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THE 'ULTIMATE TOPONYM' AND NATIONAL IMAGINARIES IN GEORGIA AND AZERBAIJAN: CONSTRAINING IMAGINARIES OF BORCHALI AMONG GEORGIAN AZERI-TURKS

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Abstract

A central component of any national imaginary is the extent to which it is or can be made marketable and consumable by audiences within and outside of the borders of the territorial state. Physical and symbolic delimitation of the "homeland" – in 2- and 3-D, on the ground and on maps, in speech and in individual thought processes - facilitates a certain degree of intra-group solidarity and out-group wariness. After expanding upon the theoretical utility of the concept of the *national imaginary*, the author examines the role played by the "ultimate toponym", that of the bounded and institutionalized nation-state, in reifying dominant national imaginaries in Georgia and Azerbaijan. A further aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways that popular and elite-centric conceptions of Azerbaijani and/or Georgian nation-hood stymie Georgian Azeri-Turks' abilities to imagine alternate forms of identification and belonging, using the phantom territory of "Borchali" as a key example.

Key words

national imaginary, political toponyms, contested territories, Borchali, South Caucasus.

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1. Introduction

The toponyms of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia and *Azerbaycan*/Azerbaijan represent far more than placeholders on maps, stamps within passports, or terms embedded within pieces of legislation. These key toponyms represent two bounded territorial states, their populations, and the socio-cultural thread that stitches both together. The socio-cultural and geo-political fabric housed under the toponymic umbrella of "*Sakartvelo*/Georgia" and/or "*Azerbaycan*/Azerbaijan" is part in parcel of collective (i.e. "national")

imaginings. Such collective imaginings and their socio-cultural, geo-political, and narrative moorings constitute the focus of this paper. By comparing and contrasting discursive accounts of "Borchali" – a historical territory situated at the crossroads of the Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian territorial states – stemming from actors and audiences in Georgia and Azerbaijan, this paper seeks to answer the following query: How do *ultimate toponyms*, as facilitative and integrative aspects of *national imaginaries*,

promote recognition of collective "Selves" and "Others"? This article demonstrates that, not only are national imaginaries and their constituent narratives frequently solidarity- and creativity-generating, but they are also commonly exclusionary and inhibitive. Dominant understandings of "Borchali" as either threatening or supporting the ultimate toponyms and imaginaries of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia and *Azerbaijan*/Azerbaijan inhibit members of Georgia's largest minority grouping, Georgian Azeri-Turks, from credibly imagining alternative forms of social identification *within Sakartvelo*/Georgia and *apart from Azerbaijan*/Azerbaijan.

1.1. The Imaginary and Its National Variant

Given the relative continued novelty of the concept of the *imaginary* in ethnographic, geographic, political, and/or sociological studies of nation-building, one might assume the concept's provenance to be fairly recent. As P. James (2019) points out in his thorough and thoughtful analysis of the origins of the concept, however, philosophers have been engaged in quests to understand the psycho-social foundation of human nature and behavior for centuries. Examples include Voltaire's mid-18th century writings on the 'spirit of the times', G.W.F. Hegel's early 19th century theorizations on (*Welt/Volks/Zeit*)*geist*, and other works flowing from the philosophical musings of figures like J. Lacan, J.P. Sartre, and C. Castoriadis since the mid-20th century. One sees further linkages between these discussions of the innerworkings of the human mind and the interplay therein of "inner" and "outer worlds" in P. Bourdieu's work on *habitus* and M. Foucault's discussions of Power and regimes of truth.

A wide-range of adjectives have gradually been attached to the concept of the *imaginary*, particularly since the work of C. Castoriadis (1975) and C. Taylor (2004) and the elaboration therein of the imaginary's *social* foundations. Some of the most frequently employed descriptors include, for example, (*geo*)*political*, *global*, *national*, and *spatial* in addition to the traditional *social* label (cf. Anderson, 1983/2006; Hage, 1996; Lennon, 2015; Steger, 2008; Steger, James, 2013). In this work, *national* is preferred over other alternatives in that what is *national* is inevitably an amalgamation of all the aforementioned descriptors. What is *national* is (*geo*)political, spatial, and both juxtaposed to and informed by global trends.

Key scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including, for example, B. Anderson (1983/2006), R. Brubaker (1996), C. Flint & P. Taylor (2007), E. Gellner (1983), M. Guibernau (2007) E. Hobsbawm (1990), E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds.) (1983), M. Steger (2008), C. Taylor (2004) touch upon the emergence of

the nation-state in the late 18th century as the idealized locus of political and social organization emulated by audiences the world over. The aforementioned scholars understand the *nation-state* ideology as having swept in on coattails of rising advancements in technology, literacy and education, communication, and travel alongside a marked decline in ecclesiastical and monarchical legitimacy. In a way that had not heretofore occurred on a widespread scale, the *nation-state* and the institutions and practices it inspired came to bring diverse peoples together in the imagination, on the map, and on the battlefield by providing both *effective* and *affective* incentive and meaning to such social organization.

The vision of the *nation* employed here is pragmatic and highly flexible. Flexible understandings of what constitutes the *nation* in a given time and place allow for a more nuanced understanding of its role in the overarching *social imaginary*. There are countless *national imaginaries* in existence, each rooted within particular spatial contexts and informed by local and global practices and ideologies, practices that in turn represent a heady mixture of the "historical", "contemporary", and "future", or "aspirational" narratives of group-ness. The dominant discourses, narratives and memories that inform the *national imaginary* are instrumental, affective fodder feeding into and legitimizing the imaginary's very existence. Similarly, these discourses, narratives, and memories frequently serve as sites of contestation over whom and what is chosen to represent the *nation* in question. As sites for coherence as well as contestation, these discursive, mnemonic structures nevertheless serve – albeit in different ways – to legitimate ontologies of *nation(-state)-hood* as the most commonplace, efficient, and effective locus of collective social and political organization. The *national imaginary* exists in many forms, gradually shifting and changing to accommodate ebbs and flows in the tides of demographic indicators, public opinion, and geopolitics. Power relations underlie the entire process – who has power at a given time, who does not, and who, *powerful* or *powerless*, dares to challenge dominant claims to knowledge and truth.

