



Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Breaking the Ice: Borders, Nations and Sorority in
Frozen River (2008)

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Abstract: This dissertation explores the role played by borders (both thematically and formally) in the development of female relationships in Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008). The main purpose is to demonstrate the existing relationship between the processes of border construction and dissolution and the development of the female characters' identity. In order to do so, the essay starts with an introduction to border theory and to the so-called "border film". After this section, the essay explores the interaction between geographical and metaphorical borders and the two female characters in *Frozen River*. The analysis is divided into two parts which correspond to the examination of physical and mental borders as divisionary, and the study of the borderland as a place where the development of friendship and the establishment of sorority are central.

Resumen: Este trabajo de fin de grado explora el papel desempeñado por las fronteras (tanto a nivel temático como formalmente) en el desarrollo del vínculo entre las mujeres en la película *Frozen River* de Courtney Hunt (2008). El objetivo principal es demostrar la relación existente entre los procesos de construcción y disolución de fronteras y el desarrollo de la identidad de los personajes femeninos. El ensayo comienza con una introducción a la teoría de la frontera y a las películas de frontera. Después de este contexto, se explora la interacción entre las fronteras geográficas y metafóricas y los dos personajes femeninos en *Frozen River*. El análisis se divide en dos partes que corresponden al entendimiento de las fronteras físicas y mentales como divisorias, y al estudio de las fronteras como un lugar donde el desarrollo de la amistad y la instauración de la sororidad son primordiales.

1. Introduction

In 2008, in the middle of economic, migrant and inequality crises, the director Courtney Hunt released her debut feature film *Frozen River*, for which she was awarded a Grand Jury Prize for Dramatic Film making at the Sundance Festival. This low-budget thriller (according to the Internet Movie Database, it was made on an estimated budget of 1,000,000 dollars) revolves around two main aspects: the location where the film is set—the cold and harsh landscapes of Massena in upstate New York, the St. Regis Mohawk reservation, and Southern Quebec—and the relationship between Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo), a white working-class mother of two children, and Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham), a Native American low-class mother of a one-year-old. The two women are unable to earn enough money legally, and, therefore, the only solution that they find to provide for their families is to smuggle illegal migrants across the border between Canada and the United States. Yet, this is not the only border that the two women will have to cross in the film since geographical and metaphorical borders will shape, thematically and formally, the identity of the protagonists.

This essay explores the relationship between borders and the two protagonists in *Frozen River*, relating the processes of border construction and dissolution to the development of the identity of the female characters. In order to do so, the essay starts with an introduction to border theory and to the so-called “border film”. After this section, the essay explores the existing interaction between geographical and metaphorical borders and the two female characters in *Frozen River*. The analysis is divided into two parts which correspond to the examination of physical and mental borders as divisionary, and the study of the borderland in which the development of friendship and the establishment of sorority are central.

2. Understanding Borders and Borderlands

“[A] line in the sand” (Rovisco 151) separating states or “a barrier (...) to what is immediately to the other side” (110) are considered to be the traditional understandings of the border. This notion has relied on a geo-political organisation of space that sees the borders as more or less problematic dividing lines between countries. Yet, as Sandro Mezzadra argues (2) borders are not only geographical: culture, race, gender and class distinctions can also create borders if differences are placed side-by-side in the same space. Thus, as can be seen, in recent border theory, the notion of border is not restricted to geographical lines.

Critical theorization of the border has also emphasized its intrinsic paradoxical nature. Dividing lines are always created by contact and, therefore, the points through which two bodies, cultures or countries are separated automatically become what they have in common. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable drives when talking about borders (De Certeau 127). It is not that any border can easily be opened and turned into a crossing, but rather that “delimitation itself is the bridge that opens to the other” (127). This is one of the main ideas in Gloria Anzalúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In her foundational text, Anzalúa envisions the “border” as a site of conflictive divisionary paradigms and challenges this hegemonic concept when describing a “borderland” as a space where “two or more cultures edge on each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). For her, what results from this cross-cultural clash, is a “further evolution of mankind” (Anzalúa, preface), a hybrid race superior to the previous ones.

Pertinently, Homi Bhabha, basing his theories on the Derridian concept of *difference*, understands the borderland as a “Third Space,” or in other words, as an in-

between hybrid site or liminal space producing new diasporic identities as a consequence of the encounter of cultures (Rutherford 211).

