

Writing in the Margins: Exploring the Borderland in the Work of Janet Frame and Jane Campion

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On the border

Why has the geographical border become so prolific as a metaphor for cultural identity in the work of theorists, authors and filmmakers in recent years? From feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) to postcolonial theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), critics have made the crucial recognition that subject position and cultural location within the borders of social, political and geographical territories are just as fundamental to the understanding of identity as the unconscious and disembodied realms of the self, and talk of borders now abounds across the disciplines (Grosz, 1995; Soja, 1996). This is a recognition that has been of particular importance to those who occupy a marginalised position within social space – subjects who are metaphorically positioned at the edges, outskirts or margins of society by the dominant racial, ethnic, political, class-based or gendered systems of power. For these subjects, the border offers a symbolic location of their marginality in the social system; and for writers, artists and filmmakers seeking to portray their marginality, such a symbolic location might seem the ideal starting point for their work.

This paper follows just some of the attempts that have been made, through theory, text and film, to locate the border as an empowered position for the marginalised self. It will begin by assessing the use of the border as a critical metaphor in postcolonial theory, where it has been used to both reveal and transgress the cultural boundaries that construct racial and ethnic ‘otherness’. It will then explore how author Janet Frame employs the border as a textual metaphor in order to address her own marginal cultural identity in her novel *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962). Finally, this paper will examine the visual construction of the border in director Jane Campion’s cinematic portrait of Frame’s marginality in the film *An Angel at My Table*

(1990). Tracing the theoretical, textual and visual manifestation of the border in this way will reveal that whilst it forms a difficult and fraught cultural territory for subjects to navigate, the border can act as a flexible metaphor for imagining cultural identity both at the margin and beyond the marginal. This paper hopes to make some suggestions as to how the marginalised subject might venture both to and beyond the border most successfully.

Locating the border in theory

How might the border, a spatial construct, be linked to cultural identity? The answer lies in the fact that it is not simply a geographical structure, but a power structure. It reveals the arbitrary construction of both territory and cultural identity, as Avtar Brah explains:

Borders: arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those who they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where the fear of the Other is the fear of the Self; places where claims to ownership – claims to ‘mine’, ‘yours’ and ‘theirs’ – are staked out, contested, defended, fought over. (2002, p.198)

Borders testify, like spatial inscriptions on the land, to assertions of power and ownership exercised by an authority. As Brah recognises, they are ‘social, cultural and psychic’ rather than simply matters of physical landscape, laying claim to both people and places. They map out not only land ownership but social hierarchy, the central authority designating who are the ‘outsiders, aliens, the Others’, enforcing binary boundaries of identity. It is hardly surprising that the border holds particular resonance for postcolonial critics, since colonial power remains inscribed in the landscape in the form of borders long after the colonial power may have withdrawn, the arbitrary colonial division of Africa’s formerly tribal territories providing only one of many examples of this (Ottoway, 1999). Yet the border also occupies an ambivalent status. In demarcating the territory between inside and outside, here and there, us and them, the border forms a

liminal, or in-between, space – a thin line of respite for the marginal, at which the authority of the centre peters out. It is for this reason that critics such as Edward Soja see the postcolonial project as a matter of rereading the power relations inscribed in social space, creating ‘an assertively different and intentionally disruptive way of (re)interpreting the relation between the colonizer and colonized, the centre and the periphery’ (Soja, 1996, p.126). What this amounts to is a process of questioning the authority of the colonially produced map. We shall now turn to how one such rereading of the power relations inscribed in the border has taken place, through the conceptualisation of the ‘borderland’.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) provides the definitive description of the ‘borderland’: the place where two borders and hence cultures meet and are divided, and in which that liminal zone between here and there, us and them, occurs. Anzaldúa writes specifically of the US-Mexico border:

The US-Mexico border is *una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haemorrhages again, the lifebloods of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture...A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (1987, p.3)

