

MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Fluid Boundaries: Regional Imaginaries of Danube River Borders

verfasst von | submitted by

Sophia Danielle Luongo

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears
on the student record sheet:

UA 066 656

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium CREOLE-Cultural Differences and
Transnational Processes

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Ass.-Prof. Dr. Sanderien Verstappen

Abstract (German)

Könnte man sich Trennung und Verbindung als koexistierende Realitäten vorstellen, die durch dieselben Prozesse entstehen? Eine Grenze verbindet, was sie enthält, und trennt, was sie ausschließt. Das eine kann nicht ohne das andere existieren, und die Akzeptanz dieses „Sowohl-als-auch“ ermöglicht eine ganzheitliche Betrachtung der durch Grenzen geschaffenen Relationalitäten. Eine feuchte Ontologie von Grenzimaginarien versucht, dieses Reframing zu erreichen, indem sie Raum für das Vorhandensein multipler, manchmal widersprüchlicher Wahrheiten schafft. Diese Arbeit berichtet über zwei Monate Feldforschung mit mehreren Standorten, um die übergreifende Frage zu beantworten: Wie stellen sich Menschen, die mit dem Donauraum arbeiten und sich entlang der Donau bewegen, die nationalen Grenzen dieses Raums vor? Die Methoden umfassen teilnehmende Beobachtung in einem regionalpolitischen Think Tank in Wien, Österreich, und entlang des Flusses zwischen den nationalen Grenzen in Passau, Deutschland und Bratislava, Slowakei. Es wurden Interviews mit regionalen Verwaltern und Politikforschern, Binnenschiffahrtsexperten, regionalen Tourismusorganisatoren und Individualreisenden geführt. In diesen Gruppen werden nationale Grenzen auf vier Arten imaginiert: (1) als in der Gegenwart praktisch nicht existent, (2) als dringende Mobilitätshindernisse, (3) als etwas, das überwunden werden muss, oder (4) als etwas, das gestärkt werden muss. Diese widersprüchlichen Grenzvorstellungen deuten darauf hin, dass nationale Grenzen keine singuläre, verfestigte Realität schaffen. Die vielfältigen Realitäten, die als Reaktion auf die Flussgrenzen des Donauraums imaginiert werden, liefern stattdessen eine ontologische Erzählung, die der Singularität des Nationalstaates entgegenwirkt. Indem wir die Vielfältigkeit der Grenzen verstehen, arbeiten wir gegen eine vereinfachende „Politik der Angst“, die von absoluten Werten lebt. Vielleicht ist es kontraintuitiv, mehr als nur den Schaden in den Vordergrund zu stellen, der von Staaten durch Grenzprozesse verursacht wird, nämlich eine Arbeit, die staatliche Projekte untergräbt. Indem wir uns aktiv unserer Grenzvorstellungen bewusst werden und sie letztlich kritisch hinterfragen (ob sie nun von Angst, Hoffnung, Chaos oder Apathie geprägt sind), gewinnen wir die Macht zurück, zu entscheiden, welche Realitäten wir schaffen wollen, und wie wir in Beziehung zueinander leben wollen.

Abstract (English)

Could separation and connection be fruitfully imagined as coexisting realities born of the same processes? A border connects what it contains by separating what it excludes. One cannot exist without the other, and accepting this both-ness allows for a holistic account of the relationalities created by borders. A wet ontology of border imaginaries attempts to achieve this reframing by creating space for the presence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, truths. This thesis reports on two months of multi-sited fieldwork to answer the overarching question: How do people who work with the Danube Region, and move along the Danube River, imagine the national borders of this area? Methods include participant-observation at a regional policy think tank in Vienna, Austria, and along the river between national borders in Passau, Germany and Bratislava, Slovakia. Interviews were conducted with regional administrators and policy researchers, inland shipping professionals, regional tourism organizers, and individual travelers. Among these groups, national borders are imagined in four ways: (1) as practically nonexistent in the present moment, (2) as urgent barriers to mobility, (3) as something to overcome, or (4) as something to strengthen. These contradictory border imaginaries suggest that national borders do not create a singular, solidified reality. The multiple realities imagined in response to Danube Region river borders instead supply an ontological narrative that counteracts the singularity of the nation state. By understanding border multiplicity, we are working against a simplistic “politics of fear” that thrives in absolutes. Perhaps counterintuitively, foregrounding more than the harm enacted by states through bordering processes is work that subverts state projects. In becoming actively aware and ultimately critical of our border imaginaries, (whether those be of fear, hope, chaos, or apathy) we reclaim the power to choose which realities we work to create, and decide how we want to live in relation to one another.

Any given boundary shows the double face of Janus: it is always a boundary between and a boundary to [...] Hence, any given boundary met by any agency, human or not, presents this agency with the necessity of an interpretation: may it and can it be transgressed or not? By what means? The between presents a possible obstacle, the to a possible opening – a boundary is a barrier or a gate.

(Larsen 2007, 3)

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Imaginaries, Mobility, Borders and Rivers	7
Imagining Mobility.....	8
The Anthropology of Borders	12
More-Than-Human Borders	15
Wet Ontologies & Ways of Knowing.....	19
Conclusion	21
Chapter 3: Research Methods.....	23
Interlocutors and Field Sites	23
In the Office	23
Moving Along the River.....	26
Interlocutor Table	29
Positionality & Limitations.....	30
Multi-Sited Ethnography	32
Chapter 4: Historical and Institutional Context of the Danube Region.....	35
The Danube “Region”	35
Changing Borders of the Danube Region.....	38
The European Union.....	41
The Schengen Area	43
Conclusion	45
Chapter 5: Imagining Borders Moving Along the River	47
Individual Travelers	47
Memory Border	48
Map Border.....	51
Checkpoint Border	54
River Border.....	57
Inland Shipping Professionals	58
Borders Imagined as Bureaucratic Procedures	59
Riverine Connection: a European Inland Waterway System (Almost).....	64

Past and Present, Soviet and Refugee Borders	66
Conclusion	70
Chapter 6: Imagining Borders in the Office	73
Overcoming Borders.....	73
Strengthening Borders	79
“Who Belongs Where”: Borders of the Schengen Area	81
Fluidity and Knowing the Danube as a Static Symbol	82
Conclusion	87
Conclusion: Regional Imaginaries of Danube River-Borders	89
Moving Along the River	89
Individual Travelers.....	89
Inland Shipping Professionals	90
In the Office.....	91
Multiplicity Against State-Driven Hegemony.....	92
Acknowledgements.....	95
Bibliography	96

List of Figures

Figure 1: <i>Practical Handbook for Border Guards</i> Extract (European Commission, 2022)	45
Figure 2: Gates of Freedom Memorial at Devin, Slovakia	49
Figure 3: Map of Slovak-Austrian Border at Devin, Slovakia	52
Figure 4: IDM Conference Room (GLOBSEC, 2023)	83
Figure 5: Map in IDM Conference Room, Version Found on Website (IDM, 2023)	84
Figure 6: Map of Danube River Basin and Tributaries (ICPDR, 2023)	86

Chapter 1: Introduction

On the morning of March 7th, 2024, I rode a commuter bus from Vienna, Austria to Bratislava, Slovakia. I had a meeting scheduled with a representative from a Bratislava-based tourism office, during which I would ask questions about national borders. My journey to Bratislava, although across an international borderline, was direct and without passport control. After arriving, I sat in the small waiting room at the entrance of the office. Well-kept house plants filled the windowsill that looked out over the street. Posters depicting local travel destinations and limited time offers decorated the bulletin board on the wall across the room. There would be a cruise sailing from Budapest to Passau, stopping in both Bratislava and Vienna, for which I should “act fast” because booking early could earn me a discount, one poster read. I drank the coffee I brought and listened to the staff in rooms around me type on computers, unspeaking or talking in hushed tones.

Tony, the representative I was meeting, soon arrived and we began the interview. I pulled him out of the headspace of the office environment by asking him to recall times he had been sailing internationally on the Danube River with clients. I asked if he ever thought about rivers and borders in parallel, to which he responded,

...Rivers are natural borders everywhere... it's always with everything— you are from one side of the river or the other side of the river. It applies in life and this is what I mean by that. It's natural for the rivers to split something you know? ... when you want to find in some areas who belongs where and so on, it comes out from the river... When you consider it, it's normal.¹

For Tony, the river is a “natural border” and separator of the region. He believes that this is where political borders ultimately originate. Sitting in this travel office in Slovakia with its specific but common business aesthetic, I was surprised to learn this perspective.

A few months prior, I had sat in a different office across from someone who held the opposite perspective. In November of 2023, I interviewed a colleague named John during my month-long traineeship at the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe*. John was

¹ Tony (tourism associate at Floratour) in discussion with the author, March 2024.

a research associate, from England, and in his mid-twenties. When I asked him about the river as it relates to the region's borders, he responded thusly:

I think maybe in a psychological sense [the Danube River] gives the people who live in the region a common region-hood to think that they connect. I mean if the river flows through Germany and Austria but then also into Romania and Bulgaria, it gives them a sense that all of these peoples are somehow connected. I dunno it seems to be used more as a region-building symbol between countries that aren't particularly alike [...] It makes it easier for people to absorb political influence from other countries I think.²

In John's description, the Danube River acts as a cross-border connector – a logic behind why these countries that “aren't particularly alike” could form a region.

What can we make of these contradictory river border interpretations? Both attempt to use the river as a deeper meaning behind logics of separation and connection, but arrive at different conclusions. In this context, perhaps separation and connection could be more fruitfully thought of as coexisting realities born of the same processes. A border connects what it contains by separating what it excludes. One cannot exist without the other, and accepting this both-ness could allow for a holistic account of the relationalities created by borders. The questions would then become: When might a border be imagined as a separator and when would it be a connector? To what political end are these imaginaries applied? Ultimately: can we find an overarching answer in this multiplicity?

Explored in this thesis are the multiple realities created by bordering processes – or, “borderscapes,”³ to use the term developed by Perera (2007), Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007), and later expanded by Brambilla (2015). By highlighting borderscape multiplicity, it becomes possible to work against singular and simplistic narratives of state-driven hegemony. Nationalized, militarized, and bureaucratic borders operate within a “politics of fear” that thrives in absolutes. Aware of this, Brambilla and Jones (2020) call for a more nuanced study of borders as sites of not only conflict and violence, but where a “politics of hope” (Appadurai, 2013) may also be cultivated. Creating the conditions for a politics of hope requires the recognition of more than a singularly dominating narrative of border violence so that

² John (IDM research associate) in discussion with the author, November 2023.

³ “Borderscape” is a “concept that can express the spatial and conceptual complexity of the border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries” (Brambilla 2015, 19).

“alternate scripts for a good and healthy life” may be written (Ozguc & Burridge 2023, 485). This is not to diminish or ignore the tremendous human and non-human harm enacted by border conflict around the world. Rather, this is to say that situated within an awareness of this suffering, multiplicity can exist, and if there is more than one kind of border, there remains the possibility for the cultivation of a politics of hope within borderscapes.

Centering rivers in the search of multiplicity, Lamb (2024) responds to Brambilla and Jones by writing about the caring for nature that border-residents undertake at the Salween River border. Crucially, Lamb recognizes the multiple, contradicting realities presented by a river border, explaining how, “...the border is a ‘natural’, flowing river that provides livelihoods to residents, and simultaneously, the river is a border with all the political institutions and limitation it brings” (2024, 6). Ultimately, the river border phenomenon is not one thing. These borders have the capacity to both envelope and create near-infinite manifestations, meanings, and imaginaries dependent on personal positionality. This thesis responds to Brambilla and Jones’ (2020) call for nuanced thinking on borders, and uses the Danube Region to build on Lamb’s (2024) work on multiple realities at the Salween River border. In the following chapters I explore the multiple, contradicting narratives that speak to the overarching question: How do people who work with the Danube Region and move along the Danube River imagine the national borders of this space?

The Danube River Basin covers 10% of continental Europe, beginning in southern Germany, and flowing through ten countries before reaching its destination at the Black Sea. Stretching across Central and Southeastern Europe, the Danube has a catchment area that encompasses a total of nineteen countries, making it the “most international river in the world” (Gascoigne & Mandl, 2009). Described as the most international river in the world, while simultaneously responsible for shaping a region that prides itself on borderlessness, the Danube is a region of contradiction. Rivers provide an opportunity to think with this contradiction in order to grasp the cognitive fluidity demonstrated by a watery environment. A “wet ontological” understanding of these national borders allows for the presence of multiple human and nonhuman truths to overlap. Thereby, a holistic account of geopolitical bordering processes may be revealed, and people and places on either side of any kind of border may be imagined in equal regard.

Indeed, the diverging border imaginaries of the Danube Region point to a reality of multiplicity. The river goes beyond symbolizing connection and separation by embodying a

reality of both, because these relationalities need not be placed at odds with one another. Rather than “this or that,” it is a “this and that” mindset that works to understand contradiction as fundamental to reality-making. There will always be places and people which are not included in a connection, and versions of separation which secondarily connect something else. By confronting the fact that these relationalities are inevitably and continually evolving from one into the other and back again, regional governance institutions are challenged to adopt a mindset of fluidity that would regard connection as existing on a scalar continuum from the regional to the interpersonal. By becoming actively aware and ultimately critical of our border imaginaries, we reclaim the power to choose which realities we work to imagine and subsequently create. I make the argument that by stepping into a reality of multiplicity with intentional awareness, and perhaps a hopeful openness to fluidity, a holistic account of borders can be rendered.

Chapter 2 of this thesis introduces the necessary grounding literature needed to appropriately develop these arguments. This includes literature on imagining, mobility, borders, the more-than-human, and wet ontologies. Imagining and imaginaries are the foundation on which I build my research question. In asking, “How do people *imagine* Danube River borders?”, I am signaling an awareness of the multiple and socially constructed natures of these borders. Within the context of political borders, literature on the more-than-human centers an awareness of earthly situatedness and interconnection beyond the human; it signals an openness to shifting worlds of multiplicity as demonstrated by the river. Upon initial observation, these borders may appear simply institutionalized and bureaucratic. However, through the more-than-human, I write to remind myself and readers of the inherent life interwoven amongst these bordering practices. A special attention is granted to literature on wet ontologies, where the questions of multiplicity thrive in the suggestion that there is a different kind of reality based on watery experiences and knowledges (Steinberg & Peters 2015; Morita 2017). By using these so-called “fluid” mindsets to understand Danube River national borders, this research aims to understand how multiplicity is imagined.

Chapter 3 overviews the methods employed in this research. I report on two months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork including participant-observation at a regional think tank in Vienna, Austria, and along the river between national borders in Passau, Germany and Bratislava, Slovakia. Interviews were conducted with regional administrators and policy researchers, river ship captains, regional tourism organizers, and individual travelers. These

field-sites and interlocutors are divided into two categories: those who imagine borders moving along the river, and those who imagine borders in the office.

Chapter 4 describes relevant regional, historical, and institutional context of the Danube Region. The national unit, and subsequently national borders, are fundamental to understanding the concept of “region,” because regions definitionally describe areas which are sub-state, supra-state, or cross-border (Jones & Paasi, 2013). This says less about the fundamental essence of a region, and more about the centrality of nation states to our conceptualization of space. The Danube Region, like any region, is a nebulous and shifting category. The EU’s active involvement in defining the Danube Region highlights the particularity of official European regions as top-down, institutionally enforced, and economically sanctioned international governing bodies. Notably, the Schengen Agreement allows for increased personal mobility between member countries by reducing interior border controls while strengthening those exterior. This demonstrates the juxtaposing nature of borders as phenomena (reminiscent of river interpretations) which act as both connectors and separators dependent on the scale of focus.

Chapter 5 poses the question: How do people who physically move along the Danube River imagine the national borders of this region? This first empirical chapter is divided into two sections. The first analyzes data collected as an individual traveler, and the second through interaction with inland shipping professionals. Throughout this chapter, the experience of people who physically move alongside the river for either leisure or work is foregrounded as a window into imaginaries of Danube Region borders. I conclude that, for individual travelers, national border imaginations are polarized between two extremes: they are either an inconsequential symbol or an urgent barrier. National borders emerge for individual travelers in four varieties: Memory Border, Map Border, Checkpoint Border, and River Border. For inland shipping professionals, national borders are imagined as bureaucratic processes situated within a larger regional waterway system. Both groups’ imaginaries are informed by the materiality of these borders, the process of physically moving around them, as well as historical narratives and current-day mobility politics.

Chapter 6 asks: How do people who work to create a Danube Region from an office imagine the national borders along the river? This chapter uses the experiences of people who work in regionally minded organizations to understand an alternative imaginary of Danube Region borders. Here, an international scope is adopted, leading to imaginaries of

Danube Region national borders that are removed from their material context. This “removed” quality allows for borders to be understood as processes that are in flux and can be changed. I conclude that the borders of the region are imagined as entities that must be either overcome or strengthened. Some regional organizers desire to overcome borders through both a physical and conceptual “borderlessness.” This ranges in scope from practical travel mobility to the goal of an equitable interpersonal and epistemological framework. At the same time, others posit that the need to strengthen exterior regional borders supersedes the aspiration of an interior borderlessness. Across both of these political efforts, the river is understood as a multivalent symbol of both separation and connection, supporting efforts to both strengthen and overcome borders.

I conclude that multiple realities are already visible within borderscapes. Bringing this multiplicity into light cultivates the potential to work against singular frameworks of state-driven hegemony. Imagining borders only as the dominant, state-driven narrative describes them (eternal, unchangeable, preordained, etc.) does the work of creating them as such. Crucially, “unchangeable” here does not refer specifically to geographically moving a borderline, but rather to the idea of changing what a border is and how it is practiced. If we remain unconscious to the imaginaries and subsequent methods of knowledge production through which we know the world, we are bound to perpetually recreate the social and political systems which inform those imaginaries. I make the argument that by stepping into a reality of multiplicity with intentional awareness, a holistic account of borders in all their forms can be rendered. By becoming actively aware and ultimately critical of these border imaginaries (whether those be of fear, hope, chaos, or apathy), we reclaim the power to choose which realities we work to create and decide how we want to live in relation to one another.

Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Imaginaries, Mobility, Borders and Rivers

The literature on imagining, mobility, borders, the more-than-human, and wet ontologies provides the theoretical basis for this research. These subdisciplines are overlapping, each in part informing the others. Imagining and imaginaries are the foundation on which I build my research question. In asking, “How do people *imagine* Danube River borders?”, I am signaling an awareness of the multiplicity and constructed nature of these borders. Not insignificantly, these borders are created through individual and collective processes of imagining. Furthermore, the imaginary concept serves as a corollary to the culture concept in its ability to articulate a person-centered approach to the study of social processes (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1996; Castoriadis 1997; Taylor 2002; Strauss 2006). Closely related to this imaginary dynamism, this research is conducted from an awareness that a reality of mobility is the basis from which the world exists. Mobility is not only about the act of moving, but also about the power dynamics, social inequalities, and cultural meanings associated with said movement (Sheller & Urry, 2006). The imaginative element necessary for creating the world is foregrounded especially by the large, abstract organizations of region, state, and border. Grounded in political anthropology, the anthropology of borders emphasizes an awareness of the (1) individual people who compose nation-states, together with their (2) correlated institutions (Wilson & Donnan, 2004). Within the context of political borders, literature on the more-than-human centers an awareness of earthly situatedness and interconnection beyond the human; it signals an openness to shifting worlds of multiplicity. Lastly, a special attention is granted in this research to the literature on wet ontologies, where the questions of multiplicity thrive in the suggestion that there is a different kind of reality based on watery experiences and knowledges (Steinberg & Peters 2015; Morita 2017). By using these so-called “fluid” mindsets to understand Danube River national borders, this research aims to understand how multiple, alternative, and sometimes contradicting imaginaries are articulated side by side with one another.

Imagining Mobility

In the words of Claudia Strauss, “to a certain extent *the imaginary* is just *culture* or *cultural knowledge* in new clothes” (2006, 322). What kinds of thinking do these “new clothes” allow? Foremost, by utilizing the concept of imaginary rather than culture, the presence of fluidity between the social and psychological can be more readily acknowledged. The *imaginary* concept draws significantly from a grounding in psychological anthropology, where the individual imaginary as situated within a social context has been of particular interest (see e.g. Wallace 1970; Whiting and Whiting 1975; Sperber 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997). Imaginaries allow for an awareness of the interplay between the external and the internal, or, the concrete and abstract worlds. Specifically, I follow Salazar’s wording of what imaginaries are, describing them as “culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with the personal imagination and are used as meaning-making devices, mediating how people act, cognize and value the world” (Salazar 2020, 770). The “culturally shared and socially transmitted” aspect of this definition acknowledges how groups may share some cultural understandings, or imaginaries, amongst one another, while remaining nonetheless capable of diverging in regard to other understandings (Strauss, 2006). By asking the research question, “how do people imagine the national borders of the Danube Region?” I center the individually and differently positioned actors who experience and create these borders. Asking the alternative question, “what is the *culture* of the national borders of the Danube Region?” removes the person-centered emphasis and abstracts “culture” from the people who live it. The latter question would lack specificity and create a sense of regional homogeneity.

Indeed, the imaginary concept has grown in popularity in part for its capacity to sidestep the homogeneity and fixity of the culture concept (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1996; Castoriadis 1997; Taylor 2002; Strauss 2006). Where “culture” wears the baggage of coloniality and Otherness, “imaginary” allows us to rethink the implicit categories used to understand groupings of people. By using imaginary, we are afforded a better capacity to recognize the dynamic assemblages of “real people” who exist in relation to one another and create these groups (Strauss, 2006). Crucially, Strauss advocates that a paradigm shift from culture to imaginary is only possible if, instead of discussing the “imaginary” on the level of abstract and imagined “society,” we foreground the imaginaries of “real people” (2006, 339).

When we talk about imaginaries, the question of “whose imaginaries?” inevitably arises (Strauss, 2006). This is ultimately a good thing for the usefulness of the concept, because without an impetus to ask ourselves who these thought processes belong to, cultural knowledge gained is only gained out of muddled social homogenization. The imaginary avoids cultural abstraction by taking the level of the individual as the starting place for social understanding.

If imaginaries emphasize the individuals who create society, what are imaginations? Cangià & Zittoun define imagination as “an ever-changing embodied and creative activity both embedded in and shaping the social and cultural world around” (2020, 643). Imagination and imaginaries are a positive feedback loop wherein one is created by and subsequently creates the other (Zittoun, 2020). Although often conflated or used interchangeably, the two terms refer to different scales of the socio-psychological world. Early theories of “imagination” (Greek: *phantasia*) can be traced back to Aristotle, for whom the concept of imagination was a crucial component for human knowledge, perception, and decision-making (Shields, 2020). In contemporary scholarship, imagination is described as the individual, dynamic, human, and creative mental activity of conjuring thoughts and ideas, places, or scenarios that are not necessarily physically present (Appadurai 1996; Lennon 2015; D’Onofrio & Sjoberg 2020; Salazar 2020). Although emerging from a long tradition, the recent imaginary turn in anthropology has caused some critics to argue that “‘imagination’ and ‘imaginaries’ have acquired too many meanings” and that these concepts “tend to overgeneralize, to elide scale, and to gesture toward without pointing at” (Stankiewicz 2016, 796 & 807). If the imagining concept of anthropology were simply a sub-par substitute for the culture concept sans colonial baggage, I would be in agreement with Stankiewicz. However, the capacity of the imagining concept to allow for the individual to be understood as such, while still recognized as belonging to a collective, and additionally as taking part in the creation of the social world through said imaginative processes, renders this concept especially fruitful to social science research today.

