Re-mapping Europe

Field notes from the French-Brazilian borderland

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Introduction

Day by day, dozens of children and adolescents who live in Brazil's northernmost city of Oiapoque contest and conquer a Fortress called Europe.[1] Day by day, early in the morning, they embark on small boats which bring them from Oiapoque to Saint-Georges, a small town in neighboring French Guiana. By doing so, the Brazilian children enter a little-known part of the French Republic and, as consequence, of the European Union. As soon as they leave the boats, after a ride of about fifteen minutes, and set foot on the small town of Saint-Georges, they are in the EU, where they attend one of the local public schools.

Although European borders are gaining increasing attention within the social sciences (e.g., Heimeshoff et al. 2014; Hess and Kasparek 2010; Hess et al. 2016; Klepp 2011; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007), the French-Brazilian and, hence, EU-Brazilian border clearly remains a blind spot. Look at mainstream sociological journals or university curricula and research projects, and you will learn that the EU's southern shores lie in the Mediterranean. Yet as a matter of fact, they lie far further to the south. These far-away regions—official EU terminology calls them »Outermost Regions« of the European Union—consist of territories in

the Indian Ocean (Réunion, Mayotte), in the Atlantic Ocean (Canary Islands, Azores, Madeira), in the Caribbean Sea (Guadeloupe, Martinique), and in South America (French Guiana). By placing emphasis on the latter, this contribution aims to raise awareness of these overlooked overseas territories, and poses a number of questions: How can sociology, and the social sciences more generally, adequately take this »conundrum of geography« (Sharpley-Whiting and Patterson 2011) into consideration? Which shifts in (conventional) perspectives are necessary to deal with *Europe d'outre-mer*? Which insights can be gained from such an approach? Finally, which questions may be addressed in and to the territories that seem to cause much trouble for the established academic notion of clear-cut borders between allegedly homogeneous European nation-states?

In order to give (preliminary) answers to these broad questions, this article proceeds along the following lines: First, I will make some introductory remarks about »Overseas Europe« and highlight some literature in this small—but growing—field of research. Departing from this current state of research, I will provide a brief theoretical discussion that rejects mainstream sociological traditions and supports the conceptual lens of *geteilte Geschichten* (shared and divided histories). In a third step, these histories will be illustrated by means of selected historical accounts about French Guiana. Fourth, I will emphasize the on-going post-colonial entanglements between French Guiana, its geographical neighbor Brazil, and »mainland« France by providing first-hand ethnographic insights obtained in the French-Brazilian borderland.[2] The article concludes by summarizing the main arguments and by highlighting the potential that lies in future research at and about these rarely studied EU borders.

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2 The term »borderland« has gained increasing conceptual attention and denotes a »cross-border perspective, in which the region on both sides of a state border is taken as the unit of analysis. This approach allows us to take into account the paradoxical character of borderlands« (Baud and van Schendel 1997, 216).

