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A Multidisciplinary Approach

Edited by
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5. Borders have never been linear: moving beyond the borderline map trap in political cartography

Rodrigo Bueno Lacy and Henk van Houtum

Draw the line: it's not a figure of speech. This is precisely how territories are brought into being.
—Denis Wood (1993, 68)

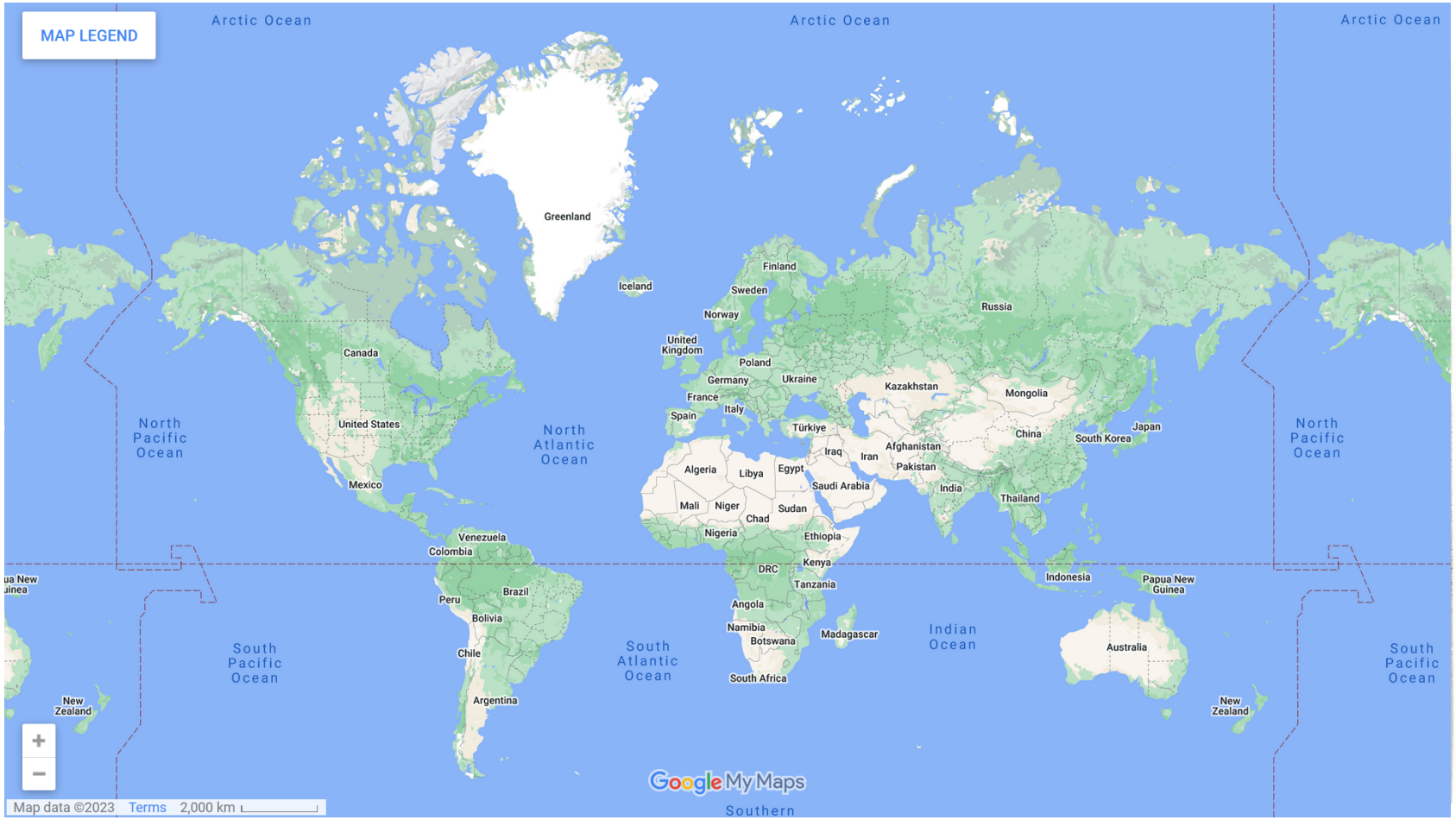
INTRODUCTION: THIS IS NÓT A BORDER

Figure 5.1 shows the whole surface of the Earth parceled into nation-states by a boundary which, symbolized by the borderline, has become such an unquestioned staple of *cartopolitical* representation (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2015, 2019; van Houtum 2012, 2024), that its grid constitutes the default template of political cartography (Boria 2015).