Furthermore, the connection between imagining and mobility lies in how imagination enables a person to think about things that are not physically present, or that do not concretely exist at the moment (Salazar, 2020). By envisioning a reality that is not the one physically before you, you are able to engage in acts intended to change the present reality. Anthropologists such as Sheller and Urry explain mobility both as a conceptual framework, as

well as the physical practice of movement undertaken by humans and nonhumans alike (2006). Mobility is everywhere, and can be observed in the movement of “people [...] cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating across (and even beyond) the planet” (Salazar & Jayaram 2016, 1). Sheller and Urry emphasize that mobility is not only about the act of moving but also about the power dynamics, social inequalities, and cultural meanings associated with said movement (2006). This includes the infrastructures, technologies, and policies that enable or restrict movement, as well as the experiences of bodies in motion. This concept of mobility is not limited to geographical movement, and instead emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of life as an inherent process of movement. Summarizing this idea, Sheller and Urry conclude that “mobilities need to be examined in their fluid interdependence and not in their separate sphere” (2006, 212).

Indeed, precedent scholars such as Wolf argued that mobility is the very basis from which the world operates (1989). This is in direct opposition to an assumption of stasis initially accepted in the social sciences, and against which Sheller and Urry also argue. In an attempt to study the social world, early social scientists divided society into units of analysis. These units are still utilized today in the categories of “culture,” “nation,” and “region.” These categories create what Wolf termed the “billiard ball” model of history, in which separate and homogenous sociological units interact by occasionally colliding and “bouncing off” of each other (1989). From this “billiard ball” logic, methodological nationalism arises out of the uncritiqued understanding that historical and sociological processes are contained within national borders (Wolf 1989; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). This is further demonstrated by the erroneous idea that “mobility is border crossing, as though borders came first, and mobility, second” (Ludden 2003, 1062). Rather than operating from an understanding in which societies/cultures/nations (pre)exist and occasionally encounter each other, Wolf challenged scholars to reimagine dynamics of mobility as central to the creation of these “static” categories in the first place (1989).

While a condition of mobility may be the basis from which the world operates, imaginaries work against this by describing the world as statically bound. If the world is imagined as bounded, it is treated as bounded, and this impacts how, why, and if it is physically possible to move. In other words, by imagining society as bounded it may functionally operate as such. While borders are often imagined as the epitome of stationary,

they can be more accurately conceptualized as an “entanglement of movement, meaning, and practice, involving a complex politics of hierarchy, of inclusion and exclusion” (Salazar 2020, 773). Borders – national, social, or otherwise – are a manifestation of the “regimes of mobility” that create a reference against which a scale of movement is measured and imagined (Schiller & Salazar 2013; Salazar 2020). Movement is not defined by itself but by how it relates to what is not moving.

In this regard, mobility and immobility are to be understood in terms of the “unequal globe-spanning relationships of power” that manifest themselves as individually experience-able in local contexts (Schiller & Salazar 2013, 195). Schiller and Salazar emphasize the role of state actors in shaping these systems through their power to define the fundamental categories of “legal,” “undocumented,” “territory,” “space,” and “border,” thereby creating the measuring stick against which mobility and stasis are understood (2013, 196). Indeed, the (state-sanctioned) process of map-making played a pivotal role in determining what is incorporated into imaginaries of said, “territory,” “space,” and “border.” Ludden explains,

Old spatial realities remained—and new ones emerged—but maps in everyone's mind increasingly had to make sense inside maps of national states. National boundaries covered the globe only after 1950, and only since then, all histories of all peoples have come to appear inside national maps, in a cookie-cutter world of national geography, the most comprehensive organization of spatial experience in human history (2003, 1058).

Building on Wolf's understanding of the precondition of connection, it is possible to understand how state- or even region-centered imaginations of space “invisibly bury” the histories of places perceived as “disorderly” uncategorized by hegemonic global mapping systems (Ludden 2003, 1058). In this vein, Schiller & Salazar see the emergence of multiple global mobility regimes that are responsible for differential access to systems of mobility across demographically diverse categories of people (2013). Here the state emerges as an imprecise assemblage that aims to enact conditions which contribute to an imaginary of global categorical rigidity. Following these ideas, my empirical research works to understand the phenomenon of national borders from the individual, mobile, and heterogeneous imaginaries of those who interact with and create them.

The Anthropology of Borders

With a long and wide-ranging history, the anthropology of borders thematically concerns the study of local border experiences as situated within the context of national and state power dynamics (Wilson & Donnan, 2004). Thought to have truly begun with the idea of “ethnic boundaries” (Barth, 1969), the anthropology of borders later expanded to include broader meanings of the word “border,” pointing additionally towards the racial, gender, class, and sexual borders present in society (Anzaldúa, 1987). Other scholars, such as Heyman, called attention to the physical and “territorial nature of state activities” in borderlands, thereby emphasizing the importance of a phenomenological reading of borderlands (1994, 43). Establishing a temporal critique in the subdiscipline, Cole and Wolf showed how the memory of cultural division can endure despite political borders having changed over time (1974).

These border subdisciplines placed alongside each other, it becomes evident that borders are a multiplicity of interpretations, realities, and meanings. Borders are particular in anthropology and the social sciences for the way that they “capture” the “fundamental social process of relationality” (Somers 1994; Emirbayer 1997; Lamont & Molnár 2002, 169). Heyman questions, however, whether the border concept “can withstand being a buzzword for theories of power, struggle, and connection?” (1994, 49). I would expand: can the borders remain useful areas of study if they are routinely stretched in order to explain more and more of society? What can the border say about the world when it is simultaneously a metaphor and a policy, a fence and a memory, a symbol, a river, and a bureaucracy? Would it have been better to study each of these entities as discrete phenomena without trying to create an overarching “border” entity? Despite these concerns, I maintain that the potential benefits of problematizing borders and subsequently the states that erect them as a unit outweighs the possible epistemological confusion. Political ecologists would agree, saying that it is indeed possible that the border concept remains analytically relevant so long as we “respect the concretely located nature of [borders]” (Heyman 1994, 49), even if a fundamental characteristic of these borders is in fact their susceptibility to change over time (Cole & Wolf, 1974).

Therefore, in order to understand what borders are and how they become laden with meaning and power, the researcher must understand how borders are imagined by the people who create them— this includes state and institutional actors, as well as those who

regularly cross and live among political borders (see e.g. Herzog 1990; Heyman 1994; Alvarez 1995). Grounded in political anthropology, the anthropology of borders emphasizes an awareness of the (1) individual people who compose nation-states, together with their (2) correlated institutions (Wilson & Donnan, 2004). Indeed, Wilson and Donnan maintain that it is imperative that the people who work within and perform the functions of the state not be “reduced to the images which are constructed by the state” (2004, 4). From this person-centered approach, the grand-scale of national bordering processes may be rendered comprehensible, and their material realities laid bare. It is from this grounding that I focus my empirical research on individual border crossers and the state-adjacent policy organizations that work to create and functionalize these Danube Region national borders.

Termed “border studies,” the broader parent field of the anthropology of borders is a multidisciplinary area of research in the cultural/social sciences that aims to create a “holistic understanding of the territory currently referred to as ‘borderlands’” (Zygadlo 2023, 2). Ganster and Lorey (2008) establish seven common characteristics of borderlands territories, the first three of which are particularly relevant to this research and will be overviewed here. Firstly, borders maintain an arbitrary nature in the sense that while there may exist a natural barrier, such as a body of water or mountain range to signify the borderline’s positioning, political borders are fundamentally arbitrary human creations (Ganster & Lorey, 2008). The Danube River acts as what I call a “pseudo-explanation” for the presence of national borders. In the places where the borderline runs along the river, interlocutors were inclined to explain the “naturalness” of these state boundaries. This interpretation is in the context of a region that actively works to render these national borders functionally invisible to travelers at the moment of border-crossing. Secondly, for Ganster and Lorey, the subjectivity of border demarcation means that borders are rarely indications of clearly defined cultural or ethnic divisions, and this is in large part due to borders’ inherent lack of fixity (2008). Ganster and Lorey specifically use the European Union and its ever-evolving borders as an example of this characteristic. Lastly, and echoed in the findings of this thesis, people living in border areas will often ignore the borderline itself (Ganster & Lorey, 2008). However, where Ganster and Lorey understand the disregard of political borders foremost in regions where this is an illegal practice, my research focuses on a region in which the dismissal of the importance of national borders is in many ways encouraged by state and regional authorities.

In the Danube Region, there is a concerted effort on the part of state, regional, and institutional policy makers to render these borders functionally invisible. This functional invisibility includes the not insignificant caveat that the official border crossing procedure has been observed (usually) in advance of the attempted border crossing. Wilson and Donnan describe how some European Union member states chose to implement “only a nominal presence at borders,” rendering these borderlines relatively “porous” (2004, 10). However, interestingly and paradoxically, Wilson and Donnan also use Carsten’s (2004) study of Malaysian border regimes to flag the sense of spatial closure characteristic of European borders when compared to some non-European notions of what a border ought to be (2004). Despite European national borders being viewed as functionally “porous,” they simultaneously possess a striking solidity when compared to the “effervescence” of Malaysian borders (Carsten 2004; Wilson & Donnan 2004, 10 & 20). This existential dichotomy is foundational to Danube Region national borders and indeed in part describes my interlocutors’ imaginaries of them.

Why use borders as an entry point to understand the social world? Wilson and Donnan (2012) say that, “borders help us to understand major forces of change that seem to be sweeping the globe, forces often included as aspects of globalization, but which may also be seen as neoliberalism, neo-imperialism, late modern capitalism, and supranationalism” (2012, 1). Border discourse, which was originally and most thoroughly studied on the Mexico-United States border (Anzaldúa 1987; Alvarez 1995; Zygodlo 2023), now also sits at the front of discourse in Europe, where refugees and migrants from regions called, “Africa,” the “Middle East,” and also “Eastern Europe” arrive in increasing numbers. Theoretically, an anthropology of borders has the potential to tell us about the “past, present, and future of nation and state” (Wilson & Donnan 2004, 7). In this thesis, I use the border concept both with an awareness of the concrete world issue that they are, and also for borders’ ability to capture the “fundamental social process of relationality” (Lamont & Molnár 2002, 169). By studying borders of the Danube Region phenomenologically, I aim to paint a picture of what a bureaucratized, institutionalized, nationalized, and historicized “relationality” looks like.

Finally, I maintain that a social barrier and a national border exist on a continuum – the former eliciting a sense of ephemeral fluidity, the latter a sense of everlasting solidity. This thesis treats borders as a physical manifestation of the boundary that informs what it looks like to live in relation to an “other.” While imaginatively fruitful, the border metaphor

can also be “elusive, undefinable, tautological, and even mystifying” (Alvarez 1995, 448). As such, the anthropology of borders has also come to embody the “juncture between the literal and conceptual” and provide an epistemological challenge for scholars to work outside of predefined containers of knowledge production (Alvarez 1995, 450). More than a study of literal national borders, the border genre is to be used as the foundation upon which scholars can work to “redraw conceptual frameworks of community” (Alvarez 1995, 447). I interpret this epistemological challenge as expanding the lens of analysis to include the land through which national borders are drawn, lending a more-than-human understanding to the fundamental processes of separation and connection.

More-Than-Human Borders

A more-than-human orientation serves as the epistemic mood of this research. I use “mood” similarly to Andrea Ballesterio’s use of the term in her book, *A Future History of Water* (2019). For Ballesterio, “wonder” created an epistemic mood from which she was able to understand the instability and confusion inherent to her ethnography of time (2019). Here, a more-than-human mood centers an awareness of earthly situatedness and interconnection beyond the human; it signals an openness to shifting worlds of multiplicity. Upon initial observation, these national borders may appear mundanely institutionalized and bureaucratic. However, through a more-than-human epistemic mood, I write to remind myself and readers of the inherent life interwoven amongst, and contributing to, these bordering practices.

Can an imagination of borders be divorced from the land which these borders divide? Or, more specifically appropriate for this thesis, divorced from the river that both cuts through and creates these borders? The waters that flow across a region with the “most international borders on the planet” lend a specific perspective to these national borders. A perspective that, as Ozguc & Burridge powerfully word, has the power to “offer us different scripts for a good and healthy life” (2023, 485). Without an attention to this earthy context, understandings of borders remain in the “abstract” realm without a “grounded” context (Ingold, 2010). This more-than-human and grounded approach need move beyond the conceptual, however, as Ozguc and Burridge warn, “research on more-than-human borders should not simply be seen as an analytical or conceptual exercise, but also as an ethical and activist conversation,” (2023, 484-485), and crucially one that advocates for suppressed

epistemologies. By looking to the non-human as it arises in this research, I aim to interrogate the static and human-centered framework from which we know and imagine national borders, and by proxy, one another.

What is a more-than-human approach? With works such as *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) and *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2010) David Abram explores how human perception and experience are intertwined within the broader nonhuman environment. As opposed to the dichotomous term, “nonhuman,” Abram coined the phrase “more-than-human” as a way to emphasize a multidimensional component to the larger context of earthly life. This context includes humans and their activities, but necessarily goes beyond human culture to describe the earth, land, water, flora, fauna, microbial, fungal, and all other agents on earth. Abram’s phenomenological approach highlights the importance of acknowledging the presence and agency of nonhumans in shaping human experience. Additionally, in her works *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway explores the blurring of boundaries between humans, nature, and machines, advocating for a nuanced understanding of agency and existence that reconfigures ideas of human exceptionalism. This approach is utilized in critical border studies through a recognition of the non-human agents (animals, plants, rivers, flora, mountains, technologies, rocks, soils, etc.) that together create borders through collective encounters (Ozguc & BurrIDGE 2023). The human and more-than-human components of borders are discussed across anthropology, mobility studies, and geography scholarship. Relevant examples include: Boruah’s (2021) writing on the riverine sector of the Indo-Bangladesh border as an actor, Duncan and Levidis’ (2020) analysis of the intentional weaponization of the Evros River in Bulgaria, and Thomas’ (2021) interrogation of the very concept of the “international river system” and her work to understand how rivers create cross-border flows. The human and non-human together are what co-constitute national borders.

The water component of the river enjoys a particularly influential position in the structuring and experience of the human world. This is true in both the abstract and material sense. The fluidity and transmutability of water are potent in metaphors of change, flow, and transformation (Strang, 2006). Water shifts between physical states and geographical locations amid the backdrop of temporally comparatively solid landscapes, and thereby embodies the essence of an ever-shifting manifestation of life, place, and identity. Water in the form of rivers is commonly used to represent “human journeys through time, the source

representing new birth, and the sea representing the ‘great sink’ into which the spirit is finally released to be regenerated in the larger hydro-theological cycle” (Strang 2006, 159). As an indication of the discursive power of water, water-based terminology can be used to describe shifting social relations such as an area being “flooded” by or “swamped” with newcomers (Strang 2006, 167-168). This is particularly relevant in the context of Danubian borders, where the national borders of the region are engulfed by narratives of immigration anxiety.

Through each of these engagements with water, nonbinary identities are negotiated within a “metaphorical continuum between abstraction and materiality” (Strang 2006, 175). This continuum presented by water as both a material reality and metaphoric concept “allows us to consider intangible connections with larger imagined communities” and see beyond interconnectedness in order to witness an intra-connectedness of co-constitution (Strang 2006, 175). Socially, the global pervasiveness of water in our lives, minds, bodies, and landscapes creates a point of shared experience and cross-border connection, while also containing the possibility for boundary and resource conflict. Furthermore, rather than centering a study of identity around a located vs. fluid dichotomy, Strang argues that by focusing on the continually shifting and relational process of “becoming,” researchers are able to write past static and unitary descriptions of the world. I parallel borders and rivers for their theoretical capacity to index the same ideas: relationality, mobility, separation, and connection. When the river is used as an underlying logic behind human relations, the meanings associated with rivers and borders are conferred between each other and interpreted through a process of co-constitution.

However, this is not to suggest that the water is merely a metaphor, or a setting for the scene of geopolitics. Indeed, in her book *How To Make a Wetland*, Scaramelli recognizes water as both an agentive political actor as well as a site through which politics are enacted (2021). In her descriptions of Turkish wetlands, she details how these spaces are made, destroyed, imagined, and preserved through the competing ideas, agendas, and morals of the global and local, non-human and human actors who engage with them. As a historical and contemporary site of politics made visible, Scaramelli uses vignettes to make the argument that Turkish wetlands “reveal the fluidity of cultural and ecological boundaries, networks, and dichotomies” (2021, 50). Scientists, NGOs, and bureaucrats fight to enact their own vision of what a wetland should be. Although diverse ontologies are frequently overlapping and co-constitutive, power asymmetries are always present and crucial to these world-building

outcomes (Scaramelli, 2021). How people imagine what a wetland *should* be informs the systems created to make it so.

Scaramelli provides one example in which water can be interpreted in a theoretically sensitive yet materially aware way. Because as Andrews aptly warns, “simply say[ing], ‘borders are fluid,’” without providing concrete examples for what that means “too easily leans on water for its value in metaphor without exploring how different material experiences produce distinct social, economic, and political motions” (2019). This would be the result of studying national borders from an abstracted and solely theoretical positioning. Working with a notion of “fluidity” has the potential to obscure localized specificity if used without a material touchstone. At the same time, the ramifications of borders extend far beyond the lines that represent them; borders are equal parts social, symbolic, and physical (Viljoen, 2023). Studying national borders from a phenomenological approach does not mean ignoring the radiating effects of borders beyond the borderline. Rather, I take care to recognize that *an* understanding of *a* border is not homogeneous with *the* understanding of *all* borders or a universalized border metaphor. I attend to the different dimensions of these Danube Region borders as they appear in person-centered border imaginaries.

Finally, in an attempt to move away from the focus on violence at borders, Lamb (2024) writes about the caring for nature that border-residents undertake at the Salween River border between China and Myanmar. Crucially, Lamb recognizes the multiple realities presented by a river border, explaining how, “...the border is a ‘natural’, flowing river that provides livelihoods to residents, and simultaneously, the river is a border with all the political institutions and limitation it brings” (2024, 6). In one sense, the border is akin to an apathetic filter, sifting out that which it desires, and isolating one area of the world from its surroundings. In another sense, the border can create a greater cross-border unity, effectively dissolving certain borders while reinforcing others – as is the case in the Schengen Area and European Union. Ultimately, the river border phenomenon is not one thing. Borders have the capacity to both envelope and create near-infinite manifestations, meanings, and imaginaries dependent on personal positioning. The ways we know this reality of multiplicity is described, again, by more-than-human “wet ontologies.”

Wet Ontologies & Ways of Knowing

The term “onto-epistemological” attempts to describe the bounded essence of being in, and making sense of, a particular place in the world. Ontology describes what is “reality,” and epistemology describes the ways we know about that reality. Some would argue that the two cannot be separated, since epistemologies cannot be meaningfully differentiated if ways of knowing are ways of making the world in a particular way – hence the term onto-epistemology (Krause, 2023). In positioning the river, water and wetness at the center of my inquiry into border imaginaries, I work to understand how the borders are imagined in this environment (literally and abstractly).

The framework of wet ontologies places wetness and fluidity into an ontological framework, suggesting that there is a different kind of reality based on watery experiences and knowledges (Steinberg & Peters 2015; Morita 2017). The philosophical questions at the heart of this approach are: Is there one shared physical and “real” world? Is there one “nature” with various cultures that try to make sense of and know this world? Or are there *multiple worlds* to know through the mechanisms of what is ultimately one culture? The way of inhabiting a place and the way of knowing a place cannot be separated from that place. “Terracentrism” refers to the idea that the vast majority of human knowledge has been built while resting on solid ground. Colloquial metaphors (which are used throughout this thesis) such as, “territories,” “based,” and “grounded,” aptly reflect this (Krause, 2023).

How would knowing and understanding the world look different if we were to approach it from a watery perspective? What might a fluvio-centric (as opposed to terracentric) worldview offer us in terms of understanding socio-political issues saturated in the rigidity of systematic, land-based, organization? Steinberg and Peters propose that the usage of wet ontologies as an alternative cognitive framework “endorse[s] the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings” (2015, 2). In agreement, Davis writes to unsettle the nature/culture binary in describing how in the practice of “thinking like and about rivers, we can enter into different kinds of river relationships” that allow for holistic ecologies and reveal the presence of multiple avenues of connectivity between the human and nonhuman world (2021, 387). By using these so-called “fluid” mindsets to understand river borders, this research aims to understand how multiplicity is imagined. Rather than “this

or that,” it is a “this *and* that” mindset that works to understand contradiction as fundamental to reality-making.

Relating to the literature on imagining mobility discussed in earlier sections of this literature review (Wolf 1974; Appadurai 1996; Strauss 2006), I understand the terms “fluidity” and “mobility” in conjunction. Both about movement, the term “fluidity” communicates a certain character to mobility – one of elasticity, change, and becoming. Fluidity is a mobility that is not necessarily in constant motion, but that has the capacity to morph, adapt, and negate itself. It is not one thing. Embodied by the river, fluidity is sensitive to the material conditions created by the abstract ideas fostered in bureaucratic spaces and manifested into specific realities. For these reasons, I choose to use the word fluidity in conjunction with mobility to emphasize how a more-than-human – and specifically wet – mindset portrays the simultaneous presence of both mobility and stasis created by border regimes. In asking how the national borders of the Danube Region are imagined, the answer is one of multiplicity and contradiction; the prerogative of this research is to understand this multiplicity and contradiction as fundamental to the human experience of world-making as situated in an earthly context.

It is from an awareness of this earthly context that Ingold (2010) writes about knowing, breathing, and moving through the world. Ingold underlines that the ground on which life is carried out is not an inert, lifeless background actor. It is rather a dynamic, living substance of uniquely earthen material through which life is engaged in a cycle of death and renewal (Ingold, 2010). The idea that life *is* the ground, that the ground continually bursts forth with life, that all of life that ever was is the ground, and that we are connected both beyond and through our bodies to the rest of the world, alters how we know the earth not just as the substance on which life happens, but as the medium through which we live (2010).

Ingold explains how the presumption of an inert ground is closely linked to the Kantian conception of knowledge and its limits (2010). Kant described the ground as the surface upon which a perceiver can acquire complete knowledge of all the things that lay on top. If a person were simply to move from point to point, building up their knowledge in a systematic, pre-conceptualized framework of information, all knowledge lay in the grasp of human reason. However, Ingold refutes this and instead claims that movement along the surface of the earth serves only to gather knowledge that has been abstracted from its interwoven context of earthly entanglement. A person who moves from point to point building their knowledge in a

pre-conceptualized framework seeks not to allow themselves to be changed in the process of movement through the medium of the world. Alternatively, for someone who allows themselves to be changed, moving *is* knowing (Ingold, 2010).

An awareness of the intrinsic connection between the earthly medium and knowledge-growing is reminiscent of Indigenous scholars, among others, who seek to highlight nonhuman forms of intelligence in the world. The hierarchical organization of humans and nonhuman others in schemes of knowledge production can be seen as a hindrance to the formation of holistic accounts of the world. These are ideas with which we must reckon even in governmental, bureaucratic spaces that would traditionally be considered void of everything but the human, specifically *because* they are considered void of everything but the human. Following these ideas, this research understands border imaginaries as situated within an ecosystem of movement – one that slides between the scales of individual travelers, inland shipping professionals, offices spaces, policy makers, and between different countries, cities, and riverbanks along the Danube River.

