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West of Everything? The Frontiers and Borderlands of Critical Discourse

Part One. Where Boundaries Collapse, New Ones Are Likely to Form

For all of us who are professionally preoccupied with North America and North American studies, the terms West, frontier and more recently, the concept of borderline delineate both geo-political and imaginary spaces – spaces from which have evolved both historical and fictional narratives of expansion, migration, immigration, colonization, and exclusion, as well as of freedom, liminality, and transgression. These narratives have followed their own historical trajectory. After the closing of the historical frontier, new frontiers opened up, extending the American cultural territory and imaginary way beyond the geo-political borders of the United States into global, outer, and in fact various and vast utopian spaces. What comes to mind at this particular time, 40 years after John F. Kennedy's visit to Berlin and his assassination, is the address of Senator Kennedy accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the presidency of the United States, presented at the Memorial Colosseum in Los Angeles on July 15 in 1960. Kennedy invoked the "last frontier" to project a new one: "For I stand tonight," he famously phrased,

facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, the prisoners of their own price tags. Their motto was not "every man for himself" – but "all for the common cause." They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from within and without.

Today some would say that those struggles are all over – that all the horizons have been explored – that the battles have been won – that there is no longer an American frontier.

But I trust that no one in this vast assemblage will agree with those sentiments. For the problems are not all solved, the battles are not all won – and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s – a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils – a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threads.

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[…] the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises – it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people but what I intend to ask of them. It appeals to their pride, not to their pocketbook – it holds the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security.

But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unresolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric – and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me, regardless of party.

But I believe the times demand new invention, innovation, imagination, decision. I am asking each of you to be pioneers of that New Frontier. My call is to the young in heart, regardless of age – to all who respond to the Scriptural call: "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed."[1]

I am quoting Kennedy at length here not only because his address gains an entirely new resonance in our post-9/11 and post-Second-Gulf-War world; and not only because his ingenious "high rhetoric" underlines how far the American conception of the frontier can be stretched. While Kennedy extends the notion of the frontier to include a "technological revolution" as well as "[a] peaceful revolution for human rights – demanding the end to racial discrimination," he also makes all too evident that the opening of new frontiers correlates with the closing of novel borderlines, such as the so-called Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall which in turn transformed Berlin into a kind of frontline, if not frontier city. "Are we up to the task – are we equal to the challenge?" Kennedy asks in the final part of his address. "Are we willing to match the Russian sacrifice of the present for the future – or must we sacrifice our future in order to enjoy the present? That," he claims, "is the question of the New Frontier." Accordingly as these Cold War borderlines were eventually transgressed and finally – figuratively as well as literally – deconstructed, Kennedy's new frontier politics had long vanished from the American agenda. Even before the Berlin Wall came down the United States had already erected their own version of such dividing line, protecting themselves against illegal immigration across the border in the Southwest.

[1] Http://www.kennedylibrary.org/j071560.htm, visited on 15 April 2003.

What I mean to suggest here is that, first, narratives of frontiers and borderlines are inextricably intertwined, and that, secondly, the closing of one frontier tends to open up new "virgin lands." Or to put it differently: wherever boundaries collapse, new ones are likely to form, demarcating spatial, political, religious and ethnic territories which both in- and exclude individual and collective bodies. Of course the latter claim is a highly general and generalizing one. However, I do believe that we indeed *have to* take the synchronicity of transgressions and demarcations of boundaries into a broader perspective. I do believe that the interdependent tendencies of inclusion and exclusion which dominate our current geo-politics as well as certain scholarly and scientific pursuits ultimately join in a common, globalizing effect: the cementation of economic or class differences which thus also reinscribe a borderline that has slipped our post-1989 "end-of-history" perspective. And when I talk of tendencies of "scholarly and scientific pursuit" here I include both the developments within American and cultural studies (and it is those developments that I will be talking about primarily) and the New Frontiers currently opened up by the so-called hard sciences (and the ongoing "technological revolution" that Kennedy invoked): As the developments in the new sciences unfold, so cultural critics Steven Best and Douglass Kellner observe, "boundaries are collapsing everywhere, in both the natural and the social worlds, collapsing differences among the species (bacteria, plant, insect, animal, and human) and between biology and technology, transgressing the limits of what previously was declared improbable or impossible" (134).[2]

Many of us would probably agree that, at this point in the history of the sciences, we fare best if we meet such views with scepticism. For – to repeat my punching line – wherever boundaries and borders collapse, new ones are likely to form. In our post 9/11 world with its renewed efforts of nation-building I would also suggest, however, that a similar scepticism should guide our perspectives on the dominant trends within our own field, a field which stretches across the human and social sciences and which has more recently displayed a comparable enthusiasm with regard to transgressions of boundaries, transnationality, and spaces of liminality.