The concept of the *imaginary* as it is invoked here calls to mind the existence of multiple worlds or imaginative modes through which an individual can conceive of his or her existence. This existence, while necessarily tied to the present, somehow also both transcends and is rooted in the past and the future. An imaginary doesn't necessarily need to be relegated to the sphere of dreaming, day-dreaming, or delusion. This concept is also useful for us in understanding how nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983/2006) gradually come into

existence and in understanding how such communities might change over time. The *imaginary* represents the marriage of the social and the psychological elements of a human agent's existence as a being among beings in the world. The imaginary is rooted in something, some shared sense of understanding of what the world is, how it works, and what position spatio-temporally-situated individuals roughly occupy in the broader scheme of things. Still, this leaves room for the imagining of alternative forms of existence and/or outcomes attainable within one's own life. The *national imaginary*, then, is a concept through which we can think *with* and *about* the processes surrounding official nation-building initiatives, the means and motives behind these initiatives, and the audiences targeted by them.

As will become clear throughout the pages of this article, the push and pull of contextualized power relations demonstrate the benefits as well as the drawbacks of the *imaginary* in its contemporary *national* form. Systemic and normative constraints exist that inhibit an individual's ability to conceive of the *national* in ways that deviate from dominant conceptions of whom/what is or can be credibly conceived of as belonging to the "nation". After all, membership in a nation bespeaks access to certain symbolic and material benefits. These benefits include, among other things, the ability or right to speak out on controversial and/or sensitive subjects tangential to nationhood without incurring disproportionate risk to life, limb, or livelihood. Speaking out on subjects related to the (re)naming, (re)zoning or (re)drawing the boundaries of the "homeland" and its constituent territories, for example, can be a particularly hazardous exercise. For those residing upon the spatial and symbolic fringes of the nation-state, however (including members of poorly integrated non-titular minority groups), speaking out on such issues frequently incurs additional risks.

1.2. The *Ultimate Toponym* and Its Role in the National Imaginary

The concept of the *ultimate toponym* is utilized here in reference to the state's highest, officially sanctioned designation for the bounded economic, legal, socio-cultural, and territorial unit over which it governs (purportedly at the behest of the *nation*, and, ideally, within the confines of the *homeland*). Here, the *ultimate toponym* refers to the endonym rather than the exonym—that is, the legal name of the spatio-cultural unit in the country's official language rather than its foreign-language designation. For example, *Sakartvelo* is the endonym for the spatio-cultural unit known as "Georgia" in English ("Gurcistan" in Azerbaijani, "Vrastan" in Armenian,

and in most Slavic languages as "Gruziâ"). *Sakartvelo* is the country's endonym, while the other aforementioned designations are exonyms. The endonym of *Azerbaijan* is similarly transliterated to exonyms like "Azerbaijan" in other languages.

The *ultimate toponym* reflects dominant discourses of nation-hood as well as the status of the named nation, however officially and/or popularly conceived. The officially sanctioned, ultimate toponyms of *Sakartvelos Respublika* (the Republic of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia) and *Azerbaijan Respublikasi* (the Republic of Azerbaijan) provide clues as to the relative inclusivity or exclusivity of the named nations—the *Kartveli* people named in the designation, *Sa-kartvel-o* and the *Azerbaijan milleti*, or Azerbaijani nation/people—and insights concerning the roles of the respective nations in overarching political apparatuses. The ultimate toponym helps to put the nation-state on the map, literally and figuratively, by situating it within contextually-embedded collective imaginations. Additionally, the selection of this key toponym is vital to the procurement of a position for the nation-state and its constituents within the global geopolitical and economic arena. International recognition of the ultimate toponym at the inter-state scale contributes, in turn, to the legitimacy of the nation-state among members of its own citizenry.

In sum, the ultimate toponym is a legal-political, socio-cultural, and territorial marker of multidimensional, multifunctional space as well as a carrier of symbolic, material, functional, and pragmatic value. The ultimate toponym facilitates the goings-on of daily life in a given nation-state, whether by making it possible for politicians to implement the rule of law within the borders of the territorial state, structure economic relations within and across political borders, engage in diplomatic relations with representatives of other countries, and/or promote particular collective attributes, practices, and symbols for broader dissemination. Thus, the ultimate toponym is an integral, mutually-constitutive component of the national imaginary. Imbued within the linguistic structures of ultimate toponyms are representations of space/place, time, and norms of social and political organization—localized as well as globally informed. The concept of the *ultimate toponym* helps us to think more critically about the ways that seemingly empty spaces are collectively imbued with meaning and value, gradually shifting from mere *spaces* to layered, affective *places*.

2. Data Sources and Methods of Analysis

Scholars including Azaryahu (2011), S. Hoelscher & D. Alderman (2004), R. Rose-Redwood et al. (2010), and J. Vuolteenaho & L. Berg (2009) note the “critical turn” taken in place-name studies since the 1980s and the emphasis therein upon the power-laden, socially mediated act of naming. The critical turn in place-name studies represents a shift away from encyclopedic, etymologically based studies of place names to studies of the politics of naming as a form of cultural production, dissemination, and contestation. Rather than attempting to unpack the etymological underpinnings of the ultimate toponyms of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia or *Azerbaycan*/Azerbaijan as many local historians have been wont to do over the past one-and-a-half centuries, this article focuses upon the power relations reflected in these toponyms as well as the narratives informing and providing them with popular and political legitimacy. As subsequent discussions of the socio-spatial construct of *Borchali* illustrate, officially sanctioned narratives pointing to the territories historically or presently attributed to *Sakartvelo*/Georgia or *Azerbaycan*/Azerbaijan inhibit credible alternative, localized imaginings of nationhood and belonging.

