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## Earthworm Hermeneutics

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### Cover Page Footnote

Derek Owens is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of the Writing Program at St. John's University. His book, *Resisting Writings (And the Boundaries of Composition)*, was published by Southern Methodist UP in 1994.

# Earthworm Hermeneutics

Derek Owens

## The Omnipresence of Boundaries

The markers are everywhere. Riding through Queens at 7 a.m. on the Q31 bus, I begin to tally the obvious barriers: Metal doors barricading unopened shops; graffiti on walls, sidewalks, stoops—hundreds of tags on a single block, city as strata of palimpsests; concertina wire strung around apartment balconies; iron gates built across a street leading to a school; parking garage stairwells dead-ending in plywood; bars on windows. And from where I sit on the bus, invisible lines of separation surround every face. In the standing-room-only crowd I search to find cracks between bodies where my line of sight might leak out a window.

I get off at the University for my 8 a.m. class, note the iron fence enclosing the campus; the security booths; combination locks in the doors of the buildings; my office cubicle where the walls don't quite reach the ceiling, blurring public and private space; the raised platform in my classroom where instructors are expected to stand behind a podium twelve inches taller than students.

At the end of the day, waiting at the Jamaica train station I see concessions where porn magazines are sold by men bunkered behind their counters; sitting on the train, I keep my elbow from touching the woman's next to me, my eyes from hers; on the ride home through Nassau and Suffolk counties I realize that I can't look out the window for more than 30 seconds without seeing chainlink fence, the one ingredient "nice" neighborhoods, industrial parks, and vacant lots all have in common.

At 7 p.m. I walk home through empty suburbia. It is dark, and I trigger motion detectors above garage doors, spotlights clicking on as I come within range. When I walk into my own yard I am, as always, momentarily conscious of my feet making contact with the ground. This is our new house, and the first thing my wife and I want to do is surround it with an attractive fence.

## Boundaries as Psychosocial Inevitabilities

The boundaries stratifying our communal and psychic landscapes are more than omnipresent. They are nothing less than prostheses, psychotopological extensions shooting out from mental into physical space. Not only are we cyborgs, as theorist Donna Haraway (1989) taught us, but we are the very lines of territorialization and demarcation that we navigate every waking hour. Boundaries are social constructs, as integral to our construction of the world as language. In fact, while it has been said that language is a system of boundaries, it might be more apt to say that we are systems of boundaries painted with

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something called language.

Consequently, talk of dismantling boundaries and eliminating once and for all the lines of attraction and repulsion that are our physical signatures, of moving beyond boundaries into some pure, perimeter-less space is at best a fantasy, at worst fascism (conscious or otherwise). It is human to construct boundaries on top of boundaries, to create boxes of influence and resistance. Hedgerows, avenues, voting districts, grids, lines of latitude, every utterance and signifier—the blanket hung over the rope between the beds in Clark Gable's and Claudette Colbert's motel, those two reluctant lovers in *It Happened One Night*. They're all signs of our need to preserve and redefine the spaces that are ever extensions of our bodies. While the forms our markers take are infinite, at a base level we are all dogs constantly marking our territories and just as obsessive in our constant need to seek out scents made by others.

Of course, no boundary is ipso facto permanent. The walls of Jericho can and do come down, as Gable says in the movie—and are of course always in states of potential flux. But if boundaries crumble they leave in their stead not vacuums but newer walls, mutations, and hybrids. Even Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea of the body without organs is not to be confused with the fantasy of the transcendentalist's transparent eyeball passing through the environs, but "is a limit" (p. 150) and thus a horizon point toward which our tribes of selves continually slide and yearn. We are all border writers, to use D. Emily Hicks' term (1991), and it must be within the ability of every one of us to "present the world with a new multidimensional holographic ordering of desire" (p. 123). Because constructing boundaries is so inherently human (Perelman, 1993, p.233), we need to imagine newer, richer ways of articulating whatever boundaries we seek to build with and over the old. But before we introduce some routes toward this end, it is necessary to expose what's wrong with binary thinking that wants either to preserve final boundaries or transgress (through inclusion) "all" of them.

## Binary Assumptions in Centrist and Pluralist Thinking

The problem with boundaries is not that they exist but how people pervert them. The most obvious abuse comes in the form of those who define themselves as the Center and need to maintain that image of power and self-promotion through systematic oppression of all who do not meet their image of Being. First world countries, militaries, corporations, elitists, men who destroy women, adults who destroy children, all read boundary as weapon. Those who do not exist in the Center do not exist. They are threats and as such must be erased or converted. For the Centrists there is only one border, the edge of the world. The battle to maintain a State of purity, an anaesthetized zone of sameness is waged against pagans threatening to rise from the abyss. This (patho)logic of the Center has been expressed countless times but perhaps nowhere more thoroughly than in the work of Argentinean philosopher Dussel (1985).

