From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies

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The following essay attempts to mark and account for what seems to me a key transition—perhaps “displacement” is a better term—in recent cultural studies theorizing that has particular relevance for scholars in American studies. I refer specifically to the slippage, or even the virtual disappearance, of the work of symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner as a major methodological influence upon current American studies scholarship. In place of his models of rite of passage and processual analysis we have come to recognize the explanatory power of what might be called a “borderlands” position—a mode of understanding social and cultural processes and formations that, to judge from the theme of the 1994 meeting of the American Studies Association (“Borders and Bonds: Society and Custom in a World of Regions”), appears to have a shaping influence on current American studies scholarship. Although there are numerous literary figures and theorists identified with this critical perspective (Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga especially), in light of the recent shifts in anthropological theorizing I want to examine (perhaps best represented by the post-modern challenge to classic ethnography contained in the essay collection Writing Culture), I will discuss the important work of Renato Rosaldo, especially his recent Culture and Truth, as exemplary of the challenges and transformations in cultural studies that currently influence scholars working in many areas associated with American culture studies. Specifically, in this brief reflection, I want to

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first historicize the “moment” of Victor Turner’s influence—to explain why his mode of symbolic anthropology achieved such methodological authority for American studies; second, I want to draw out Rosaldo’s implicit critique of Turner (a critique not as yet fully recognized or analyzed, in my view); and, finally, I want to offer a tentative explanation of why “border” has overturned “liminal” (or “liminality”) as a key word—perhaps the key word—in current American studies and in cultural studies scholarship in general.

Eighteen years ago, the theoretical atmosphere of the 1977 American Studies Association Convention in Boston was filled with the tropes and terminology drawn from the writings of Victor Turner, a maverick symbolic and cultural anthropologist who had developed, through his experience among the Ndembu tribes of Central Africa, a rich, evocative lexicon of compelling words and phrases (“social drama,” “rite of passage,” “liminality,” “communitas,” “anti-structure,” among others). In my memory at least, this terminology appeared to have caught the collective interdisciplinary imagination of scholars working in a variety of areas of American culture studies. I recall vividly a number of ASA sessions devoted to Turner’s paradigm of ritual process: bibliographies were handed out along with a glossary, provided by Turner himself, defining his keywords. I remember especially a very well attended session on ritual studies, chaired by Sacvan Bercovitch (at the time, Turner’s writings were having a deep impact on him), with a major paper on ritual and flow by Roland Delattre.2

Between the mid-1970s and 1983, the year he died at the age of 63, Turner emerged as perhaps the most important (if not the most important, then at least the most readily invoked) cultural theorist for a host of disciplines; indeed, his specialized vocabulary of processual analysis had found a receptive place in religious studies, performance studies—the area/field that especially engaged him at the end of his career—literary theory, and, of course, American studies.

My sense, however, as I noted at the outset, is that Turner’s authority for current American culture studies has markedly diminished; the Turnerian model of social dramas as a mode of explaining social change no longer retains the kind of explanatory power it seemed to provide a few years ago. A telling sign of this striking displacement may be found in the index to the mammoth volume of state-of-the-art essays titled Cultural Studies, which does not include even one reference to “Victor Turner” among its catalogue of “Turners” listed—although “Tina Turner” is mentioned
twice. In trying to account for this striking absence, I want to examine the relation between Turner’s notion of “limen” or (“threshold,” as Turner often defined it) and “liminality”—the culturally dangerous but culturally creative middle stage of the rite of passage where all the action (so to speak) during social transitions takes place—and the idea that has come to replace “liminal” in recent cultural theory, the notion of the “border.” What, I want to ask, is the difference between a “liminar,” a liminal figure straddling “betwixt and between” (in Turner’s famous phrase) structural positions, in passage between identities, and the imagination of the “border” as a zone or sphere of positionality? How, that is, does the discourse of the border challenge Turner’s model of liminality? Moreover, I want to ask why the position of the border has become a more attractive and perhaps more powerful mode of cultural criticism. First, however, let me briefly establish some of the key contexts for understanding Turner’s model of symbolic anthropology.

