

## **Lines, Traces and Tidemarks: reflections on forms of borderli-ness.**

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### **Abstract:**

If borders mark differences, they do not all do so in the same way. While this has been studied from a range of angles, this has rarely focused on the forms that borders take, both in material and conceptual terms. Most often these days, borders are thought of as **lines**, or entities related to lines: walls, barriers, fences, perimeters, edges. Lines always evoke a sense of two sides, and of course, that has been critiqued by scholars who prefer to think in terms of rhizomes, webs, fractals or networks. Others have noted that most borders are experienced as a series of points rather than lines, as such: points at which people, things, animals, cross or fail to cross. Lines only really appear on *images* of borders – maps, GIS images, aerial photographs. **Traces**, on the other hand, evoke a sense of time in a way that lines do not: traces are not always visible, or if they are, then they are only a small fragment of the whole entity – the crumbs left from a loaf of bread, the memory of a conversation only half heard. Traces are porous, leave much room for doubt and speculation, and they change over time, perhaps disappearing altogether. **Tidemarks** perhaps combine lines and traces, mixing the notion of a place in particular with the sense of time passing, in different ways at different moments. A tidemark left by waves in the sand will disappear shortly; one left by spilled coffee seeping into the weft and weave of a white shirt may leave a longer trace. Using the ideas of lines, traces and tidemarks, this contribution is intended to begin a conversation on ‘borderli-ness’.

### **Introduction:**

This contribution is a collection of thoughts and propositions about how to think about borderli-ness. It is very preliminary, and is intended to begin a discussion. In that sense, the text is not intended to make assertions that should ‘stick’: it is intended to open out a debate.

**Lines:**

Describing borders as lines, or some line-like idea, such as an edge, wall, boundary, perimeter, etc, has attracted lengthy and effective critical commentary. This is particularly the case for descriptions of borders as somehow 'natural' or self-evident markers of territory. The main complaint against this idea was that it naturalized what is anything but a natural entity: the moment you start to think about them at all, political borders are anything *but* 'natural' – they are clearly made up; and they are made up differently during different periods and in different parts of the world; and having been made up, they have to be constantly maintained and enforced, day in and day out, in their tiny details as well as the broad brush applied to abstractions of what they *stand* for.

The most well known critiques of the notion of borders as self-evident territorial lines, which were based on studies and stories about the US-Mexican border in the late 1980s and early 1990s, developed a series of debates aimed at encouraging a politically radical potential of borderlands. Once people ceased to think of borders as being 'just there,' and simply containing those located on each side, the possibilities of interfering with dominant assumptions embedded in what border stood for began to be explored. For anthropology, Alvarez summarized this as follows:

"Rather than maintain a focus on the geographically and territorially bounded community and culture, the concepts inherent in the borders genre are alert to the shifting of behaviour and identity and the reconfiguration of the social patterns at the dynamic interstices of cultural practices. ... we need to examine paradox, conflict, contradiction, and contrasts." (Alvarez 1995: 462)

In short, the idea was that border was the location of all kinds of relations and experiences that could challenge the hegemonic story of what border represented. By focusing on migration and movement across the border, rather than on what the border contained and separated, a whole slew of hybrids, fluid identities and mixtures would be revealed.

As interesting as that focus upon uncertainty and transgression was, the perspective offered by Alvarez did not discuss the qualities or characteristics of border as *such*, in itself or of itself. Many of the approaches within this genre in fact appeared to take for granted what constitutes ‘border’: it is the location of the meeting of differences, and therefore border is a site for conflict as well as holding the potential to generate hybrids and other forms of border-transgressing entities. Somewhat ironically, this assumes that borders mark differences and separations, and then goes on to look at some possible challenges to those separations.