It is from this vantage point that I would like to revisit the frontiers and borderlands of our critical discourse. For the terms frontier and borderline not only delineate geo-political and imaginary spaces, they also figure prominently in our theoretical perspectives. In fact criticism and theory of the last thirty years or so have assigned a privileged

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[2] Best and Kellner discuss this development in terms of Bruce Mazlish's work on the four discontinuities (1993) which human beings have been subjected during modernity – the Copernican (between earth and universe), the Darwinian (between human and animal), the Freudian (between conscious and unconscious), and the current technological one (between man and machine). The authors add a fifth discontinuity that "opens with the *possibility* of discovering other forms of life in the cosmos, and the *actuality* of species mixing, the creation of new life forms through genetic engineering, and widespread cloning" (130).

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position to anything in "transition," to realms located in an "inbetween," "beyond," or "elsewhere," to a space that, as I will argue, has meanwhile turned into methodological trap. Thus in the second and main part of my paper I want to invite you to take a walk on the wild side, to revisit with me the borderlines and zones of critical discourse and explore the cultural desire and significance that fed into the many „beyonds," „betweens," and „elsewheres" that have populated critical space in the final decades of the twentieth century. The final destination of this inquiry into the spatial dimensions of contemporary critical discourse, however, is aimed beyond an understanding of their cultural and political functions and effects. I rather wonder meanwhile what novel sense of space, of frontiers and borderlines the new millennium holds in store, and I will speculate about this question in the third and final part of my paper.

Part Two. Between, Beyond, Elsewhere: Privileged Spaces in Late Twentieth-Century Critical Discourse

It has long been a commonplace observation that the insights of deconstructivist and poststructuralist thought have tended to limit and minimize the arenas of effective individual and collective agency, thus to disempower, at least to a certain degree, the historical subject and to capitalize on spatiality instead. The present epoch, Foucault famously wrote in his essay "Of Other Spaces," is "above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."[3] At the same time, however, theories that have evolved on the margins, at the dawn and in the aftermath of poststructuralism – and I am thinking in particular of various modes of feminist inquiry, cultural anthropology, and post-colonial criticism – have also effected a shift within our modern sense of space, a shift more specifically from modernist notions of "text as space" to post-modernist conceptions of "space as text," a shift in the process of which the term space itself has been repoliticized.

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[3] In fact, as Foucault underlines, "space has a history in Western experience" (22). Foucault traces the history of space from medieval space or the space of emplacement consisting of a hierarchic ensemble of (sacred, profane, protected, exposed) places to a sense of space as extension where (beginning in the 17th century) "a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement." Meanwhile the site, defined by relations of proximity between points or elements, has been substituted with extension. "Our epoch," according to Foucault, "is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites" (23). Both post-modernist architecture which echoes multiple styles and the fact that we were able to share the images of the events of 11 September, collectively and globally are manifestations of this "epoch of space." ("Des espaces autres" was originally published in 1984).

More precisely, as theories of the post-modern, the post-colonial and, most particular, of performativity conceive of the political in terms of discursive space, they have frequently projected spaces of political momentum located in an indistinct, if not nebulous "inbetweenness," "beyond," or "elsewhere." These and related spatial terms like liminality and borderland have been incessantly deployed by late twentieth-century critical discourse, my own work being no exception. In my first book *Fashioning the Female Subject* (1997), for instance, I argue – as I would still hold: convincingly – that the poetics of Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore work in a rhetorical and philosophical „in-between,“ a term that I borrow from the French poststructuralist Hélène Cixous. And this tendency to privilege the in-between, the liminal, the spaces beyond dominant discourse is by no means restricted to the last millennium. In June 2002, the 26th Annual Conference of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, for instance, set out to explore „Intermedialities“ and featured workshops entitled „In the Between,“ „Liminal Spaces,“ „Inter-Esse: Beyond Borderlines,“ „The Third,“ „Hermes — The Intermediary,“ „Inter-Writing/Imaging,“ „Between the Cultures of Multiculturalism,“ and even one session called „In-Between Jacques Derrida.“