In this borderland, the central authority no longer holds any sway. This is a space that indicates both the traumatic nature of inhabiting the margins – present in the imagery of grating, wounded identity – but also the transgressive, productive potential of cultural fusion in which the inhabitants of two cultural margins form a new sense of community. As Anzaldúa recognises, this is not a cultural construct exclusive to the US-Mexico divide:

In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (1987, unpagged preface)

This is a site at which the binary power structures of racial, class-based and gendered self versus other are broken down in an altogether more egalitarian space. In this way, crossing the border offers communal and regenerative possibilities. As Gómez-Peña puts it, ‘the border is the juncture, not the edge’ in such an understanding of the borderland (1993, p.44).

Considering the border as a juncture into the borderland, rather than simply as a margin, means that the border becomes an attractive location for the cultural self seeking to transgress its marginal cultural location. The implications of this for the borderland are complex: If the border-crosser seeks the borderland not only out of necessity, to escape, hide, seek refuge or pledge new allegiance, but also in order to redefine themselves out of choice, then the borderland also becomes a psychologically empowered space, not simply a site of wounded identity. It is perhaps for this reason that the proliferation of metaphorical borders have appeared across the range of cultural theory and artistic practice, for the desire to cross ‘psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialised boundaries’ (Brah, 2002, p.198) extends well beyond the realm of postcolonial theory into a multitude of social realms - the patriarchal, the heteronormative, the bourgeois to name but a few.

The borderland can be summarised as a counter-cultural position that occupies a radical position of marginality rather than seeking to reclaim central power structures. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin identify, this counter-cultural position not only characterises the reclamation of social identity, but also of language in postcolonial theory:

The ‘marginal’ and the ‘variant’ characterise post-colonial views of language and society as a consequence of the process of abrogation. The syncretic is validated by the disappearance of the ‘centre’, and with no ‘centre’ the marginal becomes the formative constituent of reality. (2002, p.103)

This recognition is crucial to authors who might seek to identify themselves as inhabitants of the borderland since it implies that it is possible to be relegated to the margins not only through social position and identity,

but also through the very power structures of the language in which they might seek to express themselves. Such power structures might include ownership or national origin of a language resulting in the racial, ethnic or national subject position of the speaker potentially affecting their use of the language. The creolised languages of the Caribbean, for example, are the result of colonisation and create complex issues for its speakers concerning what constitutes their ‘mother tongue’. Do they become complicit with the coloniser in adopting their language (Tanikella, 2003)? Yet Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin also suggest that these marginalised sites of language become modes of resistance. Anzaldúa herself recognises that language is a complex cultural territory but in *Borderlands/La Frontera* she articulates a vision of the borderland through experimental verse that fuses both English, Spanish and innovative linguistic play in a gesture towards the hybridity of the borderland, suggesting that the power structures of language can also be rewritten:

This is my home
this thin edge of

barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemaya blew that wire fence down. (1987, pp.2-3)

Encountering Anzaldúa here at her ‘home, this thin edge of barbwire’, she suggests that just like the borders of cultural territory, the borders of language ownership, form and meaning can also be transgressed. Here we arrive at a starting point from which to explore Janet Frame’s textual borders in her novel *The Edge of the Alphabet*, in which she also poses the question of how to communicate at and beyond the margin.

The borderland as textual territory in Janet Frame's *The Edge of the Alphabet*

In her 1962 publication *The Edge of the Alphabet*, New Zealand born author Janet Frame locates herself in a position akin to Anzaldúa's home on the border:

Home?

The edge of the alphabet where words crumble and all forms of communication between the living are useless. One day we who live at the edge of the alphabet will find our speech. (Frame, 1962, p.302)

Frame also considers herself as belonging on the margins. Yet this territory is specifically textual; she is positioned at the border where communication and understanding between human beings breaks down. This is an odd position for Frame to locate herself, since she lacked neither voice nor audience in her lifetime, receiving numerous accolades and international recognition for her writing (Hawes, 1995). From where, then, does Frame's marginality stem? Indeed, why does this marginality manifest itself in the textual and spatial terms of the border and borderland in her novel?

