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Visualizing the Canada-US Border: Comic Adaptations of Wayde Compton's "The Blue Road" and Thomas King's "Borders"

GILLIAN ROBERTS

RECENTLY, CANADA-US BORDER TEXTS from the 1990s that represent the difficulties of border crossing for Indigenous and Black people have been revisited through adaptation into comics, namely the short story "Borders" by Thomas King, the Canadian writer of Greek and Cherokee descent, collected in *One Good Story, That One* (1993), and Black British Columbian poet Wayde Compton's short prose piece "The Blue Road," originally published in his first poetry collection, *49th Parallel Psalm* (1999). *The Blue Road* adaptation was the first to appear, in 2019, illustrated by Filipino Canadian artist April dela Noche Milne. *Borders* was published as a comic in 2021, illustrated by Métis artist Natasha Donovan. Compton's narrative presents an allegorized version of the Canada-US border in which the protagonist, Lacuna, seeks to cross into "the Northern Kingdom," and King depicts thwarted attempts by the unnamed Blackfoot narrator and his mother, travelling to visit his sister in Salt Lake City, to cross from Canada to the United States when his mother declares their citizenship as "Blackfoot."

The Canada-US border and its imbrication in the policing of Indigenous and Black people particularly has been the subject of many border texts, among them other works by King (e.g., *Green Grass, Running Water* [1993]; *Truth and Bright Water* [1997]) and Compton (the poems of *49th Parallel Psalm* [1999]; *Performance Bond* [2004]).¹ The reimagining of King's and Compton's late-twentieth-century narratives as twenty-first-century comics, two decades after their initial publication as short prose texts, enables us to trace both the continuities of border-crossing concerns for Black and Indigenous communities and more recent developments, such as, in relation to Black migration to Canada, the period from 2012 to the present, "[an] era of neoliberal immigration and asylum" (Vernon 11), and movements of Indigenous resurgence, as

in *Idle No More*. Whereas Compton's narrative portrays the experiences of undocumented migrants and second-class citizens via its protagonist, King's short story examines the challenges that Indigeneity poses to the settler-colonial nation-state and its artificial boundaries. The comic versions of these prose texts enable additional, visual explorations of the arbitrariness of nation-state borders, especially in contrast to the natural world. The adaptation of *The Blue Road* also features updates to the narrative. In contrast, the narrative of *Borders* remains virtually identical to its source text, but the visual representation of King's story emphasizes the imposition of settler-colonial borders on Indigenous land and the perpetual threat of state violence at the Canada-US border; it also enhances the relationship between the narrator's mother and his sister. Combining the fields of comic studies, border studies, and adaptation studies, in this article I contend that both comic adaptations attest to the ongoing relevance of these texts while producing new versions for the twenty-first century. *The Blue Road* and *Borders* powerfully illustrate — literally and figuratively — the continuing violence of the Canada-US border and the failures of Canadian hospitality; moreover, they invite us to rethink the category of citizenship and consider instead the possibilities of relation.

Adaptation and Canadian Comics

In their incarnations as comics, the twenty-first-century versions of "The Blue Road" and "Borders" not only offer narratives of crossing the Canada-US border — in allegorized and literal form, respectively — but also invoke the Canada-US border at the level of medium. As Brenna Clarke Gray argues, there is a "productive intersection of border studies and comics scholarship," for cultural, historical, and material reasons: not only does "[t]he history of the Canada-US border loo[m] large over the history of English-Canadian comics" (because of the influence of US comics and the fact that "the Canadian mass-market comics industry came into existence largely as a matter of border trade" in the midst of the Second World War and the rationing of paper), but also "[b]orders, and their corollary gutters, as also part of the vocabulary of comics, [are] literal[ly] depict[ed] on the page" ("Border Studies" 170). Gray's "examination of the space between borders in comics" highlights "the border as a literal and metaphoric structure that has participated in the shaping of Canadian literature and culture" (171) in general and of comics in particular.

If, as Gray persuasively demonstrates, “[c]omics are exciting as a site of discussion for cultural ideas in part because of the space that exists between the textual narrative and the visual depiction” (“Border Studies” 185), then the examples of *The Blue Road* and *Borders* add a further layer of both the gap and the relationship between text and image in that these are comic adaptations of earlier short prose texts rather than comics in their initial form. Scholarship on comic adaptations of existing prose texts focuses largely on graphic versions of canonical fiction, engaging in debates about whether such adaptations (much like analysis of film adaptations of novels) are reductive iterations of their original narratives, given that “they typically condense lengthy novels into shorter versions” and the association of the comic medium with “juvenile and populist” audiences and modes of storytelling (Møllegaard 71). The comic adaptations of Compton’s and King’s texts present some significant differences from this model. First, although there is a temporal gap between the publication of their initial prose versions and the adaptations, it is much smaller than that of adaptations of canonical novels.² Second, if “the use of images in the graphic novel adaptation reduces the necessity for prose descriptions of characters, actions, and settings, which makes the adaptation shorter than the original text” (Tabachnick and Saltzman 10), then the opposite is true of *The Blue Road* and *Borders*, comics of 128 and 192 pages, compared with the initial lengths of twenty-two and fourteen pages, respectively, in the original incarnations. In this respect, these adaptations contradict “[u]sual adaptations, especially from long novels, mean[ing] that the adapter’s job is one of subtraction or contraction” (Hutcheon 19), and resemble film adaptations of short stories instead.³