Gloria Anzaldúa, perhaps one of the most famous of the people who generated the borderlands studies based on the US-Mexican border region, reflects this approach:

“the Borderlands” she says, “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 1987: back cover)

Scholars who have continued that genre – particularly those in American Studies and in Cultural Studies (e.g. Saldívar 1997) – took the critique of the naturalness of ‘border’ as key to developing a politics of unsettling the notion of natural identities –

particularly raced, gendered and sexual identities. It was they who connected geography and sexuality together, and who argued that making borders appear more fluid, fragmented, porous and altogether less like barriers would effectively unsettle the idea of the self-evident 'truth' of the apparent naturalness of modern classification systems. Little surprise, then, that this genre of border studies became rapidly involved with post-colonial studies, subaltern studies and, perhaps particularly, with the work of Deleuze and Guattari, especially *Nomadology* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; 1988). Their work seemed to carry a promise of escape from the constraints of border through their ideas of nomadism and the Spinoza-inspired idea of singularity – of everything existing on a single fabric of space and time – so that any divisions and sub-divisions within the fabric, what many people understood as border, were in fact all part of the same entity, in the end all interconnected like a rhizome in a field.

It was not long before critiques of the more idealistic versions of this perspective began to emerge. Caren Kaplan questioned the reliance upon the idea of travel, migration and wandering in this literature, arguing that the idealized notion of being able to travel and wander was borne of a rather old modernist belief that you can change things by travelling (Kaplan 1996). This kind of view does not, Kaplan argued, take into account the political, legal, economic and social conditions in which travelling, or the inability to travel, affects people's lives radically. She also argued that a failure to distinguish between tourism, enforced travel, legal and illegal migration and rather romantic colonial visions of the expatriate, made the idea of the singular fluidity of border inadequate to the task of understanding travel, let alone what 'line' might mean in relation to border. I myself have engaged in this kind of critique through my work on the Greek-Albanian border. In *Notes from the Balkans*, I

suggest that assertions that borders are more fluid, rhizomatic or fractal than we had previously assumed are not liberated from the modern logic that binds other understandings of border, but instead tend to reiterate that logic in a different form (Green 2005). And one of the strongest critics of Deleuzian nomadology has been Slavoj Žižek, who devoted much of his *Organs without Bodies* to the issue (Žižek 2004). Sinnerbrink, in his discussion of the book, puts the point quite succinctly:

“Far from presenting a marginalised or resistant mode of subjectivity, Deleuzian dissolved nomadic subjectivity presents a neat ideological fit with the deterritorialised fluxes of global capitalism.” (Sinnerbrink 2006: 78)

From a different angle, Hastings Donnan, amongst others, has argued that many of these studies of border had focused far too much on migration and minorities, ignoring the majorities, for many of whom border was not something to be challenged or transgressed, but instead something to be defended and shored up against any possible fragmentation or possibility of its disappearance (Donnan 2005). In other words, by looking at transgressive and queer moments of borderli-ness, the key aspects – social as well as political and economic – that keep borders in place, had been overlooked. Donnan was not critiquing the borderlands literature’s political project, which involved queering the notion of self-evident identities based on self-evident borders; but he did try to provide a means to take a more thoughtful look at other issues in relation to border than had been done within the borderlands studies.

There were also anthropologists such as Pamela Ballinger, who questioned the degree to which theories of hybridity were in fact challenging of the dichotomies and

fixed characteristics of the categories that hybrids appeared to blend together (Ballinger 2003). In order to have a hybrid, there needs to be pure forms to blend together. In that sense, the dichotomous separations of border appeared to be maintained in this border-busting literature. The line remained.

Besides all of those debates, there were also a number of scholars, including Hastings Donnan in his work with Thomas Wilson, who pointed out that questioning the idea of 'border' as a line is rather older than the work on the US-Mexican border appeared to imply. The US-Mexican borderlands studies might have highlighted the issue in a particular way, but for those focusing their attention outside the centres of power, border never quite looked like a self-evident natural or even purely state-imposed line anyway (Wilson & Donnan 1994). Indeed, a book published as long ago as 1973, Cole and Wolf's *The Hidden Frontier*, focuses squarely on border as an entity that is locally generated by historically variable social, political and economic relations, and is not simply a line drawn by the state (Cole & Wolf 1973). In Cole and Wolf's view, people who live their everyday lives generate border as much as any formal legal or political entity does so.

