»There is no Border«

Dissolving boundaries between precarious bodies and rural landscapes in Frozen River (2008)

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This article examines Courtney Hunt's Oscar-nominated debut feature Frozen River (USA 2008, D: Courtney Hunt)and argues that the film displays an interactive, unbounded understanding of rural landscape. The film is discussed as a case study belonging to a recent, loosely connected cycle of US indie films which concern themselves with rural poverty and marginality. The cycle's emergence is inherently connected to the dramatic exacerbation of multi-factored real-life experiences of poverty and precarity in rural America since the 2008 financial crisis and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, yet also hark back to much older experiences of oppression and dispossession. I have elsewhere termed this cycle New Rural Cinema (Lindemann 2024). This term reflects not only the cycle's recent emergence around the 2010s, yet also its novel, substantive approach to landscape which stands in contrast with much of Hollywood's historical treatment of rural America. Apart from Frozen River, this cycle includes films like Winter's Bone (USA 2010, D: Debra Granik), Beasts of the Southern Wild (USA 2012, D: Benh Zeitlin),Meek's Cutoff (USA 2010, D: Kelly Reichardt),Joe (USA 2013, D: David Gordon Green),Dayveon (USA 2017, D: Amman Abbasi),Leave No Trace (USA 2018, D: Debra Granik),Nomadland (USA 2020, D: Chloé Zhao),War Pony (USA 2022, D: Gina Gammell/Riley Keough), and more.

I will focus here on the motif of the dissolution of boundaries of landscape in two distinguishable, yet interconnected aspects. Firstly, Frozen River approaches the rural American landscape not as a mere representation or scenery but, as Don Mitchell puts it, »a concrete materialisation of social relations« (Mitchell 2005: 50) and conditions of possibility. It is these spatial, material conditions the film highlights in its engagement with rural poverty and thereby illustrates how »the idea of landscape […] is crucial to the development and functioning of capitalism« (ibid.). At the same time, however, it takes on its marginalised protagonists' perspective on their surroundings through a close, tactile focus on the rural landscape as a lived-in environment. This phenomenological focus on interactivity is connected to the film's communal, social approach to landscapes. By narratively foregrounding solidarity and mutual aid as well as including scenes in which

characters visually merge with their environment, the film aims to counter capitalism's ideological work to alienate communities from the land they inhabit. Secondly, the article takes into focus the relation between rural landscape and the nation in the US context and demonstrates how Frozen River actively subverts the role scenic landscape images have historically played in the naturalisation of nationalist concepts and tropes. This becomes apparent in the film's blurring of national borders which is achieved by bringing the materiality of the border space into focus and by highlighting internal boundaries to the Mohawk Nation at Ahkwesáhsne.

The article follows an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to rural cinematic landscape which draws on writings by cultural geographers like Kenneth Olwig, John Wylie, and Tim Ingold which foreground the interaction between a community with their respective environment through custom, labour, and everyday activity as crucial to the emergence of landscape. The shape of the landscape is, as Ingold (2000: 198) describes it, »generated in movement« and as such, film is an ideal medium to picture its perpetual becoming. In the context of the impoverished, deindustrialised rural landscapes represented in the films of the New Rural Cinema, this understanding of landscape is an inherently political choice as the films posit communal solidarity as a form of intersectional resistance against the atomising forces of neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy.

While overt political messaging may seem to be absent from Frozen River and other films of the New Rural Cinema at first glance, their treatment of poverty and landscape make visible historical and ongoing processes of dispossession and marginalisation. Frozen River was produced independently from major Hollywood studios and premiered at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival where it won the festival's Grand Jury Prize. Sherry B. Ortner has pointed out how indie cinema has been one of the key artistic forms in which the »seismic shifts« within the US class structure induced by neoliberal policies »have been – […] often violently – exposed for critique and challenge« (Ortner 2013: 264). Hunt's film achieves this by presenting the landscape its characters inhabit as shaped by, as Don Mitchell puts it, »all manner of exclusionary, expropriating, and often racist, and patriarchal social practices« (Mitchell 2005: 53). Thereby, the film subverts pastoral, romanticised visions of US rurality and draws attention to inequalities existing within the United States today. At the same time, its understanding of landscape as inherently tied to community and solidarity challenges the rugged individualism at the heart of neoliberal policies and reactionary US politics at large.

Frozen River focusses on the struggles of Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo), a mother of two who lives with her sons T.J. and Ricky in Upstate New York near the border of Quebec. When her gambling-addicted husband Troy leaves with the money meant for a new double-wide trailer shortly before Christmas, Ray desperately needs a new source of income to feed her family and secure the down-payment for the new home. An opportunity arises when she meets the Native American single mother Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham) while searching for her husband on the nearby Mohawk reservation. Lila suggests the possibility of smuggling illegal immigrants across a little-known border crossing nearby. This crossing leads across the frozen St. Lawrence River from US to Canadian soil yet remains on Native land as the reservation straddles the international border. This is an actual, real-world condition of the reservation community of Ahkwesáhsne which goes back to the so-called Jay Treaty of 1794 between the United States and Great Britain. The treaty

both clarified the US-Canadian border and »acknowledged and […] codified […] the rights of Indian nations occupying areas« (Simpson 2014: 133) near the border. Crucially, it also gave these tribal nations »the right to traverse the boundaries of the US-British divide freely and without levy« (ibid.). However, despite this explicit right to pass, the treaty »implicitly leaves the legal regimes of Canada and the United States with the power to define who those Indian nations are and how that right to pass shall be rendered and respected« (ibid.: 133f.) This ambiguous local history has informed centuries of colonial anxiety about Native sovereignty and trade.

