

# 17 BORDER

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## Definition: Rigidity and Fluidity

To some, a border is a line drawn on a map, materialized on the ground in a fence, hedgerow, sign or checkpoint. It does the work of distinguishing between two separate entities on either side. For political geographers, the border is often international; it separates the national territories of two nation-states.

But in reality, a border takes many forms and serves all kinds of functions. The border operates in as many ways and places as one's geographical imagination can fathom. The border certainly *is* a line that delineates here and there, separating an 'us' from a 'them', one place from another. It is physical, tangible, material. For evidence, one need only witness the militarized construction of fences and walls along the border separating the United States from Mexico, North from South Korea (see Figure 17.1), or between Israel and Palestine today (Figure 17.2). As these examples illustrate, borders often have an infrastructure to regulate crossings, in many cases exacerbating material inequalities between persons on one side or the other. The walls that surround and separate a gated community from its neighbours, for example, often emphasize the greater wealth of those who live behind the gates (see Figure 17.3). Likewise, an urban university campus with walls around its perimeter demarcates the divide between students and their neighbours.

Various industries have arisen to both maintain and traverse borders. Border enforcement, for example, is undertaken usually by government authorities or private security companies that patrol borders and use sophisticated technology, such as infrared sensors, to catch those making illegal crossings. Other groups work to subvert border enforcement, smuggling humans, drugs and money across borders. In fact, the business of smuggling people across borders now rivals the lucrative business of transnational drug smuggling (Kyle and Koslowski, 2001). In short, border crossings are desirable, and profits are high in the industries that capitalize on this desire.



**Figure 17.1** Fence topped with barbed wire in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea



**Figure 17.2** Concrete wall separating Israel from Palestine  
Bakka-El-Garbia, Israel



**Figure 17.3** The front entrance to a gated community in the US

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The border signals division and the containment of people, ways of life, economic goods and systems to regulate trade. Borders demarcate not only the contours of the nation-state, but also a highly visible location where the state is able to flex its might to protect, police, regulate; where states express sovereignty, often in dramatic ways. The growth of the machinery to enforce it is often referred to as *militarization*. Political geographers have studied the militarization of borders between nation-states, particularly as sites where conflicts over territory transpire.

Of course borders are also drawn so that they can be crossed. They are not solid lines, but porous thresholds. The border is a meeting place of conjoinment where persons and ideas come together; where people and places meet, abut, mingle and neighbour. At the same time that the United States' government increases security along its southern border with Mexico, for example, thousands of workers daily cross the border to do jobs on the other side. Many work in the booming service industry on the US side of the border, while others work in the *maquiladoras*, foreign-owned factories near the Mexico-US border where corporations enjoy reduced tariffs and duties and cheap labour.

The border slices through areas known as 'border regions', and many studies have been done of border regions that ask, for example, how they are governed and what kinds of crossings, cultural hybridities and transnational businesses exist there. Sometimes nations and communities span borders, whether first nations groups that predate national borders or international travelers holding dual citizenship who spend their time betwixt and between places (e.g. Nevins 2002; Sparke 2006, Sparke et al. 2004).

## Evolution and Debate: Bound for Controversy

Borders are contradictory, paradoxical sites, and the debates about them are no less confusing. Joe Nevins (2002: 8) distinguishes between 'boundary' and 'border'. The boundary, he suggests, is 'a strict line of separation between two (at least theoretically) distinct territories'; whereas a border is 'an area of interaction and gradual division between two separate political entities'.

Political geographers have traditionally understood borders as key to establishing and defending the territory of the nation-state. The modern nation-state arose in Western Europe, and one of its most important defining factors was a clearly delineated border. In order to define membership or citizenship and attach this belonging to a defensible territory, states rendered national landscapes legible with the use of borders. Passports were developed in order to define and regulate the mobility of those populations residing inside and outside the nation-state (Torpey 2000). Clearly delineated borders thus came to replace the more ambiguous and fluid boundary zones that once existed between populations. Because these international borders are a relatively recent invention, they are often contested and subverted by nations older than nation-states. The borders of some African states, for example, confirm the practice of Western European colonial powers drawing lines far away from their operationalization on the ground, where they actually cut across tribal nations. In spite of this mismatch and the territorial conflicts that often result, these borders remain straight.

Thus the border is a clear location where nation-states attempt to differentiate places and peoples; states 'see' (cf. Scott, J. 1998), police and regulate borders in all sorts of ways. States exercise the right to control the movement of goods and persons across borders.

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Political geographers have studied geopolitical relationships between states. They inquire into the role of border disputes as expressions of international relations between states (Agnew 1998). They also understand the boundaries as expressions of lines drawn by those who engage in geopolitical relations: 'for hundreds of years geopoliticians have drawn lines of inclusion and exclusion that were based on power politics, culture, and even physical geographical arguments' (Paasi 2001: 9).