The outlines of Turner’s intellectual biography are now beginning to take shape, thanks to essays by Barbara Babcock, Frederick Turner, and Edith Turner. “Drama was in his blood,” observes Turner’s widow Edith; “he was interested in the events of life, processes he could watch unfolding.” During his Ndembu field work, Turner found himself resisting the fairly rigid models of social formation and explanation established by the anthropological school known as British Functionalism. “Disillusioned” is how he recalls his resistance to Functionalism’s authorizing narratives; in reaction, Turner rejected “their models of society and culture [which] tended to be based upon ideology” (positing a “social reality as stable and immutable”) rather than upon “social reality” (as fluid, open, expressed in/by the drama of ritual symbols as process). In addition, he rejected the academic taboo against crossing disciplinary boundaries; “boundary ambiguity was,” Turner reflected (quoting Mary Douglas) in “The Anthropology of Performance,” “regarded as an abomination.” Instead, Turner fashioned a new symbolic anthropology by celebrating the unfolding, processual, dynamic dimensions of cultural change: the shifting relations among liminality, communitas, and structure.

How did Turner arrive at, where did Turner “discover,” these now famous terms? Turner himself provides a partial biographical source: the family’s own transition, in the early sixties, to America; their betwixt and between status in the fall of 1963, waiting passage to Cornell and a new life, highlighted the very theoretical issues Turner was grappling with in his research. (The first public performance of his now classic “Betwixt and
Between” essay was in March 1964, after reading Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* in a 1960 edition.) Indeed, what is remarkable upon re-reading Turner’s early work on ritual process, including the now famous essays collected in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, is their relation to the historical moment.

There is, I would argue, a significant discursive correlation between Turner’s rhetoric of processual analysis and the culture of the 1960s—in America, at Cornell. These links have been noted before—most notably by anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano—but now, twenty years later, I sense in Turner’s imagination of liminality turning into/generating *communitas* (the ritual leveling process containing the potential for new social arrangements, new forms of imagination, of ritualized play) a profound, creative adaptation of contemporary history, a deep drawing upon the *authority of experience*—his experience, in America—to validate his vision of social strain and creative upheaval. To be sure, Turner offered numerous case studies of social dramas in history to illustrate his theories, but it was, in my view, the heady promise of social critique and social regeneration inscribed in the fact of the counterculture, the experience of playful carnivalesque performances (from the put-on of street theater to Richard Shechner’s revolutionary Performing Garage—an association which inspired Turner’s later work in performance theory) that helped to shape, in indelible ways, Turner’s anthropological imagination. “*Communitas* has a hippy ring to it,” notes Vincent Crapanzano; indeed, Turner’s emphasis on what in 1969 a young Stuart Hall described as the “existential now,” on “the continuous present tense—‘grooving’ . . . ‘tripping’ ” expressed for Turner the millenarian expectation, the *flow* of cultural revitalization he ascribed to the ritual process itself. *Communitas* has, for Turner, an apocalyptic agency; it “breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality.” Ritual liminars, or “edgemen,” as Turner calls them in *The Ritual Process*, possess the radical potential of cultural critique, indeed of deconstruction. “The essence of liminality,” Turner explained in the late 1970s, “is to be found in the release from normal constraints”; liminars have the power to “reveal the freedom, the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds, the free play of mankind’s cognitive and imaginative capacities.”

