

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6 The concept of 'bordertextures,' together with the interpretative strategy of 'bordertexturing,' are currently being developed in the Working Group Bordertextures at the University of the Greater Region-Center for Border Studies at Saarland University in Saarbrücken, Germany. Proposing a theoretical foundation for analyzing borders, bordertexturing emphasizes an understanding of borders as (im)material structures consisting of practices and discourses with various social and cultural reference points. See AG Bordertexturen, Fellner's "Counter-Mapping," and Fellner's "Thinking from the Border."

So while *la Frontera*—the borderlands of the US Southwest/northern Mexico and the site of much recent theorizing of a post-national borderlands critique—solicits conceptualizations of a more fluid exchange of identity across borders, the northern United States/southern Canada border presents a different set of problems to negotiate and articulate as a critical borderlands practice. (33–34)

Part of this set of problems is a topographic imaginary that likens Canada to the border. As novelist and literary critic Robert Kroetsch has stated, “Canada is supremely a country of margins, beginning from the literal way in which almost every city borders on a wilderness” (Kroetsch 22). Marginality, “a life of shifting edges” (30), is part and parcel of Canadian self-understanding. Then, the Canada-US border is an important identity marker, a dividing line that also secures Canadian distinctiveness. Famously, W.H. New has said of the importance of borders in Canadian thought:

Borders, as sites of contestation [...] neither require nor guarantee fixed differences, or inevitably commit to the erasure of difference [...] the presence of the United States right next to Canada almost constantly presents Canadians with socio-political options: some of which they adopt, some they resist, and some they ... export. (New 27)

As a result, examining the Canada-US border or the US-Canada border is a remarkably different endeavor depending on the point of view of whether one looks at the border from a Canadian or a US-American perspective. This difference in the meaning of the border is also related to the fact that Canadian historians have defined the importance of the border and frontier development differently from US historians, investing it with a different ideological meaning. Where Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “Frontier Thesis” claimed that the exceptionalism of the United States was rooted in the country’s history of “westering,” Canadian historians viewed the expansion of the West “through the prism of ‘metropolitanism’” (Higham xiii). This theory, also referred to as “Staples Thesis” by Harold Innis, “states that the markets of the metropolises in Europe and eastern Canada shaped the economic and political development of the hinterlands. In other words, the desires and needs of the established regions drove and defined the creation and development of the West and/or North in Canada” (Higham xiii). As Innis explains: “The importance of metropolitan centers in which luxury goods were in most demand was crucial to the development of colonial North America” (Innis 4). The most important example that corroborated this theory was the development and significance of the fur trade in the Canadian

West. Innis's analysis of the material practices, the forces of transportation and trade, and the colonial relations between center and margin "originated with his research on the fur trade, which led him to focus on the development of the canoe, boat and rail routes that transported European commerce to the New World" (Berland 68). Two important and intertwined historical transformations resulted from this trade: "the development of increasingly rapid transport routes across the Canadian shield and eventually through the Pacific coast; and the emergence of a mercantile policy dedicated to the export of natural resources, or 'staples,' for external markets" (68).

What both Turner's 'Frontier Thesis' and Innis's 'Staple Thesis' of westward expansionism have in common is a focus on east-west connections and the importance of the westward movement in the development of the nations. Most crucially, both the Frontier Thesis and the Staple Thesis have ignored Indigenous perspectives, proclaiming each country's national success and justifying the conquest and dispossession of Native peoples who lived in the borderlands. While north-south exchanges, as the whiskey trade in nineteenth-century Whoop-Up Country shows, were still important in the pre-national era, they were relegated to obscurity when the international boundary was established. The border bisected native land, and the new nations enforced their territorial claims by developing strong east-west connections. In the years that followed, the drawing of the boundary line, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and the rise of other communication technologies like the telegraph and newspapers enabled rapid expansion. "Such technologies," as Berland explains, "mediate ontologically between power, and knowledge and spatially between center and periphery," facilitating "both the spread of empire and the reorganization of cultures within its reach" (74). Before long, Indigenous claims to land, local traditions, and native forms of knowledge "collapsed before the pecuniary and technical advantages of the European explorers, and the land, along with its use, was profoundly altered" (69).

Therefore, imperial expansion and establishing national borders interrupt time and space, and these breaks are often marked by trauma. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa has described the US-Mexico border as "*una herida abierta*," an open wound, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25). This image of the violent character of the boundary line dominates the current imagination of the US-Mexico border. By contrast, the Canada-US border has been viewed as a benevolent, peaceful border for a long time. This reputation goes back to the 1870s and 1880s when the interna-

tional boundary came to signify political refuge from the American government on the Canadian side and the Canadian on the US side. Sitting Bull and the Sioux famously fled across the border after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Louis Riel, in turn, fled South of the border to the US. There were countless others for whom crossing the border meant sanctuary.<sup>7</sup>

