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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
Designed by Heather Hensley
Typeset in Warnock Pro by Keystone
ambivalent nexus of politics and violence are never far from view. To observe these dual tendencies is not merely to make the banal but necessary point that borders always have two sides, or that they connect as well as divide. Borders also play a key role in producing the times and spaces of global capitalism. Furthermore, they shape the struggles that rise up within and against these times and spaces—struggles that often allude problematically, but in rich and determinate ways, to the abolition of borders themselves. In this regard, borders have become in recent years an important concern of research and political and artistic practice. They are sites in which the turbulence and conflictual intensity of global capitalist dynamics are particularly apparent. As such they provide strategic grounds for the analysis and contestation of actually existing globalization.

What Is a Border?

In an influential essay titled “What Is a Border?,” Étienne Balibar writes of the “polysemy” and “heterogeneity” of borders, noting that their “multiplicity, their hypothetical and fictive nature” does “not make them any less real” (2002, 76). Not only are there different kinds of borders that individuals belonging to different social groups experience in different ways, but borders also simultaneously perform “several functions of demarcation and territorialization—between distinct social exchanges or flows, between distinct rights, and so forth” (79). Moreover, borders are always overdetermined, meaning that “no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states” but is always “sanctioned, reduplicated and relativized by other geopolitical divisions” (79). “Without the world-configuring function they perform,” Balibar writes, “there would be no borders—or no lasting borders” (79). His argument recalls, in a very different theoretical context, that developed in 1950 by Carl Schmitt in *The Nomos of the Earth* (2003), a text that maintains that the tracing of borders within modern Europe went hand in hand with political and legal arrangements that were designed to organize an already global space. These arrangements, including different kinds of “global lines” and geographical divisions, provided a blueprint for the colonial partitioning of the world and the regulation of relations between Europe and its outsides. To put it briefly, the articulation between these global lines of colonial and imperialist expansion and the drawing of linear boundaries between European and Western states has constituted for several centuries the dominant motif of the global geography organized by capital and state. Obviously, this history was neither peaceful nor linear.

The history of the twentieth century, which was characterized by the turmoil of decolonization and the globalization of the nation-state and its linear borders in the wake of two world wars, witnessed an explosion of this political geography. Europe was displaced from the center of the map. The U.S. global hegemony, which seemed uncontested at the end of the Cold War, is rapidly giving way, not least through the economic crisis that marks the passage from the first to the second decade of the twenty-first century. On the horizon is a more variegated and unstable landscape of global power, which can no longer be fully described with such concepts as unilaterialism and multilateralism (Haass 2008). New continental spaces emerge as sites of uneasy integration, regional interpenetration, and political, cultural, and social mobility. Although this is a long and doubtlessly unfinished process, we can identify several factors at play in its unfolding. Devastating wars, anticolonial upheavals, changing patterns of communication and transport, geopolitical shifts, financial bubbles and busts—all have contributed to re-drawing the world picture. Furthermore, under the pressure of class struggles and interrelated contestations of race and gender, the capitalist mode of production continues to undergo momentous and uneven transformations. A crucial aspect of these changes is the realignment of relations between the state and capital—sometimes seen to work in tandem, at other times understood to exist in logical contradiction—but always implicated in shifting regimes of exploitation, dispossession, and domination.

If the political map of the world and the global cartography of capitalism were never entirely coincidental, they could once be easily read off one another. In the post–Cold War world, the superposition of these maps has become increasingly illegible. A combination of processes of “denationalization” (Sassen 2006) has invested both the state and capital with varying degrees of intensity and an uneven geometry of progression. In particular, the national denomination of capital has become an increasingly less significant index for the analysis of contemporary capitalism. In this book, we tackle this problem, elaborating the concept of “frontiers of capital” and investigating the relations between their constant expansion since the origin of modern capitalism and territorial boundaries. Although there has always been a constitutive tension between these relations, the development of capitalism as a world system has given shape to successive forms of articulation between the demarcations generated by economic processes and the borders of the state. One of our central points is that contemporary capital, characterized by processes of financialization and the combination of heterogeneous labor and accumulation regimes, negotiates the expansion of its frontiers with much more complex assemblages of power and law,
which include but also transcend nation-states. Looking at the expansion of capital’s frontiers and considering the proliferation of political and legal boundaries, we are thus confronted with a geographical disruption and a continuous process of rescaling. A deeply heterogeneous global space corresponds to this process, and the border provides a particularly effective angle from which to investigate its making.

