I Rendered a World Where I Was Wanted

MASSAWA AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF ACCESS

01 The photograph and its jurisdiction

The point of departure for *I Rendered a World Where I Was Wanted* (2026) is a set of photographs of butcher shops in Massawa, an Eritrean port on the Red Sea. [1] I take the shop as an institution in its own right: a place where a body is divided into portions, where those portions acquire prices, and where people negotiate the terms on which they can buy or sell them. The picture gives the viewer a position near that activity without identifying the participants or supplying an account of the exchange. The cuts of meat across the foreground can be recognized more readily than the relations among the figures. That imbalance matters. It is possible to identify what has been made available for sale without knowing who has the authority to sell it.



Fig. 1. *I Rendered a World Where I Was Wanted*, 2026.

My research follows a field bounded for the purposes of this essay by four references: the northern Sudanese frontier, the southern extremity of Tanzania, Rwanda's western longitude, and an offshore station east of Somalia. These are not the borders of a proposed country. Nor are they interchangeable: one is a disputed historical alignment, another a surveyed national extremity, another a published range, and the last a point I select. The field includes places with different histories and forms of sovereignty. I use it to ask how a place is made available to somebody elsewhere, and how institutions distinguish between access to a place and authority over it.

The working distinction is between *empirical* description and *imperial* power. By the former I mean the evidence through which a place is measured, described or made administratively legible. By the latter I mean the capacity to set the terms of movement, access or representation at a distance. The two can support each other without being identical. A coordinate can document an overreach as readily as it can assist one. I am interested in keeping enough of the description to establish what happened and enough distance from its categories to see whose purposes it serves. [2]

1 Unpublished artist materials, *Bereket art writing*, 2–3. The source identifies the Massawa photographs and reproduces the work. It separately mentions a Sudanese press photograph in relation to the wider practice, not as a confirmed source for this drawing.

2 J. B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1–20. [source]

02 Four limits and a station

I use coordinates to delimit the inquiry, not to assert that the places within it share a single history. The register combines different orders of precision. The southern extremity is a named point. The western limit is a reported longitude, for which I do not invent a latitude. The eastern station is mine. The distinctions are part of the notation rather than problems to be erased from it.

North — **22°00′ N** · Sudan–Egypt reference parallel. The 1899 line and the 1902 administrative arrangement are not coincident. The reference does not settle the status of Halaʾib. [3]

South — **11°32′ S, 37°05′ E** · Mtalika, the southernmost point named by Tanzania's National Bureau of Statistics. Use its latitude for the frame and retain its longitude as site information. [4]

West — **approximately 28°53′ E** · Western longitude in Rwanda's published national extent. This is a working meridian, not a verified pinpoint on the Rwanda–DRC frontier. [5]

East — **05°00′ N, 53°00′ E** · An offshore station selected for the essay, east of Somalia in the western Indian Ocean. Its longitude is a working cutoff. It is not an official maritime boundary or a universal starting line for the high seas.

Primary site — **15.60811° N, 39.47455° E** · Massawa, Eritrea. Gazetteer coordinate for the city, not the position of a particular butcher shop. [6]

The northern and southern limits are separated by 33°32′ of latitude. Calling that span a rectangle is useful as a way of stating what I have included, but it does not make the four sides commensurate. Much of the Red Sea and part of the Arabian Peninsula can fall inside the coordinate envelope, while portions of Sudan fall west of the chosen meridian. Those consequences are not errors to be concealed. They demonstrate why the envelope is a method for selecting material rather than a claim to have discovered a natural region.