In popular tradition, the border came to be nicknamed 'the Medicine Line' in recognition of the boundary's power to mark different jurisdictions. For Northern Plains Natives, the word "medicine" referred to objects with magical power, and the term was adopted to suggest that the boundary line possessed strong medicine. While for the Europeans, the international boundary stood for the establishment of two different legal systems, the border was also seen as a "road" by the Indigenous population, a "path of something living," an "instrument of camouflage, a stay against the erosion of life that had begun decades earlier" (LaDow, *The Medicine Line* 41). According to Tony Rees, the Sioux probably started to use this term after Sitting Bull sought refuge across the border after the Battle of the Little Bighorn (5). While it is unclear when exactly or by whom the term Medicine Line was first used, Beth LaDow quotes a Mohawk scholar who believes that the term originated with the Iroquois Confederacy in the East as early as the 1760s when, during the Seven Years' War, one group of Mohawk attempted to persuade another to come back to the confederacy. As La Dow explains: "They promised to police this line in order to prevent the whites from warring with each other, and represented the medicine line on their wampum belts as a white line between two black lines" (41). Conspicuously, while in the late nineteenth century, for a brief moment, some Indigenous people found refuge and power in the medicine line, as the border began to take shape, it became a dividing line, bifurcating Blackfoot country in northern Montana and southern Alberta.

Interestingly enough, the idea of a 'wild' American West has remained in popular imagination, which is contrasted to a peaceful, orderly Canadian West and the Canada-US border as a guarantor of sanctuary. As LaDow has stated, "Sitting Bull's description of Canada as the benevolent 'white mother' and the United States as the evil 'white father' was a simple and lasting scheme" (LaDow, "Sanctuary" 73). Furthermore, while the US Army and the Texas Rangers on the US-Mexican border have come to serve "as symbols

7 Charles Card and his Mormon brethren also went to Canada. Among the refuge-seeking people were also many deserters of both the US Army and Canada's Mounted Police (Morris Peter 157).



for a brutal, racist white conquest of the American West,” the North-West Mounted Police have managed to be viewed as “the benevolent authority of the Canadian frontier” (73).

As history has shown, however, border wounds have also been inflicted on the Canada-US border. The world’s longest undefended border, as it was referred to for a long time, can be renamed “the world’s longest *secure* border after the attacks of 11 September 2001” (Conway and Pasch 3). Border violations occur everywhere, also in places “sometimes overlooked as staid, such as the northern Great Plains and the Prairies, which may appear to people on the coasts as fly-over country” (3). While the much-studied US-Mexico border “appears to find its remedy in the sanctuary offered north of the forty-ninth parallel” (Roberts 15), recent interventions from Indigenous, African-Canadian, and Latin American perspectives have drawn attention to Canada’s troubled history and complicity in colonialism and neocolonialism, refiguring Canada as “a site of privilege and power rather than its nationalist sense of disempowerment vis-à-vis the United States” (19).

#### BORDERTEXTURING THE FORTY-NINTH PARALLEL

In order to analyze this complexity and carve out the multi-dimensionality of the forty-ninth parallel, I want to introduce an approach that allows for the analysis of the interrelated material and ideological workings of bordering practices. Drawing from Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s proposal to analyze borders not simply as objects of study, but, through concepts such as labor, also as methods, the following analysis of some key border texts of the northern Plains borderlands attempts to offer an analysis of the bordertextures of Whoop-Up Country. Following Mezzadra/Neilson, borders can be viewed as social methods of division and multiplication; they both divide geographical and social space and multiply social differences. Bordertexturing then attempts to outline the different methods with which the border both separates and constitutes space, obstructs global flows, and channels movement. Playing a key role in “producing the times and spaces of global capitalism,” borders shape “the struggles that rise within and against these times and spaces” (Mezzadra and Neilson 4). For Mezzadra and Neilson, the study of borders as a method “is above all a question of politics, about the kinds of social worlds and subjectivities produced at the border and the ways that thought and knowledge can intervene in these processes of production” (17). Viewing the border as an “epistemic angle” (viii), bordertexturing then means listening to the varied stories of the border and conduct-



ing a deep mapping of the borderlands, which picks up on differently orchestrated heteroglossic border voices. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks describe deep maps in the following way:

Reflecting eighteenth century antiquarian approaches to place, which included history, folklore, natural history and hearsay, the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place. (Pearson and Shanks 64–65)

Bordertexturing strives to carve out stories that address the “depth of place” (65), which is the depth of borderlands, in our case. It gives voice to the border as a viewpoint that “allows an acute critical analysis not only of how relations of domination, dispossession, and exploitation are being redefined presently but also of the struggles that take shape around these changing relations” (Mezzadra and Neilson 18). As such, bordertexturing can expose what Walter D. Mignolo has called “border thinking” (64). Crediting, in turn, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, border thinking, for Mignolo, does not only entail the study of actual territorial borders but rather constitutes an epistemic framework for the geopolitics of knowledge and power. Referring to the creativity and energy that emerge from subaltern subject positions, thinking *through* or *from* the border rather than thinking *about* it, according to Mignolo, exposes the colonial underside of Western modernity.

