

TWO TYPES OF EVENTS IN BORDER CROSSING NARRATIVES OF CONTEMPORARY TRAVELOGUES

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Abstract. The paper analyzes border crossing in two contemporary travelogues – *The Border* by E. Fatland (2021) and *All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands* by S. E. Griest (2017). Methodologically, the study relies on the framework proposed by Peter Hühn [Hühn 2011], distinguishing two types of events – the first refers to the sequential elements, changes of state, constitutive of any narration, while the second pinpoints the transformative and disruptive quality of certain changes in the story. The same actions or facts may, or may not, be interpreted as events of both types in different plots. The notion of an event thus helps the author highlight the temporal and experiential dimension of travelers' movements across borders.

Both narratives describe borders as fluid and shiftable, emphasizing their artificial and performative nature. Fatland, whose border crossings structure her itinerary, highlights the minimal geographical and yet stunning cultural distance between different “universes”. Griest is more interested in exploring the liminality experienced by the ethnic communities whose lands the national borders cut through. Of special interest is the experience of border crossing for “undesirable” travelers such as illegal migrants.

What may be a type I event or non-event for “trusted” travelers (e.g. American citizens or Russian shoppers in Heihe) may easily mean a type II or even the final event (death) for the “undesirables” (e.g. Mexican immigrants). Thus, the status of border crossing as a type I or type II event depends on its unpredictability and inherent risks.

Keywords: borders; border crossing; mobility; hybrid identities; event; travelogues; literary travels; literary genres; narrative

For citation: Purgina, E. S. (2022). Two Types of Events in Border Crossing Narratives of Contemporary Travelogues. In *Philological Class*. Vol. 27. No. 2, pp. 200–207.

ДВА ТИПА СОБЫТИЙ В НАРРАТИВАХ О ПЕРЕСЕЧЕНИИ ГРАНИЦ (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ТРАВЕЛОГОВ)

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Аннотация. В статье анализируется пересечение границ в двух современных травелогах – «Граница» («The Border») Э. Фэтленд (2021) и «Все агенты и святые: истории американского пограничья» («All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands») С. Э. Грист (2017). В качестве методологической рамки исследования используется предложенный Петером Хюном [Hühn 2011] подход, различающий два типа событий: первый тип – события, составляющие последовательность, лежащие в основе сюжета, изменения состояния; второй тип – трансформирующие события, которые являются более непредсказуемыми и потенциально более разрушительными. Одни и те же действия или факты могут быть интерпретированы и как события 1-го, и как события 2-го типа в зависимости от сюжета. Понятие события позволяет нам раскрыть роль темпоральности и опыта непосредственного переживания при пересечении границ.

Оба нарратива отмечают подвижность и текучесть границ, делая особый акцент на их искусственности и перформативном характере. Свой маршрут Э. Фэтленд выстраивает вокруг российской границы, подчеркивая парадоксальную природу границы, которая сочетает в себе минимальное физическое расстояние с большой культурной дистанцией между двумя нациями. Грист, в свою очередь, больше интересуется лиминальным опытом этнических сообществ, чьи исконные земли оказались «разрезаны» пополам государственной границей. Особый интерес представляет опыт пересечения границы «нежелательных» путешественников – нелегальных мигрантов.

Опыт пересечения границ для путешественников со статусом «заслуживающий доверия» (например, американских граждан или российских любителей шоппинга в Хэйхэ) может быть событием 1-го типа или не являться событием вовсе, для «нежелательных» путешественников (например, для мигрантов из Мексики) это событие 2-го типа, которое в некоторых случаях может стать и окончательным событием (смертью). Пересечение границы получает статус события 1-го или 2-го типа в зависимости от степени непредсказуемости этого процесса и от связанных с ним рисков.

Ключевые слова: границы; пересечение границ; мобильность; гибридные идентичности; событие; травелоги; литературные путешествия; литературные жанры; нарратив

Для цитирования: Пургина, Е. С. Два типа событий в нарративах о пересечении границ (на материале современных травелогов) / Е. С. Пургина. – Текст : непосредственный // Филологический класс. – 2022. – Том 27, № 2. – С. 200–207.