Turner elaborated, extended, and enlarged his theory of liminality over the years, at one point distinguishing “liminal” phenomena from “liminoid,” the latter expressive of the ritual process in postindustrial societies. Of course, an entire essay could be devoted to these important shifts and turns.
in Turner’s developing vision; instead, let me cite three instances of Turner’s continuing reflections on liminality in order to begin to suggest the ways in which the term is now problematic for current “committed” (to invoke Rosaldo’s term) borderland theorists:

Liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm. In either case it raises basic problems for social structural man, invites him to speculation and criticism. But where it is socially positive it presents, directly or by implication, a model of human society as a homogenous, unstructured committas, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species.14

I see liminality, in tribal societies . . . as the provision of a cultural means of generating variability, as well as of ensuring the continuity of proved values and norms.15

As well as the betwixt-and-between state of liminality there is the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of any given system, or being situationally or temporally set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system. Such outsiders would include, in various cultures, shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies. They should be distinguished from “marginals,” who are simultaneously (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another. These would include migrant foreigners, second-generation Americans, persons of mixed ethnic origin, parvenus (upwardly mobile marginals), migrants from country to city, and women in a changed, nontraditional role. What is interesting about such marginals is that they often look to their group of origin, the so-called inferior group, for committas, and to the more prestigious group in which they mainly live and in which they aspire to higher status as their structural reference group. Sometimes they become the radical critics of structure from the perspective of committas, sometimes they tend to deny the affectionally warmer and more egalitarian bond of committas. . . . Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity.16

Let me point out what are, I believe, a number of problematic assertions embedded in these variations on liminality. Re-reading Turner in light of recent border theorizing highlights Rosaldo’s quarrel, expressed in his “The Erosion of Classic Norms” and “Putting Culture in Motion,” not only with Turner but also with the latent imperialist project of “classic” ethnography in general.17
Perhaps the first aspect of Turner's thought to note here is the implicit consensual dimension of Turner's vision of cultural change through rite of passage. For all the emphasis on rupture and breach, Turner's social imagination is compelled by the scene of re-incorporation, of re-aggregation as the telos of rite of passage. In this respect the work of ritual symbols (as anthropological theorist Sherry Ortner has pointed out) is to "resolve social contradictions" and (now I quote Turner) to forge "the process of regenerative renewal."18 Emptied of, reduced from what we now term his subject position, the liminal is shorn of his structured (i.e., political) status as he merges in the flow of communitas, the aim of which Turner defines as the "continuity of proved values and norms." At some level, Turner's model of social drama is transcendent, ultimately ahistorical and apolitical; it is unable to recognize the contested, charged political valences embedded in the phrase "proved values," for Turner's vision of liminality issuing in "homogenous" communitas followed by a regenerative return to structure is essentially utopian.19

Yet perhaps the most problematic aspect of Turner's imagination of liminality and the cultural office of liminars is embedded in the long passage from Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors, for there Turner encounters a (bewildering?) resistance to incorporation on the part of those "marginals" who somehow refuse to join the ritual consensus. These figures—"migrant foreigners, second-generation Americans, persons of mixed ethnic origin" among them—somehow find their communitas outside of the transcendent vision; they "tend to deny the affectionately warmer and more egalitarian bond of communitas," Turner confesses, not realizing that he is privileging his sense of social leveling and attendant cultural bonding over what we now recognize as an encounter with identity politics and the border. Indeed, the passage marks a scene of "encounter" between Turner and those "marginal" (now read as "border") figures who resist incorporation; Turner could not, it appears, "see" the border before his eyes. The radical criticism that issues from these marginals in their resistance to the dominant culture ("structure" in Turner) adamantly refuses the "stable resolution of their ambiguity" offered in the "affectually warmer" and "more egalitarian" space conjured in the ritual process. (What does this mean? Do liminars of "mixed ethnic origin" bond with less emotion? Is their choice of a more local cultural identity somehow less "authentic"? Will their identities remain "ambiguous" until they accept the harmonious resolutions of "true" communitas?)