Meanwhile, thousands of individuals embark on distinct kinds of border crossings around the globe every day. The border is a site experienced in a variety of ways, sometimes painfully and violently, particularly for those fleeing political persecution in search of protection away from home, and other times with relative ease, such as by those who cross daily to work.

Some political geographers have written recently of the hyper-policed, militarized border in the geographical imagination, as in the case of the Israel–Palestine border and the Berlin Wall. These borders serve as dramatic and sometimes deadly sites where sovereign power is exercised. In the case of Palestine, borders are hyper-regulated through a series of onerous checkpoints where identity documents are colour-coded in order to control mobility along short distances, from one town to the next.

Still other borders can be mapped in a more fluid fashion, as borders in motion. Knowing that their locations are often disputed, it is important to ask where borders are located and how their governance is changing. International travelers often cross borders in airports. With globalization, the border has moved into our daily lives. Some workers cross borders daily to work, whether in the high end service economy of the financial world or the low end service economy as construction crews and domestic workers. People can now have dual citizenship and even carry multiple passports (Ong 1999).

These distinct kinds of border crossing, ranging from the mundane to the deadly, expose power relations, rendering visible power that often operates in a more subtle fashion. People who have more money in the bank, who drive nicer cars or can afford airplane tickets and tourist visas, will have a better chance of crossing successfully than those who are poor and may attempt to cross on foot or by bus or boat, or in an illicit fashion, undocumented by the state.

Borders have taken on full conceptual lives for political and cultural geographers in recent years. They do the work of delineating not only space, but identities in space. The mere existence of a border creates

two dualities: us and them, inside and out, domestic and foreign, citizen and alien, legal and illegal.

National borders are sites where individuals must express their identities in the legal terms of citizenship. When crossing, they are literally rendered visible, legible to the nation-state. Anthropologist Michael Kearney (1991: 58) notes, 'It is in this border area that identities are assigned and taken, withheld and rejected. The state seeks a monopoly on the power to assign identities to those who enter this space'. Thus the border is not only a site of division, containment and crossing, but an exercise linked to processes of identity formation and identification.

Who are we, and how does that relate to our location of birth, work and residence? Where do these locations begin and end, and where do they blur? The border functions as both a material and metaphorical separation. Borders exist not only to divide but as sites of transgression, subversion and resistance. Struggles over identity and belonging arise there.

Many examples throughout history offer stories of such transgression, from the racially integrated freedom bus riders who rode through and challenged racially segregated parts of the southern United States during the civil rights movement of the 1960s to anti-detention activists who pushed down walls around detention centres where asylum seekers were detained in rural Australia at the turn of the twenty-first century (Mares 2002; Mountz, forthcoming).

Borders represent not only sites of policing and transgression, but of deep ambiguity, as in the case of migrant workers. Migrant workers often have temporary legal status in the nation-state where they have migrated to work; they have the right to work but not to remain. As such, global inequalities are inscribed, written on to the bodies of foreign workers whose identities are reproduced at work, at home and at the border (e.g. Pratt 2004; Wright 2006). Because of the ways that migrant workers from the global South are often racialized in their daily lives in the global North, the border migrates in their lives, moving with them and perpetually reconstituted in their interactions with employers and others. Geraldine Pratt (2004), for instance, demonstrates the ways that national immigration policies are scripted onto the bodies of Filipina domestic workers through Canada's Livein Caregiver programmes. (For more information on immigration policies see Chapter 15 on migration.) Let's turn to two more specific examples now, that illustrate how borders work not only as fixed lines that demarcate the territories of nation-states, but as powerful forces in the daily lives of the people who live in those territories.

## Case Studies: A Rigid Border and a Border in Motion

### Case Study 1: Gloria Anzaldúa and the US–Mexico Border

The US–Mexico border occupies a prominent place in the geographical imagination and public discourse of Mexican and American citizens. Gloria Anzaldúa is a Chicana writer and poet who grew up in the border region in south Texas. Her text, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an autobiography and conceptual tome on life and loss in the borderlands. She presents the border as an edge, the end of one thing and the beginning of another, ‘a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge’ (1987: 3). This border divides people experiencing great socio-economic disparities: ‘The US–Mexico border *es una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds’ (1987: 3). Anzaldúa renders the border a living, breathing entity through her use of metaphor, poetry and mythology. She grew up along the border in Texas’s Rio Grande Valley where the US–Mexico border acted as a permanent presence in her daily life. She adeptly demonstrates the ways in which we internalize borders that then shape our daily identities, regardless of where we live. She also argues that individuals fight the power of the border to impose, regulate, and colonize. As such, border regions offer opportunities alongside barriers. The person who straddles cultures and contradictions along borders will have the ability to challenge binaries with what Anzaldúa calls a ‘consciousness of the borderlands’ (1987: 77): the ability to operate in more than one culture, more than one language, to inhabit more than one identity.