Furthermore, *The Blue Road* and *Borders* present differences from both the case studies that Gray examines and the phenomenon of canonical literary texts adapted as graphic novels in relation to authorship. Gray’s examples — Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (2007), Bryan Lee O’Malley’s Scott Pilgrim series (2004–10), and Michael Yahgulanaas’s *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009) — consist exclusively of “independent artist-authored comics” (“Border Studies” 172) responsible for both text and image, whereas graphic novelizations of canonical texts have a clear separation between original author and artist. For *The Blue Road* and *Borders*, artists have rendered these narratives in a visual capacity, using a version of the text that is either updated by the original author (as in *The Blue Road*) or virtually intact from the original (as in *Borders*). In both adaptations, a female artist has produced

the images of the comic in which attention to female characters becomes more pronounced in the adaptation: in the case of *The Blue Road* because of Compton's alteration of the protagonist's gender and in the case of *Borders* because of the visual rendering of the relationship between the protagonist's mother and his sister in silent moments of the text.

The representation of gender in *The Blue Road* and *Borders* is heightened in the comic versions but not at the expense of the critique of the Canadian settler-colonial nation-state that Compton and King produced in their original texts. These comics bear a radically different relationship to Canada from their high-profile Canadian forebears, namely the Canadian superhero comics that date from the Second World War. As Bart Beaty notes, "the temptation to provide the Canadian superhero with a distinctly nationalist identity, generally at odds with American-themed superheroes, has been one of the dominant hallmarks of the Canadian superhero genre" (429). Granted, neither *The Blue Road* nor *Borders* fits the genre of superhero comics. Nonetheless, given the representation of the nation-state and its policing of borders in both Compton's and King's works, Beaty's analysis is fruitful as a point of contrast, throwing into relief the contribution of their comics to the genre. Where Canadian comics "had been successfully recuperated for the discourses of Canadian cultural distinctiveness, particularly in relation to the culture of the United States" (432), *The Blue Road* and *Borders* mount Black and Indigenous challenges to the efforts of the Canadian settler-colonial nation-state to position itself as a more just country. Furthermore, if the 1970s figure of Captain Canuck celebrated "a heterosexual, middle-class, white, male government employee as the ultimate desire of the populace" (434), then Compton's and King's border-policing characters, on which both the Canadian and the American nation-states rely to reinforce their boundaries, are agents of the state who are mostly antagonists, not heroes, capable of both discursive and physical violence, as emphasized in the comic adaptations.

The focus in both texts on citizenship as belonging that is bestowed or, indeed, imposed by the nation-state contributes to the undermining of Canada's "dominant national myth of heroic law enforcement, white civility, and benign colonial dominance" (Michaels 31); instead, these texts mount critiques of Canada and nation-state citizenship by foregrounding inhospitality and territorial usurpation. As Gray observes, from the War Exchange Conservation Act Comics⁴ to the late-twentieth-century *Alpha Flight* (1983-94),⁵ Canadian comics have rendered

Indigenous peoples in “stereotypical, culturally appropriative ways” (“Canadian Comics” 68). Indeed, appropriation of Indigenous cultures “is a particular problem in Canadian nationalist comics, where the intersection of a desire to present the characters [is] expressly connected to the land and the unbearable whiteness of mainstream comics culture more generally often draws creators to appropriate Indigenous people . . . as symbolic characterizations of the Canadian landscape” (Gray, “We the North” 11). Thus, Donovan’s work in *Borders* — along with that of other Indigenous comic artists such as Yahgulanaas (Haida), Gord Hill (Kwakwaka’wakw), and Tara Audibert (Wolastoqiyik) — constitutes an important intervention in the history of comics in Canada, among “Indigenous comics creators [who] are at the forefront of Canadian comics production today” (Rifkind and Rondonelli 5),⁶ in her representations of Indigenous characters and their relationships to the land. Similarly, if, like “Indigenous peoples, Black Canadians have . . . seen their histories ignored by Golden Age Canadian comics and their historical experiences relegated to the periphery of national memory” (Michaels 37), then *The Blue Road*, alongside the work of Black Canadian artists such as Jon Olbey, inserts Black border crossings into Canadian comic history.

