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Dominic Walker, 'Preface: "Bounded in a nut-shell"'

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Preface: ‘Bounded in a nut-shell’

When people push boundaries too far, it's not because they are strong but because they are weak.

Vladimir Putin, June 2014.

It is difficult to imagine a concept more universal, and therefore perhaps more indifferent, than the concept of a boundary. As a theme for an interdisciplinary journal, even ‘Things’ or ‘Ideas’ would mark out a narrower catchment area. This unboundedness of scope – mirroring the scope of interdisciplinarity – presents some difficulties for coherence. What kind of centre does the theme of Boundaries offer for the essays in this issue? What is there to discuss except its infinite denominability?

All events, ideas and physical entities require boundaries to exist. This screen or copy of *Excursions* would not be a spatially extended object unless it had boundaries.

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The ideas I am organising in this sentence would not make sense to you unless they had boundaries we could roughly agree upon (even “God” or “everywhere” possess certain boundaries as ideas). Time may appear to be a continuous flow but, as Russell says, ‘events of which we are conscious do not last for a mathematical instant but always for some finite time’, the ever-vanishing boundary between now and then (Russell, 2009, p.93). Johanna Skibsrud discovers a fitting quotation in Flaubert’s correspondence. ‘Like God in creation’, writes Flaubert, the author must be ‘everywhere felt and nowhere seen’. Boundaries are felt and seen everywhere.

Yet on closer examination they are often nowhere in particular. Perhaps nothing could be more obvious than the boundary of a physical object, as Dr. Johnson testified famously by injuring himself on a stone (‘I refute [Berkeley’s immaterialism] *thus*’ (Boswell, 1976, p.333)). Yet an electron microscope would reveal even the bluntest edge to be a fuzzy commotion of particles, ‘a zone of indistinction’, in Agamben’s terms, used by Skibsrud to adumbrate the paradox of sovereignty in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. ‘Concepts’, writes Frege, must have ‘sharp boundaries’ in order to be logically intelligible (Frege, 1984, p.133). Yet according to Wittgenstein, whose philosophy of language is exercised by Hugh Foley to consider an ethic of representation in recent American poetry, they must also be ‘pointed’ at ‘roughly’ and ‘indistinctly’ in order to be communicated (Wittgenstein, 2009, p.xcix). The individual is ‘ringed round [...] by a thick wall of personality’, writes Walter Pater, whose critical imagination Callum Zeff discusses in terms of ‘personification’ (Pater, 2010, p.119). Yet as William Tucker finds, discussing the finitude of language in David Foster Wallace, selfhood must eventually be traced to the otherness it is assembled or distinguishes itself from. Social boundaries are a consensus of invisible mental constructions individuals are born or grow into, as we are reminded in different ways by Sleiman El Hajj and Laura Wilson. They may feel as restrictive as a straitjacket or as natural as our skin (a membrane used by Nicole Birch-Bayley to figure the diaspora, a continuity of separateness); but they are always hallucinations, however real or necessary they might be.

In *Spaces of Capital*, David Harvey makes a subtle connection between the apparent self-evidence of social boundaries – he is speaking of national and cultural identity groups – and ‘a Cartesian logic in which *res extensa* [material phenomena] are presumed to be quite separate from the realms of mind and thought and capable

of full depiction within some set of coordinates' (Harvey, 2001, p.220). When Hamlet says he could 'be bounded in a nut-shell and count [himself] a king of infinite space', he is applying the same dichotomy: the geography of physical space is used antithetically to figure the unfigurable – because unbounded – geography of mental experience (Shakespeare, 1992, p.75). But this negative topology is too easily troubled by the pressing and immediate boundaries of material life, whether these are the 'bad dreams' Hamlet refers to (the 'too, too solid flesh', for instance) or the decidedly bounded principles of ratiocination Descartes himself put forward in the *Meditations*. It is this tension between the limitless and the circumscribed, between 'infinite space' and 'bad dreams', which makes the theme of boundaries as generative as it is universal. Their existence depends on an infinite contestability, an unending negotiation which calls into question not only the whereabouts of particular boundaries but their decidability as such. Far from being an obstacle to his sovereignty, Hamlet's 'bad dreams' are in fact a condition of the infinity they only seem to preclude.

This issue of *Excursions Journal* considers a variety of bad dreams. Their boundaries arc and criss-cross the material and political world – from Nigeria to Canada, Lebanon to Poland, the US to Iraq – in addition to its cultural and metaphysical expressions. There are discussions of law (Skibsrud), language (Tucker), truth (O'Brien); sexuality (El Hajj), embodiment (Wilson), touch (Birch-Bayley); persona (Zeff), medium (Morris) and representation (Foley). Themes of knowledge, selfhood and form occur throughout. The issue is organised in clusters to emphasise each one; but, as always with boundaries, there is no definite edge between them – truth for O'Brien is considered in terms 'giving account of oneself'; for Morris, the boundaries of form are understood in terms of rhizomatic structures of knowledge. As Foucault writes, '[t]he limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess' (Foucault, 1977, p.34). The limits of this issue, its own bad dreams of finitude, are offered up for the reader's transgression.

Vladimir Putin is at once a decidedly transgressive figure and a very bad dream. 'When people push boundaries too far,' he said in June of this year, 'it's not because they are strong but because they are weak' (Monaghan, 2014). He was speaking to French journalists after a meeting with Hillary Clinton ('maybe weakness is not the

worst quality for a woman', he later added); but there is an obvious geopolitical subtext to his remarks. Clearly he means to invert the terms of an argument which saw the invasion of Ukraine as an act of imperial aggression. In this macho syllogism it is not Russia pushing the limits of their territorial boundaries, since that is an act of weakness. Rather it was a small group of Ukrainian "fascists" exceeding the boundaries of international law by seizing power from a legitimately elected government, which they did as an act of cowardice and unmanly desperation. In *The Bonds of Love* (1988), feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's argues that patriarchy and capitalism rest on the repudiation of dependency, ergo of the "feminine" caregiver we depend on in infancy. Putin's workings are a perfect instance of this. While strength is resourceful and self-contained, like Russia protecting its borders from the threat of clamouring outsiders, weakness must go in search of what it needs, whinging for democracy like the Ukrainian protestors, or groping like the international community in the affairs of a sovereign nation. But Putin's statement does not only elegantly reveal the homology of sexism and nationalism. It is also a highly fetching truism of dialectical thinking. The weakness that makes us helpless and frightened sends us out in search of otherness into the world. The need that makes us hungry and impoverished enriches our desire and nourishes our curiosity about others. 'Love you will only find', writes Theodor Adorno, 'where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength' (Adorno, 2005, p.192). The paradox of a slave without a master, a weakness that does not provoke strength, is the paradox of the boundary: the separation that unites. Taken as a whole, the essays in *Boundaries* propound and elaborate this contradiction without diminishing its vital tension.

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