

Breaching Boundaries Introduction

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The soldiers are camped at the northern end of the abandoned goods yard. They don't wander very far from their tents because they hate being here and they are worried about the police, who are in charge of things, even though someone said a contingent of border guards are on their way to take control, with clear directions from the ministry. The soldiers don't trust the police and the police are afraid of the border guards because they come from outside the province, and are networked into politics in the capital. The refugees themselves have been pushed back away from the frontier. When they first arrived, they got almost across to the other side, until the two permanent guards at immigration control started shooting into the air. Everything is calm. Tomorrow, a representative from the UNHCR will come, and then the NGO's, sleepless, anxious, overwhelmed, with inadequate resources and thinking about the next camp, the next huddle of refugees along the line. Everyone is here, for one reason: because the border crossing is here.

We live in an era of the deconstruction of borders. Deconstruction does not abolish or erase principles or identities. It shows up their contingency, even as they continue to operate, sometimes more ruthlessly than ever. Deconstruction has a logic of "both/and": things are both fixed and unstable, both true and meaningless, both self-identical and in an irreducible relationship with the other. Indeed, in deconstruction, self-identity arises only in relation to what is different, what is distinct from you and in distinguishing you, becomes a necessary part of what you are. We live in an era of the deconstruction of borders because we know that borders are constructions, the consequence of historical decisions by colonial administrators as they abandoned ex-colonies to their fate, or the outcome of wars fought to a standstill here at this particular point rather than somewhere else, or the result of the more or less accidental

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choice of one geographical feature – a mountain range or river – as a natural boundary between ethnic groups, themselves constructions of a similar kind of historical contingency. Yet, borders are both constructions and fixtures, both contingent and eternal. It's easy to draw attention to their contingency, yet they still hurt, and the current suffering of refugees is the most pressing present example of their cruelty. Borders are both accidental and fixed, both arbitrary and rigid, both inviting and excluding. Nothing is more typical of their present deconstructed state than the contradiction in their nature in the contemporary world. As many commentators have pointed out, in the era after Globalisation, borders have been reconfigured to simultaneously make movement as free as possible, for certain things and people, and to set up absolute and violent obstacles to the free movement of others. Capital, goods and the global professional classes are all supposed to be able to move as freely as possible, with minimum regulation and irritation, while troops and militarized police forces – border protection squads – are deployed to make the movement of certain other groups impossible. This is the most explicit way in which racial and economic hierarchies are now played out in the world. The first point to make is that this inequality in access to free movement for peoples is heavily determined by race, class, religion and nationality. It keeps alive the old inequalities inherited from the colonial and post-colonial worlds. And secondly, we need to refrain from calling the current refugee situation a crisis, because even though the language of crisis may somehow capture its urgency, it also implies it is a simple and specific problem that can be solved and that will then go away. The global movement of population has ebbed and flowed for hundreds of years, peaking at certain times and slowing at others. It is naïve to think this problem will ever go away, especially now that climate change will add extra triggers to movement: disputes over resources, decline in fertility of land, and many more and greater local conflicts.

But what are borders? What are boundaries? Our impulse is to disrespect them for their contingency, even as they structure our lives, even as they stabilize the polities and economies within which we live and even as they frame, condition and ensure the viability of our decisions, mapping our advances and retreats, underwriting our

successes and failures, our joys and losses, every single day. What are boundaries and what does it mean to breach them? I want to approach these questions by way of one of the most pressing and influential accounts of boundaries, the logic of transgression, as initially outlined in the work of Georges Bataille and then, Michel Foucault.

To Bataille, the taboo sets limits beyond which it is perilous to go in daily life. Locked in a logic of survival and purposeful self-management, we need to exclude from the workaday world those practices and impulses that threaten the rule of purpose and order. We have to feed ourselves, for god's sake, so any outrageous, excessive or destructive impulse has to be ruled out, in the literal sense of the phrase, relegated to a beyond we alienate from our regular practice. Yet, for Bataille, what is most human about the human is the drive to total and absolute freedom, freedom from rules and constraints, even from the requirement to live on, to survive from one day to the next, and protect ourselves from harm. The highest form of danger to the human is, of course, death, and the most intense form of abandonment to the immediate and purposeless is in sexual desire, so it is in the domains of sex and death that our drive to shatter rules and explode into the world of absolute freedom is most deeply invested. It is in rites dedicated to sex and death, and especially the conjunction between them, that we glimpse our freedom, the absolute freedom that Bataille calls "sovereignty." In their most typical form, religions enact rituals of sex and death that allow us temporary access to what lies beyond the limits set by the taboo. Religious sacrifice, temple prostitution, ritual combat, symbolic cannibalism, public torture and execution, and festivals in which social roles are temporarily reversed, all offer fleeting access to the world beyond the taboo. In Bataille's language, they *transgress* the taboo. The term transgression has come to be used to describe radical violations of conventional order, especially in the domain of sexuality, gender and bodily practice. Yet, this is only part of the story. The purpose of transgression in Bataille is not at all programmatic. It is not intended as a device for change, and definitely not for social progress. As we will see in Foucault, reading transgression programmatically folds it back into an altogether different logic, the dialectic. The primary function of transgression in Bataille is not to shatter, but to reinforce the taboo. Transgression

offers us a temporary experience of the sovereignty which is our essential nature. But sovereignty is not only absolute freedom from oppressive regulation. It is freedom from the practical logics of purpose and social order which alone can guarantee our survival. A world of continuous sovereignty would be a world of unrelieved violence and abandonment. In short, it would be unlivable. The purpose of transgression, therefore, is to allow some brief license to sovereignty as a way of containing it. Transgression may violate taboo, may even ridicule and scorn it, but in the end, the day of festival passes, we return to our regulated partnerships, and remain alive. Transgression's fundamental role is to reinforce the taboo.

Yet it is not this simple. Transgression is not a simple exercise we go through and then relegate to the past. Sovereignty remains a permanent feature of our subjective landscape and the will to transgression constantly incites us to disruption. In this way, transgression never disappears totally from our mental lives. We can only tolerate taboo because we know it will offer us some opportunities to indulge, albeit temporarily, our need to live sovereignly. Taboo needs transgression and always bears it along with it. There is no taboo without an accompanying logic of transgression, but these two are not easy collaborating partners. Transgression always challenges the taboo, putting it permanently at risk, in the end, always unsettling, even harming it, driving it on to become open to what is beyond it, to what is other to it. Transgression never leaves taboo alone, installing at the very heart of the logic of rule, the drive to wreck it. This pairing never settles into a neatly constituted order. It is always uneasy, risky and violent. Taboo reinforces itself by allowing itself to be transgressed, but at the same time, transgression always threatens it, harassing it, destabilizing and mocking it. The limit is always questioned and in the end, it shifts, despite itself. It becomes something else. After the playing out of transgression, the taboo always becomes something different.

This complexity is picked up eloquently by Foucault. If taboos represent a social order in which limits are meaningful and credible, and transgression represents the complex mechanism by which this rule is simultaneously reinforced and transformed, how does transgression operate in the world after the Death of God, where we don't believe

in taboos or limits? To Foucault, what is at issue in the unleashing of transgression is not the simple content of the taboo--it's elaborate rules of bodily propriety, for example, or its prohibition of sexual freedom, or hostility to the mixing of races and social classes—but the logic of the limit itself. Transgression is not simply about redrawing the line in order to allow new freedoms or greater Justice. What it does is show that at the heart of all social organisation is the irrepressible drive towards a disorder that requires a certain restlessness amongst us, a will to remake ourselves. Echoing Bataille, he argues that what transgression does is not threaten the ordered world of the taboo from the outside, as much as demonstrate how within the taboo, there is a point of access to an intense and open outside that draws us on. He writes:

“Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes to experience its positive truth in its downward fall.”
(Foucault, 34)

Transgression of the limit does not simply lead us out into a new world of open freedom, where we simply live in a new way and leave the old styles behind. The pure violence of transgression achieves its intensity because it allows the tension—the cruelty, irrationality and contradictions—of the taboo to be released, to be seen and named and then confronted. This is not simply a release of a kind of unconscious energy, in the manner of a Freudian materialism. The taboo encloses a latent violence, made up of its arbitrariness, oppressiveness and injustice. It is in naming, recognizing, and confronting this violence that transgression attains its own intense festival violence:

And yet, toward what is transgression unleashed in its movement of pure violence, if not that which imprisons it, toward the limit and the element it contains? What bears the brunt of its aggression and to what void does it owe the unrestrained fullness of its being, if not that which it crosses in its violent act and which, as its destiny, it crosses out in the line it effaces? (Foucault, 34-5)

How does this theoretical discussion help us in understanding what it means to breach boundaries? In an older model of politics, one built around a dialectical logic, older systems were clearly opposed by a revolutionary logic that was alien to them and in the clash between these two, the old fell away as we progressed into a liberatingly new world. In the logic of transgression, things are different. This emerges explicitly in the classical sites of transgression: gender and sexuality. Queerness destabilizes the traditional binary of a masculinity and femininity (and for that matter heterosexuality and homosexuality, self-identity and otherness, activity and passivity, pain and pleasure) and legitimates a range of hitherto abused sexualities in a play of innovation and liberation. Yet it cannot simply relegate masculinity and femininity to history. Deconstructed, even fictionalised, they remain cardinal reference points in the discourse and practice of sexuality. Queerness may completely reconfigure inherited gender identities but it will never fully abandon them. And here we have the most important aspect of the transgression of the logic of limits. By breaching boundaries, transgression does not invent a new world. It takes older paradigms and transposes them, recasting them, re-interpreting them, so that they mean something new, so that they can no longer operate or even be what they were before. The flash of transgression may be extinguished in a new darkness, but the taboo that gave rise to it, and of which it is a part, or even the engine, will never be the same again. What we have here then is not a logic of evolutionary advance towards a new and different world, nor of revolutionary change where the *ancien regime* falls away into ruin, but a constant tension and unsettling, in which nothing can ever stay the same, where identities are constantly threatened and pulled apart, but endure even as something else, a world of constant debate and incitement, rather than of an ever clarifying truth.

Each of the articles in this collection exhibit this logic. What makes this selection so successful is the range of approaches to breaching boundaries we see here. By introducing new terms into a discussion whose boundaries seemed settled (creativity in the practice of social work), analyzing politics via an untested approach (sound and gender in political discourse) or problematising conventional, seemingly unambiguous, political language (in the reporting of the Syrian conflict), they test the

boundaries of how we describe the world, and remake the academic disciplines that are the most influential point of access we have to that world. No one should underestimate what it means to test and push the limits of academic discourse. In a world of dumb, crushing orthodoxy – the dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm in economic planning and consequently, social discourse – academic work remains one of the few loci of truly inventive, challenging, questioning thought. Of course, academic discourse, dominated by huge, traditional social institutions like universities, has its own oppressions and silences, but it remains the most articulate and engaged way of thinking new thoughts that we have. Testing the limits of this discourse, drawing attention to its limitations and challenges, *breaching its boundaries* remains crucial work of supreme importance. It is this kind of work we see demonstrated here.

Works Cited

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