3 UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, *Egypt Toponymic Factfile*, section on the Egypt–Sudan boundary. [source]

4 Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics, *Tanzania in Figures 2020*, §2, "Geography." [source]

5 Rwanda Ministry of Health, *Rwanda Climate and Health Vulnerability Assessment* (2025), geographic profile. [source]

6 GeoNames, "Massawa," populated-place entry, Eritrea. [source]

03 The Somali coast and the offshore limit

“Where international waters start” is not a sufficiently exact instruction for drawing the eastern edge. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a territorial sea can extend up to twelve nautical miles from the applicable baselines. Beyond it, an exclusive economic zone can extend up to 200 nautical miles. There the coastal state has specified rights over resources, while other states retain freedoms including navigation and overflight, subject to the Convention. The high seas are a separate legal category. A ship can therefore be outside a territorial sea without being on the high seas. Nor does the status of the water column necessarily determine the status of the seabed. [7]

Somalia’s 2014 proclamation specifies a 200-nautical-mile EEZ measured from its baselines. Where maritime claims overlap, distance alone does not settle delimitation. In 2021 the International Court of Justice rejected the existence of an agreed Somali–Kenyan boundary along the parallel claimed by Kenya. It fixed the landward starting point at 1°39′44.0″ S, 41°33′34.4″ E and the end of the territorial-sea segment at 1°47′39.1″ S, 41°43′46.8″ E. Its Point B, at 3°04′21.3″ S, 44°35′30.7″ E, is the point at which the adjudicated line reaches the 200-nautical-mile limit measured from Kenya’s baselines. It is not the easternmost point of Somalia’s EEZ. The Court continued the delimitation of the continental shelf beyond B subject to outer limits and third-state rights. [8]

These points are not proposed endpoints of the artwork. I retain them as a comparison with my chosen offshore station because the court record shows what it takes to make a line operative. The judgment specifies a beacon, a low-water line, a datum and a method. The offshore point in my register has no such authority. Its function is to keep the ocean within the inquiry rather than let the shoreline serve as the edge of the picture.

There is also a distinction between the way the sea appears on a route map and the way it appears in a legal record. The route map can make waters look continuous because the vessel moves through them. The legal record can assign several kinds of rights to the same stretch of water. Neither view can stand in for the other. A coastline alone tells me no more about the division of those rights than the edge of the butcher’s counter tells me who sets the price.

7 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), arts. 2–3, 55–58, 76–78, 86–87. [source 1] [source 2] [source 3]

8 Federal Republic of Somalia, EEZ proclamation, June 30, 2014. International Court of Justice, *Maritime Delimitation in the Indian Ocean (Somalia v. Kenya)*, judgment, October 12, 2021, operative clauses and sketch-map 13 as reproduced in the Court’s release. [source 1] [source 2]

04 Massawa before and after the colony

Massawa is not a proxy for the Horn of Africa. It is the source of the shop images and a port with a history that makes the category of an imperial possession insufficient. Jonathan Miran's study of nineteenth-century Massawa reconstructs the city through merchant families, religious affiliations, commerce and migration. His account makes it possible to describe the port's relations with the highlands and the opposite coast of the Red Sea without assuming that those relations originated in the plans of a European administration. [9]

The succession of administrations still matters. Massawa was incorporated into the Ottoman sphere in the sixteenth century, passed into Egyptian administration in the nineteenth, and was occupied by Italy in 1885. The Italian colony of Eritrea was formally established in 1890. These dates name changes in administration, not successive origins of the city. Eritrea's heritage documentation and a late nineteenth-century Italian colonial history register the same port from differently situated institutions. The former presents the city as a heritage site. The latter belongs to the period in which Italy had to account for the acquisition and consolidation of a colony. I would not use either source alone to establish who could work, trade or own property in the port at a given moment. [10]

The butcher shop is a useful point at which to stop the port history from substituting for the image. A port inventory lists what arrives and leaves. A shop has to make an object of a different size out of what arrives, assign it a price, and find a purchaser. Both depend on classification, but they classify for different purposes. It would be possible to learn a great deal about Massawa as a strategic asset without learning anything about the people who work in the shop. The painting does not supply their biographies. It holds open a place for their labor in a description otherwise liable to begin at the harbor and end at the customs house.

The relevance of Massawa is therefore not that a cut of meat symbolizes an imperial frontier. It is that the source photographs place a particular kind of work inside a city generally made visible through other objects: ships, monuments, government buildings, trade statistics. I use the shop to question the choice of unit. A description at the scale of the port is not false. It is inadequate for identifying what the shop makes available to the painting.