Emphasized here are the *narratives*, the story-like discursive structures, that individuals employ to distinguish themselves and members of their imagined collective from those of other perceived groupings. It is crucial to note the socially-constructed nature of narrative, even when the narratives in question are based upon certain authoritative, popularly-recognized accounts of historical events. It is not the aim of this article to determine the veracity of officially propagated or counter narratives of nationhood and national identity prevalent among audiences in Azerbaijan or Georgia. Rather, given the overtly political, instrumental, and contested nature of history (or *histories*) in the region and its frequent (and selective) application in inter-group disputes, the importance of narrative here lies in its affective power to unite and divide people. In line with the work of critically-minded scholars such as D. Alderman & J. Inwood (2013), S. Hoelscher & D. Alderman (2004), and G. Hoskins (2010), narratives are recognized as tools with the potential to aid in minorities' struggles for wider recognition and/or restorative social justice. The view of narrative espoused within the pages of this article is post-structuralist in nature, supporting “a doctrine of panfictionality maintaining all history to be quasi-fictional and all fiction quasi-historical” and challenging the “validity of an anonymous and disembodied optics of knowledge” (Hoskins, 2010, p. 260).

This article demonstrates the inherent fragility of the *one nation-one state-one homeland* truism underpinning national imaginaries in Azerbaijan and Georgia by highlighting the existence of alternative—albeit inhibited—counter-imaginaries of nation-hood and belonging among Georgia's Azeri-Turk minority grouping. Georgian Azeri-Turks are a people “in-between”, not only in terms of their geographic concentration in the border region of Kvemo Kartli and along the frontiers of the Georgian-Armenian-Azerbaijani political borderline, but also in terms of their perception among officials in both Tbilisi and Baku as “ethnic Azerbaijanis” within the Georgian host (nation-)state.¹ Data pertaining to Georgian Azeri-Turks' attitudes, perceptions, and valuations of *Borchali* are extracted from twenty-eight original interviews with community leaders and social activists from 2016–2018.² Important to note here is that interview participants serve their communities in a number of capacities and do not represent merely one side of the debate – that is, participants are not merely representatives of Azerbaijan-affiliated diaspora organizations or of Georgian political bodies. Interviewees include a mixture of state- and non-state actors whose livelihoods are secured by a mixture of funding mechanisms, some stemming from Azerbaijani and/Georgian state bodies, for example, and others from North American, European, and/or Middle Eastern organizations. Methodologies of content, discourse, and narrative analysis are utilized to identify and analyze the

¹ Research thus far has thus far uncovered a variety of possible, alternate namesakes for and by the individuals in question, and these namesakes in turn evince a variety of desired subject positions vis-à-vis the Georgian and Azerbaijani territorial states and societies. For our purposes (and due to a lack of consensus among participants regarding their preferred namesake), members of Georgia's largest socio-cultural minority grouping are referred to here as “Georgian Azeri-Turks”. This label is utilized in reference to their liminal position in Georgian and Azerbaijani national imaginaries and to flag the importance of human agency in questions of labels and labelling. For more on these issues (see: Storm, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d).

² In the nineteen semi-structured interviews conducted between 2016 and 2017, the term “Borchali” regularly surfaced of participants' own volition and without prompting by the interviewer. Repeat mention of Borchali by interviewees in 2016 and 2017 flagged Borchali's significance among research participants. These same participants frequently made mention of Borchali in response to questions regarding their cultural heritage and homeland association/s. Interviews conducted in 2018 specifically included questions pertaining to participants' understandings and perceptions of Borchali. All translations are my own and have been verified by native speakers to ensure accuracy.

discursive structures underpinning dominant and counter imaginaries. Interviews are interpreted in terms of both content and trajectory, with subsequent readings teasing out similarities and differences in participants' usage of particular terms and reasoning mechanisms. This process helps to shed light upon interviewees' attitudinal stances, value and belief systems, and perceptions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Lost, "Phantom" Territories and the Georgian and Azerbaijani Geo-Bodies

In speaking about the territorial-embeddedness of national imaginaries in Georgia and Azerbaijan, statements concerning the contemporary political boundaries of the sovereign nation-states and their "historical lands" are emphatic in visualizing and imagining what T. Winichakul (1994) refers to as the "geo-body". The geo-body "occupies a certain portion of the earth's surface which is objectively identifiable", as though it is somehow independent from the "act of imagining" (p. 17). T. Winichakul assures us, however, that "That, of course, is not the case. The geo-body of the nation is merely an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map" (p. 17).

The territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia feature prominently in domestic and inter-national discussions of Georgia's national autonomy and territorial integrity. The same is true for Azerbaijan with regard to the territories of Nagorno-Karabagh. For most politicians, historians, and titular publics in Georgia and Azerbaijan, the loss of these territories is frequently compared to the catastrophic and painful loss of physical as well as symbolic attributes of the geo-body—akin to amputation of a limb, removal of the head or heart, and/or fracture of the "national soul". For F. Billé (2014, p. 169),

These eerie sensations [of 'phantom limbs'] are stubborn ghosts of limbs lost years or even decades before but not forgotten by the brain. Continuing to endure through the mental map held in the brain's 'circuitry', these sensations continue to be perceived long after the disappearance of their sensory stimuli.

Feelings of loss invoked over seemingly unjust and forced contractions of the geo-body's historical borders are easily utilized for elite political gain and make mutually agreeable solutions to territorial conflicts appear to be out of reach. Both "cartographic anxieties" (Kabachnik, 2012; Krishna, 1994) and "cartographic exhibitionisms" (Broers, Toal, 2013) are symbolized in maps and written texts outlining the

contemporary and/or historical borders and boundaries of the South Caucasian nation-states. What are frequently termed "lost historic territories" by titular publics in Georgia and Azerbaijan are framed here as *phantom territories*, the perceived loss of which continues to produce psychosomatic ripples of pain within both societies.