Conclusion

This thesis is positioned amongst the literature of imaginaries, mobility studies, border theory, the more-than-human approach, and wet ontologies. The culturally-situated yet person-centered “imaginary” is used as the basis of analysis so as to highlight the imaginative processes fundamental to the creation and maintenance of political borders. Mobility is conceptualized in relation to what is not moving, and therefore, borders could be thought of as the embodiment of the stationary – a benchmark against which movement is made visible. These mobilities are not only about the act of moving but also about the power dynamics, social inequalities, and cultural meanings associated with said movement. The imaginative element necessary to creating and engaging with the world is foregrounded especially by the large, abstract organizations of region, state, and border. Following these ideas, my empirical research works to understand the phenomenon of national borders from the individual, mobile, and heterogeneous imaginaries of those who interact with and create them.

Furthermore, when these borders are situated in and around an international river, I work to understand how the nonhuman river is interpreted as a logic behind separation and connection; I interrogate the static and human-centered framework from which we know and

imagine national borders. Literature on the more-than-human centers an awareness of earthly situatedness and interconnection beyond the human, and it signals an openness to shifting worlds of multiplicity. In this research a particular attention is granted to literature on wet ontologies, where the questions of multiplicity thrive with the suggestion that there is a different kind of reality based on watery experiences and knowledges (Steinberg & Peters 2015; Morita 2017). In using these so-called “fluid” mindsets to understand Danube River national borders, this research aims to understand how multiple, alternative, and sometimes contradicting imaginaries are articulated in coexistence. Rather than “this *or* that,” it is a “this *and* that” mindset that works to understand contradiction as fundamental to reality-making. This research brings the study of imagining borders and mobility in conversation with wet ontologies, and in doing so contributes to an anthropology of rivers as agentive and political border actors.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

How do people who work with and move along the Danube River imagine the national borders it crosses and creates? In order to answer this question I conducted a multi-sited ethnography that utilized participant-observation, structured interviews, and informal conversations both one-on-one and in group settings. My interlocutors are categorized into three categories: individual travelers, inland shipping professionals, and regional administrators/policy researchers. My field sites were split between stationary office buildings, ships moving along the river, and the national borders that were sometimes materially and sometimes abstractly present in these places. Sometimes I moved across these borders, and other times I sat beside them. I never found them. They were everywhere. The challenges I encountered when developing my research methodology reflected the philosophical dilemma presented by the conundrum of finding the “place” where an imaginary can be studied.

Interlocutors and Field Sites

In the Office

Practically, I began with who I had access to. My first contact was a visiting hydrosocial anthropology professor with whom I took the graduate seminar “Hydrosocial Anthropology: Waterworlds and Wet Ontologies,” the semester prior to beginning this research. Through this visiting professor, I got in touch with a local professor at the Universität für Bodenkultur Wien. I conducted an “expert interview” with this local professor who specializes in historical aquatic ecosystem management of the Danube Region. I used this initial conversation to assess the players of the river and region in order to determine who I could situate my research around. It was this professor who suggested I might reach out to the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe* (IDM).

IDM is a regional policy think tank that works across Central and Southeastern Europe under the mission of transnational region-building, peace-building, and political collaboration. I emailed the director of IDM and he responded within 30 minutes the same

day, agreeing to meet and discuss how I might use their institute in my research. We set up a meeting two days after the first email. I found the IDM office building in the 3rd district of Vienna, along the U4 metro line. I explained my project and questions more confidently and resolutely than I felt about them at the time, mentally sifting through the scope of my research in order to present the parts most obviously related to the institute. In doing so, I emphasized the questions I had about the political borders and regionhood of the Danube River Basin.

Following this first meeting, I was a trainee at IDM from November 7 - December 4. During this time, I participated in a 3-day conference and three public discussion panels, for two of which I was the official notetaker. Before each of these events, I assisted in administrative setup. During the Transnational Reflection Group conference held from Nov 15 – 17, I engaged in debates on the topics of climate, migration, EU enlargement, and digital transformation. I was a member of the climate policy group that drafted practical recommendations to become part of a Policy Recommendations Report delivered to local, national, and EU policymakers after the conference. I was responsible for taking notes of the four keynote talks and for writing a summary of the conference for the institute's website. During the month at the IDM office, I attended five staff-wide meetings and one academic team meeting. I conducted two in-person semistructured interviews with staff members in addition to spontaneous office conversation over the duration of my traineeship. I thought of everyone in the office as an informant, and getting to spend ample amounts of time in their environment was useful in understanding the social norms and methods of knowledge production in this space.

On those days I was in the office, I took note of the printed material that discursively described the institute's conceptual positioning and mindset. On the walls connecting individual offices there were posters that depicted different Central and Southeastern European capitals. For the 70th anniversary of IDM, the institute held a short story competition where people could submit stories describing how the Danube River impact(ed)s their lives. These stories were compiled into a book titled, "My Danube Story." This book, along with hundreds of other topically related literature, was on display on a bookshelf next to the coffee machine. The "Danube Region" and "Danube" were often used interchangeably in office conversations, printed materials, and posters. Through my traineeship at IDM, I became familiar with the methods of knowledge production used in a Danube Region

transnational policy think tank, and interrogated the question of where and how the river resides in this setting. By understanding the ways team members think about the Danube as a region, I gained insight into an imaginary of national borders, and the Danube River as situated amongst them.

The primary challenge with this field site was figuring out my place in the office. When the director had suggested a traineeship, I had, perhaps wrongfully, assumed that this would come with some predefined responsibilities. This was not the case. However, the fact that I had nothing specific to work on proved useful in that I could simply lurk around the office, talk to people at the coffee machine, seem occupied when necessary, and try to understand what everyone was doing every day. Almost everyone who worked at IDM had an academic or journalistic background. There were more women than men, but men held the most senior positions. It was a relatively young office, most associates in their mid-twenties and thirties. A notable aspect of the team was their internationality. The institute used English for office-wide meetings and regular communications. The people who worked there were from all over Europe: Austria, Germany, Poland, England, Hungary, Croatia, Czechia, France and Russia were represented during my time at the office. This also meant that everyone spoke at least three languages and often more. Everyone either had, or was actively pursuing a graduate degree. Engaged in the bureaucratic and policy-driven work of regional coordination, this group of informants regularly moved through the Danube Region mentally.

Although I spent the most time at IDM, I have the least number of formal interviews from this fieldsite. I asked almost everyone in the office at least once if they would be willing to sit down with me for an interview, but I left with only two, ~15 minute interviews. Both were with new hires, one of whom was a trainee like myself. Their interviews were fruitful, but I would have liked to have spoken directly with some of the more senior staff at the institute. A theme of their organization was being constantly overworked, everyone doing what seemed like the job of at least two people. There was a constant rush, deadline – something that had to be done immediately. My desk was set up next to the coffee machine where I witnessed everyone periodically returning for more caffeine throughout the day. I asked a colleague how he was doing one morning, his response was just, “very tired,” and I believed him. As a result, interviews with an arbitrary anthropology grad student were not their priority.

Included in the same “office space” category of border imaginaries as IDM, I spoke with two river tourism professionals in March of 2024. I met Natasha over a video call one morning, and she was glad to share her experiences working with Danube tourism. Natasha was specifically affiliated with Interreg, an EU international tourism project aiming to increase sustainable tourism in the Danube Region. She was young, in her late 20s/early 30s, and from Austria. Two days later, I took a bus to Bratislava and met Tony in his office at *Floratour*. *Floratour* is a Bratislava-based tourism agency that most regularly coordinates the Slovakian leg of international cruise ships and passengers. During our conversation, Tony’s responses were thorough and surprisingly insightful. Tony was in his 40s and from Slovakia.

Moving Along the River

The second and third groups of informants with whom I engaged were the inland shipping professionals and individual travelers. These were riverboat captains, sailing students, shipping company managers, and individual unaffiliated people who were physically moving up and down the Danube River and across national borders of the region. In each of my conversations with inland shipping professionals, I tried to find out if there were any sites the informant had access to that I could visit in person, such as a ship or port. However, no such visit took place due to various access issues. Instead, I engaged in activities that I had access to independently. I booked a ticket on a passenger ferry and visited relevant sites along the river by hiking or biking. In this way, I paired what I was learning from interviews with river navigators to the experiences of river mobility I undertook on my own. During these individual excursions I was also able to speak with fellow travelers on buses, on walking paths along the river, and on the ferry to ask about their imaginaries of the national border we were crossing or sitting beside.

A timeline of my individual river border observations unfolds as follows: On 08.02.24 I visited the Lobau National Park, a nature reserve in Vienna and Lower Austria that is primarily made up of a section of the Danube River’s floodplain. I rode the Twin City Liner passenger ferry to Bratislava on 11.02.24. On 13.03.24 I signed up for a tour of the UN complex after noticing it was described as “international territory on the Danube.” I spent several hours across multiple days on the Donaukanal. On 20.03.24 I took a Flixbus to the Slovak-Austrian Border/Danube-Morava Confluence point and spent the day there. On 28.03.24 I rode a WienRad bicycle for ~20 km along the Danube to Lower Austria in the

westward direction. On 03.04.24 I returned to the Slovak-Austrian Border/Danube-Morava Confluence point for more observation. Lastly, on 11.04.24 – 13.04.24 I spent two nights in Passau at the German-Austrian Border and Danube-Inn-Ilz confluence point. After and during each of these trips I wrote detailed descriptions of my experiences in my notebook, and then typed these field notes into a WordDoc.

Throughout this time, I conducted seven semi-formal interviews with inland shipping professionals and individual travelers which resulted in ~8.5 hours of recorded audio (see Interlocutor Table). Seven of these interviews were in person and two were a video call. After the interviews, I manually transcribed each on my trackpad laptop. The first interview was with ViaDonau, a government funded river logistics service where I met with Ulrich. He was warm, jubilant, and eager to share. He was from Germany and in his 40s. Ulrich offered to personally call two people he thought would be willing to talk with me after our interview, one of whom was Harry and the other was William. Harry was the managing director of Transport Trade Services, a cargo shipping company that operates across the Lower Danube. I called Harry for one hour on a Friday while he was at the airport waiting to board a plane. He was meticulous in his answers, in his 60s, and from Austria. He took his time and gave the most precise response possible when describing border controls along the river.

William was a corporate captain and the official legal contact for CroisiEurope, a French cruise company. He was also a teacher at the Nautical School of Vienna. William was descriptive and ready to share, in his late 40s/early 50s, and from Austria. Our interview lasted about 45 minutes, and after which he offered to connect me with two of his students, and one of his colleagues. I asked explicitly if there were any women he knew who were captains, aware that thus far I had only spoken with men. One of the students he contacted, Lauren, and her boyfriend, Christian, were the next two river navigators with whom I spoke. The three of us met at a cafe in Vienna on their day off. They explained that working on ships means you have an unusual schedule, and this was their first day off in almost a month. Christian's English was better than Lauren's, or at least he was more confident and spoke more during our conversation. They were both from Austria and about my age, and I felt myself speaking more confidently and casually because of this generational commonality.

After Lauren and Christian, I met Rufus at Gasthaus Kaptn Otto where he gathers with a group of fellow retired captains every Tuesday. When I arrived, they were all still there, and Rufus directed me to a table to the right of them in the small, mostly empty restaurant. As we

spoke, he frequently gestured to the people he was referencing, either physically in the room with us, or in pictures on the walls. Similarly, boats he spoke about, often pictured somewhere in the room, he would stop and point out. His meandering way of storytelling meant there was little direction to the conversation, but a lot of context. Rufus was in his 70s and from Austria.

Lastly, when asking interlocutors in each of these categories about how they imagined the borders of the Danube Region, I was intentional to not specify which borders I meant. I gave an explanation of my project, talked about the Danube River and the associated region, explained that I was interested in studying the borders of this area, and then asked, “How would you describe, or how would you imagine, the borders of this region?” By asking this question towards the beginning of the conversation I wanted to give the interlocutor the opportunity to express what they thought constituted a border; there was no wrong answer. Rarely did they ask for clarification, and if they did, they would usually say, “you mean the national border?” Even without clarifying, almost every interlocutor immediately began speaking about national borders specifically. It is for this reason that during the writing phase of this project I revised my question to specify the imaginary of *national* borders. Although, as established in the Anthropology of Borders section above, we know that borders are equal parts material and symbolic. Borders will be discussed in their myriad of manifestations in the chapters that follow.

Interlocutor Table

Pseudonym	Analytic Category	Affiliation	Age	Gender	Interview Length	Description
Stephen	Regional coordinator	IDM	45-54	M	~30 minutes, not recorded	Director of IDM, the person I emailed to access the institute.
Stella	Regional coordinator	IDM	25-34	F	Regular office interaction over the course of 1 month traineeship	Second in command at IDM, does most of the big picture organization.
John	Regional coordinator	IDM	25-34	M	16:32	Research associate, British
Katherine	Regional coordinator	IDM	25-34	F	15:40	Fellow trainee, researching terrorism
Ulrich	Inland shipping professional	ViaDonau	45-54	M	44:54	Main organizational contact, funding & logistics, communications
Lauren	Inland shipping professional	CroisiEurope	25-34	F	1:30:02 (joint interview with Christian)	Sailing student, river steersman
Christian	Inland shipping professional	CroisiEurope	25-34	M	1:30.02 (joint interview with Lauren)	Sailing student, river steersman
Rufus	Inland shipping professional	CroisiEurope	65+	M	2:41:06	Retired river captain, enjoys telling life story
Tony	Regional coordinator	Floratour	35-44	M	29:54	Travel agency manager, very busy
Natasha	Regional coordinator	Interreg	25-34	F	21:08	Corporate Communications
William	Inland shipping professional	CroisiEurope	55-64	M	44:07	Passenger vessel captain, teacher at the Vienna Nautical School

Harry	Inland shipping professional	Transport Trade Services	65+	M	1:01:28	Managing director of TTS
Slovak-woman	Individual traveler	Unaffiliated	45-54	F	<10 Minutes	Met beside the river
German-woman	Individual traveler	Unaffiliated	35-44	F	<10 Minutes	Met beside the river
English-woman	Individual traveler	Unaffiliated	25-34	F	<10 Minutes	Met beside the river
Blue baseball-cap man	Individual traveler	Unaffiliated	25-34	M	Conversation with German Federal Police overheard	Fellow bus passenger
Brown jacket man	Individual traveler	Unaffiliated	25-34	M	Conversation with German Federal Police overheard	Fellow bus passenger
Audrey	Regional coordinator	Danube Commission	25-34	F	Regular interaction at TRG 3-day Conference	Transnational Reflection Group Conference Participant
Melanie	Regional coordinator	European Movement Ireland	25-34	F	Regular interaction at TRG 3-day Conference	Transnational Reflection Group Conference Participant
Vanessa	Regional coordinator	European Movement Ireland	25-34	F	Regular interaction at TRG 3-day Conference	Transnational Reflection Group Conference Participant

Positionality & Limitations

At IDM my positionality as a mid-twenties, American, English-speaking, non-German speaking woman and graduate student researcher was largely in line with the other people at the institute. The markers of difference were my nationality and lack of

Central European background context. While I consider myself decently well read and engaged in European politics, ~3 years of interest vs. a lifetime of experience and personal associations with local actors were missing from my repertoire. Furthermore, my study focus is not policymaking or political science, in which most people at the institute did have training. One interesting observation in regard to my nationality was that people were relatively surprised to find out I was American and had frequently (perhaps subconsciously) assigned me a different nationality before learning otherwise.

My first day at the institute, I was standing with three colleagues after a panel discussion and one of them asked where I was from. I said the US, and her eyes widened in shock. The other colleague standing there said, “Really? I thought you were French!”. I had known both of these people for less than 48 hours, and was curious as to what they had observed that would have meant I was specifically not American (as indicated by the shocked, eyes-widened expression), and that I was rather specifically French. The second time it came up was my last day as a trainee. A colleague asked if I was going home to Italy for Christmas, and it came to light that for the past month they had thought I was Italian.

In the second half of my research I focused on the individual travelers and inland shipping professionals. Here, my non-German speaking and gender positionalities created some challenges. By conducting interviews in English, I could definitionally only interview interlocutors who spoke English. This meant that my interviewees were generally younger and excluded anyone who was not comfortable proceeding with the interview in English. When I conducted street interviews, the first question I asked was, “Do you speak English?” and if the answer was no, I thanked them and moved on.

My gender identity, while I would not call it a limitation, did create a certain positionality during data collection. Shipping and nautical activities are historically and primarily undertaken by men. This affected how comfortable and focused on my research I felt when conducting fieldwork alone in unfamiliar places, boat yards, and “borderlands.” There will always be a not insignificant portion of my energy dedicated to assessing the safety of a situation: whether I should walk down that bike path alone, whether an interlocutor is merely trying to be helpful or if I should be wary of their invitation to tour a ship, etc. During street interviews, this also meant I was more inclined to approach women and families to ask if they would be willing to have a conversation.

I would have liked to have taken a river cruise across national borders, and ideally to the Black Sea, but this was not possible for financial reasons. Additionally, it was a bit arduous to find people that responded to my emails and were also willing to speak with me. Once I spoke with someone, the obstacle was then that people would dismiss my question, saying that the border “doesn’t matter anymore” or that it’s “disappeared” and that they simply never think about it. While frustrating at first, this did eventually provide some interesting data.

Multi-Sited Ethnography

Here I include a reflection on my experience with a multi-sited ethnography of a river’s region. At the beginning of this project, I had not intended to specifically conduct a multi-sited ethnography. Rather, when I knew I wanted to research imaginaries of national borders, the most immediate and obvious methodology seemed to be one that included multiple locations. The logic followed that since, when I imagined the national borders of the region, I imagined “where” they were, I needed to physically go to all those places. However, I quickly realized that going to the border presented a philosophical challenge. By conducting research in the geographically-large and definitional-illusive “field” of the borders of the Danube Region, “entry” into this field was already an act of interpretation. Where I decided to go, and who I chose to speak with, were both decisions guided by where I imagined the borders of the Danube Region to “be.”

The first half of my research was at IDM, where the office space provided a physical locus around which to orient my data collection. Knowing that borders are political inventions, I wanted to be in a space where these issues, if not being actively decided, were being talked about as though they *could* be decided or ultimately changed. I worked to understand how borders are created through processes of imagining in this space. In practice, this looked like me sitting in the extra workroom for eight hours a day, periodically wandering around the office, offering to help with anything that needed to be done, and trying to balance ethnographic data collection with maintaining a respectful distance from staff members who had plenty of other things to do everyday.

After this experience, I wanted to augment my data with the more material component of these borders. Therefore the second half of research shifted away from the ways people think *about* borders, to trying to think *on* the borders. I contacted inland shipping professionals and river tourism agencies. After being in the IDM office for a month, I felt the urge to see the “real” Danube, not the idea of it or an exposition of how it “should” be. In retrospect, my thought process could be described as, “I’ve heard what you all have to say and write about what borders are, but what are they *really*?” I desired a personal experience with the physical borderlines along the river. It was as though these researchers and policymakers had a common understanding of something that was second nature to them, and they assumed I knew it too, but I did not and may never in the way that they do. In fact, I believe I will not, because understandings of a region, as will be explored in this thesis, are collective but still individual experiences. The way that these policymakers situated themselves within the Danube Region was something beyond their academic understanding, it was something more obvious – the confidence one gains simply by being familiar with a place for so long that you have forgotten what it is like to not know it.

In my process of thinking *on* the borders of the Danube River, I resorted to looking at maps, identifying national borderlines, and traveling there. A challenge I confronted throughout this research was the internal methodological struggle of trying to wrap my head around the region. Understanding the region as such seemed straightforward enough if not a little large in scope at the initial onset of project planning. But wrapping my head around something figuratively, and wrapping my body around it physically, are two different things. This was exemplified during my trip to Passau, Germany. My first day there I made the long walk down the cliff where my accommodation was, to the tip of the island between the Danube, Inn, and Ilz rivers, and decided I would start there that morning. I then spent the day traversing the entire peninsula, and essentially exhausting myself. My phone told me I took 22,000 steps and climbed the equivalent of 57 flights of stairs in about six hours.

One of the times I was seated between the Danube, Inn, and Ilz, I looked at a map of the three rivers, associated land masses, and subsequent national borders. But with this I was unsatisfied. Instead of seeing a representation or interpretation of these borders, I wanted to see the “real” borders. “These rivers are so big,” I thought. “The borders around them are so big, I will only ever see a point of them if not on a map.” Even with the aerial viewpoint from the top of the Passau Castle (which I did climb, adding to the 57 flights of stairs), this was still

one snapshot of the area. It was only a moment, and not the full story. At the time it was a dejected feeling, but now I understand this as relevant information: only on a map are the borders clear, complete, and whole. Multi-sited ethnography does not mean omnipresent ethnography.

Experiencing borders as a human means always experiencing them partially. The same goes for rivers, and truly any earthly feature so grand in physical scale. It is the ethnographer's responsibility to understand these pieces of borders as inherently relational. The borders I experienced were almost always indexing some other time, or some other place. While observing every time and place that contributed to these borders' imaginaries was impossible, it was also unnecessary. Hannerz explains that in a multi-sited ethnography, "the sites are connected with one another in such ways that the relationships between them are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them" (2003, 206). Understanding the local dynamic of each possible border site of the entire Danube Region was not so important as understanding some of the key forces that connect them. It was the process of traveling from one place to another around different borderscapes (borderlines and offices alike) that contributed to my understanding of these diversely situated river border imaginaries.

Chapter 4: Historical and Institutional Context of the Danube Region

Borders index the nation state. Nations index their international neighbors. National border imaginaries exist in tandem with the larger, sometimes philosophical, geopolitical borders that surround them. During group discussion at the Transnational Reflection Group Conference at IDM, one participant drew attention to an extreme scale of border imaginaries by posing the intentionally thought provoking question, “Where does Europe end?” Regions can be defined by the cultural, personal, institutional, environmental, jurisdictional, and more (Jones & Paasi, 2013). It is from an awareness of this inherent nebulousness that we understand Danube Region border imaginaries. Throughout research, interlocutors referenced a general “history” and set of regional policies which, while second nature to some, create the specific and localized context of border imaginaries in the region.

This chapter will provide insight on European ideas of regionhood, and situate this research in the broader history of post-World War II national border configurations. Then, the present day institutional bodies of The European Union and Schengen Agreement will be overviewed. The Schengen Area is a project of the European Union which works to reduce internal borders by strengthening exterior borders. The fluidity of the meanings of “border” and “region” can be observed between institutions, while within a given institution these definitions are bureaucratically inhibited from frequently changing in an official sense. The Schengen Area, as a political entity, demonstrates the juxtaposing nature of borders as phenomena which act as connectors and separators dependent on scale and focus.

The Danube “Region”

The Danube Region is generally considered, unsurprisingly, the area around the Danube River. However, the exact extent of the region is largely up to interpretation. There are two recurring versions of Danube Region definitions: an environmental definition and a geopolitical definition⁴. Environmentally, the Danube River starts in Germany’s Black Forest

⁴ An argument can always be made for the interrelation of these two categories.

and flows 2,850 kilometers southeast before reaching the Black Sea. It passes through or borders ten countries: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine (Gascoigne & Mandl, 2009). Although the river itself travels through a relatively small area of each of these countries, the entire nation is considered part of the Danube Region for administrative and logistic environmental management purposes. This fact segues into the second kind of definition: a geopolitical Danube Region.

