Frontiers FREE

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Summary

The term "frontier" is generally taken to mean an area separating two countries, or a territorial limit beyond which lies wilderness. But frontier is also used symbolically to refer to the limit of knowledge and understanding of a particular area, as in "frontiers of science" or in the idea of outer space as the "final frontier." A certain elasticity therefore inheres in the term. Scholarship on frontiers generally examines geographical and cultural "peripheries"—zones that are viewed both as political barriers and sites of contact and exchange. However, the frontier as an empirical object as well as a scholarly heuristic is intertwined with long and often violent histories of colonialism, imperialism, and resistance. Anthropological concepts of the frontier are developed in relation to neighboring terms such as border, boundary, and line and methodologies for its empirical investigation in relation to other social science disciplines like history, international relations, geography, and gender studies. Drawing on a multidisciplinary perspective, ethnographic research aims to destabilize conventional notions of the frontier as the limit of settlement or as a space of statelessness, anarchy, or disorder in order to attend to the diverse cultural and political institutions that produce distinctive ideas of sovereignty, mobility, commerce, and community in such spaces.

Keywords: frontiers, states, borderlands, sovereignty, space, mobility, conflict, colonialism

Subjects: Histories of Anthropology, Sociocultural Anthropology

Engaging Frontiers

Frontiers refer both to concrete physical spaces and symbolic thresholds that mark the limits of knowledge and understanding, such as the idea of outer space as the "final frontier" (Messeri 2016). Frontiers invoke ideas of separation and contestation, conquest, and negotiated exchange imbricated in long and problematic histories of imperial, colonial, and capitalist expansion and ingress. The term has enjoyed a conceptual revival of late. Events of the previous century such as the world wars and the struggles for decolonization reconfigured old frontiers, as did the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the accelerated globalization of the 1990s.

Despite holding out promises of a "supranational" and "borderless" world, over time the increased circulation of goods, capital, and labor ironically led to the expansion and tightening of border surveillance and security regimes (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Jones 2016; Brown 2010; Fassin 2011). Intransigent or mutable, frontiers have gained traction in both public and scholarly discourse. Researchers have also rekindled interest in frontiers as spaces of indeterminacy and volatility, with the frontiers of former empires—Ottoman, Russian, Qing, and British– emerging as geopolitical flashpoints in the Balkans, Syria, Afghanistan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Kashmir (to

name a few). As such, frontier and borderland studies have proliferated in a number of academic fields such as history, geography, political science, sociology, and anthropology (Anderson 1996; Baud and Van Schendel 1997; Donnan and Wilson 1994, 1999; Martinez 1994; Paasi 2005; Prescott 1987; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012).

The proliferation of frontiers and borders in both academic literature and everyday discourse has posed an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the frontier is an overdetermined category. Frontiers and borders are everywhere and are imbued with particular assumptions about the mutual constitution of center and periphery, sovereignty and citizenship, circulation and security, and identity and difference. On these grounds, frontiers provide a productive frame of comparison across time and space. Yet the further one digs into particular contexts and case studies, one finds that frontiers are extraordinarily diverse and ecologically and historically singular. Such variations and singularities demand deep historical and ethnographic engagement with spaces and communities that are defined through the term. Despite the concept's endurance in the social and political sciences, frontiers cannot be taken as timeless or self-evident. The contemporary challenge for anthropology and other academic disciplines is to understand political and cultural characteristics of frontier regions that are simultaneously historical, emergent, and distinctive.

This article engages frontiers first by examining the term's overlaps and distinctions with concepts such as border, boundary, and line. It then traces how a specific idea of the frontier emerged in colonial contexts to refer to putative cultural and geographical peripheries and their occupation and control: a phenomenon coterminous with the rise of anthropology as a scientific discipline (Asad 1973). This is followed by an examination of how colonial legacies are engaged and figured in the contemporary ethnographic study of frontiers in diverse political and cultural contexts in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East.

Some Definitions: Frontier, Boundary, Border(lands)

The terms "frontier," "border," "boundary," "line," and "borderlands" may appear to be interchangeable in much scholarship. While these terms certainly overlap, it is of interest to track how they may be distinguished both in common language and academic literature. The border may be taken as the territorial limit from the perspective of national sovereignty (Gellner 2013). A boundary, following Frederick Barth (2000), marks conceptual distinctions between social groups that may or may not overlap with a concrete line on the ground that calls forth two sides. A frontier is usually characterized as a zone, both literally and figuratively, that institutes a physical barrier as well as field of potentiality for engaging alternate conceptions of sovereignty, mobility, exchange, identity, and political imaginaries. This indeterminate nature of the frontier goes back to the American historian F. J. Turner's "frontier thesis" (engaged in the section "The Frontier Imagined") that initially guided much historical and anthropological research on this form of landscape. Rather than provide a detailed description, this section sketches the thematic overlaps and distinctions between frontiers, borders, and boundaries in a way that aims to be conceptually useful for anthropologists.