From school primers to Google Maps (Farman 2010, 877–878), borderlines make up one of the most recognizable cartographic templates. We argue that such carve-up of the world into homogeneous boxes has entrenched a state-centrism in cartography long enshrined in the choropleth of nation-states (heralded as a tool of colonial governance in the 16th century), which has become the hegemonic visualization of geopolitical variation, and the indispensable artefact of statecraft.

The standardization of nation-states as the sole independent variables endowed with geopolitical agency – and the only ones deemed worthy of scholarly and geopolitical attention – has deformed geography, history and our understanding of power relations, not least by depicting state borderlines even when the map's subject matter would have warranted a different visual design. Such chronic cartographic misconduct has deformed the visualization of geopolitical phenomena, whose dynamic cross-border entanglements have never ceased to defy such simplistic and misguided compartmentalizations (e.g., the myth of a strictly 'national' cuisine, economy, culture, etc.; Grandi 2020).

The extent of such widespread indifference to the deformed picture of world politics is perhaps best captured by one uncanny fact: even the interactive



Source: Google Maps' default Web Mercator template.

Figure 5.1 *The world map*

world map showcased by Google Maps (i.e., the most widely used navigation application worldwide) preserves a scientifically antiquated grid of national borderlines as its default backdrop – regardless of which layer the user decides to foreground (i.e., transit, traffic, biking, terrain, street view, wildfires, and air quality). Curiously, purely physiographical maps are also frequently drawn against this checkered background, thus making nation-states look as though they were features of the Earth's landscape as indisputable as tectonic plates. In fact, the borderline has come to be regarded as such a trivial icon of the modern cartographic template that world maps featuring the grid of nation-states are synonymous with a 'blank map'. We contend that such enduring reliance on the borderline map conjures up what geographer and border scholar Samuel W. Boggs called a *cartohypnosis*: a visual and cognitive illusion in which the modern map, a model of reality consciously designed as a tool of empire (Akerman 2009), has been subconsciously internalized to such an extent that it is mistaken for reality itself (Boggs 1947).

Counterintuitively, however, this state-centric way of seeing and mapping the world is neither natural nor has it been thoroughly scrutinized (with the exception of some notable works; see Boria 2015; Goettlich and Branch 2021; van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2024; Green 2018), for neither the line that divides a country from another nor the line that divides representation from reality are as clear-cut as 'realists' would have us believe (Ashley 1984; Wendt 1992; Fisher 2009). In fact, the irregular borderline that demarcates the typical silhouette of nation-states on our maps does not exist beyond the hegemonic political cartography that invents it. To begin with, the cartopolitical uniformity that the world map forces upon boundaries is inadequate, as can be easily corroborated through a simple exercise in 'comparative border photography' (Eker and van Houtum 2013): one can zoom into the territory of individual national borderlines on Google Maps and marvel at a border morphology that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, bears no resemblance to the abstract, uniform, and continuous lines depicted on political world maps (henceforth, also *borderline maps*).

Hence, we believe that it is analytically useful to conceptualize cartographic borderlines as iconographic adulterations of borderscapes on the ground, i.e., falsifications of the peculiar territorial aesthetics characterizing the physical and human geography that connects people, cultures and places across national jurisdictions (Chávez Chávez 1999). Unlike boundaries, borderscapes comprise not merely border-control infrastructure (e.g., booths, walls, barbed wire, guards, etc.), but also international roads, airways, sea lanes, tunnels, and other desired paths; uninterrupted topographic accidents and ecosystems; and everyday mobility patterns involving information, money and border-crossers (*Grenzgänger*) – both documented and undocumented – as well as the thick 'web of meaning' that mobility knits together, i.e., culture (Geertz 1973). Such

tireless cross-border migration engenders borderlands (*grenslanden*), whose integrating forces indefatigably sew together geographies otherwise sliced off by the borderline map's careless iconography (Eker and van Houtum 2013; Brambilla and van Houtum 2012).

Almost nowhere on Earth can one find uninterrupted, thin lines neatly severing national territories (Parker et al. 2009), and the few apparent exceptions (e.g., the floodlit fence between Pakistan and India) are belied by the relentless maintenance that state apparatuses need to invest in their otherwise fragile linearity – which, on closer examination, bifurcates into countless rhizomatic borders anyway (van Houtum 2012, 413–414; Bailey 2019). Even walls – arguably the cartographic borderline's closest correspondence on the ground – only intermittently overlap the national boundaries of merely 25% of the world's nation-states (WPR 2023): a territorial discontinuity that the political world map *fills in*. Although this iconological mismatch (i.e., the incongruence between an image and the socio-spatial contexts it represents) may appear trivial at first sight, its implications go far beyond mere cartographic error (Muller 1987).

