

## Culture



# On Crossing Borders And Boundaries: A Parallax View Of The Postmodern Experience

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or the drug addicts? And if we do, are we not simply redrawing the boundaries, with an Other closer to home, but still marginal and powerless? Like Professor Fabian, I am troubled with these questions, though I have no magical answers to them. I share his skepticism that changing our tropes from boundary-maintenance to boundary-crossing will resolve old contradictions concerning the politics of representation.

Finally, I want to come back to an image evoked early in Professor Fabian's talk, of border guards as gatekeepers, and of "the border as a place and time of dominance/submission". The genocidal insanity in Bosnia, as in Nazi Germany, reminds us that boundaries encircle, entrap, and imprison; that crossing frontiers can be a matter of control and state power. We can look closer to home as well. The border between Mexico and the U.S. is easily perme-

able if you are a Mexican peasant needed as a cheap farm worker by agribusiness in California, and brutally closed if you are a Salvadorean or Guatemalan refugee from U.S. supported political terror. Indeed, we do not have to leave Canada to be reminded that the gatekeepers of the state have the power to define patriarchal terror as domestic conflict from which one cannot be a political refugee.

This is, indeed, a time to study boundaries and boundary-crossing. But ultimately, as Professor Fabian has warned, terror and power, conflicts of class and gender, a political economy of interest, are constitutive of the borders and control the movements across them. If we focus too narrowly, uncritically, and apolitically, we can render it all in pretty cultural pictures, the captivating collages and multiple, shifting images of our postmodern era.

## On Crossing Borders And Boundaries: A Parallax View Of The Postmodern Experience

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Professor Fabian's observations about the potential problems entailed in embracing a new—if it is new—root metaphor will serve as my point of departure. Perhaps I can also start to address the issue of practicality and the image of one humanity by wandering around for a bit in a problematizing landscape. To begin, let us go back in time...

On June 13, 1940, as the German army marched into Paris, Simone Weil confided a startling and seemingly perverse observation to her journal. "This is," she wrote, "a great day for the people of Indochina." (Reiff, 1990:15) I mention this hurried jotting in the private journal of a European Jewish intellectual more than half a century ago to make a simple point: it matters rather a lot who is crossing just what border. Too abstract or universal a notion of borders will, I fear, risk a unidimensional understanding by privileging the notion of borders over the people who cross them. Weil established a parallax perspective (one where objects appear to change position when observed from different points) in her

interpretation of the Nazi occupation of her homeland by drawing attention to the coming French retreat (and implicitly, the prior French occupation) of Indochina. This perspective is similar to the postmodern emphasis on irony and especially cynical or dead power.

As Fabian notes, one of the human experiences at borders is "submission". In this connection it is worth noting that the passport itself was instituted by England at the outset of the first World War. The intent was to keep people from leaving, because to re-enter Britain would require a valid passport. Indeed, most passports actually issued were one-way (out). Regulation 14c of D.O.R.A., passed Nov. 30, 1915 reads, "A person coming from or intending to proceed to any place out of the United Kingdom as a passenger shall not, without the special permission of a Secretary of State, land or embark at any port in the United Kingdom unless he has in his possession a valid passport..." Although a war-time measure, like early pub closings, it was never repealed. The

measure caused a scandal, particularly among the literati, well into the 1930's but has come to be accepted (see Fussell, 1980:25). Thus, political boundaries rigidified in anticipation of a state of war, and they now represent a virtual tattoo branded upon the modern world. My supplementary to this is that a theoretical posture which authoritatively abstracts borders replicates this subordination.