»Overseas Europe«—A growing field of research

It was only recently that scholars of various disciplines have begun to stress the need to research the blind spots of the European Union's spatial, post-colonial configuration. »Out of sight, out of mind« (Boatcă, forthcoming), the overseas territories of several EU member states easily escape conventional research perspectives. Revised maps (see Fig. 1; see also Bonilla and Hantel 2016) aid in getting a better idea of the various parts of the world which belong, though to varying degrees, to the European Union. While »Outermost Regions« (OMRs) such as French Guiana are fully-fledged parts not only of the respective nation-state (in this case France), but also of the European Union, those parts of the world labeled »Overseas Countries and Territories« (OCTs) »are constitutionally tied to a member state without being part of the EU« (Gad and Adler-Nissen 2013, 3). This, for instance, is the case with the French »overseas collectivity« of Saint-Martin which is falsely declared as OMR in Figure 1, but in fact obtained »collectivity«-status on the national level and OCT-status on the European level in 2007, resulting from a referendum in 2003. Many of the overseas territories—whether OMRs or OCTs—are located in the Caribbean, which »was also where Europe first achieved the systematic destruction of the Other« (Trouillot 1992, 20). Therefore, the Caribbean has the most entangled colonial history with Europe, the legacies of which are still apparent today due to the ongoing (inter-)dependencies and »overlapping zones of affiliation« recently stressed by anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla (2013, 156–57).
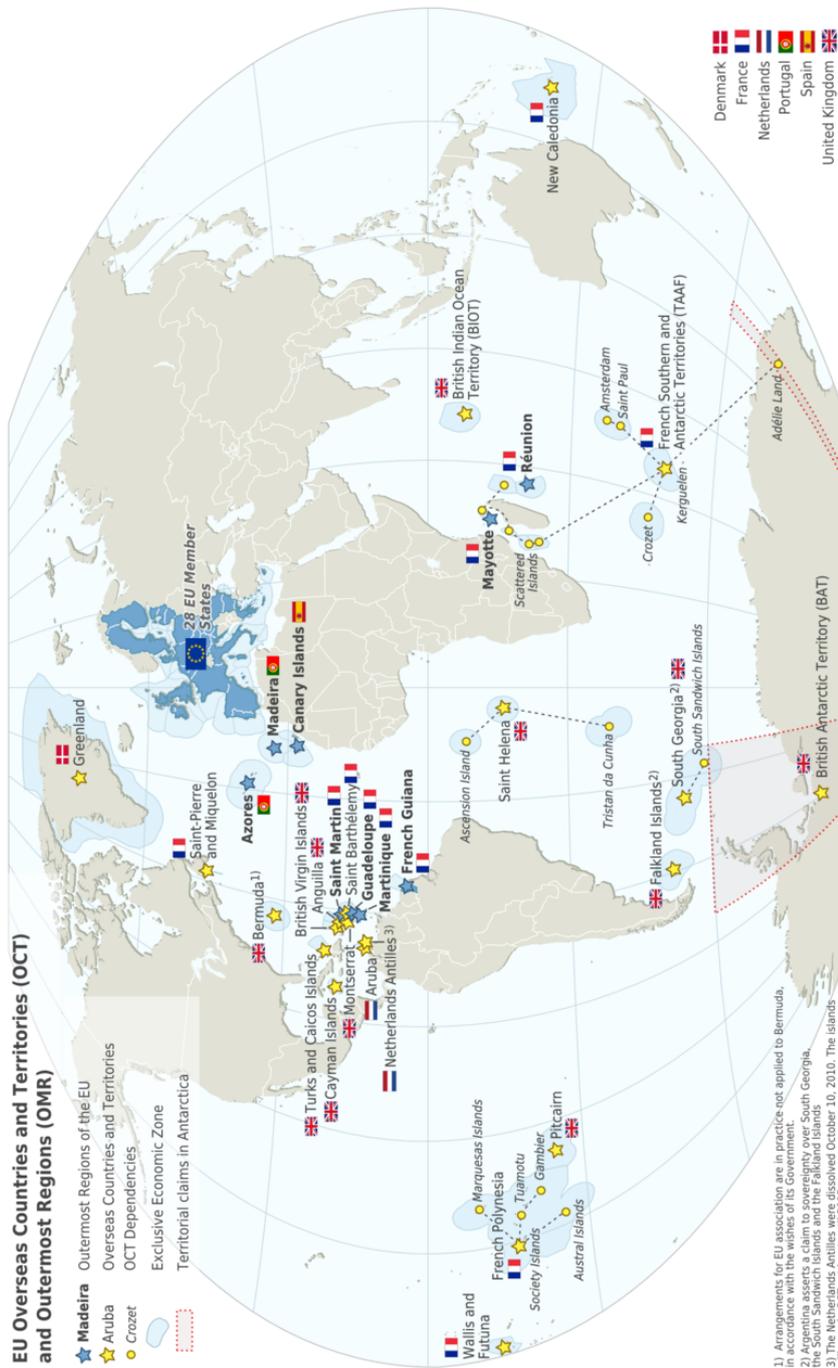
Fig. 1: Map of EU overseas countries and territories and outermost regions. (Source: Adler-Nissen and Gad 2013, xx)

In her ethnography of the 2009 labor strike in the French »overseas department« of Guadeloupe, Bonilla (2015) demonstrates how collective social action questions the complex political status of the island without opting for independence. As one of her informants put it, »[w]e want to transform our lives, even if it's under the French flag« (Bonilla 2015, 3). Located in a wider (Caribbean) region where *non*-sovereignty is not the exception but the norm, Guadeloupian workers undertook the longest strike in French history (six weeks) to fight against various articulations of inequality which are apparent in virtually all *départements d'outre-mer*. These include high rates of unemployment, impressive price differentials and »the lingering social legacies of colonialism and slavery, particularly the racial hierarchies that persist on the island« (Bonilla 2015, 2). Despite the fact that agreements were signed between protesters and the French government, the achievements of the strike are usually regarded as partial at best.

Similar observations could be made with regard to the very recent series of protests and strikes in French Guiana. In March and April of 2017, large parts of the population took to the streets under the motto of »Nou bon ké sa« (meaning »enough is enough« in Guianan Creole) and brought life to a standstill for several weeks.[3] Undoubtedly, this topic should be considered for future research by scholars with an expertise in social movements. Some of the most astonishing protests of our time take place in the EU's overseas territories, and important contributions such as Bonilla's work point to the promising potential of research about these collective social actions. Why then is there so little to be found about such topics, about *Europe d'outre-mer* more generally and French Guiana more specifically? In the pages that follow, I will briefly explore how mainstream strands of social thought for a long time constrained—and continue to constrain—the decentering of Europe, all too easily conflating the EU with Europe and with the epicenter of modernity.

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3   A first overview and analysis of this social movement was recently written by Mam Lam Fouck and Moomou (2017).

From Eurocentric to entangled modernity

Several attempts have been made in recent years to »read sociology against its grain—exposing and disposing of its conventional European genealogy of thought and revealing its national boundaries as limitations to knowledge of global interconnections« (Boatcă, Costa, and Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010, 1). Yet despite the fact that questions of disciplinary internationalization have become a »favourite topic at world congresses« (Keim 2010, 169), one can observe a »continuing, in some respects even increasing dominance of US-American and (West) European knowledge production« (Çelik et al. 2014, 5; see also Roth in this volume). To date, sociology's curricula, academic elite, and most-cited authors are predominantly male, White and centered around North Atlantic social thought that is blind to global entanglements (see Heilbron 2012; Reuter and Villa 2010a, 26).