In an essay on the evolution of the (French) term "frontiere," Lucien Febvre, the cofounder of the *Annales* school, argues that its earliest roots were architectural and military (1973). In the European Middle Ages, the frontier denoted the façade of a building and the front line of troops

facing the enemy. Thus, Febvre suggests that the term frontier encompassed both movement ("marching forwards to attack") and a sense of being firmly rooted. Febvre tracks the transforming meaning of the term across different European languages and contexts as it moved from natural geography to the idea of a "limit" that roughly coincided with the line of territorial demarcation. In unraveling the concept of the frontier in Europe, he rejected a naturalized picture of the frontier and argued that it was a political and historical category constructed and evolved over time (see also Power and Standen 1999; Wieczynski 1976). Even so, the elastic and processual element in the concept's own transformation resonates in the way it intersects and converges with the more general concept of the boundary or the more precise border or line.

Broadly, boundaries may be political, cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, or of any other kind. The concept has been viewed as part of the "classical toolkit" of anthropologists for analyzing a variety of symbolic and social distinctions (Lamont and Molnar 2002), whether between insiders and outsiders, sacred and profane, or purity and danger (Douglas 1966; Durkheim 1965; Bourdieu [1979] 1984). This is echoed in Barth's (2000) contention that boundaries are first and foremost conceptual and cognitive categories with "massive cultural entailments." The political scientist Ladis Kristof's (1959) essay on "The Nature of Frontiers and Boundaries" makes the boundary's spatial entailments more precise. In his classic conceptualization, the frontier is a forward-moving zone of interface with the "other side," while the boundary is a legal and juridical limit harnessed to the modern nation-state, that is, the territorial limit of exclusive jurisdiction. Correspondingly, the boundary exerts a centripetal force on populations in making we–other distinctions that orient peripheral people back to the central "core," whereas frontiers conversely exert a centrifugal force in opening out into spaces beyond boundaries. Kristof's picture of the boundary is different from that of Barth, for whom boundaries designate relational dynamics of commonality and separation with others, including in the process of nation-making (Paasi 1999; Sahlins 1989). For Kristof, the boundary is synonymous with the idea of national borders —designated political, administrative, and symbolic lines that demarcate national territory and shape national identities (Anderson 1996).

The border, "a form of boundary associated with the nation-state and the establishment of an interstate order" (Gregory et al. 2009), has been the most prolific of these concepts, the favored site for researching states, sovereignty, citizenship, migration, globalization, and localization (Wilson and Donnan 2012). Borders have been studied as rigid barriers as well as porous membranes, hierarchically organized and popularly subverted, a site where nation-states are both sanctioned and contested. In much anthropological writing, border studies have subverted and taken for granted assumptions about the correspondence of state borders with national culture and identity (Ferguson and Gupta 1992; Herzfeld 1997; Rosaldo 1989). While early scholarship on borders highlighted the storied and incomplete nature of the nation-state's territorial norms, many anthropologists (as well as political scientists and geographers) have turned their attention to "bordering practices" and "border work" (Green 2012; Reeves 2011, 2014) to highlight the ongoing dynamics through which borders are made, remade, and transcended by state officials as well as borderland inhabitants. Particularly, the term "borderlands" has evolved as a "concept-metaphor" (Gregory et al. 2009; Alvarez 1995), paradigmatically at the Mexico–US interface, for questioning normalized assumptions about the nation-state's master narratives of identity and gender (Anzaldua 1987), examining how what was sought to be separated was combined or mixed up through economic, cultural, and imaginative practices that transgressed given boundaries. In anthropological writing, the terms frontiers and borderlands are often paired (Roesler and Wendl 1999), since both suggest a zone of

potentiality pertinent for studying flows and exchange, the bending and blending of identities, and power differentials and the production of violence.

Amidst this cluster of overlapping and cross-referencing concepts, how is the distinction of the frontier conceived? The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1987b) defined the frontier as "an area over which political control by the regional metropoles is absent or uncertain," "sensitive spaces" materializing "anxious contestations" for sovereign control, and sites of rebel activism and guerrilla warfare (Dunn and Cons 2014; Eilenberg 2011). Such a definition is primarily political and presages the frontier as a site of struggle—political, economic, and ecological. This contribution suggests that the frontier is an important heuristic for studying the *longue duree* (Braudel 2013) of modern sovereignty, particularly against the backdrop of imperial and colonial expansion. The frontier thus becomes important not just for studying the limits of the nation-state and its troubled relations with its purported peripheries, but also to understand what political and cultural practices had to be repressed and effaced for national sovereignty to emerge as the dominant form. Frontiers may thus be figured as geographical and symbolic zones, often multiply bordered, that have a volatile relationship with the center of power. As such, frontiers comprise both physical barriers and native populations and remain enduring sites for studying how sovereignty is spatialized as well as the continuing struggles over the definitions and alternative conceptions of sovereignty, mobility, and exchange.

