

Editorial: Border Fictions

Paula McCloskey^a, Sam Vardy^b * and Mohamad Hafeda^c

^a School of Arts, University of Derby, Derby, UK;

^b Department of Architecture / Cork Centre for Architectural Education, Munster Technological University (MTU), Cork, Ireland

^c The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL), London, UK

* Sam Vardy, Department of Architecture, MTU/CCAEE,
samuel.vardy@mtu.ie

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“...in traumatic times like ours, when reality itself is so distorted as to have become impossible and abnormal, it is the function of all culture, partaking of this abnormality, to be aware of its own sickness. To be aware of the unreality or inauthenticity of the so-called real, is to reinterpret this reality. To reinterpret this reality is to commit oneself to a constant revolutionary assault against it.” (Wynter 2019, p.129)

The term that this special issue is concerned with, Border Fictions, stems from the work of the independent art and spatial research practice, a place of their own (Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy) [<https://aplaceoftheirown.org/>] who tentatively propose *border fictions* as a concept, and *border fictionings* as a method, that enacts a critical, politicised, and transdisciplinary exploration of the histories, narratives, spaces, potentials of fictions/ings as a resistant praxis with which to challenge the naturalization of nation-state borders. Editing this special issue of Architecture and Culture presented us with the opportunity to critically interrogate this experimental thinking both with a range of thinkers and writers (the authors) and with new collaborators (other editors). We were grateful that Dr Mohamad Hafeda joined us as special issue editor. Hafeda is an artist and academic who develops situated participatory art methods in the contexts of urban conflict and immigration. Hafeda’s practice-led research theorises the tactical and critical role of bordering practice in negotiating the immaterialities and temporalities of everyday borders with the purpose of exposing their mechanisms and transforming their positions.¹

Border Fictions / Border Fictionings

Our sense is that there is critical and productive personal, social and political potential in working with fictions / fictionings to understand and resist the complex workings and

manifestations of nation-state border regimes. Nation-state borders are those that mark sovereign territories, and are often created by settler colonialism, across the world. Beyond spatial and material demarcations of national frontiers, these sovereign borders are complex, distributed, spaces and processes of social exclusion, policed through surveillance and migration control.² They enforce the displacement of peoples and the securitisation, if not criminalisation, of immigration and immigrants in relation to a growing prison industrial complex, the racialised hierarchy of citizenship, and the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labour that benefits transnational capitalism.³ A whole history of worldmaking rests on this ubiquitous border complex.

In *Undoing Border Imperialism* (2013) and *Border and Rule* (2021), and based on her activist work, Harsha Walia takes a contemporary, transnational approach to analysing bordering practices, meticulously illuminating the imperial, colonial, capitalist, and racial relations that are embodied in the border. For Walia, borders are a network of transnational practices of racialised capitalism, entangled with histories and current practices of colonialism, dispossession, and displacement – a condition which she calls border imperialism. As well as showing how borders are transnational systems of oppression that serve as violent tools of an ongoing imperial logic, Walia also encourages us to think of, and imagine, borders differently, in her call to “undo” border imperialism, to undo “the physical borders that enforce a global system of apartheid and... the conceptual borders that keep us separated from one another.”⁴

The concept of border imperialism and subsequent call for its undoing, is central to the motivation for the proposition of border fictions (further explored in the paper *Towards Border Fictions* in this issue). Through practices of border undoing, the ways in which borders are mapped, (re)known and (re)made by the humans and more-than-humans that they most affect are made visible, thereby emerging as a specific mode of

resistant anti-colonial practice. ‘Border fictions’ (as concept) or ‘border fictionings’ (as method) are proffered to explore broad instances of creating alternative imaginaries of the border, that critique colonial, patriarchal and capitalist territoriality.

Part of the development of border fictions involved questioning the reality of nation-state borders. Yes, of course, borders exist. Their real consequences are felt by all; their severe and violent consequence are felt by many. Their ubiquity and seeming inevitability is crucial to maintain the related construct of sovereign nationhood.

