



cyclista zine

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our bikes, our stories

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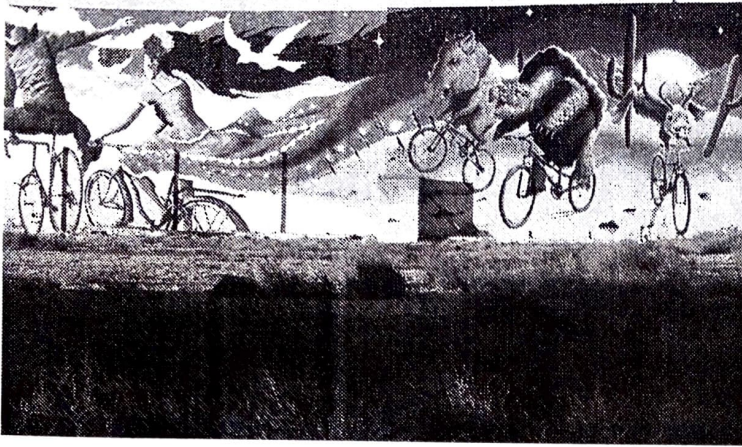
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Kate, I'm almost mad at you. I'm mad that you wrote such a devastating song to the long routes which send dreams beyond boundaries and only bid for me to join you after you got under the guardrails and over the passes. Or perhaps I'm mad (in mid-day Chihuahuan desert heat) to not have known sooner that I could have invited you biking with me, along a border searing another desert.

TO KATE, FROM THE BORDER OF ANOTHER DESERT

A LETTER TO KATE HARRIS, AUTHOR OF LANDS OF LOST BORDERS: A JOURNEY ON THE SILK ROAD, FROM A CYCLIST ON THE US/MEXICO BORDER BY HONORA SPICER

After our bike trip in the US/Mexico borderlands, Andy, my own wilder-haired biking companion (my own Mel) sent me Lands of Lost Borders: A Journey on the Silk Road. When I received your book, I had just finished hosing down my bike and oiling the chain after a month of mountain biking in southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. Andy and I are outdoor educators, and we were researching experiential education in the US/ Mexico borderlands, teaching social justice through the moving body.

When we crossed back into Nogales, AZ from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, the traffic was jammed up for hours and the sellers of trinkets meandered between honks alongside elote drink vendors and money changers. The National Guard had delivered freight crates to stack in every gap of the port of entry, stuffing concertina wire in the cracks. We passed the rusted border fence where families would come for Sunday picnics.



passing tacos through the slats until the extra layer of wire mesh was installed. We rode by a mural of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, the teenager who was shot by US Border Patrol through the fence in 2012. Nearby a couple whispered internationally with the wire mesh between their lips.

We wove across the rows of cars to glimpse the pedestrian entrance with a line snaking out of the processing facility. A massive metal gate slid open to let through a locomotive laden with trade more free than people. Being on bikes, we peddled to the front of the line of cars, spoke with the guards, and rode through. While not an exclusive gate, bikes have their own doors which open lands of lost borders, which we were learning just like you.

After riding the vast grasslands of the Sky Islands, the incessant arroyos and crests of the Arizona Trail, gravel backroads and licks of highway, it was in El Paso that I stopped moving from place to place. Over and over you meet us one place at the paragraph's start and drop us off in an unexpected elsewhere, 'the red planet to the Silk Road, bicycles to the moon, a modern Georgian highway back in time to the Ujarma Fortress.' I would backtrack and retrace our steps but the reread still had all the magic.

That's the fortune of the writer, granting meaning to the disparate and in doing creating a pathway. Your pathway as an explorer by bike along the Silk Road is a weaving together of an intrepid longing for Mars, an astute awareness of exploration's precedent, and an insistent hope in the possibilities for contemporary discovery on human powered expeditions. And so, like the writer; 'perhaps the great task of modern explorers is not to conquer but to connect, to reveal how any given thing leads to another.' In this sense my expedition led me to yours, or perhaps they led to each other.