As shown elsewhere (Boatcă and Spohn 2010; Costa et al. 2006), one of the major disciplinary roots of this blindness is the impact of modernization theory. The belief in a unidirectional model of modernity is deeply engrained in sociological thinking and only came under attack at the end of the last century, when a number of scholars (e.g., Eisenstadt 2000; Therborn 1995, 2003; Wallerstein 1997) pointed to the insufficiencies of conceptualizing modernity as a one-way street whose final point would be those parts of the world that are commonly referred to as the West. »The Rest«—itself the product of the West's discursive attempt to create its Other (see Hall 1995)—would thus only strive to reach the standards set by the West. Yet even if an important contribution such as Eisenstadt's seminal notion of »multiple modernities« stresses the »multiplicity of cultural and social formations« (Eisenstadt 2000, 24), it also perpetuates ideas of seemingly clear-cut entities and finally locates the reference point of modernity in the West (see Spohn 2006).

Around the same time, the anthropologist and sociologist Shalini Randeria (1999a; 1999b) joined the debate, playing a pioneering role in the dissemination and establishment of Postcolonial Studies in the German-speaking context. Refusing essentializing ideas of disparate modernities, Randeria speaks of an »entangled modernity« which grew out of the *geteilte Geschichten*

between metropoles and colonies. She skillfully plays with the ambiguity of the German verb *teilen* which can—depending on the context—refer to a *division* or a *mutuality*, to something that is *divided* or something that is *shared*. Yet the colonial histories (and their present legacies) she has in mind are not shared *or* divided; they are always shared *and* divided: They are *shared* in the sense that exchange and circulation irrevocably led to histories which cannot be treated as separate from each other. A large part of these momentous interactions and of these entangled, mutual histories across borders are based on the power asymmetries inherent to any colonial endeavor. Yet the possible modalities of interaction are manifold, ranging »from enforced adoption, voluntary assimilation, violent destruction to mutual restructuring« (Conrad and Randeria 2013 [2002], 40).[4]

Yet how are these histories *divided*? Randeria shows that colonial aspirations and encounters produced new demarcations between »us« and »them.« These demarcations—symbolized by the nation-state, its hymns, flags and constitutions—disguise the multiplicity of interactions between people from virtually every corner of the world in favor of essentialized, seemingly static cultures (in the plural). Sociology as a discipline significantly facilitated and profited from this division, as it »was constituted as the science of ›modernity‹« (Randeria 1999b, 375) and in opposition to anthropology which came to fill the »savage-slot« (see also Trouillot 2003). Consequently, Randeria (1999b) calls for a research agenda »beyond sociology and socio-cultural anthropology« and, in other words, for the inclusion of the »non-Western world in a future social theory,« as signaled by the title of her article. First steps into this direction have been undertaken (see Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boatcă, and Costa 2010; Reuter and Villa 2010b), but postcolonial perspectives still play a marginal role in sociology. Interestingly, Randeria herself (Randeria and Römhild 2013, 22–23) pointed to neglected fields of research in which the »entanglement«-approach could be studied empirically:

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4   Original quotation: »[…] von erzwungener Übernahme, freiwilliger Assimilation, gewaltsamer Zerstörung bis zu wechselseitiger Umstrukturierung […].«

Despite the new attention paid to historical and more current dimensions of global entanglements, the present project of »Europe« itself was hardly addressed by postcolonial analyses. It remains, for instance, largely unnoticed both by postcolonial discourse and by research into Europeanization that there are clear overlaps between the formerly colonized world and today's European Union. With Cyprus, Malta, Greenland (as an autonomous administrative division within the Danish Realm) or the French overseas departments of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, Réunion and Mayotte, colonial history is a direct part of the EU-European present […].[5]

This important remark about the »tiny rests of European colonial power,« as Hauke Brunkhorst (2014, 14) calls these regions, corresponds with my above-mentioned thoughts and offers a whole new research agenda which urges social scientists to re-think the supposed convergence of EU borders and European (continental) borders. If the European Union's actual borders extend to far-away continents and islands—that is, if »Europe is also located on a North-South axis with its furthest reaches where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Caribbean Sea« (Sharpley-Whiting and Patterson 2009, 84)—then how can we design our research in a way that tries to elucidate the EU's forgotten »margins« and their relations to »mainland« Europe? Before turning to empirical insights gained in the French-Brazilian borderland, on the following pages I will provide a brief account of how *geteilte Geschichten* unfolded in this region. Rejecting »the retreat of sociologists into the present« (Elias 1987), I will embed the

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5   Original quotation: »Trotz aller neueren Aufmerksamkeit für historische und aktuelle Dimensionen globaler Verflechtungen ist das gegenwärtige Projekt ›Europa‹ selbst noch kaum zum Gegenstand dezidiert postkolonialer Analysen geworden. So bleibt etwa—sowohl im postkolonialen Diskurs wie in der Europäisierungsforschung—relativ unbeachtet, dass es deutliche Überschneidungen zwischen der ehemals kolonisierten Welt und der heutigen Europäischen Union gibt. Mit Zypern, Malta, Grönland (als heute selbstverwalteter, autonomer Teil des Königreichs Dänemark) oder den französischen ›Übersee-Départements‹ Guadeloupe, Martinique, Französisch-Guayana, Réunion und Mayotte ist Kolonialgeschichte ein ganz unmittelbarer Teil EU-europäischer Gegenwart […].«

area of what today comprises the French-Brazilian borderland into its complex and overlooked history.