Other contemporary academics have also contributed to describing the nature of the borderland, highlighting the porous quality of borders and its shifting boundaries due to human interaction. Thus, José David Saldívar refers to the borderland with the metaphor of a “*Trasnfrontera* contact zone” (15) and Anthony Cooper and Chris Rumford with the metaphor of “Interface” (109). Most of these academics have been influenced by French philosopher Michael Foucault and his 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces” which gave an enormous centrality to space:

[t]he present epoch will perhaps be (...) the epoch of space [and] (...) simultaneity: (...) of juxtaposition, (...) of the near and far, of the side-by-side (...). We are at a moment (...) when our experience of the world is (...) that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (22)

Foucault became decisive in the study of border theory since he understood the non-divisionary space, or more specifically, the borderland, as a heterotopia, as a counter-space, in which all real spaces “that can be found within culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). Therefore, even if borders are built to protect us from the other, they can gradually become borderlands, spaces or canopies that generate fruitful relationships with the Other, as will be seen in the analysis of *Frozen River*.

3. Borders in Films and Border Films

Following Camilla Fojas examination of 1980s Hollywood border films and Kristin Franks' sub-categories within the cinema of borders, the stories dealing with the border as a central motif are countless.

The border has attracted a lot of attention throughout the history of cinema and it has been widely represented in many generic forms. There are films dealing with the Mexico-U.S. border within the western genre, as is the case of films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960), *The Professionals* (Richard Brooks, 1966) and *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). There are also more recent examples such as *All the Pretty Horses* (Billy Born Thornton, 2000), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tome Lee Jones, 2005), *Bandidas* (Espen Snadberg and Joachim Roenning, 2006) or *No Country for Old Men* (Coen Brothers, 2007). Other films focusing on this border fall within the generic frame of the melodrama, such as *The Border* (Tony Richardson, US, 1982), *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, US/UK, 1983) or *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, France/US/Mexico). Films about the Mexico-U.S. border within other generic frameworks are: *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, US/Germany, 2000), *María Full of Grace* (Joshua Marston, US/Colombia, 2004), *Trade* (Marco Kreuzpaintner, Germany/US, 2007), or *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015), to name just a few.

When compared to the Mexico-U.S. border, the U.S.-Canadian border has received little attention in films. This border has very rarely been represented in relation to smuggling and criminality. Romantic comedies like *Highway 61* (Bruce McDonald, 1991) or *Bordertown Café* (Norma Bailey, 1992) bring to the fore the cultural differences between both nations, and only some comedies like *Canadian Bacon* (Michael Moore, 1995) or *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997) humorously questioned the security of the U.S.-Canadian border.

Films portraying any U.S.-Indian reservation border are rare. The thriller *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan, 2017) attempts to deal with the conflicting encounter between North American whites and Arapaho Native Americans, and displays a re-consideration of their cultural relations with the other.

What most films about these borders have in common is the prevalence of male characters. This is what makes *Frozen River* stand out from the rest of border movies. Not only it is a “multi border” film, because of the overlapping borders it deals with, but it is also a border film about women.

The centrality of the border in filmic texts during the twenty-first century has resulted in the emergence of the “border film” or “cinema of borders” (Bennet and Tyler). According to Bennett and Tyler, border films are characterized by “fragmentation, multilingualism, and liminal characters” (21). Most importantly, they represent a world “of barriers, fences, checkpoints, exploitation, and death” (21), highlighting the experience of the individual in between borders. Celestino Deleyto has pointed out that border films are not only thematically influenced by the border, but also formally. Hence, borders constitute a fundamental part of the plot and the stylistic language of these films (2).

Frozen River is a border film both thematically and formally. The existing relationship between physical and cultural borders interacts with their formal representation reinforcing the prominence of the US-Canadian and US-Mohawk border. Thus, the natural geographical space reflects the tensions of the geo-political world in which the characters live. Within this context, as it will be argued, the protagonists generate a cosmopolitan atmosphere which not only questions national borders but also allows for the emergence of hybrid relationships/families across the border.

4. *Frozen River*

4.1 Borders in *Frozen River*

As has already been mentioned, *Frozen River* displays different kinds of borders that play a pivotal role in the characters' evolution. These borders, both geographical and cultural, abide by the main features of borders that have been introduced above: they are simultaneously dividing lines and shared spaces (borderlands). Some of the borders in the film are the result of a turbulent decade marked by globalization. As Franks points out, "in a highly globalized world, where goods and capital flow incessantly across international borders, human traffic has yet to reach such levels of easy mobility" (Franks 23). This incongruity is mainly a consequence of September 11th, 2001, which added terrorism "to the list of threats and dangers judged to be worrisome to 'homeland security'" (Dodds 562). Consequently, governments implemented new policies which reinforced the security of the border to protect nations and which resulted in the systematic exclusion of the Other and the flourishing of a racist mentality. Hence, metaphorical borders can be considered a direct consequence of the physical ones. Within this context, the existing border between Ray and Lila is promoted and legitimized by the US state: they are not only separated by a geographical line, but by a racial stigma also, as it will be argued in the following analysis.

