

Après la ligne: Juliet Fall's along the line: Writing with comics and graphic narrative in geography

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journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg**Klaus Dodds¹**

I re-read Juliet Fall's pioneering book last December while attending a conference hosted by the Paris-based *Le Grand Continent*. Nestled in the foothills of the Alps, somewhere betwixt Geneva and Turin, this is a part of Italy that has a vibrant Francophone-Italian heritage. Borders and the movement of goods, services and people are part of that translational and transnational story. Further northwards of where I was in the small Roman-era town of Saint-Vincent, Mont Blanc/Monte Bianco awaits and it there in the Alps where countries such as Italy and Switzerland have been experimenting with the concept of 'moving borders'. Acknowledging that a warming Europe is leading to state-change in high-altitude environments and once reliable indicators of the territorial edges of nation-states are being eroded and undermined. Mountain ridges have been destabilised, glaciers retreat and landslides and avalanches continue to disrupt those natural borders, a topic that Professor Fall has also reflected upon in the past.

But the topic of Juliet Fall's latest book is the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and everyday lived borders. Towards the latter stages of the book, there is an important section which outlines clearly the nature and scope of this project. Fall writes that 'I purposefully did not study flashpoints, the crises, the boats, and the deaths, the places in the news and the wire fences. Instead, I stumbled upon a border close to home that seemed to mundane that people, or at least those with privileged passports and privileged bodies, almost forgot existed, until a pandemic carved it back into the landscape' (158). The net-result is a stunning book-length

reflection, published both in English and French (with important differences between the two publications) that fleshes out that vision through text, drawing and photographs. There is a wonderful shape-shifting quality to all of this as well as the tone and style of writing meanders purposefully through this scholarly and personal enterprise.

This section, I extracted above, struck me repeatedly as important for a suite of reasons. First, Fall is too-accomplished a scholar to 'stumble' onto anything – this is a project animated by deep thought and a long-standing commitment to think with borders in a humane and decent manner. Second, this body of work, including *Along the Line* possesses a sensibility and sensitivity to asymmetrical power-geometries. As someone who wrote a book called *Border Wars* in 2021, I confess I am often drawn to flashpoints and crises, but I also very much endorse the underlying message in this book about unfairness and inequality when it comes to who gets to move across borders straightforwardly and who does not (Dodds, 2021). In that sense the pandemic and its lockdowns revealed a loss of mobility privilege – not just white privilege but all those who are fortunate enough to be citizens/passport holders of countries that find themselves at the top of the passport power index. Finally, this point about

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memory and forgetting strikes me as highly pertinent. The history of Europe is one profoundly shaped by border delimitation and it is easy to forget that many European borders are less than a hundred years old. Notwithstanding the conflict in Ukraine, due to the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation, Europe's boundaries are still unresolved in parts of southeast Europe, Spain/Gibraltar and elsewhere. There is a poignant section of the book where the lines of treaties are etched onto landscapes, with some wonderful photographs detailing the fixed presence of numbered border stones, brass border markers, and border stones. There is something rather beguiling not just about these objects but it is also what those numbers, orientations and labelling represents as part of the geometric work of the state, whether local or national.

In October 2020, I recalled an incident thanks to reading this book, where France and Italy had a fresh argument about Mont Blanc/Monte Bianco. The French were accused of imposing a natural protection zone, which in its area of application included part of a glacier that is considered part of Italy, thanks to a treaty dating from 1860. The current Prime Minister of Italy Giorgia Meloni was not in a forgiving mood at the time:

Brothers of Italy denounced the unacceptable French invasion of Mont Blanc. France continues to violate our borders. We cannot tolerate yet another attack on Italy (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/22/italy-reignites-mont-blanc-border-dispute-with-france>).

All of which reminded me of something that I experienced firsthand as a doctoral student in Argentina in the early 1990s when Argentina and Chile were disputing their respective borders in the high Andes. One cannot never under-estimate how seemingly remote places can stir the passions. Senior political leaders at the time spoke about 'violations' to the territorial integrity of their respective countries, and there is a long geopolitical tradition of framing the nation-state as a living body as well, which makes these defilements seem all the more discomfiting.

While Italian observers were taking umbrage at high-altitude French expansionism, Fall's account considers the intersection of landscape, mobility,

borders and bodies at lower altitudes. To be clear not all the action occurs at ground level. This is a volumetric encounter, the encounters and episodes that are narrated and sketched in the book are ones requiring things to be climbed on, crossed over and cycled around – as and when it was possible.