The entangled histories of French Guiana and its border with Brazil

The current borderlines of today's share of France in South America were disputed and unclear for a very long time. Different European colonial powers »explored« the continent's Northeastern corner, a fact that is still apparent when looking at the three exceptional cases of Guyana (British colony until 1966), Suriname (Dutch colony until 1975) and French Guiana (French »overseas department« since 1946) in a region of predominantly Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, that is, of former Spanish and Portuguese colonization (see Hoefte et al. 2017).

In fact, it was only in 1900 that a Swiss conciliation demarcated the exact course of the border in favor of the Brazilian territorial claims (see Granger 2012). After a long period of border disputes—termed as the *Contestado franco-brasileiro/Contesté franco-brésilien*—the Oyapock River now forms the official border between (what is today the Brazilian state of) Amapá and French Guiana, between Brazil and France as well as between the economic blocs of the Mercosur and the EU (see Fig. 2 and 3).

La mise en relation de deux »bouts du monde«
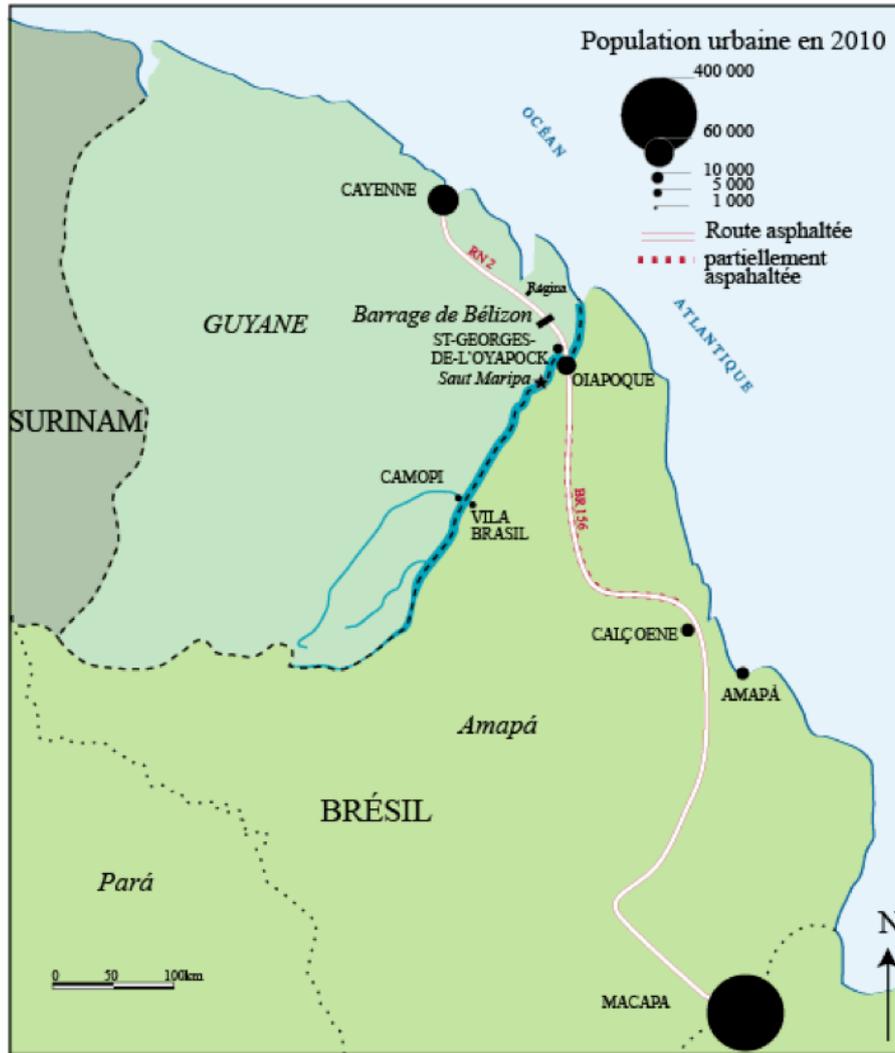
**Fig. 2: Geographic location of French Guiana and Amapá.
(Source: Letniowska-Swiat 2012)**