4.1.1 Geographical Borders: Borders as Division

Frozen River opens with a shot of the mesmerizing landscape of the North County of Upstate New York and the St. Laurence River, the main natural and geopolitical border between the United States and Canada. It is a winter landscape and snow and ice have taken over. As far as the eye can see, there is only a vast horizon of grey ice. There is a dividing line between the sky and the snowy ground, but the grey line is blurred and

difficult to see (Fig. 1). This establishing shot presents the river as a hostile, cold and dangerous place. In this sense, the river is a divisionary mark which anticipates the fate and atmosphere that the main protagonists are going to face or, in other words, the frozen river is a metaphor for the static position and the impossibility of progress of the female characters living at the border.



Figure 1: The frozen St. Lawrence River.

After this “natural” border, there is an abrupt cut to the “constructed” border between Canada and Massena, the border town in the state of New York in which the story takes place. A detail shot reveals an iron fence and a metal bridge, which immediately evoke Anzaldúa’s words about borders. As she puts it, borders “are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. [They are] a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge (25). The fence, in particular, pops up from the image due to the use of shallow focus, which highlights the clear-cut separation between nations (U.S.-Canada) through a material object. Some seconds later, the bridge on the background is in focus, leaving the blurry image of the fence at the front. The use of rack focus in this shot suggests the dichotomy that, as many border theories have pointed out, is intrinsic to the concept of the border: the border is both fence and bridge, line of separation and of contact. In the next shot, the view of the

border as a division line prevails. Several fast-edited shots show numerous signs marking the territory compulsively, enforcing the role of the border as a ‘marker’ which is “operationalizing demarcation as a form of division” (A. Cooper and C. Rumford 110). The shot from the Canadian side reinforces this notion when the check-point between the two nations is presented, since this “conventional border with its array of security and regulatory activity” (110) is part of the traditional imaginary of the border (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: The U.S-Canada border.

In this sense, the physical border suggests imprisonment which is translated into confinement in Ray’s character the first time we see her in the film. A detail shot of her bare feet on the cold ground shows an old tattoo and hints at her precarious situation. The camera tilts to the packet of cigarettes in her hands until we get a close-up of Ray’s face while she is smoking. Her careless nail polish and her wrinkled face show her weariness. Tears are about to come out of her eyes. Even if the spectator does not know that yet, this is the moment in which Ray has just found out that her husband has abandoned her and has run away with the money they had saved for their new house. She feels trapped and without escape. Later on, when she is in the corridor of her old house, the straight-vertical lines of the walls and windows simulate a jail and the small

cubicle-rooms give a sense of claustrophobia, suggesting incarceration and highlighting her isolation and her delicate position (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Ray in her corridor.

The second main geographical border presented in the film is the US-Mohawk reservation border. This border is visibly marked by a signpost that reads “Thank you for visiting the Land of the Mohawk”. The land of the Mohawk is a territory that is part of two countries, the U.S. and Canada. The Akwesasne St. Regis Mohawk Reservation (U.S.) is adjacent to the Akwesasne reservation in Ontario and Quebec (Fig. 4).

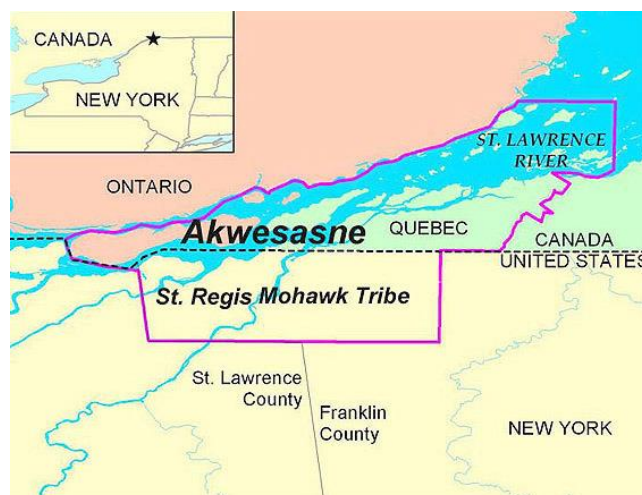


Figure 4: Map of the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation between the U.S. and Canada.

