'Le Tour de L'Hexagone': Circulation and Iconography in Loràt Deutsch's *Hexagone* and Lionel Daudet's *Le Tour de la France, exactement*

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'LE TOUR DE L'HEXAGONE': CIRCULATION AND ICONOGRAPHY IN LORÀNT DEUTSCH'S *HEXAGONE* AND LIONEL DAUDET'S *LE TOUR DE LA FRANCE, EXACTEMENT*

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Introduction: circulation and iconography

According to the political geographer Jean Gottmann, national territories are defined by two processes: on the one hand 'circulation', the movement of people and goods; and, on the other, 'iconographie', the symbolic systems that regulate and contain that movement.[1] In a French context, the most obvious element of iconography is the representation of the national territory as a hexagon, which has been a commonplace of French pedagogical and journalistic discourse since the 1960s.[2] The Hexagon provides an approximate schematic image of the physical contours of France's European territory but it also carries a range of connotations that can be mobilized in the service of a discourse of national identity: the rationality of geometry; the necessity of nature; the balance of symmetry; and the integration of multiplicity into a coherent whole.

Since the 1990s, some geographers and historians have argued that the symbolism of the Hexagon has been overtaken by an accelerated movement of people and goods, that iconography has been eroded by circulation. Internal and external processes such as political decentralization, European integration, and economic globalization have blurred the contours of the French Hexagon.[3] The term has also been criticized for identifying the entirety of the French Republic with continental Europe, effectively excluding its overseas departments and territories from equal

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[1] Jean Gottmann, *La Politique des états et leur géographie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1959), pp. 157–60, 213–55, and 'La Politique et le concret', *Politique étrangère*, 4–5 (1963), 273–302 (p. 283).

[2] On the history of the Hexagon, see Nathaniel B. Smith, 'The Idea of the French Hexagon', *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1969), 139–55; Eugen Weber, 'La Formation de l'hexagone républicain', in *Jules Ferry, fondateur de la République*, ed. by François Furet (Paris: EHESS, 1985), pp. 223–41, and Weber, 'L'Hexagone' (1986), in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. by Pierre Nora, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), I, 1171–90; Marie-Claire Robic, 'Sur les formes de l'Hexagone', *Mappemonde*, 4 (1989), 18–23; and Douglas Smith, 'The French Hexagon: Defining the Shape of the Nation', in *Transnational French Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), pp. 139–52.

[3] See Jeanine Cohen, Marie-Claude Guerrini, Nicole Mathieu, Marie-Claire Robic, and others, 'L'Iconographie dans l'aménagement du territoire: changer la donne et/on donner le change?', in *L'État et les stratégies du territoire*, ed. by Hervé Théry (Paris: CNRS, 1991), pp. 197–207 (p. 200); *Remaking the Hexagon: The New France in the New Europe*, ed. by Gregory Flynn (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–13; and D. L. L. Parry and Pierre Girard, *France since 1800: Squaring the Hexagon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 246.

representation and investment.[4] While France is clearly not a Hexagon (in the sense of an exclusively continental territory free from internal tensions and external pressures) and misrepresenting it as such has serious implications for those regions considered extra-hexagonal, the continued use of the term in popular and political discourse bears further scrutiny.

This article explores the status of the Hexagon by examining the relations between iconography and circulation in two recent texts that engage significantly with the geography and history of metropolitan France: Loràmt Deutsch's *Hexagone: sur les routes de l'histoire de France* and Lionel Daudet's *Le Tour de la France, exactement.*[5] These works operate in the context of contemporary writing about France characterized by Ari Blatt as 'topographic' in its focus on place and as 'peripatetic' by Charles Forsdick in its emphasis on movement.[6] Behind these two modes of writing lie the historical precedents of the geographical *tableau* as practised by Jules Michelet and Paul Vidal de La Blache and the educational travel narrative pioneered by G. Bruno (Augustine Fouillée), types of writing devoted respectively to mapping (via the description of physical geography) and narrating (via the story of a journey) the territory of France.[7] Against this backdrop, the choice of two texts aimed at a popular general readership is intended to indicate the ongoing presence of the Hexagon in the wider culture. After providing an outline of the history and uses of the Hexagon, and exploring the ways in which the narrative forms of the *tableau* and the pedagogical tour operate in relation to one another, I will examine how the two texts by Deutsch and Daudet negotiate the relations between iconography and circulation, the topographic and the peripatetic, mapping and narrating, before closing with some remarks on the continued relevance of the Hexagon to an understanding of contemporary France.