Anzaldúa shows that borders divide people not only materially, but also metaphorically by reinforcing difference: ‘Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them’. While she characterizes the border as itself an ‘open wound’, Anzaldúa suggests that borders simultaneously scar the bodies of those who inhabit border regions:

1,950 mile-long open wound  
Dividing *a pueblo*, a culture  
Running down the length of my body  
Staking fence rods in my flesh  
Splits me splits *me raja me raja*  
This is my home  
This thin edge  
Of barbed wire (1987: 2–3)

She draws a parallel between the marginalization of inhabitants of border regions that exist along the edges of sovereign territory and those who occupy zones marginalized from ‘mainstream’ society because of their distinct locations, histories and identities: ‘the perverse, the queer, the troublesome ... in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal”’ (1987: 3). As a queer woman whose sexual preferences are not normative, as a woman of colour, a bilingual speaker of Spanish and English, Anzaldúa continuously writes her own location in the borderlands long after she leaves the actual US–Mexico border region.

### Case Study 2: The Border in Motion

Borders themselves are evolving in geographically imaginative ways. The policing of borders is growing more integrated through something called *harmonization* and *perimeter theory*. Members of the European Union, for example, harmonized regulatory controls over migration, opting to dramatically loosen control over internal migration among member states but to strengthen regulation of the perimeter of the newly integrated European Union. This integrated border-policing manifests in the joint policing agency called Frontex, formed in 2004. In North America, Canada and the US collaborate in a more subtle fashion, such as sharing-information through integrated databases to build a perimeter by regulating movement to North America.

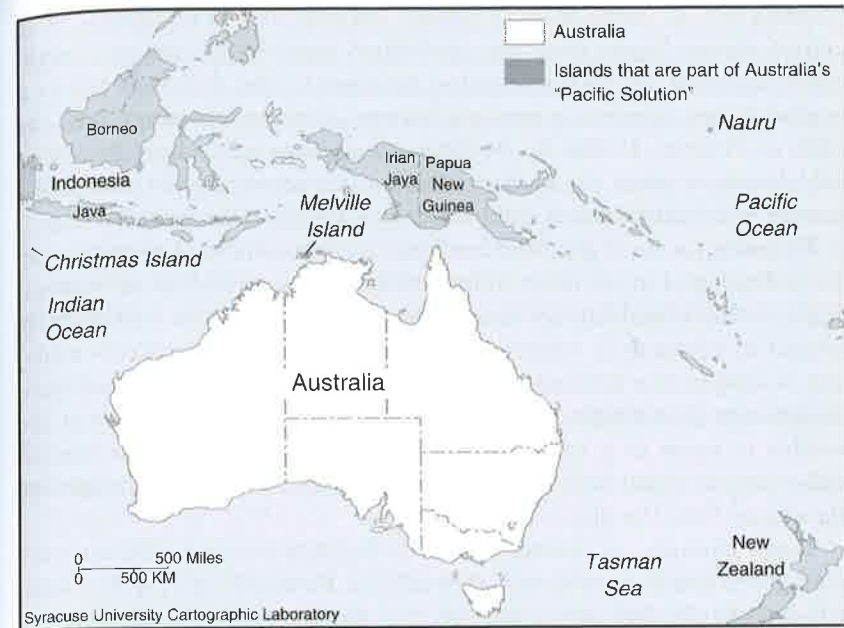
Collaborative policing efforts serve as reminders that borders are not only fixed in time and space, but also dynamic entities, always in motion through the very people who police them. Alison Mountz (2006) has studied the deployment of civil servants abroad by Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. These civil servants are called airline liaison officers. They work in foreign airports where they do not hold jurisdiction but informally police travelers in queues to board international flights. They are looking for false documents or ‘false’ pretences for travel, such as a person who is traveling on a tourist visa but plans to make an asylum claim on landing on sovereign territory. The stopping of these persons before they arrive is a practice called ‘interdiction’. These officers also train airline staff to recognize false documents. They share information on human smuggling rings with local authorities, and call ahead to authorities on the ground in the ‘host’ country when an individual they suspect might be traveling under false pretences boards a plane. Through these programmes, called ‘the multiple borders strategy’ by Canada and ‘Global Outreach’ by the

United States, civil servants are extending the border outward well beyond traditional sovereign territory to police what civil servants call 'hot spots' where human smuggling operates (see Coleman 2007; Mountz 2006). In these cases, the border itself is in motion through the daily efforts of authorities to police and patrol migration. It follows migrants well beyond traditional spaces of sovereign territory.