Mohawk Land is divided into two by a natural border, the St. Lawrence River at the 45th parallel. The 1794 Jay Treaty established that the Mohawks could cross without restraint the United States-Canada border since the reservation is considered a “sovereign nation,” even if it “shares jurisdiction with the State of New York, the United States of America, and the Town of Bombay” (Raussert 19). As a result, the reservation has a unique sovereignty, as can be seen in the following conversation between Ray and Lila the first time on their first smuggling trip together.

Ray: “I’m not crossing that.”

Lila: “Don’t worry, there is no black ice.”

Ray: “That’s Canada.”

Lila: “That’s Mohawk Land. The res is on both sides of the river.”

Ray: “What about border patrol?”

Lila: “There is no border patrol.”

Ray: “I’m still not crossing that.”

Lila: “Don’t worry it will hold a Spirit. I have seen Semis cross it... the only other way is the bridge and they are not going to let you take that.” [Ray has a pistol].

While Ray is aware of the border between the two countries, for Lila it is all part of the same territory: Mohawk Land. The reservation is a liminal space, left on the margins, and Lila epitomizes this isolation. Therefore, the first time that we see Lila, a long shot presents her walking on the shoulder on her way to work in the Bingo House. The cars passing by recreate a border and emphasize the marginal role of Lila since they leave her on the sideline of the road (Fig. 5). Hence, this long shot is a metaphor for her situation in real life—she is left on the margins, ignored by everybody.



Fig 5. Ray on the shoulder going to work.

4.1.2 Metaphorical Borders: Race and Culture as Division

The other kind of border that we find in the film belongs to the metaphorical paradigm of race and culture. It is generated as a direct consequence of the different understandings over the geopolitical borders and of the neo-liberal system which esteems and protects some lives over others (Dodds 562). Thus, this mental borderland functions chiefly as a separation between Ray and Lila.

As an example of the hatred generated by the construction of geopolitical borders and nation-states, the first conversation they maintain epitomizes their overall disagreement and incomprehension towards the other. Therefore, when Ray follows Lila to her van/house, Lila claims: “This is Mohawk territory” but Ray, ignoring the comment, answers: “This is New York State, so quit the bullshit.”

On the other hand, if we analyse the strain between the two characters, it is obvious that part of the problem derives from a sense of superiority on Ray’s part, since she sees Lila as the Other. Foucault explains this notion through the “dualistic mechanism of exclusion” (Franks 199) in which he argues that society generates a division of people into binaries in order to develop a “pure community” (198). The creation of the binary (white/colour), or in other words, the “categorisation” (Crenshaw 1297) of the “abnormal” (Franks 25) into the Other, establishes a hierarchy which is

fundamental to control and construct the Native American woman in the film. This subject is a monolithic invention in which the white person can portray their worst qualities. For this reason, the native in this case, is believed to be an inferior being, dangerous, not clever enough or a savage.

This is a process of inequality which justifies the superiority and privileges of white people against people of colour, and Lila is no stranger to it. Therefore, when the couple smuggles for the first time, and Ray worries about being stopped by the border patrol, Lila explains: “They’re not gonna stop you. You’re white.” Moreover, even if women are also considered as the Other, Ray benefits from this binary system (white/Other) in order to survive at the border. Therefore, Ray’s nativism towards Lila can be seen when she refers to her as “some Indian chick,” and contributes to the double prejudice that women of colour suffer from (for both their gender and race) (Crenshaw 1297). In this sense, the border woman is more susceptible to social, political or economic discrimination. This means that the risk that Lila may suffer at the border is greater than Ray’s (Anzaldúa 33) since “those who inhabit this perilous [border] live double threatened, [and] triply marginalized at times” (Real 96).

Within this context, the mental borders that they have created are materialized through the caravan and the gun. When Ray follows Lila to her caravan in order to reclaim her husband’s car, Ray stands outside while Lila remains inside the van. The door is closed and the two women have a conversation without having direct eye contact. The tension rises when the two characters are framed individually in the fast-edited shots that follow. Ray and Lila never share the frame, which suggests that even if they are physically in the same space, metaphorically, they are far away (Fig. 6).