While the works of Mezzadra/Neilson and Mignolo have shaped the theoretical underpinnings of bordertexturing, my understanding of this concept also has evident genealogical roots in two concrete borderlands practices, one from the US-Mexican and the other from the Canada-US borderlands. Combining ideas and concepts from Chican@ Studies and decolonial thinking, bordertexturing also draws attention to how border thinking can give rise to alternative forms of this border zone knowledges. Concretely, the metaphor of textures takes its creative force from Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, in which she refers to her border writing as a “mosaic” or “weaving pattern.” Describing her text as writing that threatens to “spill over the boundaries” and that offers a “hybridization of metaphor [...] full of variations and seeming contradictions,” Anzaldúa stresses that it refuses the neat dichotomy of “deep structure” and “smooth surfaces” in its “central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance” (88). It is this weaving practice that performs the labor of border thinking. The weaving patterns that appear and disappear “in a crazy dance”

provide the epistemic angle from which my understanding of the concept of bordertextures derives its creative potential and radical force. The metaphor of weaving, I argue, is constitutive of the act of bordertexturing, which can be seen as a performative process of creating a thickly amalgamated web of corporeal and other disciplinary discourses that form a dense border texture.

My understanding of bordertexturing also owes much to the First Nation epistemological tradition of wampum belts, which function as important documentary, legal, and cultural records according to the Haudenosaunee tradition. The historic Two Row Wampum Belt is a woven beaded belt, which is an early seventeenth-century treaty of friendly coexistence and mutual respect between Haudenosaunee and Europeans. Originating in 1613, the Two Row Wampum Treaty has two purple bands, symbolizing the two parallel paths taken by two ships, one of the Haudenosaunee and the other of the Europeans (Morris, “Running the Medicine Line” 555). In this belt, as Birgit Brander Rasmussen explains, “the Haudenosaunee recorded an early agreement with European settlers to be ‘like brothers’ rather than ‘like father and son’—metaphoric language that means to interact as distinct, equal, and sovereign nations” (Rasmussen 72). Central to diplomacy, the Haudenosaunee have held wampum belts as the authoritative records of agreement until today. Crucially, used as mnemonic devices in the ratification of treaties, wampum belts constitute alternative forms of knowledge, what Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo have termed “alternative literacies,” which have “the potential to radically disrupt a colonial legacy maintained by narrow definitions of writing and literacy” (10). They function as important archival records, which store the knowledges of the borderlands, retaining the alterity of an uncompromised Indigenous presence.

The Two Row Wampum belt and Anzaldúa’s weaving logic inform my conceptualization of bordertexturing. In the following sections, I want to re-read and cross-read selected historical events and texts that were important in making the national border between Canada and the US with First Nation histories and stories. Exposing the interwoven and continuous existences in the borderlands, I also intend to reveal the historical and cultural politics of exclusion in making the forty-ninth parallel.

WHOOPIING-UP THE FORTY-NINTH PARALLEL: PAUL F. SHARP'S  
WHOOPI-UP COUNTRY AND WALLACE STEGNER'S WOLF WILLOW

Review of *International American Studies*

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, Whoop-Up Country was an isolated area in the West that spread over present-day Montana in the US and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. After the United States had acquired the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, Thomas Jefferson suggested a boundary at 49 degrees North latitude as the northern line of the Louisiana Purchase (LaDow, *The Medicine Line* 2). In 1818, British and American diplomats agreed on this border to separate the US from British territory from Lake of the Woods to the Rockies. When the Lewis and Clark expedition arrived in the area, they found the Prairies at the northern edge of the Louisiana territory dry and uninviting to settlers. "This Country may with propriety I think be termed the Deserts of America, as I do not think it can ever be settled," was the judgment that Clark noted in the journal entry for May 26, 1805 (Thwaites, Vol. 2, 84). Lewis wrote on July 17, 1806, comparing the plains to an ocean: "I steered my course through the wide and level plains which have somewhat the appearance of an ocean, not a tree nor a shrub to be seen" (Vol. 5, 205). As Paul F. Sharp has noted, the ocean metaphor turned out to be an image many settler colonists used.<sup>8</sup> As he writes:

The undulating swells rolling away to distant horizons like restless waves, the vast solitudes resembling the ocean wastes, the unlimited vision of the daylight hours and the myriads of bright stars during the night watches suggested the ocean environment, even to unimaginative travelers. (Sharp 11)

Before the railroad's completion on either side of the border, which made east-west connections possible,<sup>9</sup> this ocean-like grassland area was "one horizon-stretching singularity" (Rees 4). Between the Hudson's Bay Company's surrender of the North-West Territories to the Canadian government in 1870 and the arrival of the North-West Mounted Police in 1874—followed by the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway—Whoop-Up Country became a haven for outlaws, fugitives from justice, and deserters from the American Civil War. After the Montana territory in the US was garrisoned, the area was policed, and contraband trade in liquor was pushed North

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8 Sharp cites the British explorer Captain William F. Butler, who also compared the vast area of the Great Plains to an ocean, saying that this "[...] ocean is one of grass" (Butler 199, qtd. in Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country* 11).