Sovereign borders seem to have been around forever. They haven’t. Nation-states and the borders that secure them, are a relatively new invention, replacing empire, kingdoms and city-states over the past 200 years or so.⁵

Many of the nation-states in existence today were fashioned by political agreements between the great imperial and colonial powers of the past, their borders and very existence shaped by these agreements and not by actual realized divisions between peoples.⁶ Furthermore, these nation-state borders continue to proliferate in number. The border paraphernalia that demarcates one territory from another which used to consist of visible flags, passport checks, security, customs control and all the architecture therein, barriers, gates, watchtowers, and stations has continuously evolved, been scaled up, and moved from the border site becoming invisible. This is amplified by advancing technologies of the border that reflect a new era of the border regime; a digital upgrade to the colonial project, spreading the reach of borders wider, across the entire globe and deep into communities and bodies that have been deemed undesirable. These so-called “smart borders” are often invisible, which were once the domain of science fiction or speculative design, have become a reality: “Technology is mobilized in order to create an omnipresent border that sequesters those with rights from those without them.”⁷

This slippage between the reality and the fiction of borders is a specific feature of this proposed notion of border fictions – a way to think through how these nation-state borders have been made (real), and thus how they might be remade or unmade. There was a time, to paraphrase Ursula Le Guin, that the divine right of kings (which pre-dated the current border imperialism) once seemed inescapable.⁸ The end of the tyranny and violences of sovereign borders once imagined might then plausibly become a reality. With this in mind, the concept of border fictions or border fictionings-as-method, sitting within the reality/fiction conundrum, might be put to work to explore the place of the imaginary in propping up border regimes, and the potential of creating alternative imaginaries of the border, as part of a process of undoing them.

Border fictionings follows on the proposition of “border as method” by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson that moves away from the study of the border as a research object into considering “the border as an epistemological device, which is at work whenever a distinction between subject and object is established.”⁹ This approach responds to the proliferation and heterogeneity of borders, material and cognitive dimensions, as outlined by philosopher Etienne Balibar.¹⁰ Using border as method allows a “cross disciplinary and geographical” study of the intersectionality of concepts and sites relating to contemporary global borderscapes including labour, migration, border struggles, subjectivities, and temporal borders.¹¹

Border fictions is also concerned with the temporal dimension of border that expands the focus from the spatiality of borders to include time. The diversion or split between time and space is well observed when it comes to the experiences of subjects confined within the physical structures of border regimes, whether in detention centres, camps, at border crossings or within urban settings waiting for their documents to be processed, or when it comes to labour, occupying different time zones from those they

are serving. The passing of time and what happens during that time period are all important in comprehending temporal bordering. More importantly, these temporal experiences expose the wider border strategies of control including laws, visas, skill qualifications, language barrier, and through which time, not only space, is employed as a bordering tool.¹² Border fictionings method allows opening up or negotiating the boundary between the temporal and spatial through the use of time-based media and processes that have the capacity to occupy different temporalities and make links and associations that are not necessarily possible in real time and life.

Border fictions /fictionings, as such, is a dual or two-way process; it acknowledges the fiction inherent in the making of borders and it employs fiction as a counter bordering practice to defy border regimes and strategies. It is important to mention that the fictional, as the imaginary, is integral in the processes of representations within both the political sphere and the arts in the form of “things that ‘stand for’ or ‘take the place of’ something else”¹³ and which “exact some cost”¹⁴ through its operations. The fiction/imaginary of representation also amounts to the production of everyday spaces and social life following on Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space.¹⁵ The processes and spaces of representations Lefebvre refers to include maps and laws as well as the resistance positions that subjects seize. Embedding fiction or considering fiction as part of everyday life, and reality, helps to understand how borders are practised, negotiated and resisted; on the one hand, materialised in space in the form of physical occurrences and on the other hand, immaterial in the form of bordering practices and processes, be it tactical and/or critical, and that could divide and connect simultaneously.¹⁶ It is within this bordering understanding that the reality/fiction conundrum continues its illusive interplay as an obscured phenomenon that is not easily deciphered or perceived by subjects. The contributors of this special issue deliberately

employ the fictionings of creative processes through the use of multi representations, media and narratives (writings, images, films) to interrogate the existing borders they study. Their processes help expose the blurring lines between the space of reality and fiction, or unpacking the fictioning in reality, while constructing new propositions. There is a social and political commitment in this fictionings method and this is part of an ethical consideration and responsibility when engaging in such an exercise of fiction (as a counter) production, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics and the lives of vulnerable subjects impacted by the cruelty of border regimes. The position of this special issue is to take fictionings as an ethical methodology, and not a criterion, following on artist and writer Walead Beshtey's suggestion. This ethical position defies aesthetic/arts autonomy and situates cultural production within the wider social context while critically assessing the processes of its production as well as reception.¹⁷

Antecedents

Empires crumble, capitalism is not inevitable, gender is not biology, whiteness is not immutable, prisons are not inescapable, and borders are not natural law.¹⁸

The positioning of fictions and fictioning as a political, resistant practice in art and cultural work is by no means novel. The production of radical new imaginaries sits at the core of science fiction, afro- and other futurisms and within various queer and feminist strategies.