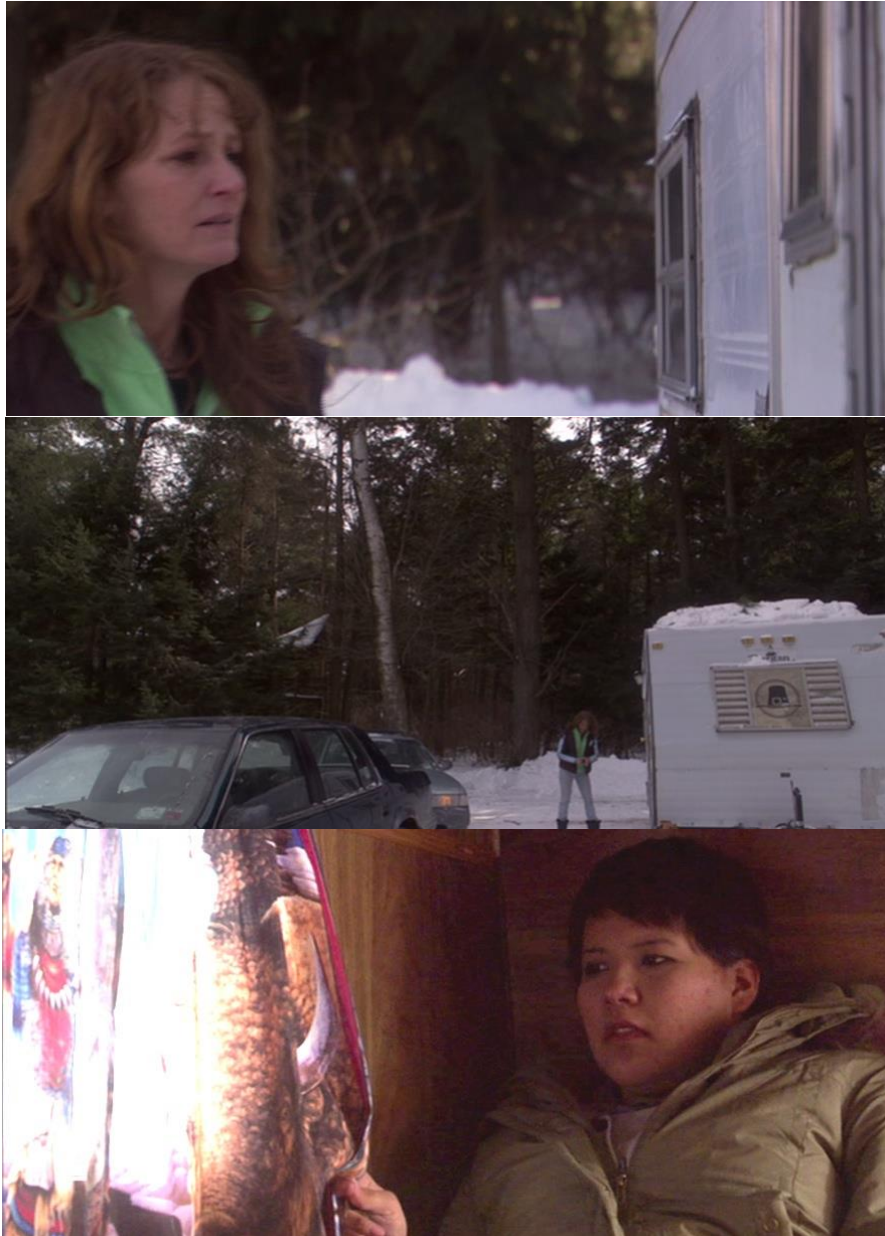


Figure 6: Sequence of the shots when Ray and Lila meet at Lila's house/van.

The gun is also a representation of the mental/cultural border between them. When Ray drives the car for the first time with Lila inside, a shot shows both women separated by the weapon since Ray is holding the pistol as a way of security against Lila. The gun stands for brutality and confrontation, and eventually, the encounter between the pair ends up in violence when they fight for the car and the weapon. In this last example, there is a moment in which Lila seems to have control over Ray, since, once inside the Mohawk territory, she forces Ray to smuggle Chinese people into the

U.S. Nevertheless, when they cross into U.S. territory, Ray gains full command. This control over the Other is encapsulated through the possession of the car and the pistol. Ultimately, the U.S. land gives the power back to the white, depriving natives of any right.



Figure 7: Sequence of shots when Ray and Lila are about to cross the river.

The border of race expands to other communities and does not limit itself just to the conflict between Lila and Ray. As Anzaldúa puts it: “the only legitimate inhabitants are those in power, the whites, and those who align themselves with whites” (25). The attitudes of both Ray and Lila towards the non-U.S. citizens they deal with is a consequence the era of terror since “in a post-9/11 environment, the US government (...) invested even more (...) in mechanisms and regimes designed to filter out undesirable life” (Dodds 879) and “although borders are set up to ‘define places that are safe and unsafe,’ the threats remain constant” (Real 96). When Lila and Ray decide to smuggle illegal aliens in an attempt to escape from their precarious situation, the binary smuggler/illegal migrant reveals that both border women are slaves and perpetrators of hierarchical systems. They do not question the positions of hierarchy and power which rule society and which also repress them. This notion is encapsulated through the figure of the car. Thus, the main protagonists stay in the front seats with the gun while the

migrants are hidden in the boot, without boots, or enough clothing for the cold. Therefore, this automatically positions the illegal aliens in a lower status.