9 The Northern Pacific Railway arrived in Helena, Montana, in 1883, while the Canadian Pacific Railway made it to Calgary in 1884.

of the border. As a result, whiskey traders from the South of the border seeking to exchange liquor for buffalo robes set up their trading posts on the banks of the Belly River near present-day Lethbridge, Alberta. "The ribald name of Whoop-Up became a generality, more a description of the region than of the Fort itself—an autonomous duchy untouchable by law," writes Gordon E. Tolton, the biographer of John J. Healy, the notorious proprietor of Fort Whoop-Up (Tolton 116). Fort Benton, the American Fur Company post located at the head of the Missouri River navigation, was the hub of Whoop-Up Country, and the Whoop-Up Trail tied it neatly to the prairie commerce up North.

In historiography, Whoop-Up Country has been most famously chronicled by Paul F. Sharp. His 1955 study, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865–1885*, is an interesting example of a regional history that focuses on this "shared Canadian-American borderland" (Morris, "Regional Ideas" 472). The book explores the late 1860s and 1870s trans-border whiskey trade and is a detailed study of the Whoop-Up Trail. This is how Sharp describes the trail:

Despite its rowdy name, this half-forgotten highway once brought trade and culture into a great interior market stretching northward from the Missouri River to the Bow River Valley. From Fort Benton on the Great Muddy to Fort Macleod on the Oldman, it reached into the North, writing history in whiskey, guns, furs, freight, and pioneer enterprise. (Sharp 3)

Fort Whoop-Up, the original Fort Hamilton, was "a notorious rendezvous for whiskey traders at the junction of the Bow and Belly rivers" (McKenna 86). The origin of the name Whoop-Up is as mysterious as some of the whiskey trading tall tales which were spun like wild yarns. As the story goes, a frontiersman who was in Fort Benton to buy supplies was asked, "How's trade?" The reply supposedly was: "We're a whoopin' it up" (Turner 46). As Tolton explains, the phrase 'whoop'n it up'—referring to rowdy behavior—was in everyday use at the time, and 'bullwhackers' manning the freight wagons would call out 'Whoop-it-up!' when they wanted the bulls to pick up the pace" (108). Sharp says that some claim that the name came from "traders whose fast, six-horse wagons 'whooped it up' for the boundary to avoid both police and army patrols" (Sharp 49). He also states that the phrase "whoop you up" means "to be rounded up" (49). The name stuck, and soon "official government maps, both Canadian and American, marked the wagon road into Canada as the Whoop-Up Trail," and the entire region was referred to as Whoop-Up Country (50). As the success story of this trading post spread, other forts were set up,

echoing the name Whoop-Up by employing monikers such as “Slideout, Slough Bottom, Robber’s Roost, and Standoff” (Tolton 117).

Sharp points out that it is impossible to write “an accurate history of these colorful little forts” (46). Many of the stories that emerged from Whoop-Up Country were exaggerated, combining fact with fiction. They have become part of the extensive mythic repertoire of the West. “Tall tales of garrulous old-timers and lively imaginations of colorful writers nourished the myth to formidable proportions,” writes Sharp (107). The Western writer Bertha Muzzy Sinclair, better known by her pseudonym B.M. Bower has undoubtedly contributed to this myth. In 1933, for instance, she also wrote a dime novel, *The Whoop-Up Trail*, in which she told the story of a young man named Chip Bennet, who sets out along the Whoop-Up Trail in search of his older brother.

All these stories have fed into the creation of the lasting myth of the West. Sharp’s historical analysis, however, also zooms in on the economic struggles of this region. He elaborates on how the Hudson’s Bay Company, the North West Fur Company, and the American Fur Company each struggled to assert their rights and claims to the regions and how the Sioux and Blackfoot resented intrusions and struggled for survival. Offering a detailed chronology of the “massacre at Cypress Hills” in chapter 4, Sharp also writes about Sitting Bull’s flight (chap. 12). In the chapter “One People, Divided,” he quotes the observation by Police Commissioner Gilbert M. Sproat, who in 1878 summed up the dilemma of the Blackfoot people: “The Indians north and south of the International boundary are one people, severed politically by an invisible line” (133). When in 1882, he states, the American government “acted unilaterally to end the free movement of Canadian Indians and half-breeds across the boundary,” the forty-ninth parallel became a barrier to the Indigenous population: “From that time onward the Blackfeet were truly one people divided by an invisible line” (156).