Two significant interventions in this lineage and to the evolution of border fictions are Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*¹⁹ and Harsha Walia's *Undoing Border Imperialism* (2014) and *Border and Rule* (2021). Both texts start from personal experiences of borders, weaving the political and the poetic to analyse the embodied, political, social, and cultural effect of the tyranny of nation-state borders. Both, in different ways, argue for and enact the importance of decolonizing

hegemonic border imaginaries, as a tactic to challenge the inevitability of nation-state borders. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1987) starts with Anzaldúa's experience as Chicana of the US/Mexican border by entangling poetry and prose to enact a mestiza consciousness through which Anzaldúa uses myth-making and other strategies to contest the hegemonic border imaginary to create new epistemologies rooted in language, culture, memory, and history. "By creating a new mythos - that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave - la mestiza creates a new consciousness."²⁰ Drawing on thinking from the feminist and trans community, in her transnational analysis of borders, Walia²¹ talks of decolonisation as a framework that offers a prefigurative vision of the society for those engaged in activist work. The idea of prefigurative visioning is important to understanding the place of the imagination in activist work, but Walia also offers a caveat that the idea of visioning a new society needs to start with "indigenous troubles" as all forms of decolonisation flows from this. Envisaging, or imagining as part of decolonisation must start with the presence of already existent indigenous systems which are alive and well; that are based on co-existence, stewardship, kinship, and care and thus are a rejection of settler colonialism.

Art and spatial practices that might be said to "undo border imperialism" have a long history. They can be traced in the artworks such as Ana Mendieta's *Siluetta Series* (1973-1978); numerous works of Guillermo Gomez-Peña to the more recent Zach Blass' *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011-2014); Electronic Disturbance Theatre's *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2007-ongoing); Larissa Sansour's *Nation State* (2012) and *In Vitro* (2019), Karmadavis' *El Vecino* (The Neighbour (2016), Otobong Nkanga's *Baggage* (2007-08) and the performing borders platform²². The contemporary research of Nishat Awan's *Topological Atlas*²³ also works with material and affective qualities in

the production of visual counter-geographies of borders understood as topological entities through the experience of the undocumented. These practices differently invoke alternate imaginaries towards re-making the lived realities and unrealities of borders and that which they define.

Stemming from the field visual culture, the relatively recent “fiction” turn offers a different entry point into the thinking underpinning border fictions. For example, Burrows and O’Sullivan, in their work on mythopoesis²⁴, explore the potential of fiction as a verb; as a practice that might disrupt and impact on the real. Delphi Carstens and Mer Roberts of the collective Orphan Drift, further suggest that “[d]espite the scenario in which even language and artistic expression are complicit with the totalizing aesthetic of spectacle, fiction is productively wielded in acts of negation and inversion that make radical demands on the imagination, creativity, and desire.”²⁵

The Special Issue

As editors we come at this from our own artistic, (geo)political, and subjective positions, and an overarching desire for this issue was to enable the question of border fictions to be interrogated and articulated from different contexts, sites, subjectivities and disciplines; and to put this multiplicity of situated readings into dialogue with each other. Behind this call was the aim to tentatively share and invite responses to the notion of border fictions in the hope that it might collectively evoke and evolve into critical new insights into political, spatial and cultural experiences of borders in order to “provide them with another meaning. That of a passage, a communication—a relation.”²⁶ One of these that we hoped to enact in inviting responses was the relation between the notion of fictions or fictionings into relation with other nation-state borders and “borderscapes”,²⁷ following Walia, to move towards a transnational understanding

of border fictions/ings.

To do this, in the call for this special issue we asked the questions:

- (1) What becomes of fictions and fictionings as a resistant spatial practice when it engages with nation-state borders?
- (2) How can activist, anti-colonial, critical spatial art practices open new imaginaries of borders while acknowledging the often-violent lived experiences that they impose?
- (3) Is there political potential in exploring expanded framings of various and opposing forms of speculative design - from the making to the unmaking of borders?

The responses gathered here relate to borders and fictions in different ways, and in ways we did not necessarily anticipate. The first article “Towards border fictionings’ functions by way of an expanded introduction to the notion of border fictions. This explores how it emerged from an art and spatial practice research project “Eile” by Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy. This practice is an investigation into the border in Ireland and works with site responsive performance, film, sound, installations, and various writings to create an alternate border world of the character of Eile, an imagined creature of the border. The article then charts a course from this practice to the theory and other practices which informed it. The movement between the art and spatial border practice of Eile, and to other theory and thinkers was vital to the emergence of the phenomena of border fictions.

In the paper “Politicizing Acoustic Features: undoing the colonial fiction of voice-as-citizenship in the German asylum seeking system” Pedro J S Vieira de Oliveira investigates the shifting technologies of nation state borders, specifically “dialect

recognition software". de Oliveira proposes the "colonial fiction" of the German border which, it is argued, actively listens for "citizenship" to constantly create, enforce and sustain it.