These questions sound from the other side of the liminal threshold; they
emerge from the politicized, postcolonial realm of the border—an embattled landscape where Turner’s “marginals” resist incorporation; indeed, a space where academic outsiders (who refuse to join the professional consensus) now write ethnographies in opposition to classic norms of narration, newly empowered by the subversive literary “flow” created by postmodern narrative itself. Rosaldo, as a committed border anthropologist, has challenged Turner on a number of issues, most importantly (for my purposes) on how Turner “reduce[s] complex human dramas to mere illustrations of supposedly explanatory structural principles”; Rosaldo hears, that is, a language of social control, of what Turner referred to over twenty years ago as the “steering function” in social process, of a dangerous mechanism of regulation latent in Turnerian models of ritual analysis.20

Are Rosaldo’s criticisms valid? Again, it would, no doubt, require a separate essay to engage fully Rosaldo’s brief but stringent critique. Instead, let me focus on a curious instance in Turner where Rosaldo’s concern perhaps finds some validation. In one of his many riffs on the liminal, Turner invokes, tellingly, Shakespeare’s Prospero (from The Tempest) as a “master of liminality.”21 In most current Renaissance criticism, Prospero is taken as a figure of—and for—imperialism, a figure who seeks to control, to shape outcomes, to master. (To be sure, Prospero, caught between two countries, cultures, etc. is himself a liminal figure, but he is invariably read pejoratively, as archetypal imperialist.) His antagonist Caliban, by contrast, inhabits the border; he is a hybrid figure, the marginal who claims political and imaginative empowerment by seizing the language of the dominant culture. To speak of Prospero in what I take to be positive terms, Turner unwittingly betrays—as Rosaldo senses in his own reading of Turner’s ethnography—the darker, mechanistic “steering” dimension residing in the processual model of incorporation. In general, Rosaldo observes, “Turner’s conclusions emphasize principles of social structure more than the human processes he so thickly dramatizes. . . . Culture and society thus have the function of regulating human behavior.”22

In addition to the political contest between reintegrative communitas and the resistive/resistant filiations of the border (“homogenous, unstructured communitas” in Turner is perceived as a potential coercive threat to Rosaldo’s marginals claiming difference), what also drives the border critique of Turner’s anthropological model is the implicit apolitical consciousness of the ritual liminar, his or her refusal to recognize the historically contingent power coordinates that inhere in positionality.
What, therefore, is missing in Turner is a conception and recognition of culture as political contestation: the battle over narrative power, the fight over who gets to (re)tell the story, and from which position. Thus Rosaldo’s chapter “Narrative Analysis” challenges traditional modes of ethnographic narrative, including the Manchester School’s elevation, in Rosaldo’s phrase, of “unified social drama[s]” as its (and, by association, Turner’s) characteristic mode of exposition. The problematic term is, of course, “unified,” for Rosaldo’s ultimate challenge to Turnerian ways of doing anthropology involves a recognition, indeed an embrace of “the social analyst’s multiple identities.”

For all his later nods to what Turner called “postmodern ways of thinking”—indeed, a recent reviewer speaks of the temptation “to view [Turner] as a pre-postmodernist”—Turner’s anthropology seems far removed from the project of borderlands anthropologists like Rosaldo, who insist, in James Clifford’s words, on a self-reflexive narrative mode—“a state of being in culture while looking at culture.” A number of scholars in history and anthropology,” Rosaldo noted in 1990, “now write as academics and as members of minority communities based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.” As a result, Rosaldo claimed, “The disciplines are undergoing change in part because once sovereign scholars must now engage in dialogue with natives who are both objects of analysis and analyzing subjects.” Such a critical perspective, resisting narrative incorporation, claiming the border as the political space conferring an enabling doubleness (or triplenness, etc.), is radically different from Turner’s ritual liminars, seeking transcendent communitas and a new, “unambiguous” self. Claiming the border amounts to a declaration of interdisciplinary—and narrative—freedom: the border, porous and open, emerges as a zone capable of nourishing a rich grid of “crisscrossed” (Rosaldo’s own keyword), multiple identities, a celebration of ambiguity as the condition of the postmodern self, and is now the space of real (i.e., political, and not “pure,” as in Turner) potential.