Geopolitically, the Danube Region is governed foremost by international institutions. In 2011, the European Union established a policy initiative called the “Strategy for the Danube Region” (EUSDR) which provides a political and administrative basis from which to define the region. This strategy encompasses not only the ten countries the river directly touches, but also countries that are part of the river’s basin, and even those that have only political, economic, or environmental ties to the region without a geographic claim. EUSDR considers fourteen countries part of the Danube Region: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic (not on the Danube but part of its basin), Slovenia (part of Danube basin), Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (partially in the Danube basin), Montenegro (minor portion in the basin), Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine (Danube Region Strategy, 2024). Central to this thesis, the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe* is primarily concerned with the geopolitical definition of the Danube Region. At this institute, the “Danube Region” and “Central Europe” are expanded to include nineteen target countries in total, each of which is linked by historical, cultural, and geographical ties, and some of which are also part of the Danube River Basin. These countries include all the countries in the EUSDR, plus Poland, Lithuania, Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia (IDM, 2024). These nineteen countries combined represent a mix of EU member states, candidate countries, and non-EU countries.

The Danube Region is therefore both an area physically defined by the river and its tributaries, as well as a politically defined area containing countries with shared interests in river management, regional development, and international security. Across these definitions, variation of the Danube Region is understood as variation at the level of the nation state. A smaller region means fewer countries while a larger region means more. This is not to be read as an apolitical fact. Instead of understanding a region as a neutral environmental or geographic definition, we must ask why it is that Europe contains sets of politically coherent regions that operate according to the agendas and governance of member countries. When

we say, “Danube Region,” we are not speaking solely about a territorial, personal, or geographic region, but specifically about a bureaucratically defined and institutionally coordinated political body.

Therefore, if we are to understand imaginaries of Danube Region national borders, the concept of region must also be problematized. Like a border, a region is a multivalent, political, and open-ended term used irregularly from person to person. On my first day in the IDM office, the director of the institute said to me, “We are wanting to develop more into the concept of ‘regions’ rather than ‘nations’... it’s all about overcoming borders.” Early on in this research, the concept (or, goal) of a unified region was signaled. In this quote, the idea of a region is dependent on the borders which appear in and around it; for the director of IDM, the presence of the region is in part understood as the result of having overcome the borders within it.

Developing more into regions is not a new political discourse. The concept of a “Europe of Regions” dates back to 1966, when writers such as Denis de Rougement (1966) and Guy Heraud (1974) aimed to promote regions in the process of European integration. Even before the term “Europe of Regions” was penned specifically, the idea of regionalizing European nations had been explored by scholars such as Bretons Maurice Duhamel (1928). These are examples from those who wanted to create a “Europe of Regions” like the one IDM is working for today, but the concept of a region itself was further problematized only later.

In their editorial on *Advancing the Geography of Regions*, Jones and Paasi describe how “Regional worlds certainly exist, yet at the same time ‘region’ remains a vague category, set within a deep geographical lineage, interpreted and understood in many ways” (2013, 2). In the last couple decades, the idea of a region has been heavily discussed in the social sciences. Topical interests range from the performance of “regionhood,” to the significance of regions for certain political ecologies, to the implementation of political or economic region-making policies (Painter 2008; Jones 2009; Paasi 2009; Kneafsey 2010). Regions exist in tandem with nation-states because they create categorical or jurisdictional spatial groupings that specifically do not follow national borders; a region is analytically and definitionally “sub-state,” “supra-state,” or “cross-border” (Jonas & Paasi, 2013). This regional multi-levelledness creates the phenomenon of “nested governments” that exist within the “supranational, national, regional, and local” scales (Marks 1993, 392). Indeed, in this quote from Marks, “regional” is used to mean specifically a sub-state region, demonstrating how

the word “region” itself is a flexible term that bends at the writer’s discretion. Ultimately, a region is a subjective, political, and imaginary construction malleable to support a certain socio-spatial categorization which the categorizer finds useful.

Particularly relevant to the national borders of the Danube Region is the fact that the official regions of Europe are top-down, state-driven implementations that go hand-in-hand with post-Soviet integration efforts (Jones & Paasi, 2013). While interwoven with market- and identity-driven forces, the official regions of Europe are particular for their intentionality. International institutions and enforced procedures are responsible for the creation and practice of these regions. The supranational political institutions with which this research engages are the European Union and the Schengen Area. Fundamental to the argument of my thesis, Allen and Cochrane point out that “political institutions lend themselves to the language of territory, fixity and boundaries” (2007, 1162). While “the urge to draw lines around spatial regions [and] to know the limits of political authority” is strong, a willingness to shift organizational frameworks so that they center “the symbolism of a more diffuse, somewhat nebulous, regionalism” is absent (Allen & Cochrane 2007, 1162). Knowing space through the singular and simplistic category of the nation state remains the accepted norm across public and private sectors.

There are official institutional definitions of what constitutes the Danube Region, then there are historical, ecological, economic, and political definitions. Beyond the multitudinous nature of official definitions, which all rely on the boundaries of nation-states, there are the individual imaginaries of those who live in the region and perceive themselves within it to varying degrees. Counterintuitively, Danube Region borders do not follow solely the ecological condition of the river. Instead, they overlap with, and are expanded beyond, geopolitical definitions that interpret the river as a meaning behind regional and spatial coordination.

Changing Borders of the Danube Region

In 1953, the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe* was founded amidst fears of “losing the German-speaking minority behind the Iron Curtain.” This is the institutional origin story described by IDM staff at public events and in personal communication when I asked about their founding. In the geopolitics of post-World War II

Europe, significant numbers of ethnic Germans were placed in countries under Soviet influence. While a history of ethnic German minorities in the Russian sphere dates back to the 1800s, the shifting borders of the post-World War II era increased this population in nations such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Poland (Pohl, 2016). These groups were at risk of experiencing cultural suppression as Soviet allied governments sought to solidify their power within the Eastern Bloc (Bacon, 1992). Western European countries, particularly West Germany and Austria (as the nations foremost representing the German-speaking world) feared not only the loss of political and cultural ties, but also the potential that these minorities may suffer under Soviet authority (Pohl, 2016). This scenario highlights the potential for historically shifting border configurations to inform a consciousness of border regimes today.

The East-West divide, and the historically differential implications dependent on which side of a borderline one finds themselves, leaves a lasting memory that influences the meanings of national borders in the present day. The *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe*, in large part funded by the European Union, works to advance cross-border collaboration between countries across these lasting geopolitical divides and within the European sphere. Border configurations in Central and (South) Eastern Europe have undergone relatively significant changes between 1945-2024. Despite how national borders are often regarded as a constant, and even unimportant, fact of everyday life, a brief look into their histories renders their politically constructed-nature and instability glaringly apparent. Describing just the last seventy-nine years describes a complex story of change. The following section, while by no means exhaustive, will serve to orient the reader in the historical border geography of Central and South Eastern Europe.

In 1945, Germany's borders were changed following the end of WWII as the eastern territories of East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia were ceded to Poland and the Soviet Union. The "Oder-Neisse line" became Germany's eastern border and the German-speaking populations in these areas were forcibly expelled (Eberhardt, 2015). This marks one of the main events that directly led to the founding mission of the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe*. During World War II, Austria was occupied by the Allied Forces and remained divided into four occupation zones until 1955. In that year, the Austrian State Treaty restored Austria's sovereignty and re-establishing its pre-war borders without any changes (Komlosy, 2000). However, the lasting effects of occupation and small-scale internal division

(down to the level of district in the capital city of Vienna) remain a stark cultural memory that contributes to imaginaries of what a border is and means today.

One of the most relevant historical borders in this thesis is the Iron Curtain. The Iron Curtain was not a literal continuous border structure, but rather refers to the metaphorical and physical boundary that separated the Soviet nations from Western European nations. The Iron Curtain was a complex system of fortifications, barriers, and heavily guarded borderlines that extended from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south (Eckert, 2019). These borders were notoriously intense and militarized. The specific methods of border control varied depending on the country. However, common features could have included physical walls made out of barbed wire, concrete, or electrified material, minefields, armed border guards, watchtowers, electronic surveillance such as motion detectors connected to alarm sirens, and psychological control or intimidation tactics aimed at deterring border-crossing attempts (CIA, 1955).

In 1991, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia became several independent states. This resulted in significant changes to the borders in the western part of the Danube Region. The key changes included: Slovenia declaring independence from Yugoslavia on June 25, 1991, Croatia declaring independence on June 25, 1991, and Bosnia and Herzegovina declaring independence on March 1, 1992. Montenegro voted for independence from Serbia on May 21, 2006, and later Kosovo declared independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008. Later, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine in 2014 and conducted a full-scale invasion of the country in February of 2022. This led to a war-time shifting of territorial control in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (Bailey, 2022). Because this is an ongoing conflict at the time of writing, retrospective maps depicting even momentarily solidified border changes remain ever-changing. These official border changes are understood by interlocutors as a worrying future possibility. The entire length of the Danube River, and European inland waterway transport at large, is currently experiencing altered trade capacity as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian War (Zinchenko, 2024). This demonstrates the far-reaching consequences of territorial conflict and subsequent border changes on cross-border trade networks.

The Danube Region has experienced significant border changes from 1945 to 2024, particularly due to the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Recent conflicts in Eastern Europe, and specifically Ukraine, highlight the interdependence and continuously changing relations of the region. Only with time are these

border changes solidified with maps into a cultural consciousness. This cultural consciousness subsequently informs imaginaries of contemporary national borders.

The European Union

National borders of the Danube Region exist in the context of the larger, regulatory body of the European Union (EU). Although each EU member country is a sovereign nation, by joining this extrastate alliance they agree to perform their national borders in certain ways and in accordance with EU policy. During my conversation with Harry, the managing director of an inland cargo shipping company, he made the simplified but helpful summarization: “the EU is borders for goods and cargo, the Schengen Agreement is borders for people.” An overview of the EU is warranted as this institution acts as the international governing body of the Danube as a region.

A relatively recent development, the European Union was established on November 1st, 1993 with the signing of the “Maastricht Treaty.” However, the EU as it exists today is the result of decades-long work of European Integration. An abridged summary of events proceeds as follows. European integration began officially in 1951 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) by Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. In 1957 the Treaty of Rome was signed by these six countries in order to create a common market (European Union, 2024b). In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty was signed and came into force on November 1, 1993, thereby officially establishing the European Union under the common principles of “freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, promoting peace and stability” (European Union, 2024b). Today the European Union is a political and economic union of twenty-seven countries that operate together as one market.

In order to achieve international organization, each of these countries has adopted standardized laws that allow the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people⁵ among member states. Although not a strict requirement, part of this economic cooperation includes standardized currency in the form of the euro (€). Twenty of the twenty-seven

⁵ Specifically outlined in the Schengen Agreement, of which not all EU members are a part. The details of the Schengen Agreement will be explained in the following section.

member countries have adopted the euro, together creating another subregion, known as the “Eurozone.

One of the many EU projects is Interreg: “a program that promotes cooperation between regions and across borders” (European Union, 2024b). The three subdivisions of *Interreg* programming are termed Cross-Border Cooperation, Transnational Cooperation, and Interregional Cooperation, each referring to a slightly different geographical scope and focus within the EU. Especially relevant and discussed in this research, the “Danube Pearls” project is an initiative of *Interreg* that works to promote sustainable mobility and tourism along the Danube River. The project aims to create a network of destinations, referred to as “Danube Pearls,” that offer eco-friendly travel options and promotes that tourists can see the river as a borderless region. Countries participating in the “Danube Pearls” project include both the EU and non-EU member countries of Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia (non-EU), Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine (non-EU). Projects like *Interreg* demonstrate how layered within the borders of sovereign countries are transnational cooperatives that create regional border imaginaries of their own.

Lastly, EU Strategy for the Danube Region describes Priority Area 1a as the need “to improve mobility and multimodality of inland waterways” (Hartl 2023, 1). The “Practical Manual on Border Controls along the Danube and its Navigable Tributaries” by the EU- and state-funded *ViaDonau* provides guidance on the procedures and regulations related to border controls for inland waterway transport along the Danube River, with particular attention paid to borders outside of the EU. This manual aims to facilitate efficient and consistent border management practices and ensure secure navigation for vessels operating across multiple countries. The manual outlines the standard procedures for border checks, including customs, immigration, and security inspections for countries East of the EU border. The EU governing body and *ViaDonau* are especially attentive to what they call the “harmonization” of inland waterway transport. The manual emphasizes the importance of harmonizing border control practices across different countries and encourages the adoption of standardized (and often digital) procedures for information exchange between border control authorities (Hartl, 2023).

The Schengen Area

Some authors have argued that “the end of the cold war and the break-up of the bipolar system left the armed forces, as a result of their vanished enemy, with an identity crisis [that] led to a merging of internal and external security” (Schwell 2010, 317; see e.g. Lutterbeck 2005; Bigo 2006; Eriksson & Rhinard 2009). Today in the EU, the line between “internal” and “external” security is increasingly blurred by the establishment and maintenance of Schengen Agreement policy. Unlike national borders, which international policy professionals like to think of as relatively unchanging in Central Europe, the borders of supranational regions are of constant debate. The Schengen Area (also known as the “Schengen Zone,” or as countries belonging to the “Schengen Agreement”), comprises twenty-seven countries, four of which are not EU member states. There are three EU member states which are not part of the Schengen Area (European Parliament, 2024).

For many, the Schengen Area represents one of the most significant achievements in European integration, facilitating “free movement for over 400 million people” (European Commission, 2024a). Indeed, it is in large part due to the Schengen Agreement that interlocutors were quick to say that national borders are no longer important. “Since Schengen—”, “since freedom—”, interlocutors repeated, borders generally are not relevant anymore. The Schengen Area is explained in official discourse with the intense verbiage that internal national borders have been “abolished” (European Commission, 2024a). The reality of this border abolition carries asterisks; I would posit that borders are not so much abolished as dormant, practiced at certain times and locations dependent on personal identity, profession, means of transport, purpose of travel, length of intended stay, and nationality of the person traveling.

Using the word “abolished” suggests an abandonment of the national border framework, which is not the case. On the European Union website, it is stated that within the Schengen Area, there are no routine checks at borders between member countries. Ideally this would allow people to travel freely across borders without the need to show passports or undergo control procedures. However, certain controls can be temporarily reintroduced in “exceptional circumstances,” such as security threats defined by a nation’s government (European Commission, 2024).

Furthermore, while internal borders have been nominally “abolished,” the Schengen Area has a common, intensified external border. Borders on the edge of the Schengen Area are strictly enforced. This creates the motivation for member states to dedicate resources with the aim of strengthening the exterior borders of the region so that an interior borderlessness may be maintained. Since the Schengen Area’s establishment in 1985 it has expanded to include most EU member states and a few non-EU states. Today the Schengen Area includes 29 countries. Mutual exceptions include:

1. **Non-Schengen EU Members:** Ireland and Cyprus.
2. **Non-EU Schengen Members:** Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein.

In terms of challenges faced by the Schengen Area, migration and security are grouped into one category in official discourse. Especially highlighted is the “2015 European migrant crisis,” which is referenced as an example of how the lack of internal borders meant that once a migrant enters one Schengen country, they can travel freely and undetected to others. This is thought to complicate immigration control. In response to specific security threats, such as the suspicion of terrorism or significant migration influxes, countries can choose to temporarily reintroduce border controls. While this is allowed under Schengen rules, it is intended to be a temporary measure.

For European Citizens and documented persons, the Schengen Area acts mostly as an institution of free mobility. For non-EU citizens and those without documentation, the Schengen Area presents itself as an additional series of bureaucratic controls exerted with the combined power of 29 sovereign states. Page 126 of the *Practical Handbook for Border Guards (Schengen Handbook)* (European Commission, 2022) titled “Part Three: Border Surveillance” outlines the “purpose of surveillance” as follows:

PART THREE: BORDER SURVEILLANCE

1. PURPOSE OF SURVEILLANCE

1.1. The main purposes of the surveillance of external borders at places other than border crossing points and surveillance of these crossing points outside opening hours are:

- (a) to prevent and discourage unauthorised border crossings;
- (b) to counter cross-border criminality;
- (c) to apply or to take measures against persons who have crossed the border illegally;
- (d) to maintain reliable situational awareness and reaction capability;
- (e) to support identification and registration of persons crossing borders illegally.

1.2. The officer in command must take all necessary measures to prevent the unauthorised crossing of the border and deploy the staff and other resources based upon the assessment of the risk of irregular immigration and of cross-border criminality.

The resources used should be selected in accordance with the type and nature of the border (land, inland waterway or sea).

Figure 1: *Practical Handbook for Border Guards* Extract
(European Commission, 2022)

The purpose of border surveillance is explicitly described as the apprehension of individual border crossers who do not possess appropriate documentation. Within Schengen rules, the topics of paperwork, citizenship status, and prescribed procedure are of particular concern. These stipulations create a scenario of differential and even polarized access to mobility in the Danube Region and the European continent at large.

Conclusion

This chapter situated the Danube Region within the history of post-World War II national border configurations and provided insight on European ideas of regionhood. The present day institutional bodies of The European Union and Schengen Agreement were overviewed, noting the EU as an intentionally created jurisdictional region and the Schengen Area as a juxtaposing institution of both increased mobility and reinforced barriers. The Danube Region

maintains both an environmental and a geopolitical definition, and each definition is engaged with on the jurisdictional level of the nation state. Particularly relevant to the national borders of the Danube Region is the fact that official regions of Europe are top-down, state-driven implementations that go hand-in-hand with post-Soviet integration efforts (Jones & Paasi, 2013). While interwoven with market- and identity-driven forces, the official regions of Europe are particular for their bureaucratic intentionality. The Danube Region is to be understood as a political body.

Furthermore, the Danube Region has undergone significant border alterations from 1945 to 2024, particularly due to the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Recent conflicts in Eastern Europe and specifically Ukraine highlight the interdependence and continuously changing relations of the region. With time these border changes solidified with maps and adopted into a cultural consciousness through which “borders” are imagined as phenomena at large. For European citizens and documented persons, the Schengen Area signals free mobility, while for others, the “purpose of surveillance” described by the *Practical Handbook for Border Guards (Schengen Handbook)* is to ensure they do not enter the area or move around undocumented.

Chapter 5: Imagining Borders Moving Along the River

How do people who physically move along the Danube River imagine the national borders of this region? A region overlaid and created by a river system, this chapter will use the experiences of people who physically move along the river for either leisure or work as windows into the imaginaries of Danube Region borders. Interlocutors include individual travelers (bus passengers, ferry passengers, hikers, bikers, kayakers) and inland shipping professionals (ship captains and crew, shipping logistics professionals). I conclude that, for individual travelers, national border imaginations are polarized between two extremes: an inconsequential symbol or an urgent barrier. For inland shipping professionals, national borders are imagined as bureaucratic processes situated within a larger regional waterway system. Both groups' imaginaries are informed by the materiality of these borders, the process of physically moving around them, and historical narratives combined with current-day mobility politics.

Individual Travelers

This section includes two river border sites: the Slovak-Austrian border at the confluence of the Danube and Morava rivers, and the German-Austrian border and the confluence of the Danube, Inn, and Ilz rivers. As an individual traveler myself, speaking with travelers on ferries, buses, and along the river borders, I saw how the border can be elusive or pressing. Borders can appear in multiple configurations. Sometimes the border is the river, sometimes it's the line on a map, sometimes it's a memory of what the border once was, and sometimes it's the uniformed police officer asking for your documents. In each of these scenarios, the "border" as a phenomenon is dislodged in time and space from the national borderline. By stepping out of the broad, high-level, systems-based approach to borders and instead asking what these borders are phenomenologically, I gained a sense of how abstract national borders are imagined through concrete individual experiences.

As a category of interlocutor, "individual travelers" is a rather random collection of people. The only reason this category maintains any semblance of analytical relevance is that

I, myself, throughout the duration of this research, was also an “individual traveler.” Individual travelers can be traveling for any reason, they could have never been to the place I met them or they could have been born there. The unifying quality between the interlocutors in this section is simply that they were at the border when I was there, experiencing the same scene that I was experiencing. When people individually move around and across borders, they are not necessarily seeing a border for its broader ideological purposes. People experience the border as what it is concretely represented by; the border is always something else. It is made up of the infinite concrete and imagined pieces that contribute to its material and abstract existence. In this research, the border appeared as equal parts memory, map, checkpoint, and (debatably) river.

Memory Border

The memory of the Iron Curtain and Communist Czechoslovakia create a reference point in comparison to which my interlocutors described national borders as largely “unimportant.” When the border is imagined today, it is done so in reference to the memory of this time period. Occupying the westernmost edge of Slovakia, the town of Devin is situated directly along the border between two sovereign states (Austria and Slovakia). With the respective capital cities placed less than 60 km on either side, and both within the larger borders of the European Union and Schengen Area, today this is hardly the conflict-ridden no-man’s-land stereotypically characteristic of borderlands (Alvarez, 1995). Essentially a nature park and archaeological site, at this border tourists can be found recreationally exploring the area.

During one of my visits to Slovakia, I sat along the banks of these rivers trying to observe the border, but foremost experiencing the gentle breeze, peaceful flow of the water, and sweet ring of chirping birds. In stark juxtaposition to this scene, a tour guide walked by and gestured to the *Gates of Freedom Memorial*, saying to her tour group, “... this is to remember all the people who died— who were shot down, *handgun motion* *bang*, trying to cross the border into Austria.” She was pointing out over the serene water while the birds sang and the river lapped over the rocks at the bank. No current-day government signage or border markers are visible at this national border. Making a reference to the historical border the primary way in which the border was felt at this moment.

Next to the river, *The Gates of Freedom Memorial* stands at the confluence of the Danube and Morava. The plaque placed beside it says the memorial was unveiled in 2005 to

commemorate the 400+ people who died trying to cross the river border into Austria between 1948 – 1989. It's a large, white, stone archway full of bullet holes with a section of an iron gate in the center (Figure 2). Its placement along the serene scene creates a jarring contrast between the past and present moment.



Figure 2: Gates of Freedom Memorial at Devin, Slovakia⁶

The area is not allowed to be simply a river. It is a river with a history of a border that is sometimes intentionally remembered, and other times, the memory is there whether the person wants it or not.

Indeed, a middle-aged Slovak woman sat alone on a bench directly at the confluence of the two rivers, to the left of the memorial. She had been looking at the water as I had. “As you sit by the river, are you aware of the national border here?” I asked. “Oh yes, I think about it,” she grimaced and responded in a way that suggested I touched on a particular subject for her. “Yes from my childhood, I remember, so I think about it,” she elaborates. Her thinking about the border is contingent on a historical context which, based on her tone, is not pleasant. She recalls her childhood and a memory of when the border was an intense phenomenon. “How does it feel to be on the border now?” I asked, trying to get at her idea of the area at this moment. She paused for a long second, then responded, “It's like Schrödinger's Cat ... it is and it is not.” By using the metaphor of Schrödinger's Cat, the woman

⁶ Sophia Luongo, personal photograph, March 2024.

articulated the feeling that she could not know for sure whether the border was there now. But because she remembered when it was undeniably there, that memory created the border's presence in the present moment.

In juxtaposition to this conversation and the Slovak-woman's explanation of the national border, I spoke with a German couple who were biking along the river and had little personal experience in this area of the world. About the national border, the woman responded, "Yes, we know the border is there but that's it. It's not really important. Here's Slovakia and there is Austria, that's it." With the tone she used, she could have just as easily said, "this is the land and there is the river." This is an obvious fact. There is a sense of the Slovak-Austrian border's presence due to the fact of there being two different countries here, but a feeling of the border itself appears to be lacking.