3.2. Delimiting the Geo-Bodies of Georgia and Azerbaijan

Historical narratives of conquest, victory, suffering, loss, redemption, and resurrection—rooted in space-time and projected upon the backdrops of the present and future—feed into the national imaginary and the visualization of the geo-body under the ultimate toponym of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia (cf. Storm, 2018, 2019a). Upon achieving independence from the Russian Empire in 1918, the leaders of the newly established Georgian Democratic Republic faced considerable difficulties establishing and securing state borders. A. Tsutsiev (2014) notes the tendency of then-Georgian political elites to point to Georgia's "Golden Age" in attempts to demarcate the fledgling democracy's political borders. The Georgian Democratic Republic (GDR) was to be based upon 11–12th century models of the Georgian state, during which time national heroes unified and controlled large swaths of territory in the region. The key difficulty faced by GDR leaders espousing such a conception of Georgian territorial nation-statehood, however, was the demographic, socio-cultural makeup of the populations within the borderlands—Muslims and/or Turkic populations in Adjara, Borchali, Meskhetia, and Zaqatala, for example, as well as diverse demographics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tsutsiev, 2014, pp. 77–79).

The centuries-long push and pull of local and external forces in the region resulted in considerable in- and out-fluxes of peoples along shifting, grey, and frequently irresolute territorial boundaries. It is for this reason that the histories of states' political borders and the territories surrounding them are contested to such a degree by Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani audiences. The complex interplay of localized, regional, and inter-national influences in the region did indeed play a role in border-drawing initiatives undertaken between the dissolution of Russian imperial power and the region's incorporation into the Soviet Union. Whereas the borders presented by the Georgian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919–1920 were drawn in reflection of previous, 11–12th century glories (see Fig. 1), nation-building and bounding proceeded somewhat differently during that period in the short-lived Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan.

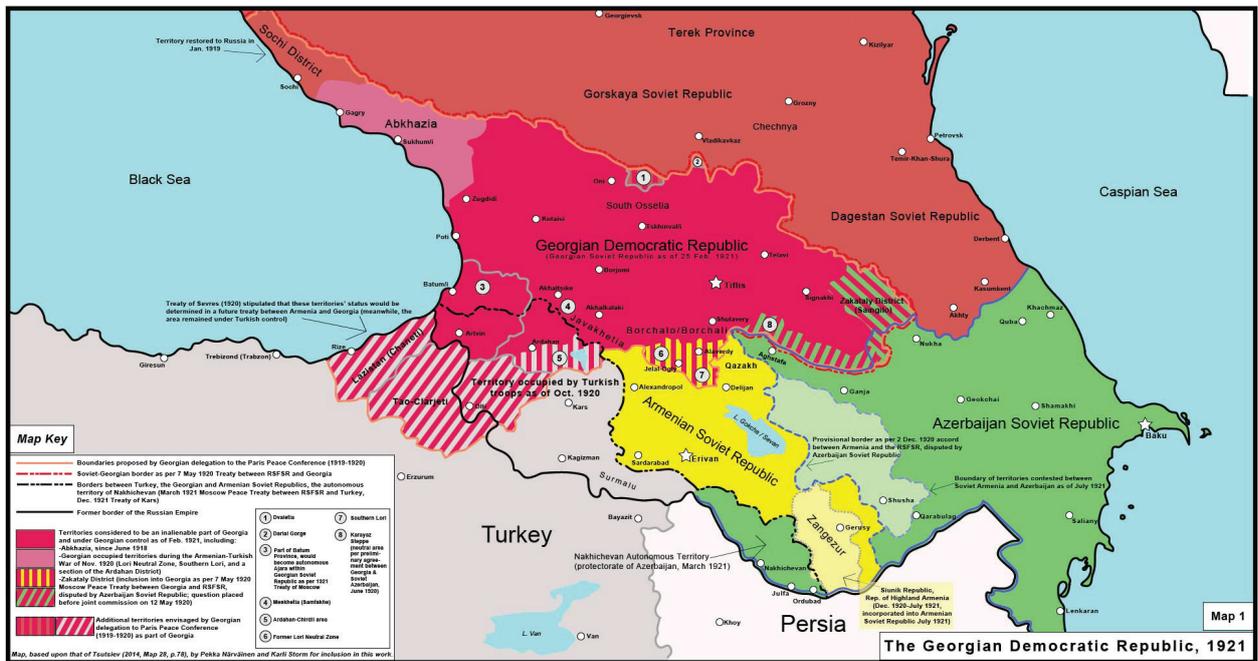


Fig. 1. The Georgian Democratic Republic, 1921

Source: Map, based upon Tsutsiev (2014, Map N. 28, p. 78), by Pekka Närväinen and Karli Storm for inclusion in this work.

