Mind the Gap: An Analysis of the Construction and Cultural Function of Borders in Media

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Borders confine and divide; they keep "us" in and "them" out–what was fruitful coexistence yesterday could become a turbulent division tomorrow. Yet the borders raised up out of these shifting relationships remain subject to the constraints of the people who build them, the places and realms they divide, and, ultimately, time itself. Just as a physical wall may be built brick-by-brick, a border is raised gradually, often secretly, as the temperature of the sociopolitical climate rises. These physical walls are often built from the bricks of metaphysical borders, laid on the foundation of power and fortified by majority acceptance of a border's reality.

A prototypical example of a border both physical and metaphysical is Brexit, the United Kingdom's vote to withdraw from the European Union in 2016. The repercussions of Brexit are still echoing throughout the world, just as how Brexit itself took decades to develop. As in the case of Northern Ireland, Brexit drew new lines over ancient maps. These revised borders were enforced by those in power, their force exerted over those who walked where fences now lie. In her essay "Fences: A Brexit Diary," Zadie Smith reveals first-hand how perceptions of social attitudes create a veil that can hide conflicting views, especially from those living within the same community. She notices how Brexit revealed not only the split in political views in her community, but the flawed democratic system that spurred Britain's departure. Although the question of whether 'to leave or stay' was posed as a binary, the network of consequences that would ensue prompted complex reasoning among citizens. Two years later, borders that have been rising slowly now stand jagged and sharp in the forefront of a political climate wrought with fear. At the time of writing, the world watches Russia dispute the borders of Ukraine, still reeling from the outbreak of a global pandemic where friend and enemy; life and death; hope and reality itself are thinly veiled.

Introduction

Psychologically, humans are social creatures who possess a deep-rooted desire to protect our kind. In the modern world's sea of ever-changing diversity, however, everyone must constantly seek out ways to differentiate between friend and foe. Therefore, we establish an increasing number of physical borders every day to divide groups which possess distinct social traits. Prison yards separate law-abiders and law-breakers, Lima's Wall of Shame carves out the rich and poor neighborhoods, Belfast's Peace Walls separate Catholics and Protestants.

Belfast's Wall of Separation serves as a physical border between Catholics and Protestants (image via Grace Babcock)

Lima's Wall of Shame contains the poor community (left) to keep them from mixing with the rich community (right) (Robinson)

Yet oftentimes, citizens cross these borders by uniting through a common identity. China's Great Wall once kept out invading nomads but quickly became a walkable symbol of regional pride, while East and West Berlin came together to tear down the Berlin Wall. As identity fluctuates, borders come in and out of relevance; they are built and destroyed in a constant battle to define identity.

But not all borders are so easily identified—metaphysical borders also determine who belongs within a group and who is worthy of protection, such as race, nationality, sexuality, religion, and identity. They can invisibly divide one's internal life from their external, their real feelings from their overt expression. Borders are simultaneously concrete and abstract, inter-and-intrapersonal, social and individual.

Many pieces of literature focus on challenging a character's sense of identity, either to strengthen their sense of self-worth or to rebuild their selfhood entirely. This phenomenon occurs in countless ways, from inward reflection to peer-led awakenings, from minor accidents to world upheavals. Real and fictional characters across both geography and history traverse borders in both physical and mental space in order to overcome confining, border-like circumstances and discover what lies across the fence.

It is because of the diverse, continuously shifting nature of borders across time,

regional space, and personal experience that the *Digital Literature Review* felt compelled to explore them. When considering how borders continue to affect global sociopolitical relationships, our team began to centrally question how we can best define our observation of and connection to our own experience of culture, those of our authors, and those detailed in texts. The theoretical framework under which we operated was outlined by Homi K. Bhabha in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*. Our frame of reference for captivating culture became a multifaceted exploration of the "past and present, inside and outside" of any of our conceptions of what culture "meant" (Bhabha 2). This edition of our journal attempts to understand how the construction, destruction, and redefinition of the borders around us (established both physically and through the media we consume) reflect the "cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation;" it is our version of a project that attempts to encapsulate "ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction" (Bhabha 3; 27). *The Digital Literature Review* wanted to provide another space to create cultural conversations between texts, between authors, and between critical perspectives.