As we have seen, the border marks out more than simply geographical territory. Its implications extend to designating a zone of inclusion in society, bearing resonance for multiple forms of social exclusion. Frame's sense of being pushed to the edges of society is derived from sources which explain her emphasis on language and communication as manifestations of her social marginality.

An acutely sensitive young woman, Frame was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and spent several years at the Seacliff Mental Hospital, where she underwent almost two hundred electric shock treatments. Only weeks away from a leucotomy, Frame received the Hubert Church Memorial Award for her collection of short stories *The Lagoon* (1990) and startled psychiatrists subsequently reassessed and released her. Despite this reprieve, Frame was left with a lasting sense of anxiety and difference that manifested itself as extreme shyness (Hawes, 1995; Frame, 1991). Throughout her life, she remained conscious of the fact that it was her writing that had saved her

(Frame, 1991). Language and textuality therefore became a powerful means to define and control her sense of self, including that residue of psychological anxiety from her experiences at Seacliff. As Sander Gilman writes, Frame's dependency on writing to negotiate her sense of psychological difference is hardly surprising:

Of all the modes of pathology, one of the most powerful is mental illness. For the most elementally frightening possibility is loss of control over the self, and even loss of control is associated with loss of language and thought. (Gilman, 1994, p.23)

In this sense, Frame's use of language becomes a means to retain control over her sense of self where she employs the world of the text to inscribe her own set of social boundaries and borders, amongst which she feels comfortable. Yet what are the spatial dynamics to this textual world, and how does positioning herself on the margin in this way help Frame to secure her sense of self?

The characters in *The Edge of the Alphabet* are integral to both the construction and deconstruction of space in the novel. Toby, Zoe and Pat each undertake journeys in the novel: they meet on board a ship voyaging from New Zealand to England, some returning home, others seeking their English ancestors. Where we learn little of the characters beyond the direction in which they are travelling, their function, however, appears to be to engage in musings about their identity as they undergo this spatial transition between territories. This provides Frame with intermediaries through which to voice her own imagined existence between social realms.

The overriding feature of her characters' musings is the sense in which they deconstruct the authority of divisive territories. Toby tells Pat, who grandly states that he comes from Ireland, 'I'm always meeting people who come from the other side of the world. Everybody comes from the other side of the world. Haw Haw, it's a good excuse'. Frame's metafictional narrator adds, 'And it is a good excuse, isn't it, to put seas and continents between yourself and someone whose ways are often so strange that they

frighten you' (1962, p.130). Here, Frame reveals the 'fear of the Other' that constructs our understandings of space and need to assert territory and effortlessly dispels the authority of the binary structures of self and other, here and there by revealing the fallacy of the power structures on which these binaries rest. Zoe Bryce has a similar moment of epiphany:

And then she laughed out loud to think that she had never known, that she had always believed that people were separate with boundaries and fences and scrolled iron gates... that people lived and died in shapes and identities with labels easily recognisable, with names which they clutched, like empty suitcases, on a journey to nowhere.
Well, it is a mistake, said Zoe smiling. I am interested now in traffic lanes, in byways, highways... (Frame, 1962, p.106)

Once again, identity surfaces as a construct that is limited by the division of space in those numerous social territories implied in her description of 'boundaries and fences and scrolled iron gates'. Despite removing her characters from social space and into the realm of their imaginative musings, identity remains a source of trauma for Frame. In her novel, Frame is one of the 'passengers adrift in one-class fear on the dark seas of identity' (1962, p.82), retreating into an imaginative and evasive existence beyond the realm of the social, rather than relocation in a communal borderland beyond the margins. Yet there is another way Frame manages to negotiate a safe-haven for herself more successfully - through language.