When it appeared in 1955, Sharp’s transborder study was well received, but it quickly fell out of favor as a localized account of a specific area. From today’s point of view, the book clearly is dated: it is essentialist and, in many ways, condescending to the Indigenous population. I do not want to rehabilitate Sharp’s study within the larger American and Canadian West historiography. Instead, I aim to show that in offering a history of a particular segment of the Great Plains, which lies astraddle the Canada-US border, this book constitutes an interesting border voice that, by zooming in on north-south connections, has departed from many national histories. At the same time, however, it has also eclipsed other voices, notably Indigenous perspectives.

As Aaron L. Barth has said, Sharp shifted Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier model north across the forty-ninth parallel. In doing so, Sharp turned Turner's national model into a transborder one, describing the two-decade history of the trail (Barth 2012). Sharp's words clearly sound like Turner's when he states: "Here on the northern plains, the two great streams of Anglo-Saxon pioneering that had pushed across the continent finally reached their last west in the same environment" (Turner 8). As Johnson and Graybill explain, when the book came out in 1955, it was initially favorably received in the US. However, Sharp was criticized by Canadian historians "for emphasizing the regional unity of the northern Great Plains" (Johnson and Graybill 12). The dominant school of Canadian history around Harold Innis at that time "stressed the economic links between the eastern core of the nation and its western hinterlands, leaving little room for north-south connections and making it easy for Sharp's more politically oriented account to be treated as a regional, and not national, story" (Johnson and Graybill 12). Sharp's study, however, provides a good insight into the boundary-making process of the Medicine line, also showing that embedded in the power struggles over control of the land were also efforts to contain and suppress alternative understandings of territoriality and sovereignty of Indigenous communities. The separation and division of myths into national frameworks—that of the orderly Canadian hinterland and the American Wild West—pushes other stories into the background. Sharp, for instance, adds a footnote to the history of Whoop-Up Country, a trivia fact which, although part of the multi-layered bordertextures of this cross-border region, has long been forgotten. Before the Canadian Pacific Railroad was completed, mail from Macleod and other Canadian settlements in the area went East through Fort Benton, bearing United States postage stamps. The Canadian Fort Macleod even had a United States post office on Canadian soil (Sharp 188). With the completion of the railroad, Macleod and its surrounding Whoop-Up Country experienced a reorientation "onto a new all-Canadian axis" (Morris, "Fort MacLeod" 153). The accumulated knowledge of the borderlands, the stories and experiences of the many frontiers people who used the border to their advantage, and the many Indigenous people whose lives were affected by the settler colonists together with the detrimental effects that colonialization and settlement had on the natural environment, flora, and fauna, has all too often been dismissed in the dominant national versions of the settlement of the Prairies.

In the same year as Sharp's history of Whoop-Up Country appeared, Wallace Stegner started to write his memoir *Wolf Willow*—which,

unlike Sharp's book that was concerned with how the border came into being and how it affected an area, focused on the border as a marker of a clear difference between Canada and the US. Whereas Sharp's book presents itself as a history of the region, which, however, also relies on the techniques of storytelling, Stegner's text is "history filtered through the evocative and judgmental mind (and memory) of the region's most illustrious native son" (Stegner xi–xii). Consequently, the Penguin edition of the book is called *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. Stegner spent the time from 1914 to 1920 growing up in southwestern Saskatchewan in a town called Eastend, a homestead lying 70 kilometers south of this town, right on the Saskatchewan-Montana border. By the time Stegner's parents took their sons to homestead on the Saskatchewan-Montana border at the beginning of the twentieth century, the settler colonists' dream of founding a new society, as Frederick Jackson Turner had described it, began to fade, and his family's experience of homesteading was a disillusioning one. Droughts and frigid winters destroyed the crops and decimated livestock, and the Stegner family had to give up and leave. In 1920, Stegner's father briefly turned to a border-crossing activity that Whoop-Up Country was familiar with: smuggling bootleg liquor. This time, the direction was, however, reversed: after the passage of the Volstead Act in the US, whiskey was smuggled into the now dry Montana from Canada (xvii–xviii). In the end, though, Stegner concludes, Whitemud, the fictionalized town of Eastend, was a failure, a place that was "dead, dead, dead" (296) and could only be seen as "an object lesson in the naïveté of the American hope of a new society" (287).

Being "engaged in a deep mapping of the place" (Naramore Maher 7) and offering a good example of bordertexturing, Stegner carefully weaves together fiction and nonfiction, history and personal impressions, childhood remembrance, and adult reflections. Set in the Cypress Hills, *Wolf Willow* brings to life both the pioneer community and its magnificent landscape. As he describes the beauty of the land:

The drama of this landscape is in the sky, pouring with light and always moving. The earth is passive. And yet the beauty I am struck by, both as present fact and as revived memory is a fusion: this sky would not be so spectacular without this earth to change and glow and darken under it. (Stegner 7)