Another dynamic of frontiers deployed by anthropologists draws from political economy, adapting Marxian ideas of primitive accumulation and the expansion of capital (Luxemburg [1913] 1951; Marx 1976) to new conditions of the international economy in the 21st century, addressed specifically to their spatial dimensions. Building on David Harvey's (2003) renovation of primitive accumulation as "accumulation by dispossession," such scholarship conceives frontiers as critical spatiotemporal "fixes" for resolving crises of overaccumulation, opening out new sites for the accommodation of transnational capital and the extraction of novel forms of commodities and labor (Peluso and Lund 2011). Attending to land not formerly available on the market, but transformed into commodity through extra-economic and state-sponsored coercion, such scholarship has been significant for debates around enclosure, expansion, and expropriation in critical agrarian studies and political ecology (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000; Kelly 2011; Levien 2012; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Sundar 1999). It has also produced a set of discussions on new frontiers of capital accumulation through study spaces like special economic zones, export processing zones, and call centers (Freeman 2000). While critical for highlighting logics of ongoing colonization of frontier spaces (see the section "Resource Frontiers"), such scholarship may risk making the conceptual category of the frontier too top-down (Tsing 2003), capacious and diffuse. Global dynamics of expropriation and expansion must be studied together with the material and imaginative specificities of spaces defined as frontiers for the concept to retain historical and empirical traction.

In order to engage frontiers in our contemporary world productively and substantively, we must suspend anxieties about disciplinary boundaries and devise collaborative practices of theory and methodology. Abundant writing and discussion on frontiers exist in history, geography, political science, and international relations. More recently, fields like postcolonial and indigenous studies and gender and sexuality studies have conceptually engaged frontiers for examining the constructions, dissembling, intersections, and rules of engagement between socio-spatial power relations and different identities (Arondekar and Patel 2016; Massey 1994; Puar 2007, Rose and Davis 2005). Sarah Green (2012) emphasizes—invoking Butler (1990), Del Sartro (2010), and Foucault (1986)—that frontiers and borders, like sex and gender, are historically constructed,

performed, reinforced, and disintegrated, but are nevertheless real and have concrete and often devastating implications on the everyday lives of people. The versatility of ethnographic methods makes anthropologists particularly well-placed to draw on and steer these interdisciplinary conversations.

The Frontier Imagined

Frontiers emerged as a significant object of study and discussion at the turn of the 19th century, coeval with colonial consolidation and expansion. In this context, two *fin de siècle* tracts stand out for defining the object and the terms of the debate in the Euro-American world. The first is Frederick Turner's "frontier thesis" that addressed the significance of the frontier in the making of American democracy ([1893] 1920); the second a lecture delivered at Oxford University by George Curzon, the former viceroy of India, in 1907. In both, the frontier takes on a certain shape and becomes invested with a set of contentious assumptions about sovereignty and national character that rely on specific omissions of histories of violence and expropriation in order to establish themselves.

Frederick Jackson Turner's lecture on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was delivered to a gathering of historians in Chicago in 1892. He famously contended that the vital force of frontier expansion into the North American West accorded American democracy its distinctive character. In the process of expansion, Turner argued, the pioneers were released from European influence, had to revert to elementary social organizations, and pass through all stages of civilization—from hunting to industrial production—in a compressed period of time. As such for the American pioneers, the frontier set the stage for the renewal of and experiments with the lessons of civilization and democracy, of taming wildness and overcoming fear. This shaped the distinctive individual traits (liberty, egalitarianism, antipathy to control, violence) as well as the collective institutions and the "composite" national character of the American settlers.

The frontier's enticements, however, were attached to a picture of the frontier as "free land" for the taking—a "new field of opportunity"—that concealed, among other things, the violent history of the expulsion of Native Americans from their lands (Kearns 1998; Lamar and Thompson 1981; Limerick 1987; Grandin 2019). Turner's argument was influential both in the political figuring of the frontier as a crucible for robust popular democracy, as well as for its symbolic figuring as a *terra nullis*, the margin of settled land, and the threshold of renewal. These pictures, however, are predicated on the erasure both of peoples and political institutions already present on the putatively "wild" and "empty" landscape, as well as the persistent role of the state in the economy of expansion.

George Curzon's 1907 lecture at Oxford began by emphasizing the profound and practical significance of frontiers and lamenting their neglect in writings on political geography, without any mention of Turner's contribution (though a brief footnote compares westward settlement in the American Pacific with westward expansion in British India). Curzon's own authority drew on his experience of consolidating the frontiers of the British Empire against (primarily) the Russian Empire in Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet, and Burma. He declared frontiers to be the "razor's edge" on which war and peace hang suspended (Curzon 1907, 7). While for Turner the frontier was the American West, for Curzon, it was constituted by the "mountains that sweep around from Burma to Sind" (Curzon 1907, 3) that he figures as the "gates of India."

