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Borderlands: Alienation and the Art of Finding the Edge

“Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our own identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.”

Julia Kristeva, “Strangers in Ourselves”

The fence, the tower, the cairn, the wall: Where is the end of here? What marks the beginning of there? Throughout oral and recorded histories, the border has been imagined as a liminal place of danger and mystery. In contrast to the security of home ground, the borderlands are where one meets the foreign, the unknown. On renaissance maps, the final limit of the map is where “there be dragons.” From the view of the center, the border is the place where identity loses its meaning. At the edge of the domestic village, the community dissolves into the wilderness. In the modern world, the sharpest examples of the border is often at the edges between nations. It is the policed line, the limit and focus of power. Borders categorize the people who dwell on either side of the line. A border can be trespassed, escaped, or otherwise violated, though often at the risk of confronting the power that sustains it. Yet, just as maps construct the very places they represent, the border too is the site where artificial taxonomies are built up and broken down.

By asking the question: “What is Border?” this seminar seeks to identify how the existence of border defines, shapes, and limits our sense of self. We will read historical, theoretical, and fictional accounts of emigration, exploration, tourism, and nation-building, among other forms of being on the edge. We will also read anthropological, philosophical, and psychological work on borderlands to explore these phenomena not only as geographic boundaries but also in relation to social, mental, and political discourses.

Majors from diverse backgrounds would have much to offer to this seminar. The border touches nearly all disciplines, from the spacial-diagrammatic world of the map to the politically undefined space surrounding border conflicts. Fictional novels and short stories will provide a grounding point for our discursive forays into theoretical texts emerging from diverse academic traditions. Ultimately, the seminar will urge students to consider how the concept of border permeates social communities and categorical organization of the world as we wrestle with our own positions as alienated and socialized individuals.

Seminar Plan:

Week 1: The Map

Week 2: Defining the Center

Week 3: Tracing the Edge

Week 4: Coming and Going/Violating the Border

Week 5: Who am I? The Border in Us.

Literature

Nurrudin Farah, *Maps*
Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*
Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*
Peter Schneider, *Wall Jumper*
Nadine Gordimer, “Jump”
Franz Kafka, “The Great Wall of China”
Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands*
William Least Heat Moon, *PraryErth*, “With the Grain of the Grid”

Theory/critical texts

Christian Jacob, *The Sovereign Map*
Julia Kristeva, “Strangers to Ourselves”
Georg Simmel, “Bridge and Door”
Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” and “Art and Space”
Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”
Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”
Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas”
Michel de Certeau, “The Writing of History”
Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*, “Centres of Calculation”

Regional texts

Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*
Between Heaven and Hell, Ed. Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine
— Harret Murav, “ ‘Vo Glubine Sibirskikh Rud:’ Siberia and the Myth of Exile”
Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*
Mary Heimann, *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*
Charles King, *A History of the Caucasus*
Peter Hessler, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*
Fei-Ling Wang, *Organizing Through Division and Exclusion: China’s Hukou System*
Susan Oliver, *Scott, Byron, and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter* (excerpts)
John Veitch, *History and Poetry of the Scottish Border*

Potential Speakers to invite to Campus:

Amitav Ghosh, author of *Shadowlines*
Peter Schneider, author of *Wall Jumper*
William Least Heat Moon, author of *PraryErth*