Stegner's account is framed by his telling of a visit as a "middle-aged pilgrim" (5) back to the town he calls Whitemud in his memoir. At the beginning of his visit, he describes a walk around the town during which he tries to elicit memories, which come back in a moment of sensory experience of the land's "remembered textures" (6). "It is wolf willow, and not the town or anyone in it, that brings me home" (19), writes Stegner, recalling the "tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell" (18) of this shrub. His story is an "embodied narrative" (Naramore Maher 8) or what Kristie S. Fleckenstein has termed a "somatic" text, that is, writing that "recognizes the cultural, historical, and ecological systems that penetrate and reconstitute these material places" (281). Weaving together a narrative that emerges from the place and is embodied in the immediate experiences of the writer, Stegner admits that his "own recollections cover only a fragment; and yet it strikes me that this is *my* history" (Stegner 20, emphasis in the original), Stegner writes a memoir with healing powers against his previous feeling of "discontinuity." When he lived in the Cypress Hills as a young boy, the adult Stegner remembers, "I did not even know I lived there, and hadn't the faintest notion of who had lived there before me" (27). He blames his feeling of alienation and displacement on the experience of his family's failure as homesteaders and on the broken dreams of settler colonialists when they discover the harsh realities of the West: "Once discovered, history is not likely to be lost. But the first generation of children to grow up in a newly settled country do not ordinarily discover their history, and so they are the prime sufferers of discontinuity" (111). Stegner's bordertextures restore not only his memories but also local history, countering the process of forgetting.

The metaphor of the map functions as the guiding rod of Stegner's project, and the book correspondingly begins with a map: "An ordinary road map of the United States, one that for courtesy's sake includes the first hundred miles on the Canadian side of the Line, will show two roads, graded but not paved, reaching up into western Saskatchewan to link US 2 with Canada 1, the Trans-Canada Highway" (3). It immediately becomes clear that Stegner writes from a US perspective. Generally considered a US-American writer, Stegner's stay on the Canada-US border was only a brief episode in his life, albeit, as the book shows, the most formative time. Returning to Cypress Hills through the writing of this book, the adult narrator can then finally say, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from" (23). As his son writes in the introduction to the book, "it is clear that this historical memoir

is, above all, a conscious attempt to define a *who* out of the excavation of a childhood *where*" (xiv, emphasis in original).

The Medicine line is an important factor in this narrative (re-)construction of his sense of himself. He explains that "the forty-ninth parallel ran directly through my childhood, dividing me in two" (81). The border shaped the young boy's upbringing: the textbooks used in school were Canadian and published in Toronto, but in the summer, he celebrated the Fourth of July and Labor Day (81–83). Nonetheless, as it becomes clear, the border divided people, exerting "uncomprehended pressures upon affiliation and belief, custom and costume" (84). As he sums up: "The forty-ninth parallel was an agreement, a rule, a limitation, a fiction perhaps but a legal one, acknowledged by both sides; and the coming of the law, even such limited law as this, was the beginning of civilization in what had been a lawless wilderness" (85). The border was "less a boundary than a zone" (85), he states, and although there "was no telling where the precise line lay" (85), the border did have a dividing effect. Stegner also makes out the division when it comes to the policing of the line. Because of the contrasting coats of the US Army and the Mounted Police, the border was clearly visible:

One of the most visible aspects of the international boundary was that it was a color line: blue below, red above, blue for treachery and unkept promises, red for protection and the straight tongue. That is not quite the way a scrupulous historian would report it, for if Canada had been settled first, and the American West had remained empty, the situation might well have been reversed. (101–102)

Essentialism and prejudices aside, Stegner's account reflects the dividing character of the international boundary, which, if we consider the national focus of (his)stories North and South of the border that have been written about the Prairies, really has also been an intellectual border that few scholars and writers crossed.

Stegner acknowledges that the completion of the boundary drawing in Whoop-Up Country in 1874 had the most immediate effect on the Natives, who, as he says, "can see the last years of the Plains frontier with the distance of history and with the passion of personal loss and defeat" (112). Writing about the power of the medicine line, he explains:

It turned out that the Line which *should* not be crossed by raiding Indians literally *could* not be crossed by uniformed pursuers, and generally

wasn't crossed even by the un-uniformed ones. The medicine of the line of cairns was very strong. [...] The red coats of the Mounties [...] came only to the Medicine Line, like stars that rise only a certain distance into the sky. (97–98)

We know, however, that this line that crossed Whoop-Up Country and which bifurcated Indigenous territories not only provided sanctuary but also inflicted deep wounds. We also know that the Cypress Hills witnessed massive cruelty and violence. It was here that a band of American wolfers out of Fort Benton in Montana killed twenty-four Indigenous people in 1873. The Cypress Hills massacre and the arrival of Chief Sitting Bull, who escaped across the border to Canada after defeating Lt.-Col. George Custer, in 1876, focused international attention on this particular stretch of the border for years.