Despite a different geographical context and his reticence about Turner, Curzon shares Turner's figurative language of the frontier in the colonial project of seeking "fresh outlets," tracing lines upon "unknown areas" and filling "voids" and "vacant spaces," as well as its describing the impact of frontier expansion on the "manhood" and "national character" of the "Anglo-Saxon race." The lecture gave Curzon an occasion to distinguish between "natural" (sea, desert, mountains, rivers) and "artificial" frontiers (borders, buffers and their accoutrements of passports, taxes, etc.), and between "frontiers of separation" and "frontiers of contact." He elaborated upon the theory of the "scientific frontier," a form of territorial consolidation that united "natural and strategic strength" through monopoly over the control of passage. Curzon's lecture gives anthropologists a clear insight into colonial ideology of frontier wars pacification viewed as a "competition" waged exclusively between the "Great Powers."

Pictures of the frontier proffered by Turner and Curzon, writing from different contexts but at a particular historical juncture, are visibly distinct. Particularly, Turner's frontier is a nostalgic one, that in being closed represents the end of a certain kind of American expansion and identity-making. Contrastively, Curzon's frontier is a form of "political technology," a space imbued with threat that could potentially be mobilized as a tool for imperial peace.[1] More significantly, however, they share several common features: that of frontier settlement as significant for shaping national character and virility, of the frontier as empty land and political vacuum that is both beckoning and dangerous, as a site for colonial and capitalist expansion, as a site of encounter between civilization and savagery, and the dominant role of industrial technology, particularly railways, in allowing spatial access and control over frontier regions.

As in the 21st century, such engagements reveal an increased attention to frontiers and "hinterlands" in periods following intense periods of global connectivity, and portend violence. Turner's speech ends with a prescient warning about American neo-imperialism: that with the hitherto "open" Western frontier now "closed," Americans would seek other arenas for expansion. Curzon's complacence that the settlement of frontiers would ensure peace between nations is belied by the outbreak of the First World War merely seven years later.

Since, scholars have explicitly engaged, critiqued, and diversified the picture of the frontier put forth by Turner and Curzon as ethnocentric. With all its shortcomings, however, the argument provided a heuristic for future research. Owen Lattimore distinguished "inner Asian frontiers" as an enduring site of dynamic exchange and intermingling of distinct cultures (particularly nomadic and agriculturalist) from the American frontier that witnessed the obliteration of one culture by another with greater economic and military power (1947). Edmund Leach (1960) widened this distinction by arguing that non-European contexts did not share the idea of a "precisely defined frontier," which he attributed to a culturally specific European "dogma" of territorial sovereignty as absolute and indivisible. In theorizing the "internal African frontier," Igor Kopytoff (1987a) reversed Turner's theory of the frontier as a force for cultural transformation, arguing that communities "constructed" at the frontier from fragments of remembered societies may also be "a force for cultural-historical continuity and conservatism" (3). In the years after the Second World War, the frontier re-emerged in anthropology as a significant site of encounter and fabrication and for observing dynamics between different peoples that were as asymmetrical as they were mutually constitutive.

Dissidence, Ethnicity, Ecology, and Mobility

The developments of the Second World War and movements for decolonization that followed further dismantled political certitudes, altered national boundaries, and forged new ones across Europe, Asia, and Africa. Against these global upheavals, frontier ethnography conspicuously moved from colonial concerns around how to govern an unruly people toward engagements with frontier regions as sites for studying political order outside the nation-state. Edmund Leach (1954) took up highland regions of Burma (Myanmar) as a domain of inquiry to de-essentialize the idea of the frontier as bounded and clearly demarcated, and frontier societies as primitive and "stagnant." Adopting a synchronic as well as historical perspective, Leach argued that the region acquired its distinctive political characteristics from the dynamic and unstable interface between a sedentary and hierarchical social model (*gumsa*) and a more mobile and egalitarian one (*gumlao*). In the Atlas mountains of Morocco, Ernest Gellner (1969) analyzed the region's purported anarchy as a form of self-conscious "institutionalized dissidence" where political organization was maintained through a balance between religious and secular authority, charismatic "saints," and tribal leaders.

Correspondingly, frontiers also emerged as privileged arenas for studying the formation and transformations of ethnic groups as well as the relations between them. In the seminal 1969 publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Frederik Barth and his colleagues rejected the view that ethnic groups were organic bounded entities that were ecologically situated and shared a common culture. Drawing on his fieldwork among Pathans in the Swat Valley as well as among nomadic peoples in Kurdistan, Barth emphasized the mutual maintenance of boundaries and boundary-crossing flows and exchanges, arguing that boundaries were simultaneously stable and in constant flux. While acknowledging the importance of ecology for the distinctive political-economic organization of ethnic groups, Barth refuted the dominant idea of cultural isolation as a condition of ethnic diversity. Instead, Barth's theoretical framework emphasized the continual negotiation of boundaries and ongoing interaction with proximate others in the process of group formation—in other words, that boundary production and boundary-crossing were two sides of the same coin. Writing on the Tyrol region in Europe, Cole and Wolf (1974) further untethered cultural identities from geography by showing how, despite identical ecological conditions, two neighboring Tyrolean villages showed a clear cultural boundary mapped on the cultural differences between "Germanic" (German-speaking) and "Romantic" (Italian-speaking) Europe.