In *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*, Emily Hicks defines 'border writing' as 'a strategy of translation rather than representation' (1991, p.xxiii). The border writer, a writer who must contend with existence between cultures, seeks not to create stasis or definition in meaning-making, but to engage in a communicative process, inviting movement between borders and boundaries of expression. These are 'cultural, not physical borders: the sensibility that informs border literature can exist anywhere' (1991, p.xxv). Such a desire to bridge a gap of communication through translation rather than to designate a static meaning can be read as an attempt to transgress the boundaries of textual authority. This can be felt

most keenly in the stylistic and poetic traits of Frame's writing. Trinh T. Minh-ha notes:

To use the language well, says the voice of literacy, cherish its classic form... Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language...To write 'clearly', one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify. (1989, p.16)

We sense Frame's resistance to these standards of style in the dense, richly multireferential imagery in passages such as this:

The day is patched with long silences between the communication of people, give rise to dread; as if the time itself held a reserve of opinion too terrible to express. In the cracks of the silence the people's voices grow like bright feverish weeds whose stalks are hollow and whose shallow roots are separated from the earth (or water) with one tug of a hand or breeze; now and again people's voices disappear in the gaps that open with the continual shock of Time. (1962, p.215)

In this description language is spatialised as a place in which the authority of communicative space breaks down into 'the cracks of the silence' as 'voices disappear in the gaps'. In its abstraction, such language does not seek to fix meaning; interactive, creative reading is required to make the jumps in sense and explanation – how 'time', for instance, can '[hold] a reserve of opinion'. Yet there is also a generative, organic tone to her phrasing; a sense of something trying to grow or break through the disintegrating structures of communication, 'voices grow like bright feverish weeds whose stalks are hollow'.

This passage conveys Frame's textual borderland starting to take shape in its imagery of marginal, innovative forms breaking through the old structures. Such a formation is strongly suggestive of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature' – a textual practice that also takes place at the margins of meaning-making. They suggest that it is not necessary to engage with literal barriers of foreign languages in order to disrupt signification (meaning-making in language), but

to make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language...to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, pp.26-27)

Opening up the gaps, silences and underdeveloped sites of language creates a textual borderland in which language becomes interactive and evasive of the central authorities, a place where 'language can escape'. With its emphasis on innovative and hybrid language use in order to create a new textual space, Frame's writing bears much resemblance to Anzaldúa's poetic expression of the borderland in the previous section of this paper. It would seem, then, that Frame constructs a borderland of sorts in which she does manage to subvert the dynamics of centre and margin - but as they manifest themselves in language, within the world of the text. However, we are left with an unsettling question, if language is what resides in the textual borderland, then where is Frame herself?

Re-framing the borderland in Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*

The borderland of Frame's text provides a place for her to imagine herself beyond the marginal, but, as we have seen, does so by dissolving any secure social identity in favour of a language-based realm. How might Frame's sense of self find a secure position? In this we must ask how the borderland might be created through processes other than the textual.

The final section of this paper will examine how Jane Campion's film, *An Angel at My Table* (1990), based on Frame's autobiographical trilogy (1991), attempts to represent Frame's identity in a reconfigured social space akin to that of the borderland. Like Frame's writing, Campion's cinematography employs a visual language that seeks to counter dominant modes of representation. Yet unlike Frame, Campion manages to create a communicative space in which a bond between borderland, subject and viewer is formed, fulfilling the communal potential of the borderland.

