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Where is the Border?

Henk van Houtum and Anke Strüver

*A*NKE, BORN IN GERMANY, AND HENK, BORN IN THE NETHERLANDS, RECOLLECT THEIR CHILDHOOD BORDER EXPERIENCES:

Border reminiscences

“When I was a kid, my family’s holiday destinations were quite ‘far away’ from our home in northern Germany. ‘Far away’ meant somewhere else in Europe and we always took the car to get there. During those long hours or even days of sitting in the car and watching the landscape pass by, we used to play a game called ‘Ich sehe was, das du nicht siehst.’ In this game one person has to claim, ‘I see something that you don’t see and that’s... red’ (or blue, or whatever), and the others have to guess which red ‘thing’ the person was seeing, or, rather, was thinking of. For, because of the car’s movement, the red (or blue, or whatever) ‘thing’ originally seen was long gone and left behind.”

“That’s funny that you say that—my sister and I played the same game, ‘Ik zie, ik zie, wat jij niet ziet,’ when travelling from the Netherlands to other countries, in addition to guessing the origin of car license plates of course. Funny how children’s games can be the same for different cultures. I think gaming is preconditioned by a feeling of safety though—I felt safe and comfortable in the car with my parents. It was as if we were bringing our home, represented by our home-packed car, to another place. In the safety of the knowledge and experience of my parents, traveling to another place was an adventure, an exotic fantasy.”

“I have to say though, when we had to cross a border during these trips across Europe, we never played the game of subjective visibility (I see what you cannot see). It was much too exciting at the check points—there were too many other, let’s say ‘real’ things to see. The German-German border was without a doubt the topper—exciting and frightening at the same time. But also, at the border between Germany and France we were always quiet, and carefully watched what was going on at the check points. Back then, I was not so much interested in whether one could actually see differences between two neighboring countries; it was rather obvious and accepted, an unconscious knowledge that of course there would be visible variations between the two different cultures and systems.”

“I can see what you mean. What impressed me most in terms of border experiences as a kid was traveling through the political borders of Western and former Eastern Europe. First of all, I found it surprising to see that the so-called ‘Iron Curtain’ my father spoke of

was not made of iron at all. I truly expected the border to be a gray iron curtain nailed down in the ground, and was rather surprised to in fact see not one iron gate, but two wooden red-and-white gates hanging horizontally over the road, shielding off a kind of No Man's Land in between. Furthermore, what particularly struck me during the passing of the Iron Curtain was the impressive sound of silence. On the way there, my parents were comforting and attentive. Games, music, eating, laughing—all was permitted up to this point. But the border stopped our childishness. When going through customs, my parents became surprisingly and impressively silent. We sensed they were no longer in control. Realizing that there was a bigger, overarching power other than our parents was frightening, unreal. The heavily armed men who checked our faces and passports made an intimidating impression on my sister and me. It was as if the making of sounds could lead to suspicion. We did not dare to look at each other. Our faces were motionless, without expression. We kept quiet. No laughter. No nothing. Passiveness. Tension. An atmosphere built out of machines, uniforms, domination, pressure and suspension. Not seldom this tension and containment turned into a joy of relief when we finally passed through. My father then would pedal the car a bit harder and we shouted things like 'YEAH! We're through! Now our holiday can start!' It was if we had just passed a test. We were who we were in the eyes of the other."

HENK & ANKE, NOW TWO BORDER SCHOLARS IN A HUMAN GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT IN NIJMEGEN, REFLECT ON THEIR VISION OF THE BORDER TODAY:

Looking for the border

Looking at the borders in the European Union now, more than twenty years later, with the trained eyes of border scholars, it is not too much to say that the European landscape of our childhood remembrances has altered dramatically. Within the European Union, over the past twenty years or so, much attention has been focused on deleting the physical effects of borders, which were seen as hindrances to a free movement of people, ideas and capital. The No Man's Land between the Netherlands and Germany has been given a new meaning. No longer are the borderlands in the European Union seen as zones in-between, but they have come to be understood as transition zones, zones that link, not separate two lands. They have become refunctionalized and resymbolized. The borderlands are now dominantly seen as micro-laboratories of the integration process between people across the European Union. Where does that leave us? Here we are, at the border of the Netherlands and Germany—and the border seems to be gone! Or, to be more precise, the border patrols and checkpoints are gone. The tension of the panopticon-control system ('we are watching you') has gone. And yet the border is still "out there." But where is the border between a German and a Dutchman? The point is that we don't know exactly *where* it is. It is beyond direct visibility, it cannot be mapped, and what is more, we don't know exactly where we are, i.e., to which side (& site!) to 'belong.' Who are we now, in the eyes of the other? And who is the other, and who is the we?