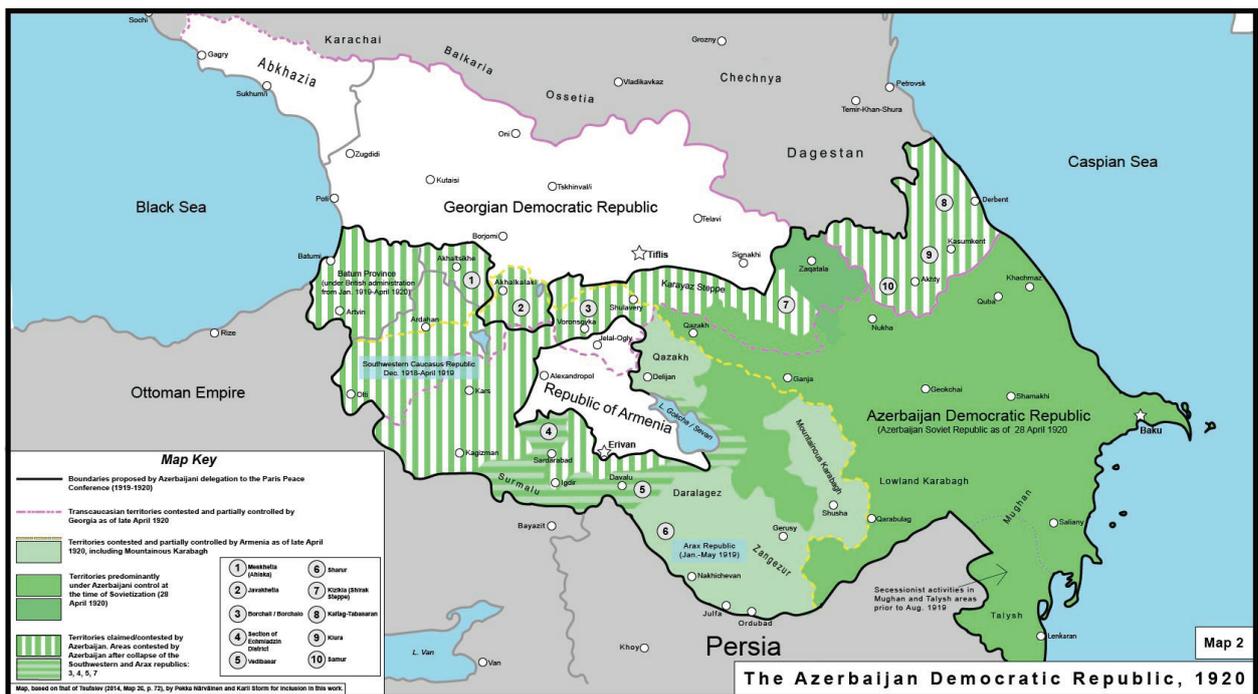


Fig. 2. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1920

Source: Map, based upon Tsutsiev (2014, Map N. 26, p. 72), by Pekka Närväinen and Karli Storm for inclusion in this work.

One would be hard-pressed to speak in earnest of the existence of a conscious, mass-based Azerbaijani national identity prior to early Soviet initiatives in this direction from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. The nationalizing states of neighboring Turkey and Iran and the socio-cultural and religious linkages between their populations and the people of fledgling

Azerbaijan represented a cause of worry for imperial Russian leadership and the Allied Powers of World War I. Shifting sentiments of pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism, and uniquely “Azerbaijani” nationhood meant that independent Azerbaijan’s borders were envisaged to encompass territories with large Muslim and Turkic populations (see Fig. 2). The nationalization of

these territories and their peoples would occur later alongside officially directed, selective (re)constructions and narrations of territorially-rooted Azerbaijani-ness, gathering renewed interest and fervor when the specter of independence showed itself again many decades later (cf. Tsutsiev, 2014, pp. 71–73).

The conception of the territorial nation-state of Azerbaijan as depicted in Figure 2 cuts considerably into Georgian territories as well as those of neighboring Armenia, the Ottoman Empire/Turkey, and Russia. Azerbaijani claims upon territories along Batumi Province, Meskheta, Javakhetia, Borchali, and the Shirak Steppe strained Georgian-Azerbaijani diplomatic relations during the brief independence period. The same was true regarding Georgia's claims upon the territories of the Zaqatala District, referred to as "Saingilo" by Georgian speakers. Figure 3 demonstrates current political borders in the region, disputed territories, and ill-defined swaths of land representative of what F. Billé (2014) calls "phantom territories".

Although Azerbaijan and Georgia have yet to define approximately 35 percent of their shared political border, the majority of the territories contested between the two states between 1918 and 1920/21

are no longer officially disputed. These territories might have disappeared from the bilateral diplomatic agenda, but they certainly have not disappeared from collective consciousness. Historians, football fans, and politicians alike give voice to narratives concerning "historical Georgian/Azerbaijani territories" and feelings of loss over seemingly unjust contractions of the embodied national homeland (see Storm, forthcoming).

Conflicts over the disputed territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabagh represent far more immediate cartographic anxieties and symbolic pains for the states and societies of Georgia and Azerbaijan, more akin to the psychosomatic aches and pains incurred from a recent amputation than those arising from the inter-generational transfer of traumatic memories. The former implies closer spatio-temporal proximity and shared experience with the circumstances surrounding the infliction of the wound upon the geo-body, whereas the latter implies greater spatio-temporal distance between the wound and the subjects inflicting and/or being inflicted by it. This helps to explain why conflicts over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabagh are experienced and perceived differently



Fig. 3. Georgian and Azerbaijani phantom territories

Source: Original map by Karli Storm and Pekka Näreväinen for inclusion in this work.

among audiences in Georgia and Azerbaijan than are phantom territories of Zaqatala/Saingilo and/or Borchali, for example. Some narratives of territorial nationhood bring more immediate and painful memories to the fore, while others become less salient over time. As the following section regarding Borchali will demonstrate, however, just because a phantom territory no longer ranks highly upon a state's list of diplomatic disputes, it does not mean that the role played by said phantom territory within dominant national and/or counter imaginaries is inconsequential.

3.3. Borchali: A Contested Phantom Territory

"From the day that the Earth came into Being, Borchalo has always been here": This phrase was uttered by an unidentified gentleman sitting in on one of my fieldwork interviews in 2016.³ His words stayed with me, as they proved to be representative of a larger trend among Georgian Azeri-Turk interview and questionnaire participants – Borchali (occasionally referred to as "Borchalo" or even "Borchalu") as representing the socio-cultural legacy of Georgian Azeri-Turks upon the lands of their historical and geographic settlement within Georgia.⁴ Those seeking to encase the lands of Borchali within specific borders and boundaries on maps will be hard-pressed to do so, as the geographic extent of Borchali often depends upon the historical, political, and socio-cultural narratives endorsed by one's interlocutor. The difficulties encountered with regard to Borchali's bounded visualization are a result of the many times that the region's lands changed hands between local and external powers throughout the centuries, but particularly as a result of the tug-of-war between Ottoman, Persian, Imperial Russian, Soviet, and local elites and nobles over the 17–20th centuries. Ms. Aygul Isayeva, professor, social activist, and former director of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic (or SOCAR)-funded Integration Center for Azerbaijanis of Georgia, explains the ways in which the historical territories and peoples of Borchali have been incorporated into contemporary Azerbaijani narratives of nation-statehood. Particularly since attaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijani authorities have been keen to link to the existence of historic Persian as well as Ottoman/Turkic statelets in the region to overarching narratives of historical Azerbaijani nation-statehood.