We cannot stress enough the degree of distortion that the borderline exerts on our *way of seeing* the world, and thus on our way of acting upon it (Berger 1972). By uncritically relying on a hegemonic cartographic layout of national boundaries that do not exist as such, the borderline map fundamentally interferes with our perception of reality. The persistence of such a misfitting icon, we surmise, lies in its function as the elementary geopolitical grammar of modern cartography, which, since the Renaissance, has drawn boundaries among alleged races, nations and civilizations to compartmentalize the growing collection of faraway geographies coveted by imperial ambition (i.e., statesmen, merchants, and intellectuals; see Pedley 2005; Buisseret 1992).

Borderline maps have evolved as unparalleled epistemic artifacts whose formative, professional and official character has become central to the conduction of modern statecraft. They are veritable windows to contemporary and past notions of global space and history, and thus visual overviews of systems of representation, thought and action that inform the interaction among nation-states and global society: a worldview *objectified* in the synoptic image of the political world map (Cosgrove 2003; Brotton 2012; Debord 1967, 17). The borderline's deceiving cartographic geometry has monopolized the iconographic delineations that divide friends from foes (Schmitt 1932), thus hijacking the fundamental categories of a geopolitical discourse that thrives on essentialized antagonistic dichotomies legitimized by nation-states and nationalism (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 194–195).

Furthermore, the geopolitical distortion contrived by cartographic borderlines represents a surprising blind spot in border studies, especially given that the boundary – i.e., the territorial jurisdiction of nation-states represented by

cartographic borderlines (Kristof 1959; Prescott 1965) – has sustained relentless scholarly critique since the 1990s (see e.g. Newman and Paasi 1998). Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of *hyperreality* (what we describe as an 'impostor reality'), we craft a conceptual lens to analyze the normalized yet spurious portrayal of the world as a collection of linear boxes: an image nurtured not only by consistent cartographic reproduction but also an imagination inculcated by texts, speeches, imagery, and the everyday practice of local and global statecraft – i.e., a specific form of cartohypnosis built into the global geopolitical discourse that we dub *the borderline map trap.*

Since an 'aesthetic turn' in border studies is well underway (Moze and Spiegel 2022), we make a plea for the field to embrace an iconological approach for the study of borders, i.e., a focus on the dialectics between border aesthetics and the border narratives, images and practices they naturalize (Schimanski and Nyman 2021; Schimanski and Wolfe 2019). We conclude by outlining the dire geopolitical repercussions of relying on a cartography of borderlines that hampers our ability to distinguish between reality and simulation, not least by representating world politics in a manner systematically detached from the very external reality which it purportedly stands for, thus encouraging the production of geopolitical knowledge and practice based on mirages that do not exist beyond the map.

BORDERS HAVE NEVER BEEN LINEAR

The mismatch between the cartographic depiction of boundaries and their scientific conceptualization is not only a pending task of a technical nature, but chiefly a symptom of a conceptual flaw (Wälther et al. 2023, 1). Although border studies used to associate borders with national boundaries, this synonymity started to be questioned by behavioral geographers during the 1960s (Minghi 1963; Paasi 2005, 664), and finally came crumbling down with the constructivist turn throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Newman and Paasi 1998; van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). The field of border studies now dominantly looks away from the national boundary as the *locus classicus* of border research, and instead traces the wider social processes that shape it (Newman 2006b; O'Dowd 2010; Vallet 2020; Jones 2012). Accordingly, border scholars have shifted from *borderism* to *bordering*: from a concern for static national boundaries to a broader socio-spatial preoccupation for the ways in which the discourse that legitimizes national borders is reflected afar from them: a wider concern for the fluctuating demarcation, classification and hierarchization of difference wherever it may happen (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; van Houtum 2021).

Instead of assuming that borders are synonymous with boundaries and that these coincide with the cartographic iconography of borderlines, as though

these were *natural* topographic accidents, border scholars today assume that wherever geopolitical (or socio-spatial) markers of difference might be found, they are the result of contingent and contextual *borderwork*, i.e., the product of someone's vision, construction and maintenance (Hooper and Kramsch 2004; Rumford 2008). In other words, whereas border scholars used to think of the border as a self-evident fact located along coordinates provided by the national boundary, the field's 'processual shift' turned the border's location into a question to be ceaselessly elucidated. Ironically, this conceptual refinement has trapped border studies in a new paradigm: the notion that borders are *everywhere* (Rumford 2013, 169), which was prominently articulated by Étienne Balibar as a counterintuitive critique on the frivolous hubris for a 'borderless world' that swept through the world after the fall of Berlin's wall (Johnson et al. 2011, 61; Newman 2006a):