In doing so, then, we must confront the real dangers that strict border-making has on global politics and on human life. In Gloria Anzaldúa 's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she utilizes a mixture of Spanish and English to reveal how culture can divide and limit self-identity. She examines how culture has both expanded and confined her own identity as a lesbian Chicano, and illustrates her struggle to break out of a cultural narrative that rejects her sexuality, her ambition, and her mixed racial background. Anzaldúa takes the position that the conscious and unconscious fear of rejection creates feelings of unease with the inner self, the parts of the soul that are deemed unsavory, which she refers to as the "Shadow-Beast"(Anzaldúa 38). She discusses growing up in America and experiencing prejudice against Spanish and her accent, uncovering how Chicano Spanish, a dialect which she calls a "border-tongue," was a part of her expression of culture and heritage (Anzaldúa 77). Similarly, in her speech "Grievability and Resistance," feminist theorist Judith Butler reminds her audience of the necessity to bring "intellectual resources to bear" on the damage that artificially constructed borders across Europe, and to consider how borders like those which separate countries are "determined and interpreted." Butler states that the enforcement of borders and the cementation of isolationist policies continue to redefine "who is considered living;" borders, then, take on a "lethal power" to dictate who is assigned dignity and who is not. In many of our selected essays, there is a marked recentralization of human dignity and a deep exploration of the many "forms by which grievability is asserted" by refugees, by survivors, and by the artists who encapsulate these experiences (Butler, "Grievability and Resistance").

One of the biggest barriers for the expression of selfhood, autonomy, and culture

are those constructed by the institutions of the global community and authors themselves. The threats to refugees outlined in Butler's speech are made manifest in Riley Ellis's essay "Stranger Danger: the Imperialist Tendencies of Peacemakers." Ellis discusses how abusive patterns of peacekeeping organizations, namely the United Nations, affect the creation and enforcement of physical borders. Through her analysis of the novels *Girl at War* by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, Ellis details the experiences of three unique victims of war. She illustrates how peacekeeping institutions like the United Nations reinforce geographical borders and endanger the people on either side, often stripping them of their humanity in exchange for the enforcement of their policy. Ellis cultivates an in-depth look into imperialism to explain how the peacekeeping organizations' invasion of privacy and repeated violation of human rights in war-torn countries leads to desperate, often treacherous border crossings like those shown in Nović's and Hamid's texts. Delving further into the discussion of the social institutions that provoke protagonists to cross institutional borders, author Erin McKee continues analyzing Nović and Hamid's novels in her essay "Currency and Border Crossings: the Role of Social Class in Exit West and Girl at War." McKee details how access to money correlates with access to and through borders. Her essay picks up the economic threads woven through Ellis's discussion of geographical borders, but focuses further on how immigration is primarily hindered or bolstered by the institution of social class. Finally, McKee argues that even when people such as the refugees in *Girl at War* and *Exit West* successfully cross geographical borders, they are still bound by physical borders which encircle them. Social class limits access to currency, which McKee argues reinforces physical borders like food security, xenophobic racism, and other barriers low-income immigrants face on either side of the geographic borders between their countries.

Class and financial stability are often weaponized by border agents and wielded against the most vulnerable. Labor, the primary asset of the working class, is rarely protected by profit-driven capitalists and frequently contributes to the abuse of employees. The government of the UK, with its decision to secede from the European Union, made physical the preexisting economic and social borders between demographic groups. As explored in Natalie Fulghum's essay, "My Neighbor is Lesser: A Look At Xenophobic Social Borders That Would Lead To Brexit," the underlying, dangerous xenophobia hurt recent migrant families and festered in the UK before the government's official decision to "Brexit." Through her analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Steven Frears'ss *Dirty Pretty Things,* Fulghum illustrates the multiple ways that xenophobic ideology violates immigrants' sense of bodily autonomy and often dehumanizes them to capitalize off of the labor they produce without guilt. Work becomes more essential than personhood, while the borders that slice through Britain's population continue to divide its population into those who "fit"

and those who do not.

Access to reliable transportation, too, is an inherent luxury of middle-to-upper class life. The two road narratives included in *The Digital Literature Review* simultaneously provide an exploration of moving through, across, and over regional space while detailing the effects that these travels have on the arc of the narrative's characters. Like the works which preceded it, Cassidy Forbing's essay, "An Exploration of the Ford Within *The Remains of the Day,*" details the way social and economic class affect the perception individual characters have of one another. Stevens, an English butler hired in service of a new-money American entrepreneur, navigates both the countryside of his homeland and the social expectations of the evolving elite class as he drives across England in an expensive Ford and encounters new acquaintances and old friends. In Eden Fowler's analysis of the multiple borders in the film *Little Miss Sunshine,* the vehicle the Hoover family uses to cross state lines is far less glamorous: a barely-functional Volkswagen van. As the family struggles (both financially and logistically) to get their daughter Olive to her dream beauty pageant, each member experiences embarrassment, discomfort, companionship, and contentment at different points throughout their story. Both Stevens and the Hoovers experience substantial individual development as they move across their native territories and transgress both physical and emotional borders; they gain an understanding of their own personal experience, their connections with those they meet and love, and finally their place in the world that surrounds them.

