

Culture



Crossing And Patrolling: Thoughts On Anthropology And Boundaries

Johannes Fabian

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081388ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081388ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Fabian, J. (1993). Crossing And Patrolling: Thoughts On Anthropology And Boundaries. *Culture*, 13(1), 49–53. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081388ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1993

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Crossing And Patrolling: Thoughts On Anthropology And Boundaries ¹

Johannes Fabian

University of Amsterdam

When I was invited to speak to a plenary audience on the topic of this meeting my first reaction was 'Why me?' The second one was: With a topic as vast and vague as this, what can I contribute specifically? Ken Little then assured me that I had crossed so many boundaries in my work that, as a tried and tested boundary-crosser, I could talk just about anything.

I took this as a licence to indulge in more than the usual intellectual vagrancy I am inclined to. You will have to decide for yourselves whether you have any use for my roaming reflections. What you may not expect is a historical or systematic review of anthropological studies that somehow addressed the topic of crossing boundaries — who would dare to cover in a lecture an immense amount of material ranging from diffusion to transgression, from shamanistic travel to the intricacies of liminality. Nor will I attempt some sort of instant analysis of the reasons and motives that made the organizers of these meetings (and those of a few others, it seems ²) choose 'crossing boundaries' as this year's theme. Obviously, crossing boundaries is in the air. But I am not; I can only think and speak from the ground I stand on, or rather move on. What I shall have to offer are the thoughts of someone who crossed linguistic boundaries before he went to grade school, and has since been moving

between a handful of languages, to and from a handful of jobs and countries, and dabbled in a handful of disciplines, admittedly often seeking the excitement of disciplinary transgressions. Eventually, I hope to make some general propositions on anthropology and boundaries, but before I get there I want to put before you some loosely connected thoughts on how I got there.

Crossing Boundaries: Some Personal Recollections

What makes 'crossing boundaries' such a attractive theme is that its terms are richly evocative, each in itself and both in combination. What a difficult theme 'crossing boundaries' is one realizes as soon as evocations and connotations are to be put into words. Dictionaries and definitions are not helpful at this point. They only spell out what we already know or ought to know. I was presumably invited to give an example of where reflection might lead us when we begin to think about, or think in terms of, crossing boundaries, rather than just determine what it means.

What comes to my mind when I think of crossing boundaries are, first of all, childhood memories. These days, anthropologists no longer need to make excuses

for autobiography. But just in case, I want to assure you that a few personal recollections will help you to understand my point of departure in these reflections. They should explain why, to me, the notion of boundary does not so much evoke abstract limits, or containing confines, or authoritative restrictions, but borders (*Grenzen* in my native language). My parents came from a region in Eastern Germany (now Western Poland) where three countries touched; they were born in a village that, linguistically and culturally, belonged on the other side of one of the two political borders nearby. As a child I listened to them and to other relatives telling stories of border crossings: of their own visits to relatives (my paternal grandfather had family in Moravia), of exciting excursions to Prague, of village criminals escaping Prussian police, or of soldiers deserting. My maternal great-greatgrandfather had fled from Austrian military service and started out as a squatter just across the border in Prussian Silesia. These stories, at least as they were deposited in my memory, celebrated borders because crossings held the excitement of a different world, or of escape from political or legal authorities. And when these borders were put up to a popular referendum by the League of Nations, the event seems to have been the cause for celebration — thousands who had left and emigrated to other countries where brought back to cast their votes — whereupon the borders were promptly confirmed (with insignificant changes).

As an adolescent I found myself again in a 'three-country corner,' this time on the western border of West Germany. There, in the years after the war, entire villages lived on smuggling. Gangs of a few hundred children would cross the 'green border' to Belgium (an unmarked international frontier running through hills and woodlands), each returning with a rucksack filled with coffee beans. Armed customs officers watched helplessly. At any rate, they were most of the time chasing after the armored vehicles that were used by the professionals. Yet, although these boundaries were close (only 15-20 miles from the place where we lived), they were different from those my parents had grown up with. They did not invite crossings and thus contained us, although I don't think that this caused us much discomfort. We lived in the self-contained world of a small town, at a time before postwar prosperity made a tourist out of almost everyone; in ten years I crossed the borders to Belgium or Holland only two or three times, always to return on the same day.