Meanwhile, the crisis of cartographical reason (Farinelli 2003), which has been at the center of debate between geographers since the early 1990s, has raised epistemological questions that are of great relevance for the study of the material transformation of borders. The increasing complexity of the relation between capital and state (as well as between their respective spatial representations and productions) is one of the factors at play in this crisis. This has given rise to a certain anxiety surrounding the figure and institution of borders, questioning their capacity to provide stable reference points and metaphors with which to geometrically order and frame the world (Gregory 1994; Krishna 1994; Painter 2008).

Borders today still perform a “world-configuring function,” but they are often subject to shifting and unpredictable patterns of mobility and overlapping, appearing and disappearing as well as sometimes crystallizing in the form of threatening walls that break up and reorder political spaces that were once formally unified. They cross the lives of millions of men and women who are on the move, or, remaining sedentary, have borders cross them. In places like the Mediterranean or the deserts between Mexico and the United States, they violently break the passage of many migrants. At the same time, borders superimpose themselves over other kinds of limits and technologies of division. These processes are no less overdetermined than those of the modern world order, but the ways in which they configure the globe has dramatically changed. Rather than organizing a stable map of the world, the processes of proliferation and transformation of borders we analyze in this book aim at managing the creative destruction and constant recombing of spaces and times that lie at the heart of contemporary capitalist globalization. In this book we do not aim to discern the shape of a future world order. Rather, we investigate the present disorder of the world and try to explain why it is highly unrealistic to think of the future in terms of a return to some version of Westphalian order.

We know that the border is not a comfortable place to live. “Hatred, anger and exploitation,” wrote Gloria Anzaldúa over twenty years ago in describing the background for the emergence of what she called the “new Mestiza,” “are the prominent features of this landscape” (1987, 19). Walls, grating, and barbed wire are the usual images that come to mind when we think about borders, whether that between Mexico and the United States, those in the occupied Palestinian territories, the “fence of death” constructed around the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in north Africa, or the many gated communities that have sprung up all over the world to protect the privileged and shut out the poor. We are prone to see borders as physical walls and metaphorical walls, such as those evoked by the image of Fortress Europe. This seems even more the case after the events of September 11, 2001, when borders became crucial sites of “securitization” investment within political rhetoric as much as the actual politics of control. We are painfully aware of all of this. Yet we are convinced that the image of the border as a wall, or as a device that serves first and foremost to exclude, as widespread as it has been in recent critical studies, is misleading in the end. Isolating a single function of the border does not allow us to grasp the flexibility of this institution. Nor does it facilitate an understanding of the diffusion of practices and techniques of border control within territorially bound spaces of citizenship and their associated labor markets. We claim that borders are equally devices of inclusion that select and filter people and different forms of circulation in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures. Our argument thus takes a critical approach to inclusion, which in most accounts is treated as an unalloyed social good. By showing how borders establish multiple points of control along key lines and geographies of wealth and power, we see inclusion existing in a continuum with exclusion, rather than in opposition to it. In other words, we focus on the hierarchizing and stratifying capacity of borders, examining their articulation to capital and political power whether they coincide with the territorial limits of states or exist within or beyond them. To analyze the pervasive character of the border’s operations—let alone the marked violence that accompanies them—we need a more complex and dynamic conceptual language than that which sustains images of walls and exclusion.