In the age of globalization and transnational flows of people, goods, money and information, we might think that we are heading towards an increasingly borderless world. We may, therefore, be the more surprised to find that borders retain their relevance in the 21st century as there are more or less violent border disputes regularly popping up in national and international news. The questions of borders and bordering have recently been attracting a lot of attention on the part of travel writers, who structure their itineraries around national borderlines. I believe that it is this kind of narratives that may provide us with some interesting insights into contemporary border imaginaries.

In narrative studies, Peter Hühn distinguished two types of events – the first refers to the sequential elements, changes of state, constitutive of any narration, while the second pinpoints the transformative and disruptive quality of certain changes in the story from the perspective of the narrator or reader [Hühn 2011]. As Hühn puts it, “a change of state qualifies as a type II event if it is accredited... with certain features such as relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness” [Hühn 2011]. In other words, events of type II are somehow exceptional in their nature, which crossing a boundary of any kind (e.g. physical, social or moral) is a perfect example of. Obviously, this distinction is context-dependent since the same actions or facts may or may not be interpreted as significant events in different plots. To a certain extent Hühn draws on Yury Lotman’s understanding of event: in his *Notes on the Structure of a Literary Text*, Lotman writes of an event as “the smallest indivisible unit of plot construction” (type I event) and an event that occurs on a higher level and corresponds to the “deviation from the norm” and “shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field” (type II event) [Lotman 1970].

In the case of the type II event, the same actions or facts may, or may not, be interpreted as events in different plots.

This paper analyzes the eventfulness of border crossing in two travelogues: *All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U. S. Borderlands* by American writer Stephanie Elizondo Griest (2017) and *The Border* by Norwegian writer Erika Fatland (original title: *Grensen* (2017), translated from the Norwegian by Kari Dickson, published in 2021). In both cases, border crossing and travelling along the national borderlines is used as the backbone of the authors’ itinerary. Fatland’s travelogue is centred around the Russian border, while Griest travels along the two land borders of the USA – with Mexico and Canada. Both travelogues bring to light the complex and multi-dimensional nature of borders in the modern world by describing the experiences of border crossing. They look at physical manifestations of borders (e.g. walls, checkpoints, monuments) but also zoom in on borderwork – “ordinary people making, shifting and removing borders” in accordance with their grassroots agendas [Rumford 2014: 3]. Both travelogues describe various bordering processes as well as life in borderlands and borderland cultures.

It should be noted at this point that border studies are now a sprawling field encompassing a variety of themes and approaches [Paasi, 2019]. Borders are largely seen as “artificial human constructs” [Paulsson 2011: 122], which can be discussed in relation to their functions as filters, mirrors or walls, as markers of national identity, as means of ordering and othering, as places of cultural encounters, integration and transformation – this list goes on and on [Cooper 2015]. The modern view of the borders as fluid and shiftable is shared by both of the texts in question: Fatland and Griest tend to approach borders as social and

political constructs rather than some fixed, immovable boundaries. The border is not a given or, as Erika Fatland puts it, “in reality, the land mass is continuous: there are no borders in nature, just transitions. It is people who have divided the world up into different colours, separated by lines on the map” [Fatland 2021: 66].

A perfect example of the artificiality of the border is the Russian “invisible” maritime border in the North Sea, which Fatland’s book starts with. She describes it as “both very real and highly abstract” [Fatland 2021]. The rigorous control over this imaginary line (“the Russian border guards had to be alerted at least four hours in advance of whenever we crossed the invisible line” [Fatland 2021: 65]) turns it into “an absolute and awkward reality” [Fatland 2021]. She thus stresses the performativity of the border (in Mark B. Salter’s words, borders becomes a site for the performance of subjectivity and sovereignty [Salter 2007]). To exist, the border has to be insistently re-enacted over and over again in cross-border communication. Sometimes this is done in a most extravagant fashion as in the passport control procedure described by Fatland, when a whole helicopter of border guards had to be landed on an island in the Arctic for the purpose of stamping the tourists’ passports. Borders are performed through physical signs (checkpoints, fences, cameras, buffer zones), symbolic rituals and communications by granting the right of entry (the object that gains special significance in this process is the traveller’s passport) or by refusing the entry, which means that an imaginary border easily becomes a real boundary.