The memory of a past version of the world is a foundational element to interpreting the world today. Despite, or perhaps because of⁷, my lack of personal history with the Iron Curtain, I felt over the course of this research that there was a strong sense of a border in this place. The change in language, the change in architecture, the physical river to demarcate the two lands, and an intangible sense of cultural difference between Slovakia and Austria, among other things, created for me an imagination of the border's presence. My most intimate experience with national borders prior to this research was the US-Mexican border in south Texas, close to which I grew up. This border was established in 1848, and today remains a heavily surveilled and controversial barrier that includes monitored checkpoints. Coincidentally, this national border is also overlaid by a river. The Rio Grande flows from Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, and in this path creates the entire southern edge of Texas.

The US-Mexican border having been a somewhat recent political arrangement in the scheme of human activity, it is difficult to wrap my mind around a place like Devin, Slovakia where hundreds of thousands of years of acknowledged and documented borders have existed, albeit reconfigured and controlled by different people, but in a generally similar arrangement to the national borders that exist today. It is from this personal context that I find it intriguing when people say that they do not think about the national border. In my experience, national borders are always a social issue, actively present in the cultural

⁷ "Despite" because someone with a personal experience of the Iron Curtain would have the reference to say, by comparison, there is no border anymore. "Because of" because the lack of personal experience might make it easier for my imagination to fill in the gaps and exaggerate what may have been.

consciousness. In an area where there are proportionally so many borders, laden with all the social-political history that comes with state projects, I was dubious of the repeated claim that these borders are wholly “unimportant.” However, it became apparent that the discourse of these national borders being “unimportant” today is created in relation to a recent past when they were thought of as critically “important.”

I met a father and daughter duo while in Devin who were biking to Schloss Hof, Austria. I asked about the borders in this area, and whether these are ever on their minds when traveling along the river. The father said that now it is a “symbolic border,” not of much importance. But he remembers before when there were spikes all along the bank stopping you from crossing. At that time, there was definitely a border here, he was saying. When responding to my questions, he first pointed to the *Gates of Freedom Memorial* and explained how people were shot trying to cross. This is the first thing he wanted to make sure I understood, and this is the context in which the border is now only a “symbol” to him.

His daughter, a woman in her late 20s-mid 30s, said that she does not think about the border like this because she was born “after freedom.” When she thinks about the river and this area, she thinks about it in an environmental context. She references Strauss’s *Blue Danube* and says that she wishes she could have seen it like that. Her father begins a long explanation of something historical in Slovak and limited English, so the daughter tries to translate for me and says apologetically about his monologue, “sorry...my father really likes history.” He quipped back, “I don’t like history, I lived the history.” Rather than the Memory Border constituting something inconsequentially situated in the past, this history of the border directly contributes to the border being described as “unimportant” today. Thereby, the memory of the Iron Curtain and past political arrangement create an imagination of current borders as largely irrelevant by comparison.

Map Border

If national borders of the Danube Region are imagined in relation to the past, how might one recognize them today? When observing the land of Danube River-borders in person, in the majority of these spaces there appears nothing to materially demarcate the national border, other than the river itself. Because there is little built along the national boundary, maps and diagrams serve to create the relational specificity of these borders for most people. In some

senses, they *create* the borders. Drawn with reference to nearby rivers, structures, and towns, maps situate the otherwise invisible border within the present moment.

At the top of Devin Castle overlooking the Danube and Morava rivers, maps are set up depicting the immediate surrounding landscape, including national borders. One such map reads “Österreich”⁸ on one side, “Slovensko”⁹ on the other, and depicts a dashed line between them where the border “is” (Figure 3). A complicated verb in this scenario, as without representations such as this, there would be no recognizable national border here. I thought about this while standing at the top of Devin Castle, looking at this map, watching a kayaker paddle across the river and sit on the Austrian riverbank.



Figure 3: Map of Slovak-Austrian Border at Devin, Slovakia¹⁰

It has been well established in the literature that maps, never objective nor apolitical, take part in creating certain realities (e.g Ludden 2003; Ingold 2021). For some people who travel along the river, the Slovak-Austrian and German-Austrian borders are known and imagined in the present moment *foremost through* these visual depictions. During my trip to Passau, Germany, across the German-Austrian border, I sat at the tip of land between the Danube, Inn, and Ilz rivers. Next to an observation lookout, there was a map of the area on a large sign. People would walk up, look at the confluence of the rivers, look at the map, and

⁸ Austria

⁹ Slovakia

¹⁰ Sophia Luongo, personal photograph, March 2024.

point to the rivers and borders the map depicted, saying, “There is the Inn and there is the Danube,” “Over there is Austria,” “This is Germany and there is Austria.” I heard this on repeat in English, German, Spanish, and Italian (meaning it was likely being said also in other languages which I could not understand). After referencing the map, tourists were able to look up at the rivers and mentally relegate them to national border and national territory respectively. In a region where the borders are not fenced nor physically demarcated, the map was the reason there was a border in that moment.

Having experienced two scenarios in which I was stationary, observing the national border from one place, I boarded the Twin City Liner at Vienna’s Schwedenplatz in order to engage in the process of actively crossing a river border. Although a highly sensorial experience, here too, the national border manifested itself foremost as a map. The boat was scheduled to depart at 10:30 on a chilly February Sunday. It would sail from Vienna to Bratislava along the Danube. At the port in Vienna, the journey began when an officially dressed man opened the tall metal gate leading to the access ramp. He beckoned the growing crowd through the gate by announcing, “Passports please.” Everyone proceeded one by one, without a clear line nor apparent rush, to the ship. “Thank you very much,” he said to me in English after inspecting my American passport. It took less than a second and I was on my way to the boat. We began moving after watching a safety video that told us we were not to stand up from our seats while the boat was still in the Donaukanal. There were four television screens that, in addition to playing the safety video, displayed a live map of our location once we were moving along the river.

I sat and watched out the windows as the urban industry of the Donaukanal transitioned into rural riverbank. The landscape softened, the edges blurred, and no longer were there concrete walls delineating the river from the city, but instead a gentle transition from flowing water, to tree lined soil, to more arms of the river and sloping riverbanks. The foggy air and misty rain added another layer of hazy boundaries between these spaces. At that moment, I could not help but visualize a parallel between the channelized section of the river within the city, and the institution of national boundaries along this route. As we moved away from the metropole, the river and its borders became softer and less controlled.

About midway through the journey, I asked one of the crew members what happens at the Slovak border. “Nothing happens!” She assured me and described how, when moving in this direction, there is no passport control by police when we get off the ship. “So at the

actual border, when we cross from one country to the next, nothing happens?” I confirmed. She responded that when coming from Slovakia, Austrian police do a passport check upon docking in Vienna, but nothing happens at the borderline in either direction. I thought there might be some kind of exterior marker or signal of having crossed the border mid journey, at the moment of crossing. But no, “nothing happens.”

I watched the shore move past and I found myself periodically wondering, “have we crossed the border yet?” “Did I miss it?” What there was to miss was unclear, but I wanted to be paying attention when “it” happened. I checked my phone’s Google Maps a few times to see where we were. Referencing both my phone and the on-board screens displaying our live location, I saw that the border was coming up shortly, but what I had not considered was that there is a stretch of the river that creates the border. So by traveling along it, there is no moment at which we can say we have moved from one country to the next, but rather it is a gradual transition into and simultaneously out of, where there are a couple minutes during which we are in both. At some point along this transitional period there was an announcement that we were approaching *Devin Hrad*, and the westernmost province of Slovakia, at which point we had begun crossing the border.

This was an international trip that required passports to board, but during which the border was of little concern for travelers. The map that displayed our live location along the river was the only reason the national border was recognizable or acknowledged. The map was the avenue for the border to be present. There was no demarcation on the land or water. When I asked the crew about the national border, they responded with an intensity that suggested they did not want me to think something bad would happen at the border. It was a reassuring tone of, “Don’t worry! Nothing happens.” When something does “happen” at the border, this is understood as cause for concern. What cruise vessels desire is an uneventful border. As we will see in the following section, the reassurance that “nothing” happens at the border is made with an awareness that sometimes, rather than a map, the border is a barrier.

Checkpoint Border

Creating an antithesis to what could be considered the functional irrelevance of a “memory” or “map” border, the checkpoint border operates with the stereotypical surveillance parameters of a state monitoring their national boundary. The Schengen Agreement states that in extraordinary circumstances, individual countries are at liberty to re-institute national

border controls. These are considered “temporary” and “exceptional” circumstances to be implemented only “if there is a serious threat to public policy or internal security” (European Commission, 2024a). As of August 2024, eight Schengen Area countries have reinstituted border controls citing reasons including terrorism, the Olympic Games, organized crime, and irregular migration (European Commission, 2024a). The country that re-implements these border controls can decide to place them at all their borders, or only on borders between certain countries. Indeed, when traveling in the direction from Slovakia to Austria by bus, the Austrian police conduct random identity checks at the land and water border crossings. I have made this trip six times, and my documents were checked four out of those six. This entailed the bus driver pulling over at the border station, one or two Austrian police officers boarding the bus, and walking down the aisle to glance at each person’s passport for less than a second, and then exiting.

The imaginary that surrounds the Slovak-Austrian border as what used to be the last border before Soviet-allied countries, or the last border before the “East,” means that the (albeit, minimal) presence of border controls at this crossing somehow feels appropriate. In comparison to the barbed wire fences, a militarized borderline, and the highly restricted mobility that used to characterize this area, one or two officers boarding the bus and glancing at your documents feels benign. This mundanity, however, is paired with several interlocutors assuring me that document checks on the Slovak-Austrian border is not the “normal way.” One interlocutor attributed this to what must be “fears of illegal immigration,” and said he “couldn’t think of any other reason for it.”

Germany has instituted a similar document check when people are traveling from the east. The peculiarity of this scenario is that the German-Austrian border is not imagined as having as much of an acutely divisive history as the Slovak-Austrian border. Linguistically similar and more recently politically allied, the interlocutors with whom I spoke regarded the German-Austrian border as almost unworthy of attention. The border here is so incredibly “unimportant” that a traveler may not even notice they have crossed it, interlocutors maintained. Given this preface, I was surprised the first time I traveled to Germany and the border crossing was an undeniably noticeable event.

I was on a two-story Flixbus that would travel from Vienna to Amsterdam. Beginning in Vienna, my destination was Passau, Germany, right across the German-Austrian border. A little further beyond the borderline, a police officer in a booth on the side of the road waved

down our bus driver and asked him to pull into a border control station. We were stopped for a long while in anticipatory silence before the police climbed to the second floor of the bus. They announced themselves as, “German Federal Police” and asked that everyone prepare their documents. It was evident they were taking their time with each passenger – distinctly unlike the Austrian police at the Slovak border – asking, “What is your final destination?” “How long are you staying?” “Do you have a return ticket?” “Who are you staying with?” “In a private residence or in a hotel?” Also unlike the one or two Austrian police that boarded the bus, here there were five or six German officers.

There were two passengers seated in front of me with whom the police took particular interest. One was a man wearing a blue baseball cap sitting five aisles directly in front of me, and the other was a man wearing a brown jacket across the aisle and one ahead. Both were early-middle age and traveling alone. The man with the brown jacket was from Kosovo, and had been traveling for a long time, possibly since the beginning of March. He told the officer he was planning to meet his sister in Frankfurt where she lives, and the two of them would be traveling back to Kosovo together. The officer was particularly interested in whether or not he had a return ticket already booked, which he did not seem to. He also kept asking how long the man was staying in Germany. He was not sure, but assured him “not long.” Four days, maybe a week at most. The conversation was stunted by the man from Kosovo’s English, which seemed weak in comprehension but sufficient when speaking. After several minutes of questioning, and no legal reason to bar the man’s entry into Germany at this time, the officer eventually moved on.

For the man further ahead of me with the blue baseball cap, the situation was going poorly. There was also a language barrier. The officer questioning him asked if he had a residence permit, signaling she had reason to believe that he had been in the Schengen Area too long for the nationality of his passport. There was a stretch of that conversation I missed because another officer came up the aisle and asked me for my documents. I presented them, he asked me no questions, and then moved on. When I turned back to the man in the blue baseball cap’s conversation, the woman across the aisle was translating for him. I could not hear enough of the sounds to determine the language with certainty.

Their conversation lasted long minutes, and more officers slowly gathered around them. Tension in the bus grew as they tried to get more information from him. At one point, the officer who had been with him the whole time began taking pictures of his bright blue

passport. They then abruptly escorted him off the bus. Soon after, we made our way towards Passau Central Station without him. This border's presence could not be attributed to a childhood memory of a barbed wire fence, nor to the map with a dashed line saying that the border is there. This border presented itself in the form of a checkpoint. The man escorted off the bus experienced this border foremost as a barrier to mobility across the region.

River Border

Where borders insinuate a desire for controlled stasis, the river barrels through and flows along these borderlines in a dance of juxtaposition. These entities are interpreted as either being at odds with one another, or as reinforcing one another. As such, the river adds its own influence of what borders are to individual travelers. At the Slovak-Austrian border I approached two women who seemed about my age. A few moments into our conversation, I realized that they were native English speakers, visiting from England. They said that they rented a car and are taking a road trip through Germany, Austria, and Slovakia. I asked them about the border over the river, to which the woman to my right responded,

Oh yeah it's a border, we were just up in the castle and we thought it was quite cool that over there is Austria... We drove to Austria yesterday, and on land it's much more solid, firm, whereas here because it's a natural border, it's softer I guess.¹¹

For this woman, the border is “soft” when it is a river in comparison to the “firm” border she encountered along the road. The river carries with it an imaginary of its own that mixes with the imaginaries of the national border. From this woman's perspective, something as institutional, ideological, and bureaucratized as a national border can be read as “natural” and “soft” when it coincides with a river. Ultimately, the river border, although present in memory and maps, is foremost a river today. Without the presence of a fence or checkpoint, there is nothing in this place which denotes this space as anything but a river.

In an attempt to find the border in this place, I climbed to the top of Devin Castle. From up there I saw the river's confluence more fully. I took detailed notes: The mixing of waters and their velocity differentials created a grand display. There were two stone barriers that guided the Morava into the Danube. The Morava was moving significantly slower than the Danube so when they met, the Danube physically pushed against the Morava's flow in the direction of Austria. This created gentle ripples that moved back towards the Slovak shore.

¹¹ English woman (individual traveler) in discussion with the author, April 2024.

I used these national directional descriptors only with a border awareness created by the previously internalized “memory” and “map” borders.

Just a little further beyond this riverine meet point was a churning beneath the surface where the currents completed their mixing. “It’s quite swirly, isn’t it?” a different English tourist said to her travel partner beside me, referencing that part of the river. The travelers around me were mostly tourists, enjoying the view of the water from the castle parapets. As the Morava got picked up in the faster Danubian current, lighter colored swinging watery arms reached out and disappeared in a continual process of absorption. Content with my effort to observe the river border, I walked back down from Devin Castle to the riverbank. The birds created their forest chocophony. Every sense was gentle: the water flowed past, the supple green leaves of spring pushed from their buds, a sweet floral scent carried on the easy breeze. As I stood on the bank looking at Austria, I absentmindedly pushed the tip of my walking stick into the soft – not muddy – fresh dirt beneath me. I made little divots in the earth with a twist of my stick. These were the elements that foremost informed my imagination of this space. The border, whatever it was, felt somewhere else entirely, and distinctly not here.

Inland Shipping Professionals

Unlike the random and disjointed nature of individual travelers crossing national river borders in specific circumstances, inland shipping professionals routinely cross these borders in a standardized way. Cargo and passenger vessels move along the Danube transporting people and goods across borders and through the region. Inland shipping professionals imaginaries of these borders speak specifically to understandings of institutionalized and riverine bordering processes.

Wrapped up in regional transportation systems, inland shipping professionals imagine borders as distinctly procedural entities. Interlocutors include: Ulrich, a representative of a government-funded river transport logistics company. Harry, the managing director of a cargo shipping company. William, Christian, and Lauren, three captains of passenger cruise vessels. Connecting each of these interlocutors is their routine of moving along the river, and/or thinking with these river-routes as they coordinate shipping routes. There are three

categories of river border imaginaries that arose within the group of inland shipping professionals:

1. **Borders Imagined as Bureaucratic Procedures** – National borders along the river are encountered as predetermined bureaucratic procedures that are abstracted from the geographic location of the borderline.
2. **Riverine Connection of a European Inland Waterway System** – The river creates a materially connected “European inland waterway system” that extends beyond national, regional, and ecological containers, but that maintains larger geopolitical boundaries.
3. **Past and Present, Soviet and Refugee Borders** – Today, the imaginary of European national borders is (1) informed by a historical memory of Soviet-era borders, and (2) made sense of through narratives of irregular migration and refugee arrival.

Borders Imagined as Bureaucratic Procedures

National borders along the river are encountered as predetermined bureaucratic processes. These include activities such as making calls to a port control station before crossing, supplying a national official with passenger and/or crew lists, or having a port authority board the ship to check the documents of everyone on board. An inherently complicated system of international coordination, *ViaDonau* is a river transport logistics service that aims to make these processes more understandable by providing maps, trainings, border form explanations, and port procedure information free of cost to shipping companies. I arranged a meeting with Ulrich, a logistics consultant for *ViaDonau* and co-author of the *Practical manual on border controls along the Danube and its navigable tributaries* (Hartl, 2023). I prepared to center our interview around his understanding of national river borders, asking questions such as, “What comes to your mind when you think about borders of the region?”, “What happens on the ship when crossing a border?”, and “Are there any borders that are more challenging than others?”. What arose was a conversation that revolved around the processes required not necessarily at, but in abstract reference to, these national borders.

The *ViaDonau* office is located in DonauCity, a master-planned collection of office buildings on the Danube River next to the Vienna International Center and United Nations complex. When I arrived in the lobby, one of the many rooms in a 4D labyrinth of an office

building, someone offered me coffee and said Ulrich would be right with me. I only waited a couple of minutes before he entered. Ulrich was particularly tall, and had a warm, booming voice that filled the otherwise silent waiting room in a way that I could imagine put people at ease. He was in his early to mid 40s, and originally from Germany, having moved to Vienna in the last decade. Once in the meeting room down the hall, he offered me apple juice, which seemed pleasantly Austrian.

With the understanding that I was doing research on river borders, Ulrich had set out some maps, manuals, catalogs, and handbooks on the table in preparation for our meeting. As he spoke for the next hour or so, he would periodically gesture over the unfolded maps, pointing to specific sections and certain borders. When thinking about his answer to a question, he would gaze over the map on the table, eyes moving across the region. Towards the beginning of the interview, I asked broadly what “borders” come to mind when he thinks about his work at *ViaDonau*. He started to respond, then paused, and instead said,

Ulrich: *But first, I have a question to you... do you know the world record of the Danube?*

Sophia: *It's basin covers the most countries, so it's considered the most international river in the world?*

Ulrich: *Exactly... It's not the longest river in the world, but it's the most international river on the whole planet, which is quite impressive. It connects 10 different countries and that is a very special challenge. We have ten national governments, legislations, and also we have EU borders on the Danube stretch, Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine are still not members of the EU so that means that special border controls are still at work when an inland vessel comes through.*¹²

Ulrich's method of framing my question about *what* borders come to mind was to highlight the extreme *presence* of borders in general. But he did not proceed to describe dozens of gates, fences, or any physical border. Instead, he outlined the challenge of coordinating national governments and legislations both inside and outside the EU. For inland shipping professionals, the extreme presence of these borders is not physical, but bureaucratic; Danube Region national borders emerge as a series of bureaucratic processes, often dislodged in time and space from the geographic location of their corresponding borderline.

Someone who experiences these bureaucratic processes as a riverboat captain is Christian. A sailing student based in Vienna, I asked Christian how he thinks about the borders that he routinely sails across. As a European citizen with an official border-crossing profession, Christian began by explaining that he rarely thinks about borders that are within the EU and

¹² Ulrich (fundings, logistics, and communications associate at *ViaDonau*) in discussion with author, March 2024.

Schengen Area. These are functionally obsolete to him when he is on the river as they require no stopping or extra documentation, he described. This mirrored how Ulrich explained the borders. However, almost two hours into my conversation with Christian, he began discussing the bureaucratic headache surrounding national licensing and where he is allowed to work.

The agency responsible for granting ship licenses recently standardized the requirements needed to obtain the license to sail in certain countries of the Danube and other inland waterways. Because this is a recent change, it is unclear how and from whom Christian should get an updated license. Each agency he speaks with refers him to another, and no one seems to know exactly what the protocol is. In the meantime, if he sails through a country for which he does not hold the appropriate license, he risks fine or penalty – or it is possible that nothing would happen. The issue is that he simply does not know, and no one else seems to either. In the bureaucratic context, national borders within the EU are a prominent concern for Christian, but these challenges are initially obscured in border conversations because the geographical location of national borders within the EU is considered an uneventful place for inland shipping professionals. Instead, these borders are abstracted by means of the offices in which shipping professionals like Christian must schedule appointments, supply personal documents, and undergo questioning to receive the proper sailing permits that allow them to move across certain borderlines.

Furthermore, all borders are not created equal, and Ulrich singled out certain borders along the Danube as needing more attention than others. Particularly, national borders that coincide with EU or Schengen borders as a result of not holding membership to these extrastate alliances. When a vessel passes through Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine, there are particular border crossing procedures required of the crew that call these national barriers into the immediate consciousness of those who move along the river. These include docking at a certain port, contacting the port authority, taking measurements of the onboard cargo, supplying crew or passenger lists to the appropriate authority, and/or having each person's documents checked on board by the border police (Hartl, 2023). It is the requirement of physically stopping the vessel and undergoing these checks that renders borders of the EU and Schengen Area more visible when compared to borders inside these areas.

Regardless of the absence of physical borders inside the EU, the crew of a passenger vessel is tasked with performing the border within the EU as one responsibility among the many required for operating a vessel. I met with William, a nautical instructor and corporate

riverboat captain at a restaurant overlooking the Danube on February 27th at 10:00am. He arrived at 10:04am and apologized profusely for his tardiness, however slight. William was in Vienna that day for a regular meeting with fellow riverboat captains. An instructor himself, he was enthusiastic to help as best he could with my research, often taking time to think before responding, or correcting himself with a more exact answer. Having traveled on the Danube and Rhine for thirty-nine years, he has crossed national river borders thousands of times. During our conversation he spoke about all the ways he does not think about the border, and how “nothing changes” for him during and after a crossing.

I asked if the passengers are notified when the vessel enters a new country, to which he responded, “Oh yes of course, yes yes we tell the passengers, ‘now we’re crossing the border’.” Sometimes the announcement is GPS recorded and runs automatically when the on-board computer recognizes the ship’s position as approaching a national border. Other times, William explains, he calls the reception from the wheelhouse and tells them “Ok in five minutes we will pass the border,” and then they make an announcement. William says that beyond noting the borderline, they sometimes make announcements with more information, such as, “On the left-hand side you can see Croatia, and on the right hand side Serbia, behind us was Hungary...” It is common practice that either a pre-recorded, or in-person tour guide will explain some historical or architectural “fun facts” about the area. While all of this is happening, the captain is minimally involved, and William said he does not know exactly what they tell the passengers because he must concentrate on the radio from other ships. Although borders inside the EU require no official demarcation when crossed, for passenger vessels, national borders become an educational, historical, or sightseeing activity that is created through standardized crew procedure.

