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FREE THE MAP: ON A NEW CARTOGRAPHY OF BORDERS, CITIES AND MIGRATION

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A world map is a visual story that aims to represent a perspective of reality. One would then expect multiple visual narratives depicting the various aspects, actors, and international relations that shape our world. However, since the 16th century, the standard atlas—conceived by Gerardus Mercator in the colonial era for purposes of discovery (read: conquest)—has predominantly told only one visual story: that of separate state-boxes. This narrative, rooted in territorial annexation, centers on the question of which state governs where, reducing the world's complexity to territorial containers on a map. As a result, a world map typically depicts distinct, homogeneous entities, confined within national borders represented as thin, continuous lines. And cities – despite their dynamism and interconnections – tend to be reduced on these maps to nothing more than isolated, fixed dots. Further, tellingly, migration, is dominantly portrayed as an abnormality invading these bordered boxes, often represented by oversized, red arrows—the language of a hostile invasion (see also our article: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17450101.2019.1676031).

It is remarkable that this simplistic state-centric cartography of borders, cities and migration has become so normalized—hegemonic even—that it is mistaken for objectivity and neutrality, even though it represents only one perspective on the world. To act as if this is the world map is surrealist. *Ceci n'est pas le monde* – this is not the world.

The consequences of this form of surreal, visual storytelling are vast. The cartography of bordered boxes to represent the world suggests that a state or a city functions as a self-contained, autarkic entity, while in reality, all societies are constituted by cross-border connections of people, goods, capital, ideas, and legal regimes. It thus fundamentally misrepresents everything we know from international studies, urban studies, sociology, economics, geography, and migration. It masks historical and relational geographical realities, international socio-economic relations and experiences, demographic diversity, and international legal interdependencies. And it reinforces underlying nativist and nationalist power interests, sustaining the divide between 'us here' and 'them there'.

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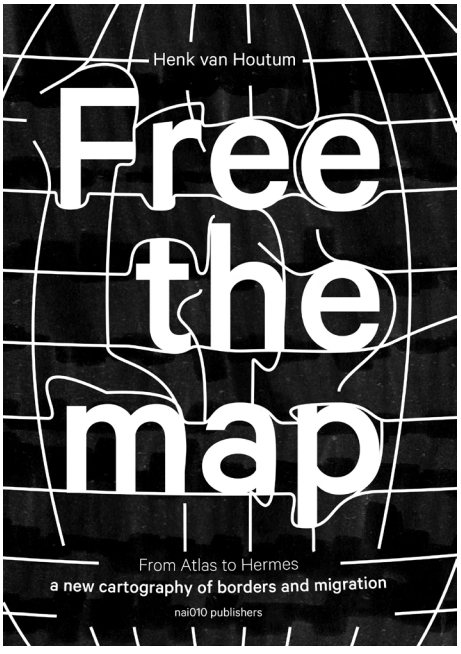
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In my lecture, based on my recently published book *Free the Map: From Atlas to Hermes. A New Cartography of Borders and Migration* (2024) (https://www.nai010.com/en/product/free-the-map/), I will first unravel the impact of this hegemonic cartography on our current understanding of borders, cities and migration. Then, I will present an overview of existing alternative cartographic representations that powerfully and convincingly humanize and mobilize the map, which I categorize as counter-mapping, experience-mapping, and connectivity-mapping. These approaches not only challenge the notion of borders as mere lines, cities as dots and migration as unidirectional arrows but also map human experiences, discriminatory (in)hospitalities, socio-economic relationships and connections.

It is time for a breakthrough in how we represent the world in media, education, and politics—one that fosters inclusive and decisively more honest, humane geographic imaginaries, acknowledging how deeply interconnected and interdependent we are on the globe.



van Houtum, H. *Free the Map: From Atlas to Hermes, a new cartography of borders and migration*. nai010 publishers, 2024.

Selected recent publications

Van Asseldonk, M. and H. van Houtum (2025), We have never owned ''Us'': A philosophical critique of nationalist b/ordering and othering ideologies, Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space

Bueno Lacy, R., & van Houtum, H. (2024). Europe's spectacular borderlines: on refugee camps, banlieues and other spaces of exception. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 47(12), 2652–2674.

Osso, B. N., & van Houtum, H. (2024). 'Now You See Me': Refugees Looking Back at the EU's Border Camp Watch in Lesvos. Geopolitics, 1–30.

Houtum, H.J. van & Uden, A.M. van (2021), The birth of the paper prison. The global inequality trap of visa borders, Environment and Planning C.

Houtum H.J. (2021), Beyond Borderism: Overcoming discriminative B/ordering and Othering, TESG

Houtum, H.J. van & Bueno Lacy, R. (2020). The Autoimmunity of the EU's Deadly B/ordering Regime; Overcoming its Paradoxical Paper, Iron and Camp Borders. Geopolitics, 25(3), 706-733

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