Border as Method introduces a range of concepts that seek to grasp the mutations of labor, space, time, law, power, and citizenship that accompany the proliferation of borders in today’s world. Among these are the multiplication of labor, differential inclusion, temporal borders, the sovereign machine of governmentality, and border struggles. Taken together, these concepts provide a grid within which to fathom the deep transformations of the social, economic, juridical, and political relations of our planet. They point to the radically equivocal character of borders and their growing inability to trace a firm line between the inside and outside of territorial states.
The political theorist Wendy Brown (2010) has illustrated how the proliferation of walls and barriers in the contemporary world is more a symptom of the crisis and transformation of state sovereignty than a sign of its reaffirmation. Particularly important, in our view, is Brown’s thesis that “even the most physically intimidating of these new walls serves to regulate rather than exclude legal and illegal migrant labor,” producing a zone of indistinction “between law and non-law of which flexible production has need” (Brown 2008, 16–17). Our argument goes beyond Brown’s by considering how borders regulate and structure the relations between capital, labor, law, subjects, and political power even in instances where they are not lined by walls or other fortifications. The distinctiveness of our approach lies in its attempt to separate the border from the wall, showing how the regulatory functions and symbolic power of the border test the barrier between sovereignty and more flexible forms of global governance in ways that provide a prism through which to track the transformations of capital and the struggles that mount within and against them.

The most acute architects and urbanists who have studied one of the most physically intimidating walls the world currently knows—the one that runs through the occupied Palestinian territories in Israel—have shown how it produces an elusive and mobile geography, which is continually reshaped by Israel’s military strategies. Far from marking the linear border of Israel’s sovereignty, the wall functions as “a membrane that lets certain flows pass and blocks others,” transforming the entire Palestinian territory into a “frontier zone” (Petti 2007, 97). According to Eyal Weizman: “The frontiers of the Occupied Territories are not rigid and fixed at all; rather they are elastic, and in constant formation. The linear border, a cartographic imaginary inherited from the military and political spatiality of the nation state has splintered into a multitude of temporary, transportable, deployable and removable border-synonyms—‘separation walls,’ ‘barriers,’ ‘blockades,’ ‘closures,’ ‘road blocks,’ ‘checkpoints,’ ‘sterile areas,’ ‘special security zones,’ ‘closed military areas’ and ‘killing zones’” (2007, 6). Shortly we return to the distinction between the border and the frontier. For now, we want to note the emphasis Weizman places on the elasticity of the territory and the mobility of techniques for controlling the limit between inside and outside in a situation dominated by what should represent the most static crystallization of the linear border: a wall, no less. Clearly the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories needs to be examined in its specificity. But what Weizman calls the elasticity of territory is also a feature that can be observed in relation to the operation of many other borders across the world. Attentiveness to the historical and geographical significance of individual borders does not disqualify an approach that isolates particular aspects of a situation and lets them resonate with what takes place in very different spatial and temporal zones. This is what we propose to do in the following chapters, which explore not only how individual borders connect and divide but also the patterns of connection and division that invest the relations between radically heterogeneous borderscapes.

In the Borderscape

Our aim is to bring into view a series of problems, processes, and concepts that allow us to elaborate a new theoretical approach to the border. In so doing, we take distance from arguments that center on the image of the wall or the theme of security. We also depart from the classical paradigm of border studies (Kolossov 2005; Newman 2006), which tends to proceed by the comparison of discrete case studies, assuming clear and distinct differences between the various situations and contexts under investigation. The instances of bordering that we analyze in the following chapters are selected according to the intensity with which the relation between the two poles of border reinforcement and border crossing manifests itself in border struggles. We are of course aware of the radical difference between the elusive borders that circumscribe special economic zones in China and the external frontiers of the European Union, to mention an example. But our primary interest is not in comparing different instances or techniques of bordering. Rather, we want to interlace, juxtapose, superimpose, and let resonate the practices, techniques, and sites in question, highlighting their mutual implications and consonances as well as their differences and dissonances, their commonalities, and their singularities. The result is a different means of knowledge production, one that necessarily involves practices of translation, although more in a conceptual than a linguistic sense. Later in the book we elaborate on this question drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on the translatability of scientific and philosophical languages, which is constructed on the structural friction between concepts and heterogeneous specific concrete situations. Border as method is an attempt to make this friction productive both from a theoretical point of view and for the understanding of diverse empirical borderscapes.

To do this, we draw on a great wealth of ethnographic writings and materials without ever limiting our analysis to a single ethnographic focus. By engaging with ethnographic works, alongside writings from fields such as geography, history, and jurisprudence, we hope to provide an empirical