While different ecological terrains—deserts, mountains, forests—produce distinct vectors and rhythms of circulation that contest political centers, highland frontiers became paradigmatic for studying the contours of parastate political organization and the friction and interface between ecological barriers, ethnic and cultural boundaries, and exchange. J. P. S. Uberoi's structural configuration of the frontier as a "wall [that] is also a corridor," a "revolving door" rather than an open and shut gate" (1978), was derived from the Hindu Kush Himalayan region, where Barth also conducted fieldwork among the Pathans. Observing that human activity invariably "leaks" through boundaries (2000), Barth argued that:

> In fact, throughout history, political boundaries have been rich in affordances, offering opportunities for army careers, customs-duties collecting agencies, defense contracts and all manner of work and enterprise. They have provided a facility of escape and retreat for bandits and freedom fighters eluding the control of states on both sides; and they are a constant field of opportunities for mediators, traders and middlepersons of all kinds.
>
> (Barth 2000, 28–29)

In particular, the picture of the highland frontier as space of dissidence and non-state authority and activity has produced a particular conceptualization of mountainous regions as "zomia."

Zomia and Its Discontents

The term "zomia" was first used by Willem van Schendel (2002) to refer to the highlands that comprise the Southeast Asian massif (northeast India, Myanmar, northern Vietnam and Thailand, Laos, and southwest China) as a distinctive political and geographic space. This space straddled—but could not be subsumed within—the traditional "area studies" specializations of East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia. For van Schendel, zomia indexed a transnational zone that was characterized by highland terrain, sparse populations, historical isolation punctuated periodically with periodic extractive interventions by politically powerful surrounding states, and inhabited by a population of staggering linguistic and ethnic diversity. This designation subsequently extended westward and northward to incorporate the Pamirian–Himalayan knots of Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Xinjiang as sharing a similar heritage (Michaud 2010).

Initially coined to challenge institutionalized boundaries of area studies, the term zomia was popularized as a spatial and conceptual heuristic by the political scientist James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Writing from an anarchist perspective, Scott used zomia to refer to the southeast Asian massif as a region whose diverse inhabitants had historically and deliberately opted out of the state rule and state-centered political economies that dominated the lowlands. Scott argued that zomia inhabitants were conscious refugees from the state form, whose putatively primitive practices (such as swidden agriculture and the absence of writing) were, in fact, strategically devised to keep the state at arm's length.

The zomian counter-narrative to the state generated enormous debate among scholars studying frontier regions in Asia (see *Journal of Global History*, special issue, "Zomia and Beyond" 2010; Brass 2012; Tenzin 2017; Tsing 1993). While many scholars have found the term "zomia" inspiring as an additional analytic for framing frontier political cultures (Giersch 2010; Shneiderman 2010), others have refuted Scott's claims as based on thin ethnographic, historical, and comparative evidence (Lieberman 2010), and zomia as a primitivist "utopic construction" that romanticized marginalization, reinforced identitarian politics, effaced interethnic violence, and denied the consistent historical interconnection between zomian regions and surrounding lowland states (Brass 2012). Nevertheless, the zomia debate is significant not only because it exemplifies long-standing tensions between conceptual frameworks and empirical and historical data, but also because it unfolds along the different political commitments that contemporary scholars bring to the study of frontiers.

Beyond and within the Nation-State

Focusing on frontiers has enabled contemporary social scientists to transcend the "territorial trap" (Agnew 1994; Brenner 1999) of epistemological bondage to the nation-state and follow the call to "rescue history from the nation" (Duara 1995). Historians and anthropologists have long explored the different forms of sovereignty encompassed by empires as opposed to absolute territorial sovereignty of nation-states (Benton 2009; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Comaroff and

Comaroff 1997). The pacification and conversion of frontiers into borders, with varying degrees of violence and success, has been a constitutive of state formation and national identities. For the empire concerned primarily with expropriation, the frontier provided multiple nodes of passage and profitable transactions, including taxes on mobile commodities and the availability of mobile labor, whereas the (postcolonial) nation-state may be invested with different desires to do with incorporating frontiers and finding value in its inhabitants as subjects (Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Hopkins 2020).

David Ludden (2011) cautions against drawing hard and fast distinctions between past empires and present-day national logics, arguing that contemporary struggles in frontiers and borderlands reveal "a process of adaptive transformation in which people create, assemble, configure, reassemble, renovate and remodel imperial forms of power and authority under diverse, changing circumstances" (133). This demands a temporal rather than a simply spatial analysis of frontiers (O'Dowd 2012). Certainly states like India, Israel, China, or Indonesia are branded as colonialist or imperial at dissident and occupied frontiers such as Kashmir, the West Bank, Tibet, Xinjiang, or East Timor (Beissinger 2005). Furthermore, colonial partition and territoriality have left indelible and intractable legacies in contemporary frontier wars (Alam 2008; Allen 2017; Baruah 2005; Gardner 2014; Kar 2013; McGranahan 2010; Phanjoubam 2015; Robinson 2013; Stoler 2016; Stoler and Cooper 1997; Sur 2015; Zamindar 2007).