How would Victor Turner, a figure who challenged the structures of classic anthropology he inherited, who no doubt saw himself as a liminal figure (he was, it is reported, given two burial rites, a Mass to memorialize his committed Catholic self and an African burial according to Ndembu ritual) have responded to the current provenance of the border? I do not think he would have lamented, like some older new leftists do in our own time, the social and political fissures preventing consensus in the wake of identity politics; nor do I think he would have ungenerously explained—or
explained away—the advent of border theory as compensation for political erasure on the part of marginalized groups in the academy. In light of the collective testimony to his generosity of spirit and capacious imagination, I would like to think that Turner would have welcomed these challenges, revisions, and adjustments to the concept of liminality, seeing in critique the dialectical process of cultural and intellectual ferment that issues in new consciousnesses. "He enjoyed what was earthy, what was fecund, growing, seminal," Edith Turner informs us of her husband's (1960s-nourished?) cosmic consciousness. I would like to think that Turner would have recognized—and indeed embraced—the rich potential of the border perspective as a powerful regenerative-critical force for rearranging social relations along more open, fluid, democratic lines.

Still, it seems clear that despite the frequent invocation of his appealing rhetoric (how many of us continue to speak of "liminal" situations in our teaching?), Turnerian models of social analysis appear less helpful, less compelling than they once did. It may be that Turner's original vision of social process filled a methodological vacuum in American studies scholarship after the exhaustion of the myth-symbol school; after all, Bruce Kuklick's now-famous obituary for that hegemonic approach to cultural analysis came in 1972. In turn, it may be that the discourse of the border may only be the theoretical paradigm of the moment. My point, simply, is that Victor Turner's legacy to and influence upon American studies, once so pervasive—and persuasive—seems no longer able to persuade us, or dislodge us from our current positions along the various borders that comprise the always fluid scene of American studies.

**NOTES**

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2. I should mention that I, too, found Turner's theories of ritual process to possess formidable explanatory power: his models of cultural-social passage, the "subjunctive mood" expressive of communitas's utopian potential, and the ideological leveling that can follow in the wake of cultural breach appeared to explain everything I was engaged by as a graduate student in early American literature and in my subsequent research on
religious language and the question of the rhetorical linkage between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution.


4. In the largest sense, my subject involves the uses—or appropriation—of anthropological theory by scholars in American studies, of which this essay attempts to form a brief, recent chapter. The fuller narrative tracing this interdisciplinary practice would have to include, for example, the ways that figures such as Boas, Redfield, Benedict, Mead, Kroeber, perhaps the Lynds (as a model of community studies), etc. have influenced work in American studies. The essay would need to ask why certain anthropologists attain a kind of methodological and interpretive authority? Most recently that narrative would need to address the ongoing debates about the relations between history and anthropology (especially the impact of Geertz and the rise of ethnographic history—Rhys Isaac and the Melbourne Group is perhaps the prominent example. In the past, Geertz and Turner have, incorrectly I believe, been linked together on this subject; as anthropologist Sherry Ortner has explained, Geertz and Turner derive from very different genealogies in anthropology (Weber via Parsons for Geertz, Durkheim with a Marxist inflection via Max Gluckman for Turner). My observations remain limited to the impact and legacy of Victor Turner and the implicit revisions of his work by contemporary border theorists such as Renato Rosaldo. On the influence of the Melbourne Group upon ethnographic practice, see Clifford Geertz, “History and Anthropology,” *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 321–35 (and Rosaldo’s reply to Geertz in the same issue, 337–41); Jean-Christophe Agnew, “History and Anthropology: Scenes from a Marriage,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (1990): 29–50; and Rhys Isaac, “On Explanation, Text, and Terrifying Power in Ethnographic History,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6 (1993): 217–36. For an important overview of recent theorizing in anthropology, see Sherry Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 126–66 (see 128–30 on the different genealogies of Geertz and Turner).