The Hexagon: history, iconography, and ideology

According to Nathaniel B. Smith, the hexagonal representation of France first emerged in German geography manuals of the eighteenth century before starting to appear in French-language materials from 1830.[8] By the late 1860s, the Hexagon had

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[4] For critiques of the Hexagon, see Quentin Deluermoz, 'Introduction: les échelles de la France', in *D'ici et d'ailleurs: histoires globales de la France contemporaine*, ed. by Quentin Deluermoz (Paris: La Découverte, 2021), pp. 13–45 (pp. 27–42), and Françoise Vergès, *Le Ventre des femmes: capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021), pp. 195 and 224.

[5] Loràmt Deutsch with Emmanuel Haymann, *Hexagone: sur les routes de l'histoire de France* (2013; Paris: Points/ Seuil, 2015), hereafter *H* in the text, and Lionel Daudet, *Le Tour de la France, exactement* (2014; Paris: Livre de poche, 2015), hereafter *TFE* in the text.

[6] Ari J. Blatt, 'Traversing the *territoire*', *The Romanic Review*, 108 (2017), 277–92; Charles Forsdick, '*À quoi bon marcher*: Uses of the Peripatetic in Contemporary Travel Literature in French', *Sites*, 5 (2001), 47–62.

[7] For the *tableau*, see Jules Michelet, 'Tableau de la France' (1833) and Paul Vidal de La Blache, 'La France: tableau géographique' (1903), in *Tableaux de la France, suivis de Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris: Omnibus, 2007), pp. 7–112 and 317–810 respectively. For the educational travel narrative, see G. Bruno, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants: devoir et patrie* (1877), in *Tableaux de la France*, ed. by Rioux, reproduced in facsimile at the end of the volume with original pagination. On the relevance of the *tableau* to contemporary travel writing, see Isabelle Lefort, 'Tableaux et voyages: questions d'écritures et d'identité', *Annales de géographie*, 739–40 (2021), 141–59.

[8] Nathaniel B. Smith, 'The Idea of the French Hexagon', pp. 144–45.

become firmly established in pedagogical publications destined for French schools. According to Marie-Claire Robic, the first cartographic representation of France as a hexagon occurs in Émile Levasseur's *Petite géographie de la France et de ses colonies à l'usage des écoles primaires* (1868), where a relief map of the country is framed by a hexagon.[9] In the same year, in the Introduction to Jules Verne's *Géographie illustrée de la France et de ses colonies*, Théophile Lavallée describes the territory of France as a 'hexagone irrégulier' whose six sides are defined by the English Channel (in the north-west), the Atlantic coast (in the west), the Pyrenees (in the south-west), the Mediterranean coast (in the south-east), the Alps, Jura, and Rhine (in the east), and the German and Belgian borders (in the north-east).[10] By the 1880s, the figure was fully integrated into the curriculum of the Third Republic education system. Ferdinand Buisson's influential *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire* (1882–97) describes France as a hexagon and recommends instructing children to use a hexagonal template to draw the map of the nation.[11]

For Michel Foucher, the Hexagon is an icon of the French nation-state.[12] It certainly qualifies as such in terms of Gottmann's model of iconography, but the graphic representation of France as a hexagon also operates as an icon in terms of semiotics. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce distinguished between three types of sign: the icon, the index, and the symbol, defined in terms of their increasing arbitrariness in relation to their referent. The icon resembles its referent (as with a portrait), the index carries a trace of its referent (as with a fingerprint), while the symbol is a purely conventional sign without any necessary link to its referent (as with a word).[13] The graphic Hexagon is then both an icon and an index of France: an icon insofar as its shape resembles approximately the physical outline of its territory, and an index insofar as its contours trace schematically the actual frontiers of the nation. A similar relation of association and contiguity between word and referent is suggested in the description of the verbal Hexagon as a metonymy of France, where the attribute of approximate hexagonality comes to stand for the nation as a whole.[14] In each instance (as icon, index, and metonymy), the Hexagon enjoys an element of motivation that renders it more persuasive than purely conventional signs, allowing it to operate widely as a logotype or logo of France and Frenchness.[15]

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[9] Marie-Claire Robic, 'Variations sur la forme: l'exercice cartographique à l'école (1868–1889) (2ème partie)', *Mappemonde*, 3 (1991), 34–40 (p. 38).

[10] Weber, 'L'Hexagone', pp. 1171–72; Théophile Lavallée, Introduction to Jules Verne, *Géographie illustrée de la France et de ses colonies, précédée d'une Étude sur la géographie générale de la France par Théophile Lavallée* (Paris: Hetzel, 1868), pp. i–xxxii (p. ii).

[11] See Weber, 'L'Hexagone', p. 1172, and 'France (Géographie)' and 'Cartographiques (Exercices)', in Ferdinand Buisson, *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire*, 2 parts, 4 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1882–93), II.1, 801 and I.1, 342 respectively.

[12] Michel Foucher, *L'Obsession des frontières* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), p. 181.

[13] Charles Sanders Peirce, 'The Icon, Index and Symbol', in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998), II, 156–73.

[14] On the Hexagon as metonymy, see Robic, 'Sur les formes de l'Hexagone', p. 18, and Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières: un tour du monde géopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 97.

[15] On the Hexagon as logo, see Robic 'Sur les formes de l'Hexagone', pp. 20 and 23.

The iconographic success of the Hexagon derives also from its ideological effectiveness. Extending Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth in non-western societies, Louis Althusser defined ideology as an imaginary solution to real social contradictions.[16] The Hexagon provides an ideal resolution to some of the chief contradictions of French national identity. As a form founded in both reason (geometric projection) and nature (geological formation), the Hexagon reconciles two understandings of the French nation: France as a voluntarist project whose frontiers are the result of political will and France as a providential entity whose frontiers are the product of nature.[17] Furthermore, as a complex whole made up of multiple elements (six sides and six points), the regular hexagon offers an image of unity in diversity, echoing one of the main themes of French geographical writing.[18] This unity is often associated with balance, as the symmetry of the Hexagon mediates symbolically between land and sea, with its abstraction of three inland borders (Pyrenees, Alps, and Rhine), and three coastal borders (Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Channel).[19] The Hexagon's manifold qualities allow it to articulate an additional paradoxical feature of French nationalist discourse: the characterization of the nation as both exceptional and universal, both unique in terms of its specific qualities (its geometry is unrivalled) and exemplary in its capacity to offer a model for emulation (its balance is a quality to which other nations should aspire).[20] So the Hexagon encompasses the contradictions of a nation that is both rational and natural, unified and plural, exceptional and universal. Finally, the Hexagon lends itself to the combination of remembering and forgetting identified by Ernest Renan as essential to the existence of any nation.[21] The Hexagon serves as an effective mnemonic device, extensively mobilized to teach children how to draw the contours of the nation. At the same time, however, it is also a basic geometric form, commonly found in nature and available as a design motif without specific national connotations. The Hexagon is both memorable and forgettable, and may be employed both to recall the past and to consign it to oblivion.

Historians generally agree that the two most decisive periods in the consolidation of the Hexagon as an icon of the French nation are the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). Following

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[16] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'La Structure des mythes', in *Anthropologie structurale*, 1 (Paris: Plon, 1985), pp. 235–65 (pp. 239 and 264); Louis Althusser, 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État', in *Positions* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1976), pp. 67–125 (p. 101).

[17] See Peter Sahlins, 'Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century', *The American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 1423–51 (p. 1451).

[18] See Michelet, 'Tableau de la France', p. 77, and Vidal de La Blache, 'La France: tableau géographique', p. 336. On the theme of unity-in-diversity in French geographical writing, see Isabelle Lefort, *La Lettre et l'esprit: géographie scolaire et géographie savante en France, 1870–1970* (Paris: CNRS, 1992), pp. 197–207, and Dana Kristofor Lindaman, *Becoming French: Mapping the Geographies of French Identity, 1871–1914* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 100.

[19] Nathaniel B. Smith, 'The Idea of the French Hexagon', p. 145.

[20] See Naomi Schor, 'The Crisis of French Universalism', *Yale French Studies*, 100 (2001), 43–64, and *The French Exception*, ed. by Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004).

[21] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1884), pp. 7 and 9.

the annexation of the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Empire, the educational establishment of the Third Republic embraced the Hexagon as an aspirational image of restored territorial integrity.[22] The Hexagon operated as an incentive to remember the lost provinces. At the same time, its qualities of balance and unity invited the forgetting of the recent internecine conflict of the Paris Commune. Some ninety years later, in a reversal of external commemoration and internal oblivion, the Hexagon would encourage the forgetting of a lost empire and the remembering instead of the development needs of a domestic European territory, a reorientation that would largely occlude the needs and aspirations of the overseas regions which remained under French sovereignty.[23] After Algerian independence in 1962, the Hexagon came to represent a post-imperial France freed from the majority of its overseas commitments to concentrate on the infrastructural planning and economic growth of its metropolitan territory.

In the 1960s, the Hexagon became the emblematic object of the technocratic planning associated with the presidencies of Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou.[24] Its geometric form represented an ideal national territory, a smooth homogeneous surface free from the uneven development of the past. Essential to realizing this ideal was the provision of transport infrastructure and technology that offered equally rapid access to and from all parts of the country. The Hexagon combined accessible space with reduced travel time to constitute what might be called the chronotope of Gaullism, to transpose Mikhail Bakhtin's term for the spatiotemporal configuration of cultural forms.[25] The Gaullist chronotope of frictionless speed was intended to compensate for the uneven development of a capitalist economy that had historically privileged certain regions while relegating others to the status of backwaters. But in doing so it paradoxically embraced another aspect of late capitalism, namely the time–space compression produced by technological acceleration that progressively abolishes geographical distance in an ongoing quest for lower labour costs, which themselves are often to be found precisely in regions left behind by earlier phases of development.[26] The Hexagon in this sense was a planner's fantasy, both critical of and complicit with contemporary capitalism, and continually encountered the obstacles posed by the persistent

[22] Nathaniel B. Smith, 'The Idea of the French Hexagon', p. 147, and Catherine Dunlop, *Cartophilia: Maps and the Search for Identity in the French–German Borderland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 59–62.

[23] See Nathaniel B. Smith, 'The Idea of the French Hexagon', p. 150; Weber, 'L'Hexagone', pp. 1184–85; Robic, 'Sur les formes de l'Hexagone', pp. 19–20; Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 269, and Shepard, 'Plus grande que l'Hexagone', in *Made in Algeria: généalogie d'un territoire*, ed. by Zahia Rahmani and Jean-Yves Sarazin (Marseilles: MuCEM, 2015), pp. 165–69.

[24] See Edward Welch, *Making Space in Post-war France: The Dreams, Realities and Aftermath of State Planning* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2023), pp. 20–21.

[25] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258.

[26] On time–space compression see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 240.

unevenness of physical geography and the multiple coexisting temporalities of historical development, not to mention political and social resistance.[27] However, its abstraction reflected the vision of technocratic planning in the post-imperial era and provided the context for much subsequent domestic travel writing.[28]

The 'tour' and the 'tableau': narrating and mapping the nation

If the history of the Hexagon provides an essential context for the way in which Deutsch and Daudet present their contemporary vision of France, another key background element is the classic school manual of the Third Republic, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* (1877), by G. Bruno, the pseudonym of Augustine Fouillée.[29] A narrative pedagogical text designed for primary school children, *Le Tour de la France* operates as both a reader (intended to develop literacy) and a textbook (conveying didactic content). Each chapter provides the basis of a lesson on a different region, covering features including topography, agriculture, industry, flora, and fauna. These illustrated object lessons are connected via the story of two orphan brothers, André and Julien Volden, who leave their original family home in Phalsbourg in Lorraine, recently annexed by the German Empire, on a quest to rejoin their only surviving relative in France. After a protracted journey beset with challenges and obstacles, the boys are at last happily reunited with their paternal uncle. The story is in many ways a resettlement narrative, recounting how the boys come to know and love their mother country in lieu of their lost parents, acquiring the knowledge and attitudes expected of a good citizen, and how they are adopted in turn by the French Republic.

The boys' journey invokes four historical and contemporary precedents: the circuits of the travelling apprentice, the royal progress, the religious pilgrimage, and the didactic adventure novel. First, their travels are punctuated by spells of work to replenish their finances and so replicate the travelling years of a journeyman apprentice who takes to the road to further his professional education.[30] Second, the boys' circuit of France is a republican version of a traditional royal progress, affirming the sovereignty of the people (rather than the king) as apprentice citizens who 'appropriate' their homeland by travelling across it.[31] Third, their journey further constitutes a secularized version of a pilgrimage, where the specific destination of a sacred site has been superseded by the national territory as a whole, and the boys' progress takes the form of a gradual initiation into the spiritual community

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[27] See Doreen Massey, 'A Sense of Place', *Marxism Today*, 35 (June 1991), 24–29 and '(Contrary to Popular Opinion) Space Cannot Be Annihilated by Time', in *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 90–98.

[28] See Forsdick, '*À quoi bon marcher*', and 'Alternative Itineraries 1: Deceleration', in *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 161–83.

[29] See Jacques Ozouf and Mona Ozouf, '*Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*: le petit livre rouge de la République', in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. by Nora, I, 277–301, and Patrick Cabanel, *Le Tour de la nation par des enfants: romans scolaires et espaces nationaux (XIXe–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Belin, 2007).

[30] See Ozouf and Ozouf, '*Le Tour de la France*', pp. 280 and 298, and Lindaman, *Becoming French*, p. 95.

[31] On the royal precedent for Bruno's narrative, see Patrick Cabanel, 'École et nation: l'exemple des livres de lecture scolaires (XIXe et première moitié du XXe siècles)', *Histoire de l'éducation*, 126 (2010), 33–54 (pp. 36–37).

of the nation.[32] Fourth, in literary terms, the use of a narrative of circumnavigation as the framework for an encyclopaedic survey, exploiting a suspenseful adventure story as a vehicle for communicating didactic material, is a variation of the formula used by Jules Verne in contemporary works such as *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1872).[33]

Bruno's text frequently resembles the genre of geographical writing known as the *tableau*, a physical description of the national territory intended to preface a chronological account of its history.[34] The model for this genre is often taken to be Michelet's 'Tableau de France' of 1833, designed to preface his own multi-volume *Histoire de France*, while the *tableau* that was to dominate the geography teaching of the later Third Republic was Vidal de La Blache's prefatory text of 1903 for Ernest Lavisse's multi-volume *Histoire de France illustrée depuis les origines jusqu'à la Révolution*, launched in 1901.[35] The function of the *tableau* was to set the scene for the historical narrative to follow, providing a spatial frame for temporal events and actions. Its structural placement as a preface reinforced the voluntarist agenda of figures such as Michelet and Vidal de La Blache, for whom the purpose of human endeavour was to transform geography into history, the imposed physical conditions of existence into a chosen way of life, nature into culture, and, in a national context, the givens of the geology and climate of a part of Western Europe into something recognizable as France.[36] As Roland Barthes has noted in relation to Verne's didactic adventure fiction, the descriptive *tableau* is also a standard introduction to the nineteenth-century novel, setting the scene for the story.[37] And as in the novel genre, the alternation between description and narration in texts such as Bruno's has the potential to become a source of friction, insofar as description operates as a brake on narrative movement, while narrative movement disrupts the stability of description.

In its alternation between *tableau* and narrative, Bruno's book internalizes a tension within nationalist discourse identified by Homi Bhabha. For Bhabha, nationalism operates through two main modes: pedagogy and performance.[38] Where pedagogy stresses the unchanging essence of the nation subsisting across time, performance actively seeks to enact that essence but in so doing inevitably subjects it to a destabilizing series of iterations: 'In the production of the nation as

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[32] On pilgrimage as initiation, see Victor Turner, 'The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions*, 12 (1973), 191–230.

[33] On Bruno and Verne, see Timothy Unwin, 'Jules Verne: Negotiating Change in the Nineteenth Century', *Science Fiction Studies*, 32 (2005), 5–17 (pp. 5 and 14), and Lindaman, *Becoming French*, p. 87.

[34] See Kory E. Olson, 'Creating Map Readers: Republican Geographic and Cartographic Discourse in G. Bruno's 1905 *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 19 (2011), 37–51.

[35] See Jean-Yves Guiomar, 'Le *Tableau de la géographie de la France* par Paul Vidal de La Blache', in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. by Nora, II, 568–97, and Marie-Claire Robic, 'L'Identité nationale et ses enjeux: à propos du *Tableau géographique de la France* de P. Vidal de la Blache', *Treballs de Societat Catalana de Geografia*, 48 (1999), 125–37.

[36] Michelet, 'Tableau de France', p. 82, and Vidal de La Blache, 'La France: tableau géographique', p. 329.

[37] Roland Barthes, 'Par où commencer?', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), IV, 86–94.

[38] Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139–70.

narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative.'[39] In these terms, the *tableau* element of Bruno's text aligns with Bhabha's national pedagogy, while its narration of a nationwide tour, repeated in multiple readings in multiple contexts by children across the country, constitutes a performance of national identity. In the Third Republic classroom, the textual *tableau* was accompanied by the maps of France hung on the classroom wall, and the maps that schoolchildren were taught to reproduce from a hexagonal template. Since the *tableau* is a kind of verbal map, one way of thinking of the Hexagon as it develops in the nineteenth century is as a kind of graphic shorthand for the *tableau*, a simplified geometric sketch of the physical geography of metropolitan France. However, whether embodied in reading or drawing, the repetitive and contingent character of performance cannot deliver the unchangeable certainty of an essentialist pedagogy anchored in physical geography, so the narrative blurs the contours of the map and the tour warps the shape of the Hexagon. In Bhabha's analysis, the double nature of nationalist discourse actually undermines the stable national identity it seeks to underwrite. As will be demonstrated, a similar effect can be discerned in the work of Deutsch and Daudet.[40]

Roads and borders: the Hexagon according to Deutsch and Daudet

Both Loràut Deutsch and Lionel Daudet recount tours of the Hexagon that might be characterized as 'peripatetic' circuits of a 'topographic' entity. Deutsch's *Hexagone* follows the development of the French road network, from its mythical origins to the present day, and in so doing retells the history of the nation. It is an unashamed exercise in popular history, a follow-up to the bestseller *Métronome*, which used the underground transport network as a vehicle to present the history of Paris.[41] In both cases, historical episodes are linked via an itinerary made possible by infrastructure.

As an actor turned multi-platform popular historian (both *Métronome* and *Hexagone* were adapted for television), Deutsch has attracted considerable criticism for his approach to French history.[42] *Hexagone* presents a version of the history of France that is populated by kings and punctuated by battles, a simplified history of great men and spectacular events at odds with the methods and perspectives of modern academic historiography. In Nicolas Offenstadt's formula, this is an example of 'l'histoire bling-bling', an affirmative narrative of national grandeur

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[39] Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 145.

[40] If this is an inadvertent effect of the metropolitan narrative itineraries of the Hexagon discussed here, it is by contrast the avowed aim of other postcolonial or decolonial practices that actively seek to exploit the disjunctions and contradictions of French national identity in order to replace what Vergès has called the 'cartographie mutilée' of a hexagonally conceived French Republic with a 'cartographie narrative' that reinstates the occluded histories and ongoing legacy of its colonial past. See Vergès, *Le Ventre des femmes*, p. 224.

[41] Loràut Deutsch with Emmanuel Haymann, *Métronome: l'histoire de France au rythme du métro parisien* (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2009).

[42] See William Blanc, Aurore Chéry, and Christophe Naudin, *Les Historiens de garde: de Loràut Deutsch à Patrick Buisson, la résurgence du roman national* (Paris: Libertalia, 2018).

enacted by celebrities.[43] Furthermore, the opening of the book has a clear religious or spiritual dimension, as Deutsch speculates that the prehistoric standing stones of Brittany might form a kind of 'highway to the beyond', an expression of a fundamental human impulse towards mobility that seeks a transcendental outlet once it reaches physical limits such as the Atlantic coast (*H*, pp. 10–11). The road possesses an anthropological and a religious meaning for Deutsch, as a vector for human migration that leads people first towards encounters with others (human contact) and then with the unknown (spiritual experience) (*H*, p. 474).

Within this broad framework, Deutsch traces the development of transport infrastructure in France, identifying a number of key moments from the Roman era of road building (*H*, p. 118) to the twentieth-century development of national networks adapted to the motor car (*H*, pp. 461, 467–69). In its focus on infrastructure, this popular history superficially echoes recent specialist research into the impact of transport networks on aesthetics, urbanism, and territorial development.[44] However, for Deutsch, infrastructural development serves primarily as a pretext for an anecdotal history of France, featuring familiar episodes, such as Julius Caesar's defeat of Vercingetorix at Alesia (*H*, pp. 112–13) or the Battle of Bouvines (*H*, p. 321). Each chapter follows a particular itinerary that permits the narration of an episode from French history, creating an impression of spatial and historical continuity. The ostensible story of infrastructural development becomes the actual story of the construction of the French nation-state: 'en deux mille six cents ans, nous avons parcouru treize mille cinq cent soixante-treize kilomètres, retraçant l'histoire agitée de la construction d'une nation' (*H*, p. 473). This qualifies somewhat the book's premise that the road is an open road, a vector towards encountering the other (whether social and transcendental), rather than a route with a predetermined destination defined in terms of nation-building.

Two other features of the book undermine its gestures towards openness and inclusivity. First, the final pages, which are set on either side of the English Channel, are marked by a disconcerting omission. Deutsch takes (pre-Brexit) freedom of movement between France and Britain for granted, and discusses the site of Sangatte exclusively as the location of the first abortive nineteenth-century attempts to construct a tunnel under the Channel (*H*, p. 471). There is no mention of migrants, makeshift camps (the so-called 'jungle'), or perilous attempts to cross the Channel. The contemporary humanitarian and political crises attending migration into Europe are passed over in silence. Second, Deutsch's chapter devoted to the Battle of Poitiers in 732 alludes to Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis in its characterization of the confrontation as a decisive encounter between an expansionist Islam and an embattled Christianity (*H*,

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[43] Nicolas Offenstadt, *L'Histoire bling-bling: le retour du roman national* (Paris: Stock, 2009).

[44] See Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement: transports et perception de l'espace XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Éric Alonso, *L'Architecture de la voie: histoire et théories* (Marseilles: Parenthèse, 2018); and Nathalie Roseau, *Le Futur des métropoles: temps et infrastructure* (Geneva: MētisPresses, 2022).

pp. 237–54).[45] His account of the episode elicited a polemical response from historians who had already criticized his previous work as narrowly nationalistic and poorly researched.[46] Both of these passages contradict Deutsch's presentation of the road as a site of open encounter with otherness.

Daudet's *Le Tour de la France, exactement* adopts a quite different itinerary in relation to the Hexagon. The line it follows is that not of the road but of the border, as Daudet records his attempt to circumnavigate the nation by tracing its physical frontiers as exactly as possible without recourse to mechanical means of transportation. Doing so in practice involves hiking, mountaineering, cycling, kayaking, and sailing around the edges of France in a counter-clockwise direction, beginning and ending at Mont Blanc in the Alps. Between August 2011 and November 2012, Daudet covered around 10,000 kilometres, recording his progress via a live blog and social media posting.[47] Apart from the sporting exploit, the circumnavigation was also an exercise in experimental travel and in the art of the project, taking a set of self-imposed rules as the basis for a journey and as the means of generating an interactive website and text.[48] After completing multiple mountaineering expeditions abroad, Daudet aimed to reacquaint himself with his native country and its inhabitants through a project designed to slow down movement and open up connections 'à l'heure où tout se cloisonne et s'accélère' (*TFE*, p. 13).

Daudet's project operates as a kind of fieldwork, in two senses. First, the circumnavigation resembles a geographical mission, engaged in the empirical testing of the concrete frontier against its abstract cartographic representations. Second, the project is an exercise in what might be called reverse ethnography, producing at points a quasi-anthropological account of the frontier life of the author's home culture. To use terms developed by Georges Perec, rather than focusing on an 'exotic' other culture, Daudet chooses a supposedly more familiar 'endotic' subject matter, which becomes an internal exotic in turn: 'mon regard de nomade a perçu une forme d'exotisme, […] celui des lieux ravissants dont je n'aurais pas même soupçonné l'existence' (*TFE*, p. 317).[49]

To continue in Perecquian terms, if the project engages with the infra-ordinary (the unobtrusive specificity of a frontier as it exists often unnoticed on the ground), it nonetheless retains an element of the extraordinary, in terms of the demanding parameters of the self-imposed task and its often spectacular backdrop, symbolized

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[45] Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (1993), 22–49 and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[46] See Aurore Chéry, 'Loràant Deutsch et le mythe de l'invasion musulmane', *Huffington Post*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr>.

[47] For the project website, which incorporates links to the live posts, see *DODtour*, <http://www.dodtour.com>.

[48] See Rachael Antony and Joël Henry, *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2005) and *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture*, ed. by Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005). Daudet's trip has been described as 'experimental mountaineering'; see Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, 'Vers un alpinisme expérimental? Deux tours des frontières alpines en perspective: Lionel Daudet/John Harlin, 2011–12', *Revue de géographie alpine*, 101–02 (2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/2125>.

[49] Georges Perec, 'Approches de quoi?', in *L'Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 9–13 (pp. 11–12).

by its chosen start and end point.[50] The selection of Mont Blanc, the emblematic site of the Romantic sublime, as both point of departure and destination underlines how Daudet's circuit is presented as a challenge and a feat, and so implies a gendered and individualistic ethic of adventurism. His circuit of France requires considerable physical strength and endurance, and functions on one level as a performance of masculinity.

The focus on individualistic masculinity is not exclusive, however. Daudet openly acknowledges the considerable assistance he receives from others, primarily from his wife Véro but also from a range of highly skilled companions who accompany him along part of his journey, as well as from commercial sponsors providing financial and logistical support. In addition, he invites followers of his online blog to accompany him on stretches of his journey. His tour is not envisaged entirely as a solo exploit but acknowledges its dependence on others and incorporates a participatory dimension. If there is some tension between individual exploit and group endeavour, perhaps the main contradiction of Daudet's project is not *that* it is supported, but *how* it is supported: Véro shadows his itinerary in a camper van, so that, while Daudet's own circuit of France is self-propelled, it depends ultimately on motorized transport for its success.

Both Deutsch and Daudet engage with the Hexagon explicitly. Deutsch immediately invokes it in his title, clearly indicating the extent to which he takes the identity and territorial integrity of modern France for granted. However, if the Hexagon of the title is assumed rather than defined, its historicity is paradoxically acknowledged in passing: the territory of seventh-century Francia is admitted to stretch beyond the current hexagonal borders of France into Belgium and Germany (*H*, p. 234); a sixteenth-century map is noted for its representation of the kingdom of France as a 'losange' or parallelogram rather than a hexagon (*H*, p. 384); and there is a reference to the 'completion' of the Hexagon under the Second Empire (*H*, p. 439). The Hexagon is, then, both presupposed and produced by the history Deutsch relates, and the narrative movement of the book calls into question the assumptions of its title by historicizing (however questionably) what it presents as an absolute given from the very outset.

The Hexagon also provides a conventional starting point for Daudet's circumnavigation of France, and this conventionality is further stressed through the heteronormative imagery used initially to describe the physical geography of France as a 'marriage' between a three-sided land frontier ('la frontière (elle)') and a three-sided coastal border ('le littoral (lui)') (*TFE*, pp. 12–13). The conjugal imagery prefigures one of the subtexts of the book, which offers an indirect portrait of the relationship between Lionel and Véro Daudet. However, it does not prevent the narrative from exploring the paradoxes of the national frontier as they emerge when the abstract line on the map is confronted with the actual terrain it defines. In a way that echoes a classic discussion by the historian Lucien Febvre, the border

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[50] Perec, 'Approches de quoi?', p. 11.

is shown to be both linear and zonal, as the line of the frontier is followed by Lionel and the frontier zone adjacent to it is navigated by Véro (*TFE*, pp. 108–09).[51] The frontier is also revealed to be a vacillating entity, in Étienne Balibar's terms: both fixed and elastic, closed and open, and, in a post-Schengen Agreement context, everywhere and nowhere once Europe's outer boundary has been crossed (*TFE*, pp. 312–13).[52]