In short, for decades, the notion of border as a simple and straightforward 'line' has been insufficient for an understanding of border. The unresolved question, however, is whether 'line,' in a more complicated understanding of the concept, is still a useful idea in relation to border, or whether it should be discarded altogether. I would argue that the reason this has not been resolved is that border, in itself as a concept and an entity, was not the point of these borderlands debates; rather, the point was that once border existed, people could challenge it, transgress it, become hybrids, etc. Whether or not a line was still there somehow became beside the point.

At the end of this paper, I will tentatively suggest that some sense of line – denaturalized, made multiple, non-dichotomous, formed in trajectories and historically contingent – is still important for understanding a sense of borderli-ness. However, it is crucial that this sense of line not only evokes spatial location, but also *time*: one of the problems with ‘line’ is that it appears to be a static entity, fixed in place, without time. That is one reason I propose to replace the word ‘line’ with the metaphor of ‘tidemark,’ a notion that inevitably evokes the passing of time: tides are what is left after some kind of past activity has occurred, and often implies more activity to come.

I am getting ahead of myself. Let me finish my discussion of lines with a brief look at Tim Ingold’s recent book, *Lines: a brief history* (Ingold 2007). This text reflects Ingold’s previous work in its strongly phenomenological, anti-structuralist approach. For Ingold, human life is made up of embodied, sensory realities, of life lived and *then* thought about, rather than life thought about and *then* lived. Ingold argues that the whole of life could be seen as the creation, or following, or wandering around, of a series of lines (which do not need to be, and are usually not, straight), and that anthropologists should focus on that rather than on points. For him, neither networks nor kinship diagrams are about lines: they focus on the points in between the lines. Ingold prefers the term ‘meshwork’ to network, to get away from the idea of points with connectors, as opposed to lines interrelated with other lines.

Meshwork, Ingold suggests, more accurately reflects lines as experienced in the world, which are open ended, curly, intertwined, not necessarily hierarchical, they change directions, and so on. Ingold distinguishes repeatedly between wayfaring and transportation: wayfaring, he suggests, is a form of wandering, whereas transportation is a movement between one point and the next point. His argument is that lines are

about the process of travelling and the experience people have while doing it, whereas transportation is about the points - starting point A and destination point B.

There appears to me to be some similarity between Deleuze and Guattari's understandings of nomadism and 'lines of flight' and Ingold's notion of wayfaring, albeit arrived at from very different angles. So perhaps it is not altogether surprising that Ingold does not focus on how lines in the world could constitute borders or boundaries, rather than threads or traces of wanderings. To that degree, he appears to be in agreement with the notion that the world is not broken up into pieces, but is all interconnected in a fairly seamless fabric, a meshwork, to use Ingold's term. Yet Ingold explicitly distances himself from postmodern approaches, suggesting they lead to a fragmentary, rather than interconnected, understanding of the world. Ingold says:

"If the straight line was an icon of modernity, then the fragmented line seems to be emerging as an equally powerful icon of postmodernity. This is anything but a reversion to the meandering line of wayfaring. Where the latter goes along, from place to place, the fragmented, postmodern line goes across: not however stage by stage, from one destination to the next, but from one point of rupture to another. These points are not locations but *dislocations*, segments out of joint. To put it in terms suggested by Kenneth Olwig, the line of wayfaring, accomplished through the practices of dwelling and the circuitous movements they entail, is *topian*; the straight line of modernity, driven by a grand narrative of progressive advance, is *utopian*; the fragmented line of postmodernity is *dystopian*." (Ingold 2007: 167)