Equally sinister but slightly less obvious than the Us versus Them rhetoric of the Centrists is the supposedly "multicultural" agenda of romantics who claim to promote difference but in reality are engaged in a project where differentiation is imposed on others in order to preserve another centrism, this time

calling itself Pluralism. To distinguish humans by cataloging them under difference (such as race, class, sexuality) too often amounts to assigning the “Other” a title through which it can be made recognizable: The once exotic, like a butterfly, is now safely pinned in its appropriate box. The unknown is now “ours” and thus no longer a threat. Soundings from the periphery are “brought in” by the Pluralist, made canonical and palatable, in a word, legal (whereas “the inevitable position of liberation [is] subversive illegality,” [Dussel, 1985, p. 66]). Any originality, any true difference is now subsumed by the (always fictitious) rubric under which it has been assigned. Difference “in the name of” multiculturalism is racism—often unintentional, but racism nonetheless. It reflects a desire to classify and regulate humans and their works under a desensitizing, awe-inhibiting grid of familiar, dead terms (Black lesbian writer; young Asian-American artist). To fetishize difference this way is to cultivate a different kind of sameness. This is why multicultural anthologies are sanitized, nonthreatening, and interchangeable. “Difference” here is not so much that which is genuinely new—and thus not just a threat to existing canons but the notion of canonicity itself—but that which will best “fit” within the pluralistic project. Its marketability determines its value. Even Giroux (1992), who rightfully articulates the violence of binary oppositions, does so in a discourse predicated on an assumed dualism where “radical” theory exists to right the wrongs of conservative and leftist ideology (pp. 23-28). Many of the sentiments embedded in so-called radical educational theory are laudable, but we still have to admit that all parties involved in the debate are related in some embarrassing but undeniable ways. Fundamentalist conservatives, Afrocentrist theorists, and postmodern feminists alike all collect paychecks from institutions with questionable if not reprehensible politics. We (I do not leave myself out of the equation) own property, want more money, consume more than we need, and think constantly of our careers. And we all waste dangerously limited natural resources in our race to publish. Seen from this angle, we are all on the same side of a fence that few are willing to acknowledge.

“The smell of totalitarianism is in the air,” wrote Giroux (1989, p. 218), and we are all gagging from the stench as hateful dimwits infest an already infected federal legislature. But there is a problem when we become too caught up in our own us-versus-them rhetoric; even the best of us have the little voice of the fascist lurking somewhere deep (and too often not deep enough) within our psyches. “Perhaps now it is only the impure which might claim any kind of authenticity,” writes one of the editors of *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Ferguson, 1990, p. 12). But *none* of us is pure. None exempt. Which renders the very notion of a viable “out there” dangerously suspect (particularly an “out there” desperate to “claim” authenticity. For if one is indeed the real thing, why beg the question?)

Both the centrist and the pluralist rely on boundary markers of exclusion; the latter simply permits more variety in its territory than the former. But of course, even for the pluralist there are still voices and activities “way out there” which will never appear in any made-for-profit anthology or surface in any politically correct pedagogy of multiculturalism. Such works can only be declared obscene, pornographic, unsuitable even for the most permissive of canons. And, of course, that which is truly different—that which is unclassifiable, terrifying in its strange

and alien beauty—is precisely pornography but not in the sense of the body hatred found on newsstands, but as magic, gnosis (Bey, 1991).

## Earthworm Hermeneutics

To address “the boundary question” I am trying to flesh out a stance from which we might begin to rejoin our selves and our environments; in the process we move ever away from the homogenized emptiness that characterizes any center in order to locate the truly different and dangerously authentic. To peel away the inevitable film of cynicism that coats all of us living in the late twentieth century and reach the potential for amazement and fascination I believe still lies dormant within anyone not totally anaesthetized by television or theory. To translate the self *to itself* on its own terms, unmediated by the State. My thinking—which to be sure on this matter is still in the infancy stage—draws from Enrique Dussel’s philosophy of liberation through exteriority and antifetishism, the writings of Hakim Bey, and the ecopolitics of Paul Ryan. I have chosen the worm motif for the moment not just because of catchy alliteration (although the sounds of the terms are now at least as important as what they contain) but because it helps us focus on a three-pronged pedagogical initiative embedded within a hermeneutics concerned not with textual exegesis or reinterpretation of the social, but with poeisis. That is, the project of writing the world, again and again, from scratch, each time.