Perhaps the same can be said for more generally for boundaries in knowledge and practice. Let us return to Weil's journal momentarily. Few remarks have seemed to be more ill-timed, and for years this extremely ironic statement was dismissed as an outrageous example Weil's loyalty to abstract principles at the expense of a humane reaction to the plight of her fellow French Jews. But, as David Reiff reminds us in his essay "Homelands", that does not mean she was wrong about Vietnam. Although the boundary crossing of June 13 was certainly a catastrophe for Europe, it proved to be a dramatic benefit for the long suffering peasants of *Cochin China* by initiating the rapid decline of French colonial power in the region. Unfortunately, it did not end all colonial power in the region; but certainly, the expression of colonial power around the world was dimmed throughout the second world war. Perhaps we might even extend Weil's comment by noting, as Andre Gunder Frank did over twenty years ago (1966), that the economies of South America did rather better while the powerful were preoccupied with World War II—until it ended and they realized that they were, from quite another perspective, the spoils of that war.

My point is rather basic. To begin to understand the risks entailed in accepting either "crossing borders" or "crossing boundaries" (and I do not take them to be the same thing) as a root metaphor requires us to think not about what is common to these lines across landscapes and thought, but instead about the many different forms of borders, of crossings, and of contexts in which they may be crossed, and by whom. What Weil's comment leads us towards is an open questioning of our cherished notions of history itself...a history which blinds us to our own power in the world. Or, in Reiff's words, we must begin to entertain...

"the sense in which different people are occupying the same space but living through different historical epochs." (1990:15).

I am fairly sure that a theoretically privileged version of boundary—one which accepts such an

abstraction as an entity, ie. as "fetishized", will inhibit this kind of multidimensional understanding. This is accomplished by valorizing space over the people who dwell within it and by doing something rather monstrous with time. The conjunction of these two moves in space and time may well be our theoretical and practical replication of the authoritarian and the authoritative at borders. With respect to space, Henri Lefebvre puts the matter so:

"Fetishized abstract space thus gives rise to two practical abstractions: 'users' who cannot recognize themselves within it, and a thought which cannot conceive of adopting a critical stance towards it." (1991:93, originally, 1973).

Living within subordinated space seems to be the crux of the temporal problem of "our times". But what is time subordinated by? ...certainly by economics, and most of all by politics. Or, in Lefebvre's words: "Economic space subordinates time to itself; political space expels it as threatening and dangerous (to power)". (Lefebvre, 1991:95). This leads Lefebvre to comment, that "time may have been promoted to the level of ontology by philosophers, but it has been murdered by society". (1991:96).

Turning towards conceptual boundaries compels me to comment on what I still perceive to be the rather lamentable state of much ethnographic writing. Several decades of steady commentary on the problems of writing ethnography have produced an enormous corpus of literary criticism—much of it virtually cant—but rather little in the way of creative ethnography itself has actually appeared. The voices of "the other" are still rarely heard. If you doubt this, I challenge you to read through the proceedings of our most recent (or, most any other) conference in search of papers jointly authored by anthropologists and their subjects. Alas, despite our reinvented intentions, today one hears and reads but a few hollow echos of imported, decontextualized, and reconstructed experiences of the other. The literary boundaries of genre have been recognized, and challenged, but still lie rather untraversed.

I have been trying for some time to understand how such a widespread critical awareness can be so strongly wedded to the status quo. Several years ago at an International Writer's Day conference in London sponsored by PEN, the South African writer and Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer gave an address which bears directly on the issue of conceptual constraints on the practice of writing. Her comments were directed at the aftermath of censorship, but

most of what she said applies directly to our own impoverished response to an open invitation to transgress the conventions of ethnographic genre. Gordimer describes the consequences of years of constraint on written expression as,

“...fear of freedom—fear, for a writer, meaning not knowing what you are going to write next. Although they were overjoyed, as citizens, at their new freedom, they were bewildered about its meaning at the internal level from which the transformation of the entitles of living into the writer’s vision takes place. With the vise on the writer’s head removed, there disquietingly is revealed—an aftermath of censorship I believe we’ve never considered—a cramped and even distorted imagination. For when I speak of the reactive consequences of censorship I am referring to the other pressure upon the writer that censorship calls into being. The counter-pressure of resistance also, ironically, screws tight the vise. Defiance of censorship and the regime it serves calls upon the writer to cut and weld his work into a weapon. It is necessary. But he may have to discard much of his particular insight in the process. It is impressed upon him that certain themes are relevant; certain modes are effective (1990:27).