What I liked throughout this book is a scholarly praxis that is relentlessly auto didactic, it is both questioning of power as well as thoughtful about its positionality and privilege. The author knows well that the epicentre of this border drama is a part of the world that has not been subjected to relentless conflict and crises, but that does not mean that one cannot diagnose the way borders make themselves felt. Even in the middle of Europe, somewhere rather than nowhere in the Franco-Swiss borderlands, the lines that divide us can and do leave a bad taste in the mouth. They are perfectly capable as Giorgia Meloni noted some six years ago at the time of writing of causing outrage and dismay.

For political geographers and others who investigate borders, *Along the Line* has plenty of scholarly nourishment to offer. A pre-eminent theme in this work is the place of the body, and this picks up a wider concern in feminist political geography that border studies has too often focused its attention on the border as performative spectacle rather than lived experience. Fall demonstrates, repeatedly and evocatively, how and where her family, local communities as well as those charged with policing borders were coping with the improvised measures. Walking, cycling, driving and standing still all have their part to play in this evolving drama. Allied to all of that there is a persistent sensitivity to materiality – gates, concrete blocks, tape, cones, wire, branches and signage. The pandemic ushered in not only a suite of rules designed to influence both gathering and dispersal but also unleashed an onslaught of disposable items designed to signify a reconstituted bordered landscape. The end-result as Fall's graphic narrative illustrates well was for many frustration, confusion, resentment and fear. There are along the way some truly bizarre moments when Geneva becomes the meeting place for Biden and Putin in June 2021 and the city's infrastructure is re-engineered so that the two leaders can meet for

a few hours. As Fall notes poignantly ‘Hundreds of meters of barbed wire were unrolled in the preceding days, 900 police officers were brought in from across Switzerland, and the Swiss military moved into pop-up camps with armoured vehicles. The entire area around the lakefront in the heart of the city was sealed off into a Red Zone ... All local inhabitants were asked to stay away for 24 h’ (145). As the author noted, this compliance order was respected.

The final substantive element I would foreground is the way which playfulness and poignancy weave their way through this book – there is a method here that lends itself well to an ‘everyday political geography’. This is not the result of intellectual ‘stumbling’. This is a clever book which shows well the way states, in this case France and Switzerland do their collective border work and how those caught up in it react and respond. It makes visible things and processes that might have hitherto been considered invisible or barely worthy of citation. Between pages 74 and 83, we have a graphic narrative that speaks of small transgressions such as a dog with a pin-chipped collar walking across the border, fantasy bike tours, photographic opportunities with bewildered agents of the state, locking and unlocking border gates, border incarnations and the unique circumstances surrounding a Jewish cemetery with entrance/exit into both France and Switzerland. The poignancy to all of this, as this book recognises throughout, was that at least 14,000 people died due to COVID-19 in a population of just under 9 million. COVID-related measures were finally lifted in April 2022 (https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/covid-19_coronavirus-the-situation-in-switzerland/45592192).

Three final questions to the author. Part of me wondered, firstly, given that land-locked and multi-lingual Switzerland is surrounded by five nations, whether we might have had at least five different versions of *Along the Line* depending on whether the neighbour was France, Italy, Liechtenstein, Germany and/or Austria. It is also composed of 26 cantons, both full and semi-cantons ranging in population size and financial heft. Is there something context-specific to the area immediate to

Geneva, or would we have found something similar in other parts of Switzerland where it intersects with international neighbours?

Second, I wondered what the author’s family made of all of this – a co-created borders project? Or something that I think will impress many readers who struggled to manage children in an era of lockdown, bereavement at a distance, and educational and social disruption – a master class in finding ways of helping younger members of the family make sense of something quite exceptional in a continent that has largely been the beneficiary of internal movement and limited oversight of its borders, at least once inside Schengen. But there is something interesting here about doing ‘fieldwork’ with a team – whether family, friends, students and colleagues – and how they engage with ‘lines’ and the generation of a multitude of stories about neighbourliness, proximity and encounters with objects and communities.

Finally, how does this body of work sit alongside another more dominant strand of work in critical border studies, which often focuses on the inherent violence of Europe’s borders, especially when irregular migration is the subject matter? I have read plenty of work that has showcased the ‘affective attachments to violence’ and inequalities associated with borders and mobility but less on how Europeans navigated their way at a time when local borders and lockdowns suspended those privileges (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2024.2321158#abstract>).

Did any of this have impact on European publics in terms of generating new, however temporary, solidarities with those who have had far more precarious lives before and after the pandemic? In other words, one way to think of *Along the Line* is as a contribution to a more empathetic understanding of how and where borders work even amongst the most privileged in Europe.

Overall, this book is a tour de force and one that showcases what a thoughtful scholar Juliet Fall is – she has absolutely shown how it is possible to master, in her concluding words, *dans la forme et dans le*

fond. Whereas graphic novels are often credited with turning geopolitical abstractions into tangible and relatable stories, *Along the Line* is a hybrid one that infuses a scholarly purpose with creative sensibility. Mes félicitations, Professor Juliet Fall.

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