This becomes relevant in the film when the two precarious women reluctantly team up for the smuggling operation. After several successful runs, the final attempt goes awry when a local police officer notices them and pursues them up to the gates of the Mohawk reservation where he has no jurisdiction. The Mohawk tribal leader decides to expel Lila from the reservation for her actions and intends to hand her over to the police. However, Ray decides to accept the sole responsibility for the crime. She asks Lila to look after her sons and see through the purchase of the new mobile home while she serves her prison sentence. Lila and her infant son join T.J. and Ricky in their RV home. The final scene shows a truck arriving with the newly purchased double-wide trailer.

Both Frozen River and the New Rural Cinema cycle at large are indicative of the need for a critical re-evaluation of rural spaces in twenty-first-century US cinema. As Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield point out in the introduction to their edited collection on rural cinema, urban spaces are often implicitly understood to be cinema's favoured geographical focus while representations of the rural seem »retrogressive and thus not worthy of the same critical and historical focus« (2006: 1). This limited perspective on US cinema is especially apparent in studies which use spatial and geographical analysis to comment on developments in US society connected to the implementation of neoliberal policies and the depictions of their victims. While »films about poverty set in New York and other big cities exist radically out of proportion to the actual poverty we find there«, as Stephen Pimpare correctly points out (2017: 155), there was until very recently a notable dearth of academic focus on depictions of the rural. Some studies go as far as denying »any corresponding interest in small-town America beyond caricatures of rednecks and hillbillies« (Andersson/Webb 2019: 25) in US cinema.

The aim of this article is to challenge these assumptions on several levels. Firstly, the New Rural Cinema's recent depictions of rural America, whilst maintaining a close, hermetic focus on their isolated locales, nevertheless make palpable the dramatic shift in the class structure caused by deliberate economic processes like deindustrialisation. These depictions of hardship also illustrate that neoliberal policies such as austerity and deregulation as well as the resulting precarity do not solely affect urban areas and are, in fact, indicative of the entanglement of remote rural areas with the global economy. As Tickameyer and Wornell argue in their overview of the causes of rural poverty in the US, »many remote and persistently poor places are not left behind by the modern world. Rather, they are poor precisely because they are part of the world capitalist system.« (2017: 93) Importantly, the films illustrate these developments and their devastating results on America's working class through a close focus on landscape and space. Frozen River and other films of the New Rural Cinema cycle are thus valuable tools in understanding

the changing attitudes, environments, and experiential realities of rural people, not just in the US context.

Secondly, this article aims to counter the understanding of US rurality and its popular depictions as homogenous in terms of race and gender. In fact, the New Rural Cinema's cast of protagonists is far removed from the supposed »caricatures of rednecks and hillbillies« identified by Andersson and Webb. Both of these derogatory terms are mainly associated with the white, male ›*Lumpenproletariat*‹. While the cycle certainly engages with these stereotypes in various ways, its films employ mainly female protagonists and/or constitute nuanced explorations of non-white rural communities. This diversity is not an end in itself but accurately reflects the empirical data concerning who suffers the most from, for example, the withdrawal of social security structures as part of neoliberal austerity policies. For example, the Economic Research Service for the US Department of Agriculture points out in a recent report that persistently poor rural counties »are not evenly distributed, but rather are geographically concentrated and disproportionately located in regions with above-average populations of racial minorities« (Farrigan 2021), particularly Black and Native American communities. This points to the fundamental impact race has on one's class position in the United States and, thus, to an enduring legacy of systemic racism. As I will show, Frozen River is a particularly striking example of this focus on heterogeneity within the rural landscape as it concerns itself with the national and legal boundaries separating white and Native Americans suffering from poverty.

Finally, while at the time of writing, the cycle of rural indie films seems to have subsided, it is worth pointing out that the dramatic spending cuts and erasure of inclusionary programs implemented by the second Trump administration in early 2025 signal a coming deterioration of the already dire living conditions depicted in these rural spaces.[1] As such, Frozen River and the other films are not only indicative of the spatial outcomes of a particular moment in the history of capitalism – the run-up to and aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis – they also point towards a potentially even bleaker future for rural Americans.

1. »Eye, Body, and Land« – Embodied Vision in Frozen River

Linda Badley acknowledges Frozen River as part of a stylistic revival of social realism in works by US female filmmakers which she terms neo-neorealism. She identifies a corpus of films which »feature middle and lower-class female protagonists who find a limited agency within a meticulously rendered web of intersectional circumstances in which they are embedded« (Badley 2016: 121). While Badley's article is not primarily focused on cinematic landscape, this notion of embeddedness within a »web« chimes with Mitchell's above quoted definition of landscape as a »concrete materialisation of social relations«

1 One out of many examples concerns Trump's shutdown of United States Agency for International Development (USAID). While ostensibly affecting foreign aid, The Economist reported in February of 2025 that »USAID has a domestic rural constituency. The food it gives away is grown by American farmers who, in a troubled farm economy, depend on the government to be a consistent customer.« (The Economist 2025)

which, he clarifies, »are defined by a capitalist, commodity economy« (Mitchell 2005: 50). The claim of a ›realist‹ depiction of landscape, however, has traditionally been suspicious to Marxist cultural geographers like Mitchell and Denis Cosgrove.

In his influential essay »Prospect, Perspective, and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea« (1985), Cosgrove argues that the development of a perspectival and, thus, scientifically realist technique of landscape depiction in Renaissance Italy was inherently tied up with landownership and expropriation. According to Cosgrove, this »claim of realism is in fact ideological […]. Subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and the viewer – those who control the landscape, not those who belong to it.« (Cosgrove 1985: 24) Badley's definition of her term neo-neorealism does grapple with this problem. According to her, the neo-neorealism of Frozen River and her other case studies »consists of finely tuned negotiations between two modalities – neorealism and melodrama, one ›objective‹ and analytically distanced, the other expressionistically heightened and affective« (Badley 2016: 128). Following her conclusion that these feminist, genre-bending films constitute »a form of resistance« (ibid.: 133) to mainstream US cinema, I identify a similar negotiation in the treatment of landscape in Frozen River. As I will show, Frozen River establishes an affective, entangled perspective on its environment which foregrounds the gaze of its marginalised female protagonists – of those »who belong to it«, to use Cosgrove's words. At the same time, the film constructs a realist focus on its landscape which aims to unmask, as Mitchell puts it, »the relations that go into its making« (Mitchell 2005: 51).

