As the Gates of Jerusalem, so the Gates of Maḥuza: Defining Place in Diaspora

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Did not Rabbah bar Bar Ḥana state in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Jerusalem—if not for (the fact that) its gates were locked at night, would the Sabbath restrictions applicable to a public domain have been imposed on it?

And (has not) Ulla, too, stated that the city gateways of Maḥuza, if not for (the fact that) their doors are locked, would be subject to the restriction of a public domain?

B. Eruvin 6b, emphasis added

Dadurch, daß die Tür gleichsam ein Gelenk zwischen dem Raum des Menschen und alles, was außerhalb desselben ist, setzt, hebt sie die Trennung zwischen dem Innen und dem Außen auf. Gerade weil sie auch geöffnet werden kann, gibt ihre Geschlossenheit das Gefühl eines stärkeren Abgeschlossenseins gegen alles jenseits dieses Raumes, als die blossen ungegliederte Wand. Diese ist stumm, aber die Tür spricht.

Georg Simmel, Brücke und Tür, emphasis added

The topos of boundaries, boundary making and boundary crossing forms a red thread through Daniel Boyarin's oeuvre, from the methodological commitments¹ to the titular, as in Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity

¹ Mostly between what is in commonly referred to as Judaism and Christianity, e.g., Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); "Semantic Differences; or: ‘Judaism’/ ‘Christianity’,” in The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (ed. Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65–85.
(2004). Indeed, a reference to a well-known humorous folktale about boundary crossing opens that book:

Every day for 30 years a man drove a wheelbarrow full of sand over the Tijuana border crossing. The customs inspector dug through the sand each morning but could not discover any contraband. He remained, of course, convinced that he was dealing with a smuggler. On the day of his retirement from the service he asked the smuggler to reveal what it was that he was smuggling and how he had been doing so. “Wheelbarrows; I have been smuggling wheelbarrows, of course.”

The smuggler in the folktale exposes the porosity of any border, even the most heavily guarded of borders. To be sure, the smuggler is also a fitting figure of Boyarin himself, who smuggles the logos into Judaism, midrash into Christianity, radical Judaism into Paul’s epistles, and attraction to Christianity into the Talmud. So much of the oeuvre focuses on discursive boundary-making, and on the strategies by which collective identities are instituted, at the same time as they are exposed to be inherently unstable, thus retaining the ever-present potential to come undone.

To Boyarin the much-contested fenced, walled and lethal US-Mexico border functions as an analogy for the boundary between the cultural formations of Christianity and Judaism. He emphasizes two characteristics of geo-political borders that surely even today’s most essentialist and essentializing minds can agree to. First, they are historically conditioned, appearing and disappearing

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2 Border Lines, 1, identified by Boyarin as “humorous anecdote.” One might make an emendation that as a folktale this “anecdote” goes back centuries, and is told in countless versions applied to countless borders imposed on people who did not choose them. An internet search quickly results in attributions of a version of this tale to the wise fool Nasrudin of Sufi lore, here involving a donkey and straw at a generic border crossing in the Ottoman Empire of old: “Nasrudin used to take a donkey across a frontier every day, with the panniers loaded with straw. Since he admitted to being a smuggler when he trudged home every night, the frontier guards searched him again and again. They searched his person, staffed the straw, steeped it in water, even burned it from time to time. […] One of the customs officers met him years later. ‘You can tell me now, Nasrudin,’ he said. ‘Whatever was it that you were smuggling, when we could never catch you out?’ ‘Donkeys,’ said Nasrudin.” Biographical Encyclopaedia of Sufis: Central Asia and Middle East (ed. N. Hanif; New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2002), 335.

3 A side-glance at the study of border discourses in Chicano/a Studies, e.g. José David Saldivar, Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), may make one somewhat uneasy about the ethical underpinnings of the analogy here, but that is a different question.