Fairy Tales and Fables: Beyond the Rainbow Border

“The Blue Road” began as a prose section of Compton’s first poetry collection, *49th Parallel Psalm*. This collection contains a number of poems about the six hundred San Francisco pioneers of the mid-nineteenth century, a group of Black migrants from California to British Columbia invited by the mixed-race governor, James Douglas, in the midst of the gold rush, at a point when “the California legislature had passed a series of increasingly repressive racial laws” (Compton, “Introduction” 17). The pioneers migrated in 1858 but found their hopes for equality, based upon Douglas’s “promises [of] . . . citizenship and suffrage” in British Columbia, dashed upon their arrival, such rights “not to be granted as easily as he had originally led them to believe” (18). In *49th Parallel Psalm*, “The Blue Road” appears as a kind of allegory following Compton’s more historically based poems. In fact, this original version bears the subtitle “A Fairy Tale.” Conversely, in the comic adaptation, the subtitle is “A Fable of Migration.” Other updates include the change in the gender of the protagonist: Lacuna is male in the original version and female in the comic (apparently to make the work more interesting

to Compton's daughter, born after the publication of his first few books [Odegaard]). Compton also includes more information about the history of Lacuna, whose family goes unmentioned in the original.

On the one hand, the temporal gap between the first and second versions means that Compton could incorporate "the current anti-immigrant backlash we are living in now, and how children have so become a target and a rallying point for contemporary xenophobia and racism" (Derdeyn). Just one example of this backlash occurred one year prior to the publication of *The Blue Road*, when François Legault's election as the premier of Quebec was "partly due to a campaign that represented the (largely) Black families who had crossed the border in 2016 onward as a threat to the province, [to] the nation, to society as a whole, sparking a manufactured and racist 'crisis' over immigration" (Maynard and Simpson 68). On the other hand, as Compton notes, "People ask if I wrote this because of what's taking place now, but this was happening 20 years ago, and 20 years before that and 20 years before that. It highlights how perennial the issues of international migration and xenophobia are as part of the background to life here" (qtd. in Odegaard). Compton has said that "'The Blue Road' was somewhat of a fairy tale for the children of this first Black community [i.e., the San Francisco pioneers], whose stories are mostly absent from historical accounts" (Odegaard), but there are ways that we can read a variety of Black migrations from this narrative, including those that have happened since the San Francisco migration. In this manner, the change from fairy tale to fable in the narrative's subtitle suggests a wider applicability, the devastation of continuing relevance of a story about the violent policing of borders regardless of the passage of decades.

We first meet Lacuna in the Great Swamp of Ink, where she lives alone, with no memory of anywhere else or any family or community. She is confronted by a will-o'-the-wisp called Polaris, who insists that the swamp belongs to him and that he will incinerate her if she does not leave. In the comic, Compton indicates that Lacuna has "what she needed to survive. But just barely" (*Blue Road* 10); nonetheless, it is the only home that she has ever known. When Polaris demands that she leave, Lacuna decides, arbitrarily, to go north. Once out of the swamp, she encounters an impenetrable thicket of tickets: although the tickets are stamped with "admit one," she can hardly pass through. The illustrations of the thicket across three single-page panels convey this disorientation and the arduous nature of passing through, with the coils

of tickets resembling manacles: indeed, Lacuna has no sense of how long it has taken her to traverse the thicket, and “the edges of the tickets cut into her skin as she walk[s] through them, torturing her with a thousand tiny slices” (29). Once on the other side, she burns down the thicket for the benefit of anyone who might come after her. But she discovers, upon arriving at a border — a rainbow painted on the blue road — that she needs one of those tickets to cross. The border guard, in possession of a skeleton key crutch, which is also a sharp axe, tells her that she must limbo under the border in order to cross, or she will be killed. Even the natural world is not safe: a bird attempts to fly across the border and is immediately killed by the guard. Lacuna eventually outwits him, waiting for a rainbow in the sky and spilling some ink from the swamp across the rainbow border, allowing her to walk through. Having made a bet with the guard that she would succeed in crossing, she wins his axe. She arrives at the Northern Kingdom, where she is asked for her papers, but she has none. She is admitted on the condition that she carry a mirror around at all times; if she looks away, she is struck with acute pain. The “Mirror People,” as they are called, are effectively second-class citizens in the Northern Kingdom, always at a disadvantage because they have to navigate backward.

In an addition that Compton had made to the original story, it transpires that before the Mirror People there were the “Faceless People,” rendered faceless by order of the king because they were poor, and the king did not want to have to see them. Faceless People were not permitted to leave, but some escaped. Through resistance of the Faceless People, the mirrors were introduced instead, but they are still marked as different. Furthermore, in the comic, Lacuna discovers from a fortune teller that her parents were Faceless People who escaped the kingdom, which explains why she has no memory of them. With her axe, Lacuna invents a pair of glasses with a mirror in one eye, allowing the Mirror People to look directly (with the other eye) at the world. She makes a fortune from this innovation. At the end of the narrative, the annual Festival of the Aurora Borealis takes place. With these glasses, the Mirror People can look at the Northern Lights directly for the first time (with one eye). But not all Mirror People can afford the glasses, and some choose to leave the walls of the kingdom so that they can look at the lights directly.