³ Author's interview. September 2016. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

⁴ Reference to the territory/ies of "Borchali" is said to stem from the settlement of a Turkic tribe, the Borchalu, in the region at the behest of Shah Abbas in the 16–17th centuries.

Isayeva notes the importance of the rule of Nadir Shah (1736–1747) in explaining the manner in which the historical territory of Borchali came to be part of Georgia. Azerbaijani historians and politicians point to the Shah's contempt for his enemies as facilitating the transfer of Borchali and its territories under the fealty of Teymuraz II of Kartli.⁵ Similarly, Elvir Hasanoglu, social activist and schoolteacher, states,

if we look at history, this place was Borchali. [...] these lands later became a part of Georgia. We all know that, in the past, these lands were part of the Ganja *khanate* and were later given to Georgia. We had been living here because we were the Borchali Turks. But then the history changed, the geography changed, and the map changed.⁶

The narrative retold by Isayeva and Hasanoglu is recognizable for many Georgian Azeri-Turks searching for answers about their collective past upon Georgian lands. This narrative is likely familiar to school children and college students in neighboring Azerbaijan as well, as it coincides with official Azerbaijani accounts regarding the historical development of the Azerbaijani nation-state. The official retelling of Georgian history tends to provide representatives of minority communities with relatively few opportunities to see themselves or their ancestors represented in the state's historical development. It is for this reason that narratives espoused by politicians and academicians in Azerbaijan continue to hold sway within Georgian Azeri-Turk communities. The narrative of Nadir Shah's "gifting of Borchali" to historical Georgian leaders in the mid-18th century is a discursive site of contention in Georgian and Azerbaijani historiography. The contested nature of this narrative occasionally manifests on the ground in Georgia as well, as is evinced by a recorded confrontation between a Georgian history teacher and Georgian Azeri-Turk student in Marneuli in May of 2017. The student presented the teacher with this narrative, after which time the teacher proceeded to challenge Georgian Azeri-Turk students' identity as a Turkic people. The Georgian teacher was subsequently fired, and the stories were removed from circulation.

Leyla Mamedova, Marneuli-based social activist and former employee of Georgia's Office of the Public Defender, asserts that Georgian historiography is flawed in its portrayal of Georgia's Azeri-Turk community. In Mamedova's view,

that teacher is the unfortunate one, as she does not know that Azerbaijanis living here are Turks. [...] no one says

⁵ Author's interview. July 2018. Tbilisi, Georgia. Interview language: English.

⁶ Author's interview. July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani, English.

anything about the villages, the historical monuments that have a history of 600–700 years. No one knows about these, as it is not written about in history books. [...] along the banks of the Kura River, there have always been Turkic tribes called “Karapapaks”. Everyone accepts this fact. It is simply very unfortunate that the act of falsifying history is so trendy nowadays.⁷

Mamedova’s statement reflects wider sentiments and desires among Georgian Azeri-Turks to be seen as rightfully belonging *within* and *to* the territorial state of Georgia—within which Borchali is a historical and constituent part. In the words of Huseyn Yubsov, head of the Congress of Azerbaijanis of Georgia (GAK),

We have always emphasized that we are from Georgia. There is only one reality for us, [one] which is not understood by Georgians. It is the fact that we are *Gurcustanli* [from Georgia], or the people of Borchali. Both of these terms mean the same thing for us.⁸

Interview participants understand very well, however, that mention of the term “Borchali” is frequently accompanied by fear and mistrust within political, academic, and social spheres in Georgia. Emin Yadigarov and Kamran Mammadli, social activists and representatives of the NGO, Salam Platform, assert that the negative undertones of “Borchali” are due in large part to the manner in which the term has been coopted by historians and politicians in Azerbaijan. Yadigarov explains, that, whereas the term “Borchali” was commonly used among local Georgian Azeri-Turks in the past,

Unfortunately, people – especially scientists and historians who moved to Baku [in the late 1980s/early 1990s] – started to write papers and histories about Borchali, and they took... Have you ever seen their maps?! [Borchali] is located in Azerbaijan in Azerbaijani maps, not in Georgian ones. And that makes Georgians angry as well as the Georgian government. They [Georgian speakers] also make histories and, when you use ‘Borchali’, it means ‘separatism’.⁹

Mammadli, for his part, sympathizes with the concerns of Georgian speaking audiences, noting that there were indeed individuals who attempted to coopt the term for their own political purposes following Georgia’s attainment of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.¹⁰ He sees two common

threads related to use of “Borchali” by Azerbaijani speakers, the first representing official Azerbaijani views wherein Borchali is considered to be a historic territory of Azerbaijan, and the second wherein Borchali is more closely aligned with Georgian nation-statehood. For Mammadli, the second perspective is one that “the people of Borchali, of Georgia, are trying to create” that sees “Borchali as separated from Azerbaijan and ‘Borchali Turks’ [as] an identity which is not part of the Turkish Republic or Turkey, but ‘Turk’ as a bigger concept” that supports the existence of a “separate [Borchali Turkic] identity within Georgia”.¹¹

While the majority of interviewees recognize the linguistic, religious, and other socio-cultural linkages between Georgian Azeri-Turks and titular Azerbaijanis across the border, participants consider Georgia to be their homeland. Borchali is a source of both pride and anxiety among Georgian Azeri-Turks. It is a source of pride because it represents longevity, a historical trajectory that established a felt link between Georgian Azeri-Turks and the lands upon which they have long dwelled. It is a source of anxiety in that local Georgian Azeri-Turks understand the ways Borchali is perceived in dominant political and academic circles—as something akin to traitorousness in Georgia and something resembling border revisionism in Azerbaijan.