> Borders are vacillating. This does not mean that they are disappearing. Less than ever is the contemporary world a 'world without borders'. On the contrary, borders are being both multiplied and reduced in their localization and their function, they are being thinned out and doubled, becoming border zones, regions, or countries where one can reside and live. (Balibar 1998, 220)

While such insight has inspired *non-state-centric* theorizations on borders, which privilege mobility over stasis (Rumford 2013), we would argue that its underlying hypothesis is fundamentally flawed. The impression that borders have suddenly mushroomed entails a 'deterritorial trap', i.e., the persuasion that borders have scattered so much that they have become ubiquitous. Yet, instead of questioning the underlying abstraction that endows the border with meaning, Balibar's 'dispersion hypothesis' betrays a mental image still rooted in cartographic borderlines. How could borders be 'vacillating' unless they were perceived as stable lines to begin with? How to understand the meaning of borders *multiplying yet shrinking in their localization and function* without already assuming what a 'multiplied' or 'shrunk' geometrical figure would look like? Either the shape of the borderline is readily assumed, or these are mystifying elucubrations. Moreover, the dispersion hypothesis downplays the historical cross-border interdependencies and intrinsic international relationality of laws, politics, identities, cultures, economies, and populations (Delanty 1996, 2006).

No geographical phenomena are constrained by national boundaries, for people, culture and space are all inherently woven into a global community as a matter of history and everyday life, and they cannot be considered autarkic. Groundbreaking research in genetic admixture has proven 'that migration patterns of the human race are more complicated than anticipated. Ultimately, we all have a migration background of some sort' (Gross 2015). Hence, migration

and hybridization are inherent to human history. Notions of either a completely independent national economy, a distinct culture, or a pure *demos* are theoretical constructs lacking real-world validity – existing solely within the discourse of populist demagogues or in the standard map of a borderline-fragmented world. Ergo, a historical examination of territorial formation should not merely reveal that the relation between borders and territory is becoming ever more complex (Parker et al. 2009, 583), but also the everlasting fact that borders have never been lines in the first place. Consequently, what ought to be 'vacillating' is not the understanding of linear borders per se, but instead the notion that there ever were linear borders at all.

Proof that the *essential* image of the border remains deeply anchored in the depiction of cartographic borderlines is that border studies, despite a sharp critical turn, remain remarkably focused on the border's most immediate evocation: the national boundary. Despite attempts to study borders beyond the nation-state's borderline (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019), the methodological nationalism inspired by this icon represents an enduring territorial trap – one into which even border studies persistently keeps falling (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002; Agnew 1994).

We believe that the hegemonic image of the borderline has clouded border scholars' conceptualizations of the border as a supposedly *sui generis*, dispersed condition, thereby preventing recognition of an immemorially connected world. For example, pioneering border metaphors such as *sutures* may evoke the patchiness, permeability and fragility of national boundaries (Salter 2012), while *arteries* (Vogt 2017), *theatres* (Campos-Delgado 2022), or *spectacles* (De Genova 2013) may conjure up either the diffuse spatial capillarity emanating from boundaries or the state-choreographed inauthenticity of the geopolitics they enable (van Houtum 2012, 416; Debord 1967). Yet, such conceptualizations – albeit rich and inspiring – still seem to presuppose either the nation-state borderline – a.k.a. the boundary – as the instinctive geometrical pattern, site of convergence, or main stage where borders should be sought. Thus, the paradigm of border dispersion has not only identified an apocryphally novel border condition, but also implicitly refuted what may be the most revolutionary insight for border studies: that neither national borders nor any other kind have ever been linear – except in the worldview of ruling elites, which has been materialized as state-centric cartography.

Even concepts such as *borderlands,* which have been tailored to revise 'the assumption that important borders are always state borders' – not least by by emphasizing the *borderwork* that 'ordinary people play' in their construction (Rumford 2013, 169–170) and the *borderscapes* that they contrive (Brambilla et al. 2016) – seem to take the national boundary as their self-evident geometry of reference (e.g., Nicol and Konrad 2016). The same goes for conceptualizations of borders that seek to define them by their technology or politics,

be it new border walls and fences (Jones 2009), biometric passports (Amoore 2006), or expanded security practices at airports and border crossings (Salter 2008; Sparke 2006; Johnson et al. 2011, 61). Since these critical theorizations evince a cartographically inspired 'borderlinear image' as their primordial abstract model, we suggest that the border has so far had a neglected cartographic ontology.