Gordimer quotes Albie Sachs, a constitutional advisor for the African National Congress, and a fine writer himself:

“Instead of criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work; it is enough to be politically correct....It is as though our rulers stalk every page....everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed....What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world?” (in Gordimer, 1990:29).

Within ethnography, our inscription of others within the boundaries of modernist genre may have been severely problematic; not only by defining others within our own prose, but also by limiting their own ability to transcend our definitions. Anthropology’s problem with boundaries and genre is not just a literary problem for itself (the image conveyed by its current critical discourse) but it is, as the quote from Albie Sachs implies, a problem for the very humanity of the people we have worked among and written about. Professor Fabian has raised this issue quite generally in his work, and re-emphasizes it here when he states that “a point of departure for

a critical understanding of our discipline must come to grips with a profound contradiction in the practice of our discipline” which he then situates (in the context of this discussion) as the shift from crossing boundaries to patrolling them. His figure of thought is apt. I would add that If the dominant description of the world offered by post-modernism is that of a simulacrum where “the nature of the real is severed from the natural and becomes solely what has been reproduced” (Kroker & Cook, 1987:210), then both ethnography and theory are now fused in the process of simulation, and we are no longer engaged in either description or reflection. Instead we are headed into “virtual reality” (as if there was only one) and the domain of the cyborg. I can only add to this observation that if there is no movement beyond simply understanding this matter, then the entire post-modern critique will represent a mere footnote in a failed manifesto coopted by what Fabian refers to as the “institutions and professions of knowledge production” .

To sign off here I think it is important to hear a few Vietnamese voices, since we began with an oblique reference that part of the world. By way of preamble, I was a war resister from the United States during the Vietnam War, and I have been working with Vietnamese refugees and more generally with survivors of torture for a number of years. Until very recently, I have not written about this for reasons that must be fairly obvious from my previous discussion: I have no desire to appropriate the pain of others for conversion into academic capital. As someone who works in medical anthropology, I am taken up with the fuzzy division of states of well-being, from states of illness, with migration, and with decisions that people make based on their experiences of illness and health. My sense from conversations with Vietnamese people is that all the questions about what kind of medicine they prefer to use, or actually use, are all wrong because they never deal personally with who does, but are phrased in the utilitarian terms of what works. As one older man put this (somewhat exasperated at the linear line of my questioning):

“...every kind of medicine works...many people choose Traditional Medicines because even if they get the wrong one, it will not harm you, it is only made of herbs and roots and leaves. But if they prescribe the wrong western medicine (or even the right one), you can have bad trouble from it...so the kind of medicine you choose, is because of the kind of person you are,

not because one works and the other does not..."

A middle aged woman recently told me,

"The joints in my ankles and knees have been swelling up and it really hurts. Sometimes I cannot even walk. When I am working, I take off my shoes and walk around the hotel bare-footed [she is a chambermaid] but the supervisors tell me not to do this.

*(How long have you had this problem?)*

It was already beginning to hurt when I was still in Vietnam, but here the weather is colder so I think that is why it hurts even more now.

*(Did you seek an herbalist?)*

Yes, the herbalist took my pulse and looked at my tongue and then he gave me the herbs. I am much better now.

*(Did you consider an accupuncturist?)*

No, I am afraid they don't know what they are doing because they were trained here.

I will allow that I harbour a deep and abiding suspicion that as anthropologists we have been far too much like the accupuncturist in this person's statement. I would hazzard that indeed we often don't know what we are doing because "we were trained here" More precisely, we have been trained to the point where we have too often believed ourselves capable of transcending our fragementary experiences with others in the interest of a vision we deem greater than their experience without us.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues on the plenary panel (Johannes Fabian, Roger Keesing, Janice Boddy, and Christine Jourdan) for such a stimulating set of discussions around this topic. With the greatest respect, I dedicate these remarks to the late Roger Keesing, a dedicated and veteran crosser of boundaries.

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