Let us now go back to the question of border crossing as an event. One of the features that helps distinguish between cross-border movements as a type I or type II event is the *unpredictability* inherent in this process [Schmid 2003]. The more unpredictable the process is, the more significant the event and the more attention is given to it by the travel writer. For instance, when Fatland crosses the Ukrainian-Belarussian border, she all of a sudden faces a stringent interrogation on the Ukrainian side, while, surprisingly, despite her worst apprehensions (“I cursed myself for having been so stupid. I was about to enter a dictatorship and had not considered the border crossing” [Fatland 2021: 610]), the procedure of crossing

the Belarussian border “would have been one of the fastest yet, had the customs officers not then dismantled the bus to look for contraband, presumably sausages” [Fatland 2021: 610].

If the border is transparent and permeable and acts as a gateway, then the event of border crossing is imbued with much less significance (it is either a type I event or no event at all) than in the case of an impermeable border such as the border with North Korea (Erika Fatland gives a detailed description of this event) (in this case, it is a type II event). Moreover, it is the difficulty of border crossing that determines whether it will qualify as *an adventure*, an important attribute of a travel text, or not (in the latter case the author may decide to skip the description of border crossing altogether). The more difficult the border crossing is, the more exciting the adventure and, therefore, the more engaging for the prospective reader this account will be.

Despite a number of similarities the two travelogues share, there are also some remarkable differences in the way they treat the border. For example, Fatland highlights the minimal geographical and yet stunning cultural distance between the “universes” on both sides of the border and border crossing as stepping out of one reality into another (“crossing a border is deeply fascinating. In terms of geography, the switch is minimal, almost microscopic. You move no more than a few metres, but find yourself in another universe” [Fatland 2021: 310]). Griest, on the contrary, lays the main emphasis on the artificiality of the national border lines – for her, the only difference the border makes is that it cuts through ethnic communities, bringing more harm than good, disrupting the flow of daily life through physical, administrative and other barriers. In her book, the Mohawks living on the US-Canadian border retain their ethnic identity and their unique culture while seeing the border as encroaching upon their ancestral land, which otherwise would have stayed indivisible [Griest 2017].

The differences in the way the authors interpret the phenomenon of the national border and border crossing largely stem from the narrative persona they adopt¹. While Fatland presents herself as a Western observer, who strives to stay im-

¹ In this paper narrative persona is understood as “the character that writers must create to represent them, their spokesperson in their narrative writing”; “self-invention and a construct, but a truthful, focused construct, a more insightful, reflective representation of who the writer is in day-to-day life” [Keisner 2015: 195–196]. For more on the narrative (or narratorial) persona

partial, especially when she visits the zones torn by violent cross-border clashes such as Nagorny Karabakh or Donetsk [Fatland 2021], Griest starts her book by explaining that she has a personal bias in the story as she is a Tejana – a Hispanic person originally coming from or living in the state of Texas. Therefore, she, like many other people of Mexican descent living in the USA, is emotionally involved in the matter she is discussing and she, like many of her interviewees, feels entitled to say: “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” [Griest 2017: xiii].

Border crossing in Fatland’s travelogue is most often than not an adventure, a type II event that signifies an exciting switch to another culture, language, religion, political order, and even time (as is illustrated by the example of North Korea). Griest, in her turn, is more interested in the communities living along the national borders, wondering “what happens when an international borderline crosses over *you*, slicing your ancestral land in two?” [Griest 2017: xi]. In fact, her whole book may be seen as an exploration of the experience of liminality – living “in-between” or what Susan Stanford Friedman refers to as “inbetweenness” [Friedman 2002]. To denote this state, Griest uses an Aztec term *nepantla*, which meant the Aztecs’ struggles to “reconcile their indigenous ways with the one Spanish colonizers forced upon them” [Griest 2017: 3]. Griest, however, goes on to explain that recently a Tejana writer has suggested using this word as a metaphor for a “birthing stage where you feel like you’re reconfiguring your identity and don’t know where you are” [Griest 2017: 3], thus bringing a more positive connotation to it. Living in-between is not easy, however, and in many ways it is a daily struggle. As is often the case with poor communities living in the periphery of a nation-state, they are vulnerable to all kinds of slow violence¹ on the part of the government and large corporations, for example, they may fall victim to the pollution systematically produced by oil refineries in Texas [Griest 2017].