Frame herself cites the visual gaze as a complex matter in her formation of identity. In the first volume of her autobiography she writes that

out of a desire to be myself, not to follow the ever-dominant personalities around me, I had formed the habit of focusing in places not glanced at by others, of deliberately turning away from the main view...My memory of myself now contains myself looking outward and myself looking within from without, developing the view that others might have of me. (Frame, 1983, p.143)

There is a self-perceived divide between Frame and those in ‘main view’. Yet just as Frame refocuses her sights on those ‘places not glanced at by others’, so too does Champion. Champion’s gaze is distinct from that of orthodox, mainstream cinematography - defined by critics such as Laura Mulvey as masculine, voyeuristic and fetishistic (1975) – in that Frame is never subjected to a masculine, sexualised or patriarchal gaze seeking ‘visual pleasure’ which would result in her marginalisation as female and feminine ‘other’ (Mulvey, 1975). Instead, Champion employs a maternal gaze that emphasises imaginative connection with Frame, identifying with her and aiding her through her experiences. Some of the spaces in which this non-marginalising dynamic is present will now be examined.

The space of Champion’s filmic shots, her frames of vision, are the primary locations in which Frame is relocated beyond the margins. As an object of visual pleasure, the female body can be likened to a filmic landscape, subjected to patriarchal drives of territorialisation and colonisation as it is surveyed and laid claim to by the voyeuristic gaze. Yet in Champion’s filmic spaces there is a consistent effort ‘to locate the female body *in* space, not to reduce her *to* space’ (Gillett, 2004, p.3). Frame does not form the object of our gaze, but is the defining factor in the production of filmic space. She is the focus, the centre of what are designed to be manageable, secure spaces. The effect is one of intimacy not in a voyeuristic sense, but of genuine closeness. There are few panoramic, expansive shots as a more dramatic style of cinematography might employ, but even when

there are, our vision radiates from Janet's presence. The first episode in which we experience this alternative visual representation is as the young Frame moves towards the camera along its central line of vision, her mop of poppy-red hair a vivid point of focus in the lush green landscape. The sensory intensity of this visuality can be likened to Frame's own style of language in her novels. The film's heightened hues and unfamiliar gentleness of pace unsettle our interpretive bearings, just as Frame's own abstract imagery does in her novel. Yet *Campion's* visuality entices the viewer into active engagement with this new way of looking. We cannot take our eyes off the startling sight of this child's small form as the camera follows at her pace, and in this *Campion* achieves a maternal filmic gaze that keeps Frame safely cradled within the screen, the borders of our sight (Gillett, 2004, p.4). These are borders that position Frame beyond the dominant modes of representing the female subject by refusing to sexualise her or direct her actions in order to fulfil narrative drives. This a space controlled by Frame.



Campion, 1990



Campion, 1990

The maternal security of this sympathetic female gaze is again employed in Campion's treatment of Frame's breakdown. Such an episode risks falling into strategies of representation that have traditionally marginalised the female subject, in which psychological illness becomes synonymous with images of femininity as madness, weakness and otherness, reflected in film adaptations such as that of the portrayal of Rochester's mad wife Bertha in *Jane Eyre* (2003) or John Clive's version of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1989). Frenetic camerawork and sensationalised, hysterical sound tend to mark such episodes, as the female subject becomes an object of horror. Yet as Gillett describes this episode in Campion's film, 'There is no dizzying angling, nothing frenetic in the montage or score. As she runs from the school she is kept in centre frame, shot from a steady perspective' (2004, p.4). The steady pace, Frame's slow and painful progress, becomes tangible, not shocking for the viewer as Campion keeps pace with her as if to steady her within the space of her gaze.

How might these visual spaces be the manifestation of the borderland for Frame? The final scene condenses many of the visual strategies used to position Frame securely beyond the margin. Rather than attempting to create a traditional narrative climax, Campion ends with a scene of Frame writing in cramped conditions in a caravan attached to her sister's property, just as we have seen her do many times