This focus is achieved by casting local, non-professional actors in supporting roles and by shooting on location along the Canadian border in Upstate New York. Both directorial choices emphasise the authenticity and specificity of the film's setting and picture its protagonists as deeply embedded within an environment marked by its structural decline. While Frozen River was filmed in the year before the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, its setting had been in severe decline before. A 2010 report on the post-crisis economic recovery by the Office of the State Comptroller stated that »from 2000 to 2004, manufacturing declined by nearly 20 percent in Upstate New York, and by another 8 percent from 2004 to 2008 – representing a loss of nearly 105,000 jobs in eight years« (»The Changing Manufacturing Sector in Upstate New York«: 1). The report then details how the crisis »has produced unprecedented job losses and increasing unemployment in all regions of the State. Prior to these recent downward trends, New York State's employment base had already been undergoing a steady structural shift.« (Ibid.: 3) How does the film visually convey these dire economic prospects through its landscape?

Frozen River opens with a series of brief shots which visualise the inhospitableness of its environment, focussing initially on the immediate proximity of the border. They depict the frozen St. Lawrence River, a rusty bridge behind barbed wire, lines of cars waiting to cross the border at a checkpoint, and a gloomy stretch of road leading towards an icy grey sky. A weather-worn town sign welcomes the viewer to Massena, describing the town as the »gateway to the fourth coast«, an informal term used to describe the Great Lakes region. This shot not only anchors the film's landscape in a very specific, real-life geographic location, the sign's reference to the town as a »gateway« also registers as an early allusion to the setting's liminal position. From the very beginning, then, the film

introduces its viewers to the »web of circumstances« its characters inhabit instead of presenting an idealised, pastoral version of the US countryside.

Furthermore, the film pictures its rural environment without resorting to the sweeping long shots and establishing shots common in Hollywood cinema's construction of US rurality. Instead, FROZEN RIVER favours what the geographer John Wylie has described as »embodied vision« (Wylie 2007: 177). This denotes a phenomenological approach, Wylie continues, in which »landscape ceases to be understood as a static, framed gaze and instead becomes the very interconnectivity of eye, body and land, a constantly emergent perceptual and material milieu« (ibid.). This aesthetic strategy can be observed, for example, in the shots directly following the credit sequence in which Ray's yard in front of her trailer is shown in a cold blueish twilight under an overcast sky. Snowdrifts have gathered on the dead grass; brownish trees and crooked electricity pylons are visible in the background. On the right, a white rectangular shed is visible; clutter and unidentifiable old metal parts are strewn in front of it. The image instantly conveys coldness, isolation, and poverty.

Fig. 1: Ray's yard in front of her trailer.

Quelle: Screenshot (Harwood Hunt Productions/Frozen River Pictures 2008).

However, a surprising object can be seen on the left side of the frame, namely an old carousel with a bright red pole and painted wooden horses. While not a luxury item, the elaborate, colourful toy still stands in clear contrast to the family's austere living conditions. Therefore, the item suggests a nuanced understanding of poverty since its presence speaks of a complex backstory that defies expectations of mere squalor. While its presence is never fully explained, the film subtly implies that it may have been a purchase made by the absent Troy after a lucky streak at gambling. It seems strangely out of place in the otherwise grey, inhospitable environment of the scene which is further emphasised by the mournful guitar score. Nevertheless, the film certainly does not shy away from the Eddy family's hardship: a later scene illustrates the dramatic nature of

their condition when Ray resorts to serving her sons popcorn and lemonade for dinner as there is simply no money to buy groceries before the arrival of the next paycheck.

The final image of this opening sequence is a slow introductory pan of the film's protagonist: Ray can be seen sitting in her parked car in front of the trailer, silently crying and smoking a cigarette as she gazes across the yard. This devastating opening scene carefully establishes Ray's gaze on her impoverished surroundings and thereby introduces the film's phenomenological approach to landscape. Wylie points out that »to speak of […] gazing upon landscape, is […] to speak about an intertwining through which observer and observed are assembled as such« (2007: 178). This brief opening scene therefore establishes the film's environment as a visibly lived-in rural landscape, not a removed scenery, as well as Ray's intertwined relation to it.

Wylie's concept of embodied vision is also visible in the film's introduction of Lila. She is first shown walking through snow and mud on the narrow sidewalk of a large road. The blocking of the shot places her at the very margins of the frame while cars noisily rush past in both directions at the centre of the image. The shot evokes her marginalised position within both her own community – we later learn that she is forbidden to own a car because of prior instances of smuggling – and in US society at large as a poor, Native woman. Furthermore, the foley sounds of speeding trucks subtly underline the bodily vulnerability inherent in experiences of extreme poverty. This is reaffirmed later when Lila mentions an incident in which she was almost hit by a snowplough on her way to work.

Fig. 2: The film's introduction of Lila.

Quelle: Screenshot (Harwood Hunt Productions/Frozen River Pictures 2008).

However, here we can also observe a second key visual strategy the film employs to illustrate the centrality of landscape. After the opening shot of Lila on the side of the road, the next image is jarring in the way it sidesteps any establishment shot of its environment: suddenly, Lila is shown in a tight tracking shot at her job in the reservation's bingo hall. This is a visual strategy commonly used in the New Rural Cinema which I have elsewhere termed »disrupted geography«: »the film denies its viewers mastery over the ge-

ography by eschewing totalising views of the landscape and instead emphasising and emulating the embodied vision of its characters.« (Lindemann 2024: 109) Frozen River explicitly does not try to *map* its environment – in the sense of organising geographic space in a visually coherent way – but instead stresses the dispersed structure of its terrain and the isolating effect it has on its characters.