In a new epilogue, with no text, Lacuna exits the kingdom so that she can join the community of Mirror People, beyond the walls, who elect to look directly at the lights. Visually, the rainbow of the rainbow border,

fixed on the ground, finds a transcendence in the northern lights and the fluid lines that Milne uses to represent them. Where the original story's Lacuna is aware of people who cannot afford his glasses and "generally avoids looking at them" (99), the female Lacuna in the comic chooses to join them, forming part of the community. Although initially conceived as a fairy tale for children as part of the San Francisco migration, *The Blue Road* functions as an allegory for border crossings and difficult migrations more generally, including the reasons that people migrate (bare survival, threats of violence), the difficulty of border crossings (bureaucracy, still more threats of violence), and the inhospitality of states that other minoritized migrants, despite bestowing citizenship on them. The fairy-tale-like illustrations, especially the buildings resembling castles in the Northern Kingdom and the old-fashioned dress of its inhabitants, enhance the allegorical element of the narrative while still gesturing toward Canada as the fabled "Northern Kingdom" that separates full citizens, in the words of the kingdom's gatekeeper to Lacuna, from "citizens like yourself" (*Blue Road* 76).

Gray's examination of Canadian and Indigenous comics in relation to their formal invocations of the Canada-US border provides important insights into how both Milne and Donovan visualize the border texts that they illustrate. This is especially the case in relation to the delineation of panels, for which "the *classic rectangle* is used most *often*" (McCloud 102). Gray argues that Chester Brown's strict adherence to this classic structure throughout almost all of *Louis Riel*, only breaking the pattern at Riel's death (where a panel is missing) and moving from a six- to a five-panel structure in the epilogue (where the third panel is double the width of the others as Brown narrates the end of Riel's family line), uses this formal disruption to heighten the violence of Riel's death and the end of his family. In contrast, in *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*, "O'Malley's use of gutters and panels is so fluid" (Gray, "Border Studies" 180), with characters exceeding the space of the panel and panels sometimes deviating from a rectangular shape, whereas in *Red Yahgulanaas* challenges European visual traditions as "the borders and gutters take on a new life as the outline of traditional Haida animal figures" (Gray, "Border Studies" 182), an implicit reconfiguring of colonial political borders as well.

In *The Blue Road*, Milne's rendering of Compton's narrative of the violence and difficulty of border crossing notably eschews the framing of panels with black lines (in contrast to both Brown and O'Malley).

Rather, although the panels are consistently either square or rectangular (as opposed to some of O'Malley's deviations), Milne has only white gutters separating panels from each other, a subtle rejection of the containment of borders and the obstacles that they pose to Lacuna in the narrative and indeed to migrants more generally. When smaller panels are inset into a main panel, Milne mostly surrounds them with white rather than black borders. Chapter titles appear on pages with margin bleed, the image extending all the way to the edge of the page. Whereas Gray reads margin bleed in O'Malley's work as part of what makes the *Scott Pilgrim* series "feel disposable and ephemeral, with text frequently cut off by the edge of the page," *The Blue Road* is not printed on the same kind of "cheap paper" ("Border Studies" 178) as *Scott Pilgrim*, and no text is cut off by the bleed. Although Milne does not have figures or objects in *The Blue Road* moving out of a panel and into the gutter, as O'Malley does in relation to the border-crossing American character Ramona Flowers, at times she does use otherwise blank spaces on the page to include elements from the natural world, such as falling leaves or snowflakes on a more curved line down the page, weaving in between the rectangular panels (58-59). The most dramatic example occurs when Lacuna dreams of skating and tracing a figure eight, which ultimately leads to her design of the mirror glasses. The edges of the panel showing her skating are blurry rather than straight, and lines extend from her skates beyond the panel, into the loops of figure eights (92-93), a formal escape that foreshadows the partial relief that she will engineer through the glasses.

In addition to the above deviations from a traditional panel structure, Milne uses more traditional framing *within* panels when the content itself focuses on the restriction of Lacuna's movement. An example occurs when Lacuna finally arrives at the Northern Kingdom, without papers, and must speak to a gatekeeper. This gatekeeper is far more ominous than the border guard on the Blue Road, despite the latter's possession of the sharp skeleton key crutch capable of slicing birds in two (52). The border guard is nonetheless more humanized in the comic version, with more details about his position and some philosophical approaches to border crossing:

I know you can return to people you've never met before. The word "return" is bigger than you think it is. . . . I've been guarding this border for a long time. But one day I'll retire and go back to the Northern Kingdom. The people I knew there before I left probably

won't remember me. But that's okay. That's fine. Because leaving, arriving, returning — those are all just different words for the same thing: starting all over again. (57)

