

John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Humanities
Proposal for Faculty Seminar for AY2019-2020

Borders and Boundaries

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How do we imagine the borders of land and the boundaries of peoplehood? And how do the human activities that take place along and across territorial borders and social boundaries enact those imaginaries?

This seminar, “Borders and Boundaries,” will explore the symbolic and disciplinary functions of the activities that construct, maintain, and transgress borders and boundaries. These activities include not only large-scale political acts such as wall-building, but also smaller and more local acts through which borders and boundaries are negotiated. Rites of passage, which mark a person’s transition from one social group or status to another, regulate boundary crossings – controlling, in effect, when and how people enter and exit social groups and statuses. Although many of these can be found in religious rituals – such as a conversion ceremony that marks the participant’s transition from non-member to member of the religious community, or a baptism or *b’rit milah* that welcomes a baby into a relationship with God and a people – they are also ubiquitous in secular life. Examples include fraternity initiation rituals, graduation ceremonies, and Presidential inaugurations. The ubiquity of such rites and rituals suggests their importance to the organization of human beings’ social lives. The seminar will be highly interdisciplinary and intersectional, and will maintain a broadly humanistic scope. It will consider human beings’ meaning-making activities at the borders and boundaries of our imagined selves and societies, and the social, political, and ethical implications of those activities.

Anthropologists, sociologists, political theorists, political geographers, scholars of religion, scholars of gender and sexuality, and others have considered, often in rather different ways, how rituals, symbolic actions, and other social practices enact and embody the permeability and, often, impermeability of borders and boundaries. In the first half of the seminar, we will read and discuss classic and recent theoretical work on these issues. The texts that we choose will address, from diverse disciplinary perspectives, the central concern of the seminar, namely, how activities at and along borders and boundaries enact and/or disrupt our various imaginaries of our individual and collective identities. They will consider such issues as ritualization, rites of passage, and identity-formation; wound, vulnerability, and care; and sovereignty, territoriality, and mapping. (See below for sample readings).

In the second half of the seminar, each participant will be responsible for a session in which they would connect the theoretical tools of the first half of the seminar to a particular context or case study that arises in their own research. These seminar sessions will be diverse in historical context, geographical focus, and disciplinary approach. But they will be united in their attention to the symbolic and/or disciplinary functions of human beings’ activities around borders and boundaries. I could envision sessions organized by participants in diverse fields on such topics as democratic and non-territorial sovereignty; notions of sexual purity and bodily integrity; the history of policing of immigrant groups in the U.S.; the sociology of gated communities; etc.

Sample Reading List:

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*

Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*

Didier Fassin, "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times"

Imani Perry, selections from *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*

Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*