Generally, the New Rural Cinema uses disrupted geography to visualise what the geographers Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore have described as »actually existing neoliberalism« (Brenner/Theodore 2002: 355). According to the authors, »each round of capitalist development is associated with a distinctive, historically specific geographical landscape in which some places […] are systematically privileged over and against others as sites for capital accumulation« (ibid.). In the case of rural America, this »core-periphery polarisation and socio-spatial inequality« (ibid.) is expressed in a systematic deindustrialisation as discussed above as well as a dramatic reduction of social safety nets and critical infrastructure. In an article for Jacobin, the anthropologist Marc Edelman has pointed out that »since the turn to […] free-market policies in the 1980s, American capitalism has systematically underdeveloped rural and small-town regions of the United States« (Edelman 2020). He specifies that one of the key causes of this underdevelopment are neoliberal austerity politics: »in recent decades, federal and state governments have slashed funding for social services [in rural areas]« (ibid.). Ann Tickameyer similarly notes that some of the main aggravating circumstances in rural poverty today result from »the limited or even total lack of availability of public and social services« (2020: 10).

Frozen River illustrates these conditions of possibility by displaying a notable absence of communal or public spaces and services such as schools, community centres, libraries etc. As a result of the film's disrupted geography, Massena appears mostly as various stretches of roads along which the film's main settings – Ray's trailer, Lila's trailer, the casino, the reservation, the shop Ray works in – are dispersed without a comprehensible structure. This disrupted editing style, which is employed to similar effect in Ballast (USA 2008, D: Lance Hammer) and Winter's Bone, thus aims to illustrate the isolated experience of poverty in the rural landscapes created by »actually existing neoliberalism«. In addition, Frozen River draws attentionto the inherently gendered nature of neoliberal marginalisation. Wendy Brown argues that »the shrinking, privatisation, and/or dismantling of infrastructure supporting families, children, and retirees« (Brown 2015: 105) lays the responsibility of care squarely in the hands of women. Therefore, Brown continues, »privatising goods uniquely penalises women to the extent that they remain disproportionately responsible for those who cannot be responsible for themselves« (ibid.). Both Ray and Lila are single mothers whose extremely precarious positions in an environment deprived of social care institutions eventually forces them into crime to avert homelessness. Furthermore, their environment's disrupted geography seems to make community or council impossible and thus fosters secrecy and criminality. Paradoxically, it is in Ray and Lila's union born of necessity that the film identifies a kernel of female solidarity that will help them overcome, at least momentarily, the immediate threat of homelessness at the end of the narrative.

2. Sovereignty, Solidarity, and Community in Frozen River

Disrupted geography as a visual strategy takes on an additional meaning in Frozen River compared to other films of the New Rural Cinema cycle due to the film's central interest in border crossings. For example, the transition from Ray's trailer in the opening scene (outside of the reservation) to Lila on the roadside (inside of the reservation's territory) crosses the internal border invisibly, ›in between shots‹. This first, unseen crossing of the reservation's border, therefore, demonstrates how the film integrates its »embodied vision« of the rural landscape into its blurring of border space. This becomes increasingly tangible with every crossing of both the internal and national border the film envisions. Ray's first entry on the reservation, for example, is marked by a close-up shot of a green signpost reading »Land of the Mohawk«; this is preceded by a less visually emphasised, yet still clearly readable sign pointing to the »Bridge to Canada«. Throughout the film, however, these crossings are less clearly marked and, therefore, the lines between the two sides begin to blur. I want to focus on the close-up shot of the »Land of the Mohawk« sign and its significance for the film's treatment of the border landscape in a bit more detail here.

The shot of the road sign underlines, as Klaus Dodds points out, »the Mohawk reservation's extraordinary legal status« (2013: 573) which is further stressed later by glimpses of »waiting police officers stationed close to the entrance/exit on the US side. There is a zoning of sovereignty and […] the state is shown to have relinquished some of that sovereign power to tribal police authorities.« (Ibid.) Dodds is referring here to the legal status of Native American tribes which are, as Angela A. Gonzales summarises, »unlike other ethnic or racial groups in the United States [because they] occupy a unique position in the US polity vis-à-vis their political status and relationship to the federal government as sovereign nations« (Gonzales 2004: 44). While the legal history and specific details of Native sovereignty go beyond the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out here, as Gonzales continues, that although »Congress has plenary […] power to limit tribal sovereignty, two principal attributes of tribal sovereignty remain: the inherent power over internal affairs and the preclusion of state intervention in tribal affairs« (ibid.: 45). Both of these attributes are explicitly referenced in the film. Firstly, while gambling is illegal in New York State, the Mohawk nation is one of »several tribes [which] introduced gaming enterprises in an effort to alleviate persistent poverty and dependence on federal resources« (ibid.: 49). This is why Ray first looks for her gambling-addicted husband Troy on the reservation before she later learns that he has left for Atlantic City. Secondly, the characters' final confrontation with law enforcement heavily foregrounds the lack of jurisdiction of state and local police officers on tribal land as a plot point.