Furthermore, for all inland navigation vessels inside and outside the EU, it is required that a strict national flag practice is observed. In the nautical industry, a vessel’s “flag state” is the jurisdiction under whose law the vessel is registered or licensed. That flag state is deemed the nationality of the ship, and this flag remains flown on the back of the ship for the duration of the voyage. At the front of the ship, the flag of the country in which the ship is currently sailing is flown. This means that at each national border, a crew member is responsible for changing one of the flags to that of the current country. The exact reason behind this practice is unclear, but a popular understanding says that it is done out of respect for the host country. This is an added border procedure, and one that features prominently

in inland shipping professionals imaginations of “what happens at the border.” At times when the river flows along the national borderline and between two countries, no flag is flown at the front of the ship. This flag practice, which was explained by William, Lauren, and Christian offhandedly, with a shrug and a tone that imparted the most basic, mundane facts of sailing, contributes to the naturalization of national identities bound in geographic space. While the border is imagined as inconsequential by inland shipping professionals, the ephemeral switch from one country to another is nonetheless necessarily marked with the changing of flags. This is one of the processes that define what a border is, and how it is imagined for inland shipping professionals.

Lastly, while the captains with whom I spoke were confident that “nothing changes,” at national borders within the EU, they did explain the procedures required *at* the border. If a border is preconceived as the line of distinction between lands with ideological differences, then it could be said that there is no border if “nothing changes” once crossed. This is the positioning from which river captains seem to be coming. Instead of the historical, conflict-ridden preconception of a border, the border that inland shipping professionals encounter is one of procedures. William explained,

*If we're coming from Austria to Bratislava I have to call the port control and tell them where we're coming from, where we're going to, the passengers names, the name of the captain, if we stop in Bratislava or if we pass Bratislava... we have to do this when we come from Slovakia to Hungary too. I have to call another channel, this is Hungarian port control, and I have to tell them again the same on a different channel – they have different radio channels. These are the things I have to think about.*¹³

National borders are one set of tasks among the entire ensemble of responsibilities required of ship captains and crew members. Borders are imagined as communications and coordinations. Moving from one bounded state to the next requires announcing yourself verbally on the radio or through written forms, symbolically acknowledging the national identity of the nation with the changing of flags, and situating passengers in the historical or artistic context of the new country. Most of all, these borders are something that are completely normal to river captains. They are an ordinary, albeit sometimes irritating, part of their job. After explaining all he could about his experience with river borders, William said apologetically, “I pass [the border] so often, at the moment I think nothing. I just know, ‘OK now we’re in Serbia’– I’m sorry I just think of the next stop. I concentrate on the river.”

¹³ William (corporate captain at *CroisiEurope*) in discussion with author, April 2024.

Following this line of William's border experience, in the next section we will discuss how the river itself contributes to particular border imaginations among inland shipping professionals.

Riverine Connection: a European Inland Waterway System (Almost)

The river creates a "European inland waterway system" that highlights the constructed nature of ideas of connection and separation. For those sailing on a river, the titular distinction between one river and another is largely irrelevant. I began my conversation with William by somewhat making a fool of myself and asking, "but the Danube and Rhine aren't connected, are they?" To which William gently let me know about the existence of the Rhine–Main–Danube Canal in Bavaria, Germany that does in fact connect the Main and the Danube Rivers, connecting the Rhine and Danube by extension. After our conversation, I read on the *European Commission* website that the "inland connection between Rhine, Main and the Danube represents the backbone of the inland navigation between north-western European basins and the south-eastern Black Sea" (European Commission, 2024b).

Despite my research questions being partly based on an idea of riverine connection, I had apparently erroneously entered the field with the categorical assumption that the Danube was itself a discrete container that contributed to connection within itself. Quite the opposite for shipping professionals like William, as he explained,

We call it the inland river system. Inland waterway system. Ah, that's perfect, yes. So you can go from the Black Sea to the Northern Sea. And it's possible in three years that there [will be] already a connection between Brussels and Paris, they will have a larger channel, so we can go with a cruise ship to Paris.¹⁴

International environmental cooperation is characterized by fraught disagreement and uneven levels of commitment between countries to goals like sustainability or carbon emissions reduction. Coming from this experience of international environmental cooperation, I had not expected regional riverine transport to be so seemingly open and fluid. I replied to William, "So it makes sense for me to ask, when you think about the Danube as a river, when you think about inland waterways in general, it is one system?" William responded, "Yes, it's a European system." From the perspective of mobile river vessels, the jurisdictional containers of state and region are expanded to the extent that the river extends,

¹⁴ William (corporate captain at *CroisiEurope*) in discussion with author, April 2024.

and the state and regional inland waterway organization must expand to accommodate the length of the rivers. This is a direct example of environmentally situated international collaboration by functional necessity.

This imagination of an international system was further emphasized by a fact as simple as the routes sailors sail. I interviewed two of Williams sailing students, Christian and Lauren, both of whom are steersmen studying to get their captains licenses. At the very start of our conversation, Lauren introduced herself and explained her position. She is training on a ship that sails a recurring route from Amsterdam to the Black Sea and back again. This fact, with its subconscious pretense of mundanity, called into question the very premise from which I was formulating my questions. If I was asking, “how do inland shipping professionals who sail on the river imagine the borders of the Danube Region?” The answer became: as gates into other sections of one European river system.

Within the EU, the borders between countries are not physically marked along the river. You would not notice them as borders. Instead, William says he knows when there is some identifiable landmark like a bridge that tells him he has crossed a national border. Alternatively, if no part of the landscape happens to be identifiably distinct, he has memorized the kilometer marker at the crossing point. Regardless, the lack of physical border demarcation along the river creates a sailing experience and a mental map that is relatively unconcerned with national borders within the EU. When moving from one country to the next, William explained that “nothing changes, because the boat, the signs, they are international, which means for me as a captain and for navigation, nothing changes.” This navigational signage consistency is true for all the Danubian States, including Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which are not part of the European Union. However, this consistency east of the EU border is partial in comparison to within EU countries.

The Hungarian port of Mohács is the last stop along the Danube River when exiting the EU. All vessels must stop and complete a document check at this port. William explained that before this port the standard language in which all vessels communicate is German. This is true for the entire length of the Danube and Rhine both, he says, not only when passing through countries with German as an official language¹⁵. After Mohács, everyone communicates in Russian. While no language is officially enforced anywhere on the river,

¹⁵ In international seaports like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Constanța, it is more common to use English.

William underlines the precision of these linguistic regions. “So even two kilometers before [Mohács] you talk with German on the radio, and after the border you switch to Russian language.” Within the EU, there is an intentional effort to create a sense of a materially and linguistically cohesive inland waterway system that extends beyond individual rivers such as the Danube. The section of the river that flows after Mohács, thereby exiting continuous EU territory, is regarded as a separate, bureaucratically convoluted area. Supporting this conception, *ViaDonau’s Practical manual on border controls along the Danube and its navigable tributaries* (Hartl, 2023) begins its instruction only after the EU border at Mohács, and provides information for every subsequent national border moving downstream towards the Black Sea and the seaport of Constanța.

In this way, the inland waterway system does create a sense of continuous connection, but only insofar as regional governments allow or desire. The sense of connection created by riverine travel between EU countries is imagined as connected in comparison to the “other,” less connected countries further to the east, where borders are visible and controls are instituted. It would be superficial to conclude that the river is an inherent connector of the region. This would ignore the agendas present in the creation of this connection, and subsequent separation. In this scenario, listening to the “logic of the river” points to the “logic of nation states,” because these rivers connect that which nation-states want connected (motivated by economic and geopolitical factors). The Danube and the Rhine are connected explicitly because the Rhine-Main-Danube canal was constructed. Following examples such as this, connection in and of itself is not to be regarded as the “Natural” state of the world. Rather, connection is to be understood politically and in the context of what (and who) is not connected.

Past and Present, Soviet and Refugee Borders

Among inland shipping professionals, the imaginary of present-day national borders is informed by a historical memory of Soviet-era borders, and made sense of through narratives of irregular migration and refugee arrival. At the beginning of our conversation, I asked Ulrich if there are any border procedures that he thought could be improved upon. He responded, “The national borders, since European unification, are not of that much importance anymore. So if we have to improve the situation regarding the border control process, it’s always on the

Schengen borders.” National borders within the EU and Schengen Area are thought of as something from the past, which the need for has been advanced beyond through the creation of the European Union and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. People today do not, “feel the border,” like they did in the past, explained Christian and in doing so contributed to an imaginary of borders as something that is linked to fear and nervousness. Meanwhile, when national borders are practiced inside the EU today, they are imagined as the direct result of irregular migration¹⁶ and refugee arrival. That is not the “normal way,” Ulrich responded when I explained the passport control required at the Slovak-Austrian border. A scenario arises in which inland shipping professionals imagine Danube Region borders as either a past, Soviet phenomenon, or a current, temporary solution to irregular migration.

With Christian I discussed sailing along the river and crossing national borders in the physical context. Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova were the countries he immediately began speaking about, thereby placing the existence of borders to the east of the EU. Christian is young, and for him the idea of a national border is associated with fear or nervousness. Now he says it only feels irritating if it takes a long time to cross. He explained, “It’s not a feeling of ‘Ohhh I’m scared, I’m going down there,’ it’s more the feeling of, especially when it’s at night, ‘Uhhh we are here again and have to do this for no reason’.” Currently there are some border checks along the way to the Black Sea, but because there is no trepidation involved, these borders are not borders in a “true” sense, he maintains. Now the only thing that really happens at the border is the changing of the flags at the helm of the ship. He suggests I speak with an older captain who sailed during the time of the Soviet Union, then I may be able to hear some “exciting stories.”

When William became a captain in 1986, he would routinely cross the border, or “Iron Curtain,” into Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. He explains how when they went to Bratislava (formerly in Czechoslovakia), they were not allowed to go outside the ship. The captain had to go to the harbormaster and get a permission with which crew members could leave the ship for two hours at a time. On shore were police with dogs and machine guns. In Bulgaria and Romania it was very strict, he says, “In the Soviet Union a sailor was not allowed

¹⁶ The term “irregular migration” is itself deserving of political critique, as it suggests a “normal” or otherwise “regular” engagement with mobility, against which the mobility of certain groups is regarded as “irregular.” These relegations into categories of regular and irregular, and subsequently legal and illegal, demonstrate the role of state actors in shaping mobility through their power to define the fundamental categories of “legal,” “undocumented,” “territory,” “space,” and “border” (Schiller & Salazar 2013, 196).

to go out, just the captains.” Adding to these descriptions, a retired river captain named Rufus explained the fear associated with crossing the border into the Soviet Union without me explicitly asking. Instead, when prompted to speak about borders along the Danube, he chose to speak about the USSR. He only made the crossing one time, and afterwards he asked his company not to send him back in that direction.

This was a theme of interviews, as multiple interlocutors chose to discuss the Iron Curtain as an example of how now, by comparison, there is free mobility across the entire area. By reinforcing a dichotomy between the borders that exist today and those during the time of the Soviet Union, interlocutors are describing modern national borders as more permeable, gentler, and less restrictive. The undertone is that all the borders are ultimately *better* now, with the understanding that some are better than others. There is a perceived difference between “Western” borders and those further to the east. Lauren painted a vivid picture by saying that when sailing from Amsterdam to the Black Sea “you are traveling from the 21st century to the 15th century,” in a feat of infrastructural “time travel.” Gradually, as you sail further east, the infrastructure becomes older, and more border controls are implemented. This phenomenon evokes the aforementioned association of borders with the semi-distant past.

When asked to discuss present-day national borders inside the Schengen Area, interlocutors chose to connect the implementation of any modern border controls to an influx of refugee and migrant arrival. William explained, “When we are inside the European Union we have mostly nothing to do. Now because of the refugees we have to stop here in Vienna... Normally inside the EU you have no stops, nothing changes when you cross the border.” An absence of border controls is the desired norm, and borders are only enacted in what are thought of as extraordinary circumstances. This is not only in Austria, but several EU and Schengen Area countries have gradually reinstituted national border controls over the past decade (European Commission, 2024a). Sailors traveling through Germany must inform the federal police when coming from the east. Each vessel must provide passenger and crew lists, and there is the possibility that the police will board to conduct a personal document check. Later in our conversation, William again reiterated that this is not the normal way of operating, and instead it is only “...since the refugees are coming, since 2015, before there was nothing.”

Ulrich also considered refugees an explanation for the recent reimplementation of border controls, explaining that the “checking of personal documents on the Slovakian-Austrian border is not the *normal* way...”, then pondered, “Maybe in connection with the fear of illegal immigration. I wouldn’t have another explanation for that...” By imagining present-day borders of the EU as unimportant in comparison to the dangers of Soviet Era borders, while simultaneously understanding the presence of these borders in the context of refugee arrival, a narrative emerges that works to obscure the harm created by border regimes today.

When compared to the physical Slovak-Austrian border of 1948 – 1989 and the 400+ people who were shot by border guards as they attempted to cross the Morava River into Austria, national borders today are considered less overtly lethal across the region. However, it is politically crucial to ask, at this moment, for whom may an EU border be fearsome, threatening, or lethal in the way that Soviet Era borders were explained by inland shipping professionals? If we are to think first of refugees when explaining why national border controls are instituted today, we should also contextualize the harm enacted against the people Europe desires to control or keep out through said border controls.

How many people have been killed enroute to the Austrian, German, or Slovak border? This is unanswerable in concrete terms since there is no comprehensive data on the hundreds of migration routes into Europe, nor could there be an official record of the intended destination country for each person who died along these routes. However, to get a sense of the scale of the loss of life in connection to (attempted) border crossings in recent years, the number of recorded migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024 is about 30,000 people (Migration Data Portal, 2024). It is likely that this number is much higher. In keeping with the effects of national borders being increasingly abstracted in time and space today, the deaths resulting from the migration process into Europe are not understood as directly attributable to European national borders in the same way that Soviet-era border-crossing deaths are directly attributed to overtly violent Soviet borders.

The inclination to emphasize the East-West divide and the historical presence of borders in Europe obfuscates the present day borders that are not fences. Instead, the border is a concept and a bureaucratic process, at once mundane and extraordinary. National borders that have been reinstituted in recent years are thought of as both reminiscent of the Soviet-era when borders were “important,” and made sense of through narratives of refugee arrival. These two imaginations work together, as together they create a cohesive narrative

of what should normally be a borderless Europe. Following these imaginations, borders are either situated in the past, or are only presently instituted when “irregular migration” is a concern. “Normally” these borders should not exist, the logic follows. As a result, the borders of the Danube Region are explained away through what they once were, and the extraordinary exception to their current existence.

Conclusion

Guided by the question, “How do people who physically move along the Danube River imagine the national borders of the region?” This chapter explored river border imaginations of individual travelers and inland shipping professionals. Both groups understand national borders as dislodged in time and space, experienced through the rivers, maps, checkpoints, memories, and the institutional or bureaucratic processes that surround them. Imaginaries are informed by the materiality of these borders, by the process of physically moving around them, and by historical narratives and current-day mobility politics. By stepping out of the broad, high-level, systems-based approach to borders and instead asking what these borders are phenomenologically, this research gains a sense of how abstract national borders are imagined through concrete individual experiences. When people individually move around and across borders, they are not necessarily seeing a border for its broader ideological purposes. Interlocutors experienced the border as what it was represented by.

Individual travelers imagine four versions of Danube Region national borders, each emerging depending on individual positioning and situational context. These are: Memory Border, Map Border, Checkpoint Border, and River Border. The Memory Border emerged for those with a personal experience of Soviet-era borders that provided context from which the border is described as “unimportant” today. The memory of the Iron Curtain created an imagination of current borders as “symbols” of what once was, suggesting that for some, these borders exist in equal parts past and present moments. In relation to the current irrelevancy described by the Memory Border, the Map Border was the means through which tourists imagine national borders at the borderline in the present moment. Drawn with reference to nearby rivers, structures, and towns, maps situated the otherwise invisible border within the present moment. In contrast to the Memory and Map Borders, the

Checkpoint Border was foremost a barrier to mobility across the region. The Checkpoint Border was experienced regardless of historical context or map reference, and performs the nationally desired filtering of travelers based on the possession of required documents. Furthermore, the River Border could be described as an oxymoron, as the physical presence of the river instills a sense of soft “natural” borders imagined in comparison to the harsh, rigid fence or checkpoint. River Borders for individual travelers are overwhelmingly rivers. I would estimate for the sake of illustration these river border imaginations were made up of 20% border and 80% river, with the 20% having been informed by the aforementioned Map and Memory Borders.

There were three categories of river border imaginaries that arose within the group of inland shipping professionals. (1) National borders along the river are encountered as predetermined bureaucratic procedures that are abstracted from the geographic location of the borderline. These procedures included activities such as applying for national work permits ahead of a voyage, calling the port authority of the approaching national border, undergoing cargo and passenger checks, or raising the host country’s flag on the front of the ship. (2) The river creates a materially connected “European inland waterway system” that extends beyond national, regional, and ecological containers. Through the construction of intra-river channels such as the Rhine–Main–Danube canal, national stakeholders create regional riverine connections that are conducive to creating the imagination of a borderless Europe. This connection is created in comparison to other, separated countries further to the East, where borders are visible and controls are instituted. (3) The imaginary of European national borders is informed by a historical memory of Soviet-era borders, and made sense of through narratives of irregular migration and refugee arrival. The inclination to emphasize the East-West divide and the historical presence of borders obfuscates the present day borders that are not fences. Inland shipping professionals imagine Danube Region borders as ordinary, bureaucratic, and largely document-based parts of their everyday lives. In contrast and indicating a polarization of modern borders, for the refugees that supply the narrative behind borders’ continued presence, borders are a physical, urgent, and sometimes deadly barrier to mobility. In keeping with the effects of national borders being increasingly abstracted in time and space, the deaths resulting from the migration process into Europe today are not understood as directly attributable to European national borders in the same

way that Soviet-era border-crossing deaths are directly attributed to overtly violent Soviet borders.

These Danube Region borders are dislodged in time through (1) the way that they require the memory of when they were strictly enforced to understand them today, as well as (2) the lengthy processes that require travelers and shipping professionals to obtain permission ahead of time to cross them. The border is dislodged in space insofar as its physical location is one of multiplicity. The border is in multiple locations, and nowhere consistently. When the border is drawn along the river, the river obscures the presence of the national border with its own narratives. Alternatively, with maps, the border is overlaid onto physical space through individual processes of imagining. Sometimes the border is there when people choose to think about it. Other times, checkpoints are instituted at random between countries, often taking place not on the border itself, but kilometers removed on either side of the place where the line is on the map. Therefore, national border imaginations of the Danube Region are polarized as either elusive or pressing. They emerge as a *symbol* of a border, as an abstracted bureaucratic process, or as an urgent barrier.

Chapter 6: Imagining Borders in the Office

How do people who work to create a “Danube Region” from an office imagine the national borders of the river? This chapter will use the experiences of people who work in regionally-minded organizations to understand an alternative imaginary of Danube Region borders. Field sites include: a regional geopolitical coordination and policy research institute (IDM), and two regional tourism agencies (*Interreg* & *Floratour*). Across these sectors, an international scope is adopted, leading to imaginations of Danube Region national borders which are removed from their material context. This high-level, removed quality to the imaginative processes in this section allows for borders to be understood as processes that are in flux and can be changed. I conclude that the borders of the region are imagined as entities that must be either overcome or strengthened. Some regional organizers desire to overcome borders through both a physical and conceptual “borderlessness.” This ranges in scope from practical travel mobility, to the goal of an equitable interpersonal and epistemological framework. In the same spaces where borderlessness is sought-after the need to strengthen exterior regional borders supersedes the aspiration of an interior borderlessness. The river itself is a multivalent symbol of both separation and of connection, supporting efforts to both overcome and strengthen borders.

Overcoming Borders

What does borderlessness mean for those trying to create it? From the vantage point of the following interlocutors, borders (national and otherwise) are explicitly something to be worked around and ideally dissolved. One such entity attempting to reduce the influence of borders is *Interreg*, an EU-funded interregional cooperation program that sponsors regional tourism projects as one of their many initiatives. During the process of moving along the Danube River and acting as a tourist, I was made aware of the *Interreg* logo on park benches in Passau, on informational signs at the top of Devin Hrad in Slovakia, and on the Danube Island in Vienna. I spoke with Natasha, a tourism professional at *Interreg*, who works to ensure that “tourists do not see the border,” between countries, and instead are able to enjoy a

“borderless” travel experience along the river. From her perspective, the river is understood as a tangible argument for, as well as a source of, regional connection. She explains that since the river flows through all of these countries, it is only right that tourists should be able to follow the path of the river unhindered by the barrier of national borders. In this example, the river demonstrates the possibility and proof of free mobility; this is what a borderless Europe could look like in practice, Natasha explained.

In an act of future imagining, the goal of a “borderless Europe” emerges in regional coordination. The river, in the context of the Danube Region, is in some cases used as narrative proof of the existence of a material connection with the countries east of Austria. Natasha explained that the people who live along the Danube, regardless of country, have similar fish stew recipes and know how to live with flooding. To her, sharing a connection to the river connects these people more substantially than any political or historical disconnection. She is not alone in this mission, and many regional coordination professionals I encountered during this research understand the act of instilling a sense of international connection an urgent priority.

Founded in 1953, the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe* (IDM) is a regional policy think tank that conducts policy research and creates “pro-European” and “pro-democracy” advocacy materials aimed at unifying the so-called, “Danube Region.” Their mission statement positions the imaginary of riverine connection as fundamental to working across borders:

Connected by the Danube and beyond, the people of Central and South-Eastern Europe share a common cultural heritage and face similar regional and global challenges. Democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law and human rights, as well as universal European values, flourish through dialogue and discourse. To preserve and build upon these morals, cooperation and communication across borders are the key to a democratic, peaceful and sustainable European future (IDM, 2024).

Using the semantic device of the past tense, “*connected* by the Danube and beyond,” the institute frames the Danube River as having already created the connection which is the political and ideological aim of their work.

In an attempt to understand how national borders are imagined in the setting of a regional think tank, I arrived at the IDM office building for an interview with the director. Located in a typical older-style Viennese building, I walked up the marble staircase surrounded by large, regal windows until I found the door labeled “IDM.” I rang the piercingly

effective bell and a woman about my age answered. She offered me coffee, which I politely declined, never sure if Austrian office coffee is more of a gesture than an actual offer. I waited in the central space of the office from which multiple corridors and doorways led into unknown rooms. While seated, I noticed pop-art posters of various Danube Region capital cities on the walls. There were pamphlets and publications in a display case to my right. I could hear the clicking of keyboards in rooms all around me, but saw no one. The silence was palpable with concentration. After a few minutes, the director came out and greeted me, welcoming me back to another table in his large office. He was in his mid-40s, tall, and from Germany. There were half a dozen partially deflated balloons in the corner of the office congratulating someone on a newborn baby. The first thing he did was ask to make sure I had been offered coffee.

I presented the idea for my research project, with the aim of not only interviewing him at this moment, but also spending an ideally extended period of time at the institute as a field site. He agreed that I may perform a month-long traineeship almost immediately, and began explaining some of the background of the institute. He emphasized that they were founded with a “common good purpose,” and the original mission was that the German speaking minority behind the Iron Curtain would “not be forgotten.” Since then, the scope of the institute has expanded to include nineteen target countries, ranging from Germany in the west, along the Danube River and to the Black Sea in the east. They include almost every country south and north of the river, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea. This is a geographically substantial section of Europe, which has in many ways outgrown its “Danube Region,” and even “Central Europe,” namesakes. Nonetheless, the imagery of a Danubian river connection is visible in institutional marketing, pamphlets, publications, and posters.

