

Peter Cashwell, *Along Those Lines: The Boundaries That Create Our World*. Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 237 pages, \$16.95 (paperback edition), ISBN 978-1-58988-092-4

*Along Those Lines* is a pleasant investigation about the diverse boundaries that people draw, more or less consciously. Some seem very real, others, imaginaries, yet both have concrete effects in our everyday life. Peter Cashwell, the author, can be credited for revealing the very reason of all these lines, as the subtitle sums it up: “the boundaries that create our world.” Not only people have deeply integrated them (as detailed in the section “What God Has Put Asunder” for instance, which explores moral boundaries), but they also crucially need them to actually apprehend the world. Therefore, “lines are just convenient tools for human activity” (13), be it the taxonomy that serves to classify species (“Names Will Never Hurt Me”), the borderline between existence and extinction (“The Undiscovered Country”), the lines we use to distinguish among genres (“Rock And a Hard Place”) or to basically divide genders (“Parts is Parts”). As suggested, the author considers a very wide array of lines. His holistic and vivid inquiry concerns the ways we operate all kinds of distinctions, as well as their common purpose, namely, to rationalize our environment, be it physical, temporal, sexual, natural, social, moral, etc.

The chapters combine to create an impressive and composite set. To put things in order, the various lines considered are distributed in two parts of approximately the same length (comprising eight chapters of about fifteen pages each). The first section, “Time and Space,” deals with historical and geographical examples. Peter Caswell, first considers the states’ lines, from a cultural, an economical, and more especially, a historical perspective in regards to the geographical drawing of the states and the dividing line opposing slavery to freedom (“State of The Union”). The second section, “Arts and Sciences,” looks at different attempts to make sense of our surroundings, and at the drawbacks as well of such rationalization. Particularly useful are the introductory chapters of each part. They provide an interesting insight into the dual nature of the line. “Maps and Legends” starts with the geometrical definition of the line, as infinite and unidimensional –hence triggering a comparison with God. But the author rather insists on the dividing purpose of it: “All lines are imaginary, established only because human beings need them for purposes of division” (18). Introducing the second part, “Just Lines on Paper” focuses on comics. Curiously putting aside the cultural distinction between Art and not-Art, Peter Cashwell addresses here the uniting function of the line while considering comics’ meaning-making process.

The idea to lead such an investigation about human-made boundaries first came to the author as he was crossing many state borders along his birding quest. Almost every chapter, if not all in fact, ends up making a connection with birding, which is probably less intentional than it is the result of a consuming hobby. Nevertheless, the author does not only rely on personal experiences (and the many trips he did with his father across the country), he also conveys the inputs of specialists he has met along the writing. First, his colleagues from Woodberry Forest School where he teaches English Literature: the Math teacher for the geometry of the line, the History teacher regarding the construction of the Union, and the Physics teacher who specialized in sports umpiring (see “The Starting Lineup”). Second, a diverse group ranging from audio engineer Mike Bread, sex and cognition psychologist, Abigail James, to artists such as Ursula Vernon or Shawn Smith, the latter being known for his voxels (“volumetric pixels” as detailed “Bricks and Morter” that addresses the border between digital and natural worlds). Third, ornithologists from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and more especially, Tim Gallagher, who

welcomed him as an intern for *Living Bird Magazine* (it is during this stay in Ithaca that the book was actually written).

Between these many references, Peter Cashwell manages subtle and habile transition, and his book is not devoid of humor, as shown by the “santorum” story for instance (in a chapter about eponyms: “History’s Greatest Monster”), or through the self-deceptive delineation of musical artists by a Pandora listener. This last example reveals the main issue revolving around the line: consensus. Whether it is the lines that we consistently debate about (genres) or lines that are so deeply anchored in our minds that we have trouble conceiving their social founding (genders), we nevertheless have to agree on divisions –or lack thereof– to build a cultural understanding of the natural world. As the author puts it: “the world we perceive is always perceived indirectly” (44). Therefore, those lines that we draw, some being very useful, and others, blindly discriminating, are always a cultural product that seemingly overlaps with nature.

As a matter of fact, we are doomed to draw lines that in the end happens to be eminently ambivalent. Despite its oneness feature, a line systematically generates a problematic dualism. Although Peter Cashwell points at this ambivalence to reveal the arbitrary feature of some lines, he does not really name it, nor does he explore it. Lines are highly paradoxical: visible and invisible, imaginary and real, abstract and concrete, cultural and natural. More essentially, they serve as both a uniting and a dividing artifact. For instance, the author acknowledges that some lines are made to be crossed (“Rite of Passage”), while others we do not quite govern, can only be crossed once, such as death. Yet, in both cases, the crossing in itself is the act that gives the line its very meaning; a statement that would need to be stressed explicitly. There is a very appropriate location in the book where this idea could have been emphasized: the introductory chapter of the second part that draws on comics. Following McCloud’s reflection about the way comics operate, Peter Cashwell introduces the “gutter” –the particular space separating two images– and the “closure” –the relation a reader creates between the distinct elements of a sequence. This is where the very essence of the line lies and how it works: by creating a difference that is at the very source of meaning (whether one considers Saussure’s linguistics or Bourdieu’s sociology, meaning only emerges from the act of bridging distinct entities).

A line, in order to acquire significance, should be envisioned as a borderline and a guideline at once. Now, coming to this abstract comment, can one really compare geographic, economic, political, biological, cultural, artistic or literary borders? It might well be so, provided that this structural dimension of the line has been conceived, acknowledged, and reflected upon, which is not done in the book. This is clearly not its aim, yet the reader is left with a mixed impression of richness and overabundance regarding the many examples in the books. Less is more: a rigorous selection of concrete illustrations would have allowed a deeper understanding of the line. The drawback of Peter Cashwell’s work resides in the fact that he points out a whole set of lines without underlining their different natures, thus, he relies only superficially on their common aspect. This being said, one can congratulate the author for his deconstructive attempt and for not imposing on the reader any particular thread.

Benoît Mauchamp  
Independent Scholar