This sympathetic version of the border guard contrasts sharply with the version of the gatekeeper at the Northern Kingdom. Milne shows Lacuna sitting across from the gatekeeper, separated by his desk, with two inset panels of different sizes: a smaller panel, with no border, in which he offers her a quill to sign a contract on his desk, and a larger panel, in which he holds up an inkwell, saying, “But there is one rule I need to tell you about” (75). He will proceed on the overleaf to explain the regulations about mirrors. But at this moment, the first invocation of the rule, this panel is surrounded by a thick, black frame, the first that appears in the comic and as such a visual harbinger of the violence of the Northern Kingdom's policies governing the lives of Lacuna and “citizens like [her] self (76).” Rectangular shapes dominate subsequent pages, including the portrait of the king in the office, which appears at an oblique angle in the first panel showing the office but on the subsequent page appears straight-on over the desk, with Lacuna and the official in profile (76). A further, smaller panel is almost completely taken up with the king's portrait, if in extreme close-up, cutting off part of his face, accompanied by the threat that, if Lacuna cannot adjust to life as a Mirror Person, “well, you can always go back where you came from” (77), demonstrating the anti-immigrant position embedded in state policy, one frequently repeated by privileged, unmarked citizens when minoritized migrants — seemingly ungrateful “guests” — criticize the nation-state, often despite their own citizenship status.

Black rectangular lines recur in the images of the contract that Lacuna must sign to gain entry into the Northern Kingdom (77), its edges especially thick and rigidly straight in the panels showing a close-up of the contract and Lacuna's signature, above a line designating her as a Mirror Person. The mirrors themselves in subsequent pages introduce more rectangular shapes, producing borders around the reflections of Mirror People, illustrating violence toward their identity enacted by the xenophobic state. This association is further enhanced when Milne presents Lacuna through the window of her lodgings looking at herself in her mirror, with lattice windows accentuating the suggestion of containment (89). Finally, Milne uses another thick black border around an inset panel during the Festival of the Aurora Borealis, which features Lacuna, dressed as the border guard, and the accountant who manages

her finances in the foreground, both wearing mirror glasses, with people behind them, some of them also wearing the glasses. Lacuna says to the accountant, "Before I came here, I was stranded in the Great Swamp of Ink, completely alone. Now look where I am. Look at all these people. I'm so lucky." The accountant replies, "It's not luck that got you here. You're clever and you've worked hard" (107). The thick border might initially seem to contradict Lacuna's narrative of her fortune, but it draws attention to the discourse of the accountant, echoing the narrative of "hard-working migrants" who deserve their success and are acceptable to the capitalist state.

The accountant's version of Lacuna's happy ending contrasts sharply with her own as it appears in the comic version. In the adaptation, Lacuna finds a far more authentic happy ending when she leaves the Northern Kingdom's walls to join other Mirror People, without mirrors, beyond the reach of the state, in the wordless epilogue: "silent panel[s]" that "produce a sense of *timelessness*" allow the images to "*linger* in the reader's mind" (McCloud 102). As Lacuna gets farther away from the Northern Kingdom, she removes her mirror glasses, sheds her border guard costume, and then lays down the crutch that has forged her fortune in the Northern Kingdom but not otherwise altered the status of herself or the other Mirror People within it. Although she has profited financially from the mirror glasses, a sign of her own oppression and that of the other Mirror People, she hands over the crutch to the first person whom she encounters outside the walls and is then welcomed with a warm drink into the crowd of people, with a range of skin colours and ages. The wordlessness of the epilogue makes the comic, and its update from Compton's original text, all the more striking for the reader, invited to ponder the nature of belonging and the split between nation-state citizenship and community. Here we catch a glimpse of Lacuna and her companions "liv[ing] life collectively," illustrating what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes to Black Canadian scholar Robyn Maynard in *Rehearsals for Living* as "systems based on relationality, reciprocity, consent, and diversity, . . . refus[ing] hierarchy and authoritarian power in both collective and intimate settings" (Maynard and Simpson 181). The wordlessness of this epilogue beyond the Northern Kingdom's walls also echoes the narrative refusal of the state's discourse, its qualification of citizenship rights as it seeks to mark — and to produce — degrees of (un)belonging while gesturing

instead to the possibilities of life “outside of nation-states” (Maynard and Simpson 181).

The Blackfoot Side of the Border

Citizenship also lies at the heart of the struggle of the Blackfoot boy and his mother to cross the Alberta-Montana border in Thomas King’s *Borders*. Unlike *The Blue Road* with its updates and additions, the text of *Borders* in its comic incarnation is almost the same as the original short story. In a CBC Radio interview, King stated of the comic that “I didn’t have to do any work!” (King and Donovan) — thus indicating that he produced no new material for this adaptation. The Blackfoot narrator of *Borders* and his mother attempt to visit his sister in Salt Lake City, but they are refused passage across the Canada-US border when the mother’s reply to questions about their citizenship is that they are Blackfoot, a nation whose territory straddles the border. The narrative revolves around the repetition of this question from multiple American border guards and, when they are refused entry, the Canadian border guard as they attempt to cross back into Canada. The Canadian border guard is the friendliest, but her answer is no different, in substance, from that of the American border guards, regardless of how she couches it: “I’d be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian” (94). Thus, among the questions asked by both countries’ guards about whether any firearms, tobacco, or plants are in their possession, various threats to each nation-state (whether violence, lost revenue, or danger to the ecosystem), the assertion of Indigenous citizenship constitutes the greatest threat.

As Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson writes of her own border-straddling nation, many “refuse the ‘gifts’ of American and Canadian citizenship,” and the Canada-US border is “an international border that cuts through their historical and contemporary territory and is, simply, in their space and in their way” (7, 115). In relation to the Blackfoot specifically, in the nineteenth century, Commissioner Sam Steele of the North West Mounted Police believed that the

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 non-Native settlement. For years, [the Blackfoot] were prohibited from crossing this land, even though it

cut the Alberta Blackfoot off from their promised timber reserves, which were supposed to supply the population with the lodge poles and firewood they otherwise lacked. (Davidson et al. 124)

Restriction of the Blackfoot's cross-border movement has a lengthy history, the policing of such movements inextricable from territorial expropriation by the settler-colonial nation-states on either side of the boundary imposed on Indigenous nations.

Nothing was added to the text of *Borders* in its comic incarnation, and only a handful of phrases were amended or removed. For instance, the narrator's account of his "flipp[ing] through some back issues of *Saturday Night* and *Alberta Report*" at the Canadian border crossing in the original story (142) becomes "flipp[ing] through some old magazines" in the comic (103), but such alteration is rare. Virtually all of the added content is visual. There are some illustrative similarities as well as differences in the comic structure used by Donovan and Milne. As in *The Blue Road*, *Borders* includes no black framing around panels, implying an Indigenous rejection of Euro-North American borders just like the narrative. Donovan occasionally does use a white border around an inset panel (e.g., 30). Where Milne makes sparing use of margin bleed, *Borders'* margin bleeds are frequent, both for individual panels and for full or even double-page panels. Again we might read this recurring margin bleed as a visual representation of Indigenous refusal of the Canada-US border and its colonial containment. If "a 'borderless' panel . . . can take on a *timeless quality*" (McCloud 102), then a particularly poignant example occurs in *Borders* when the narrator's mother first identifies her citizenship as Blackfoot, in a double-paged panel with margin bleed, the American border guard on the left page and the mother on the right page, with her single-word response (42-43). This invoked timelessness underscores the primacy of Blackfoot sovereignty over that of the settler-colonial nation-states whose border bisects Blackfoot territory. In addition to the frequent margin bleed, Donovan disrupts the panel shape on occasion, including one whose contours mimic the shape of a car window from inside, showing two American border guards from the perspective of the Blackfoot mother (51).

As in *The Blue Road*, illustrations enhance the narrative concerns. In the case of *Borders*, this occurs at points through illustrations that appear to replicate the imagination of the young Blackfoot narrator rather than dramatization of the action. For example, the insistence by the young Canadian border guard, Carol, that "you have to be American

or Canadian” precedes an illustration of Carol flanked to the left by an American Marine standing in front of an American flag, an eagle overhead, and to the right by a Canadian Mountie, standing in front of a Canadian flag and a beaver at his feet (95). Thus, Donovan projects the narrator’s imagination of what that settler-colonial “choice” looks like: white, uniformed employees of the state who are apparently as representative and indeed symbolic of these two countries as the flags and animals. This panel echoes an earlier one in which the narrator muses about the names of the border towns Coutts and Sweetgrass: “Just hearing the names of these towns, you would expect that Sweetgrass, which is a nice name and sounds like it is related to other places such as Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw and Kicking Horse Pass, would be on the Canadian side, and that Coutts, which sounds abrupt and rude, would be on the American side. But this was not the case” (28-29). Here, in an ironized “use of stereotypical icons . . . [that] can be easily recognized by [comic] readers” (Lefèvre 171), we see the moose accompanying the Canadian side, with a man with a great deal of ammunition in evidence on the American side. This image also distills some central concerns of both the narrative and the visual choices by Donovan in the comic: first, the representation of firearms at the border; second, the representation of land in relation to the border.

As in the original story, the comic pointedly remarks on the American border guards’ firearms: the description of the first border guard whom the narrator and his mother encounter includes “the holster on his hip pitching up and down” (39); Stella, the female American border guard, also has a gun, with her name engraved on it (67); and the final guard whom they encounter “jam[s] his thumbs into his gun belt” (154). The first two American border guards, when they approach the narrator and his mother together, also appear to be “swaying back and forth like two cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight” (51), a description fraught with implications in relation to the two Indigenous protagonists. Although the descriptions in the comic’s text replicate those of the short story, the pacing of the illustration emphasizes the firearms further, with several close-ups of the border guards’ gun belts and occasional images of the guards grasping their holsters that interrupt the dialogue (41, 155). This visual reminder occurs even after the Blackfoot characters, prompted by media attention, are permitted to cross into the United States with a declaration of Blackfoot citizenship. Thus, what is superficially a happy resolution is intertwined with the ongoing reminder of settler-colonial state violence

against Indigenous people and their claims to sovereignty that counteract those of Canada and the United States. King's original story states that "[t]he guard rocked back on his heels and jammed his thumbs into his gun belt" (146), and this narration appears in the comic but with two images of the guard's hand on his gun belt: the first accompanying the narration (154) and the second occurring three panels later (155). This second close-up of the guard's hand on his gun belt is a silent panel, inviting, in McCloud's terms, a lingering of this image in the reader's mind that undermines the guard's dialogue in the next panel: "Have a pleasant trip" (155).