In both travelogues, the event of border crossing (or not being able to cross the border for that matter) involves not only the traveler herself, but

also local borderland communities – in Griest’s travelogue, these are the Tejana community members and people of other ethnicities and nationalities living on both sides of the US-Mexican border and the Mohawks living on the border between the USA and Canada. In this respect, Griest’s text is a perfect illustration of Etienne Balibar’s thesis that “borders do not have the same meaning for everyone” [Balibar 2002: 81], that their main task is to draw the line between the “desirables” and “undesirables”. This way Lotman’s metaphor, who conceptualizes border as a membrane, is taken a bit further: for Balibar, border is a membrane but an asymmetrical one or a firewall. One of the border patrol agents on the US-Mexican border says referring to the wall: “It’s a good filter, so we know where they [migrants – E.P.] go through... the wall just filters them through” [Griest 2017: 92]. The border is more or less invisible to bearers of American passports, those with the “trusted traveler” status, but for people on the other, Mexican side, it may turn into an insurmountable obstacle. In other words, what may be a type I event or a non-event for some, may easily become a type II event or even the final event (death) for others.

Griest goes on to explore the darker side of the US-Mexican border, which is not only a filter-wall but also a gate for drug trafficking from Latin America to the USA. This makes the prospect of crossing the border much less alluring to the Americans than it used to in the olden days. Griest nostalgically ruminates about the perceived transparency the border used to have in her childhood: “When I was a child, piling in the Chevy and driving to Mexican border towns like Progreso and Nuevo Laredo was my family’s favourite way to spend a Sunday. We’d cross the border for no-prescription-necessary penicillin when one of us fell sick. We’d cross the border for *cajeta*, a goat-milk spread that tastes like caramel, when one of us craved something sweet... We’d cross the border to feel Mexican. We’d cross the border to feel American. Now, we never cross. Neither does anyone else we know” [Griest 2017: 65]. Thus, while the mobility of the Mexicans and other “undesirables”

in travel writing, see: Dickinson, S. (2006). *Breaking Ground. Travel and National Culture in Russia from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin*. Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi. 285 p.

¹ The term *slow violence* was coined by Rob Nixon, who used it to refer to “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” [Nixon 2011: 2].

is impeded by the wall on the American side, the Americans are prevented from travelling by crime. Griest comments sadly: "... the drug war has erected a border wall that surpasses anything Congress has constructed, only in reverse" [Griest 2017: 65].

For Griest, there is another category of characters whose plight may seem heavier than that of the borderland communities: the Central American migrants trying to make it across the border to the USA. The landscape on the American side of the border can be read like a book, for it bears the traces of migrants' stories, often sad or even tragic: "Bras are often a sign of rape... coyotes [people smuggling immigrants across the border – *E.P.*] will hang them on a tree afterwards, like a trophy. Homemade flotation devices usually mean a baby has been brought across. Sometimes you find religious cards on the banks of the river and know someone left them there in thanks for a safe passage. You see caffeine pills, and it is so they can stay awake during the journey" [Griest 2017: 98]. The most horrible part of the landscape is the body of an unknown woman found by patrol agents, one of the many ("a Tejano agent sticks out his head and informs us that sixty bodies have been found up ahead" [Griest 2017: 100]). Most of these migrants remain anonymous after they die, being robbed of the last thing they had – their names and being known only by their number. To restore at least some semblance of justice for this woman and other people like her whom Griest sees as victims of the border, she tries to recreate the story of this woman, who had probably been deceived by the coyotes and died of thirst and exhaustion on her way to the nearest town.