Moreover, the landscape shots filmed through Ray's car window which immediately precede and follow the explicit insertion of the »Land of the Mohawk« sign are notable because of their similarity. While the legal sovereignty has changed, the wintry landscape made up of conifers, snow drifts, trailers, small huts, and shops has not. We can observe a similar refusal to depict spatial difference in the later scenes which involve border crossings between the US and Canada. What may seem like an obvious observation – why would the landscape change drastically just because a man-made border is crossed – represents a noticeable distinction from many mainstream depictions of the US bor-

der, specifically to Mexico. For example, in Steven Soderbergh's influential border drama Traffic (USA 2000, D: Steven Soderbergh) and the popular TV series Breaking Bad (AMC 2008–2013), the crossing of the national border is visually accentuated by employing a stark yellow filter in the scenes taking place on the Mexican side. This refusal to ›colour-code‹ the non-US side in Frozen River speaks for a critical perspective on borders as such which is already reflected in the film's promotional tagline: »Desperation knows no borders«. The line chiefly draws attention to the fact that economic conditions on the Native side of the internal border are just as dire, if not worse than the conditions outside of the reservation. Gonzales summarises the general situation of Native Americans as follows:

> »American Indians have been one of the most economically deprived segments of American society. According to nearly every social indicator – such as income, employment, educational attainment, quality of health care, and life expectancy – American Indians are well below the national averages. On most rural Indian reservations, persistent poverty, unemployment, and overcrowded and inadequate housing are similar to conditions found in many underdeveloped nations.« (Gonzales 2005: 43)

These economic factors are exacerbated by the persistent racism Native Americans face. Especially since the introduction of tribal gambling in the 1980s, these racist sentiments have led to »the organisation and mobilisation of anti-Indian opposition in a number of states, including New York« (ibid.: 49). These violent sentiments are in fact so deeply ingrained in the environment Frozen River depicts that even Ray's teenage son T.J. suggests to »kick some Mohawk ass« after he hears of his father's relapse in the reservation's casino.

How does Frozen River negotiate these complex economic, racial, and legal factors in its depiction of rural landscape and, specifically, the border landscape? The film taps into US cinema's long fascination with, as Dodds points out, »the border as a geographical and social marker of difference« (Dodds 2013: 566). However, it also significantly deviates from this tradition by focussing on the border to Canada as well as internal borders to tribal nations, not on the much more frequently portrayed desert landscapes of the border between Mexico and the United States in the South.[2] Jack M. Beckham has summarised the normative tendencies of US cinema's historical depictions of the Southern border:

> »Because the border region is an amorphous and culturally malleable space […], American-made cinema of the US-Mexico border has repeatedly attempted to *reduce the vagueness* of the border region by inscribing the inhabitants and ideologies of both the

2 US films centred around the US-Mexican border form a diverse corpus in terms of genre, industrial position, and political leaning. Just the last fifteen years have produced titles such as Sicario (USA 2015, D: Denis Villeneuve) and its sequel Sicario: Day of the Soldado (USA 2018, D: Stefano Sollima), Sin Nombre (USA/MEX 2009, D: Cary Joji Fukunaga), 2 Guns (USA 2013, D: Baltasar Kormákur), Rambo: Last Blood (USA 2019, D: Adrian Grünberg), Cry Macho (USA 2021, D: Clint Eastwood), The Mule (USA 2018, D: Clint Eastwood), and more.

> United States and Mexico into a binary opposition that places Anglo and American values in a hierarchical position to (stereotypical) Latino […] values.« (Beckham 2005: 131, emphasis T.L.)

Frozen River, on the other hand, subverts these often reductionist tendencies in US mainstream cinema. Instead of reducing the vagueness of the border zone, I will show how the film works to complicate seemingly stable boundaries and borders through its use of landscape and draws attention to the pivotal role landscape plays in the self-definition of nations. While the US-Canadian border informs the film's smuggling plot, »the presence of the St. Regis Reservation […] complicates this border space – as the film suggests there are multiple nationalities and multiple border control/immigration regimes operating along the US-Canadian border« (Dodds 2013: 562). Through close readings of pivotal scenes and by considering Kenneth Olwig's writings on landscape, nationalism, and indigeneity, I will demonstrate how the film engages with notions of Native American sovereignty and comments on the role of landscape in the definition of national borders.

Despite its interest in Native American sovereignty, the film is not considered part of US Native cinema and its central tenet of »visual sovereignty«. I base this assessment on both Joanna Hearne's (2012) and Lee Schweninger's (2013) accounts of US Native cinema. This is not to diminish the film's nuanced portrayal of contemporary Native life: Frozen River, like the examples of Native cinema analysed by Schweninger, clearly »refute[s] Hollywood depictions, other simulations or [ethnographic] ›images of Indians‹« (Schweninger 2013: 11) and instead offers a modern, realist image of American indigeneity – due in no small part to Misty Upham's measured performance. However, Schweninger also notes that Native cinema necessarily »constitute instances of self-representation and a form of visual sovereignty« (ibid.) which Frozen River – made by largely white filmmakers and primarily following a white main protagonist – cannot claim for itself. Other films of the New Rural Cinema cycle such as Songs My Brothers Taught Me (USA 2015, D: Chloé Zhao), The Rider (USA 2017, D: Chloé Zhao), and War Pony are closer to the ideal of self-representation since they focus exclusively on Native experiences of poverty and employ a partially Native crew behind the camera. Nevertheless, Frozen River's engagement with landscape images in the formation of US national identity and its exclusionary effects has obvious implications for Native sovereignty.

Kenneth Olwig has written extensively on the role of landscapes in the formation of national identity. He argues that:

> »Their power lies in the idea that nature, commonly understood as the opposite of culture, can nevertheless provide a source of human identity. National identity can thereby be seen to be a heritage of nature, rather than culture, and this, in turn, lends legitimacy to national identity by suggesting that it is natural, rather than artificial.« (Olwig 2008: 73)

He bases this understanding of the nation on Benedict Anderson's concept of the »imagined community« (Anderson 2003) and comments directly on the importance of the border in this process of identity formation. He continues:

> »If people can be convinced that the fact of having lived one's life *within the borders* of a given nation-state means that one's identity has been shaped by the nature within those bounds, it is possible to create a unified national identity as part of an imagined national community that, simultaneously, can be opposed to the identities of other nations.« (Olwig 2008: 73, emphasis T.L.)

