

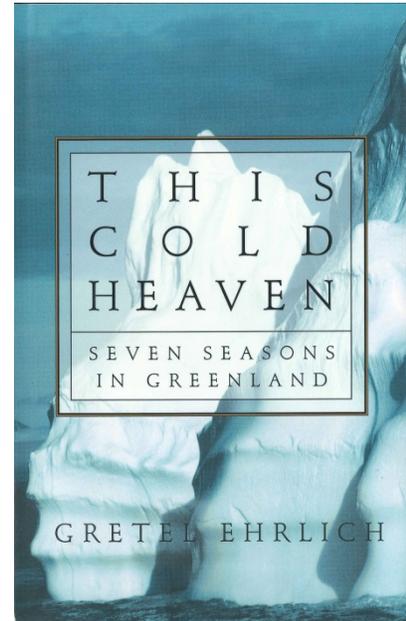
Boundaries to Borders in Gretel Ehrlich

By Jill Hampton

Border Studies has grown increasingly relevant inside and outside the academy. As in all interdisciplinary studies, it comes with its own lexicon. Evelyn P. Mayer identifies what I consider the most relevant in her literary approach: “Key terms for any border analysis are: boundary vs. border, borderlands, and bordering” (31). According to Mayer, “The term border is a multi-faced expression that can encompass geographical boundaries as well as symbolic borders, whereas boundaries, strictly speaking, refer to geophysical demarcations” (31). Until the 1990s, when in many ways, Homi Bhabha challenged the concept of borders and cultural identity, the idea of boundaries reflecting regionalism and identity appeared fixed and grounded primarily in geography (*The Location of Culture*).

Before and during this shift from fixed to hybrid identities and borderlands, Gretel Ehrlich’s work appears prescient in its imagery and language as it transgressed, blurred, and undermined these borders in several ways: through gender, sexuality, geography, culture, history, and the private/public worlds. With her letters, journals, and notebooks, her archive most clearly shows scholars how she transverses multiple boundaries—beginning with the myth of the American West in *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985)—and continuing through nearly all her texts. Her first collection of essays, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, is her breakthrough book that establishes her frame of mind to landscape: how land and space shape people regardless of artificial or natural boundaries. In her latest book, written after a journey to post-tsunami Japan, *Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami*, she breaks through geographical and cultural boundaries of an island-nation by sharing its stories of human tragedy and courage.

Ehrlich continually challenges traditional bordering, including linguistic boundaries, with her epistemological interrogations of place and identity. For example, the Ehrlich archive in the Sowell Family Collection in Literature, Community and the Natural World provides evidence of Dan Fran, her editor at Pantheon, encouraging this approach for *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland* (2003), a chronicle of multiple journeys to Greenland, incorporating history, myth, and friendships. He advises her, “This book is distinctive because it is an exploration of the cold as terrain not only physical, meteorological and physiological, but also emotional, psychological, and as a source for the imagination” (Sept. 8, 2003, Box 28, Folder 8). In the Orion text published in 2016, *Animals & People*, the writers persist

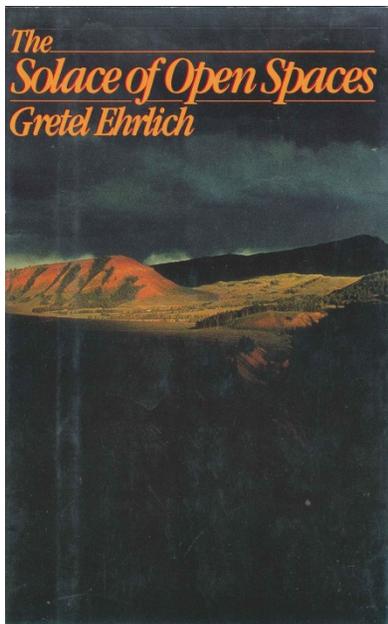


in calling for new ways of thinking about animals, about the earth, and essentially, about ourselves. Border Studies especially asks us to interrogate identity. Aoileann Ni Eigartaigh and David Getty cite challenges innate to the ideologized questions in this field: “Central to its overall theme is the negotiation of identity, whether it be individual or group identity, and the problems of contested or fractured identities” (qtd in Mayer 32). Who am I if not an American, a Westerner, a woman, a white-middle-class heterosexual female? Who am I if not a social construction of my culture? Alternatives to this negotiation, however, may offer assistance or opportunities for alternate views.