Participants demonstrate a desire to *see themselves* and *be seen* by others as belonging rightfully within Georgia, to gain acceptance as rightful citizens who, too, have a historical right to call Georgia and/or Borchali their homeland without being accused of separatism or disloyalty.¹² Interview participants are keen to distinguish themselves and their ancestors from those who wished to divide Georgian territories in the past as well as the present. Participants stress that, while they consider themselves to be the descendants of indigenous Turkic peoples, they are not, have never been, and will never be a threat to Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Their indigeneity as well as their loyalty in the past and

and early 1990s. Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s ethno-nationalist rhetoric did little to assure Georgian Azeri-Turks that they would be safe or welcome within the newly (re)established Georgian state. Violent confrontation occasionally broke out between Georgian Azeri-Turks and titular Georgians during this time; several hundred Georgian Azeri-Turk families reportedly sought refuge in neighbouring Azerbaijan, Turkey, or Russia in response to real or perceived threats to their lives and/or livelihoods. For more on these issues, see: Storm, 2019c, pp. 452–455; Wheatley, 2005, pp. 13–17.

¹¹ Author’s interview. July 2018. Facebook video messenger. Interview language: English.

¹² See also: Storm, 2019c.

⁷ Author’s interview. July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

⁸ Author’s interview, July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

⁹ Author’s interview. July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview language: English.

¹⁰ Relations between local Georgian Azeri-Turks and titular Georgians were particularly strained during the late 1980s

present – and projected onto the future – is what participants feel distinguishes members of their collectivity from the country's numerous other minority groups, whether "newcomers" or otherwise.

Mayak Nemetov, head of the Tbilisi-based NGO, Elder's Council, that members of his collective have always been among the country's most loyal servants, never hesitating to fight alongside "ethnic Georgians" for Georgian territorial integrity and sovereignty. Nemetov states that, while "One example would be Khudu Borchali [...], the most reliable assistant of Erekle [II, ruler of Kartli (1744–1762) and Kartli-Kakheti (1762–1798)]", although Nemetov asserts that there have been many other such loyal and dedicated Georgian Azeri-Turks over the centuries.¹³ Maya Recebova of the Rustavi-based NGO, Maya Salam Society, insists that such loyalty is a natural extension of what she perceives to be the historic friendship of the Georgian and Georgian Azeri-Turk peoples. She asserts that, although there were some unnamed third parties who sought to do damage to the historic and fraternal relationship of Georgians and Georgian Azeri-Turks in the past, these efforts were unsuccessful because Georgians and Georgian Azeri-Turks "have always been together, are still together, and will always be together".¹⁴

Participants note that the prior and contemporary service and loyalty of Georgian Azeri-Turks to the Georgian state and is frequently overlooked and undervalued, however. Head of the Tbilisi-based NGO, Georgia is My Motherland, Ali Babayev, emphasizes that both his children and ancestors fought to preserve Georgia's territorial integrity. Given the loyalty demonstrated by generations of his own family members, Babayev asks, "why shouldn't I love it [Georgia]? Why shouldn't I value the history of my ancestors?" He emphasizes that Georgian Azeri-Turks have no desire to divide Georgia, for "We are not separatists who demand some kind of autonomy" and states that, "Because of all of this, we [Georgian Azeri-Turks] should be appreciated more. Because we deserve it."¹⁵ Similarly, Elvir Hasanoglu insists that Georgian Azeri-Turks have always been loyal to Georgia and will continue to be loyal into the future, as "We are citizens of Georgia and [are] the children of this land".¹⁶

While participants note the propensity of state officials and historians in Baku and Tbilisi to utilize

the term for geopolitical, instrumental purposes, Georgian Azeri-Turk interviewees value the term for its association with what participants believe to be their uniquely developed, territorially rooted socio-cultural heritage. This heritage is reflected in unique styles of carpet weaving, *ashiq* folk music, dance, dress, language, and cuisine developed among generations of Georgian Azeri-Turks. Alibala Askerov, head of the Marneuli-based NGO, "Geyrat" Public Movement, notes the uniqueness of the Borchali School of *ashiq* music – involving the lyrical retelling of folk tales on the *saz* (lute) by masters of the trade – within the Turkic world of *ashiq* music, and expresses pride in the unique carpeting styles that are unique to Borchali. Askerov sees a missed opportunity for Georgian officials to embrace the "many pearls of multiculturalism" represented by these unique traditions and states that, "At the very least, Georgia should have regarded these [Borchali-based] carpets as its own".¹⁷ GAK's Huseyn Yusubov similarly praises the uniqueness and artistry of the Borchali schools of *ashiq* folk music and carpet weaving, yet he insists that the socio-cultural legacy of Borchali goes far beyond the traditions of these two types of folk art: "When you look at the world map, Borchalo might not be visible," but it "has left its own marks within every area of life", including "in our dances, poems, literature, etc."¹⁸

For many interview participants, however, it is difficult to reconcile feelings of pride at the mention of "Borchali" with the knowledge that the term tends to produce contrary emotions among Georgian speakers. Yusubov goes on to state that,

I don't know what this term evokes in Georgians, but, whatever it is, I always find it amusing, because the word 'Borchali' is a literary/cultural term for us—not a [political-] geographic one.¹⁹

For Seyid Mirtagi Esedov of the Supreme Religious Organization of All Georgian Muslims, although "the term 'Borchali' has always been and continues to exist here", "Georgians still cannot digest the word, 'Borchali'. That is why they are somewhat cautious".²⁰ Still, for young social activists the likes of Kamran Mammadli, Georgian Azeri-Turks should not be discouraged from reclaiming the term and imbuing it with meaning within their own lives. In Mammadli's opinion,

¹³ Author's interview. September 2016. Tbilisi, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

¹⁴ Author's interview. September 2016. Rustavi, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

¹⁵ Author's interview. September 2016. Tbilisi, Georgia. Interview language: Russian.