Within this context, Ray seems to act on behalf of the United States, assuming the role of border security and exerting her own authority and rules (Dodds 576). This is conspicuous regarding the Pakistani couple. Even if she does not even know where Pakistan is, she still connects their country with terrorism which makes her feel “security unease” (576). The bag that the Pakistani couple is carrying is a “suspicious item” (576) for Ray and, unaware of the fact that there is a baby inside the bag, she ends up leaving it behind on the ice of the river while says: “Who knows what they have in there. I’m not going to be responsible for that”.

Nevertheless, these existing borders will endure the same fate of the river: eventual melting. The Saint Lawrence River is strong and fragile, rough and slippery, and so it stands for the unstable condition of Ray and Lila. Therefore, the shot of the two women crossing the river shows the car in the middle of the vast river, which makes the car and, by extension, the protagonists, insignificant and almost inexistent (Fig. 8). They know that the river is not a place to stay in, but a place of transit, since it means death, as was the case of Lila’s husband. Yet, they decide to cross it and leave their fate into the river’s hands. If frozen, they will be able to cross it and continue with their illegal business; however, if there is black ice, it will become a hazardous task. This means that crossing this unknown territory, both literally and metaphorically, is going to be one of their most difficult tests in life.



Figure 8: Ray's car crossing the frozen river for the first time.

4.2 Borderlands in *Frozen River*: Into Melting Ice

On the other hand, the borders that have previously been mentioned can also epitomize what Anzaldúa called a borderland, “a figurative, psychic, sexual, physical and material liminal space” (Dulfano 93).

Therefore, the river can also be regarded as a “zone of interaction” (Konrad & Nicol 32) or point of connection, in which cultures overlap and mix. In this sense, the low-angle shot that shows some birds flying over the sky in the first shot suggests freedom and development. This shot is followed by the fast-edited shots of the US-Canada border mentioned above. This generates a feeling of mobility reinforced by the cars waiting to pass the control. Hence, this scene presupposes a “mechanism of connection and encounter” (Cooper & Rumford 108) which generates a liminal space.

The Mohawk land, for its part, becomes what Foucault called a “heterotopia,” in the sense that it is a territory in between U.S. and Canada which works as a progressive contact zone (Raussert 15) and involves a “system of opening and closing that both isolates (...) and [is] penetrable” (Foucault 5). Therefore, the Mohawk land is separated from Canada and the U.S., and at the same time operates as a bridge for migrants. Hence, it is considered as “a permeable space that represents a contact zone, permits

transgression, and calls for negotiation” (Raussert 28). This idea is reinforced by the image of the river running which hints porosity and fluidity.

4.2.1 Crossing Borders: The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

Silvia Martínez Falquina claims that in the positive space of the borderlands theorized by Anzaldúa, asymmetrical relationships are prone to emerge (149) since, as we have already seen, the hierarchical positions of subordination established during the colonialist era are still present. Hence, when analysing Ray and Lila’s relationship and how they evolve in the borderland, we need to consider that their first encounter was marked by violence generated by convoluted inequalities and differences, and that their position as women makes their situation and advancement arduous. This entails that the process of hybridity which Anzaldúa describes is not a simple task and it is usually fraught with violence.

Within this context, if we analyze both characters we realize that they are two sides of the same coin and that, even in different ways, they are equally subject to several inequalities. Ray (a working-class, middle-aged, white woman) works as a shop assistant at the “Yankee Dollar,” while Lila (a slightly younger Mohawk woman) works at the reservation bingo. Ray is not promoted in her job because her boss does not take her seriously and Lila is fired from hers because she cannot see well. Their jobs have precarious conditions and are poorly paid. Moreover, both of them are alone. Hence, Ray’s husband is a game addict who abandons the family, and Lila’s husband drowned in the river when smuggling. This makes them single mothers having to look after their children on their own. This uncertain and hazardous situation is brought to the fore when they are crossing the river for the first time and an extreme long shot introduces the women in the car confronting a vast cold horizon as metaphor of their harsh future.