So I knew of boundaries and crossing ever since my early childhood. But when I search my memory for experiences that probably did more than anything else to impress a lasting image on my mind, then I always come back to the crossing of borders that separated East and West during the Cold War. So powerful were these early experiences as a war refugee, that they somehow determined my mood and attitudes whenever I had to pass customs; and they were reinforced by all those oppressive bottleneck experiences of getting into and out of Zaire, the country where I did my research between the mid-sixties and the mid-eighties; experiences, I am sure, that are shared by many of you. As I reflect on them now, I realize that they had a typical structure:

CROSSING A BORDER

BEFORE:

There is waiting in lines; people talk in hushed voices or keep silent; you move slowly and keep with the flow of people; above all, you avoid being noticed.

AT:

As you face the border guards, a sort of numbness befalls you, or else you put on a false joviality and soon feel humiliated as you meet the stare of officialdom; you are gripped by some abstract fear, by anxieties about your documents of legitimation and possessions. You feel paralyzed or, worse, you are forced to enter or join an intricate, perhaps dangerous, game of tricks and bribes.

AFTER:

As soon as it seems safe, there is a rush away from the scene. You take a breath and feel relieved. Like others, you begin talking again, often instantly making the event into a story; you know you will have another anecdote to tell of border crossings.

Notice that this sketch, while it describes a passage and may look as if it could easily be 'anthropologized' according to the schemes of van Gennep's *rites de passage* or Turner's liminality, it has nothing of a life-giving rite, nothing of an exciting drama of death and rebirth. If it is a 'rite' at all, it is one consisting of obsessive acts of oppression and humiliation, an occasion where abstract political rule and concrete personal power (and greed) collude to inflict discomfort, anxiety and sometimes pain. Banality, not drama, is the aftertaste left by such 'lim-

inal' experiences. What, then, makes 'crossing boundaries' such an intriguing and exciting theme?

Crossing Boundaries: A Figure of Thought

I said I would have an excuse for leading you through these personal recollections and musings. Here it is: I have been able to put before you three ways in which experiences of crossing borders may be condensed to figures of thought about crossing boundaries.

- the border experienced as a source of excitement and, incidentally, a generator of stories and history
- the border experienced as essentially containing and confining, and therefore occasionally inviting transgressions
- the border as a place and time of domination/submission.

Having explored what crossing boundaries means to me, I should now take the next step which is to ask what it means to anthropology in its current state. Is 'crossing boundaries' perhaps on its way up to becoming conceptual currency with which to negotiate all sorts of cultural dynamics and movement (and does it therefore belong in the lineage of concepts such as diffusion or evolution, acculturation or enculturation, deviance and social change? Does it signal that we finally ready to abandon — remember Talcott Parsons, and more about him later — belief in 'boundary maintaining' as an essential property of functioning social systems? Many of us who have put much critical effort in overcoming the reigning sociological paradigm of the fifties and sixties will applaud such a development. But if, going on indications such as this meeting, crossing boundaries is about to become a root metaphor for society in motion then we should remember lessons we learned from using its predecessors most of which not only produced scientific illumination but also served ideological obfuscation: Genocide could pass as colonization, economic rape could become a consequence of the 'world system' and of glib center-periphery theorizing, the South African apartheid regime could in all seriousness be proclaimed a pluralist society. Remember that theories of diffusion and evolution also served to prop up imperialism and made us blind for a history of resistance to, and survival under imperialism; that acculturation and enculturation studies were often little else but inves-

tigations of the effects of regimes of education imposed with the aim to transform hunters and peasants into wage earners; and did not social change cover all sorts of forced adaptations? When I begin to search 'crossing boundaries' for similar functions I immediately suspect that it owes at least part of its current popularity to its being a euphemism for brutal displacement of political and economic refugees and I see before me the traffic signs that ingenious Californians designed and display between San Diego and Los Angeles: 'Caution! Wetbacks Crossing,' cleverly symbolized by a family on the run. I am not suggesting that these suspicions are enough to denounce 'crossing boundaries' as an ideological smokescreen. But if we want to keep using this obviously attractive and productive figure of thought we must also keep asking where it leads us. The question is: What do we take to be the result of, what is to be achieved by, crossing boundaries and by making it a theoretical notion in our search for anthropological understanding?