Campion, 1990

before. This lack of narrative drive is typical of Campion's refusal to reach any definitive moment of representation; the film is instead a space in which multiple aspects of Frame's identity are allowed space to surface, just as the borderland allows intermingling and interaction of multiple subject positions. Frame is viewed in isolation in this final scene, still the quiet, shy woman seeking artistic solace. Yet she is not presented as a marginal subject. Viewed from outside the gently rounded window of the caravan, Frame is positioned safely within the camera's unobtrusive and accepting gaze as she narrates the end of her story to herself with the soothing words 'Hush, hush, hush', imbuing her with the textual control, calm and security that her novel so desperately seem to long for. Yet her words also mingle with the sound of the wind outside, the landscape enclosing and calming, signalling Frame's position within an environment in which she finally feels at ease (Gillett, 2004, p.9). It is in this world of her imagination, that which positions her within a world of textual unhingement and uncertainty within her novel, that Campion positions her securely beyond the marginalising gaze, defining the cinematic frame with a portrait of Frame's most intimate self, articulated on her own terms. Frame writes:

From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of facts and truths and memories of truths and its

direction always towards the Third Place, where the starting point is myth. (1991, p.7)

From this ‘third place’ of Frame’s imagination, Campion shows us that a strategy of decentring, of moving beyond the margins, does not always have to result in the dissolution of subject position. In Frame, she shows us the borderland subject whose voice can be heard and self represented by remapping the acceptable boundaries of the gaze and of visual communication. This is the borderland she seeks in her writing, made visible and vocal. As Anzaldúa writes, this is a space that is not always easy for the subject to occupy, but it fulfils a need that both she and Frame share:

Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element...[it is] never comfortable, not with society’s clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home. (Anzaldúa, 1987, unpagged preface)

As Frame and Campion can testify, locating yourself in the borderland is no easy matter; it is the human desire to belong, to feel secure and in control of the space in which you exist, that drives them to seek a home there.

Back to the border: writing in the margins

What have these explorations into theoretical, textual and visual territories unearthed? In one sense, the depressing prospect that systems of authority capable of imposing marginality span not only social and political realms, but the most private and intimate spaces of self: the gendered, the sexual, the bodily, the imagined and the communal.

Yet the proliferation of metaphors of the border and borderland across theory, text and film also prove heartening. They reveal that the authorities responsible for official cartographies of power are no longer the only subjects defining where the margins lie, and who lives on them. Marginalised subjects, like Frame and Anzaldúa, are reinscribing themselves on the cultural map from these very margins. This is not to say that all of those on the margins occupy the same border. Anzaldúa’s Chicana subject is

located in very different cultural territory from Frame, but they can, of course identify with one another. As this paper has suggested, the border helps us to conceive of both social and psychological notions of the self in terms of multiple territories of existence – from the realms of society as theorised by postcolonial critics, to the realms of the self, as inscribed in Frame’s textual imagination – revealing that contingencies can be formed in space both real and imagined. These contingencies deny the authority of the centre, the coloniser, the patriarch, the dominant norm, which have relegated them to the outskirts of society; a location from which their voices should remain distant and unheard. As *Campion’s* film demonstrates, though, there are also those beyond the borderland who are listening to them. The proliferation of the border as a metaphor is not simply the latest critical trend; it is also a signal that new communities are forming – communities that cross-disciplinary borders as well as social ones. It is by writing in the margins that these communities are being formed, as Bill Nichols notes:

Both the autonomy and the transgression, as well as the reality of these artists’ achievements is revealed: they are no longer ‘objects of study’ as ‘others’ but they are now themselves the founding voices, pioneers, provocateurs, and poets – of a discourse of their own making, made with full, sometimes painful awareness of what has come before and of the representational residue available for adaptation, rejection or redress. (Nichols, 1994, p.90)

The postcolonial critics, novelist and filmmaker explored in this paper are the only few who write from the margins, but they are indicative of the variety of routes that are being taken across the border, and should encourage others to follow them. It is not just postcolonial theorists who should rejoice at the new cartographies breaking through the old boundaries of social space. This is also an invitation to all of those who occupy the peripheries of spaces real and imagined; all of those who might think their voices are out of earshot. What *Frame* and *Campion* prove, above all, is that there is a desire that transcends borders of all locations; the desire not only to be heard, but to also be understood. The borderland provides this space.

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