More specifically, their state is a consequence of the feminization of poverty, “an old problem with a new name” (Harman 6) and it is without doubt, one of the most common diseases that all women suffer from at the border. Therefore, the first border that they need to cross is the one dividing the private from the public sphere. The “natural” or, more precisely, imposed position of women belongs to the private sphere, looking after the family. According to Camila Esguerra, we think of women as “cuidadoras naturales” (151) with no self-realization. Moreover, belonging to this passive world makes women weaker and vulnerable to suffer from poverty because of their ill-condition under patriarchy (6). In this sense, both of them “are at the bottom of their respective societies” (Raussert 26) and so they decide to smuggle, in order to survive economically and escape the futile living conditions. Hence, mobility along the border provides both women with what Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” (60), a self-awakening (Dulfano94), which leads to the breaking of imposed constructions. Moreover, the absence of their husbands leads them to take up the role of men since smuggling is considered a male job. This means assuming a phallic power through the props of gun and car, which helps them to be protected and empowered at the border.

Once they have taken up an active role, they are able to cross the second border, their differences. Therefore, there are two stages in the relationship between the two women, which are mirrored by the state of the river: first, harsh and cold like their first encounter, based on inequality and suspicion; second, melting ice that stands for the surmounting of their differences and will to change. They cross the border four times and in each smuggling round, their relationship evolves. Within this context, the first trip is a violent confrontation in which several camera shots show them individually, never sharing the frame or, if they do, they are divided by the gun. At the end of the trip,

the bright light of the sun suggests that their differences are noticeable since it clearly demonstrates the division between the Mohawk land and the United States.



Figure 8: Lila back at the reservation after the second smuggling trip.

The second trip allows for some introspection as the characters have a small conversation inside the car that highlights the similarities between their respective situations. Hence, when they discover that both of them are single mothers, the borders become blurry and the mist around them (generated by the cold weather) promises the dissolution of the border that is about to take place. In the last two smuggling rounds, the borders between Ray and Lila get completely blurred since the visual becomes vague: a deep dark night and a snowy storm make it hard to differentiate the female protagonists from the outside of the car. Thus, it looks as if there is not a clear silhouette and that they are becoming the same body or person (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Ray and Lila counting their money inside the car in the middle of a storm.

Therefore, the landscape shapes their friendship since ultimately, the ice of the river starts to melt and ends up getting broken by the car (Fig.11), hinting that the cold distance has given way to friendship.



Figure 11: Ray, Lila and the Asian girls running away when the ice breaks.

This bond between Ray and Lila can be considered extraordinary since

female friendship has been largely ignored by Hollywood, giving the erroneous impression that it hardly exists. The more prevalent stereotype is of women going at each other or competing for men. However, (...) a search for new bonds began, and friendship between women gained new interest as a subject for films. (...) [F]emale friendship is as fragile, delicate, supportive, complex, nourishing, painful and difficult as a love affair. (Levy 355)

This kind of friendship breaks up with any stereotype on female relationships since it is based chiefly on trust and eventually on love. As it will be argued below, the protagonists do not only become good friends; they become family as well.

4.2.2 The Borderland as Sorority: The Culmination of a Process

After the consolidation of their friendship, the creation of sorority is essential to survive at the border. The protagonists understand that in this harsh land they cannot

survive on their own, and communality prevails over individualism. This process helps them to rebuild their identity.

When the police stops Lila and Ray on the fourth smuggling trip, there is a moment of catharsis and introspection for both women, in which, for the first time, they recognize themselves as equals. Lila decides to turn herself in and go to jail, even if it implies she will be banned from entering Mohawk territory ever again. Ray seems to accept this decision at first and runs away from the reservation. In the middle of the deep dark wood, with no clear path to follow, she undergoes a process of change in which she recognizes Lila as an individual she needs to care for. She is aware of her legal privilege as a white woman (only a four-month prison sentence) and decides to sacrifice herself for Lila.

As a third space, the Mohawk territory offers a potential for change and new beginnings. It allows both protagonists to generate a liminal site of sorority in which feminisms rule. Within this context, Ray accepts the Other, which implies breaking with the post-colonial heritage (Hutcheon 153). When she is asked if there is someone that they can call to take care of her children, she answers: "I got somebody (...) a friend". The border between the two women has given way to a female bond. In this sense, even if these women do not have the power to change the law, they try to help and protect each other. This sorority brings to the fore the question of feminisms which are inclusive and in which women aim to create a community. There are other examples of sorority in the film. Once they find out that there was a baby in the bag, neither Ray nor Lila hesitate that they have to go back to the river to rescue the baby. When they give the baby back to the Pakistani mother, the warm and cosy colours in the room contrast with the harsh and deadly frozen landscape outside. Similarly, when Ray sees that the

Canadian smuggler wants to hurt two Asian girls, she quickly uses her gun to help other women regardless of their race.