Is crossing boundaries an extraordinary event, something like making sorties, border raids and returning richer?

Is crossing boundaries proof that boundaries can be overcome, perhaps be removed?

Are we doomed to cross boundaries as part of the human condition — à la Durkheim: what counts is not where you get but that you cross and re-cross and thereby affirm boundaries?

Or conversely, is boundary crossing, as it were, a way of life, producing a desirable multi-culturalism or, to invoke another term in high fashion, creolization?

I'll just stop my list of questions at this point; others can be asked and may have occurred to you as I am speaking. I hope to have made my point: Like any striking metaphor, crossing boundaries needs to be examined critically, which (literally, because that is the meaning of *krisis*, separation / distinction) means taking it apart. There is always the risk that such an operation may lead to the disconcerting conclusion that a seemingly attractive idea needs to be rejected because it confuses rather than clarifies thought. As you may guess—why else would I have lead you up to this point—this is not the conclusion I myself came to. I believe that we have here a fertile idea and I'll spend the rest of this talk on an attempt to apply the figure of crossing boundaries to some of the recent changes, perhaps, fashions, in our own discipline.

Crossing Boundaries and Disciplines

When we try to think the ideas of an academic discipline and of boundaries together, the first association probably is with that of boundary as containment; boundary as that which defines professional legitimacy and identity by confining it to a group of legitimate practitioners. While this logically implies that to join the discipline requires crossing boundaries from an outside into an inside, does it also follow that anthropology, or anthropologists lose their identity and legitimacy when they cross boundaries in the other direction? When they become historians, philosophers, literary critics, or poets and novelists? The answer to this one cannot be what logic would seem to require: Yes, they lose their identity because, after all anthropology's claim to disciplinary status has been based on the theories, methods, and practical habits it developed for crossing cultural boundaries.

But matters are not as simple as that. A critical evaluation of anthropological discourse as it was formed during the Enlightenment and perfected ever since may make us realize that what anthropologists have been doing was not so much, and certainly not only, crossing but rather patrolling and maintaining boundaries. There can be no doubt that a driving force of anthropological theorizing used to be to separate Culture from Nature, Culture from Society, Culture from the Individual, and, indeed, Culture from Culture (as in primitive vs. civilized, traditional vs. modern). Though this may have looked like concern with crossing boundaries, it has more often than not finished by reducing culture to nature, society, or the psyche, or, indeed again, to culture. What seems to have mattered in most of our history was not crossing boundaries but drawing them differently so that they would separate the typical from the unique, the lawlike from the accidental, the rule from the deviation. This trend reached its apogee in the most sophisticated and ambitious modern theory of society, Talcott Parsons' (and Edward Shils'), in which the idea of society as a 'boundary-maintaining system' was central.

Anthropologists of my generation vividly remember debates, in the sixties and seventies, that were critical of this reigning paradigm, debates that took on new fervor with the rise of feminist thought until they threatened to explode our discipline. Then something happened that did not resolve the standoff between positivists and marxists, scientists and

humanists, analysts and hermeneuts, but certainly managed to defuse its threat to the discipline. It was the arrival of what was subsequently labelled, but hardly understood, as the post-modern condition. It came upon a field that had already been softened up by interdisciplinarity on its common boundaries with the humanities and other social sciences. At any rate, boundary maintaining was out; adventurous, indeed necessary, border crossings were advocated between science and literature, ethnography and biography, interpretation and imagination. The greatest challenge became to understand, and thereby overcome, the one border that constituted our discipline historically — the one between Us and the Other, the West and the Rest.