As in the original story, in the comic one of the methods that the American border guards employ to persuade the mother to affiliate herself with one of the settler-colonial states includes asking her "which side [she comes] from" (54), "Canadian side . . . or American side?" (56), and she replies "Blackfoot side" (57). For her, both sides of the border are the Blackfoot side since the settler-colonial boundary bisects her nation's territory. Donovan's illustrations portray integrity of the landscape: it is impossible to tell, looking at one side or the other, which is Canada and which is the United States. As in *The Blue Road*, the fluid lines in the sky demonstrate a transcendence of nation-state boundaries; in an inset panel, the mother appears to address the reader directly, asserting a powerful claim to this territory. This fluidity contrasts sharply with the imagery of the border crossing and the infrastructure of the settler-colonial state, where straight lines — of roads, power lines, railways, and physical structures of the border crossing itself — dominate (36). Ultimately, the motif of the fluid lines — on the ground, where the road is now curved, with low hills in the distance, and in the sky — closes the text in a "complex interweaving of borderline and borderland" (Bailey 11) as the narrator states: "I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower and they rolled over a hill and disappeared" (173-75), the prairie sky dominating the page.

Representing Relation

Once the flagpoles have disappeared, the sky and the land remain, impervious to the nation-state demarcation imposed on Blackfoot territory. Whereas the narrator of *Borders* describes himself and his mother as "Blackfoot and Canadian" (70) to Stella, the American border guard,

his mother never calls herself Canadian and asserts, "My daughter's Blackfoot, too" (63). This rejection of nation-state citizenship suggests the primacy of relation, based upon Indigenous kinship instead of belonging imposed by the nation-state. As Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) writes, "Nation-state nationalism is often dependent upon the erasure of kinship bonds in favor of a code of assimilative patriotism that places, and emphasizes, the militant history of the nation above the specific geographic, genealogical, and spiritual histories of peoples" (151). Donovan's illustrations of armed officers and emphasis on the weapons of border guards act as visual reminders of settler-colonial nation-states' militant histories. But her choices in rendering King's story visually also underscore relation as opposed to citizenship. Donovan fills in the gaps of the original "Borders," particularly prickly conversations between the narrator's mother and his sister, Laetitia, with images of her and their mother. When Laetitia crosses the border to move to Salt Lake City, Donovan includes a panel in which the narrator stands in the background, his mother and sister in the foreground, each pouring sugar into a cup of coffee, in the same position, both of them looking down (11), emphasizing a similarity between them that is both physical and psychological. Indeed, later in the narrative, the boy will state, in a similar physical position, "Pride is a good thing to have, you know. Laetitia had a lot of pride, and so did my mother" (107). In this panel, again, his mother and sister appear in the foreground, standing slightly away from each other, arms folded over their chests. Other panels emphasize an affection between his mother and sister only hinted at in King's text, lingering in a series of silent panels on the mother tucking her daughter's hair behind her ear (17) and flashing back to an embrace between mother and daughter (33). Thus, Donovan's visual rendering of kinship highlights the mother's rejection of the settler-colonial nation-state as her site of belonging.

The boy might have begun the cross-border journey articulating a duality of Canadian and Blackfoot, but he follows his observation about his mother's and sister's pride with the comment "I figured that someday, I'd have it, too" (107). The story implicitly tells of the boy's unlearning his affiliation with the nation-state in favour of kinship and Blackfoot traditional stories. One night when they are stuck between the two border crossings, the mother tells her son "stories about all the stars" (134), beginning with Coyote going "fishing, one day. That's how it all started" (135). As Zalfa Feghali argues of "Borders," "the border is simply a plot device that impels the narrative forward, giving the mother the opportu-

ity to tell her son Blackfoot stories" (8). Donovan's illustrations highlight the pedagogy of this scene with a double-page panel with margin bleed, the suggested "timelessness," in McCloud's terms, fitting as the mother and son gaze up at the stars and the animals (Coyote, a beaver, and two fish) visible in the constellations: "We sat under the stars that night, and my mother told me all sorts of stories. She was serious about it, too. She'd tell them slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one" (136-37). This pedagogical repetition contrasts sharply with the repetitive conversations of the mother with American and Canadian border guards, although arguably the narrator, through his mother's unwavering articulation of her citizenship as Blackfoot, is also learning about himself and his nation's history as well as its future. As Feghali points out, his sister is also implicated in the Blackfoot future since "Laetitia . . . [has] them 'tell the story over and over again'" (8) once they reach the other side of the border.