¹⁶ Author's interview. July 2018.

¹⁷ Author's interview. July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview language: Azerbaijani.

¹⁸ Author's interview. September 2016. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview languages: Azerbaijani and Russian.

¹⁹ Author's interview. July 2018.

²⁰ Author's interview. July 2018. Marneuli, Georgia. Interview language: Azerbaijani.

some people do not want us to express ourselves freely, because it is a kind of threat. Not for Georgian integrity or for Georgian national interests, but a danger for privileged positions. If you start finding out who you are, if you start saying, 'I am who I am, and I have power from this identity', [...] it is a kind of threat to those who are in power.²¹

Mammadli and other like-minded individuals recognize, however, that it will take considerable time and effort on the part of Georgian Azeri-Turks to de-politicize the term and replace its Baku-centric connotations with those that can be perceived positively or even neutrally within Georgia.

4. Conclusion: Ultimate Toponyms and Inhibited Imaginaries

The ultimate toponyms of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia and *Azerbaijan*/Azerbaijan represent bounded units of people, space, and power where the "people" tend to be exclusively defined and the "space" is made up of a mixture of historical, phantom or "lost" territories and relatively uncontested, bounded contemporary lands. *Borchali* is one such phantom territory, albeit variously conceived and perceived by Georgian and Azerbaijani-speaking audiences. For many Georgian speakers, the term connotes separatism and irredentist tendencies, whereas for most Azerbaijani speakers, "Borchali" connotes prior days of glory. Yet I have noted a crucial difference between commonplace connotations of the term among Azerbaijani speakers in Azerbaijan and those with centuries-long roots within Georgian territories. Whereas political elites and historians in Azerbaijan tend to paint Borchali as a historical territory or region of Azerbaijan, albeit now an uncontested part of Georgia, research among Georgian Azeri-Turks evinces a differing conception of the term. This latter conception is one wherein Borchali is considered to be a socio-cultural and spatial representation of a homeland *within* Georgia, *separate from* Azerbaijan. Participants are well acquainted with historical narratives of Borchali stemming from Baku, yet their interpretations of these narratives vary. Not all Georgian Azeri-Turks are ready to accept Azerbaijani historical narratives of wider, antiquated nation-statehood that includes territories far beyond Azerbaijan's contemporary political borders. Yet dominant conceptions of "Borchali" as either supporting historical Azerbaijani nation-statehood or contesting historical and contemporary Georgian nation-statehood create considerable difficulties for Georgian Azeri-Turks looking to develop

their own unique sense of socio-spatial identity – as a Turkic people rightfully belonging *within* and *to* both Borchali and Georgia.

Burgeoning interest exists among socially and politically active Georgian Azeri-Turks to take control of their own collective past, present, and future in order to develop a place for themselves within Georgian nation-statehood—both in theory and practice. However, the state of liminality, of in-between-ness occupied by Georgian Azeri-Turks in narratives of both Georgian and Azerbaijani nation-statehood impedes individuals' abilities to imagine alternative forms of such a collective past, present, and future where the contested phantom territory of "Borchali" is concerned. The *ultimate toponyms* of *Sakartvelo*/Georgia and *Azerbaijan*/Azerbaijan feed into and legitimize the geo-political, economic, and socio-cultural institutions, norms, and values underpinning national imaginaries within their respective states and societies. Phantom territories provide links between narratives of glorious pasts and underlying knowledge structures situating contemporary, ever-developing nation-states within the larger geopolitical arena. In this geopolitical arena, the Earth's surface appears to be neatly divided into bounded units within which affairs between states and their constituent societies are structured and conducted. Yet, in the words of A. Korzybski (1931/1933), "A map is not the territory"—the map is, rather, merely a depiction of reality in a given place and time. What, then, of alternative conceptions of reality wherein nationhood is accompanied by differing or altogether new socio-spatial and/or toponymic representations? What of collectives such as the Georgian Azeri-Turks, whose members find themselves situated uncomfortably between conflicting narratives and nation-building initiatives propagated by two (or more) states? National imaginaries are riddled with grey, ambiguous spaces, paranoid and pleasant ideations, dreams and delusions. These spaces and ideations are both unifying and exclusionary, effective and affective.

The national imaginaries within which we are socialized as children are nowhere near as unproblematic or idyllic as they might have once seemed. These imaginaries are more akin to fairytales than to any sort of description of objective reality, however conceived. Imaginaries help to render the world comprehensible and orderly. They enable the call of the like to the like; they facilitate the recognition of the "Self" in others, all while allowing the human agent a modicum of space for individualized expression. Yet we cannot talk about imaginaries without also talking about the power relations behind them or the ways these imaginaries tend

²¹ Author's interview. July 2018.

to be instrumentalized and made to serve political aims. What I have demonstrated in this article is that, whereas the national imaginary and its territorial, toponymic representations can generate inclusivity, acceptance, and a sense of ontological security, they can also be limiting—hence ongoing discussions over the use of the term “Borchali” as both a historical spatial representation and as a label for collective socio-cultural identity among Georgian Azeri-Turks.

There is a need for scholars to develop both the theoretical and empirical utility of the concept of the *national imaginary*. This need is evinced by the emotive, affective power of the collective imagination to help (re)fashion spoken and unspoken codes of social conduct and self-ascription. While there are undoubtedly major arteries running through national imaginaries that are channeled by powerful groups and individuals, alternative veins flow through these imaginaries as well, oftentimes branching out in different directions. While the forces flowing through these metaphorical pathways are made of similar components, both the internal organization and external appearance of the resulting organism/s are unique. Like the sensation of phantom limbs, phantom territories produce psychosomatic aches and pains that ripple throughout the national body. Are the salience and acuteness of these ‘aches and pains’ and the emotions that accompany them dependent upon one’s spatio-temporal proximity to the phantom territory (or territories) in question? This is but one of many questions in need of future exploration.

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