What is valuable in this movement, and what a passing fashion? Here is the direction in which I have been searching for an answer: the point of departure for a critical understanding of our discipline must be a coming to grips with a profound contradiction in the practice of our discipline. This is a thesis I defended some time ago. Recast in the figure of thought that has our attention today it can't be stated as follows: Whenever we do empirical research we must cross boundaries — with our bodies, with our habits of speech, with our habits of thought. We must become displaced if we want to meet the one condition that makes production of ethnographic knowledge possible: sharing time with those whom we study. But as soon as we return, literally or figuratively, and begin to formulate knowledge in writing, we turn from crossing boundaries to patrolling them, making sure that our discourse stays legitimized scientifically in form and content. This is not the place to show again how this works, what kind of devices we use to keep those about whom we pronounce anthropological knowledge on the other side of the very boundaries we had to cross in order to study them. Suffice it to state that we seem to have come to a kind of collective realization of the contradiction that our established practices involve and that our responses may have to be such that the boundary-maintaining regimes that upheld our discipline come crashing down.

Of course, we also begin to realize that something that we experience as happening only to our own little world is happening in the world at large, or at least the academic world at large. And what we see there does not inspire optimism. Yes, powerful assaults have been made on the regimes of Western education, but they are getting mired in tokenism and political correctness. In anthropology itself we

see how loss of attachment to one discipline has resulted in a proliferation of subdisciplines and sub-disciplinary 'organizations. In the United States, the current response to this seems to be to call for maintaining, or returning to, that decisively modernist conception of a 'four fields approach.' This has much to be commended, but is it more than recourse to a status quo, forgetting that the status quo was established under colonial conditions; apparently forgetting also that none of the four fields is any longer is what they used to be — what with archeology having become critically reflexive; with evolutionary biologists struggling to keep up with revisions in paleontology and advances in genetics; with notions such as grammar and, indeed, language disintegrating in the hands of linguists who have become fascinated with variability and phenomena that once were considered marginal, such as pidgins and creoles. But enough has been said already about upheavals in social and cultural anthropology.

Conclusion and Outlook

If the boundaries around our discipline are not likely to be upheld by organization and institutionalization, perhaps its identity may nevertheless be maintained as that of movement. After all, returning to our common theme, 'crossing boundaries' implies movement and we may ask ourselves questions such as the following:

- Is movement that consists of, or results in, collectively crossing boundaries and that seems to become the rule not a 'movement' (as in religious, social, political etc. movement) of the kind that we studied as exceptions during the times when the boundaries around our discipline were — or looked — still safe? How would it, in that case, relate to a critical, 'anti-establishment' perspective in the social sciences?
- How does the image of crossing boundaries relate to that of reaching stages, in other words: are we witnessing a shift from a temporal root metaphor of sociocultural development (through stages of evolution) to a spatial image (of migration and circulation). A tempting idea that should be followed in more detail, but one that needs to be tempered remembering the theoretical purposes to which (distribution in) space and migration were put by evolutionists and diffusionists — not to forget the practical

purposes of dislocation and so-called migration under colonial regimes.

Are, in sum, calls for crossing boundaries the rallying-cry of an anti-establishmentarian movement; or are they the ideological reflexes of larger, perhaps global, establishments getting themselves — their institutions and professions of knowledge production — organized? As long as we have no clear answers to these questions, we should draw some optimism from our ability to pose them. Diffuse and confused as it may be at the moment, concern with crossing boundaries can, I believe, be translated into disciplined thought. But this will happen only if the idea is taken as a challenge to reformulate what anthropology is about under global conditions that are quite different from those that admitted our field to academic status. Theoretical, critical efforts are all the more urgent in these times when academic institutions try to domesticate us and new clients begin to wave their research money at us. In the United States inter- and multi-culturalism studies are commissioned to serve attempts to overcome the threatening breakup of a nation in wars of race and class. With amazing swiftness, a new research industry has sprung up around the break-up of the Eastern block and the problems of a political unification of much of Western Europe. It remains to be seen how anthropology responds to all this. Will it be the handmaiden of new regimes drawing new boundaries and will anthropologist be again the ones who patrol the borders, or can anthropology become the midwife of a new world in which humankind begins to conceive of itself as one, not just theoretically — that has been done for centuries — but practically? I leave you with that question to ponder.

NOTES

1. Notes prepared for a keynote address delivered at the 20th Annual Conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society / Société canadienne d'anthropologie, at York University, Toronto, May 6-9, 1993.
2. See several presidential panels at last year's AAA meetings, and 'Cultural Borders,' this year's topic for the meetings of the Society of Cultural Anthropology.