First, earthworm hermeneutics finds value only at the periphery, the wildness “outside” the outside that has been tamed, appropriated, turned outside in. I believe with Dussel that liberation can be found only in the periphery, for to be of the center (which is to be the center) is to consume ourselves in the name of stasis. Exteriority brings consciousness as much as centrality induces stupor, and it is the investigation and cultivation of each person’s private exteriority that is the rightful business of education.

Soil surrounding a healthy earthworm population is usually fertile. It promotes greater diversity of flora and fauna. Poor soil, which likely indicates a thin earthworm population, invites aggressive and invasive weeds that spread quickly, monopolizing the system inefficiently and unproductively. A few aggressive, “opportunistic species” (Hawken, 1993) take over, discouraging variation. Centrist theories are built on sour soil; what makes them thrive will ultimately destroy them because the ecological balance they promote is severely restricted. Romantic pluralistic theories, on the other hand, want rich soil but limit what will grow there. The carefully shaped Victorian garden may be more aesthetically pleasing than a sea of weeds, but it is every inch an indicator of someone’s need to control and restrict. Where the centrist impulse risks inbreeding in longing for supreme homogeneity, the pluralistic stance encourages contradiction: it claims to want the conditions for variety, but simultaneously limits that variety.

Earthworms respect boundaries not by usurping them but by providing the conditions that support such surface variety. Earthworms tunnel beneath boundaries while not appropriating them. Boundaries rise and fall on the surface, and the earthworm assists that random rise and fall without seeking to contain or restrict the variation on the surface.

The educator may be seen as a chaos gardener. Not conventional gardeners limited by the tiny range of seeds reserved for them in stores, but those who help create an environment receptive to all variety. Educators reject neither the canonical nor the extreme but wish to surround themselves with human and natural works *so long as they induce fascination and amazement*. Such educators seek to share, to return to others that sense of mystery, primarily because this enhances the sense of awe. I bring particular material into my class not because it is “great” and “ought” to be taught, but because I find that to be amazed also involves a need to share that amazement. In essence, we become that mystery by entering into it, perpetuating it.

What this means in my own writing classes is that I try to introduce materials that my students will not find on television or in most American bookstores. In fact, unless it is unavoidable, I do whatever I can to ensure that discussions directly or indirectly related to television, advertising, and the unimaginative business of the world do not enter the classroom. To spend an hour critiquing the Cult of Sameness (examining misogyny in a cigarette ad, “deconstructing” Beverly Hills 90210) is to have one hour of one’s life owned by advertising executives. Dismissal of television is still promotion of the beast, since the medium continues to control the conversation.

It also means that I try not to entertain all the old stunted pseudo-debates: death penalty, abortion, euthanasia, legalization of drugs, etc. “In every single ‘issue’ cooked up for ‘debate’ in the patternbook of the Spectacle, *both sides* are invariably full of shit” (Bey, 1991, p. 50). And just as the fiction of binary debates distracts us with their seductive “arguments,” so too has the fashionable tug-of-war embodied in the Centrist-Pluralist politics become the essence of academia. As a way to resist the limitations of this split, I ferret out works located “off to the side” by visionary, intuitive, and utopian thinkers. As a result, I have students investigate communitarian sects, early American “dropout” cultures, underground “zines,” “art brut,” and “outsider art,” visionary treatises on business and economics, and so forth. Obviously shaped by my own needs and interests, the material I teach focuses on those who have thought to rebuild the world through controversial and restorative thinking. In writing about these themes, students are also encouraged to compose in exploratory forms (Owens, 1994).

Whereas the first initiative behind earthworm hermeneutics is the privileging of extreme variation of ideas, the second condition is more pragmatic. It is a mistake to encourage modes of construction (thinking, writing, performance) still dangerous in the eyes of the academic community—if students remain at risk. Students, of course, need to learn academic discourse not so they can become better puppets but because they need camouflage. Developmental writers attract attention; mistakes in grammar trigger raised eyebrows. Such outside attention restricts private intellectual activity. To have the freedom to pursue our intellectual goals, we need a certain amount of time alone. Consequently, a considerable portion of any writing course these days must be aimed at helping students pass—that is, pass for academics-in-the-making. Those who can, at least grammatically and verbally, know how to fit in, have greater opportunity to disappear, and follow their own pursuits.

