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ESSAY
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Future Pasts

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This essay is part of the Special Section, ***Border Studies: Past, Present, and Future****, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies.*

Over the last decade, as I was writing my book, *Somatic States: On Cartography, Geobodies, Bodily Integrity* (2025), I often felt the topic I was focusing on—the affective attachment to the outline of the state—was somewhat anachronistic. A lot of the cutting-edge work being done in border studies looked at bordering mechanisms that were neither linear nor even taking place at the border. Territory and sovereignty seemed increasingly detached from one another, and borders were "everywhere" (Balibar 2002). Now came the emerging era of the "pixelated subject," as Matthew Longo phrased it (2018). The state appeared to be dissolving, giving rise to new amorphous entities, such as Google (Bratton 2015), that reached across and beyond national boundaries, and we were simultaneously witnessing the emergence of ever-expanding jurisdictions that saw political systems in constant competition (Slobodian 2023)as zones of varying intensities of sovereign power.

And yet here I was looking at state shapes and frontier lines, writing about the logomap, this simple outline that divides the self from the other in dichotomous ways. The logomap is the "state as container" par excellence, something border theorists and political geographers have long criticized (Agnew 1994) and rightly so.

So why write about state borders in such seemingly "traditional" ways? The primary aim in my book was not to study the complex operations of the state, but to triangulate an imaginary of the state. The term "imaginary" does not, of course, denote a lack of substance. Indeed, one of the things I argue in the book is how, for many individuals, the border line has a very real and deadly materiality. Related to this, the scholarly argument that the bounded state has lost its force speaks from a place of privilege. One can think here about the differentials at work at the US–Mexico border, for instance, where one can simply step into Mexico without even showing one's passport, while the reverse journey involves long lines, at least for non-US passport holders.

Very much on everyone's mind at present is also the fact that Donald Trump campaigned, and won twice, on the importance of borders, of that line, anachronistic as it may well be, representing something crucial to political belonging. As his 2016 political campaign went: "We don't have a country if we don't have borders." This strong emphasis on bordering resonates, of course, well beyond the US, with an ever-growing number of border walls being erected worldwide.

The bordered state, an imaginary that I trace through an affective attachment to the logomap, thus appears to be as potent as ever, despite the transnational processes and neoliberal forms of globalization that define our contemporary economic and political life. It seems that we simply cannot think beyond state borders. An apt illustration of this failure to rethink this imaginary is the new trade tariffs that Trump announced in April, which rely on a very traditional (and simplistic) view of states and borders.

If the monochrome nature of the logomap does not reflect in any meaningful way the complex entanglements of state and nonstate actors in the contemporary world, its very simplicity gives coherence to the state's amorphous nature and labile anatomy. Similarly, in a

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previous piece of research that looked at the three-dimensional extension of borders into space (Billé 2020), I was also confronted with this limiting, very linear view of borders as imposed on maritime space and the atmosphere. Although water and air are not materially compliant, the logic of bordering remains terrestrial, thinking in terms of lines and ownership rather than zones and common use.

A couple of decades ago, a Russian military theorist wrote that the very spatial categories of war were changing, that area-based military concepts such as front, rear, and flank would be irrelevant in the future, and that "there will be no need to occupy enemy territory" (Immerwahr 2020, p. 379). While the last decade, in particular with Russia's weaponization of social media, appeared to confirm his views, what the current context of Russia's war on Ukraine suggests is that warfare is still thought of in "traditionally geopolitical" ways. Along those lines, we can also see this imaginary deployed with the US current discourse about Canada and Greenland. Militarily, but also economically, politically, and socially, the logomap continues to loom large.

A point I make in my book is that, on the one hand, this imaginary remains potent and shapes decisions, but on the other, the actual management of the state and its borders is becoming more and more complex, entangled, and automated. With its reliance on algorithms and artificial intelligence, decisions are increasingly being taken at speeds beyond human grasp. These concurrent yet divergent dynamics are opening a widening breach between the imaginary of the state and the way the state actually operates. I'm thinking here again about Trump's tariffs, but also about a broader political will to nationalize, contain, and disentangle, in which decisions based on traditional worldviews wreak havoc.

This, I want to argue, has important consequences for the ways in which we conceptualize and write about borders in our work. And it places "border studies" in a crucial place within academic scholarship.

What I suggest here is not a return to a traditional view of borders, but an attempt to bring the traditional view together with more contemporary approaches. We need more ethnographies of both border management and the algorithmic computations that create the new bordering landscape, all the while remaining attentive to their effects on the ground, to the resistant popular conceptualizations of the state, and to affective and corporeal attachment to borders. I suggest that the very gap between these two views signals peril but also holds promises and hope.

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