In his seminal text, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha interrogates the interstices of border, in the “beyond.” He writes, “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond” (1). He explains further:

[We] need to think beyond the narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1-2)

Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan’s study supports Bhabha’s thoughts in terms of culture. They claim “culture is the least studied and least understood aspect of the structure and functions of international borders” (qtd in Mayer 29). Tobias Wendyl and Michael Rosler add that “cultures are no longer regarded ‘as if they were pure, territorially bounded and ordered in systematic categories . . . But are rather viewed as more conflicting interstitial domains of paradox, fuzziness, and ambiguity” (qtd in Mayer 29). Finally, Mayer argues, “Boundary studies have given way to genuine border studies. Not only geographical or geopolitical



boundaries matter, but also cultural, linguistic, or mental borders, borderlands, and borderscapes, and bordering processes and practices” (30).

Ehrlich’s *The Solace of Open Spaces* resonates particularly here. Unbound by grief during a work assignment in the American West, Ehrlich rejects cultural boundaries and immerses herself in the local culture by riding, roping, herding, drinking, dancing, and lovemaking. Recording her actions and thoughts in her journals, she strategizes how to frame these narratives in a literary context. She contemplates her writing during this time:

A narrative is not simply a surface and temporal threading together of events, but signifies as well, a deep structure—an innate symmetry of form and function. To be human is to be in relation; to be alive is to be connected with every other thing and that fact of union keeps presenting over and over again the ripe situation in which events, entanglements, cause and effect occurs. (Sept. 10, 1981, Box 38, Folder 10)

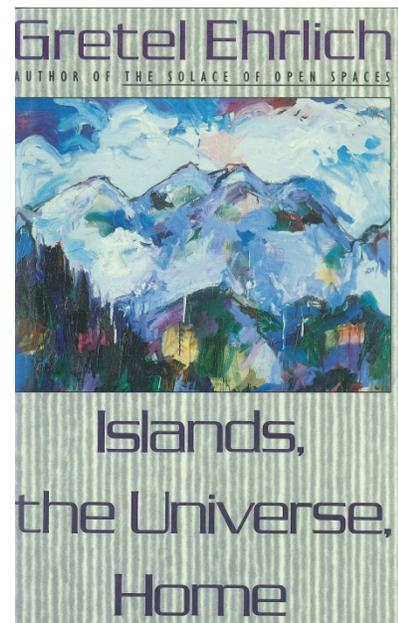
Her language, imagery, and poetics sow a peaceful way of removing, not erecting these artificial borders. As surely as she articulates the mythic romanticism of it, she also breaks through the boundaries of the American West and other regions in her early work, providing a way for each of us to inhabit the gaps, assimilate, and even claim a place in a global community. Through narrative, she hints of Hegel's dialectical approach as she argues that borders and boundaries collapse, and unity emerges.

Years later, after the repercussions of being hit by lightning and divorce prevent her from living in the Wyoming mountains and its culture, she deals with another sort of grief in a new place: her childhood home in California as she seeks to heal her body. In *A Match to the Heart* (1994), she describes the body as a continent in itself. Her memoir and research in *A Match to the Heart* explore the “interior geography of her body” (50). In her search, she comes to regard her “body as a separate continent” (51) with only her skin serving as a permeable border. Ehrlich realizes to a new depth that life exists in the interstitial space between psyche and physiology. Ehrlich recaptures her balance in Greenland, mountains laid flat, at whose lower altitude her heart can regulate itself. She lives in darkness, in cold, among dogs that outnumber the people, on top of ice, onto cracking ice, while maintaining the role of linguistic and spiritual observer. In her early days in Greenland, she struggles with the demands of a communal society, still fragile from her encounter with lightning. Yet, in this frozen oasis, different from her lost independence,

she seeks the solace of the open spaces of ice-laced ground, treeless horizons, and its inhabitants similar to those in Wyoming who embraced her. The catharsis of ice and its people teaches her the importance of blurring boundaries among people and land as much as did the forgiving geography of Wyoming and lightning did the interior geography of her physical body.