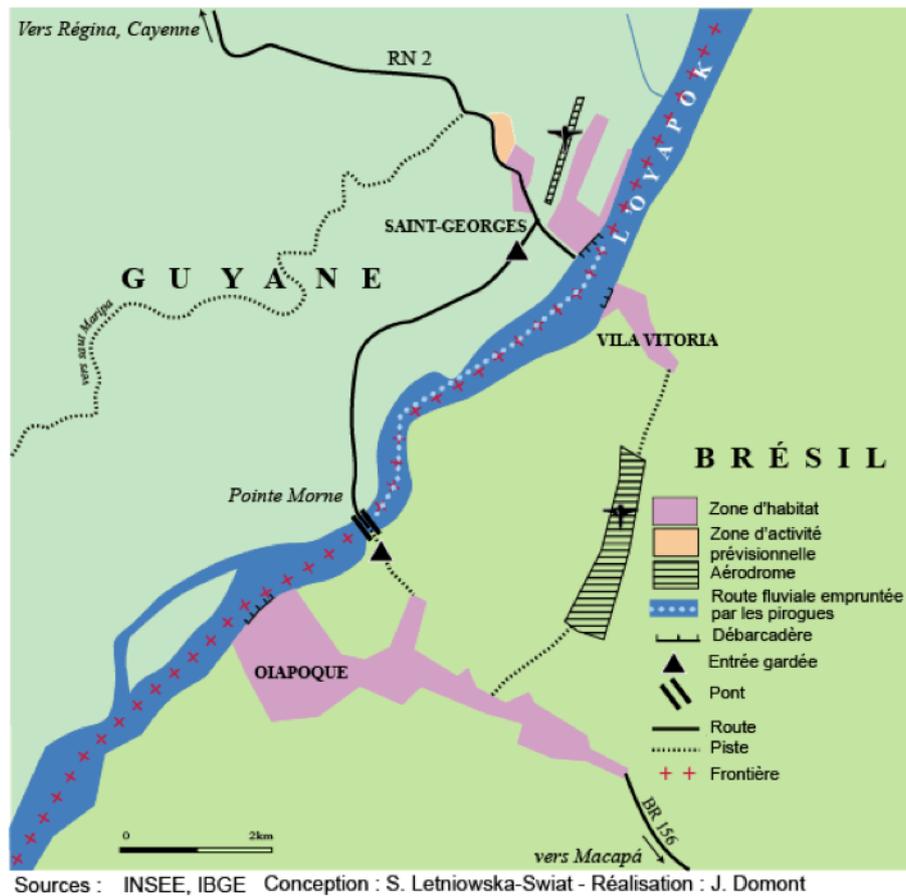**Le pont sur l'Oyapock dans son environnement local**

Fig. 3: Geographic location of Saint-Georges and Oiapoque.
(Source: Letniowska-Swiat 2012)

What kind of colony was French Guiana, what were its characteristics and what did it look like? Among the poorest and least populated French colonies, French Guiana was not only profitless to its »mother country« (*mère-patrie*), but it also had a bad reputation due to its high death rate. As historian Miranda Frances Spieler (2011, 264) describes:

> Sugar production scarcely existed there. In the final years of the monarchy, Guiana had virtually no commercial dealings with the

metropole. Cayenne, the colonial capital, was a forlorn village split by ramparts that locked at night. The inner town sheltered the officials, the arsenal and an unruly (possibly criminal) garrison. In 1788 there were 10.430 slaves, 483 free coloured people, 763 white male settlers, 330 white women and 253 white children in all of Guiana.

While the total population was extremely low by the end of the eighteenth century, one is struck by the vast amount of slaves (and ex-slaves) that were forced to work on the plantations. A total number of more than 20.000 slaves were shipped from Africa to French Guiana between 1765 and 1831 (see Piantoni 2011, 31), but it is clear that smaller numbers of African slaves were brought to the larger region since the mid-seventeenth century (see Salles 1971, 13). Horrified by the inhumane experience of slavery, some slaves managed to escape and founded *mocambos*, that is, small communities of escaped slaves that were hard to reach for slaveholders and the colonial authorities. Although borders were fuzzy and disputed, »the two Crowns signed a treaty [in 1732] by which each would send back the other's fugitives« (Gomes 2003, 254). As Flávio Gomes (2003, 256) further elaborates:

> Escapes by slaves from colonial dominions in particular were an important cause for concern in the border regions. These borders were not fixed because they were the subject of constant disputes, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Amapá region—which bordered on French Guiana—was the greatest source of apprehension. With the help of settlers, merchants, and indigenous groups, black slaves were continually migrating and establishing *mocambos*.

Gomes' research (1999, 2003, 2015) about *mocambos* demonstrates that runaway slaves developed escape strategies, established a variety of relationships, and created their own (temporary) safe spaces, weighing up the pros and cons of settling in one place or another, on this or that side of the French-Brazilian border. For example, archival material reveals that runaway slaves from Brazil were well aware of the Haitian revolution, the temporary abolition of slavery in the French Guiana (1794–1802; see

Spieler 2011 and 2013), and its permanent abolition in all of the French colonies in 1848 (Gomes 2003). This is how a number of fugitive slaves migrated to French Guiana and are, by way of their offspring, still present on this territory today. These deeply »entangled histories«—histories which not only constitute important aspects of today's Brazil and Latin America more generally, but also of present-day French Guiana, France, and Europe—are prime examples of how the European sciences produce a limited version of history and silence other parts of the past (see Trouillot 1995).[6]

Other violent, silenced and »entangled« histories include the decision to turn French Guiana into a penal colony (*bagne*) with a variety of prisons and concentration camps. Over the course of a century, from its inception until its formal closure (1946), more than 70.000 convicts—criminals and dissidents—were sent to French Guiana in order to serve their sentence under inhumane conditions: »The *bagnards* languished, and many of them, perhaps half of the 70.000 total transported, died before completing their sentence« (Redfield 2005, 57; see also Spieler 2012, 3). Although there are almost no traces left of this tragic past (Spieler 2012, 1–16), the time of the penal colony still shapes French Guiana today, as do past experiences of slavery. Also, the *bagne* clearly indicates the role which French Guiana played as an »experimental laboratory« (Randeria 1999a, 93) for the *métropole*. The techniques of imprisonment and surveillance played a significant role in the further installment of the penitentiary system »at home.« It is thus possible to speak of a »displacement of the panopticon« (Redfield 2005) and to regard the *bagne* as a precursor of what was to come in the future.

