Book Review: Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood by Joshua Keating

In **Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood***,* **Joshua Keating** *presents five present-day cases of border debates, humanising the issues they raise through personal stories and daily experiences. Covering topics from virtual citizenship to nested sovereignty, this book may rejuvenate the conversation about how countries and borders affect residents when they are neither static nor responsive to people, writes* **Jennifer Stubbs***.*

***Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood*. Joshua Keating. Yale University Press. 2018.**

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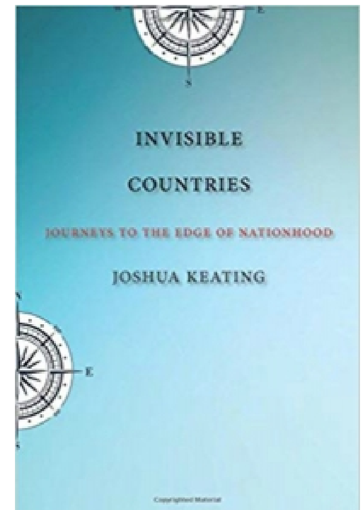

Invisible Countries is a series of vignettes on the edges of nationhood, physically and legally. It explores an easily accessible number of questions about what it means to be a nation, including the effects on a person's identity, relationships between nations and how macro issues have personal consequences, whether when navigating border checkpoints as part of daily commutes or volunteering abroad in an unrecognised but stable community. The thesis of *Invisible Countries* is that borders are dynamic, and with awareness, they could be more holistically and consciously revised. Author Joshua Keating presents five cases of border debates, humanising the abstract issues with personal stories and daily experiences.

Invisible Countries provides a short history of border delineation and theory. It looks at sovereigns without land, plural sovereignties over the same land, freedom of movement for minorities or displaced peoples and island countries facing climate change. Keating writes from a post-Westphalian, post-Wilsonian position and asks how welfare and security locally determine national borders and the exercise of sovereignty today. If the present moment marks the end of an unusual lull in border shifts, he explores how borders and sovereignty might be decided or reallocated given five examples: 1). climate change; 2). non-territorial members of the United Nations; 3). virtual citizenship; 4). once-independent partners; and 5). nested sovereignty.

Invisible Countries is written as five chapters, with four outlier anecdotes between, plus an introduction and conclusion. Having edited and written for publications such as *Slate* and *Foreign Policy*, Keating's journalistic style provides nonfiction that is very easy and enjoyable to read. He reports interviewees' experiences and the majority of citations are from news magazines, think tanks (American Enterprise Institute) or non-governmental organisations such as the UN, International Committee of the Red Cross and the African Union.

Image Credit: Cornwall Bridge (Michel Rathwell CC BY 2.0)

Keating argues that a country needs a government, population and defined territory (198). *Invisible Countries* begins with definitions. First, Max Weber's state, which has a monopoly on power in a place (9-10); second, Weber's homogenous nation based on one culture (10-11). Third, a country, Keating's preferred term for a territory with recognition by others (12). He notes how 'there are almost no ''natural'' borders […] and whenever you try to draw lines between groups of people, someone is going to end up on the wrong side' (141). Keating also explores the 'contradiction between [Woodrow Wilson's] ideal of self-determination and the realist desire to preserve stasis' (151), while recognising that 'current map stasis is due to path dependence and incremental decisions' (239).

Keating analyses how or why a country exists: externally through recognition or internally based on territory or a homogenous society. He reports the definition of a 'virtual country' given by Vit Jedlicka – President of Liberland, an island in the river between Croatia and Serbia – as 'nothing but the imagination of people that creates a country' (149). Keating based his own definition of a country on a quote by past US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles – 'No government has a right to have recognition. It is a privilege that is accorded […] when we think it will fit in with our national interest' (160). As demonstrated by stable but unrecognised Somaliland, once independent but now tied to its neighbour, Somalia, in contrast with the newly recognised but unstable South Sudan. Nonetheless, Keating sees an untenable contradiction between two modes of thought since World War II: that nationalism encourages one people, one country, while liberal democracies have shown a preference for static borders (245). This preference to create new nations such as South Sudan defies a history of maintaining borders as much as possible for 60 years, regardless of where populations have moved.

Keating contrasts settled peoples and nomads. One example of the former is Akwesasne, a Mohawk Nation territory on the St. Lawrence River between New York, Ontario and Quebec, which does not quite fit either the anthropological definition of a tribe or the political definition of a nation, state or country (96). Its rights are preserved in treaties, creating a situation that anthropologist Audra Simpson calls 'nested sovereignty' (94), where a pre-European settlement culture maintains a community separate from neighbours who have forgotten the treaties. Canadian and US border enforcement increased after 9/11, making daily commutes difficult (71). In a later chapter, Keating separately explores the nomads in Somaliland who are restricted in travel because their passports are not recognised and visa-granting processes have broken down (124).

Alongside the case of Liberland, Estonia, which offers e-residency, provides Keating with a lens to explore virtual countries. Foreign nationals gain legal standing in the European Union for banking and contracts (99-100). While the author applied for e-residency in person at an embassy, the process is now completely online. Keating remains undecided on a nationality's future that does not require physical presence.

Reporting from Kurdistan and Somaliland, Keating presents arguments for and against referendums on separation and explores the risks of international recognition (141). Clan alignments may be politicised or internal disagreements leveraged for international attention. Senegal and the Gambia (125), like Slovakia and the Czech Republic (242), divorced amicably, but Somaliland remains unable to separate from Somalia due to external resistance to any new countries after South Sudan's independence. Keating explores how, internationally, official foreign government recognition affects health-care provision and education access because volunteers are warned away due to ignorance or difficult paperwork (121).

The book's strengths include an index to cross-reference names, places, events and acronyms. It uses historical context to guide novices or students to primary documents and highlights a few lies of history such as the 'Velvet Divorce' of Czechoslovakia in 1989 into Slovakia and the Czech Republic, suggesting that it was an undemocratic 'backroom deal between nationalist politicians' (242). The book's main weakness is a lack of scholarly sources, preferring interviews with local leaders and first-hand reporting of short-term visits to each community or citing news outlets' and journalists' discussion of borders and political events rather than academic journals or studies. Thus, this book is written for a popular rather than academic audience and is very readable as an overview of the history leading to the current status quo of nation states. 'The lack of questioning how borders are currently drawn on the earth today is exactly what motivated [Keating] to write this book' (176), and *Invisible Countries* may rejuvenate the conversation about how countries and borders affect residents when they are neither static nor responsive to people.

- *This review first appeared at the LSE Review of Books.*

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Jennifer Stubbs joined NYU Shanghai Library in 2017 as the Reference and Research Services Librarian for Social Science and Economics. She worked in public libraries in New Mexico for 9 years. She earned an MSc in person and an MLIS remotely, providing a student's perspective across four learning management systems. Her ORCID is 0000-0002-6080-5703.