Driven by life's hardship, natural gifts, and accumulated wisdom, her chameleon ability allows her to assimilate past boundaries into interiority of new spaces, falling into the interstices Bhabha references. As Mayer puts it, "The border is not necessarily a negative demarcation, [but] a meeting place. It is at the border that differences are negotiated and residents on both sides of the border become aware of their similarities despite the line that tells them how different they supposedly are and should be" (39). In today's world, where war and terrorism seek to cement and politicize borders and boundaries, Ehrlich's narratives emphasize our commonalities. In her texts on Greenland, she refuses to recognize borders, integrating herself into the local culture through dog-sledding trips, symbolically establishing a communion of personal and cultural loss in the melting ice-scape.

Ehrlich breaches boundaries of intense subjectivity towards the hybrid cultures she inevitably inhabits. In most of her work, she initially seeks and relishes solitude as a source of stability. Soon enough, however, she fractures what she considers annoying rather than formidable borders in each place she journeys. In her book of essays, *Islands, the Universe, Home* (1991), she confronts the intertwining of Western and Eastern cultures (a potentially false dichotomy itself), and Buddhist ideology and practice as she recreates herself in the gaps. Ehrlich often



inhabits the “in-between” spaces generated by cultural difference as distinct from Bhabha’s “narrative of originary and initial subjectivities” (1). Perhaps, Ehrlich’s belief in the world as sacred motivates her land or boundary ethic most clearly. In her visit to Japan in *Islands*, a place embedded in her psyche, she describes her purpose:

To sniff out shizen—the Japanese word for a spontaneous, self-renewing, inherently sacred natural world of which humans are an inextricable part. I wanted to see how and where holiness revealed itself, to search for those “thin spots” on the ground where divinity rises as if religion were a function of geology itself the molten mantle of sacredness cutting through the earth like an acetylene torch, erupting as temple sites, scared mountains, planes, and seas, places where inward power is spawned. (90)

The archive provides ways to bridge multiple borders, especially the sometimes rigid ones existing between private and public worlds. What Ehrlich publishes often reveals a different Ehrlich than her journals and drafts project. In heterogeographical and cultural global movements, she confronts “competing claims of communities where . . . the exchange of values, meaning and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual, and even incommensurable” (2). Indeed, Ehrlich’s diverse narratives subvert a Grand Narrative to accommodate multiple, less dominate narratives of cultural hybridity. The evolution of Ehrlich’s works inhabits these gaps. In Bhabha’s words, “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

Ehrlich journeys up the Sacred Mountains in “The Bridge to Heaven” where she encounters priests and monks Westernized beyond her expectations. During a New Year’s ritual, her expectations are confounded, with doubt creeping in with the night. She comments on their

host, a priest, who holds an inherited position: “By his world-weary look, I suspected he didn’t always relish the duty, and when we exchanged presents, as is customary in Japan, his face lit up only when Leila gave him a bottle of Chivas Regal” (*Islands* 94). In the next paragraph, he alludes to his son’s secular habits inhibiting his ascension to the priesthood: ““If that’s going to happen, he has to start studying now . . . and that would interfere with his baseball practice”” (*Islands* 97). Other Westernizations pop up, reflecting a hybridity or cultural “collage” (Mayer 29), such as an elderly couple’s television showing a “Mickey Mouse cartoon dubbed in Japanese” (*Islands* 121). Even though she delves into the myths underlying the rituals, she remains somewhat unnerved by the undercurrent of Westernization undermining the festival. Accepting what it signifies, Ehrlich lingers in her Buddhist studies to understand this blurring of boundaries between the sacred and secular: “Religious pilgrimage through mountains expanded a sense of sacredness from specific temple site to the entire geography—wherever the pilgrim’s feet happened to land . . . Geography became internalized: the farther the sojourner walked from discursive mind and habitual thought, the closer she or he came to original nature” (*Islands* 97). Further on in the chapter, when journeying to another sacred mountain, she reflects: “Impermanence figures so strongly in Asian religions: I wondered if it might not have evolved from a geography where islands rise precipitously out of the ocean and the earth shudders under everyone’s feet” (*Islands* 110). Boundaries blur and disappear into the mind, creating this artifice as she quotes a poem by Fugiwara no Teika: “The bridge of dreams / floating on a spring night / soon breaks off: / parting from the mountaintop, / a bank of clouds in open sky” (*Islands* 110-111). Bridges connect intangible borders, interrupted by mountains, disrupting human-made mindsets, regardless of sacred and secular environments.