8. “Turner’s commitment to political analysis was deeply influenced by the political life of the American 1960s, and it was during this decade that he wrote several explicitly political analyses,” observe Babcock and Macaloon (11). For the Turners’ life at Cornell, see Edith Turner, “From the Ndembu to Broadway.”

9. Vincent Crapanzano, “Liminal Recreations” (a review of Turner’s *From Ritual to Theater* [1982]), *TLS*, 27 Apr. 1984, 473. Crapanzano offers the following tough-minded reading of Turner’s experience in the 1960s: “It may be that a few months at
the Performing Garage can turn any professor into a *porte-parole* for bohemia, but Turner often had difficulty distinguishing the event from its gloss, its ideology, its exegesis. In a way, he was trapped in the fantasies of his own Anglo-American culture, with its modernist emphasis, its faith in the novel and the new, its celebration of inventiveness” (“Liminal Recreations,” 473). In this passage, Crapanzano begins the kind of historicizing of Turner that I try to build on this essay.

10. Stuart Hall, “The Hippies: An American ‘Moment,’” in *Student Power*, ed. Julian Nagel (London, 1969), 182, 173. Hall’s astonishing essay attests to the powerful fascination and attraction of the counterculture for contemporary academic “outsiders.” Despite voicing some skepticism concerning hippie “lifestyle,” Hall nevertheless sensed in this revolutionary moment the historical potential of new social arrangements. “It is in Utopia,” the emergent theorist of popular culture observes, “that future possibilities are rehearsed. . . . it is of such dreams that the revolutionary project is made” (201, 202).


19. A separate essay could be written about the relation between the 1960s and Turner’s own charismatic aspect as visionary-shaman figure, whose personal disillusionment and dissent from the structures (of anthropology) he inherited made him influential for an American studies seeking interdisciplinary models and theoretical legitimacy. “The description of certain rites of transition,” remarks Crapanzano, “may reflect less the reality of the ritual than the culture of the anthropologist” (Crapanzano, *Hermes’ Dilemma and Hamlet’s Desire: On the Epistemology of Interpretation* [Cambridge, Mass., 1992], 261). In addition, the implicit consensual model of cultural process in Turner made his theories popular during a period in American studies when the charting of “continuities,” from, say, the Puritans to the nineteenth century and beyond, shaped areas of scholarship.

20. Rosaldo, “Putting Culture in Motion,” in *Culture and Truth*, 96, 97. It should be remarked, however, that Rosaldo does view Turner as an oppositional figure in the challenge to classic ethnography. See “The Erosion of Classic Norms,” in *Culture and Truth*, 40–41.
23. Ibid., 141, 194.
Turner's influence is, generally, not apparent in most of the essays (American Anthropologist 94 [1992], 196–97).


26. See the essay "Border Crossings," in Culture and Truth for Rosaldo's fullest expression concerning border anthropology. "Crisscrossed by multiple identities" is on 216. In this respect, Ortner's criticism of symbolic anthropology's "underdeveloped sense of the politics of culture" seems relevant to Rosaldo's intervention. See "Theory in Anthropology," 132. James Clifford's qualification of Turner's ethnographic narrative seems relevant here as well: "Overall, Turner's ethnographies are unusually polyphonic, openly built up from quotations... He does not, however, do the Ndembu in different voices... All the voices of the field have been smoothed into expository prose of more-or-less interchangeable 'informants'" (The Predicament of Culture, 49). It is against such narrative smoothings that Rosaldo, following Clifford and other postmodern ethnographers, advocates the reflexive border position, which always contains a multitude of voices and personalities.


28. In making these observations I draw on the reflections of some of my colleagues (especially Josephine Lee) in the Five College Faculty Seminar on border theory during the 1993–94 academic year.