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"Borderlines, Borderlands, Liminal Spaces: Crossing the Border Between the United States and Canada in North American Border Narratives"

Crossing international borders does not only indicate crossing a physical borderline, but also cultural, mythological, imaginary, political, sometimes linguistic boundaries, which may exert a strong influence on the border crossing individual. The border between the United States and Canada is a particularly interesting case in point. "A border like no other" (Claudia Sadowski-Smith) and the longest undefended border in the world, a Canadian diplomat once described the US/Canadian border as "a typically human creation; it is physically invisible, geographically illogical, militarily indefensible, and emotionally inescapable." In contrast to the border between the United States and Mexico, the border between the USA and Canada has rarely been investigated in border studies and literary studies to date, least of all in connection with the short story, yet there are a significant number of literary texts in both Canadian and American literature that deal with this particular border crossing experience. The liminal state created by the physical and mental act of border crossing and of staying in borderlands is particularly suited to a representation in the short story format, as has been paradigmatically rendered by Thomas King's short story "Borders."

My paper first of all intends to show the variety of American and Canadian short stories which deal with the crossing of the border between the two countries. In the framework of Comparative North American Studies I then intend to show that the border between Canada and the United States has a distinctly different meaning for and impact on these two cultures. In other words, I intend to show that in spite of the superficial similarities between these two North American cultures, Alice Munro's dubbing the United States in one of her short stories as "a foreign, a very slightly foreign, country" is to be regarded as at best a Munroian exception. More frequently, crossing the border between Canada and the United States (or the other way round) in North American border narratives entails at least an uneasy sense of dislocation, at worst an existential crisis of personal and national belonging.