Liam O'Dowd (2012) brings the prism of the frontier to bear on spaces that are unambiguously embedded within territorial boundaries by distinguishing peripheries from frontiers on the following grounds: "Unlike peripheries, frontiers [. . .] imply confrontation with other powers" (161). As an "edge" that demarcates two worlds, the frontier may manifest at any place and time. This framework resonates with Das and Poole's invitation (2004) to rethink the state through the consideration of material and figurative margins as "a necessary entailment" of the state. These margins are not spatialized per se but viewed as particular arrangements of power and its distribution, contests over entitlement and dispossession, and the indeterminate distinctions between the inside and the outside in forms of law and governance.

Such analytics contribute to a more robust understanding of the contemporary nation-state as paradoxically undermined and retrenched both by internal conflict and external forces of globalization (Aretxaga 2003; Ong 1999; Trouillot 2001). As noted by several anthropologists, dramas of indeterminacy and negotiation are heightened and played out in the frontier borderlands of nation-states (Ali 2019; Cons 2016; Cons and Sanyal et al. 2013; Ibrahim 2009; Ibrahim and Kothiyal 2017). Both approaches—one that shifts scale from national to frontier geographies, as well as one that de-territorializes the frontier from spatial margins—yield important insights. The first helps in "disembedding minority studies from national straitjackets" (Michaud 2010); the second redefines relations between territoriality and sovereignty, particularly by destabilizing the assumed congruence of margins and peripheries with the borders and boundaries of nations.

Itinerant Territorialities

The "affordances" ascribed to the frontier by Barth mark it out as a site of exchange, circulation, and mobility. Movements through frontiers and their crossings produce contingent notions of licit and illicit exchanges. Writing on endogenous ideas of space and boundaries in Africa, Achille

Mbembe (2000) highlights the "relative lack of congruence between the territory of the state and areas of exchange," arguing that rather than being delimited by boundaries in the classical sense, political entities were formed by "an imbrication of multiple spaces, constantly joined, rejoined and recombined through wars, conquests and the mobility of goods and persons" (263). Mbembe coins the term "itinerant territoriality" to designate precolonial territoriality operating through "thrusts, detachments and scissions," but the analytic of itinerancy extends well into the postcolonial present.

Patterns of movement in frontier areas have been articulated variously as flows, networks, currents, rhizomes, and "nomadology" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Latour 2005). The analytic visibility according to mobility responds to Malkki's call to defy a "sedentary metaphysics," shaped by assumptions of logical priority and moral fixity of being fixed in place and time (1992). The political-economic focus on mobility also intersects with the emergent body of scholarship under "Indian Ocean" and "inter-Asian" studies that engage concepts of connection, circulation, partiality, and trans-regionality beyond the analytic foci of globalization and extended into the historical patterns of interaction and exchange. Such patterns occur between societies that have recognized each other over centuries through social and religious infrastructures that long precede the establishment of nation-states (Amrith 2013; Bernstein 2013; Chatterjee 2013; Gohain 2017; Ho 2006, 2017; Kalir and Sur 2012; MacDougall and Scheele 2012; Thum 2014).

Thus, diverse regulatory and economic regimes of value (Appadurai 1986) converge in frontier arenas and offer opportunities for exploitation. While frontier porosities have long challenged the inviolability of the nation-state territory, the political and material realities of borders (contested and uncontested) channeling or blocking flows call for a more complicated engagement with patterns of mobility (Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Chu 2010; Wilson 2017). When mutual recognition is disavowed or fails or operates along unstable geographies and regulatory boundaries of nations, such exchanges and connections may be considered illegal or illicit. While formally illegal, some connections and exchanges are often considered permissible or licit by communities that engage in them, at times with the tacit approval of the state (Tsing 1993; van Schendel and Abraham 2005).

At other times when contraband networks challenge state authority, state actors often participate and trespass on these circuits in order to shore up their own power, reconfiguring questions of citizenship, justice, and security in the process (Jusionyte 2015; Roitman 2005; Tagliacozzo 2005). Since a common field of shared expectations and values cannot be assumed within the social complexity and ethnic heterogeneity of frontier areas, boundary-crossing economic and social relationships have provided scholars opportunities for interrogating presupposed ideas of trust, fidelity, deception, and freedom (Carey 2017; Humphrey 2017; Humphrey et al. 2018; Saraf 2020) and examine subaltern practices of "neighboring" (Saxer and Zhang 2016).

Spatial Fabrications, Phantoms, Volumes

Itinerant territorialities undermine the fixity of spatial coordinates, producing frontiers and borders not only through permanent markings but also through particular structures of feeling and hauntings, particularly in the aftermath of war and displacement. As frontiers both cleave and connect, frontier geographies emulate frontier mobilities to reshape both distinctions between the "internal" and the "external" as well as the idea of space as two-dimensional. While

spatial permutations and possibilities are intrinsic to historical forms of boundary crossings at frontiers, materialized in a meshwork of routes or patterns of circumlocutions (Hart 2006; Ingold 2007), spatial contortions are also produced in the crucible of war, violence, and forced removal.