Following Segura and Zavella's work on "Gendered Borderlands", the Mohawk land can be regarded as an "interactional milieu [which] becomes contested terrain where subjects negotiate how they are regarded and treated" (540) and which also turns into a measure to decolonize the mind and reconstruct a new identity. In this space we ultimately see the development of the characters into *mestizaje* according to Anzaldúa (102). Therefore, both women accept and learn things from the other, implying that they acknowledge difference and accept change. The transformation is more noticeable in relation to Ray. At the beginning of the film Ray embodies the physical border. When we see her looking at herself in the mirror, the dirt on the glass makes her reflection difficult to see, and together with a vertical line which divides her face into two, her emotional turmoil is suggested. In this sense, it can be claimed that Ray encapsulates the notion of the border since she also has two sides (Fig.12).



Figure 12: Ray's reflection in the mirror.

She needs to evolve from border to borderland, a process of identity change which will be a "matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' and which belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 225). Ray will be literally wounded twice along the

film and the wounds will help her change and evolve. Therefore, after her first fight with Lila, and the cut in her head, she reconsiders the situation and decides to be more respectful towards Lila. After the second wound, a shot in the ear by the Canadian smuggler, she changes completely. This bullet wound epitomizes her development as a “leader” (Dufano 91) since she is injured when trying to help other women.

In the case of Lila we can explain her change through the eventual recovery of her sight owing to the use of glasses. At the beginning she is unable to work properly since she has “bad eyes”, which can be metaphorically read as her bad judgement when it comes to taking decisions. Nevertheless, from the moment in which she uses glasses she starts to see things in a clear way and tries to amend her ill attitude. This also affects her relationship with Ray. Therefore, while Lila could not see properly, she behaved aggressively with Ray since she did not know her sufficiently. Nevertheless, when she recovers her full sight it seems that she can see through Ray, which allows Lila to understand and finally trust her.

Both of them find in the other the strength to be active and break with the roles that a patriarchal society has imposed on them. They break from their old selves and start a new identity which belongs to the past as to the present (Hall 225) with the other women. Therefore, they have generated a hybrid subjectivity since Ray learns from Lila how to be more accepting and caring, and Lila finds in Ray the courage she needed to win her baby back, love herself and be determined.



Figure 13: Ray's new house arriving.

The scene that encapsulates the climax of sorority and the result of their new identities takes place at the end of the film. When Lila enters Ray's house, we see TJ talking to his mother on the phone. Lila leaves her baby on the floor and Ray's youngest son starts playing with him, suggesting the possibility of a world in which interpersonal interactions are not defined by racial prejudices. This notion is reinforced by the next shot to the St. Lawrence River, which is melting. In contrast to the dark scenes inside Ray's house, this shot is lit up suggesting optimism and faith. Moreover, the melting of ice encapsulates fluidity and progress: fluid relationships/family and identity. Therefore, this new model of family is possible since they have settled their differences and have created new identities which permit the liberation of imposed constructions. Hence, borderlands, their connectivity and exchange process, are ultimately seen as the consequence of their new family bond and friendship.

5. Conclusion

Borders are part of our contemporary world. Either physical or metaphorical, they define our identity. In this way, they influence our relationships with others and our ways of thinking about the Other. That is why physical borders, especially in the 21st century, have been strengthened through surveillance and have ended up creating and reinforcing mental borders that separate individuals on account of race, nationality and other features.

The proliferation of borders (in the ironically called borderless world of globalization and the network society) has resulted in an increasing number of films in which borders play a key role. This is the case of *Frozen River*, a movie in which the relationship between Ray and Lila is conditioned by the borders of the neoliberal world. Furthermore, *Frozen River* constructs the border cinematically through several formal devices to encapsulate the potential that borders have in human's identity. As this essay has argued, the process of construction and dissolution of the border in the film directly affects the development of the identity of the female characters and, by extension, their friendship. This essay has used border theory to explore the process of construction and dissolution of borders in the film and how this process shapes the identities of the two female protagonists. It has argued that the border in *Frozen River* starts as a dividing line that, like the St. Lawrence River in the film, can melt and become a borderland of fruitful (even if also dangerous) interaction. As this essay has claimed, the only way to survive on the border is through union and collaboration. The two protagonists can develop a new identity that dissolves the mental border between the Other and which breaks with stereotypes about female relationships. Ultimately, their new identities are based on the principles of sisterhood which breaks with the system by generating a new family model based on female friendship and maternal bonds.

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