'WITH AND THROUGH AND AGAINST THOSE LIMITS'

'Most aspects of Oxford' you noticed, and I agreed, '--from the twisting cobbled streets to Corsi's lectures--encouraged digression, which is, after all, just a sideways method for stumbling on connection.' In between my undergraduate terms, I also biked through England's narrow lanes and turns, the cottages and rapeseed fields. I was asked (like you) over and again to let the past be more past, to approach history like a new country, without presuming there was any way to get there from here, until there was. The exams elicited a zealous adherence which you throw into broader scope in describing your own 'achievement bender'; 'isn't that the final, most forceful triumph of borders? The way they make us accept as real and substantial what we can't actually see?'

At Oxford I remember marveling at how grateful we should be to have these bodies to carry our brains around, adhering to an Enlightenment-style view of the separation of our bodies and minds. Like you, I moved to Cambridge, MA and I studied the ways in which early modern scientists were intentionally using bodily knowledge to gather and exchange information about the world around them. I began noticing how all of us are constantly learning through our bodies, whether it's deliberate or not. And it became clear to me that the higher education setting of that traditional environment would not allow students to fully live out the implications of what they were learning. 'The person who is most powerful' in an academic setting, bell hooks claims in Teaching to Transgress, 'has the privilege of denying their body.'

There's an expectation of elation when you admit to your MIT supervisor your lifelong dream of traveling to Mars, and she tells you that we are in fact living in the age of exploration. All the better, she adds, we can explore through the sterility of a computer screen while drinking a soda in a windowless, numbered building. The abruptest shifting in your story comes before the cycling journey begins, and precipitates the voyage. 'I politely thanked Zuber for meeting with me and walked out of her office. And then I left the laboratory and launched on a long voyage.'

I set out towards approaches to education which lead to connectivity, to embodiment, to living consciously today in a way that education at best is preparing us to live at some future date. In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks tells us that it's the demand of liberatory pedagogy that we return to embodiment, that we 'work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits.' In your voracious seeking, you're chasing hard and real limits, you're chasing a learning in which you're transformed. 'The only way to test the truth of a border' you say, and I imagine here your grin and your eyes gleaming, 'is to ride hard toward it and leap--or, if circumstances demand it, crawl.'

'THE DIRECTIONS TAKEN BY SOME BODIES'

Your cycling journey was the embodiment of a collectively held mental map of the historical Silk Road, one remarkably different from contemporary geopolitical maps. This tale is about what happens when these two images of space grate against each other. Your movement is a reminder of the way in which division of territory into contemporary nation-states is just one means of organizing space. You remind us that 'borders are little more than collective myths--fictions that a certain number of people, for a certain period of time, believe are fact.' On the Silk Road as in North America, postcolonial borders have been built on the genocide and oppression of groups whose boundaries preceded the nation-state. Andy and I began our bike trip in southwestern Tucson, on the edge of the Tohono O'odham nation.

In what's now southern Arizona and northern Sonora, the Tohono O'odham nation is bisected by the modern US- Mexico boundary. A frequent cry for justice in these borderlands is 'we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us.' 'In Nogales, Andy and I joined the massive cycling community on their annual tour to San Lorenzo, biking along roads which paralleled the border fence rising on the nearby hills. We were greeted with carne asada tacos in the town plaza, then returned back on the same roads, with no chance of making a northerly loop. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed reminds us, 'it is not just that certain bodies are directed in specific ways, but that the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others.' The directionality of our travel is telling.

The predominant directionality of movement across the US-Mexico border is perpendicular-- major trucking routes at ports of entry, cars backed up to cross for work, family visits, shopping, migrants crossing through urban ports or desert wilderness, bisecting the direction of flow of the Rio Grande. And then there are those who have made a journey parallel to the border-- patrollers, journalists, vigilantes, explorers. The choice to spend time on a journey exclusively along the border is a mark of privilege. While our route was planned in consideration of exploring the contemporary boundary, your journey was not parallel or perpendicular to a contemporary boundary, but rather operated with contempt for them.

'THOSE WHO SOUGHT A RIGHT OF PASSAGE'

Unlike the border which follows the Rio Grande in the east, the border through the Arizona wilderness is entirely of human construct. Like you describe of the border between Tajikistan and China, the boundary marker is an indistinguishable string of barbed wire fence. We join the Tucson Samaritans on a water drop in the Sonoran desert. The road ends in a sea of ocotillo, catclaw and mesquite, the oceanic hills billowing expansively, internationally. Just down the arroyo from our truck, a barbed wire fence marking national boundary limps brokenly, resigned to the fate of blindly crossing the land irrespective of hill or valley.