Ethnography from the Balkans describes how while separate spaces and new frontiers are crafted and forged through bureaucratic administration in the aftermath of war, such spaces remain pregnant with the specters and memories of cohabitation, conflict, and the inscription of catastrophic violence (Bryant 2010; Green 2005; Hart 2017; Herzfeld 1981). Navaro-Yashin's study of Northern Cyprus demonstrates the entanglements of and mediations between the material, the subjective, and the phantasmatic in reforged frontiers and extrapolates from such spaces to conceptualize the "make-believe" quality of state territoriality and state sovereignty (2012).

However, the make-believe quality of state territoriality makes it no less real—lost, disputed, or contested lands, particularly at the nation's edges, generate huge postcolonial "cartographic anxiety" (Krishna 1994) symptomatically manifested as a fixation on the "correct" representation of national boundaries in maps. Extending the discursive analogy between the nation and the body (Winichakul 1994) into the neuro-scientific somatic register, Bille (2013) shows how lost territories draw national sentiments and elicit "phantom pains" akin to the painful and lingering sensations of limbs lost but not forgotten by the brain (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998). More generally, Green (2009) encapsulates the palimpsest-like quality of temporal sediments that comprise "border-liness" by thinking together "lines" (images that evoke separation), "traces" (fragments and sediments of the past that may be unstable, elusive, and invisible but nevertheless vivid and evocative), and "tidemarks" that combine lines and traces to foreground the passage of time and mix the past and the present with the future.

Furthermore, studies at the intersection of politics and architecture in occupied and contested territories have highlighted the militarization of underground and air space, thus stretching the spatial dimensions of frontier wars and surveillance above and below ground (Weizman 2012; Elden 2013). Anthropologists have extended the "volumetric turn" in architecture and political geography to productively re-conceptualize the relationship between space and sovereignty in frontier regions (Bille 2017a) through examining the convergences between human and nonhuman technologies and temporalities (Bille et al. 2017b, 2019). Against the global environmental crisis and anthropogenic transformations of Earth's biosphere, scholars have highlighted the importance of nonhuman ecology for the study of political frontiers.

Pointing to "signal disjunctures between 'environment' and 'political bordering,'" Cunningham (2012) draws attention to the permeability of biotic corridors and environmental degradation across borders, urging us to consider the entanglements of political and ecological circulations and inequalities. Frontiers have long been sites for studying alternative conceptions of "being with" nonhuman entities that exceed representational and instrumentalist frameworks for relating to natural landscapes (de la Cadena 2015; Gergan 2015; Mueggler 2001, 2011, 2017; Yeh 2017). Historically, human interventions in highland, forest, desert, and deltaic margins through discourses of settlement, development, expansion, and extraction have altered and reshaped frontier materialities (Carter 1987; Eaton 1993; Gilmartin 2015; Raffles 2002; Yeh 2013). Attending to these transformations in time—"untaming" the frontier—has led to fruitful scholarly collaborations in the study of frontiers across anthropology, archaeology, and history (Parker and Rodseth 2005).

Frontier Infrastructures and Security

Infrastructural interventions facilitate the conversion of frontiers into borders and their integration into national territories as well as the global economy. Holding out the promise of modernity and development, infrastructures alter socio-spatial relations of land, water and property, channel and redirect cultural, political, and economic crossings and bring state authority closer to the edges. Such interventions comprise not just roads and dams, but also tourism and conservation (Akhter 2019, Ali 2019; Dalakoglou 2010; Gupta 2013; Harvey et al. 2014; Hathaway 2013; Murton 2017a, 2017b; Reeves 2017; Uribe 2017; Yeh et al. 2014). Such networks and materialities not only enhance connectivity and forge inclusion, but also create new markets and reduce the costs of extraction in frontiers.

Anthropological scholarship reveals how, besides providing access into frontiers to the state, communications and utilities are also negotiated and circumvented by frontier inhabitants for diverting flows of goods and labor and diversifying their own livelihoods (Harris 2013; Harvey and Knox 2015; Saxer 2011). Often these developments are heightened and concentrated in "border-cities" studied by scholars as a focal point of infrastructural investments and transformations (McDuie-Ra 2016; Nugent 2012). Moreover, the rise of large-scale "megaprojects" in frontier areas, under programs like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), demand engagements with new experiments of capital investment, regulation, and spatial governmentality, particularly in volatile frontiers (Choi 2017; Rippa 2018).

While recreating frontiers as "transnational fields" (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996) for commingling peoples, ideas, and commodities, infrastructural developments also fasten state ingress into "sensitive spaces" and strengthen security and military techniques for bringing dissident frontiers into the national fold. Militarization and majoritarianism combines with the discourses of developmentalism and humanitarianism as a mode of governance in insurgent frontiers (Aggarwal 2004; Bhan 2014; Longkumer 2020; Varma 2016). Despite globalization promising enhanced "connectivity," the expansion of legal and scientific technologies of border surveillance and security have paradoxically constrained and endangered the movement of migrants and refugees (Breckenridge 2014; De Leon 2012; Ghosh 2019; Jones 2016), while intransigent militarized borders have spatially enclosed frontier inhabitants and restricted historical patterns of movement.