Significantly enough, this continued faith in the liminal, in a discursive space of inbetweeness involves a return rather than the loss of subject and history Fredric Jameson has mourned. It is the return, however, of an 'other' subject and history, one that had long been buried under the debris of Western cultural dominance. So as we moved from New Critical conceptions of a closural spatial aesthetics (as explored, for instance, by Joseph Frank) to a post-modernist sense of space as an open intertextuality, critical discourse has evolved a previously marginal subject, an 'other' voice that is oftentimes resituated quite literally center stage. The projection of those betweens and elsewheres thus has been, to use the words of Héctor Calderon and José Saldivar, „a highly conscious, imaginative act of resistance“ (5). At the same time, though, the space that was granted for this previously peripheral – female, African American, or Third World subject – his or her speaking position and agency, has been highly limited and contested by pretexts and discursive conventions from the start. In the works of theorists as diverse as Victor Turner, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Derrida, Judith Butler, Linda Hutcheon, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hector Calderon, and Homi Bhabha, to mention but a few prominent names, the inbetweens, beyonds, and elsewheres correspond to realms of subtle discursive liminality, parody, and subversion, realms whose actual political impact is rather minute. Accordingly, critical discourse aggrandized this very limitation into a politically effective potential. In fact, from Kristeva who developed the concept of intertextuality from Bakhtinian dialogism across Turner's work that thrives on liminality

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to Gates's position on signifyin(g) and Bhabha's notion of mimicry we find plenty of faith in the powers of repetition, parody, and pastiche, of the subtle spaces of ironical distance.[4]

In this context I cannot explore these subtle spaces of subversion at length.[5] What is significant for my argument here is to underline that those theories which invest liminal spaces and realms of intertextuality and ironic distance with subversive power tend to revitalize modernist utopias in post-utopian times. By proposing a borderland or else-where located "between" or "beyond" the modes of dominant discourse, a significant part of this critical discourse to my mind remembers and salvages the central utopias of modernism – and most particularly the desire for difference without hierarchy, utopias which are prominently projected by Kennedy's conception of a "New Frontier," and which seem to have had their final heyday in the early to mid-70s.

Since the effect of parody and pastiche is significant, yet hard to measure, they have easily opened up toward utopian spaces, into "borderland[s] between art and the world," as Hutcheon puts it, a realm within what others dismiss as the aestheticized post-modern condition or a body politic turned theater. And whereas the heterotopias envisioned by post-modernist fiction are mostly disturbing, this utopian realm of cultural criticism is soothing, even if it does not open up into the easily accessible lands that have dominated the more traditional utopian imaginary. Thus rather than facing "the end of utopia" (Jacoby) post-modern culture and its critique have attempted to salvage the utopias of aesthetic modernism for the new millennium.

Part Three. Beyond Ground Zero? The Frontiers and Borderlines of a New Era

To my mind the literal deconstruction of two symbols of US economic and military power – the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – made the futility of the attempt, on the part of recent critical discourse, to salvage a modernist utopia for the new millenni-um blatantly obvious. (Interestingly enough, the Trade Towers – "minimalist monoliths"

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[4] Jameson conceptualizes the difference between modernism and post-modernism as parody versus pastiche, reading post-modernism as a culture of citation that has done away with the quotation marks and in the process creates a kind of "blank parody" (114). I myself would object, however, that post-modernist citation as deployed by contemporary popular culture, for instance, frequently historicizes and even authorizes itself in modernist cultural practices, thereby engaging in the significant work of memory and subject formation. Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche therefore cannot be drawn all that clearly.

[5] The interested reader may be referred to my essay on "Spacial Aesthetics, Ironic Distances, and Realms of Liminality: Measuring Theories of (Post) Modernism."