Plainly put, there seems to be a tension between state-of-the-art theorizations on borders as ceaselessly dynamic social constructs extending far away from the national borderline; and the dominant empirical concerns of border studies. For all the talk about deterritorializing borders, 'border studies has struggled to elaborate a set of concepts that would contribute to a more general theory of borders', while the focus of most border scholars remains confined to their 'own country's borders and borderlands' (Walther et al. 2023, 1–2). Tellingly, this inconsistency is not unprecedented. Already in 1908, George Simmel wrote what has become perhaps one of the most beloved quotations among border scholars (e.g., Paasi 2012, 2303): 'the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially' (Simmel 1908, 697).[1] Although written long before the processual turn took over border studies, Simmel appears to have been struck by an analogous epiphany. Why do recurrent attempts to reconceptualize the border as a shared social perception rather than as a tangible object keep backsliding into either the cartographic, state-centric image of the borderline, and what appears to us as border scholars' preeminent preoccupation with national boundaries?[2]

THE BORDERLINE MAP TRAP

Our suspicion is that the border as a radical abstraction (i.e., a primeval mental image) has been impervious to repeated exhortations to renounce its persistent iconographic and territorial referents (i.e., the cartographic borderline and the jurisdiction of the national boundary) because its ontology has been misdiagnosed. Although the border cannot be reduced to either the borderline fabricated by the map, to the materiality of the national boundary, or to the ceaselessly dynamic process that border studies has found it to be (Wilson and Donnan 2012, 4), all these aspects ought to be synthesized as necessary components of its definition. This, in turn, demands an effort to integrate them in a semiotic conceptualization of the border that points to the borderline as its necessary yet insufficient element – i.e., a definition purposefully tweaked to move away from the widespread misperception of the border as a line, while keeping in mind that such convention cannot be simply dismissed, for it remains the dominant abstraction fuelling geopolitical discourse.

Put differently, the conceptualization of the border should be able to explain the feedback between the cartographic borderline and the geopolitical

discourses that it crystallizes and enables (images, narratives and practices (Müller 2008)); which in turn simultaneously reify, reflect, nurture, deform, and amplify it (e.g., maps, nationalist historiographies, and passport controls). Given the mismatch between representation and practice that complicates the study of borders, we would like to propose the analytical reconceptualization of the cartographic borderline as a *hyperreality* (Baudrillard 1981): an image of the world that fundamentally distorts – or even invents – it, yet has become 'real' through power's favor, which has made it seem undeniable through pervasive representations and normalizing ritualizations across media, education, politics and society.

This hyperreality is materialized in the unrivaled geopolitical synopsis that world maps bring to life, first as cartographic image and subsequently as geopolitical practice (Branch 2011): an internal self-fertilization in which the cartographic iconography of borderlines serves as an authoritative guide for relations of power on the ground (i.e., statecraft), thus making the world in its own image – a self-reinforcing epistemic process akin to a *cartopolitical tautology*. Due to its cultural hegemony as the unquestioned background of most political maps (Gramsci 1977), the borderline should be regarded as part of a *self-referential worldview* inhabiting an ontological limbo between reality and representation, i.e., a collective delusion and thus reality (Seth 2021).

This approach exposes the borderline as an impostor reality conjured by the peerless power that maps exert on the way 'map-conscious' polities think about the world (Boggs 1947, 469; Harley 2009). Serving as portentous vessels on which borderlines travel through history and space (Beyer et al. 2018), world maps commandeer much of our geopolitical discourse – not least by rendering, all at once, an entire geopolitical system of thought, representation and practice, which dissimulates its chronopolitical entrapment in the cherry-picked historiography and mythologization of the nation-state behind the façade of a 'timeless' human history, anachronistically defined by the national characters and fates of our present (Klinke 2013).

To understand how such hyperreality operates, it is key to recognize the relation between *little images* and *big geopolitics* (Bueno Lacy 2020, 21), or how seemingly insignificant visual artifacts and their iconography (e.g., world maps and their borderlines) influence the most spectacular struggles for power across global space (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2019). To this end, it is key to employ an iconological methodology that shows how an image of the world fragmented by national borderlines has traveled through history – or perceptions of it (Southgate 2014) – and space on board of maps, which have performed as vehicles for their preservation and transmission (i.e., *Bilderfahrzeuge*; Warburg 1927, 1932). We contend that the hegemony of this borderlinear image throughout recent history has laid the grounds for a system of knowledge and thought that has unequally shaped the way people around

the world perceive their place in it (i.e., a global episteme of nations, civilizations and their putative hierarchies). Moreover, we wish to suggest that there is a largely unexplored historical process through which the borderline has become an integral part of a *worldview* which, objectivized in our maps, hides history, relationality, and overall, the arbitrary and self-serving imposition of realities that we take for granted (Debord 1967, 17).