During our initial conversation, the director emphasized several times the institute’s mission of “overcoming borders,” and “developing into the concept of regions rather than nations.” He maintained that “regions are the future of Europe,” saying that IDM “embodies” these ideals through the activities they facilitate. IDM operates between three main groups: academics, policy makers, and the public. Through hosting public panels, events, and workshops, publishing research, and advocating for certain policies, they position themselves as a “multilateral hub” for what they term “democratic resilience” in Europe.

The notion that the institute embodies the ideal of a borderless Danube Region is analytically significant because it reveals how “borderlessness” is imagined for people who are trying to create it. Indeed, this borderlessness is ideological, and decently removed from the borderlessness of which Natasha spoke. “Overcoming borders” at IDM does not mean the removal of national border control or Schengen Area surveillance (discussed in greater context in the following section). Where Natasha imagined a practical absence of national borders which facilitates free mobility along the river, IDM articulates a multifaceted idea of borderlessness in which both physical and conceptual mobility is made possible. By “conceptual mobility,” I refer to the ability to move between frameworks of knowledge production and social solutions building. As a think tank, the research undertaken in the environment of IDM radiates out to local, national, and regional governments, making this institute a direct example of how the systems we use to imagine the world predispose the ways we create it.

One experience in which “borderlessness” was “embodied” at the institute was at the The Transnational Reflection Group Conference held in November of 2023. This is an annual gathering of ~30 young professionals ranging in age from their early 20s to early 30s. Hosted in the IDM office space, this conference was organized by four partner institutions: *Globsec* based in Slovakia, *European Movement Ireland* based in Ireland, and the *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy* (ELIAMEP) based in Greece. Participants at the conference were from these four countries and more, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and (me) the United States. At cursory interpretation, it seemed as though this internationality was the embodiment of “overcoming borders” of which the director had spoken. I do believe that for some organizers and participants at the conference, international collaboration was the primary manifestation of borderlessness. However, for other young conference participants, “borderlessness” did not necessarily refer to working across physical or even ideological national borders, but rather, communicated a desire for collaboration outside of historically-established national, economic, and interpersonal frameworks.

This desire was foregrounded both as a topic for discussion, and demonstrated as a reality through some of the interactions between conference participants, facilitators, and panelists over the course of the week. Conference sessions were divided into the thematic categories of climate, migration, EU enlargement, and digital transformation. Each of these

topics was dedicated a keynote lecture and a working small group. I joined the climate group along with five other women, all about my age. The group was facilitated by the director of GLOBSEC, a Slovak woman in her 30s-40s who was enthusiastic about the work we were doing. As we discussed and organized categories of climate policy recommendations, we routinely confronted the issue that no challenge was contained within the “climate” category. This meant that any effective policy recommendation would require collaboration across thematic borders. These included the aforementioned topics of digital transformation, EU enlargement, and migration, as represented at the conference, but also others, such as economic reform, public vs. private sector power distribution, transportation, gender issues, Indigenous rights, and more. We made our recommendations regardless, including the preface that any worthwhile climate strategy would need to incorporate cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Beyond cross-disciplinary collaboration, we also outlined the need for collaboration outside of the historically-established assumption of who enters the rooms where regional policy decisions take place. One member of the climate small group was Melanie, an agricultural professional in her mid-20s from rural Ireland. While she was quiet during group discussion at first, it slowly became clear that she possessed some of the most practical and relevant knowledge in the group: what kinds of material conditions need to be ensured for food systems in her area to thrive. This information is invaluable for developing specific policy recommendations. More importantly, this scenario spoke to a systemic issue: Knowing the land and intricacies of a place are crucial for creating systems of governance that allow that place to thrive; However, those who have intimate knowledge of the land are often circumstantially and/or intentionally excluded from decision-making spaces. When those with local knowledge *are* invited into these spaces, interpersonal challenges arise.

Despite a generally welcoming and open atmosphere at the conference, Melanie expressed that she felt uncomfortable in this type of setting. This led her to remain silent during larger group discussions. Most of the other conference participants had a background in some combination of international relations, law, or government. For Melanie, this meant that she felt insecure about the relevance of her contribution. People who regularly attend these kinds of conferences are prepared to voice their opinions, engage with colleagues, and partake in the conference in a way with which Melanie was simply unfamiliar. Regardless of the relevance of their contribution, those who feel comfortable voicing their thoughts are the

ones who will likely have the most influence in decision-making spaces. Paradoxically, the specific experience and information that Melanie and people with her background could provide, that which she felt uncomfortable sharing at first, is exactly what bureaucratic, high-level decision-making spaces lack.

This interpersonal bordering of conference spaces extended beyond Melanie and her expressed discomfort. On the first day of the conference, all participants attended a public panel discussion titled, “Shaping Democratic Resilience in the European Union: The Future of European Democracy in the Eyes of Citizens.” Audrey, a research associate at the Danube Commission, wrote down some questions on the back of her program paper that she wanted to ask the panelists during the question and answer period after the talk. Seated beside me in the back-middle section of the conference room, we chatted and got to know each other before the start of the session. After the panel concluded, the host asked if the audience had any questions. Before he finished his sentence, an older, 60-70 year-old Austrian man in the front row had his hand up. This man asked his long, prewritten question which was only loosely related to anything that had been discussed during the panel. After a few minutes of responses from the panelists, the host asked for another question from the audience. Half a dozen people, including Audrey, began to raise their hands again, but none faster and more obvious than a 70-80 year old man also in the front row. The host called on this man, heard his question, allowed the panelists to respond, and then concluded the session by welcoming everyone to a cocktail hour in the room next door.

Flash forward a few days to the closing session of the Transnational Reflection Group Conference, and one of the conference organizers asked the participants for any final comments, questions, or feedback they may have on the experience as a whole. After a few comments, Audrey spoke up about the panel discussion the first night, expressing that she wished there would have been more of an emphasis on hearing young peoples’ voices at an event specifically targeted at young people as the “future of Europe.” The host of that panel event was in the room, and responded to Audrey directly. He explained that he cannot help it if the most bold, outspoken people during question and answer sessions are old men. In those moments, he is scanning the room and must call on the first person he sees.

In response, a conference participant named Vanessa, the leader of the cohort from *European Movement Ireland*, pointed out that generally, young women are taught to make themselves small and quiet. It takes specific effort to act in defiance of this socialization.

Acting as the facilitator of a public panel discussion, the host holds the interpersonal power to work against systemic social barriers. Vanessa continued, that if the host truly believes in the ideal of uplifting young and underrepresented voices, he can work to intentionally center these voices during public discussion. Following these experiences, I would articulate the notion of conceptual borderlessness found in these spaces not simply the absence of social rules, but the intentional dismantling of social barriers to equitable collaboration. In this vein, some conference participants, including myself, felt that the institutional ideals of “overcoming borders” needed to be extended to the bureaucratic and interpersonal, in addition to the national.

In some cases, overcoming these interpersonal borders took precedence over overcoming national borders at IDM. Any collaboration required to overcome national borders inevitably confronts social borders. This small-scale borderlessness can be understood as the process of directly confronting interpersonal hierarchies, and flipping the power dynamic of who is capable of voicing their perspective in decision-making spaces. Groups of interest are women, people of color, and those with different kinds of education (such as farmers) who are often not represented or welcomed in high-level bureaucratic spaces. These borders are not disconnected from national borders, because if the aim of dismantling national borders is to build regional unity, national borders are not the only borders that need to be dismantled. This requires a shift in the framework of how we imagine and categorize borders as problems to be solved, and look inward at the methodologies which aim to solve them.

Strengthening Borders

In the same spaces where a motivating discourse of “overcoming” borders was present, an opposing discourse emphasizing the need to “strengthen” certain borders could also be found. The scenario is presented such that some borders can only be overcome under the condition that other borders are strengthened. The river, which for some interlocutors in the previous sections foremost demonstrated the connectedness of the region, can also be understood as the “natural” presence of a border. This ideology contributes to what is understood as the inevitability of the national and regional bordering processes. The logic follows that borders are like the concept of an international river; they are a fact of life. At

the same time, these borders are worried over. They are understood as necessary, inevitable, but also in need of constant surveillance and creation.

Tony, a tourism professional with *Floratour*, the Bratislava-based tourism agency that facilitates Danube River tourism traveling through Slovakia, is one who thinks of the river as a manifestation of the naturalness of borders. Towards the end of our interview, reflecting on all of my questions, he explained,

...Rivers are natural borders everywhere... it's always with everything— you are from one side of the river or the other side of the river. It applies in life and this is what I mean by that. It's natural for the rivers to split something you know? ... when you want to find in some areas who belongs where and so on, it comes out from the river... When you consider it, it's normal.

The sense of the inevitability that emerges from Tony's explanation of the role of river borders communicates a resignation to the powers that be. Whether or not you want them, he is saying, borders are a fact of life, even in nature. There is no arguing against them. What's more, the river creates its own borderline regardless of limits of national jurisdiction. When this line coincides with a national border, the river aids in the naturalization of geopolitical boundaries in the cultural imaginary.

In one sense, this could be read as a dangerous oversimplification of geopolitics. On the other, it speaks to the non-dichotomous quality of separation and connection. The philosophical notion of opposites inherently requires that one cannot exist without the other. Separation is only possible with the precondition of connection, and connection is conceptualized in relation to that which is separated. The notion of creating cross-border connection by "overcoming borders" exists in tandem with efforts to create borders and subsequent separation elsewhere.

By comparing the opposing viewpoints of the river as either a connector or a separator, it becomes evident that international rivers are not one way of thinking. A wet ontological understanding of river borders encapsulates this because it allows for the presence of multiple human and nonhuman truths to overlap. The river is both separation *and* connection because these concepts are not opposites, but rather alternate manifestations of the same entity. Similarly, borders of the Danube Region work to connect what they contain through a process of separating what they exclude. By thinking of separation and connection as aspects of the same process, a holistic account of geopolitical bordering is revealed, in which people and places on either side of a border can be held in

equal regard. The following discussion on Schengen Agreement expansion highlights a discourse of overcoming interior borders through a process of strengthening those exterior.

“Who Belongs Where”: Borders of the Schengen Area

The Danube River flows outside of the current border of the Schengen Area, and in some places creates the borderline. Imagining the borders of the Schengen Area is an act that attempts to define interior Europe as a land without borders. This is accomplished under the condition that Schengen borders are heavily surveilled. In early November 2023, IDM facilitated a public panel debate titled, “The Future of the Schengen Area: Exploring its Enlargement.” The event began with a brief introduction on the topic of Schengen Member enlargement by the director of IDM, after which he introduced the four panelists. These included an ambassador from Croatia, one from Romania, one from Bulgaria, and the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs. Croatia recently became a Schengen member state in January of 2023. As of November 2023, Romania and Bulgaria had not been granted membership despite their repeated efforts, in part due to Austria’s consistent veto¹⁷. The Austrian Minister claimed that their primary motivation for denying Romania and Bulgaria membership was the recent increase in irregular migration into the Schengen Area. Given this set of international relations, the discussion became quickly heated. A particular climax included when the Austrian Minister compared admitting Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen Agreement to “a drop of cyanide in the soup.” Even one drop can ruin the entire pot. Even one dysfunctional border can crumble a system of borderlessness, he maintained. For this reason, “strong” borders are an imperative.

The panel continued with the Romanian and Bulgarian ambassadors attempting to prove, through various anecdotes, their Europeaness. After being repeatedly accused of having “leaky” Eastern borders, the Romanian ambassador leaned so far pro-border as to make the assertion that, “a lack of borders leads to chaos.” They ultimately accused Austria of operating from a place of “post-imperial nostalgia with [their] immediate neighbors” by vetoing their membership. To which the Austrian minister outlined that, “the idea of

¹⁷ On 30 December 2023 the European Council voted to lift the air and sea border controls with Bulgaria and Romania. Lifting these borders was thought of as less controversial from an irregular migration perspective. Land borders are set to be discussed later this year (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2024).

Schengen is to abolish internal borders and have more protected outside borders. We can't have a situation where outside borders are porous." In the fear of a dysfunctional exterior border, interior borders are reinstituted at the national level. This context further explains the "extraordinary" document controls at the Austrian-Slovak and German-Austrian borders.

The urgent passion with which delegates spoke about these borders initially made me think they were referencing the need for defense against an armed attack. While this is indeed within the scope of national borders, the emphasis of their concern surrounded refugees and immigrants. They used masked jargon like, "irregular migration" and "an increase in flow" as reasons they needed to "strengthen" border policy. Supporting this observation, in part three, section 1.1 of the European Commission's *Practical Handbook for Border Guards (Schengen Handbook)* titled "Purpose of Surveillance," three out of the five bullet points reference the people who undertake "illegal border-crossings" as the borders' intended purpose (European Commission, 2022). Borders are imagined as in need of "strengthening" specifically with the intention of keeping people out of the area.

Fluidity and Knowing the Danube as a Static Symbol

Distinctly unlike the interlocutors of the first chapter who imagine national borders by moving across or alongside them, regional coordination professionals most routinely imagine borders from the removed location of an office. This leads to the Danube being foremost interpreted as a static symbol of either cross-border connection or separation. As Ingold would argue, knowledge that is built up in a systematic, pre-conceptualized framework of graspable information only serves to gather information that has been abstracted from its context of earthly entanglement (2010). This is a process which works to reinforce systems that have already been established.

To the Kantian philosopher, if a person were simply to move from point to point, building up their knowledge in a systematic, pre-conceptualized framework of information, all knowledge lay in the grasp of human reason. The river, undergoing its own cycle of change and movement across the region, can emblemize an alternative way of knowing the issues which regional governance undertakes: that of fluidity. This is not necessarily a literal movement, but a willingness to be moved and fundamentally changed in the process— a

notion which is largely at odds with frameworks set forth in policy-centered institutions. These settings prioritize stability and certainty; this institutional certainty is in part created through the world-building technique of displaying regional imagery in the form of posters, maps, and iconography around the office space.

A visual representation of the Danube Region provides the backdrop to all public talks, meetings, panel discussions, and group photos (Figure 4; Figure 5). This map is at once foundational, contextual, and aspirational. It is only from a shared understanding of the Danube-defined Region that all pro-European research may proceed. Visible on the map is the outline of nineteen countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. The institute's target countries are highlighted in a soft light blue with white outlines, on a backdrop of deeper blue. A single dark blue squiggly line runs from Southern Germany to the Black Sea – a minimalist's rendition of the Danube River.



Figure 4: IDM Conference Room
(GLOBSEC, 2023)



Figure 5: Map in IDM Conference Room, Version Found on Website (IDM, 2023)

Maps such as these contribute to imaginaries which are distorted into static realities. As opposed to one, immutable, taken-for-granted version of things, the ever-shifting instability of the world is revealed when these imaginaries are interrogated. Instability is used here not as a pejorative, but rather to describe the presence of realities-in-the-making, and of the inherent movement characteristic of social worlds. These realities-in-the-making are the only kind of reality that the river knows how to produce – the sediment that it constantly reworked, the currents which are continually morphing into alternative configurations. Indeed, during our interview, Christian mentioned that there is no point in undergoing practical sailing tests in the Eastern Danube, because the morphology of the river bottom is so regularly changing. There is not one route nor prescribed velocity which the captain must take. A general idea of the course appears in Christian's mind, but it is up to his skill in the moment to decide how to move along certain parts of the river depending on how they present themselves that day.

In contrast to moving with the river, imagining the complexities of a river's region from an office creates the need to visualize it through maps. This works to solidify the region into a digestible entity. In the act of translating a regional imaginary into a visual representation, the visual representation begins informing and altering the imaginary. The imaginary of borders becomes ossified to the extent that the framework itself is regarded as immutable. Those established norms of knowing and categorizing a region create the foundation from which bureaucratic work begins. The bureaucratically necessary acts of map-making and

diagram-labeling have the unintended consequence of epistemologically shifting solutions-finding to a basis of stasis. Defined by the dark blue squiggly line on a map, the idea that the river embodies a reality of fluidity is sidelined for its potential as a static region-building symbol.

During our interview at IDM, a research associate named John explained,

I think maybe in a psychological sense [the Danube River] gives the people who live in the region a common region-hood to think that they connect. I mean if the river flows through Germany and Austria but then also into Romania and Bulgaria, it gives them a sense that all of these peoples are somehow connected. I dunno it seems to be used more as a region-building symbol between countries that aren't particularly alike [...] It's used as a way to transmute political values I think into these countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. To say 'ok you belong to the same region as Germany and Austria, which are successful democratic countries, you also belong to this region so it's just a matter of time before you also benefit from these developments.' It makes it easier for people to absorb political influence from other countries I think.¹⁸

The geopolitical tensions of relevant national governments are what is regarded as immediately pressing by this interlocutor. A need for connection is intensely discussed, and it is a political connection emphasized through shared values – or, rather, values that some believe *should* be shared across the region. In an effort to coordinate, focus, and create actionable international policy, the region is categorized into discrete containers with correlating national qualities. With the aim of encouraging unity, the river is translated into an entity that advances the state project. This is a bureaucracy that simultaneously flattens and co-opts the “clutter” on the earth’s surface in the name of regional connection (Ingold 2010, 124).

Regional geopolitical policy institutions are not the only spaces where bureaucratic flattening of earthly context is a tenant of operations. I attended a *World Wildlife Foundation: Central and Eastern Europe* webinar titled, “Untapped Opportunities: Navigating Water Stewardship in the Danube Basin” curious to think with an additional regional perspective. While I did not get the opportunity to visit their office, it is located in Vienna in a building not dissimilar to the IDM offices. The talks I attended were aimed at providing resources for small businesses to adopt more sustainable water-related practices. In the process, they presented their own visualizations of the region, which were notably void of emphasis on individual nation-states. Rather, the region is depicted as a system of tributaries channeling water into

¹⁸ John (research associate at IDM) in discussion with the author, November 2023.

the Danube River. One thick blue line represents the main body of the Danube, with thinner blue lines for its tributaries, and a black line enclosing the entire basin area (Figure 6). During the opening talk of the webinar, this map was used to demonstrate a need for collective action on water issues, as water does not yield to the logic of national boundaries. The actions of one person or institution can have dramatic material effects on people living thousands of miles downstream, they argued.



Figure 6: Map of Danube River Basin and Tributaries (ICPDR, 2023)

This imagination of geographic space yields specific realities which a map of national borders does not. However, both are engaged in a process of abstraction, wherein the Danube serves as a static symbol to incite political action. In the case of WWF, the need for collective action on the basis of connection through the Danubian system of tributaries is presented as a material reality with grave, life-altering, environmental consequences. In the case of IDM, the Danube River is understood as a connection between regions that possess grave geopolitical tensions and the need for unification under “European values.” From one perspective, a symbol of watery connection is the starting place from which political action develops, and in the other, political action is needed to bring connection to a region defined by the presence of water. In both perspectives, the region is translated into an organized set of solidified and abstracted narratives that are bureaucratically digestible and institutionally workable. Knowledge production, analysis, and subsequent political action are prioritized. In their prioritization, systems which render the region comprehensible are adopted.

Conclusion

This chapter used the experiences of people who work in regionally-minded organizations to understand office-based imaginaries of Danube Region borders. The imagining that takes place in the office space is constant and subconscious. Whether discussing the border “out there,” or creating categories of countries, people, and values in order to effectively debate an issue, the world is perpetually imagined and reimagined into particular configurations. The river emerges foremost as a symbol of connection and separation. Borders of the region are imagined as phenomena that must be either overcome or strengthened. In regard to overcoming borders, a discourse of physical and conceptual “borderlessness” emerged. Some regional organizers desire a physical borderlessness that translates to the literal removal of physical border demarcation that would encourage free mobility across the region. For others, “borderlessness” does not necessarily refer to removing physical or even ideological national borders, but rather, communicates a desire for collaboration outside of historically-established national, economic, and interpersonal frameworks. This is understood foremost as the intentional dismantling of social barriers to equitable “cross-border” collaboration.

In the same spaces where a borderlessness is sought-after, the need to strengthen exterior regional borders sometimes superseded the aspiration of an interior borderlessness. Delegates spoke with urgent passion about border issues surrounding refugees and immigrants. They used masked jargon like, “irregular migration” and “an increase in flow” as reasons governments needed to “strengthen” border policy. Borders are imagined as in need of “strengthening” specifically with the intention of keeping people out of the area. The river was presented again as a multivalent symbol of both separation and of connection, and was used here to explain the naturalness and inevitability of bordering processes. By comparing the opposing viewpoints of the river as either a connector or a separator, it became evident that international rivers are not one way of thinking. The river is both separation *and* connection because these concepts are not opposites, but rather alternate manifestations of the same entity. Similarly, borders of the Danube Region work to connect what they contain through a process of separating what they exclude. By thinking of separation and connection as aspects of the same

process, a holistic account of geopolitical bordering is revealed in which people and places on either side of a border can be held in equal regard.

Moving still beyond the idea that the river constitutes a reality of both separation and connection, the act of symbolizing the river as a binary connector and separator might overlook the possibility for a fluid reading of the river in regional organization. Undergoing a constant cycle of change and movement across the region, the river contains the potential to instruct an alternative way of knowing the issues which regional governance undertakes. This is a challenge because a framework of fluidity is largely at odds with the historically-established framework of working from a place of solidity in decision-making institutions. The world-building technique of displaying regional imagery in the form of posters, maps, and riverine iconography around the office space prioritizes static certainty. In an effort to mobilize actionable international policy the region is categorized into discrete containers with correlating national qualities. The river is translated into an entity that advances state and regional projects as a method of encouraging unity. This is a bureaucracy that simultaneously flattens and co-opts the “clutter” on the earth’s surface in the name of connection.

Conclusion: Regional Imaginaries of Danube River Borders

Borders signal separations and connections – they present barriers and gates. Imaginaries are crucial to the bordering process, as borders are a phenomenon that exist in equal parts material and abstract realms. Indeed, the relationship between borders, separations, and connections exists along a continuum from abstract to material; Symbolic and social barriers are often a precondition for state- and institutionalized borders. Borders are thought of as human endeavors, firmly situated in a more-than-human world. On the land that borders connect and separate, landforms such as rivers co-constitute the imaginaries that establish, maintain, and dissolve these boundaries. Rivers provide an opportunity to think with the cognitive fluidity of a wet environment where there exists the possibility to destabilize accepted norms about the boundaries of the socially created world. From this theoretical basis, I asked the question: How do people who work with the Danube Region and move along the Danube River imagine the national borders of this space? The answer was one of multiplicity and contradiction through which an extra-state argument for border onto-epistemologies can be made.

Moving Along the River

Individual Travelers

For individual travelers in this thesis, national border imaginations are polarized between two extremes; they are either (1) an inconsequential symbol or (2) an urgent barrier. Crucially, these two understandings are not mutually exclusive. The border can be read as either of these opposing versions by anyone at any time. The four border types observed in this research were: Memory Border, Map Border, Checkpoint Border, and River Border. The Memory Border described how the known history of a previously violent border directly contributes to the widespread inclination to describe national borders as “unimportant” today. In a scenario where the border is un-demarcated, unguarded, and uncontrolled at the borderline, the Map Border describes how physical and digital maps create the presence of national borders in the place of the borderline and in reference to surrounding landscapes.

The Map Border requires the observer's attention and capacity for imagining in order to “place” the border in the world. Juxtaposingly, the Checkpoint Border acts as a state-controlled barrier to mobility. The multivalency of possible border imaginaries is reduced to a binary of correct or incorrect documentation. Either the border will be a barrier or it will not. Lastly, the River Border for individual travelers was overwhelmingly a river. By stepping out of the broad, high-level, systems-based approach and instead asking what these borders are phenomenologically, this research understands how abstract national borders are imagined through concrete and individual experiences.