Such policing strategies are controversial because they preclude people's chances of reaching sovereign territory to make an asylum claim. Another example of the ways that civil servants are pushing the borders of sovereign power offshore through the controversial extension of border enforcement is Australia's 'Pacific Solution', in place since 2001 (Mares 2002; Taylor, S. 2005). In 2001, Prime Minister John Howard built a national re-election campaign on anti-immigrant sentiment that targeted people who were trying to reach Australian sovereign territory by sea with the assistance of human smugglers. Howard led an aggressive enforcement regime, which involved detaining migrants that Australian authorities intercepted at sea in detention centres on islands, including Melville, Nauru and Christmas Island (see Figure 17.4). Those who were detained on islands were not allowed to make asylum claims. Some of these islands, such as Nauru, were not Australian. Others were Australian (e.g. Melville and Christmas Islands), but the government excised them from the 'Australian migration zone' – a territorial categorization from which asylum applications *could* legally originate. By using geography creatively, the Australian federal government was able to distance potential asylum seekers from sovereign territory, thereby making an asylum claim impossible. Part of the 'Pacific Solution' was the 'power of excision'. The Australian Parliament met in 2001 to retroactively declare those sites where migrants had landed no longer part of Australia for the purposes of migration. The ability of a nation-state to remove parts of its own territory for some individuals, but not others, serves as a dramatic expression of the mobility and power of borders and their intimate ties to legal status, sovereign power and identity (Mountz 2004).

#### Future Research: Disorder and Borders in Motion?

As borders become less fixed in the global era, political geographers are growing less interested in the ordering of the world, and more interested in understanding disorder in the world (Agnew 2002; Flint 2002; Gomez-Peña 1996). The same can be said of scholarly interest in and



**Figure 17.4** Australia's 'Pacific Solution.' Christmas Island, Nauru, and Melville Island were used to detain asylum seekers caught at sea. Asylum seekers could not make asylum claims in Australia from these locations. Nauru is not part of Australian territory, and Melville and Christmas Islands, which are part of Australian territory, were removed from the Australian migration zone

conceptual understandings of borders. How will old ways of studying conflict between states be redrawn alongside the reconfiguration of the border? If borders are in motion, what will be the new 'theatres of war' where conflicts between states unfold? Will new forms of warfare mimic the practices of terrorist groups where combatants straddle international borders? How will borders be utilized to police not only conflict but membership in the form of citizenship?

In a more chaotic and immediate, intimate and global world, borders are no longer clearly delineated lines. Louise Amoore (2006), for example, writes about the biometric border. As the name suggests, the biometric border regulates crossings through the collection and measurement of biographical data such as retinal scans and digitized

fingerprints at ports-of-entry where citizens and non-citizens enter nation-states. These data are catalogued and shared among government agencies through integrated databases. The database allows a border guard to access a person's history of border crossings with the click of a button. Unlike the borders that cartographers have traditionally drawn on maps, the biometric border is reconstituted in a more dispersed and transnational fashion enabled by advances in technology.

To police increasingly fluid borders, the state, its civil servants and its technologies must adapt to borders in motion as well as an increasingly sophisticated human smuggling industry that also continuously adapts to advances in enforcement. In short, an infrastructure is evolving to support the policing of the border. This involves integrated technologies such as databases and software that enable authorities at the border to know in a moment where and when a person has crossed other international borders. Retinal scans, heat sensors and integrated databases take the place of guard booths.

These changes in the regulation of borders connect with broader changes in practices of governance. Michel Foucault (1977, 1991) identified these changes as a historical shift from sovereign to disciplinary power; a move from visible and violent impositions of power associated with a sovereign leader to daily practices of power associated with the circulation of intimate knowledge. As nation-states grew and bureaucratized, sovereign power was exercised in the form of census-taking, counting the population, gathering information and regulating citizenship. As states amass more biographical data about populations over time, individuals and communities begin to self-police in response to practices like racial profiling and required registries, avoiding public sites where surveillance takes place. There is, therefore, an increasingly important and intimate relationship between border and body (Mountz, forthcoming). What theories will future political geographers devise to understand these borders?

#### KEY POINTS

- A border distinguishes between two separate entities. It is often materialized on the ground in the form of a fence, hedgerow, sign or checkpoint.
- For political geographers, the border is often international; it separates the national territories of two nation-states.

- Establishing and maintaining borders are crucial to the integrity of the modern state. States use a variety of mechanisms to enforce their borders, including checking travel documents, limiting border crossings to select travelers, and in some cases building obstacles to prohibit unauthorized crossings.
- National borders are sites where individuals must express their identities in the legal terms of citizenship. As such, the border is not only a site of division, but also an exercise linked to processes of identity formation and identification.
- Struggles over identity and belonging often occur in border areas.

#### FURTHER READING

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- Nevins, J. (2002) *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of 'Illegal Alien' and the Remarking of the US – Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge.
- Sibley, D. (1995) *Geographies of Exclusion*. London: Routledge.