In order to bring to light the circular epistemology of the borderline, it is first crucial to theorize the world map as a *unique* – and undertheorized – visual artifact offering a synoptic view of geopolitical phenomena that one cannot discern from a satellite, for the visualization that we have of them exists only in world maps. Unlike the borderline world map, the Earth's spheroidal shape affords astronauts only a partial view at any given time, which is devoid of the *diagrammatic* iconography that political maps employ to visualize and narrate complex geopolitical phenomena (e.g., arrows to represent movement; colors to distinguish countries, drawings and text to evoke non-state actors and their respective actions; legends to label topography and demographic variation; icons to signify migration, borders and death, etc.; see van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020a).

In fact, the *overview effect* experienced by astronauts looking at Earth endows them with 'an all-encompassing view of Earth [...] obscuring demographic differences and national boundaries. Taken together, these features may dispose the viewer to an enhanced sense of international unity and perhaps even humanitarian attitude' (Yaden et al. 2016, 6). Contrastingly, the borderline world map offers an image of the Earth so discrepant that it triggers the opposite reaction to contemplating the planet from a satellite: not a vision of shared humanity, but a Tolkienesque fantasy of linearly bounded nations enmeshed in epics where fetishized flags, cartoonish stereotypes, and ubiquitous propaganda clash. This theatre reflects a global imperial history that has established a hegemonic system of knowledge and practice – one shaped by supposed racial and civilizational hierarchies, where territorial conquest and might have been turned into right.

The borderline world map produces a misanthropic effect: by favoring the nation-state as the fundamental form of political organization (Branch 2014, 100–119), it makes the misleading iconological suggestion that the juridico-political boundaries of nation-states constitute not only the fundamental visual unit of political cartography's design, but also a physiographical materiality as palpable as mountain ranges. This is the borderline map trap: the implicit visual grammar that maps enforce on onlookers, who interpret the world unwittingly misled by an optical illusion known as 'the strategic gaze', i.e., the gullible cartographic misapprehension that the state-centric 'blank map of the world' is the equivalent of an objective snapshot of global reality.

This strategic gaze breeds a cartohypnosis; the world map is internalized as the *only* visual referent of an Earth carved into nation-states: an image which, unsurprisingly, is reflected not only by political maps on, for example, migration, war, and economics; but also by the writings, representations and practices that shape geopolitical discourse (Ó Tuathail 1996, 30–33). Surreptitiously, this 'view from nowhere' spatializes the political myth of nationalism while concealing the history and inequitous power relations responsible for turning the nation-state into a seemingly *natural* geopolitical manifestation (Biggs 1999).

HOW THE 'BLANK WORLD MAP' IS IDEOLOGICALLY LOADED

As Jordan Branch has shown, the invention of modern territoriality (i.e., the nation-state) is not a historically mystifying 'chicken-and-egg' enigma, but a well-documented – though counterintuitive – case of what we could term *cartogenesis*: the map has preceded the territory (Branch 2014, 68). This is a crucial insight: the image of the nation-state as a neatly bounded place enclosed by the cartographic borderline has not only preceded boundary walls, but *cartolinear* figments dividing the Earth into a crooked grid of well-demarcated, monolithically colored, and seemingly autonomous 'boxes' have acted as a hegemonic iconographic vehicle carrying the ideal of nationalism throughout the last centuries (Wood 1993, 68–70; 1992; van Houtum, 2024).

The historicization of the borderline is key to understand its meaning, for its standardization coincides with 'the rise of modern nation-states in the 19th century and with the mass diffusion of maps in schools and by the media' (Schippers 2001, 27). Contemporary political maps still rely on a template checkered by political borderlines that started to become a cartographic fixture only in 1815 (Biggs 1999, 390). This was a time when the incipient idea of the nation-state as the container of a homogeneous population characterized by a timeless culture and defined by well-demarcated borderlines started to be echoed by proponents of scientific racism (Gould 1996). Naturalists like the Swiss Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) began to conflate national differences with the allegedly polygenic origins (i.e., multiple and unrelated) of the human species (Bueno-Hernández et al. 2023, 27) – a reworking of the Hellenic myth of autochthony infused with nineteenth-century social Darwinism (King 2019). It is not hard to speculate why the borderline became hegemonic during the heyday of European imperialism, a time when the dominant model of political organization that the borderline represented (i.e., the nation-state) was being elevated as the 'natural' spatial manifestation of a stratified human worth by an emerging 'scientific' (i.e., nativistic) discourse advocating an alleged hierarchy among 'human races'.

The borderline and the racism it spells are complementary tenets of the 'organic theory of the state' (Kristof 1960, 21–28; Tunander 2001), a political myth that anthropomorphizes nation-states as though they were living individuals who draw their 'vitality' from homogeneity and thus could deteriorate and die as a consequence of miscegenation with 'lesser races' (Haushofer 1939, 15). In this tradition, the borderline carries with it not only the endorsement of nationalism, but also the insidious sanctioning of racism: a cartographic justification of *Blut und Boden* (Balibar 1991; Rutland 2021). Whereas nationalism fosters the conviction in essentially distinct 'human races' (i.e., nations), which should each inhabit their ancestral homelands – or else acquire it through expansion into 'vital space' (*Lebensraum*; see Jacobsen 1981) – racism provides the theoretical justification to keep 'lesser' races separated from the 'better' ones (e.g., Günther 1922), and thus constitutes the colonial vindication of geopolitical segregation and exploitation (i.e., apartheid and extermination; see Lindqvist 1992).

The commonly held assumption that a strict national boundary (i.e., the borderline) is a precondition for national prosperity travelled from 19th-century sicentific racism into the worldview of Karl Haushofer, the main theorist of Nazi Geopolitics (a.k.a. *Geopolitik* or Classical Geopolitics), who regarded this geographical discipline as a science of the 'political Vital Form [i.e., the nation] in the natural habitat [*Lebensraum*] of its earth-bound nature conditioned by historical movement' (Haushofer n.d.).[3] The cartographic borderline should thus be regarded as the visual testament of a recent historical paradigm of political organization, i.e., nationalism: 'a principle which holds that a political and national unit should be congruent' and thus the iconographic foundation of a worldview that conditions the viewer to imagine the national communities that have mushroomed since the late eighteenth century (i.e., nation-states), as though they were immutable agents of a predestinated human ecology, history and reality (Hobsbawm 1990, 9; Anderson 1983). Since the borderline epitomizes the fundamental principle of antagonistic essentialist binaries in which much of geopolitical discourse is grounded (e.g., rich and poor, 'first' and 'third' world, Global South and North, civilized and uncivilized, 'the West' and 'non-West', etc.), it could be regarded as a Rorschach inkblot laying bare the surreptitious anxiety that haunts all nationalisms: a fear for the dilution of the nation-state's homogeneous character, particularly as consequence of the mobility of 'lesser' races across its phenotype, culture and space – i.e., the classical existential apprehension of slave-based European societies (Tesfahuney 1998; Davidson 1980).

Contrary to what most people may suspect, the 'blank map' of political cartography is thus heavily ideologically loaded. We believe that it should be regarded as the iconographic repository of a global paradigm of political organization according to which nation-states encapsulate the fundamental

unit of geopolitical agency and analysis for the study of world politics (Singer 1961), thus endorsing a wider discourse that idealizes the sovereignty, homogeneity and timelessness of nation-states. By depicting national borderlines as the most relevant political communities worthy of cartographic visualization, the borderline map turns such misleading drawings into facts sanctioned by journalistic reporting, scientific analysis, legal codification (e.g., public international law), and geopolitical practice (e.g., international diplomacy and war) (Biggs 1999).

Moreover, the borderline map's deceiving emptiness concocts an illusion concealing a stealthy but extraordinarily influential power discourse, which John Agnew designated as *the territorial trap* (1994): a fundamental misperception of world politics rooted in taking for granted the nation-state as the factual manifestation of its ideal, i.e., a world of *anachronistically homogeneous autarkies* (i.e., spuriously timeless and self-sufficient geopolitical entities). Although Agnew did not elaborate on how cartography conjures up the illusion of a territory that does not exist beyond the map's representation (i.e., how 'the map is not the territory'; see Korzybski 1933, 58), his ambition to understand the shifting dialectics between ideal types of spatial power and world politics throughout historical epochs persistently evokes the borderline-ridden map (Agnew 1999).

As a visual artifact, the borderline world map inspires a constellation of static, stratified and statistic perceptions of space, history and culture (i.e., a cartopolitics; see Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2019, 586; van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2024). It is hard to overstate the relevance of such an illusion, which conjured up by 'boxes' delineated by zigzagging borderlines, evokes an assemblage of geographical imaginations that have coalesced into the only synoptic image of the world's political organization we all share. As an assembly line of global geopolitical imaginations, the borderline map invents a hierarchy of peoples, cultures and places across the world that reflect the history of European imperialism and globalization – without confessing it (Boal 2007; Barder 2019). Since the dawn of European empires in the fifteenth century, the map has been a key technology of colonial governance that Europe's metropolitan elites have refined throughout centuries as an ever-evolving solution to the problem of faraway governance (Branch 2014, 100–119): an image that global capitalism's centers of power have crafted by representing themselves embellished by their pride, while misrepresenting others through the broken lens of unabashed prejudice (Wolf 2010).

Appraised within its historical context (i.e., European imperialism and global nation-state building), the borderline map can be credited with having been one of the most loyal tools of imperialism, colonialism, and globalization – one of the most accomplished architects of modernity. It is sobering to realize that the very image of 'the world' that we employ to depict geopolitical phenomena

derives from what is perhaps the quintessential product of European imperialism: a Euro-centric and Euro-aggrandizing version of the world popularized by Mercator and the maps he inspired (Wintle 1999). This contraption constitutes the epitome of European techno-ideological production: an image of the world that can be extrapolated to an entire system of geopolitical thought, representation, and practice, which in turn reifies and validates it. It is only through world maps that we can ever see geopolitical phenomena which, due to their sheer magnitude and complexity, cannot be fully captured by any other technological means. Cartographic imaginations such as 'the West' (Henrich 2020) as well as 'the Orient' (Said 1978) – shaped by state- and Euro-centric conventions – are sustained by the formidable body of knowledge and action they engender. These imaginations, in turn, underpin the national geographies and histories that serve as socio-spatial blueprints for state-building, border regimes, migration systems, and racial politics (Walia 2021).

The implications of this worldview are dire, for the iconography of border linearity serves as a crucial accomplice to representations of a world without human beings: a pervasive cartopolitical misperception that we have earlier described as a form of 'cartographic cleansing' (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020a, 212; van Houtum 2012). Through border linearity, the world's rich geographical diversity is dissolved into homogeneous nation-states whose boundaries are supposed to confine the movement of the populations they contain (Hall 1992). By relying on this essentialist grid of nation-states, borderline maps reproduce a *de facto* order of nativistic classifications that is artificially maintained by a biopolitical border regime which, by design, makes the crossing of its lines look like an anomaly (e.g. migration), thereby co-creating and legitimizing geopolitical hyperrealities that *other* the world along the counterfeit lines of *unnatural* communities (Foucault 1978; Anderson 1983).

Lapidary proof of the stubbornness driving such an unscientific discourse on borders is the necropolitics that characterize border regimes all around the world today (Mbembe 2003; Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023). The seemingly unstoppable power grab by necropolitical projects of an ethno-nationalist persuasion across the EU – and elsewhere – attest to the success of a worldview predicated on the very conceptualization of boundaries that border studies left behind three decades ago. We surmise that, if racism appears so natural and incontestable to so many people and governments today, it is because the formidable body of cross-disciplinary discourses that underlie racism rely on a spurious world image that remains uncontested (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2015): the borderline map and the worlds it creates and inspires.

CONCLUSION

We have leveled an iconological critique against the linear geometry underlying the hegemonic conceptualization of borders captured by the cartographic borderline. This image, we have argued, constitutes a fundamental misrepresentation of the world that distorts global relations of power across global space: by conjuring up the illusion of a world *naturally* fragmented in nation-states, it legitimizes an entire system of thought based on racial prejudice and the regimes of selective immobilization it underpins. We have contended that such geopolitical reality amounts to a hyperreality: an impostor reality that traps political communities in a self-destructive quest to restrain human mobility – ultimately, to their own detriment. This self-fulfilling prophecy is the borderline map trap we have identified: an autoimmune disorder rooted in the unwarranted emphasis on human difference that fictional borderlines stress at the expense of a vaster human common ground that they suppress (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020b, 2024). Ultimately, by forcing us to think in boxes, the borderline map persuades us to create them in knowledge and space, thus unleashing a vicious circle that keeps us trapped in a world that does not exist beyond the limitations of our infertile political imagination (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Our plea is thus to take the processual turn in border studies seriously by exploring the border's iconological ontology and its cultural, social and geopolitical spillover. It is time to free the map and see borderline maps for what they are: not mere reflections of power but *power itself.*

NOTES

1. The original text in German reads: 'Die Grenze ist nicht eine räumliche Tatsache mit soziologischen Wirkungen, sondern eine soziologische Tatsache, die sich räumlich formt'.
2. Just to be clear: the authors of this chapter are none the wiser.
3. In the original German: 'politischen Lebensform im natürlichen Lebensraum in ihrer Erdgebundenheit und Bedingtheit durch geschichtliche Bewegung'.

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