In the best-case scenario, that is, if they make it to the nearest Texan town, illegal migrants would continue living "in the shadows", caught not only between "here" and "there" but also "now" and "then" [Hurd, Donnann & Leutloff-Grandits 2017]. As Balibar notes, "for a poor person from a poor country, a border is an obstacle, which is very difficult to surmount, a place where he resides", in other words, for the majority of the migrants the border may never be fully crossed – it is "an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone" [Balibar 2002: 83].

Another community that Griest describes is that of the Mohawks, an indigenous North American tribe. Although the Mohawks are a sovereign people and enjoy more privileges than the Tejanos

(e.g. they have their own police, court, school and so on), Griest observes that their experience of living in the borderland is in many ways similar to that of the latter: the native land of both communities was split by national governments – a decision they did not get a say in. The Mohawks resent the attempts of the two states (Canadian and American) to tighten border control. For the indigenous communities like the Mohawks, state borders are nothing but restrictions that have been imposed on them against their will. Therefore, in defiance of the border, these people are trying to make the best of their "in-betweenness", sometimes in illegal ways, e.g. through the illicit tobacco trade. An interesting case described in Griest's travelogue is that of "one Mohawk who regularly switches residency from one side of the border to the other whenever one government happens to offer better benefits" [Griest 2017: xi]. What both communities – the Tejanos and Mohawks – have in common is that they challenge the dominant political rhetoric of the border "as a safeguard to homeland security". They see the border wall or any other physical obstruction as "yet another threat to our once-thriving binational community", as an insult to their sovereignty [Griest 2017].

In *All the Agents and Saints*, Griest also presents the perspective of other participants of border work and bordering processes – e.g. the staff of the governmental agencies – the so-called "homeland security" (e.g. US Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, etc). Being aware of her bias against them, she writes: "It's hard not to view these agencies as pseudo-gestapos prone to pounding on doors in the middle of the night and dragging noncitizens from their beds and their children. But because so many agents I meet are Tejanos (like me) whose families have lived in the region for centuries (like mine), I try to empathize with their plight" [Griest 2017: 79]. Griest describes a scene at the border with a bus full of Mexican nationals pulled over for inspection: "anxiety seems to be emanating from their seats" [Griest 2017]. This scene is pervaded by the feeling of extreme tension, helplessness and humiliation as "one by one, the passengers stare up at me as if I too wielded authority – a sensation my body rejects" [Griest 2017: 79]. For Mexican nationals, the process of border crossing may be a thoroughly dehumanizing experience as they are stripped of their individuality and become

nothing but the bearers of a certain, “undesirable” citizenship or are seen simply as “noncitizens” and/or transgressors.

Although the same actors involved in border work appear in Fatland’s travelogue (except for illegal migrants), she strives to adhere to her role of an impartial observer (e. g. she talks to people on both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). Most of the drama takes place in locations where border transformations have recently occurred or are still going on. Fatland’s travelogue presents a wide variety of nationalities and ethnicities living along the Russian border – a “myriad disparate histories, terrains and ethnic groups” [Fatland 2021].

The Border shows how fast what appeared to be solid national borders can be reimagined and turn into something fluid (“borders are not set in stone; the new fiberglass boundary markers are easy to move” [Fatland 2021: 850]). Fatland describes this reality as “more bizarre than imagination” [Fatland 2021]. Regardless of whether these changes are dramatic or small and seemingly insignificant, they inevitably affect the lives of people in these areas. While for national governments borders may appear as part of the big geopolitical game, as lines on the map that can be shaped and adjusted according to their goals and plans, for people in borderlands this is the reality they are living in and they, like illegal migrants, may become pawns in this game. A quite illustrative story in this respect is that of 82-year-old Dato Vanishvili, who literally got stuck between the Georgian and South Ossetian borders, when the latter moved its border “several hundred metres” into Georgia – the author comments: “once again, it is ordinary citizens who are sacrificed on the geopolitical altar” [Fatland 2021: 460].