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6 Interestingly, it was only in 2001 that the French government acknowledged the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and of slavery as a crime against humanity by introducing the *loi Taubira* thanks to the efforts of Christiane Taubira, undeniably French Guiana's most popular politician and former Minister of Justice (2012–16). In general, however, the »provincialization of France« (Mbembe 2011)—and its academic traditions, right-wing tendencies, *Hexagone*-centered media discourses, etc.—has only just begun and is anything but finished.

After World War II, French Guiana made an astonishing move from penal colony to *département d'outre-mer*. It seems to be a paradox that, in 1946, the people of French Guiana—the majority of whom had been subordinated, exploited and/or imprisoned over centuries—decided to become a fully integrated part of France just like the other three »old colonies« Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion instead of choosing independence. In fact, this turn can only be understood in light of a long process of *assimilation*—an orientation towards and adoption of French institutions, customs, etc.—which preceded the *loi de départementalisation* proposed by the Martinican poet-politician Aimé Césaire.[7]

What did *départementalisation* mean for French Guiana in the long run? It triggered an astonishing demographic and economic change which lasts until today. This sparsely populated region increased its population from only 33.295 in 1961 to 250.109 in 2013 (Mam Lam Fouck 2015, 61). This change must be largely attributed to the vast amount of immigrants from neighboring countries—mostly Suriname, Brazil, and Haiti—but also from »mainland« France (Mam Lam Fouck 2015, 61–91). The decision to build the *Centre Spatial Guyanais*—the EU's launch site in South America to send rockets into outer space—certainly triggered the arrival of thousands of people to help build and maintain this new »experimental laboratory« in the French ex-colony (Redfield 2000). Despite these technological innovations and the fact that French Guiana is indeed an »€udorado« (Police 2010) for its impoverished geographic neighbors, who often migrate because of the incredible differences in terms of wages, health services, and education (Arouck 2000, 76; Martins and Rodrigues 2012; Piantoni 2011; Silva 2016, 9), French Guiana usually still hovers at the bottom of national rankings measuring the standards of living. For instance, French Guiana's GDP of €15.513 represents only half of the »metropolitan« GDP (IEDOM 2015, 28–29). But French Guiana not only still lags behind in economic and demographic terms: 70 years after its full integration into the French republic, it also remains

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7   A more detailed history of how *assimilation* had led the local *créole* elite to fight for legal recognition by means of becoming French citizens was written by Mam Lam Fouck (2007).

»a remarkably insignificant artifact of the political landscape—rarely noticed by most of France, let alone anyone else—as well as one of the least settled regions of the world« (Redfield 2000, xiv). Additionally, to complicate the picture, French Guiana is relatively alienated from the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, most notably in political and economic terms, since its status makes it difficult to institutionalize links of cooperation by means of membership in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) or the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) (Bishop, Clegg, and Hoefte 2016; Hoefte, Bishop, and Clegg 2015). However, cross-border projects such as the construction of a bridge over the Oyapock River have been initiated in recent years, resulting in ambiguous socio-spatial changes on which I will reflect in the following section.

Ethnographic insights from the French-Brazilian border

My ethnographic insights are based on three stages of fieldwork—an explorative phase (February–March 2016), a more focused stage (October–December 2016) and a final stay (November 2017). The methods employed include informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, (participant) observations in institutions such as public schools, and during diplomatic meetings as well as in public spaces more generally. With the consent of my informants, many conversations and all interviews were recorded; I also used a notebook for jotting down notes and a digital diary for more extensive descriptions and reflections. Accordingly, I followed an open, qualitative approach in order to craft a »reflexive ethnography« (Davies 1999). From the very beginning, I understood my time in the borderland as a mutual learning process, seeing my informants as experts at eye level, as »comrades instead of instruments« (Martins 2014, 63). Nevertheless, this should not hide the fact that hierarchical relationships are intrinsic to ethnography.

As I have learnt during my stay, the borderland is traditionally regarded as a shared space of daily exchanges and encounters across the Oyapock River. Obvious examples include shopping trips and family visits to the other side of the river. Another striking example, to which I have already alluded, is the great number of children who cross the Oyapock River on

a daily basis. Many parents, pupils and teachers—both in Oiapoque and Saint-Georges—hold a critical view of the underfunded public schools in Brazil. Therefore, a large number of parents residing in Brazil decide to send their children to school in Saint-Georges where the learning environment is said to be better: In smaller groups, children can use the latest learning materials and almost automatically learn French as a second language. The opposite pattern—French children attending school in Brazil—is nonexistent due to the above-mentioned negative assessments made by my informants.

Every morning, shortly after sunrise, dozens of children gather at the Brazilian side the Oyapock river bank. Some hold each others' hands, some are held by one of their parents when they walk down the slippery little path of wooden plates that leads to the many *catraias*, as the little boats are called in Oiapoque. A few times, I joined the kids on their way to school and watched them sleep, yawn, play with their smartphones, tease others or drink hot chocolate, as children do all over the world when they go to school. While this may not seem to be a usual way of getting to school—you cross a river *and* a national border—it is the most natural thing to do for Daniel, Diogo, Ana and the other twenty children who take the boat every day. The children who were sitting next to me in the *catraia*—or in one of several other boats full of schoolchildren— cross the French-Brazilian border on a daily basis because their parents decided it would be better for their children's future to attend a *French* school.