At this point, the editors of the *Digital Literature Review* noticed a distinct evolution of argumentative focus away from a discussion of the constructions, institutions, and physical borders that fracture our society and towards those which explore the effects of metaphysical, psychological, or social borders. The throughline, however, was evidently the fact that the borders identified by our authors still had similar effects on the narrative outcomes and character trajectories in-text. In her essay "Dreams, Doors, and Death: Exploring Liminal Space and Mortality in Exit West and *The Farming of Bones,*" Grace Babcock explores the ways in which constructed space can affect growth. However, Babcock explores not physical spaces, but rather the liminal spaces present in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Hamid's *Exit West* and their contrasting effects on emotional healing. It is the crossing into these intangible spaces that Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones* and Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West* are confronted with the borders they construct within themselves. Brigid Maguire similarly centers her discussion on the novel's exploration of mortality. Rather than turn her attention to the internal borders discussed by Babcock, Maguire focuses on the other moments in the texts that mirror the border of death for Liesel and Amabelle. Death, as the character that appears in *The Book Thief,* and death, as the concept and the border between life and the absence of it, interact with the main characters of *The Book*

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Thief and *The Farming of Bones* in intimate, heartbreaking ways. These essays do not navigate geographical space, but detail borders' effects on the characters' own internal lives, lived experience, and responses to traumatic events.

Metaphysical borders are complicated still through Olivia Grenier's analysis of the multitude of ways that language and culture define the ways that both authors and readers understand the experiences of a narrative's characters. In Grenier's essay, "Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works," she discusses the impact of the linguistic and cultural translation present in the short stories "No Name Woman" and "Woman Hollering Creek," by Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros. Grenier notes that translation occurs when Cisneros provides both English and Spanish phrases in her writing to make it accessible for the monolingual reader while Kingston retells the story of her aunt living in China for an audience unfamiliar with Chinese social expectations.Grenier's analysis digs into the question of whether the continued crossing of the border of translation is one that benefits the reader and respects the culture of the author. In discussing the impact of translation on literature, readers are introduced to a metaphysical border that is not so finite as the border of death discussed in the previous papers. Rather, we interact with a border that can be crossed and recrossed repeatedly for different purposes and to different effects.

Cultural expectations have perhaps the most influence on the construction of social borders. Kingston's exploration of behavioral expectations as dictators of gender performance are further examined throughout the conclusion of this edition of the *Digital Literature Review.* Specifically, Media and popular culture shackle and restrain identity by laying out limits on how different genders should behave. Specifically, superhero film culture continues to engage itself in a battle to depict toxic masculinity as either favorable or disdainful through the character arcs of popular superheroes and supervillains.

In the *DLR's* penultimate essay, "Borders of Masculinity: The Hero's Journey in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," Cara Walsh argues that the MCU illustrates masculinity as a border to emotional and character growth in relation to the hero's journey. Walsh bases her argument on the MCU's three foundational heroes—Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor—to analyze the ways in which toxic masculinity manifests in their identities to create roadblocks for their personal lives and progression along the hero's journey. Walsh claims that sociocultural notions of masculinity influence not only their self identity but also the way in which they attempt to fulfill the hero archetype. Though Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor demonstrate these effects in ways distinct to their character, the conflicts they face are rooted in toxic masculinity and halt their growth as heroes. Sam Scoma's essay, "It's All About the Punch(line): The Crossing of Masculinity's Border as Portrayed in Todd Phillips's *Joker*" analyzes the character arc of awkward, isolationist party clown Arthur Fleck. Fleck initially has no access to social status, wealth, or confidence due to his unmasculine

appearance and temperament, but is able to gain social acclaim, newfound happiness, and confidence once he adopts the toxic masculine traits of physical violence, emotional suppression, and sexual dominance. Scoma argues that young men who are still developing their identity see themselves in Fleck the underdog, and are thus susceptible to mirroring his toxic behaviors to gain similar social acclaim. Both Walsh and Scoma's essays rely on the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, a hierarchical social structure which allows men who adopt harmful traits to hold the most power in society. This theory emphasizes the social act of grooming men, which can occur through watching films and participating in pop culture.

  The world of literature is rife with examples of borders, both physical and metaphysical. These works featured in the following journal are ordered intentionally to guide the audience through the ways in which our institutions, our perceptions, our relationships, our language, and our culture simultaneously construct intimidating barriers and provide avenues for personal and collective growth. We encourage both personal reflection and critical engagement with these essays, and aim to provide the space for the analysis which identifies the dangers, the luxuries, and the lasting effects of the many borders which influence identities. The turn of each page, the click of each link, and the inspiration behind each assertion is a border-crossing itself; we urge you to recognize, to notice, and to consider the borders which influence your own understanding of this work.

Thank you, and see you on the other side,
Grace Babcock, Cali Fehr, Aurora Hibbert, Sam Scoma, Calvin Sheinfeld, and Cara Walsh.

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