We reference GPS tracks of migrant routes, and load gallons of water into our backpacks. The routes started as game trails, and are now identifiable by traces-- the empty can of beans, the matted blanket left under the mesquite, the toilet paper wads and footprints in the sand. The Clinton-era policy of Prevention Through Deterrence fortified urban ports and funneled migrants into the most lethal parts of the desert, where hundreds have died of dehydration and exposure. Like you witnessed in the Tibetan Plateau, wilderness is appropriated by national governments as a weapon for 'homeland security', allowing certain people to pass while creating an impossible journey for others. Evident here is Mohsin Hamid's observation in the novel *Exit West*, 'The only division now was between those who sought a right of passage and those who would deny them a right of passage.'

In this story about borders, we follow your 'migratory instincts,' but this is not a story of migration. In fact, your own experience of movement seems to be the profound exception, the landscape is vacant of people following similar routes. Leaving Zorkul, Tajikistan, a boy throws a fistful of stones at you as you say goodbye, and you wonder 'whether that boy had darker, more ineffable targets in mind, such as the freedom certain humans, by total fluke, are born into, or the fact that the same road leads different people different places.'

'WORK HAS TO BE UTOPIAN'

You're impelling me to believe that one thing really does become the next, if you cycle long enough.

It's the vastness of your deserts, and their generosity of time under your wheels, which has granted you a spaciousness in your wondering and rage. 'Work has to be utopian' claims poet Eileen Myles. 'That's a requirement for me. What I get to do as an artist is start creating the world I want to live in.' You're insisting on the figment of artificial borders, on the myth of lines in the sand. But envisioning a world without borders also 'meant believing in hearts and minds without them, too,' you realize, 'and this wasn't easy when I looked into my own.' More than anything, our stories are about the friendships of adventurous women, whose self sufficiency can be maddening. I would lie in the tent beside Andy and she would breathe in frosty words, 'I'm just trying to get through to you.' Like Mel, Andy had the hair that was more unruly, she was more apt to start the conversation with strangers, she was the more persistent wheel in the slog to the lonely roadside diner for tacos. The first boundary-crossing was with each other, and we never fully crossed over.

We weighted on each other, waiting or hurrying, moving past each other all day long in the task of movement. In the borderlands it felt like we were being hit. Like we were crumbling. Like we were going to pieces and each morning picking up all the pieces, this one yours, this one mine, and trying to hold them. We sought a place called home, a place where we would dump out all the pieces. Where finally the pieces were not too many or too few or too broken, because they were not going back into the sack of travel.

PLACES MARKED BY THE PEOPLE WHOSE BODIES TRAVERSE THEM

Like your return at the end of your journey to the Indian side of Pangong Lake, we returned to the Tucson straw bale house where we had begun. We had been grateful and we had been grated. We had fought less than we should have, instead subsumed by the twisted need for remorseful withdrawal in the face of the sad injustices we beheld. There are a million ways to travel the borderlands in devastation. The only place we had biking the borderlands, we resolved, was in finding connections of joy and of healing.

We passed the winter's longest nights in desert chill as frost gnawed on the rims of our sleeping bags. One morning in the Sky Islands I awoke in the bone-aching cold and crawled outside where the night was just beginning to peel away over the mountains, longing for the first rays of the sun with a physical pain. We wake up in the tent with you when 'frost flaked off the ceiling, the fabric of space-time buckled and creased.' For the unlikeliness of friendship in the lands of separation, for the unlikeliness of writing in the searing winter night, this is why I am writing to you.

So tell me, Kate, where do we go from here? What is the role of embodied knowing about borders in this age of militarized nationalism? There's the thrill of testing the borders, and the tightening terror of being tested back. There are the starry silent nights where the peace crawls out from where it hid in desert blaze, and there are the many slants of light. But I want the explorer to again be seated at court and to implore the emperor. I want the explorer to turn to apprentices, masses. I want our understandings of these vast and contested places to be marked by the people whose bodies traverse them.