Inland Shipping Professionals

Three Danube Region border imaginaries emerged through interaction with inland shipping professionals.

- (1) **Borders Imagined as Bureaucratic Procedures** – National borders along the river are encountered as predetermined bureaucratic procedures that are abstracted from the geographic location of the borderline. The extreme presence of these borders as described by inland shipping professionals is a *bureaucratic* extremity felt through the challenge of international coordination. Therefore, Danube Region national borders are imagined as a series of bureaucratic processes, often dislodged in time and space from their corresponding borderline.
- (2) **Riverine Connection of a European Inland Waterway System** – The Danube River creates a continuous “European inland waterway system” that emphasizes the constructed nature of connection and separation. The inland waterway system creates a sense of continuous connection, but only insofar as made possible by regional governments. Therefore, riverine regional connection is not to be regarded as the “natural” state of the world, but rather, to be understood politically and in the context of what (and who) is not connected.
- (3) **Past and Present, Soviet and Refugee Borders** – Today, the imaginary of European national borders is (1) informed by a historical memory of Soviet-era borders, and (2) made sense of through narratives of irregular migration and refugee arrival. Any present border can be explained away as extraordinary, unusual, and temporary.

The border is in multiple locations, and nowhere consistently. I like to describe my experience with these borders by saying: I never found them, and they were everywhere. When the border is drawn along the river, the river obscures the presence of the national border with its own narratives. Alternatively, with maps, the border is overlaid onto physical space through individual processes of imagining. Passenger vessels engage in acts of performing the border for tourists when they make on board announcements paired with historical information. Sometimes the border is there when people choose to think about it. Other times, checkpoints are instituted at random kilometers removed on either side of the place where the borderline is drawn on the map. National border imaginaries of the Danube Region for those moving along the river are polarized as either elusive or pressing. They emerge as a *symbol* of a border, as an abstracted bureaucratic process, or as an urgent barrier.

In the Office

For those who imagine borders from an office, national borders are engaged with ideologically, interpretively, and aspirationally. The distance inherent to working with borders “out there” on the physically removed periphery allows for these borders to be understood as processes in flux which can be changed. Here the borders of the Danube Region are imagined foremost as entities that must either be overcome or strengthened. Following this binary, “borderlessness” emerges as a dichotomous discourse that was either desired or feared. Regional organizers describe “overcoming borders” on a spectrum from removing physical borders to facilitate practical travel mobility, to a conceptual “borderlessness” that allows for an equitable interpersonal and epistemological framework.

Indeed, for some, “borderlessness” did not refer to working across physical or even ideological national borders, but rather, communicated a desire for collaboration outside of historically-established national, economic, and interpersonal frameworks. The notion of conceptual borderlessness found in these spaces was not simply the absence of social rules, but the intentional dismantling of social barriers to equitable collaboration. These social barriers were specifically the issue of who was invited, able, and confident to contribute to conversation in decision making spaces. In certain circumstances, overcoming these interpersonal borders took precedence over overcoming national borders, because the

hypothetical collaboration required to overcome national borders inevitably confronts social borders. This requires a shift in the framework of how we imagine and categorize borders as problems to be solved, and look inward at the methodologies which aim to solve them.

In the same spaces where borderlessness is sought-after, the need to strengthen exterior regional borders superseded the aspiration of an interior borderlessness. The river creates its own borderline regardless of the limits of national jurisdiction and can be co-opted through the political idea that, “finding who belongs where comes out from the river.” The notion of creating cross-border connection by “overcoming borders” exists in tandem with efforts to create borders and subsequent separation elsewhere. The river and these borders alike are both separation *and* connection because these concepts are not opposites, but rather alternate manifestations of the same entity. Borders of the Danube Region work to connect what they contain through a process of separating what they exclude. By thinking of separation and connection as aspects of the same process, a holistic account of geopolitical bordering can be revealed, in which people and places on either side of a border may be held in equal regard.

Multiplicity Against State-Driven Hegemony

In an attempt to emphasize the contradiction inherent to these Danube Region border imaginaries, I will compare two emergent discourses as they appeared between interlocutors moving along the river and those in the office. The two discourses are *borderlessness* and *the river*. For interlocutors moving along the river, borderlessness equated to the irrelevance of borders. There are no longer borders that are “important,” and no one notices them anymore, some maintained. For interlocutors in the office, borderlessness equated to either a naturalness or a chaos. Borderlessness was either a fear or a goal that respectively signaled a system of mobility that was broken, or one that was functioning as desired. Meanwhile, the river for interlocutors moving along the river was foremost a river. It was largely unrelated to how the border was known: as a memory, a map, or a checkpoint. Meanwhile, for interlocutors in the office, the river was a symbol and a deeper meaning behind what a border truly is or should be. There, the river was a logic for connection and a logic for separation. Imagining Danube Region borders is a process that changes from person to person, time to

time, and place to place. The same person may even articulate borders differently depending on the context they find themselves in when asked. Together, these diverging imaginaries point to a reality of multiplicity.

The ultimate impetus of this research is to write against singularly dominating border narratives articulated especially by state, national, and regional governing bodies. Multiple realities are already visible within borderscapes and bringing this multiplicity into light works against frameworks of state-driven hegemony. A region defined in large part by a river system, a wet ontology of these national borders foregrounds the presence of multiple truths and brings a materially grounded perspective to an argument of multiplicity. Furthermore, the border-concept as a concept is a politically neutral facet of the world. What I mean is that there can be a conceptual or analytical border created between any two or more distinct entities. However, this border-concept neutrality is not to be conflated with the acutely political bordering initiatives undertaken by state projects.

Foregrounding more than the harm enacted through national borders is work that subverts state projects. Following this logic, Brambilla and Jones called for a more nuanced study of borders as sites of not only conflict and violence, but as sites where multiple realities converge, and ones where a “politics of hope” (Appadurai, 2013) may also be cultivated. This thesis responds to Brambilla and Jones (2020) and uses the Danube Region to build on Lamb’s (2024) work on multiple more-than-human experiences at a river border. By becoming aware of border multiplicity, we are working against a singular and simplistic “politics of fear” which thrives in absolutes. This is because singular narratives invite singular reactions to the harm created by border projects. Imagining borders only as the dominant, state-driven narratives describe them (eternal, unchangeable, preordained, etc.) does the work of creating them as such. Crucially, “unchangeable” here does not refer specifically to geographically moving a borderline, but rather to the idea of changing what a border is and how it is practiced. However, reimagining something as naturalized as national borders is only achievable through a politics of hope that is cultivated through an awareness of possible alternative realities.

A static epistemological practice serves most prominently to maintain the systems of governance which would describe the world as existing in separate and discrete containers. In the scenario of the Danube Region, the river goes beyond symbolizing connection and separation by embodying a reality of both, because these relationalities need not be placed

at odds with one another. Rather than “this or that,” this is a “this and that” mindset that works to understand contradiction and multiplicity as fundamental to reality-making. There will always be places and people which are not included in a connection, and versions of separation which secondarily connect something else. By confronting the fact that these relationalities are inevitably and continually evolving from one into the other and back again, regional governance institutions are challenged to adopt a mindset of fluidity that would regard connection as existing on a scalar continuum from the regional to the interpersonal.

If we remain unconscious to the imaginaries and subsequent methods of knowledge production through which we know the world, we are bound to perpetually recreate the social and political systems which inform those imaginaries. I make the argument that by stepping into a reality of multiplicity with intentional awareness, and perhaps a hopeful openness to fluidity, a holistic account of borders in all their forms can be rendered. By becoming actively aware and ultimately critical of these border imaginaries (whether those be of fear, hope, chaos, or apathy), we reclaim the power to choose which realities we work to create and decide how we want to live in relation to one another.

Acknowledgements

There are several people I would like to thank for helping me throughout this MA research. I firstly express my appreciation for the University of Vienna, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, and the CREOLE International Master's Program. Thank you to my departmental colleagues and classmates who made academic collaboration the exciting and enjoyable experience that it can be.

I would especially like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Sanderien Verstappen, for her guidance and encouragement not only during this research, but also during the several of her courses that I had the pleasure of attending. Thank you also to Dr. Franz Krause for initially inspiring the idea for this research by introducing me to the study of hydrosocial anthropology and waterworlds.

Thank you to the *Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe* for welcoming me into your office and making space for my ethnographic lurking. Thank you to all my interlocutors and interviewees, at IDM, the Transnational Reflection Group, *ViaDonau*, *CroisiEurope*, *Transport Trade Services*, *Interreg*, and *Floratour*. Additionally, to all the individual travelers I met in passing, I hope your travels are smooth and your journeys what you desire.

Thank you to the friends that sustained me along the way: KayCee, Madeleine, Jonáš, Timna, Jeannie, Leanne, Preston, Sarah, Michelle, and Anya. Your genuine companionship as I live an ocean away from home is a distinctly wonderful and life-giving pleasure. Emily, the plant whisperer, hype-woman, crazy cat, and beloved friend that you are. Thank you for reading so many of my *rough* drafts. Vicky, I am of the opinion that it is so rare and unbelievably fortunate that I would have found a friend like you in this lifetime. Thank you forever.

My built-in best friends and sisters, Isabella and Gianna. The enormity of your presence in my life leaves so little space for a written acknowledgement. I love you immensely. Finally, my parents and grandparents, whose radiating warmth likewise leaves little room for words. Thank you for your never-ending support and encouragement, even when you aren't sure exactly what my discipline is. I promise I'll write that two-sentence summary for you to use before the next extended family gathering.

Bibliography

- Abram, David. 2011. *Becoming animal : an earthly cosmology*. First Vintage books edition.
- Abram, David. 2017. *The spell of the sensuous : perception and language in a more-than human World*. New York: Vintage Press.
- Allen, John and Allan Cochrane. 2007. "Beyond the Territorial Fix: Regional Assemblages, Politics and Power," *Regional Studies*, 41:9, 1161-1175, DOI:10.1080/00343400701543348.
- Alvarez, R.R. 1995. "The Mexican-US Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), pp. 447–470. doi:10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.002311
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Andreas, Peter. 2009. *Border Games. Policing the U.S.–Mexico Divide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Andrews, Kyrstin Mallon. 2019. "Borderwaters: Conversing with Fluidity at the Dominican Border," *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/borderwaters>. Last accessed: 29 July 2024.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Appadurai, A. 2013. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso.
- Bacon, Edwin. 1992. "'Glasnost' and the Gulag: New Information on Soviet Forced Labour around World War II," *Soviet Studies* 44:6 1069–86.
- Bailey, Dominic, Mike Hills, Paul Sargeant, et al. 2022. "Ukraine in maps: Tracking the war With Russia," *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682>. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- Barth, F. 1969. "Introduction," in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of cultural difference*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Bigo, D. 2006. "Internal and external aspects of security," *European security*, 15 (4), 385-404.
- Boruah, U. R. 2021. "Human folly and border fences: Looking to non-human actors at the Indo–Bangladesh border," *Borders in Globalization Review* 3 (1):59–66. doi:10.18357/bigr31202120260.
- Bourdieu, P., and J.C. Passeron. 1972. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Transl. R Nice, 1977. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage (From French).
- Brambilla, C. 2015. "Exploring the critical potential of the borderscapes concept," *Geopolitics* 20(1): 14–34.
- Brambilla, C. and Jones, R. 2020. "Rethinking borders, violence, and conflict: From sovereign power to borderscapes as sites of struggles," *Environment and planning. D, Society & space*, 38(2), pp. 287–305. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775819856352>.
- Carsten, Janet. 2008. "Borders, boundaries, tradition and state on the Malaysian periphery," In *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, edited by Hastings and Wilson, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Cangia, F. and T. Zittoun. 2020. "Exploring the interplay between (im)mobility and imagination," *Culture & Psychology*, Available at:

- <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19899063>
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- CIA. 1955. "Appendix: Iron Curtain Controls," *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA_RDP7802771R0002004000030.pdf. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- Cole, J. W. and E. R. Wolf. 1974. *The hidden frontier: ecology and ethnicity in an alpine valley*. New York: Academic Press.
- Danube Region Strategy. 2024. "The Danube Region," <https://danube-region.eu/>. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- Davis, Micheal. 2021. "River thinking: Towards a holistic approach to watery places in the human imaginary," *River Research Applications John Wiley & Sons Ltd*. 38, pp. 385-392.
- De Rougement, D. 1966. *The Idea of Europe*. New York: Collier-Macmillan.
- Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. 2024. "Schengen area: Controls at air and sea borders with Bulgaria and Romania will be lifted - European Commission," home-affairs.ec.europa.eu. Last accessed: 23 August 2024.
- Donnan, H. and T. Wilson. 1994. "An anthropology of frontiers," in H. Donnan and T. Wilson (Eds), *Border approaches: anthropological perspectives on frontiers*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Duhamel, M. 1928. *La Question Bretonne dans son Cadre européen* [The Breton Question in its European Framework]. Paris: Editions du Parti Autonomiste Breton.
- Duncan, I. and S. Levidis. 2020. "Weaponizing a river," *eFlux Architecture*, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/at-the-border/325751/weaponizing-a-river/>. Last Accessed: 30 July 2024.
- Eberhardt, Piotr. 2015. "The Oder-Neisse Line as Poland's western border: As postulated and made a reality," *Geographia Polonica*. 88 (1): 77–105. doi:10.7163/GPol.0007.
- Eckert, A.M. 2019. "Introduction," In *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands*. 1st edn. New York: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190690052.001.0001>.
- Emirbayer, M. 1997. "Manifesto for a relational sociology," *Am. J. Sociol.* 103(2):281–318.
- Eriksson, J. and Rhinard, M. 2009. "The internal-external security nexus: notes on an emerging research agenda," *Cooperation and conflict*, 44 (3), 243-267.
- European Commission. 2022. "Practical Handbook for Border Guards (Schengen Handbook)," <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/>. Last accessed: 01 July 2024.
- European Commission. 2023. "EU Strategy for the Danube Region," https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube_en. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- European Commission. 2024a. "Schengen Area," https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area_en. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- European Commission. 2024b. "Rhine-Danube Core Network Corridor," https://transport.ec.europa.eu/other-pages/transport-basic-page/rhine-danube-core-network-corridor_en. Last accessed: 29 July 2024.
- European Parliament. 2024. "Schengen: enlargement of Europe's border-free area," *European Commission*.

- <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20180216STO98008/schengen-enlargement-of-europe-s-border-free-area>. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- European Union. 2024a. "The European Union," https://european-union.europa.eu/easy-read_en. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.
- European Union. 2024b. "History of the EU," Last accessed: 22 Aug 2024. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu_en
- Fouéré, Y. 1968. *L'Europe aux Cents Drapeaux* [Europe of a Hundred Flags] Paris: Presses d'Europe.
- Ganster, Paul and David E. Lorey. 2008. *The US–Mexican Border into the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gascoigne, Oliver and Benedikt Mandl. 2009. "The Danube River Basin Facts and Figures. International Commission on the Protection of the Danube River," Vienna, Austria. https://www.icpdr.org/sites/default/files/nodes/documents/icpdr_facts_figures.pdf. Last accessed: 3 Oct 2023
- Glick Schiller, Nina and Noel B. Salazar. 2013. "Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (2), pp. 183-200.
- GLOBSEC. 2023. "Young Leaders Transnational Reflection Event 2: A Summary," <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/events/young-leaders-transnational-reflectio-event-2-summary>. Last accessed 29 July 2024.
- Hannerz, U. 2003. "Being there... and there... and there! Reflections on multi-site ethnography," *Ethnography*, 4(2), pp. 201–216. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381030042003>.
- Hartl, Simon, Ulf Meinel and Deniza Staewa. 2023. *Practical Manual on Border Controls along the Danube and its Navigable Tributaries*. ViaDonau. 4th edition.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2006. *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time]. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Heraud, G. 1974. *L'Europe des ethnies* [Ethnic Europe]. 2. ed. Paris: Pr. d'Europe.
- Heyman, J. 1994. "The Mexico-United States border in anthropology: a critique and reformulation," *Journal of Political Ecology*, 1: 43-65.
- ICPDR. 2023. "About Us," <https://www.icpdr.org/about-icpdr/framework/about-us>. Last accessed: 18 Jan 2024.
- IDM. 2024. "Mission and Vision," https://www.idm.at/en/about-us/mission_vision/. Last accessed: 01 July 2024.
- Ingold, Tim. 2010. "Footprints through the weather-world: Walking, breathing, knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16(1) 121-139.
- Ingold, Tim. 2021. *The perception of the environment : essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. New edition. London: Routledge. Chapter, "To journey along a way of life: maps, wayfinding and navigation," 13(2): 232–304.
- Jones, Martin & Anssi Paasi. 2013. "Guest Editorial: Regional World(s): Advancing the Geography of Regions," *Regional Studies* 47:1, 1-5, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2013.746437
- Kneafsey, M. 2010. "The region in food - Important or irrelevant?" *Cambridge journal of regions, economy and society* 3(2), pp. 177–190. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsq012>.
- Komlosy, Andrea. 2000. "The Marshall Plan and the Making of the Iron Curtain in Austria," in: Bischof, Günter et al. *The Marshall Plan in Austria*. Transaction Publishers. ISBN 0-7658-0679-7. pp. 98–137.
- Krause, Franz. 2023. "Wet Ontologies," Class lecture, Hydrosocial Anthropology:

- Waterworlds and Wet Ontologies, University of Vienna, Austria. March 30th, 2023.
- Lamb, Vanessa. 2024. "Caring for the river-border: Struggles and opportunities along the Salween River-border," *Area* (London 1969) [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12933>.
- Lamont, M. and Molnár, V. 2002. "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual review of sociology*, 28(1), pp. 167–195. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107.
- Larsen, Svend Erik. 2007. "Boundaries: Ontology, Methods, Analysis," in *Border Poetics De-Limited*, ed. Johan Schimanski & Stephen Wolfe, Hannover: Wehrhahn.
- Lennon, K. 2015. *Imagination and the imaginary* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Ludden, David. 2003. "Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62(4): 1057–78.
- Lutterbeck, D. 2005. "Blurring the dividing line: the convergence of internal and external security in Western Europe," *European security*, 14 (2), 231253.
- Marks, G. 1993. "Structural Policy and Multi-level Governance in the EC," in A. Cafruny and G. Rosenthal (eds), *The State of the European Community*, Volume 2: *The Maastricht Debates and Beyond*. Harlow: Longman.
- Migration Data Portal. 2024. "Migrant deaths and disappearances," *IOM*. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances#dat-sources> Last accessed: 2 Sept 2024.
- Monuments of Remembrance. 2024. "Gate of Freedom." <http://monuments-remembrance.eu/en/panstwa/slowacja-2/55-the-gate-offreedom>, Last accessed: 29 June 2024.
- Morita, Atsuro, and Casper Bruun Jensen. 2017. "Delta Ontologies: Infrastructural Transformations in the Chao Phraya Delta, Thailand," *Social Analysis*, 61 (2), 118–33. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2017.610208>.
- Ozguc, U. & A. Burrige. 2023. "More-Than-Human Borders: A New Research Agenda for Posthuman Conversations in Border Studies," *Geopolitics*, 28(2), pp. 471–489. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2169879>.
- Paasi, Anssi. 1999. "Boundaries as Social Practice and Discourse: The Finnish-Russian Border," *Regional Studies*, 33:7, 669–680, DOI:10.1080/00343409950078701.
- Paasi, Anssi. 2002. "Place and region: regional worlds and words," *Progress in Human Geography* 26, 802–811.
- Paasi, Anssi. 2009. "The resurgence of the 'region' and 'regional identity': theoretical Perspectives and empirical observations on the regional dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35, 121–146.
- Painter, J. 2008. "European Citizenship and the Regions," *European urban and regional Studies* 15(1), pp. 5–19. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776407081277>.
- Perera, S. 2007. "A Pacific Zone? (In)Security, Sovereignty, and Stories of the Pacific Borderscape," in P. K. Rajaram and C. Grundy-Warr (eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. 201–227.
- Pohl, J.O. 2016. "The Persecution of Ethnic Germans in the USSR during World War II," *The Russian review* (Stanford), 75(2), pp. 284–303. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12075>.
- Rajaram, P.K. and C. Grundy-Warr. 2007. "Introduction," in *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. ix–xl.

- Rumford, C. 2008. "Introduction: Citizens and Borderwork in Europe," *Space & polity* 12(1), pp. 1–12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562570801969333>.
- Salazar, Noel B. 2020. "On imagination and imaginaries, mobility and immobility: Seeing the forest for the trees," *Culture & Psychology* 26 (4), 768–777.
- Scaramelli, Caterina. 2021. *How to make a wetland : water and moral ecology in Turkey*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Schwell, A. 2010. "The iron curtain revisited: the 'Austrian way' of policing the internal Schengen border," *European security* (London, England), 19(2), pp. 317–336. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2010.531706>.
- Shields, Christopher. 2020. "Aristotle's Psychology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/aristotle-psychology/>>.
- Sheller, M. and J. Urry. 2006. "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and planning* 38(2), pp. 207–226. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>.
- Somers, MR. 1994. "Reclaiming the epistemological "Other": narrative and the social Constitution of identity," In *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. C. Calhoun, pp. 37–99. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Stankiewicz, D. 2016. "Against imagination: On the ambiguities of a composite concept," *American Anthropologist* 118(4), 796–810.
- Steinberg, Philip, and Kimberley Peters. 2015. "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33 (2), 247–264. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>.
- Strang, Veronica. 2006. "Substantial Connections: Water and Identity in an English Cultural Landscape," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 10 (2), 155–77.
- Taylor, Charles. 2002. "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14: 91–124.
- Thomas, Kimberley Anh. 2017. "The river border complex: a border-integrated approach to transboundary river governance illustrated by the Ganges River and Indo-Bangladeshi border," *Water International* 42(1), 34–53. DOI:10.1080/02508060.2016.1247236.
- Thomas, Kimberley Anh. 2021. "International rivers as border infrastructures: En/forcing borders in South Asia," *Political Geography* 89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102448>.
- Viljoen, H. 2013. *Crossing borders, dissolving boundaries*. Amsterdam ; New York : Rodopi.
- Wilson, T. and H. Donnan. 1994. "Symbolic dimensions to the Irish border," in *Border approaches: anthropological perspectives on frontiers*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Wilson, T. and H. Donnan. 2004. "Nation, state, and identity at international borders," in *Border identities : nation and state at international frontiers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, T. and H. Donnan. 2012. *A companion to border studies*. First edition. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell (Publisher).
- Wimmer, A. and Glick Schiller, N. 2002. "Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation State building, migration and the social sciences," *Global networks* (Oxford) 2(4), pp. 301–334. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>.
- Wolf, Eric R. 1989. *Europe and the People Without History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. Chapter "Introduction."
- Zinchenko, S. 2024. "How the Russia-Ukraine war has impacted on logistics routes and

Supply chains,” *GMK Center*. <https://gmk.center/en/posts/how-the-russia-ukraine-war-has-impacted-on-logistics-routes-and-supply-chains/>. Last accessed: 29 Aug 2024.

Zittoun, T. 2020. “Imagination in people and societies on the move: A sociocultural Psychology perspective,” *Culture & psychology* 26(4), pp. 654–675. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19899062>.

Zygadło, G. 2023. “Gloria E. Anzaldúa : feminist body writing and borderlands,” *Abingdon*, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge.