

A Line in the Sand

For the phenomena that interest me are precisely those that blur these boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there and actually capitalize themselves there interminably. —JACQUES DERRIDA, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*

Back in the days of modern nation building and the accompanying outreach of empire, many lines were drawn in the sand. Invariably straight as a die, oblivious of the social and natural ecologies on the ground, frontiers, borders, and distinctions were drawn up on maps in the Foreign Offices and State Departments of London, Paris, Berlin, and Washington. Much of today's world is witness to the physical and cultural violence of these abstract divisions unilaterally established in distant metropolises. Look at the map. Once out of Europe and the Northern Hemisphere, the modern invention of nation and border is mirrored in straight lines running all over Africa and the Middle East (in Asia older inheritances often deviated that logic). This, too, was the case with the frontier established in Southern California drawn between the United States and Mexico. It runs between the confluence of the Gila and Colorado rivers and the Pacific, and was established after Mexico's defeat and the subsequent treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The treaty registered the appropriation of 1.36 million square kilometers of territory by the aggressive northern, slave-owning, imperial neighbor. While the U.S. Army occupied Mexico City, *La Intervención Norteamericana* led to the incorporation of what is today the southwestern United States: New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, California.

Acts of violence, invariably sanctified by "law," establish a place, give it a name, and sanctify its authority. In all of these cases, the colonial cut has produced a postcolonial wound. While the Euro-American "winners" who wrote the history of these events (Walter Benjamin) remain self-assured in their political and cultural authority

to define and explain subsequent developments, the “losers,” the defeated, the subaltern, find themselves invariably operating within spaces and languages they had rarely chosen. If, according to Heidegger, space acquires significance only when it is transformed into a particular place, both space and place, as Henri Lefebvre argued, are never given but always socially produced. So if from high above the Southern California coastline from Los Angeles to Tijuana seemingly represents a unified urban sprawl, oblivious to border legislation and national confines, close-up we inevitably encounter a very different story.

Here we discover the power of architecture to carve and articulate the land in a multiplicity of borders and confines. The power of architecture to mold, modify, and morph a territory reveals the architecture of power: it is never merely a technical, neutral, or “scientific” language.

In border zones, such as that between Israel and the Occupied Territories, it promotes a set of social and historical practices that lead to what Eyal Weizman calls a “laboratory of the extreme” and a “dynamic morphology of the frontier.” The territory, Weizman continues, is never as flat as a map, but striated beneath our feet (aquifers, land rights) and above our heads (air corridors, electromagnetic waves full of radio signals, cellular phone networks, GPS positioning, wide-band computer communications). The situation in the Occupied Territories is exemplary rather than exceptional. Similar procedures scan the Mediterranean, just as they patrol the U.S.-Mexico border. Maps are multiple, simultaneously vertical and horizontal: a three-dimensional matrix. They produce flexible, mobile frontiers that sustain invisible lines and shifting configurations of material and immaterial territory. So frontiers are not only physical, but also mobile and flexible instances of authority. The classical colonial modality of impositions from the center on the periphery through the direct imposition of a singular power and authority now gives way to an altogether more diffuse appropriation. This promotes a new conceptual landscape that invites us to consider how the order of power is inscribed, articulated, and becomes in multidimensional space.

Borders are violently imposed, are signs of power, but they are also critically and culturally productive. The border is a framing device that gives shape and sense to what it contains, what it seeks to include and exclude. If the border ushers in an instance of the exceptional state—each and every one finds his or her biographical status and citizenship temporally suspended before being reconfirmed (or challenged)—it reveals, in the very intensity of its biopolitics, the underlying protocols that define and confine its own domestic population. Borders force us to reconsider the historical, political,

and cultural configurations that gave rise to their necessity. They bring back into the picture what they were previously designed to exclude: the defeated, the subaltern, the other; other histories, other territories of belonging and becoming, push up against this seemingly impassable framing. If legally rigid, borders are historically fluid and socially complex: for some they represent simply stamps on a passport, for others an apparently impossible barrier, yet every day they continue to be crossed, and hence simultaneously challenged and confirmed, in both legal and illegal fashion.

In 2000 the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar staged a forty-five-minute event on the Mexican-U.S. border at Valle Del Matador (Tijuana-San Diego) titled “The Cloud.” The cloud, composed of hundreds of white balloons, was released to float high up over the fence, impervious to the 3,000 U.S. Border Patrol agents along the sixty-six-mile frontier in San Diego County, as a tribute to the thousands who have lost their lives trying to cross this line in the desert. Music was played both sides of the border, poetry read, and a moment of silence observed. Despite the massive investment in militarized personnel and sophisticated surveillance devices in this war zone, the frontier was evoked, mourned, and temporarily punctured. For the frontier, both to those who seek at all costs to maintain it and to those who seek to overcome and subvert its arbitrary division, has many dimensions. The blind rigidity of its bureaucracy is increasingly accompanied by a fluidity and flexibility in its application.

To leave familiar territory and cross the frontier is somehow to enter a shadow land where familiar rules come undone. Moving among the unknown, confronting one’s fears and exposure, the frontier crossing is not only that characterized in the northern imagination by existential uncertainties and a “touch of evil” south of the border; for the vast majority migrating into the north of the world, border crossings are a zone of potential death and subsequently of guaranteed exploitation. If much study and critical writing on border zones has concentrated on these inhuman conditions, it has rarely sought to examine the premises and privileges of its own world in the cruel light of this structural reality that represents an undeclared war on the poor of the planet. The disciplinary imperative has been precisely that: disciplinary. The desire has been to render the unknown transparent to one’s intellectual and cultural will. To explain has somehow meant to annul a potential disturbance and bring it all home, rationally reduced to domestic reason and subordinated to one’s view of the world. Yet borders, beyond the obvious installation of authority, surveillance, and control, exist only in the act of being crossed. Borders are brought to life, and acquire their performative power, only when they are traversed, transgressed, and trespassed; in other

words, they are not simply the sites of the hegemonic power imposing the reach of its law, but also of other, subaltern, subversive, and subterranean powers constantly pushing up against the fence, and sometimes crossing over.

If so many of today's borders represent postcolonial wounds, *una herida abierta* (Gloria Anzaldúa) bleeds into the accounting of time and place both sides of the cut. There persists proximity, even communality, often denied, negated, and repressed by those who feel their history is the unique narrative, which proposes an unsuspected cartography for traveling into border zones. The sociological, anthropological, and political mapping of such confines invariably fails to chart the full significance of this unauthorized space and associated practices. Beyond political reasoning, there is a poetics of sound and vision, of music, literature, and the visual arts, that proposes modalities of narrating a multiple modernity irreducible to the homogeneous attention of border control. The inscription of these other languages on the metropolitan body of modernity propels us into considering the disquieting annihilation of distance—both physical and metaphysical—between worlds once considered different and apart, but now suspended and sustained in a shared planetary matrix. These are also critical proximities. Such borders do not merely propose casting our attention to the previously abandoned margins of a modernity unilaterally conceived, those distant confines out there in the periphery far from the centers of our concern, but rather, and altogether more radically, invest our very understanding of modernity. Once-separated worlds—the first and the third, the north and the south of the planet, the rich and the poor—now exceed their confines.

Moving in circuits that simultaneously lie below and beyond the national frame—those of the visual arts, of local acts that travel in transnational literary and visual languages or in sound—connections and communities are formed. Modernity is blogged, temporarily caught in a snapshot, faded in and out and pasted together; it is translated and transformed in the transit of local coordinates and conditions. Subsequent versions also travel elsewhere. Despite the unequal and unjust access to the means of cultural reproduction, each and every take leaves a trace, produces a fold, creates an unsuspected intensity, forms a friction, in a modernity that is not only ours to manage and define. The once-background “noise” of the “outside” world here becomes an altogether more insistent sound. It acquires sense and shape in a modernity that branches out in a heterogeneous assemblage. Orchestrated by power, certainly, but those powers are not only those of existing planetary hegemony. The previously silenced, excluded, negated, and ignored also inhabit this space, proposing their sense of place.

Meanwhile, in Tijuana, on the border, in a city of at least 1.5 million souls, such abstract concerns acquire life and directions, and with them deviation and drift. The processes are not prescriptive; they refer to practices and potential. The violence of modern state formation, the rough justice of border settlements, and the multiple currents and eddies of a hybridizing modernity are obviously condensed in the configurations of this frontier city. Of course, but daily textures, the issues and tissues of both politics and poetics, the criss-crossing of global capital, crime and the corruption of power, not only draw Tijuana close to Los Angeles, London, and Tokyo, but transform its presumed “border” condition into an unsuspected critical space that casts its own particular light into the heart of modernity itself.

In this altogether more fluid reality where presumed peripheries and margins propose an urgent centrality, the border itself reveals its unnerving duplicity. Whose border is it? Each side of the confine claims it. While El Norte reinforces its authority on this space with a multimillion-dollar industry in surveillance and policing, it is nevertheless still unable to fully contain it or suppress its disquieting phantoms. Not only do drugs and undocumented labor continue to cross its confines, but both southern traffic and border disturbance continually interrogate the cage that simultaneously seeks to keep the South out and the North in. The frontier not only creates the figure of the foreigner who is excluded, it also constitutes, limits, and defines the very nature of what exists inside the frontier, what lies repressed in the domestic scene. In this ambivalence, all the premises—from patrolling the border to those disciplines that pretend to explain its histories and contemporary conditions—are exposed to unauthorized questioning.

From considerations of Tijuana as a border city we are pushed into thinking the whole world as a multiplicity of border zones, traversed by legislation, enforcement, and bureaucracy, and then complicated by the unaccounted histories and cultures embodied in the migrancy of unauthorized bodies and cultures. If, most obviously, we encounter this situation and its arbitrary violence in the southwestern desert of the United States, along the northern edges of the Sahara and on the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, on both sides of the English Channel, in the ambivalent territories of Palestine and Kurdistan, between Asia and Australia in the Timor Sea, it is too easy to forget that these borders also run through the streets, tongues, arrangements, and divisions of first-world cities. The multiethnic populations of Los Angeles, London, and Paris are also researched, profiled, and policed, for even if these populations are certainly resident in the nation they are frequently considered to be not fully part of the nation. The externally exercised biopolitics of yesterday’s colonial

administration has not so much disappeared as transmuted into the technologically sustained, and hence hypothetically altogether more flexible, management of the modern political body of the occidental metropolis.

At the same time, ongoing attempts to legislate and control space, to maintain the distinction between inside and outside, is constructed on a mobile terrain where categories and definitions continually slip into sites of contestation: space is never empty, it is invariably peopled and folded into multiple and multilateral processes of social becoming. The desire for transparency and rational control—by both government authorities and academic disciplines—is always destined to be thwarted, no matter what are the terrible short-time consequences in terms of lives and suffering.

There exist unregistered tempos and spaces that deviate and befuddle the accountable logic of linear time, of progress and its ideology of accumulative productivity. In the drift across the border of rational management and over the categorical divide, beyond the conceptual limits of prescribed histories, cultures, and identities, there exists a fiesta of multiplicity that challenges the homogeneous accounting of time and space.

What is being entertained here is the undoing and dispersal—not the cancellation—of an earlier configuration of knowledge, leading, in turn, to the unwinding of the legislative authority of the Northern Hemisphere (the West) as the unique Subject of History. This is to propel thinking into uncharted territory. To borrow a metaphor from urban geography, it suggests a vast and indefinite area—like the sprawling urban slums and shantytowns of Tijuana, Rio, Lagos, Cairo, or Istanbul, peopled by a complex, anonymous, marginalized underclass neither recognized as urban nor as rural—which lies between disciplinary definitions and other modalities of knowledge. If the former present themselves in terms of an epistemic configuration that pretends to impose itself universally and hence unilaterally, the latter, as a heterogeneous and unsystematic interrogation of that configuration, sets a limit, proposing an insistent border that provokes a transit, a transformation, an interrogative elsewhere. In this, Tijuana is profoundly global. While caught in the net of a political economy that sprawls across continents and seas, where labor is not national but transnational and always shadowed and disciplined by a reserve army of “illegal” immigrants, the net, as the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo once pointed out, is also full of holes.

Caught in a global calculus, Tijuana also brings to the equation unknown factors. Halting the idea of rhizomatic and intercultural patterns for a moment, we can witness how heterogeneous elements, processes, and flows coalesce in a precise critical instance like Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image

that flares up in a moment of danger: there to register the unanswered questions, the questions that perhaps will never be answered but which continue to haunt our language and understanding. Here it is language itself that provokes a further opening in the net. Torn away from the empirical medium of transparent communication imposed by the Anglophone world, language swells with signification, and border cities, where seemingly different historical blocs and cultural configurations push up against each other, become overloaded paradigms of an excess of sense. Here the explosion of ethnographic detail is decanted into aesthetic inscription.

For it is poetics, as the custodian of the excess of language (literary, visual, sonorial, performative), that most profoundly registers the inscription of time and place. Following the sound, listening to the prose, the poetry, and the poetical, caught in the visual frame, we are pushed into another space, another “Tijuana,” that is irreducible to sociological statistics, historical explanation, and political management. The cultural dimension is not here an adjunct or accessory to the sociohistorical matrix, but is rather a critical apparatus in its own right. In its reassembling practices and procedures, art proposes new conditions for receiving the “social,” the “historical,” and the “political.” The reassembling, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, referring to the task of translation as piecing together the fragments of language, does not arrive at constituting a new totality. The fragments are freed from their previous unity, and are left to find another arrangement.

This is the unsuspected power of language whatever its provenance. It proposes a potentiality: not only a way of being in the world, but also one of becoming. It is precisely on this cusp that art seeds a political inheritance with a poetical interruption, drawing out of the folds of time and memory, other, unsuspected patterns and paths. This is to suggest that we respond and locate ourselves in the arts in terms of a critical configuration that exceeds the prescribed social location as “art,” “aesthetics,” or “entertainment.” A slash across the continuity of common sense is affected. For we are invariably taught to consider the text, the printed page, the performance, particularly of subaltern cultural formations, as the social and cultural mirror of reality (however complicated the reflection), and hence as a relatively stable object of study and attention. Yet language as literature, as a transformative poetics, as sound, is itself a reality that invests us with the imperative to reconsider and review the very terms of aesthetic and ethical sense; that is, to rethink the very conditions of “reality.” This, to propose a Deleuzian figure, is a “line of flight” that permits the escape of postcolonial art and literature from the perpetual cycle of cultural representation, repression, and

resistance. It is to transform the noted Bhabhian concept of a “third space” into a dynamic, unfolding vector in which the very terms of inherited understanding are exposed to a questioning they have neither foreseen nor authorized. At this point, the literary, the poetical, the artistic provide the cardinal points of a new critical compass: one that promotes a diverse navigation of a planetary, but differentiated, modernity.

Here the city, its form, function, and future, is split open, exposed to unsuspected winds. Fragmented, cut up, translated, sampled, and remixed, the solidity of the city as social and historical edifice cracks under the heterogeneous requests of its own multiplying archive. Domestic elements migrate into new configurations of sense, become strangers to themselves. They propose the undisciplined extension of practices and analyses that breach the boundaries of the existing authorization of knowledge, evacuating local, national, and disciplinary grounds. This suggests that in order to explain the “logic” of contemporary Tijuana in a cross-disciplinary and intercultural manner, that is, to respond to its mobile textures, grammar, and unfolding languages, we need to veer away from habitual referents toward a more experimental series of ethnographies that emerge in the interstices of new cultural configurations. In order to look at the city, rather than merely see it, there are many roads that can be taken. Some are subject to dense cultural traffic; others propose isolated, but perhaps exemplary, encounters. We are often forced to slow down, get out and observe close up, other times to catch distant profiles in the mirror. The trip is always incomplete and inconclusive: it is a critical journey. What, in the performative instances of multiple metropolitan languages, is forcibly brought home is that the old imperial distances of center and periphery have evaporated. There may well be other, altogether more flexible, discriminatory practices and economies that have replaced that stern logic, but there is now also a significant proximity and communality sustained in an urban global grammar that seeds both differences and interdependence. In this sense, a border city like Tijuana, just like the Pakistani city of Peshawar on the North-West Frontier (its three million population swelled with Pashtun Afghan refugees), is saturated with its own variations of the signs and sounds of planetary modernity, and brimming with the violent economies of illegal migration and frontier life. Such cities suggestively replace Walter Benjamin’s Paris to propose themselves as the new paradigmatic “capitals” of the twentieth-first century.

The violence of the line, the brutality of borders, and the fetishization of frontiers is obviously a deeply reductive framing of social and historical space. An ecodynamics would of course situate such limits and teach us

something different. An eagle hovering in the hot air currents over the Iranian desert near the Pakistan border, like its cousin, along with the coyote, the whale, and the butterfly in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States are all humanistically appropriated but ultimately unredeemed by their diverse linguistic and national denominations. A similar fluidity lies in the unlicensed journeys of the artwork. It is this precise edge, where poetics suggests another politics, which provokes an often-unsuspected critical language. Here artistic practices are not simply modalities of historical witnessing and testimony, but rather, in proposing configurations of time and space, establish the places of another critical cartography. The realities of Tijuana come to be mapped, surveyed, visited, and lived differently, diversely, anew. An inheritance is reworked, an archive remixed, a city rendered mobile by maps it had not previously recognized nor certified. In this sense, Tijuana proposes a model of the unsettled becoming of a modernity that invests not only its own particular body and borders but also the multiple reach of the planetary languages in which it is suspended and sustained.

In this there lies the postcolonial return of the repressed as every metropolis becomes a potential migrant zone, crossed and cut up by a multiple series of borders. The previously excluded now reemerges within to reconfigure the economical, social, and cultural profile of the modern city. There is, as Michel de Certeau observed some time ago, no “outside.” Modernity itself is not a quality to be controlled, defended, and defined, but rather an ongoing urban grammar that worlds the world, collaging differences and communalities. Here in the complex prism of individual places, we encounter a modernity that no longer merely mirrors a single reasoning, but rather proposes variants in which local syntax exists and persists as a critical challenge and an ongoing interrogation. In the coeval, but unequal and unjust, mix of planetary modernity, it now becomes impossible to chart a simple hierarchy of development and “progress.” Here the classical distinction between tradition and modernity dissolves into another space; an assumed linearity breaks up in an altogether more fluid series of dynamics in which tradition and locality, as sites of translation and transformation, live on and engage with the surrounding world from within modernity itself: the faith healer with the cell phone. This suggests that it is crucial to unbind both critical and poetical narratives from linear time. Development in the non-European world is also always, as it has been for five hundred years, about planetary locations and their possibilities. The so-called south of the world is always already within modernity.

Such a change in perspective retrieves subjects and societies from the seemingly impossible race of modernity: not yet there, almost there, hopelessly

behind. It emerges in the wake of the theoretical leap proposed by the Sardinian intellectual Antonio Gramsci, and more recently reposed by the Palestinian critic Edward Said. For both thinkers, the political, cultural, and historical struggle lies not between modernity and tradition, but rather between hegemony and the subaltern. From this 180-degree shift in cultural coordinates there emerges a radical reevaluation of the dynamic and always inconclusive sense of culture. Recognizing in resistance, deviance, and drift the conditions of critique, it becomes possible to register the powers that seek both to configure and to contest the “common sense” of hegemony. On the cusp of this scenario, Tijuana lies both at the “third-world” end of Latin America and at the beginning of the “American Dream.” In terms of its positionality and as a contemporary metropolitan proposition, contemporary Tijuana continues to rehearse Frantz Fanon’s provocative reassembling of worldly relationships when in *The Wretched of the Earth* he declared that the first world was literally the creation of the third world. The dream, power, wealth, freedom, and hegemony are structurally sustained by what they exclude, negate, and repress. We now clearly find ourselves moving in dimensions that exceed contemporary cosmopolitanism, tapping complex asymmetries of power that break the boundaries of comfortable definitions, abstract securities, and the reassuring logic of transparent representation.

In the montage of the metropolis yet to come, sounds and signs betray simple mapping. They propose not so much “authentic” views of the “real” Tijuana as the altogether more disquieting deflection of inherited languages and definitions as they come to be folded into the unsuspected materialities of life. A further take, another combination, an unplanned idiom, wrenches modernity out of its abstract state (and hegemonic universalism) and decants its possibilities into the idiolectical realization of a particular configuration of place. What comes from elsewhere, from south of the border, potentially disrupts and ultimately reworks a modernity that if now worldly no longer depends only on a privileged part of the planet for its legitimacy. Over the border, across the line, in the “unconscious,” lies the challenge of the opaque, the unseen, and the unrecognized: not the irrational but further “reasons” that are irreducible to a single, however powerful, rationality.

This is the crack in the wall, the hole in the fence, which both betrays and exposes the arrogant pretensions of believing that your (or rather my) culture and history has the unique right to legislate the world. If all of this continues to occur “under Western eyes” (Joseph Conrad), it is certainly no longer only authorized by the West. If the terms are clearly of European provenance (literature, art, aesthetics, nation), they are at the same time subjected to the trans-

formative practices of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization.” In their local accents and flexible cadences the transit and translation of such terms expose a planetary promise and potential that denies their points of “origin.” Further, it leads to the uncomfortable realization that “my” culture and history is not only mine. Despite the barriers, the controls, the surveillance, and the disciplinary protocols, my space has been invaded, contaminated, creolized, translated, and transformed into a planetary syntax that provides a home for a thousand dialects, a million idioms. This leads to emerging languages formed in the inconclusive transit of time, on the threshold of place, in the mobility induced by a worldly becoming.

At this point, in Tijuana, on the border, neither the reconfiguration of existing critical dispositions nor the reconfirmation of the logics of a planetary political economy provides sufficient explanation. There is now the necessity of a critical and cultural disengagement from the existing lexicon of sense. The latter, as hegemonic reality, as institutional power and disciplinary language, is not, however, simply canceled; rather, it comes to be exposed to interrogations it has never authorized. That particular occidental inheritance, and the universalist pretensions of its archive, now spills out into a critical field that is also inhabited by others. Those who were once the “objects” of an anthropological, sociological, literary, historical, and aesthetic gaze are now “subjects” who refuse to inhabit those categories passively. Here, crossing the border, cutting the conceptual fence and exiting from the disciplinary frame, the work in this volume may begin to teach us how to begin to live, to work, to think and become in a world that does not simply mirror our passage. It is precisely here, contrasting the inventive fluidity of lived responses to the abstract rigidity of occidental classification that an intercultural critique is rendered possible. Historical, cultural, and political sense is not a category but, evoking a lineage that runs from Ibn Khaldûn through Giambattista Vico to Marx and Gramsci, a shifting constellation of practices. These, as they are here enacted in the unfolding complexities of contemporary Tijuana, force the world into an opening that cannot be reduced to a single version pretending universal validity.