



Book review of
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BOOK REVIEW

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The volume sets an agenda for investigating how images and narratives of borders contribute to political aesthetics from an interdisciplinary lens. It brings together case studies from scholars across literary, cultural and media studies; social anthropology; and political geography. The book is situated at the intersection of two turns: First is its call to investigate the cultural and symbolic dimensions of borders, including border narratives, and ongoing processes of bordering beyond the geopolitical boundary line through borderscapes, which is attributed to the cultural turn in border studies; second, the border turn in humanities is situated in poststructural and postcolonial theory and Chicanx studies of symbolic ideas of borderlands and border poetics dedicated to analysing literary narratives of border crossings and temporal, epistemological and textual or media borders.

Some main questions posed by the volume to demarcate the field of border aesthetics center around the aesthetical strategies of images and narratives of borders in forming and transforming borderscapes, their mediating role in the public sphere, the discursive organising of representation of borders historically and politically and the paradoxes of border images and narratives in empowering and blocking minor voices. The authors unsettle disciplinary debates on borders and situate sites of representation also as sites of hegemonies and resistance. The wide range of addressed aesthetic strategies allows for a rich discussion of the questions guiding the book; these questions span various media, modes, genres, styles and rhetorical figures.

The volume's strength is in bringing attention to the ambiguities and interdependence of what are otherwise understood as binary oppositions in investigations on the political aesthetics of borders, which include demarcation/transgression, realism/the fantastic, motion/stasis, opening/closing, absence/presence, abjectness/creativity, subversion/complicity, capitalism/homogenising natural borders, and borders/boundlessness. In doing so, the volume demonstrates the urgency for interdisciplinary approaches to investigate bordering processes in their multidimensionality and the mechanisms

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by which contradictory images and narratives come to coexist in the making and unmaking of borderscapes. Particularly interesting is theorising the psychospatialities in narrative strategies of the fantastic across literary works (in this case, Spanish, British, French) in spatial metaphors of horizontal vertigo and spatial psychasthenia producing non-relationality (Ch. 2). The chapter in question does wonderful work in unpacking the modes of cultivated exclusivity producing Europe that are based on isolation and intolerance to alterity in cultural texts of the second half of the 20th century.

The book invites scholars and artists across disciplines to work more closely to investigate how images and narratives play a central role in challenging and/or reproducing borders, rather than being solely focused on the visible markers of state borders and bordering and on simplistic binary claims of a borderless world versus bordered world. The book highlights the power of fiction and art to perform politically in challenging established conceptions of borders, migration, and belonging. The agenda of making visible institutional and technical infrastructures of border regimes through art – for instance, (clouds-based) security regimes of states and technocapitalism (Ch. 3) and the analysis of border art beyond representation (Ch. 7) – to uncover the power asymmetries involved in producing such art works and their modalities of borderscaping is demonstrated as important. The book is therefore important to activist-scholar-artists questioning and investigating the formations and modes of resistance to dominant border narratives and images.

However, some fundamental blindspots need attention. The book opens with Georg Simmel's work as a precursor to the field of border aesthetics given his analysis of social and aesthetic boundaries of societies through conceptual metaphors of paths, doors, bridges and windows as related to visible forms – for instance of Romanesque and gothic cathedrals. The editors produce a master narrative of migrants following routes, passing through crossing points alongside a reading of cathedrals through Simmel's work that evokes the narrative of border-crossing – of entering the cathedral as a unidirectional movement of life and death rather than free movement. In doing so, they reproduce a master image and narrative to be associated with migration and with Europe in a manner that fails to address the violence of such episteme-feeding European border regimes. Europe remains fixed and migrants are moving. They miss the debates calling to unsettle Europe as an unmarked category and people identified as 'always arriving' (El-Tayeb 2011). The gaze is on the moving migrant 'Other' – on the receiving end of exclusion and waiting and seeing a better life, which reproduces an imaginary of a linear space time.

This is part of a bigger problem in how the editors position the book in relation to border regimes. On the one hand, the book replicates the recent multiplication of cultural production on borders, the spectacularisation of borders and a need to engage with the proliferation of border images and border narratives. On the other hand, the volume argues for despectacularisation and historicising of borders in order to open other imaginaries. These two intentions tend to fall in the way of each other to take the agenda in border aesthetics beyond one that is descriptive and away from one that is not comfortable with simply highlighting the hybridity, ambivalence, plurality and multidimensionality of borders. The volume stops short of exploring the endless possibilities that emerge from emancipating the historical categories of social scientific analysis that the European border episteme is built on, such as citizen/migrant and mobility/indigeneity.

In exploring the theoretical potential of liminality while analysing artwork to plea for a world with another use of borders and another globalisation, the uneven conditions of cross-border im/mobility of artists living in Germany and Iran is left unaddressed (Ch. 1). How do the uneven im/mobilities inhibit the indispensable conditions of reciprocal acknowledgement? The historical infrastructures of Orientalism that continue to fuel European academic and artistic institutions, along with the modalities of extraction, objectification, and silencing that reproduce the coloniality of gender ([Lugones 2010](#)), are not a concern. Tehran is produced as different to situate intercultural experiences, but who defines strangeness and on what terms?

The politics of in/visibility and negotiating power relationships in participatory projects with marginalised groups is reflected upon (Chs. 4 and 11) and positioned by the editors as an important agenda of border aesthetics. The place of participatory work in reproducing or challenging (historical) power relations in knowledge production could be deepened. The performative and political work of listening to ‘marginalised voices’ that the authors call on researchers to do must also embrace the agendas of ongoing and historical debates on decolonising the university. What might spaces of listening be like when bodies and knowledges – otherwise treated as objects, commodities, or ‘Others’ of colonial universities and kept in the historical, geographical and epistemic outside – are guiding us ([Vázquez 2020](#)).

This raises larger questions around the uneven bibliographies of Mediterranean citizenship between universities straddling the European Union/Africa borderlands around the knowledge/power nexus that are ignored in the book. Some of the chapters provide a rich analysis on notions of Northernness and *the passage* as produced in so-called migrant/minority literature (Chs. 8 and 10); however, the power relations of who is doing the work and whose stories are used for developing relational geographical imaginaries and ‘shared notions of hospitality’ (p. 184) and how migrant knowledges are reduced to become legible to such a gaze, readership and authorship, remains untouched.

What are seen as contemporary concerns of the book inevitably evade the historical modalities of the colonial encounter haunting the present. The question that [Abbas \(2018: 6\)](#) raises in her book, “Are there aesthetics that necropolitics assume? [...] What, if any, relation but that of carnality could be had to the colonized, and [...] what, if any, relation but that of terror can be had to the colonizer?”, is urgent for an agenda in border aesthetics. The reliance on theories of liminality and in-betweenness, while allowing the contributors to certainly open the lexicon that can be used for borders like membranes, horizons, thresholds or passages unfortunately disables a serious engagement with the epistemic violence of border regimes important to such agendas. Border aesthetics become limited to the imaginary trappings of a colour-blind discourse haunting ‘postwar European Union’ academia ([El-Tayeb 2023](#)) that remains the elephant in the book. It needs to be unleashed to explore the limitless possibilities of an agenda of border aesthetics – one that is nevertheless situated in investigating specific formations of historical power relations also in non-dichotomous ways – while working to end the world (and its categories) as we know¹ it in modern social-scientific analyses ([Da Silva 2014](#)).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

NOTE

- 1 The use of a capital 'K' emphasises the dominant patterns of knowing producing the Other as object and commodity essential to European inquiry.

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