Daudet does not seek to avoid the symbolic and literal violence associated with frontiers: he recognizes the brutality associated with border conflicts between neighbouring nations (*TFE*, p. 113), and deplores the impact of border policing on migrants (*TFE*, pp. 104–05). He also acknowledges how the continental focus of his own project neglects the overseas departments and territories of the French Republic (*TFE*, p. 171). Nonetheless, he continues to hold on to an idealistic vision of the border as a potential site of exchange and connection (*TFE*, p. 321). For Daudet, the most contested frontiers in modern France are not located at the nation's limits but within its divided society (*TFE*, p. 259). Ultimately, Daudet's commitment to following the frontier as literally and precisely as possible effectively fractalizes its identity, breaking up the contours of the Hexagon into more complex shapes that invite critical reflection rather than simple acceptance (*TFE*, pp. 299, 309).

Deutsch and Daudet adopt different approaches in relation to the version of the Hexagon promoted by French state planning, with its chronotope of time–space compression. In his history of the road network, Deutsch endorses the acceleration enabled by infrastructural development, speeding off down the motorway of mainstream popular history. Daudet, in contrast, drops out of the race, slowing down and expanding the telescoped space of technological modernity in an eccentric adventure. In doing so, he joins a long tradition of decelerated travel writing in French. As Forsdick has noted, however, while this tradition may challenge the excesses of modern technological society, it also risks reinstating a conservative-aristocratic notion of the traveller who can afford to choose time-consuming and challenging modes of travel over those available to the masses.[53] If Deutsch presents an affirmative populist history of France for the average motorist, there is a certain extreme-sports elitism to Daudet's project.

Conclusion: the vanishing Hexagon?
For all the differences between Deutsch and Daudet, the narrative circuit formula adopted by both writers presents similar problems to those identified earlier in relation to Bruno's *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*, namely the tension

[51] Lucien Febvre, 'Frontière: le mot et la notion', in *Vivre l'histoire*, ed. by Brigitte Mazon (Paris: Laffont, 2009), pp. 379–89.
[52] Étienne Balibar, 'Les Frontières de l'Europe' and 'Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière?', in *La Crainte des masses: politique et philosophie avant et après Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 381–95 (p. 383) and pp. 371–80 (p. 379).
[53] Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Culture*, pp. 173 and 175.

between *tour* and *tableau*, between the story of an itinerary and the description of physical landscape or territory. To return to the terms of Bhabha's analysis of the discourse of nationalism, it seems as if the element of performance embodied in the narrative of a journey has disrupted the national-pedagogical message embedded in the map of the Hexagon. Neither of the circuits outlined by Deutsch and Daudet achieves the closure of Bruno's *Le Tour de la France*, with its qualified happy ending of a reconstituted surrogate family. Deutsch's apparent affirmation of the French Hexagon concludes ambiguously on the English side of the Channel, looking back at the national territory from the outside while glibly invoking the openness of a frontier that is in fact the site of a protracted migration crisis (*H*, pp. 473–74). In the course of Daudet's itinerary, the Hexagon loses its shape, as a microscopic examination of its frontiers expands the line of the border into a blurred zone (*TFE*, p. 108) or extends it into an infinity of fractal subdivisions (*TFE*, p. 299).

Has the iconography of the Hexagon simply been dissolved by increased circulation on the one hand and greater critical scrutiny on the other? The historian Quentin Deluermoz has stated bluntly that in terms of external relations and internal diversity 'la France n'est pas un hexagone'.[54] But there is a risk in dismissing the Hexagon too hastily; the fact that it does not exist empirically need not necessarily reduce its symbolic effectiveness. A recent example of the ongoing iconographic significance of the Hexagon is the new Ministry of Defence complex in the 15th arrondissement in Paris, which since 2015 consolidates the combined commands of the French armed forces in a single architectural unit. The complex is known as the 'hexagone Balard', mobilizing both a contrastive reference to the Pentagon in Washington DC, the headquarters of the US armed forces, and a distinctive element of French national iconography. In spite of its titular geometry, the new building presents an approximately orthogonal profile to the outside world, since it occupies the rectangular site of a city block. Concealed within the complex and visible only from the air, however, is an inner hexagonal courtyard. The building's name foregrounds the Hexagon verbally while its architecture conceals it visually. This paradox reveals how the Hexagon frequently functions in France today, in a manner that is both pervasive and inconspicuous. The Hexagon is not only a vehicle for the remembering and forgetting necessary to national identity but is itself intermittently, and sometimes simultaneously, remembered and forgotten. This indicates its ongoing iconographic power, even in a context characterized by increased circulation and critique, and explains the continued necessity of engaging with its history and uses.

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[54] Deluermoz, 'Introduction: les échelles de la France', p. 27.