Earthworms are “nightcrawlers.” They move under cover of darkness, know how to get things done. They work behind, beneath, and under the boundaries without drawing attention to themselves. To engage in Dussel’s idea of illegal philosophy means knowing how, when necessary, to travel incognito. Just as being alive means navigating through and constructing numerous boundaries, so too it means knowing how (and when) to wear masks.

Finally, there is a moral function to earthworm hermeneutics. To privilege variation just because it’s funky and exhilarating could be enough, but not today. Today we are in a fix unlike any we have ever known. A friend of mine says that the first required reading for every course in every discipline should be the most recent *State of the World* (1993) distributed by the Worldwatch Institute. We live in a time when, at current rates of population growth and ecological devastation, the earth will become irreversibly damaged within our lifetimes. Few of us even know how to begin to conceptualize this fact, let alone address it. But it is the responsibility of educators to make nothing less than new pedagogies in response to this news of the world. To promote variation is to foreground that which is truly strange. At this point in history the thing strangest to all of us is something called the earth. Although postmodernists like Hicks separate the world into the territorialized and the deterritorialized, all of us can now be said to inhabit the latter. Women, gays, people of color, and just about everyone who looks, walks, and talks differently from me are simply the more obvious “borders” subletting or squatting in power zones constructed and commandeered by other, usually invisible figures (white-male-heterosexual-capitalist—you know the litany). But we’re all border riders, straddling not one but an array of unstable, impermanent fences. Those who would claim centrality, who truly believe that to occupy territorialized havens, to be the hubs and the nuclei of society, are simply more far gone than the rest. These people have the *wetiko* psychosis analyzed in Forbes’ *Columbus and Other Cannibals* (1992) in which carriers “consume another’s life for their own private purpose or profit” (p. 34). But while such individuals (or more appropriately institutions) do indeed wield violent power, the figures we associate with such centers of hate have turned from humans into witches (I use the term in the traditional Native American sense), and besides, it is too late for blame; my discussion here is aimed at the remaining humans.

In order to combat the cynicism that permeates our present historical moment, we need an inventiveness borne of urgency and visionary ideals. One such example is Paul Ryan’s *Video Mind, Earth Mind* (1993) which documents his attempts over several decades to articulate strategies for an ecology of mind. Ryan begins his book, like the *State of the World*, by reminding us that in under four decades “we pass a threshold of irreversible environmental destruction. The door to a healthy life on earth dead bolts behind us. We watch our grandchildren garbage-pick their way through life in ecosystems that are terminally ill” (p. 1). Seen from this angle, we are all deterritorialized in the most literal sense: We have come to think of ourselves as nomads detached from our bioregions. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) “Body without Organs” ultimately fails as a metaphor because the fact is we have organs, and they are not just the soggy things inside but the chloroplasts, bugs, and atmospheric conditions “out there.” Of course, out there is always in here, in our guts and cells: It is empirically obvious that we are



not only children, sucking at our earth-mother's breast all of our lives, but that we are also mixed with, and part of, that which Europeans choose to call "the environment." For us, truly, there are no "surroundings."

I can lose my hands and still live. I can lose my legs and still live. I can lose my eyes and still live. I can lose my hair, eyebrows, nose, arms, and many other things and still live. But if I lose the air I die. If I lose the sun I die. If I lose the earth I die. If I lose the water I die. If I lose the plants and animals I die. All of these things are more a part of me, more essential to my every breath, than is my so-called body. What is my real body?

We are rooted, just like the trees. But our roots come out of our nose and mouth, like an umbilical cord, forever connected to the rest of the world. Our roots also extend out from our skin and from our other body cavities (Forbes, 1992). The job of the educator is to make accessible the secrets that remain hidden, repressed, censored. The strange zones of activity in between the boundaries, those glitches in the grid, those sites of shared strangeness unfamiliar to all of us require our attention. One obvious zone is the earth. Regardless of the contentious political, ethnic, sexual, and class backgrounds of our students and ourselves, we all ultimately occupy the same zone. Certainly matters of race, gender, sexuality, and class are intricately involved within such an ecological project, and Merchant (1992) presents useful strategies for making these connections in a pedagogical context. But the reality of a dying ecology is the umbrella under which all other realities and pursuits must be assembled. By this I do not mean the romantic dream of some pure, boundary-less heaven of multicultural unification. Instead, we need methods of tunneling under the walls and borders, into a common bedrock seen for the first time, in order to discover, literally, the bioregions we drive over, sleep in, eat, and dismantle. ☹

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