Although several teachers and parents highlighted that the schools in the border town of Saint-Georges are the worst in all of France, they clearly have a much better reputation than the schools in Oiapoque. Just how are the Brazilian children allowed to attend a French school? Kelly Boucq, the former head of one of the *écoles maternelles* (kindergartens) in Saint-Georges, explained that in order to attend a French school, all you need is to prove that you live on French territory. Everyone in Saint-Georges and in neighboring Oiapoque knows that the children who cross the river day by day do not live in France. But in theory, they do. Officially, they live with their aunt, a family's friend or their grandparents

on the French side. Off the record, they continue to live with their parents on Brazilian soil. This is one of the peculiarities at the French-Brazilian border: Everyone knows that things are against legal requirements, but no one really cares. In the end, not only Brazilian families take advantage of this *laisser-faire* attitude. To save money, a number of French teachers, for instance, also live on the Brazilian side—which is officially forbidden for public servants—and sit in the same boat as their Brazilian pupils. The *Police aux Frontières*, it seems, turns a blind eye to the crossings of children as well as to the place of residence of French colleagues and friends. However, more than once was I able to observe border controls, always directed towards non-White people, both Brazilian and French. A woman who lives right next to the shore in Saint-Georges explained that from her house she witnesses border controls every day and that they have increased tremendously in recent years.

During the days I spent in the classroom of a kindergarten in Saint-Georges, and during the hours I watched children running around in the schoolyard and commuting by boat, I could in fact observe an everyday conviviality between children who hold different passports and live in different countries where they speak different languages. Kelly Boucq told me that »they mix quite easily, we're not worried, I mean, kids are just kids, and that's great, that's the great advantage here at the kindergarten.« According to her estimates, 70 percent of the children come from Brazilian families, although she had to admit that such estimations become increasingly difficult because of »binational« families made up of French and Brazilian family members. Also, obviously, not all of these 70 percent actually live in Oiapoque. Many do live in Saint-Georges where their Brazilian parents settled years ago or where they were even born. Although »they mix quite easily,« it bears mentioning that the large number of Brazilian children in French schools evokes divergent opinions, including critical voices among parents and teachers who think the infantile border crossers have gained (»too much«) ascendancy. Kelly Boucq also cited another interesting case in this region where »nationality« is important, but only one of many other variables:

> The indigenous people, they don't know any border, that is to say, it's their territory, so sometimes you have indigenous children arriving from the Brazilian side and they don't have French papers. So that's a really complicated case, but in the end French law requires pupils to be accommodated in France.

It is true that for many members of the four indigenous groups in the area (Palikur, Galibi Kali'na, Karipuna, and Galibi Marworno) the Oyapock River does not represent a border. This is extremely well-illustrated by the fact that archeological findings were discovered in the course of the planning and construction of the Oyapock River Bridge, which now connects the border towns of Saint-Georges and Oiapoque. Indigenous people have lived there for hundreds of years and did not have any ideas about national borders simply because national borders did not exist before the arrival of Europeans and were fuzzy even afterwards.

A very interesting example is the case of the Galibi Kali'na—an indigenous group who historically settled in the region of Maná, which today forms French Guiana's Northwestern region (see Collomb and Tiouka 2000). As shown by anthropological research (Vidal 2000), a part of this group migrated to Oiapoque in the 1950s for a variety of reasons, most notably because of disputes within the group as well as for political reasons: In Brazil, this group was offered a protected area of land (*terra indígena*) neighboring the Oyapock River and, consequently, French Guiana. While some members of this group have returned to Maná over the past decades, a group of around thirty people still lives on the demarcated land or in the city of Oiapoque. Born and raised in Brazil, most of the Galibi Kali'na living there today are of Brazilian nationality. Historically labelled by others (see Collomb 2011, 2013; Guyon 2013), the indigenous groups in the region still struggle (and sometimes strategically decide) to identify within the constraints of seemingly strict disparate categories such as *índio*, Brazilian and French. Those who hold a Brazilian passport have difficulties when trying to visit family members in French Guiana or—as Kelly Boucq has pointed out—send their children to school in Saint-Georges. But would they even want to do the latter?

I spoke with two young mothers from the Galibi Kali'na who had mixed feelings about sending their children to school in French Guiana. Although they also believed that the French schools were better than the ones in Oiapoque, they feared that their children would become detached from indigenous knowledge in the French centralized public school system. While children in the protected *terras indígenas* (ideally) attend schools with indigenous teachers and a curriculum adapted specifically for indigenous communities, the French educational system does not allow for regional or ethnic differences, as highlighted by one of the mothers:

> [A]nd there in French Guiana it's very different, there this recognition doesn't exist. In French Guiana, the *indígenas* don't have the same status they have in Brazil. But with respect to many other things, it is probably much better than in Brazil.