Dominant (hi)stories have often framed Indigenous experience as ongoing victimization, and Sharp's *Whoop-Up Country* and Stegner's *Wolf Willow* are no exception. By approaching the history of Whoop-Up Country with a focus on "necropolitics" (Mbembe 11), both Sharp and Stegner reenact those acts of extinction, perpetuating the silencing of Indigenous voices. However, in my sketch of the bordertextures of Whoop-Up Country, I want to show how Indigenous knowledge has prevailed and how writers have contributed to the web-making of the multiple layers and strings of bordertextures by exposing the fault lines and cracks in the dominant myths. The works of Thomas King, for instance, function as powerful alternative narratives, which hark back to hidden stories in the archive of the narratives of Whoop-Up Country. Here in these borderlands of what was formerly called Whoop-Up Country, Thomas King has set his short story with the apt and simple title "Borders."

THE "OTHER" BORDER:  
On Canada/US Culture,  
Power, and Politics

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#### BORDERCROSSINGS: THOMAS KING'S "BORDERS"

Criticizing colonialism and racism as part of decolonial struggles and focusing on enduring lives, Indigenous writers have created stories that focus on what Gerald Vizenor has called "survivance" strategies, practices that promote a sense of presence over historical absence (vii). Thomas King is undoubtedly one of the best-known writers of the Canada-US border who has exposed the forty-night parallel as "a figment of someone else's imagination" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 13), even though it bears the realities of sociopolitical, cultural, and psychic consequences. Both his life and his writings have constituted forms of border transgressions. As I have argued

elsewhere, his “entire oeuvre can be read across the US-Canadian border because, as a First Nation writer, he criticizes national borders imposed by imperial nations as artificial and imaginary” (Fellner 60). King is of Greek, German, and Cherokee ancestry; he was born in the US but moved to Canada and now holds Canadian citizenship. His cultural affiliation qualifies him as a border writer, because “as an ‘American’ Cherokee who moved to Canada, he can be a Canadian writer and a Native writer, but he cannot be a Canadian Native writer because the Cherokees are not ‘native’ to Canada” (Andrews and Walton 605). Shifting the attention away from traditional forms of storytelling, his narratives are embodied forms of knowledge production, comprising a postmodern pastiche of cultural counter-narratives. Oral tales, his stories insist, can transform the “story of an imaginary border” (Miner 2013, 176). His stories show that the forty-ninth parallel can be redrawn and undrawn by writers. The Medicine line “*can* have good medicine, especially when disarticulated from their Euro-western sociopolitical contexts” (177).

In his short story “Borders,” a Blackfoot woman refuses to identify as either Canadian or US American and insists on giving her citizenship as Blackfoot. She gets stuck between border checkpoints with her son for a few days until they are finally allowed passage into the US after a television crew appears and broadcasts their story. The story is told from the point of view of the son, who has grown up on the Alberta Blackfoot Reserve, which is located directly on the border.<sup>10</sup> The border runs not only through the territory but also directly through the family. The boy’s father was born on the US side of the forty-ninth parallel, and the boy says, “Dad’s American, [...] so I can go and come as I please” (King 131). While his mother was born on the Canadian side, his sister has moved to Utah, and at the beginning of the story, the mother and son want to travel to Utah to visit her.

King’s story is “paradigmatic for the complex ways in which he addresses the issues that the forty-ninth parallel raises for Indigenous peoples” (Sarkowsky 218). The culminating point of the story is when they are waiting in the area between the two different border posts. When asked about her citizenship, the mother answers “Blackfoot” (King 1993, 135). The mother insists on her Blackfoot identity and citizenship, enacting a “decolonizing border-crossing” (Andrews and Walton 609), drawing attention to the rights of Indigenous

10 The Blackfoot of Montana were given an official reservation in 1874, which, however, was made smaller over the next twenty years. The Blackfoot in Alberta signed Treaty No. 7 in 1877 (cf. McManus 111).

border crossings guaranteed by the Jay Treaty.<sup>11</sup> “Just to keep our records straight,” insists the border official, “what side do you come from?” (King 135), to which the mother simply responds, “Blackfoot side” (136). As the drawing of the forty-ninth parallel cuts right into and through Blackfoot territory, the mother is right: it is her ancestors’ land and the border guard’s request that the boy and his mother “have to go back to where [they] came from” (137) completely misses the point. The whole situation is all the more painful as dividing the Blackfoot territory was a deliberate move in the late nineteenth century to ensure better population control. Commissioner Steele of the North-West Mounted Police, for instance, believed that:

Canadian Blackfoot [...] would be more manageable if they could not mingle freely with their American confederates, and so a strip of land on the southern side of the promised reserve [...] was confiscated and made available for not-Native settlement (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 124).

The border dilemma is resolved through the intrusion of the trickster Coyote, who seems to do his magic. Stuck in the duty-free between the border posts, mother and son watch the stars, and the mother tells a trickster story. “You see all those stars,” she said. “When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to take me and my sisters out on the prairies and tell us stories about all the stars. [...] Coyote went fishing, one day. That’s how it all started” (King 142). The next morning, media people arrive, the mother’s Blackfoot citizenship is recognized, and the mother and son are allowed to cross the border. Although the connection between the trickster and the influence of media pressure on the border patrol agents is only insinuated, it is clear that Coyote has interfered, as traditionally “[t]rickster border narratives portray the second coming of Trickster, who returns with the potential to reorder the chaos of the frontier for Native Americans” (Groover Lape 15). For a brief moment, the mother’s Blackfoot citizenship is acknowledged, and “the borderlands are thus briefly recognized as Blackfoot country spanning and overwriting the national border between Canada and the US” (Sarkowsky 20).