The art of unmapping borders

It seems as if a reversal of the border experiences of our childhood era has taken place: the visible border and its checkpoints are seemingly gone, but the formerly "invisible" differences have gained meaning. Now when we cross the border, we can

“see” it as a cartographic abstraction on a map, feel it because the pavement of the bicycle path changes. We can hear it, smell it, taste it, but at the same time, one cannot sense all those differences at the border itself! Now more than before, it becomes apparent that it is we who narrate, who make the borders in space.

We feel that borders are too often regarded as ontologically insignificant, as lines on the ground that can be easily redrawn or erased. But a border is not just a line. First and foremost, a border expresses difference. The performance of differentiating space goes much further than drawing lines on the ground and on maps. The intention to create unique space, to create your own spot, is a practice that asks for imagination and belief in yourself as well as the other. The other has to believe and recognize that a certain space is imaginatively occupied by the expression “I am here, you are there” or “you are here.” People can be spatially excluded without being restricted behind a certain line on the ground.

For too long a time, common thinking on the geography of borders has focused on visibility. This ‘what you see is what you get’ approach to mapping borders has had an immense impact on our daily lives. Weather charts, atlases, travel guides—maps are everywhere, telling you where your position is, saying “you are here.” But this perspective, one that sees geography as a true science, as a science of order and discovery, excludes the geography of imagination, emotions, and belief. Even the interest in so-called “mental mapping” of the earth in the 1960’s and 70’s only contributed to the belief that despite the fact that things might seem invisible, these things should and could be made visible. In this way, it contributed to the myth of “true science,” that you should not believe what you cannot see.

Some formerly tangible borders are now torn down, like the Berlin Wall. But the wall is still there, not visibly, but perceptively and imaginatively. Forty years of separation destroys a lot of formerly shared conventions and beliefs. Most young people growing up in West Germany or East Germany did not feel any special connection to the “other side.” Yet at the same time the wall could not prevent the political idea of connectivity and belief in common Germanhood. Maybe it was not the border that was felt as an obstruction, but the brutal visibility of the border, as an expression of differentiating and confronting systems, represented by a cold and militarized stone wall of power that frustrated people on both sides. What the Berlin experience makes powerfully clear is that there is more to understanding the borders of the world than just drawing lines on a map.

We want to move away from this myth. By honouring the richness of stories of border experiences, our aim is to make room for the power of invisibility, for things that cannot be mapped, that are not seen by everybody, that cannot be universally rationalized, and yet are felt, sensed, and believed. The many conventions and cultural rites preventing lesbians and gays, men and women from openly using certain places, the invisible borders for vagabonds in the city, the exclusionary bordering of immigrants, the presence of “illegals,” the traveling of one’s thoughts, the feeling of home in strange cities and the feeling of estrangement in your “home” city—all illustrate the need for a

reinterpretation of borders in geography. It is not about making the invisible visible or the mapping of the invisible as some scholars argue (Sandercock, 1998; Ryden, 1993). It is a matter of consciousness rather than sight, of making present to the *mind's* eye what is visibly absent (Donald, 1999). Surely, we recognize and acknowledge the power some visible borders have and will have. The border-guard performances between the United States and Mexico or between Spain and Morocco speak for themselves in this respect: In both cases, the border is clearly and horrifyingly visible. But the story and the interpretation of the border, and the reasons it is guarded as it is, are not visually inscribed in space. The telling of stories is more important than the mere visibility of the border. And stories will differ over time, over space and over people. You are here. But who are you, and where are you? Can I put my geographical lens on you? Can I map you?

Closing

All this is not to say that borders do not exist. Borders do exist. Borders exist precisely because they are imagined, sensed, felt; because they are believed. The border is absent, yet present. We define ourselves against what we are not, visible borders or not. Drawing lines on a map however does not help us much to understand and describe the world. It does not represent our thoughts, identities, remembrances, joy or fear. It is we who make the borders, who are the borders. Geography literally means *writing earth*. Looking at the world, describing the world, is to a large extent also the art of learning to read the inscriptions made in space that cannot be put on a map. It is the art of narrating the making of space taking place. Space cannot be frozen, fixed and boxed into lines and colours. Let us move away from maps. Let us be playful and close our eyes again. Let us think, imagine, feel, and narrate. I see what you cannot see. Let us unmap the borders in the world.

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