As Lauren Tynan (trawlwulwuy) writes, "Relationality is learnt from stories" (597); furthermore, "A relational reality creates relationships between ideas or entities[, and] it is an affective force that compels us to not just *understand* the world as relational, but *feel* the world as kin" (600). Donovan visualizes this sense of kinship in her renderings of the narrator and his mother under the stars and of the dynamic lines of the land and sky as they leave behind the border crossing at the end of the comic. Milne's silent epilogue in *The Blue Road*, Lacuna finding community outside the gates of the Northern Kingdom and under the aurora borealis, similarly illustrates the world as relational, as kin. Additionally, we can read these comic adaptations that reject nation-state forms of belonging as forging solidarities between different peoples, through the relationality of Milne as a Filipino Canadian illustrating the narrative of Compton, a Black BC poet in *The Blue Road*, and Donovan as a Métis artist illustrating a story of Blackfoot border crossing first written by King, a Canadian writer of Greek and Cherokee descent. These collaborative comics challenge singular notions of authorship through the transformational possibilities of illustration, and they produce new ways of reading and knowing in the process of adaptation: King declares *Borders* to be "no longer my book; it really is Natasha's book" (King and Donovan), and the addition of the Faceless People in *The Blue Road*, illustrated by Milne, might be considered one means of rendering visible the Filipino Canadian community, whom "the condition of invisibility is frequently used to characterize" (Tromly 12). Just as Maynard writes

to Simpson of “the overarching reality that our unfreedom is wrapped in one another’s, and further, that it is these interlocking unfreedoms that are in fact constitutive of the Canadian state” (154), so too these adaptations might be considered examples of collaborations “rich with possibilities for anti-colonial alliances” that are “fraught at the level of relationship to and identification with the state” (Lai 99, 100): the very relationship and identification that both of these narratives fundamentally undermine and to which they offer alternative forms of kinship.

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Both of these comics attest to racialized injustice at the Canada-US border. If the borders of the Northern Kingdom serve to police “newcomers,” then those newcomers, so to speak, police the border between Canada and the United States, representatives of the settler-colonial states whose legitimacy rests on denying Indigenous territorial sovereignty and citizenship, whose “we” includes neither Indigenous nor Black communities in the discourse of “keeping ‘us’ safe with increased police budgets, or expanded powers to tighten ‘our’ border” (Maynard and Simpson 19). Both comics depict the violence of border policing, either as a physical manifestation or as a constant threat. These are not simply historical narratives despite their initial publication in the 1990s: the illustrations of King’s text include updates (e.g., a toonie [12]) that did not exist in the original, and the era of neoliberal immigration and asylum studied by Karina Vernon that encompasses the last decade has seen many asylum seekers from Africa gravely endangered by attempting border crossings in winter (32).⁷ As such, Compton’s fable reflects on the present as much as on the nineteenth-century San Francisco pioneers. Similarly, King indicated in 2021 that, in the almost three decades since the original publication of “Borders,” “It’s just as relevant today. Nothing has changed in that regard. Matter of fact, it’s probably gotten even tougher”; hence, there is ongoing, if not more urgent, importance in “stepping out of line” and refusing the settler-colonial nation-state’s policing of identities (King and Donovan). Ultimately, in neither *The Blue Road* nor *Borders* is Canada the haven of hospitality that it has purported to be, this Northern Kingdom that guards its metaphorical walls erected on Indigenous land.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ Other examples of relevant border texts include Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* (1985) and Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood* (1997) and *The Book of Negroes* (2007); see Roberts.

² In Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman's edited collection *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*, the case studies of graphic novelizations range, in chronological order, from *The Odyssey* to the works of Ray Bradbury.

³ Indeed, some scholars note an analogous relationship between comics and films. Scott McCloud's somewhat comedic (and illustrated) suggestion that, "before it's projected, film is just a very very very very *slow* comic!" (8) finds a more extended treatment by David Coughlan:

[T]he voice-over narration of film can be compared to narrative captions in comics; both contain dialogue and sound-effects . . . ; both progress frame by frame . . . ; both are usually collaborative efforts; both employ the visual and the verbal; and both raise interesting questions about the nature of visual narrative, about how the visual and the verbal share and distribute the weight of the narrative. (835)

That said, Thierry Groensteen cautions that "the comics panel is not the comics equivalent of the *shot* in the cinematographic language" (29).

⁴ So-called because the "Golden Age of Canadian Comics" was prompted by this act, "which closed the border and Canadians to . . . American comic books" (Easton and Hewson 118).

⁵ As Gray notes, *Alpha Flight* was "Marvel's all-Canadian superhero team" created by British-born Canadian John Byrne ("Canadian Comics" 66).

⁶ Other examples of Indigenous comic collaborators, as Candida Rifkind and Zachary J.A. Rondinelli note, include Richard Van Camp (Tłıchǫ), David A. Robertson (Swampy Cree), and Katherena Vermette (Métis), whose work is illustrated by other artists.

⁷ Indeed, these dangerous crossings have affected migrants from locations other than Africa as well, as the death from exposure of an Indian family in Manitoba near the Canada-US border in January 2022 attests ("Indian Family").

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