

Mapping the Strata of the Strasbourg-Kehl Border

Taien Ng-Chan^{a,*}, Michael Darroch^a, Lee Rodney^b, Donna Akrey^c

^a York University, Taien Ng-Chan – taien@yorku.ca, Michael Darroch – mdarroch@yorku.ca

^b University of Windsor, Lee Rodney – lrodney@uwindsor.ca

^c Brock University, Donna Akrey – donnaakrey@hotmail.com

* Corresponding author

Keywords: Experimental mapping practices, walking, workshop

Abstract:

In October 2023, as part of the conference *Borders in the English-Speaking World: Mapping & Counter-Mapping*, two artist-researcher collectives (the Hamilton Perambulatory Unit or HPU, and In/Terminus) held a “walkshop” across the Rhine River, the border between Strasbourg, France, and Kehl, Germany. In her introduction to the workbook of maps and prompts given to each participant, Gwen Cressman, co-organizer of the conference, writes thusly about this border:

Moving and complex, the border between Kehl and Strasbourg has changed national affiliations twelve times since Louis XIV conquered Strasbourg in 1681. Whereas the space is marked by successive wars and frequent political change, Karen Denni also shows that border practices and the human relations it entails have been slower to evolve (Denni, 2012). Despite the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which initiated the construction of a political and economic Europe, it would take many years for the project to overcome the borders that history had erected between France and Germany. Efforts to erase the border have recently culminated with the inauguration of the Passerelle des Deux Rives in 2004, the effective disappearance of the border post on the Pont de l'Europe in 2009, and the re-establishment of the streetcar line from the center of Strasbourg to Kehl in 2017, 73 years after its closure at the end of the Second World War. While there are no physical obstacles to the crossing of the Rhine, differences in language, signage, architecture, legislation and lifestyles continue to exert “their separating effects.” (Denni, 23)

Our presentation traces this particular walk across the Strasbourg-Kehl border, first through reviewing the framework of strata-mapping as devised by the HPU since 2014 and as written about in their cross-border investigations of Detroit-Windsor (Ng-Chan 2020); we will then focus on the participatory urban art interventions and exhibition curation in the context of visual, historical and urban cultural landscape reading used by In/Terminus, again in the Windsor-Detroit urban borderlands where they are based. Some of this work has resulted in contributions to such books as *Cartographies of Place: Navigating the Urban* (Darroch & Marchessault, 2014) and *Looking Beyond Borderlines* (Rodney, 2017).

These collective sensorial, participatory and imaginative frameworks function as a means of mapping borderlands, which are always in process, tentative and shifting, varying from co-existent to alienated (Paasi, 1998). Our research-creation explorations and outputs are grounded by workbook prompts such as the following:

What are the social trails that are built into the crossing and how do they enable specific narratives? How does this space in the Rhineland feel today given its long history as a marker of borders, divisions, and incursions? Have concepts of openness and circulation overtaken the 20th century nationalist histories of division and enclosure? To what extent is it possible to erase the border?

Rather than looking for signs of division which are apparent in many bordered environments, to what extent does the language of “trade” and “exchange” and mixing appear? How and where?

Can you mark the point in the journey where you feel you have crossed the border?

Where are different languages spoken? Where do you see markers of language mixing from the past and present: store signs? advertising? faded signs reflecting different eras? street names? community newspapers or flyers?

Simple, hand-drawn basemaps are also provided in the workbooks, encouraging participants to locate their observations spatially on the page, and even to collect pencil rubbings of street textures or various detritus such as feathers and cigarette butts along the way (as one participant did). Some of these resulting maps, drawings, gatherings and texts from the workbooks will be presented, giving an overview of the walk across the Strasbourg-Kehl border with around 30 participants, along with the resulting discussion at the end to give food for further thought.

Bios

The Hamilton Perambulatory Unit (Donna Akrey + Taien Ng-Chan) has organized participatory events to engage with historical and current ideas around experimental mapping and movement since 2014. HPU has given walks in Montreal, Toronto, Windsor, Buffalo NY, Sydney Australia, London England, Galway Ireland, Memphis TN, Tokyo Japan, Galway Ireland, the online sphere of Zoom, and our home base of Hamilton Ontario. We have also exhibited our artworks at the Art Gallery of Windsor, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and at Supercrawl Hamilton.

Since 2012, the IN/TERMINUS collective (Michael Darroch + Lee Rodney) has organized collaborative and participatory research projects inspired by the tensions created by the urban environment shared on the Canada-U.S. border between Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan. Our projects unfold through research creation, intermediality, visual culture and the culture of cities as a field of interrelated inquiry and activity. Our research activity explores the cultural spaces, visual fabric, and mediated character of cities, as a constantly shifting environment that transforms human relations and social memory.

Acknowledgements

Supported by Université de Strasbourg, York University, University of Windsor and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

References

Darroch, M. & Marchessault, J., 2014. *Cartographies of Place*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wpvx07>

Denni, K., 2012. Entre Strasbourg et Kehl. Les vicissitudes d'un espace frontière (1918-1945). In: *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, no 48, « Frontières ».

Ng-Chan, T., 2020. Strata-Walking the Detroit River Border with the Hamilton Perambulatory Unit. *Intermedialities* 34, n.p. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070880ar>

Paasi, A., 1998. Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows. *Geopolitics*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 73.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650049808407608>

Rodney, L., 2017. *Looking Beyond Border Lines: North America's Frontier Imagination*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315731698>