

Elective Proposal: “Border Fictions”

Prof. (Dr.) Aishwarya Subramanian

Proposed Course Title: **Border Fictions**

Course Duration: **One Semester (14 Weeks)**

No. of Credit Units: **4 Credits**

Level: **UG**

Medium of Instruction: **English**

Pre-requisites (if applicable): None

Equivalent Courses: N/A

Course Description, Methodology, and Aims:

In Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the narrator’s grandmother, years after being uprooted from her childhood home in Bangladesh, is upset to find that she won’t be able to see the border between the two countries from a plane. She asks: “But if there aren’t trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference, then? [...] What was it all for, then—the partition, and all the killing and everything—if there isn’t something in between?”

As residents of a country with a traumatic partition history we know that these “shadow” lines, however intangible, have always had cultural, psychological and legal ramifications. But in recent years walls, boundaries and national borders have resurfaced in the public imagination with a particular frequency: in Donald Trump’s “We’re gonna build a wall and make Mexico pay for it!” during the 2016 US elections, the “Great Firewall” of China and its counterparts across the digital world, “Fortress Europe” and the refugee crisis; they can also be seen across popular culture, with images like the giant Wall in *Game of Thrones* becoming increasingly recognizable iconography in our world.

This course examines a series of fictional portrayals of borders across literature, film and tv, supplemented by critical theory and relevant non-fiction, and over the term will explore a series of questions about borders and their meanings. How are our identities linked to national borders, and what happens as those borders shift? How do lines on a map shape our understanding of space? How do literary genres play with the border as metaphor? Can we ethically and responsibly advocate for open borders in a world that seems increasingly to suggest that we need to build higher and more impermeable walls? And what is it that we’re trying to keep out?

Teaching will follow a seminar-style format, within which learning will take place primarily through class discussions. The course instructor will lecture on key concepts, but students are expected to contribute actively to the class through in-class debates and presentations. Students will also write one research paper analysing the depiction of the border in a literary text of their choice, to be submitted by Week 11.

By the end of the semester, students will be able to do the following:

- Understand the history, as well as the cultural and legal meanings of borders.
- Develop knowledge of concepts of spatiality and nationalism.
- Develop analytical approaches to literature and film, with particular attention to formal and generic elements of these.
- Analyze and write about popular culture as a phenomenon shaped by political and cultural realities, with an interdisciplinary approach to critical analysis.

Course Outline

Week 1: Bordering and Ordering: Organizing Space.

This week introduces the students to spatiality as an academic discipline, as well as its uses within the broader realms of cultural studies, using work by Henri LeFebvre, Robert T. Tally Jr. and Edward Soja.

Readings: Selections from “Introduction” and “The Spatial Turn” from *Spatiality: The New Critical Idiom* by Robert T. Tally Jr. (Routledge 2013)

Week 2: Bordering and Ordering: Maps and Empire.

Students will be introduced to the history and politics of the map as a means of visualizing and organizing space, as well as its implication in imperial history. Against this context, we will read poems by contemporary Jamaican poet Kei Miller.

Primary Reading: Selected poems from *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* by Kei Miller (Carcenet Press, 2014).

Supplementary Reading: “Inscribing the Emptiness: Cartographic Exploration and the Construction of Australia” (115–130) by Simon Ryan, from *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*. Ed. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson. Routledge, 1994.

Week 3: Border/Margin: Organizing Textual Space

Following on from the discussion of maps, this week we discuss the politics of space as they apply to the physical space of the page, and the genre conventions which train us to internalize dynamics of power and space even in the familiar act of reading.

Primary Reading: “Ogres of East Africa” (2014) by Sofia Samatar. <
<https://www.uncannymagazine.com/article/ogres-east-africa/>>

Supplementary Reading: McCloud, Scott. “Blood in the Gutter” (60-93) in *Understanding Comics* (HarperCollins, 1994)

Week 4: Our Borders, Ourselves: Space, citizenship, and identity.

This week we discuss the connections between space and personal or political identity through Saadat Hasan Manto's classic short story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955).