However, Olwig posits that this imagined connection between nature and national identity »is problematic in situations where the present territory of the nation state has been appropriated at some point in time through the colonisation of areas belonging to a previous Native population« (ibid.). The term »problematic« is used here to describe the Native presence from the point of view of the coloniser. When landscape images are used to create a unified, naturalised national identity, the presence of a Native culture, which recalls the initial »unnatural« process of colonialisation, will have to be »minimised if […] [it is] not deemed to express the natural (that is, normal) nature of the predominant nation« (ibid.: 86). This »minimisation« process takes the form of marginalisation, displacement, and, at its most extreme, genocide. The described process also necessarily results in a very different understanding of the relation between landscape and nation from a Native and non-Native perspective.

This process is not accidental or arbitrary but, according to Olwig, systematically promoted through the proliferation of *scenic* landscape images. This term refers to unifying, perspectival representations of the environment which demonstrates a connection between Olwig's writings and Cosgrove's above cited concerns. Olwig traces the origin of this practice back to Renaissance Northern Europe where scenic landscape images, mostly in the form of maps, were used in tandem with physical conquest to squash the rebellious presence of independent polities (so-called *Landschaften*) which defied the top-down power of the monarch. This, in short, is Olwig's central thesis of how the concept of landscape was »eventually emptied of its place-bound meaning and came to refer to the make-believe space of scenery« (Olwig 2002: 216): the idea of the state as one coherent whole was both naturalised and mystified, and the idea of an independent, communal *Landschaft* eradicated. He explicitly stresses that this practice has been used ever since to promote the idea of a top-down, homogenous nation state. Furthermore, he argues that the »linking of national identity and nature is accomplished using illusions like that of perspective, which is literally constructed using mathematical principles« and which can not only be found in the map but also »in the scenic stages of a play, or in the frames of film« (Olwig 2008: 86).

In the context of US history, there is a similar progression from maps to landscape art which cannot be considered in isolation from its European origins. In his study of US Native history, J.C.H. King points out that it was »colonial maps«, created by means of the »gradually regularised measurement systems […] [that] ensured proper disposal of land alienated from aboriginal peoples« (King 2017: 134). This use of landscape can be traced (see: Lindemann 2024: 50ff.) from maps to paintings, early landscape photography and,

finally, the cinema, specifically the classic Western film. However, this does not mean that for Olwig, landscape art is inevitably doomed to reproduce imperialistic tropes like »Manifest Destiny« in the US context. Olwig points out that works of art »can take on a life of their own […] and become things of beauty leading people to care about their natural environment and the people within their national community [and beyond]« (2008: 86). This chimes with an observation by Tim Ingold on the potential of art to present alternative, interactive perspectives on landscape:

> »Far from dressing up a plain reality with layers of metaphor, or representing it, map-like, […] stories […] serve to conduct the attention of the performers *into* the world. […] At its most intense, the boundaries between person and place, or between self and the landscape, dissolve altogether.« (Ingold 2000: 56)

Frozen River represents exactly such an interactive attempt to counter the removed, scenic landscape images associated with imperial conquest and violence.

This initially becomes clear in the film's depiction of the first crossing of the frozen St. Lawrence River Lila and Ray undertake together despite their obvious mutual contempt for each other. Lila convinces Ray under false pretences to take the dangerous trip with her. She claims to have a »friend«, a smuggler, who lives »through the woods, not far« and who would buy Troy's abandoned car for much more than it is worth because of its button-release trunk. She does not mention yet that they will have to engage in the smuggling themselves. The approach to the river is depicted as a narrow path branching off a small forest road which suggests both Lila's intimate knowledge of the environment as well as the secrecy surrounding the existence of the unofficial border crossing point. When they reach the frozen river, Ray exclaims: »I'm not crossing that!« Dodds points out how, to Ray, »the frozen river cannot in her conventional territory imaginary, be thought of as a crossing point« (2013: 572). Dodds' notion of the »territory imaginary« is shown here to be directly connected to an understanding of national identity shaped by scenic landscape images, as suggested by Olwig.

In more ways than one, then, the frozen river is a dangerous terrain. It is shown throughout the film to hold the risk of entrapment and death as well as, less tangibly, inspiring exclusionary sentiments. For example, the desperate migrants that Ray and Lila transport across the border risk their lives and well-being by choosing this treacherous route. This is dramatically shown in a later scene in which Ray tosses out the bag belonging to a Pakistani couple she is transporting across the frozen river and suspects of being terrorists – only to discover on arrival that the bag contained their baby which is luckily retrieved alive later. Indeed, as Laura Sachiko Fugikawa points out, »the people that Ray and Lila transport are all Asian« (2018: 118), not, for example, Eastern European, another large immigrant group to the United States at the time of filming. This directorial choice, Fugikawa continues, »signals a politics of representation, specifically the Asian immigrant as economic and biological threat that echoes historical racialised policies of exclusion in the white settler nation« (ibid.). The scene in which Ray tosses out the bag demonstrates her inherent complicity in this settler colonial project and links it directly to a scenic, map-like understanding of landscape which is focalised in the image of the frozen river.

Her suspicion of the couple due to their nationality in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia illustrates that »Ray is ensnared within and an agent of the biopolitical« (ibid.: 131) as she enacts her own racially motivated border policies. More than just removing a suspected dangerous item, Ray figuratively »acts in the interest of the biopolitical […] [by disposing of] the corporeal and reproductive threat embodied by the South Asian baby, an action that resonates with nativist fears of brown immigrant bodies and their offspring« (ibid.). The film's decision to stage this prohibitive action in the middle of the frozen river establishes a direct connection between »white settler nativism« (ibid.) and scenic rural landscape images which suggest a natural connection between nation and land. Olwig (2008: 80) calls this connection »the monster in the map«, namely the violent logic of conquest and exclusion born out of an imagined »manifest destiny for a given naturally defined geographical area to be settled by a single given nation«. It is this monster that inhabits Ray as a beneficiary of the United States' historical project of a white settler nation, and which is triggered by the crossing of the rural border space.