As I have already implied, I disagree with this commonly asserted notion that postmodern approaches are somehow inherently fragmenting or fragmentary. On the contrary, I have argued elsewhere that the opposite is the case: that the underlying logic of much postmodern thought, particularly that relating to Deleuze and Guattari, instead generates connections between everything and everything else – in other words, altogether too much *connection*, not too much fragmentation (Green 2005: 129; 139). As seen above in looking at Anzaldúa’s work, the whole point of such challenges against modern assumptions (and the same can be said of queer studies, for example) was to question the clear distinctions between one side of a line and the other, and to suggest instead that such distinctions are an ideological effect, not a reflection, of a ‘natural’ border. The disruptions mentioned by Ingold in the quote above are disruptions of the apparently natural division of the world into clearly laid out categories and classifications. One could argue, as Kaplan did, that this approach failed to take sufficient account of the continuing restrictions and constraints generated by political, economic, historical and social inequalities, which are not as easily disrupted as some of the cruder versions of nomadism would suggest. But it would be difficult to argue that postmodern approaches are mostly fragmenting, rather than the opposite – unless ‘fragmentation’ is a metaphorical reference to the ‘breaking up’ of modern classification systems and epistemologies (which was not entirely successful in any case); but that would miss the underlying point of such ‘breaking up’ – to remove separations, the division of the world into clear bits and parts, and instead to replace it with very loose, contingent, fluid, non-fixable ‘borders’ (and ultimately, no borders at all).

So, to conclude this commentary on lines: lines are obviously insufficient, in themselves, as an understanding of border, but that is not to say that line is no longer

important for a sense of borderli-ness. To argue this would be to imply an underlying singularity to location that is belied by how people experience border in their everyday lives. Line continued to be important even for the line-transgressing borderlands researchers, and it is also important in thinking of how people travel and are linked. What is missing from line, however, is a sense of the passing of time, of history. It is here that I will move on to the idea of *trace*.

### **Trace:**

Many writers speak of the idea of trace; indeed, Ingold does so, in suggesting that lines are not all the same, in that some are threads, with direct links between entities, whereas others are traces, with only hints of connections, and yet others are ghosts, apparitions of previously experienced lines (Ingold 2007: check pages). However, the sensory experience of line is not what concerns me here. Rather, as explained above, I am interested in how the notion of trace include a sense of time, and there are several scholars who have worked on that. For example, Michael Taussig regularly speaks of traces. In an article on the history of indigo, the substance used to make the colour blue in clothing, Taussig considers trace in terms of past relationships with diverse parts of the world that is left in that term, ‘indigo,’ and other similar words that emerged during the height of the period of colonial trade. Even though the colour blue is now mostly made from chemicals that no longer have any relationship with indigo (and in that sense, the trace has been erased), Taussig suggests that the trace is always there in the word, even if it is not always consciously present:

“The tongue remembers, but you do not. Life moves on while all around you lie the traces of lost eras, active in the present, hanging on the wall, covering

the windows, not to mention the couch on which you sit or the dress you will wear tonight. *Damask.*” (Taussig 2008: 4)

What Taussig is trying to do here is bring back to consciousness the colonial history of colour – in this case, indigo, the blue of jeans and uniforms, a blue that came along the same routes as spices in order to arrive here – from the East. The words we use still recall those associations, even though the reliance on indigo for our blues is long gone.

Evocative as that idea might be, it is possible to go quite a bit further than that into abstraction with this notion of trace, thanks mostly to the work of Jaques Derrida. I am not in a position to really explore Derrida’s notion of trace, which is notoriously one of his more obscure concepts, but there are some aspects of it that seem helpful in thinking about border. The key point about his notion of trace for my purposes is that it refers to something that has always-already been absent, that has never actually existed, but that is drawn upon in understanding what does exist in the here and now. In Derrida’s words, trace is “irreducible absence within the presence of the trace” (Derrida 1997: 47). In other words, trace evokes something that never existed in order to make the present – and in fact, the past and the future as well – sensible (Derrida 1997: 65-67). In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida suggests that,

“The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace....In this way the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains read” (Derrida 1978: 403)

Dermot Moran makes this point explicit:

“From Levinas in particular, Derrida takes the notion of ‘trace’ as a mark of something absent that has never actually been present. Thus, for example, our nostalgia for Arcadia or the Garden of Eden is a *trace* of something that has never existed. [...] In Derrida’s use of the term *trace*, it applies as much to the future as to the past, and indeed constitutes the present by its very relation to what is absent.” (Moran 2000: 469)

And more interestingly for my purposes, Taylor and Winquist directly relate Derrida’s notion of trace to notions of border and location:

“Trace is conceived of as a radicalized sign: the mark of an event and of a memory that transfigures this event into an ‘archive’, that is, the **border** of representation itself, its fluid limit. The trace shows the work of time by providing a locus which redefines the “who” and “what” questions into a “where.” (Taylor & Winquist 2003: 404, emphasis added)

Derrida himself describes this as follows:

“Origin of the experience of space and time, this writing of difference, this fabric of the trace, permits the difference between space and time to be articulated, to appear as such [...] It is from the primary possibility of this articulation that one must begin. Difference is articulation.” (Derrida 1997: 65-66)

This approach emphasizes the irreducibility of historical *time* in borders, the way time is crucial to experiences of border, and an element that makes clear that border is something that is best thought of as an active entity.

It also draws out the way trace could be used as a means to understand ‘border’ both as incorporating time and space simultaneously, as well as evoking a notion of absolute *difference*, without necessarily implying either inequality or separation. The fabric of the trace, for Derrida, is difference; and difference is articulation. That sounds to me like quite a good description of border: an entity that always-already implies difference; the articulation of difference; and the frequent transformation of who and what into where.

Derrida’s notion of *trace* is interesting for another reason: his notion of *arche-trace*, traces of the absence of entities that have never existed, echoes quite a lot of scholarship about borders. Borders are replete with the traces of entities that have never existed. One could easily argue that the concept of *nation* is classically one of those entities. This point is similar to the one made by Stathis Gourgouris in *Dream Nation* (Gourgouris 1996): Gourgouris pointed out that nation has to be always already there – there has to be a sense of its prior existence as an entity, before any legally recognized territory could be created to make ‘nation’ a legal reality. In other words, the lack of nation has to be felt before any nation can come into existence. That, Gourgouris suggests, is what the Greek nationalist movements in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries were all about: claiming the eternal existence of a place that had never yet existed in order to bring it into existence. Lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that the Greek nation is in any way different from any other nation in this respect; I am discussing the relationship between a dream and the subsequent reality. And I am suggesting that one could easily see that as a good

example of Derrida's notion of *trace*: sensing the existence of something that has never actually existed, and eventually creating *borders* to mark that entity. In that sense, *border* is often full of traces.

However, I do not want to suggest that *time* is the only element that makes borders active. Space also makes borders active, and it is here that Doreen Massey's highly evocative understanding of space comes in, and which has pushed me in the direction of thinking of border as 'tidemark.' So I will move on finally to that notion of borderli-ness, to tidemark.

### **Tidemarks**

Unlike Derrida, who describes space as 'dead time' (Derrida 1997: 68), Doreen Massey argues that space is entirely lively, constituting a "simultaneity of stories so far" (Massey 2005: 12). What she means by this is that at any one moment, what constitutes space is the outcome of multiple relations, unpredictable happenings and everyday activities. In crude terms, what is going on in Mumbai at this very moment is different from what is going on in Nicosia at this very moment; they are on different trajectories, and are involved in the world in different ways. There is no reason to think that Mumbai somehow sits on a single time line with Nicosia, moving from less developed to more developed, or from now to tomorrow, in the same way. There may be moments when the two are brought into relation with one another, somehow contribute to each other; but there is no guarantee that even if there is contact between them, they will somehow then become part of the same space or location.

To Massey, then, space cannot be an undifferentiated fabric; nor can it be simply representation, which many argue that it is; nor can it be static, and it most certainly cannot efface time in the sense that Derrida implies. This is because, Massey argues, the mere fact of being positioned means a difference from being positioned elsewhere. In other words, the 'trace,' for Massey, is an absolute, irreducible difference intrinsic to being located. And she also insists that time is *historical*. She berates physicists for suggesting that time is circular or reversible: it is not, in her view. So, at any one moment, different and irreversible things are happening. Massey calls this "the principle of coexisting heterogeneity. It is not the particular nature of heterogeneities but the fact of them that is intrinsic to space." (Massey 2005: 12)

There are some interesting questions that could be asked about this assertion of absolute heterogeneity, but I will pass over that for now.

Massey critiques both the assumption of the naturalness of territorialisation and the notion of deterritorialisation - as expressed by Appadurai, for example. She calls the former "essentialist," suggesting instead that space should be "thought of as an emergent product of relations, including those relations which establish boundaries, and where 'place' in consequence is necessarily a *meeting* place" (Massey 2005: 68). And she denies the idea that borders are disappearing: whatever border might be, border clearly still very much affects people's everyday lives. She points out that while the ability of goods and money to travel across borders has become easier in recent years, the ability of people to do so has become increasingly more difficult:

"the discourse of globalisation and free movement about the world is fuelling the 'archaic' (but not) sentiments of parochialism, nationalism and the exclusion of those who are different." (Massey 2005: 87)

Globalisation, for Massey, is a different kind of articulation of border, but in no way a removal of it. She concludes: "'If space is ... a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then *places* are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space" (130). What is understood as globalization, then, is simply another version of these wider power-geometries of space, a version that once again appears to squash space into one seamless fabric and render time as a single trajectory for that fabric. Massey suggests that space is in practice too 'lively' for that, which leaves open the possibility of multiple, simultaneous stories.

Finally, Massey also suggests that what constitutes space at any given moment is also dependent upon diverse 'vantage points'. In her words,

"If space is genuinely the sphere of multiplicity, if it is a realm of multiple trajectories, then there will be multiplicities too of imaginations, theorisations, understandings, meanings. Any 'simultaneity' of stories-so-far will be a distinct simultaneity from a particular vantage point." (Massey 2005: 89)

In terms of border, if 'border' for Massey is inherently relational and constitutes a 'meeting place,' then the implication of this last statement is that all borders are multiple, generated from multiple vantage points - though of course, this does not mean that people are free to imagine border in any way they please: the simultaneity-of-stories-so-far, and the entanglement of relationships and 'power-geometries of space' regularly constrain whatever vantage point emerges. Thus the inability to get a passport or visa can be as much part of generating a vantage point as is a Derridean trace in the evoking of the sense of the same border that the person without the visa is unable to cross.

## **Towards the tidemark**

It is time then, to draw this all together into the metaphor of tidemark that I want to suggest might be an interesting way to think about borderli-ness. It incorporates Massey's notion that space is lively and constitutes a simultaneity of stories-so-far, which includes the possibility that no two borders are necessarily alike, so it is not possible to read off the US-Mexican border what might be going on at the Finnish-Russian border, for example. There is no inherent assumption in the concept that official regulations, the state or other such entities are any more, or any less, important than the people who come and go daily, or those who are prevented from coming and going. Nor is there an assumption that border is located somewhere in particular – at the edges of a territory, or at crossing points; tidemarks can appear anywhere, and can be imagined as much as seen or drawn. Tidemark also partially evokes the sense of trace, without as yet being clear how much of that is a Taussig kind of trace, with visceral connections to histories that have been erased from view; and/or a Derrida kind of trace, where borderli-ness is generated from the always-already existence of difference and otherness that did not ever exist, but whose traces are crucial to the sense of border. Tidemark also retains a sense of line – or rather, multiple lines – in the sense of connection and relation, in the sense of movement and trajectory, and in the sense of marking differences that make a difference, at least for a moment. Most of all, tidemark combines space and historical time, and envisages both space and time as being lively and contingent. Borderli-ness in that sense concerns *where* things have got to so far, in the multiple, unpredictable, power-inflected, imagined and visceral way that everyday life tends to occur.

This, then, is the beginning of the conversation about 'borderli-ness' that I hope will be continued during this COST/EastBordNet project.

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