Primary Reading: "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) by Saadat Hasan Manto, trans. Frances W. Pritchett.

Supplementary Reading: Roy, Anupama. "Who is an Indian Citizen?" (1-57) from *Citizenship in India*. Oxford University Press, 2016

Week 5: Our Borders, Ourselves: Exile

Following on from last week's discussion, we explore the question of the exile's relationship with space and borders, reading a contemporary piece of speculative fiction (Majd Kayyal's "N") alongside Edward Said's essay on the condition of exile.

Primary Reading: "N" by Majd Kayyal, trans. Thoraya El-Rayyes. In *Palestine + 100* ed. Basma Ghalayini. (Comma Press, 2019.)

Supplementary Reading: Said, Edward. "Reflections on Exile" (173-186) from *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

Week 6: Defending the Border.

This week we discuss the border as simultaneously a site that needs to be defended and one of encounters with the other, through a film that was itself such a cross-cultural product: Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall*.

Primary Text: *The Great Wall* (2016; dir. Zhang Yimou)

Supplementary Reading: Teo, Stephen. "Wuxia Between Nationalism and Transnationalism" from *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009. 172-195.

Week 7: Visualizing the Refugee Crisis.

This week focuses on representations of the refugee in visual cultures, through news reportage, music videos, art and political posters. Examples of these will be discussed in class, framed using academic work by Nadine El-Enany and Benjamin Thomas White.

Primary Reading: El-Enany, Nadine. "On Pragmatism and Legal Idolatry: Fortress Europe and the Desertion of the Refugee". *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (2015) pp. 7-38.

Week 8: This week, students will present their work, analysing specific visual representations of the border in media.

Week 9: The Border as Portal:

Connecting back to Week 6's discussion of the border as a connecting, as well as dividing, point, this week we look at fantastic and science fictional representations of the border and consider how these genres open up the metaphorical possibilities of the border.

Primary Reading: "A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies" (2018) by Alix E. Harrow <<https://www.apexbookcompany.com/a/blog/apex-magazine/post/a-witchs-guide-to-escape-a-practical-compedium-of-portal-fantasies>>

Week 10 and 11: Borders in the City: Narratives of Exclusion and Transformation

This two-week module continues the theme of science fictional and fantastic borders, contrasting the role of the border in two science fiction stories set in Delhi by Vandana Singh.

Primary Readings: "Delhi" (2004) and "Indra's Web" (2011) by Vandana Singh.

Secondary Readings: Bhan, Gautam. "Introduction: How did we get here?" *from In the Public's Interest: Evictions, Citizenship, and Inequality in Contemporary Delhi*. University of Georgia Press, 2016. 1-40.

Roy, Srila. "Breaking the Cage". *Dissent* 63.4 (2016), 74-83

Week 12 and 13: Labour Across Borders:

Over this two-week period we consider the depiction of the immigrant worker across a collection of short stories (Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, set in a magic-realist UAE) and a science fiction film (Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*, set in a future where immigrant labour is entirely virtual).

Primary Texts: "Gulf Return" and "Akbaar: Exodus" from *Temporary People* by Deepak Unnikrishnan.

Sleep Dealer (dir. Alex Rivera, 2008).

Secondary Readings: Menon, Priya. "'Pravasi Really Means Absence': Gulf-Pravasis as Spectral Figures in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*". *Journal of South Asian Studies* 43.2 (2018): 185-198.

Week 14: Revision

Key texts:

Harrow, Alix. "A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies."

Kayyal, Majd. "N". (2019)

Manto, Saadat Hasan. "Toba Tek Singh" (1955)

Miller, Kei. *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014)

Rivera, Alex (dir.). *Sleep Dealer* (2008)

Said, Edward. “Reflections on Exile”

Samatar, Sofia. “Ogres of East Africa” (2014)

Singh, Vandana. “Delhi” (2004) and “Indra’s Web” (2011)

Shinkai, Makoto (dir.). *Suzume* (2022)

Unnikrishnan, Deepak. *Temporary People* (2017)

Yimou, Zhang (dir.). *The Great Wall* (2016)