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11 After the newly founded United States established a border with the British Empire in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, the Jay Treaty of 1794 should settle boundary disputes, mitigating the effects of the recently established boundary line on the Native peoples who suddenly found their lands bisected by an international border. Article Three of the Jay Treaty secured the right of free passage for Natives.

In this story, the mother fails to comply with settler colonialist logic and “aligns herself with her own conception of a nation” (Roberts 128). Surely, from a dominant Western point of view, this Blackfoot woman fails to subordinate herself to the national logic of settler colonizers. However, her failure to comply with settler rules and her refusal to locate herself within the logic of the nation state not only constitutes an act of resistance but also works as an insistence on a form of being in the world that Audra Simpson calls “the hard labor of hanging on to territory, defining and fighting for your rights, negotiating and maintaining governmental and gendered forms of power” (Simpson 3). The fault lines that King’s story exposes and renders visible activate border thinking, constituting a powerful counter-narrative that offers new tactics for cultural survival.

### CONCLUSION: THE BORDER—AN UNEXPLAINED GUEST

Following the entangled histories of labor, violence, and cruelty, my sketch of the bordertextures of a particular stretch of the forty-ninth parallel—Whoop-Up Country—has analyzed the palimpsestic rewritings of the stories of these borderlands in both dominant, mainstream texts like Paul F. Sharp’s *Whoop-Up Country* and Wallace Stegner’s *Wolf Willow* as well as subaltern texts of territorialities and corporealities like Thomas King’s short story “Borders.” These texts show that many people were driven to the northern Plains borderlands, “their last, best hope—the Indians for escape and refuge, the settlers for the open western lands that seemed nearly gone—and lived a common story of hardship, disappointment, failure and, in fewer cases than not, persistence” (LaDow, *The Medicine Line* 3). The contest over territory and questions of rights and sovereignty did not end in the national era; in fact, it has continued until today. Nevertheless, the character of Whoop-Up Country changed so dramatically at the end of the nineteenth century that the name fell into disuse. Still, its legacy endures. The reconstruction of the old fort near Lethbridge, Alberta, and the annual Whoop-Up Days festivities testify to the lasting spirit of this turbulent era. It should also serve as a reminder of a history of violence and appropriation.

As Beth LaDow has stated, the forty-ninth parallel “appears like a quiet and unexplained guest in North American history, with its seemingly arbitrary straight line, slightly mysterious origin, and hazy significance, and to none more so than North America’s Native peoples, whose territories it divided” (LaDow, “Sanctuary” 65). As fur trade empires crumbled, as the buffalo were hunted down

to near extinction, and as rival settler colonial empires consolidated their claims, the relations between the Indigenous peoples and the settler colonists deteriorated. Nation-making went hand in hand with bordering processes, hinging on “subverting the sovereignty of Indigenous people and incorporating them as domestic subjects in new nation-states” (Hogue 5). The Medicine Line, in what was called Whoop-Up Country in the nineteenth century, only forms a small part of the Canada-US border. Its cultural and symbolic significance cannot, however, be underestimated, as it also testifies to the fact that Native understandings of the border were different and mostly incongruous with settler colonialists’ views. Natives, as Brenden W. Rensink has stated, had always negotiated boundaries but viewed them rather as “shared buffer zones” than sharply defined lines on a map (Rensink 44). When Indigenous peoples did recognize the border, it was in its meaning as the Medicine Line. Using it to their advantage because they knew that US and Canadian officials would stop at the border, Indigenous peoples, however, felt that they should be able to cross it freely. “Few factors,” as Rensink has it, “transformed the nature of North American borderlands and international boundaries more rapidly than Native disregard for ‘the line’” (12). King’s short story “Borders” shows how Indigenous people continue to resist an ideology of containment, denying the authority of the borders to restrict their movements and insisting upon their freedom to reimagine themselves within shifting and fluid borderlands. His characters demonstrate that history can be revisited and endings can be rewritten.

*Abstract:* This article focuses on “Whoop-Up Country” in the Canadian/American West, analyzing a series of multi-layered cartographic texts through the lens of bordertextures. While the meaning of the Whoop-Up Trail may have faded into obscurity, the hidden histories, geographies, and knowledges of this border zone have survived and continue to resurface in the cultural imaginary. Zooming in on texts by Paul F. Sharp, Wallace Stegner, and Thomas King, the analysis carves out the multi-dimensional (hi)stories of the Canada-US border that account for the complexity of North American borderlands.

*Keywords:* Canada-US border, border thinking, bordertexturing, deep map, Whoop-Up Country

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