These two indigenous mothers were well aware of the pros and cons that attendance at a French school would imply for their children. Both emphasized the fragile health care system in Oiapoque and referred to the higher standard of living on the other side of the river. Yet when it comes to the overall—institutionalized—appraisal of indigenous heritage, they prefer Brazil. Additionally, they have not forgotten the reasons why, in part, their parents and grandparents left French Guiana. They are well aware of the manifold (post-)colonial forms of exploitation of their ancestors, ranging from the colonial exhibition of deceased family members in the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* (Paris) or at the *International Colonial and Export Exhibition* in Amsterdam (see Abbal 2010; Collomb and Tiouka 2000, 87–102; Macedo and Grupioni 2009, 803–4) in the late nineteenth century to the imposed and indiscriminate assimilation into the customs and institutions of the *Hexagone* (see Collomb 2011). Therefore, at least some members of the local population actively reflect on the legacies of colonialism, basing their decisions of whether or not to cross the border on this painful past, amongst other considerations.

The example of daily cross-border practices by some of Oiapoque's youngest inhabitants suggests that the French-Brazilian border is literally fluid. Yet even if local authorities allow a certain degree of permeability and cross-border exchange, the idea of a purely fluid border without

limits is misleading. The fact that people migrate and commute across the border does not mean that it is not a clear demarcation of differences and inequalities. School attendance illustrates quite well how strong the differences are as regards the quality of education—but also regarding adaption to culturally specific contexts. Although the *école maternelle* offers special language classes for its indigenous pupils, the larger issue of indigenous and *créole* histories is not even rudimentarily reflected in the school curricula, which are basically the same as in Paris. This leads to the peculiar fact that pupils learn about the French revolution, but have no idea about »other« revolutions which took place on the territory which today forms French Guiana (see Spieler 2013). Also, as I observed during fieldwork, they learn how to prepare a *crêpe*, but do not know what to do with the *açaí* which grows right next to the school building. These are crucial concerns, especially for indigenous parents deliberating whether or not to send their children to school in French Guiana.

The *catraieiros* (boat drivers) who bring the children—and many others— to one or the other river banks are concerned about the future of crossing the river by boat. As a large bridge was built across the Oyapock, many fear they will lose their jobs. For most politicians with whom I conducted interviews, the bridge—finished in 2012 but only inaugurated shortly after my second research stay in spring 2017 (see Grenand 2012; Kramsch 2012, 2016)—symbolizes and is aimed at cross-border cooperation and exchange (see Silva 2010, 2016; Silva and Superti 2015; Superti 2011). However, first observations from my final short research trip suggest that though finally »put in place,« the bridge is »out of place«: it is a prime example of a regional planning process that disregards the needs and interests of the local population and—instead—creates social and spatial divides. In other words, it seems to be an »opening« which increasingly leads to more »closure.« Large parts of the (especially non-French population) fear that the bridge might increasingly resemble the eye of a needle and facilitate border controls. Most *catraieiros* with whom I spoke since the opening of the bridge have complained about less fluvial traffic and, therefore, less money in their pockets. As one of my informants put it, »the Oyapock River Bridge is the first bridge that separates the

people.« Just how exactly the opening of the bridge will change people's movement between Saint-Georges and Oiapoque must be analyzed in the near future.

Concluding remarks

The Oyapock River represents a forgotten border of the world. This article has underlined the importance of shifting our focus and doing research in and about the various EU overseas territories by which the European Union and its respective member states stretch into various parts of the world, first and foremost due to colonial history. I have shown that theoretical-conceptual contributions such as the notions of *geteilte Geschichten* and entangled modernity provide important correctives to Eurocentric traditions in sociology. French Guiana is complexly interwoven with France, Europe and its geographic neighbors in Latin America. Colonial histories—slavery, the *bagne*, etc.—have irrevocably tied this region to the *métropole* where shortsighted versions of history were written and continue to be written. These versions neglect the very same colonial histories that tied French Guiana to Europe and the *Hexagone* in the first place. This is how French Guiana and the wider region *shares* its history with former European colonial powers, which in turn regard it as *separate* from their allegedly independent history. This disregard is represented not only in history books, but also in the ways in which disciplines such as sociology and anthropology are often incapable of disentangling the complexities of today's world and, for instance, the European Union.

Analyses in and about the French-Brazilian borderland aid in identifying these complexities because they force researchers to re-map their container-like images of the EU and to confront a peculiar reality of inequalities which can be partly traced back to colonial history. If children go to school on the other side of the Oyapock River and if people with a non-EU passport (sometimes without any passport at all) migrate to French Guiana, then this usually happens because of the various advantages provided by French Guiana's status as a French »overseas department« and as an »Outermost Region« of the European Union. Yet

although *égalité* is often referred to when legitimizing this status, the French state is far from providing equal opportunities for its citizens on the other side of the Atlantic, as became evident in the frustration that sparked the 2017 general strike and social movement. This complex nesting—French Guiana as France's and the EU's poor backyard in Latin America *and* French Guiana as a prime destination for people without prospects from neighboring Brazil and other countries—provides a difficult but highly innovative field for future research. In particular, the recent opening of the Oyapock River Bridge (see Fig. 4) poses a variety of questions to social scientists interested in the socio-spatial transformations at a border whose fluidness seems to turn more and more into fixedness. Such research is necessary in order to continue to draw new maps of the European Union and the world more generally.

Fig. 4: Oyapock River Bridge. © Fabio Santos.

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