"Of Force Fields and Men: Fiction and Race in the Mexican Border" by Luis Hernan continues the exploration of border technologies and fictioning. Hernan explores the science fiction trope of the force field and how this has been "mobilised" at Mexico-United States border by American entrepreneur Palmer Luckey in his promotion of the Anduril Sentry - a mobile observation post fitted with technologies of surveillance and deterrence.

Philip Arneill's visual paper, "A Shut and Open Case: Photographic Imaginings Beyond the Borders of Orange Halls", focuses on their photographic research into Orange Halls, a meeting place for religious fraternal organisation in Ireland, where they write, "the preoccupation with and importance of boundaries is endemic."

Socrates Stratis' paper "Things to Make for the Home in a Ghost City: A Silent Spatial Practice for Resistance, Varosha, Famagusta, Cyprus" unpacks the active agency of fictioning by fusing genres of writing (DIY manuals, official protocols about the United Nations Buffer Zone and Varosha with diaries of spatial narratives) that describe Varosha as a three faceted city: the ghost city, the colonized city, and the reclaimed city.

In "Marseille: Architectures of Transit in Novel, Film and Place (1936-45 and 2001-2021)" Toby Blackman responds to the phenomena of border fictions with a form of site-writing in a study of Marseille and an examination of the spatio-temporality of transit through novel, film, and place.

Through a discussion of the design, fabrication, and performativity of the device/installation The Operating Table, George Themistokleous' paper "Becoming Cypriot: Borderland Identities in Nicosia's 'No Man's Land'" shows how the device,

taking its cue from a postcolonial aspiration of ‘becoming Linobambakoi’, seeks to problematize the bi-ethnic imposed border identities constructed by regimes of power along the border in Nicosia, Cyprus.

In “Bordering as Dwelling: Spatial and Cultural Practices of Individual Refuges after Ming-Qing Transition” Lin Zhu explores the time after the dynastic transition from Ming to Qing in mid-seventeenth century China were those individuals who refused to accept the new reign, established personal territories with “fictional borders” as a form of resistance.

¹ Mohamad Hafeda, *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon: Bordering Practices in a Divided Beirut* (I.B. Tauris, 2019).

² *Undocumented International: The Spaces of the Border Regime beyond the Space of the Border*, ed. by Leopold Lambert, *The Funambulist*, 51, 2024.

³ Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (AK Press, 2013); Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁴ Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, p. 2.

⁵ Andreas Wimmer and Yuval Feinstein, ‘The Rise of the Nation-State across the World, 1816 to 2001’, *American Sociological Review*, 75.5 (2010), pp. 764–90, doi:10.1177/0003122410382639.

⁶ Lubna El-Gendi, ‘Illusory Borders: The Myth of the Modern Nation-State and Its Impact on the Repatriation of Cultural Artifacts, 15 J. Marshall Rev. Intell. Prop. L. 486 (2016)’, *UIC*

Review of Intellectual Property Law, 15.3 (2016), p. 487

<<https://repository.law.uic.edu/ripl/vol15/iss3/6>>.

⁷ Achille Mbembe, 'Deglobalization', *Esprit*, 12, 2018, pp. 86–94.

⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters'.

⁹ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 16, doi:10.2307/j.ctv1131cvw.

¹⁰ Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), pp. 75–86.

¹¹ Mezzadra and Neilson.

¹² *Waiting - A Project in Conversation: A Project in Conversation*, ed. by Shahram Khosravi (transcript publishing, 2021).

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Representation', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 11–22 (p. 11).

¹⁴ Mitchell, p. 20.

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁶ Hafeda.

¹⁷ *Ethics*, ed. by Walead Beshty (The MIT Press, 2015), pp. 20–22.

¹⁸ Walia, *Border and Rule*, p. 112.

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Fourth Edition*, 4th ed. edition (Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

²⁰ Anzaldúa, p. 80.

²¹ Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*; Walia, *Border and Rule*.

²² See <https://performingborders.live>

²³ <https://topologicalatlas.net>

²⁴ David Burrows, *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Delphi Carstens and Mer Roberts, 'The Things That Knowledge Cannot Eat: Manifested Energies in the Work of Orphan Drift', in *Fiction as Method* (Sternberg Press, 2017), pp. 193–234 (pp. 206–7).

²⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997); cited by Andrew Herscher and Ana María León, 'At the Border of Decolonization', *E-Flux Architecture*, 2020 <<https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/at-the-border/325762/at-the-border-of-decolonization/>> [accessed 7 April 2021].

²⁷ Chiara Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', *Geopolitics*, 20.1 (2015), pp. 14–34 (p. 18).

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