Resource Frontiers

The idea of the frontier as a beckoning and coveted zone of potential has witnessed a revival with capitalism seeking new arenas for investment and resource extraction. Anthropologists have called attention to the contemporary redeployment of marginal spaces and ecologies as frontiers, invested with the promise of opportunity, wealth, and entrepreneurship (Baviskar 2007; Karrar 2021; Kikon 2019; Li 2001, 2014; Ross 2014; Tsing 2003; Woodworth 2017). Such frontier imaginaries reprise stereotypes of unregulated wilderness, "deployed by contemporary planners, who see frontier spaces as 'underutilized' resources" for attracting corporate investors (Li 2014, 13), or to be mined by "resourceful" subjects for desirable commodities such as gold, timber, and rare minerals (Tsing 2003). Anna Tsing (2003) coins the term "resource frontiers" for the phenomenon—accelerated in the late 20th century—for the "'discovery' of global commodity

supplies in forests, tundras, coastal seas or mountain fastnesses," enabled by the combined power of militarization and corporate transnationalism. Like their colonial antecedents, Tsing argues that such constructions involve processes of "unmapping" or reducing or effacing situated complexities, thereby "disengag[ing] nature from its previous ecologies" in order to present such spaces as ripe for extraction.

In a recent collection, Cons and Eilenberg (2019) extend this formulation to the study of "new Asian resource frontiers." Noting the convergence between accelerated transformation of agrarian and forest land into sites of "export-oriented resource extraction" and the conversion of "remote spaces" into "productive sites" designated for infrastructural megaprojects, urban development, the privatization of services, and other forms of speculation, they draw attention to the continuities and disjunctures that inhere in the "reinvention" of frontier spaces into "zones of opportunity." In so doing, they also aim to discern how distinct histories and processes may unlock new ways of responding to exploitation. Cons and Eilenberg offer up "frontier assemblages" as a descriptive and analytic term to "map the histories and geographies that coalesce in specific spaces and moment" and trace their articulations with broader forces entailed in "managing risk, facilitating accumulation, and reconfiguring sovereignty."

Contributors to their volume engage frontier assemblages to examine the desire and fantasies that shape frontier projects, the specters and prospects of environmental degradation they carry, and the way their political economies intersect and articulate with broader flows and networks of capital circulation and spatial transformation. Significantly, this strand of scholarship waylays the fantasy of timelessness in the construction of frontiers and margins (see also Skaria 1999). Instead, such spaces are construed not simply as geographical but as a constellation of uneven social and political relations with long histories often marked by violence (Ardener 2012; Cons and Eilenberg 2019; Kar 2013; Tsing 1993).

The exploitation of resource frontiers may or may not eventually benefit those who dwell in such spaces (Moore 1998), but frontier inhabitants frequently participate in the "affordances" permitted by transforming political and economic regimes such activities set in motion. At times lucrative trades in drugs or arms may reverse the purported relationship between the center and periphery, causing increasing dependence of the center on economic activities at the frontier (Goodhand 2012; Roitman 2006). Elsewhere, local extractive economies help sustain—for a historically significant period—an internally stratified yet politically egalitarian society, and the "non development" of state-like political structures (Fiskesjö 2010, 2011) Thus, frontiers reveal historically distinct forms of resource exploitation, wealth accumulation, and redistribution that run counter to the logics of global capital and labor, but always run the risk of being subsumed within them (Eilenberg 2014; Herzfeld 1988; Steinmüller 2018).

Imagining Frontiers Otherwise

As a conceptual heuristic as well as an arena for ethnographic and historical research, frontiers are a productive field for investigating socio-spatial relations between political centers and margins, identity and difference, and ancient and emergent geographies of mobility and exchange. Temporally, they call forth the significance of colonial and imperial pasts for the study of social movements in the present as well as aspirations for future political communities. Frontiers bear out the entanglements of human and nonhuman materialities and how they unfold

to shape and direct political subjectivities.

Abundant scholarship also demonstrates the tensions that inhere in the study of frontiers, particularly with the concept's association with colonial and capitalist expansion. Can the concept of the frontier be used across diverse contexts and histories? How does it acquire meaning in the lives, experiences, and political aspirations of frontier dwellers? In studying resource frontiers in Indonesia, Anna Tsing (2003) argues that the frontier is not "a natural or indigenous category [but] a traveling theory, a blatantly foreign form requiring translation" (5101). Sarah Green, however, suggests that "borderness," and by extension frontiers, are fashioned out of distinctive border ontologies—"epistemologies made real" (2012, 580). These approaches need not be mutually exclusive. The challenge before anthropology is to adopt a "bottom up" vantage toward "frontier ontologies" and deepen forms of knowledge needed to recognize frontiers and their distinct notions of space, sovereignty, community, and political futures through ethnographically rigorous and historically informed research.

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Notes

1. Here I am citing the succinct formulation provided by anonymous peer reviewer 1.

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