Fig. 3: The camera swoops up in a crane shot to capture the expanse of the frozen river.

Quelle: Screenshot (Harwood Hunt Productions/Frozen River Pictures 2008).

Returning to the scene of their first crossing together, Lila's assurance that »there is no black ice« does not reassure Ray: »That's Canada«, she insists. »That's Mohawk land«, Lila replies and explains that »the res« stretches across both sides of the river. When Ray brings up the border patrol, Lila simply states that »there's no border«. She again insists on the physical stability of the ice (»They plough it and everything!«) and they cross the river. Dodds argues that in this central dialogue, the film lays out its »geopolitical legal ›groundwork‹. […] The border, far from being clear-cut is, in the case of this portion of the US-Canada borderland, fuzzy.« (2013: 574) The significant role of landscapes in the naturalisation of national identity is being actively challenged in this scene – Ray's palpable disbelief is partially caused by the attack on her unquestioned trust in these supposedly solid political and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, Dodds continues, »indigenous sovereignty is juxtaposed against the national sovereignty of the United States

and Canada for the purpose of highlighting […] a cross-border territory that is without borders« (ibid.). Visually, the film supports this notion by bringing the materiality of the landscape to the foreground. When Ray first moves the car off the snowy riverbank and onto the ice, the camera swoops up in a long and slow crane shot that captures the vast expanse of the river.

This visually stunning shot comes closest to a traditionally pastoral, scenic landscape image in the film which otherwise favours the »embodied vision« of hand-held footage. It thereby draws attention to, as Olwig puts it, the »›sleight of hand‹ necessary to make people imagine and feel that […] physical landscapes […] are the source of a unique and unified heritage and national identity« instead of an inherently violent concept »for which countless numbers of people have died in countless national wars« (Olwig 2008: 74). Fugikawa similarly argues that »settler colonialism is intentionally invisible« (2018: 126). As the car moves smoothly across the ice, the crane shot also emphasises what Badley (2016: 124) calls the film's »visual irony«: there is no border here since the »uniformly white landscape makes natural borders invisible«. Crucially, this visual choice thereby assumes an explicitly Native perspective: there is no crime being committed here since »for most Mohawks, smuggling […] is regarded as free trade between nations within Mohawk borders« (ibid.: 129). This points to the broader historical context of colonialism and its reliance on a map-like understanding of landscape, which impacts Native peoples' lives until today. Tone Bleie, Sheryl Lightfoot, and Elsa Stamatopoulou (2024: 2) argue that »Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty, cultural integrity, connection to the land, and overall well-being continue to be threatened, defined, and constrained by borders«. Therefore, the unifying tendency of the scenic landscape image of the river is, in this scene, subversively appropriated to present a unified *tribal* nation, not the colonial nations of Canada and the USA respectively.

This chimes with observations made by Audra Simpson who has written extensively on the Ahkwesáhsne reservation community which Frozen River depicts, and especially about its inhabitants' often difficult border crossings between the United States and Canada. The difficulty, as the film stresses repeatedly, lies in the fact that »although [Indigenous] crossers may perceive of themselves as members of a sovereign nation, the state may not« (Simpson 2014: 117). Especially because of these hostilities experienced by Native people on this particular state border, Simpson argues that »it is through their actions and, in particular, their mobility that Indigenous border crossers enact their understandings of history and law« (ibid.: 115). Their act of crossing the border represents an example of what the geographer Hayden Lorimer has termed »embodied acts of landscaping« (2005: 85), or bodily experiences of engagement with the material world. In this case, this embodied act is explicitly political since Indigenous border crossers like Lila in Frozen River »interpret and deploy their own sovereignty in ways that refuse the absolute sovereignty of at least two settler states, and in doing so they reveal the fragility and moral turpitude of those states« (Simpson 2014: 115).

This bodily engagement with the border space is highlighted in the scene directly following the master shot of the frozen river. The film cuts to a shot of the car from the side which hides the car's bottom half between the snowdrifts left behind by a snow plough. A further long shot, this time from behind, holds the gaze of the camera until the dark grey car increasingly shrinks within the frame and finally seems to disappear and merge

with the grey trees in the distance on the other side of the river. Lila and Ray have visually merged with the landscape and, thus, their act of crossing the river transforms the ideologically charged space of the border. The social interaction with the border landscape is presented in opposition to its scenic, geopolitical conception as a line on a map. As we shall see, the characters' collaboration born out of desperation and the threat of homelessness eventually evolves into solidarity and mutual aid.

Moreover, the frozen St. Lawrence River is depicted as a »haunted space« (Dodds 2013: 578) in the context of US-Native American relations. This first becomes clear on Ray and Lila's return passage from their first trip to the Canadian side of the national border. Lila asks Ray about her husband, Troy, and then describes her own situation: »My husband is dead. He went down in the river on a [smuggling] run. They never found him. Probably tangled up in the river weeds somewhere.« Lila's husband's body is »tangled up« somewhere below the ice, his remains have become a permanent part of this stretch of land. His invisible, ghostly presence in this scene reminds us that, as Michelle Raheja (2011: 146) argues, »Native American ghosts haunt the North American […] visual cultural imagination to remind settler nations of the unspeakable, horrific past«. Right after talking about her husband, Lila instructs Ray, who is driving: »You better slow down. There's ruts out here. You'll get us stuck in one.« The last line of dialogue is accompanied again by a long shot of the car on the river, partially obscured by snowbanks. Both in its dialogue and mise-en-scène, then, the film blurs the distinction between the frozen river's materiality and its role in a »long history of settler colonialism, contested border crossings, and customs disputes« (Fugikawa 2018: 124). Both Lila's husband's fate and her warning of »getting stuck« are indicative of how the attempt to resist the state's biopolitical sovereignty is fraught with mortal danger.