In both travelogues, borderlands are described as *contact zones* where cultures meet and where identities are negotiated. While in Griest’s travelogue it is mostly the unique identity of the borderland cultures that comes centre stage, Fatland is more interested in the mutual influence that the neighbouring people and cultures (assuming that these are different peoples and different cultures) have on each other. A vivid example of such a contact zone in *The Border* is the Chinese town of Heihe on the banks of the Amur River. The mirror image of Heihe is Blagoveshchensk, standing on the opposite side of the river. Due to visa-free

agreements between the two countries, Russians can easily go on shopping day trips to Heihe. For such daily shoppers, crossing the national border is a non-event since the border is made as transparent as possible, with both sides motivated to make this process smooth and fast (the Russian passport grants the traveler the “trusted traveler” status). Unlike the situation on the US-Mexican border described by Griest, on the Sino-Russian border, border officers seek not so much to prevent the travelers from entering but to facilitate their passage.

Heihe is filled with signs of cross-cultural exchanges – bilingual shop signs, Restaurant Putin and even “matryoshka-shaped rubbish bins” – a local government’s attempt to show friendliness, which, somewhat ironically, made the Russians furious – “How dare the Chinese equate their culture with rubbish?” [Fatland 2021]. The Sino-Russian relationship the way it appears in Heihe seems to be of a purely commercial nature, each side being interested in the other only as long as the other is ready to buy or sell things.

A contact zone of a somewhat different kind is found in Harbin, which, as Fatland takes some time to explain, has a rich Russian history. Fatland remarks on the striking contrast in Harbin’s cityscape, where traditional Russian houses in the old town, “reminiscent of those in St. Petersburg”, are surrounded by Chinese signs and people, and the whole place has been turned into “a free open-air museum” [Fatland 2021]. With no Russians in sight, local shops are selling what is referred to as “the Russian heritage” – chocolate powder, instant coffee, fur hats, vodka, and ubiquitous matryoshka dolls. The Chinese side of the story is thus illustrated by the Russian Style Town in Harbin, whose advertisement promises “the dances of the blonde girls” and the foreign charm placed people in exotic fantasy” in addition to reconstructions of traditional Russian homes and a giant matryoshka of Putin [Fatland 2021]. This grotesque version of Russianness reflects Chinese people’s fascination with Western exotics (in fact, the fair-haired traveller herself turns into a local tourist attraction as Chinese tourists, not caring much about whether she is Russian or not, ask to take a picture with her). The Sino-Russian contact zones of Heihe and Harbin, as depicted in *The Border*, mostly serve as a space where each side may freely interact with its own idea (or ideas) about what the other side

is like rather than a space where the actual interactions between the two nations happen.

To conclude, despite the visions of the globalized, borderless world, as both travelogues make clear, borders, though different in their functions and characteristics, have never entirely eroded and, while in some places they become more transparent, in others they are rigorously controlled. Both travel accounts emphasize the fluidity and complexity of national borders, reflecting different ways of imagining them by different actors involved in bordering processes and border work. It is the voices of these actors and their stories that both narratives seek to incorporate, showing how imaginaries of the border may vary from a non-existent or false border (“there is no border here” or “this border should not be here”) to an inviolable border that needs to be here and which needs to be strengthened and protected as a cornerstone of national security. Consequently,

border crossing in both narratives may have the status of type I event (for those with the “trusted traveller” status, e.g. Russian shoppers in Heihe or American travelers going to Mexico) – in this case the border is seen as transparent – or it may be a type II event for the “undesirables”, an event fraught with risks and dangers, for example, for Mexican travellers crossing the US border.

There are noticeable differences in the way each of the authors deals with the topic of borderland communities – while for Griest they have a unique identity of their own, which cannot be reduced to the sum of features from the cultures on both sides of the border (Tejano culture does not equal simply American plus Mexican culture), for Fatland the encounters in contact zones do not engender new identities with the border actually separating two distinct nations with two distinct cultures and their own ideas of each other.

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Дата поступления: 17.01.2022; дата публикации: 29.06.2022

Date of receipt: 17.01.2022; date of publication: 29.06.2022