Ehrlich's work, more than anything, concerns relationships among people, landscapes, weather, heaven, and earth—the metaphoric borders of our lives. In one significant sense, her work is about the brokenness and fragility of these relationships/borders wherein the sacred can begin to work in that liminal space between belonging and not. She seeks to be part of Nature, whose borderscapes blur boundaries and link her to the divine, the sacred, and the metaphysical in a spiritual union. She writes, “I’ve stumbled upon the liberating equality that exists everywhere and have been able to dismiss with great conviction the idiotic idea of human dominance over nature and know it to be physically and intellectually absurd. With equality comes a sense of the holiness—sacred or secular—of every animate and inanimate thing (“On Writing” 2, Box 31, Folder 46). Using Border Theory, I suggest that she is contesting the idea that borders we too often recognize as credible and natural falter and fall through this perspective. She perceives her role as writer as pivotal to this process. In her draft for “On Writing,” she posits, “a Writer’s life must be like these moths, beating down obstructions to get at truth” (“On Writing” 1).

There is an epistemological border between knowing and not knowing. We know so little as a species, but seekers like Ehrlich show us what we do not know with a humble, generous awareness. In a talk at Mankato State University in Feb. 1987 titled “Sacred World: A Sense of Place, A Sense of Mind,” she describes that she “must be a part of it,” the place, and immerse her entire being in the place until there emerges an equality between her and this place, to get rid of the estrangement of any part of that place. She continues:

the more I feel there’s no difference between myself and them [nature], and there’s no difference between the surges of energy in myself and the surges of weather that comes through . . . It’s when we can see the value of every atom that the sacred emerges, if we

can really see a place, really see it, then we can begin to see ourselves and with that union comes the sacred and binding spirituality. (13)

In losing ourselves to place beyond borders, our inner self awakens; in her pursuit of communion with earth and sacredness, she embraces this challenge.

Her longing for and belief in “belonging” resonates in all her work at both pragmatic and universal levels. As Mayer writes, “Bordering and belonging are inextricably linked. Bordering takes place constantly. As sense of belonging is linked to a sense of place, a sense of roots, of history, and genealogy” (42). A reader has only to glance at Ehrlich’s journal entries during her Copenhagen trip when she waits hopefully and futilely for a phone call from her companions to join them. She feels she has failed to form the relationships needed to negotiate an urban space. The first months and years in Wyoming forced her into friendship with others, no matter how different their backgrounds. Estranged from that place by illness, she explores boundaries and borders of the body, finding the skin a thin permeable line of separation. Accordingly, travels in Greenland conjoin her into a community of hope and loss, sharing its resources and mythos with her. Finally, her time in Japan nourishes the sacredness of her linguistic commitment and communion with place and land to share, in words, with us. Her sense of longing and abandonment echoes much of what we feel today in this environmental crisis and global community, which brings us closer together, yet divides us further. We all seek to belong. Somewhere. Compassion and kindness are often in short supply. Wisdom comes from life experiences butting up against borders; however, in our everyday lives, we often “go to the mattresses” (*The Godfather*) to defend what we know and cement our boundaries in self-absorption and protection. In doing so, we take ourselves out of the world of growth and increased knowledge that effect lasting change. In the crevices of the mortar, we might find

borders where water permeates, breaks down, and provides a pathway through and past our bordered worlds.

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