This permeability of the landscape is further emphasised in the film's climax which is rife with scenes in which »the boundaries between person and place, or between self and the landscape, dissolve altogether« (Ingold 2000: 56). After a tense stand-off with the head of the smuggling operation on the Canadian side, the two women are followed by police to the edge of the river. In a panic, they attempt to cross it at a different point than usual, and the car promptly breaks through the ice. Together with the frightened Chinese immigrants, they make their escape on foot across the river and take refuge on the reservation. This is an ambiguous scene that can be read in two distinct ways and thus highlights how the film mediates scenic and substantive understandings of rural landscape. Firstly, following Olwig's notion of the »monster in the map«, the dramatic breaking of the ice can be understood as the rural landscape taking on a life of its own and threatening to swallow up its transgressors in defence of the US body politic. In this reading, the inherent violence of claiming the river to be a »natural« border between two settler states – Canada and the United States – when it can just as well be understood as belonging to »Indigenous land currently occupied by a settler colonial government« (Fugikawa 2018: 124) is revealed.

Secondly, however, the scene also enables a substantive perspective on rural landscape that counters the regressive forces inherent in scenic landscape images which naturalise borders. The seemingly stable border is, after all, melting and breaking at the moment that Ray's and Lila's relation moves from mere pragmatism towards mutual aid and solidarity. This is further illustrated in a following scene in which Ray makes her escape

through the dark woods and seems to visually merge with the trees and snow behind her. Directly after this visual blurring, she comes to a halt on a clearing opening towards the frozen river and stares at the frozen surface leading into the darkness. This is when she decides to return to the reservation to take the blame for the smuggling operation, hand over her part of the money to Lila and ask her to purchase the double-wide trailer. The scene thus establishes a direct connection between an interactive understanding of rural landscape, made visible through Ray's blurring with the landscape, and an act of female solidarity. Fugikawa points out how it is »only by creating an alternative familial structure, working together and *entangling* their fates, that Lila and Ray can provide their children a home« (2018: 133, emphasis T.L.). This entanglement is, crucially, not only a personal, but a spatial one: the dissolving of Ray's body into the landscape highlights the white protagonist's shifting awareness in her relation towards both her Native neighbour and the environment they both inhabit.

This forming of a new, temporary family unit calls to mind Francesco Sticchi's discussion of the family under neoliberalism as a »minimal space of solidarity and mutual care where precarious subjectivities try to negotiate and respond to their marginality« (Sticchi 2021: 140). The fact that this unorthodox family unit explicitly subverts heteropatriarchal as well as white supremacist racial values underlines Badley's assessment of Frozen River (and other films) as a »form of resistance« (2016: 133) against both mainstream US cinema and a scenic understanding of landscape.

However, the ending's ethical ambivalence also reaffirms the film's position within the larger cycle of the New Rural Cinema and its central feature of an entangled understanding of landscape. While the immediate threat of homelessness for both women and their children seems to be averted, they still exist within the spatial conditions determined by structural poverty and biopolitical border regimes which remain unchanged. In spite of their successful act of solidarity, Ray and Lila's relation remains determined by »uneven distributions of vulnerability« (Fugukawa 2018: 125) and the persistence of the systemic oppression of Native Americans. Furthermore, their small success is based on taking advantage of the desperation of migrants caught up in these regimes – just as the Mohawk council is taking advantage of impoverished gambling addicts like Troy to marginally better the reservation's financial situation. The film never judges its marginalised characters for their actions, yet it highlights their inevitable entanglement with the landscape as the site of the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism. While its ending points towards solidarity and community as a form of resistance, the film does not offer a utopian exit.

Nevertheless, Frozen River as well the New Rural Cinema at large demonstrate the resistant potential of subverting scenic landscape images and their exclusionary legacy by foregrounding a substantive, unbounded perspective on rural landscape. Silvia Federici has described this process as a rediscovery of »the commons« underneath the capitalist, property-based understanding of landscape dominant in most of the contemporary United States. Federici's (2019: 77) aim is »to demonstrate the potential of communal relations […] as a path to transform our subjectivity and gain the capacity to recognise the world around us […] as a source of wealth and knowledge and not as a danger«. She explicitly connects this political-philosophical project to a recognition of »the first commoners on this continent: the Native American populations, the First Nations, who held the land

in common for centuries« (ibid.: 79). This change of perspective through an appreciation of Indigenous history and legacy, she continues, refuses to »romanticise an artificially constructed Indian subject«, but insists on recognising »the peoples that historically have most suffered and fought against the enclosures of the American continent« (ibid.: 81). A historically informed awareness of previous, communal conceptions of landscape can thus prevent progressive spatial politics from reproducing a reactionary, pastoral view.

I have argued in this article that Frozen River aims to shift its viewers understanding of rural landscape in a similar way. The film complicates an understanding of rural landscape as scenery by making visible the historical processes of colonisation and exploitation ingrained within the landscape and its borders as well as by drawing attention to the Indigenous commons underneath. Its positive, if ambiguous ending acknowledges the »capacity for resistance« (ibid.: 77) of communality, yet its underlying stasis also points to one of Federici's key arguments in her vision of the United States as a potential »site of future commons« (ibid.: 81). She writes:

> »No major political change will […] be possible in the United States unless the two grand injustices on which this country is based – the dispossession and genocide of the Native Americans and the enslavement of millions of Africans […] – are confronted.« (Federici 2019: 81)

The film's ending implicitly reaches a similar conclusion as it does not suggest that its protagonists' mutual aid has ignited any sort of lasting political change. Both the film itself and the New Rural Cinema at large, however, point to a persisting thread of thought within US filmmaking which seeks out the commons underneath the rural scenery.

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