of an "obsolete modernism" [Steinberg], as some would have it, built by Minoru Yama-saki in the years 1969 to 1973, were erected at the very time when social utopias thrived, the very time also when the United States were at war in Vietnam – another instance of Foucault's "epoch of simultaneity.") No marginal voice or group came playfully into power on September 11 or after. Quite the opposite: There has been utter silence or even denial on the part of those who were deemed responsible. And as the architectural site turned into a sight, a signpost, a tourist attraction, a kind of mecca, those who are mar-ginal to dominant American culture joined in the procession. Islamic cultures in the United States and elsewhere, by contrast, became the central target of political scape-goating, positioned in an intolerable realm outside, "beyond" civilization, in need to be bombed into line. Thus while critical discourse – like post-modernist novels that explore the "between-worlds space" of zones (McHale 58) – meant to rediscover and open up intertextual spaces, realms of historical difference and ironic distance where multiple texts and voices join in polyphony with each other;[6] while ethnic criticisms located themselves in borderlands and proposed to „travel between first and third worlds, be-tween cores and peripheries, centers and margins," post-9/11 developments have re-drawn the boundaries and reaffirmed the (Western) nation, leaving little space for intri-cate differences, fine discriminations, and, least of all, ironic distance. In fact, whereas Turner defines liminality as "a betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene" and a shift to what he calls the "subjunctive mood," the "as-if" mode that characterizes rituals as well as theatrical performances,[7] 9/11, by contrast, involved a shift from the „as if" to the everyday.[8] And as we opt for literal readings the space previously populated by marginal voices is emptied out, the mobility and processual dynamic critical discourse privileged has come to a halt.

While post-9/11 US culture has redrawn its cultural and political borderlines it has al-so ventured into new frontiers, first and foremost into wars on terrorism along axes of evil. The New Frontier of which George W. Bush speaks is a set of promises more than a set of challenges. It sums up not what he intends to ask of the American people but what he intends to offer them. It appeals to their pride as much as to their pocketbook – it holds the promise of more homeland security instead of more sacrifice. And on the home front, Ground Zero, the 16-acre void or "wound" in downtown Manhattan, has become a significant and highly symbolic part of that new frontier. In fact I would claim that the

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[6] McHale, for instance, finds most effective the borrowing of a character from another text, the transmigration of characters from one to another fictional universe that overruns world boundaries (58).

[7] Both, according to Turner, function as metacommentaries on human relatedness (22).

[8] On this issue see Sielke, . "Das Ende der Ironie? Zum Verhältnis von Realem und Repräsentation zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts."

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most famous construction site after Potsdamer Platz constitutes a new virgin land, a liminal space that leaves little room for ambiguity, ambivalence, and irony, yet salvages a utopia called America. By way of conclusion I would like to suggest that we briefly visit that space – a space that is truly transitional.

In the summer of 2002 the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation "initiated a world wide search for design and planning professionals to propose visionary designs" for the area. It called for "an appropriate setting for a memorial, a bold new skyline to rise in Lower Manhattan, a better-connected downtown and a range of uses on the site." From all in all 400 submissions the concept design by the Studio Daniel Libeskind was selected in February 2003 to take on this architectural project of immense scope.[9] Since then this project was subjected to a political struggle that, given the scope of its context, does not come as a surprise: Victims' organizations, insurers, city and state officials as well as the owner of the World Trade Center lease Larry Silverstein continue to debate Libeskind's design and Silverstein, who prefers more office space than Libeskind's work provides, appointed David Shields as the chief architect of the "most dramatic part of the design," the so-called "Freedom Tower," turning Libeskind from chief to collaborating artist.[10] However, despite these developments the fact that Libeskind's design made the initial competition and set the scene for the reconstruction of Ground Zero remains most significant as it underlines the politics of symbolism that is at work here – a politics that keeps doing its cultural work despite the fact that the design has given way to economic and ethical pressures.

Without even considering his actual design, I would claim that Libeskind succeeded in part not only because he is considered *the* authority for so-called spaces of memory. He also presents his designs by way of a rhetoric that rehearses narratives and terms central to America's modern self-conception. Whereas his strongest competitors THINK Design proposed that "Ground Zero should emerge from this tragedy as the first truly Global Center, a place where people can gather to celebrate cultural diversity in peaceful and productive coexistence," thus phrasing their agenda in transnational multiculturalist terms and envisioning a "World Cultural Center"; whereas the design by the Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Gwathmey Siegel, Steven Holl and their partners reject the "contained spaces" of 19th- and 20th-century precedents for urban spaces and privilege by their "21st century Memorial Square" which is "both contained and extended, symboliz-

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[9] All above and following quotations from the project descriptions are taken from the official website of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation
www.renewnyc.com/plan_des_dev/wtc_site/new_design_plans/firm_d/default.asp, visited on 17 March 2003.
[10] "Libeskind's WTC Design Still on Drawing Board",
http://www.dwworld.de/dwelle/cda/detail/dwelle.cda.detail.artikel_drucken/0,3820,14, visited on 24 February 2004.

ing the connections of this place to the city and the world;" whereas other proposals keep "the future of the global city" in mind, Studio Libeskind found its solutions along well-travelled roads.

