

FRONTIERS

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Editors: Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi, Ravi Sundaram

Associate Editor: Smriti Vohra

Translations: Shveta Sarda

Design: Mrityunjay Chatterjee

Editorial Collective: Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi, Ravi Sundaram, Ravi S. Vasudevan, Awadhendra Sharan + Geert Lovink

Cover Design: Mrityunjay Chatterjee

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The Director

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054, India

Tel: (+91) 11 2394 2199; Fax: (+91) 11 2394 3450

E-mail: dak@sarai.net

www.sarai.net

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Rokovoko - *Mogas Station* inside back cover

At Frontiers

Frequently at frontiers we are asked, "Anything to declare?"

The wisest thing to do when faced with the scrutiny of a border official is to say that you have "nothing to declare", and quickly move on. Crossing borders usually entails an effort not to say too much, or at least to get by with saying very little. A degree of reticence is the mark of the wise and experienced traveller.

Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers seeks to turn this ethic of reticence on arrival at a boundary, at any boundary, on its head. This year, the Sarai Reader considers limits, edges, borders and margins of all kinds as the sites for declarations, occasions for conversation, settings for the staging of arguments, debates, recounting and reflection. Our book invites you to consider the frontier as an open door, a chute into something new, or the rediscovery of that which has been obscured, a covert infiltration of opacity, a porous membrane of liminal potential, a zone of contact and contagion. We want to think of the frontier as the skin of our time and our world, and we invite you to get under the skin of contemporary experience in order to generate a series of crucial (and frequently unsettling) analytical and narrative possibilities.

For us, the frontier is a threshold waiting to be crossed, a space rife with the seductive aura of transgression.

The feeling of being on the edge of something has persisted for most of our lifetimes. The 20th century was an exhausting journey into a receding future, and the first decade of the 21st continues to entrance us with the allure of what seems to be forthcoming forever. We are all pioneers now, chasing and being chased by the shifting border-posts of the frontiers imposed upon us by history. Yet our efforts to break new ground do not necessarily carry any longer the confidence of self-proclaimed 'avant gardes'. As scouts, our task is to survey and report back in detail on the territory of uncertainty. And our ongoing despatches chronicle not our conquest of, but our continuing bewilderment about, the complicated times we inhabit.

We are not talking only of actual, physical borders (though of course we are interested in literal and political borders) that are usually the residues of war, but also of the borders between different temporal registers, between languages, between different modes of action, between different bodies of thought and conviction.

Looked at this way, a frontier is more a condition than a site, more a way of being and doing than a constellation of fixed markers circumscribing a domain.

The DMZ of the present, straddling the recent past and the immediate future, is the most striking frontier of all, inviting us to consider the continuities and ruptures, revolutions

and restorations that, like bunkers and watchtowers on either side, litter the landscape of all our histories.

We could also consider the borders between faith and doubt, between technology and technique, between history and memory, between art and science, between literature and reportage, between the empirical and the speculative...

We are interested in all forms of expression that straddle these spaces, especially in those that make forays into zones of confinement, such as prisons, detention camps, institutions of remand and quarantine. Here we see power relentlessly producing states of exception in a way that constantly redefines the boundaries of what might be considered normal. With each passing day, the normal condition of the world comes to resemble yesterday's state of exception, and today's state of exception seeks to lay the foundations of tomorrow's normality. This tension between the exception and the rule is another kind of frontier that we hope will provoke new investigations.

Today, we live in cities that expand by evacuating people from thriving centres and relocating them onto empty hinterlands. The shifting topos of infrastructural renewal in megacities constantly generates new urban boundaries. In these spaces that resemble maps and grids more closely than they do actual spaces for habitation, the question of what it is to have an urban identity in the time of civic dispossession, upheaval and appropriation, is asked with a violent, daily urgency.

The Reader goes to press at a time when the world observed from the Northern Ridge in Delhi (where this text gets made) seems to resemble a concentric circular maze of successive borderline conditions. Delhi itself, riven by a recent geometry of judicially mandated sealings, demolitions and evictions, is crisscrossed by different trajectories and ecologies of legality and illegality. Further away, to the east, the villages of Nandigram in West Bengal witness a reinscription of lines of force. Hope and despair take positions on the streets of Kolkata. The people of Bangladesh negotiate a repeated destiny, braving cyclones and the wrath of undeclared army rule. Still further east, Myanmar shivers in the icy grip of an amoral junta, and the walking monks of Yangon etch their own cartography of protest in the streets of their city. To the west, in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, a military dictator tries on new costumes even as he performs a script of democracy while sustaining a state of emergency. In the wider world, the invisible strings of money and power raise the price of oil here, manipulate interest rates there, and aggravate the temperature of already seething conflict zones. Battle lines are drawn, erased, recharted. People extend themselves in extraordinary acts of defiance and generosity, and then close in on themselves in exhaustion.

The texture of twilight seems to invade each hour of night and day. Everything everywhere is contingent. The margin infiltrates the centre. The core expands to the periphery. Our streets oscillate between anarchy and sullen calm. Sometimes the journey across continents still leaves us occasionally with the feeling that we haven't come very far

– and yet, in the short walk across the road to a news-stand, we may instinctively, intuitively, negotiate a dozen frontiers...

Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers invites you to become an adventurer at the fringes of your experiences, speculations, memories and histories. We have always viewed the Reader as hospitable to new and unprecedented ideas, as a space of refuge where wayward reflections can meet half-forgotten agendas, where the 'disappeared' of Buenos Aires can come upon the missing people of Nandigram. This is why we imagine Reader 07 as setting the stage for a productive encounter with the demand for an account of the limits, verges and thresholds of our times.

Welcome to these frontiers. They're a little wild, but the horizons ahead of us are wide and open.

The Editorial Collective
Delhi/Amsterdam, December 2007

*See file
Am 4/5 Jm*

*EXTRACT from an Office Memo: No. 2086, dated Simla, the
21st October 1865, from the Secretary to the Government
of India, in the Foreign Department.*

With reference to the docketts from the Home Department regarding Mr. Johnson of the Great Trigonometrical Survey, who is understood to have proceeded to Khotan, the undersigned is directed to state, that no persons should ever be allowed to go beyond British territory, and more particularly, into wild and dangerous tracts, without specific sanction conveyed through the Foreign Department.

CIRCULAR NO. 81-5174.

GENERAL DEPARTMENT.

Dated, Lucknow; the 31st October 1865.

Copy of the above forwarded to
for his information and guidance.

J. REID

Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Oude.



FRONTIER SCOUTS AND BORDER CROSSERS