The very first sentence of his design concept echoes America's cherished immigration narrative: "I arrived by ship to New York as a teenager, an immigrant, and like millions of others before me, my first sight was the Statue of Liberty and the amazing skyline of Manhattan" (1). In his proposal Libeskind also tells the story about how the architect, set on integrating the contradictory public impulses "to acknowledge the terrible deaths … while looking to the future with hope," visited the site "to feel its power and to listen to its voices. And this," Libeskind – like a shaman – claims, "is what I heard, felt and saw." He goes on to privilege the so-called "great slurry walls" which survived the attack as "the most dramatic element" of his narrative, as "an engineering wonder constructed on bedrock foundations and designed to hold back the Hudson River," constituting the borderline that accompanies this new kind of cultural frontier. "The foundations," he writes, "[…] stand as eloquent as the Constitution itself asserting the durability of Democracy and the value of individual life." To Libeskind this foundation "is not only the story of tragedy, but also reveals the dimensions of life." In fact the terms life, hope, and future constantly recur throughout his description which closes with the following paragraph:

> The sky will be home again to a towering spire of 1776 feet high, the "Gardens of the World." Why gardens? Because gardens are a constant affirmation of life. A sky-scraper rises above its predecessors, reasserting the pre-eminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks to our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy. Life victorious.

Like the height of this skyscraper, the degree to which Libeskind, by way of metaphor, invests his design with transcendent and yet political meaning can hardly be topped. The phrase "[v]itality in the face of danger" rephrases both a central meaning inherent in the concept of the frontier and Kennedy's sense of "grace under pressure," a term which he adapted from Hemingway as a motto for his first book-length publication *Profiles in Courage* (1956). Using figures of drama and performance as its privileged tropes, Libeskind's rhetoric takes up Turner's "as-if" mode and reminds us that, as Barry Vacker underlines, "[i]f there is the possibility for serious dissent" or transgression, "it lies in the realm of art and architecture, theory and media technology" (6).[11] At the same

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[11] The page numbers refer to the printed version of Vacker's digital text *Ground Zero in the Global Village*, http://www.barryvacker.net.groundzero.html, visited on 17 March 2003.

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time Libeskind reproduces the utopian project called America as perpetual past, "a nostalgic trajectory passing through the promised land, the garden of Eden," and a kind of frontier territory (Vacker 3). Libeskind's rhetoric thus performs a mimicry of America's master narrative that leaves little room, though, for ironic distance. Projecting spaces "within which no shadow will fall," his project instead bespeaks a desire for new beginnings, for a tabula rasa space of signification, for a "ground zero" indeed.

This longing persists even though Libeskind's "master plan" is being subjected to adjustments and alterations; in fact the more monolithic and symmetrical structure by which Childs intends to displace Libeskind's asymmetrical Freedom Tower may, on the level of aesthetics, turn back time in more obvious manner. "[W]e are confident," so the comment of Matthew Higgins, chief operating officer of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "that Libeskind and Childs will design a Freedom Tower that will make the entire nation proud."[12] To my mind the very discourse in which the reconstruction of Ground Zero is couched underlines the thesis, put forth by Vacker in his study *Ground Zero in the Global Village*, that the "time-space coordinates for entrance into the new millennium" are being annihilated, that culture "is being reprogrammed *not* to enter the new millennium" (2, my emphasis). "There has been a systematic effort," Vacker argues, "to warp the modern utopia backward, in a staggering reversal, an effort to 'correct' the utopian code precisely as culture accelerates ever faster into the spectral landscapes of the Global Village" (2). As a spatial performance amidst America's "war on terrorism," the reconstruction of Ground Zero thus becomes part of what Slavoj Zizek calls the "shadow of a new world order:" a war against American culture itself which – after 30 to 40 years of "emancipatory excesses," including the excesses of Kennedy's new frontier and of cultural theory and practice – is now being disciplined and contained within a soothing and solitary closure, among "great slurry walls" or new borderlines.

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[12] Quoted in David W. Dunlap, „Visions for Tower Clash at Trade Center Site," *New York Times*, 23 October 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/23/nyregion/23REBU.html?ei5070&en=ebc087fe, visited on 24 February 2004.

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