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9 Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). [source]

10 State of Eritrea, "Massawa: Natural Outlet of the Internal Trade Routes," documentation hosted by UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *La colonia Eritrea dalle sue origini fino al 1º marzo 1899*, Library of Congress catalog and digitized colonial publication. [source 1] [source 2]

05 Ethiopia and the forms of access

Article 17 of the Treaty of Wuchale (1889) is a case in which language became an instrument of jurisdiction. The Amharic and Italian versions did not establish the same obligation concerning the use of Italy in Ethiopia's relations with other powers. What was optional in the Amharic text was read as obligatory in the Italian. The dispute concerns who could speak to whom and whether an intermediary had to authorize the relation. It is more useful here than a general claim that a colonial power misrepresented Ethiopia, because the contested obligation can be located in a particular provision. [11]

This history does not put Ethiopia outside an inquiry into imperial power. Italy's claim to mediate Ethiopian diplomacy and Ethiopia's later absorption of Eritrea are different episodes, with different actors and legal conditions. The 1952 federation joined Eritrea to Ethiopia under a UN framework that provided for Eritrean autonomy. Ethiopia ended that arrangement in 1962 by annexing Eritrea. Following a referendum, Eritrea became independent in 1993. The terms under which Ethiopia could use Red Sea ports were consequently no longer those of an internal administrative relationship. I distinguish the history of Ethiopian resistance to Italian rule from the history of Ethiopian state power in Eritrea rather than let the first provide an explanation or justification for the second. [12]

A 2023 World Bank appraisal described the Addis–Djibouti corridor as carrying approximately 95 percent of Ethiopia's import and export trade by volume. That is a dated institutional estimate, not a permanent property of Ethiopian geography. The bank's description takes the corridor as a problem of freight movement. The December 2024 Ankara Declaration, facilitated by Türkiye, describes a different route to access. Ethiopia and Somalia agreed to work toward commercial arrangements for Ethiopian access to and from the sea under Somalia's sovereign authority. The text sets out a framework for negotiation. It does not transfer sovereignty or prove that a lease was concluded. [13]

A corridor, a lease and sovereignty over a coast are therefore not three expressions of a single right. A corridor concerns movement through infrastructure. A lease concerns the terms of use. Sovereignty concerns the authority under which those terms can be made and enforced. The word *access* is useful only if it prompts the next question: access for whom, under what instrument, and for what operation?

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11 "Article 17 of the Treaty of Uccialli," African Union Commission Library catalog and abstract, on the divergence between the Amharic and Italian texts. [source]

12 UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, *Detailed Findings*, A/HRC/29/CRP.1 (2015), chap. III, historical background. [source]

13 World Bank, *Horn of Africa Initiative: Regional Economic Corridor Project*, project appraisal document (2023), ¶13. Ethiopia and Somalia, *Ankara Declaration*, December 11, 2024. [source 1] [source 2]

06 Somalia and the authorized movement of force

In June 2008, UN Security Council Resolution 1816 gave states cooperating with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government a time-limited authorization to enter Somali territorial waters to repress piracy and armed robbery, subject to notice and cooperation requirements. The resolution expressly limited that authorization to Somalia's circumstances and disclaimed its establishment of customary international law. The specificity matters. The arrangement depended on the difference between the high seas and the territorial sea. It did not declare Somali waters ungoverned or open them generally to any foreign navy. [14]

An account centered on the interruption of shipping can make the coast appear chiefly as a source of risk. The World Bank's study of Somali piracy is useful for its treatment of land-based organization and political conditions. It is also a document issued by an institution concerned with the costs of insecurity. I read those two features together. Neither a narrative of foreign fishing nor a narrative of local criminality is sufficient to explain a ransom economy. More to the point for this essay, neither should substitute for an account of which lives and losses become countable when the unit of analysis is the passage of a ship. [15]

The U.S. Africa Command's civilian-harm reporting supplies a different record of external force in Somalia. Its published assessments are evidence of how the command receives, classifies and reports allegations concerning its own operations. They should not be treated as a comprehensive or independent register of harm. I keep them separate from the counterpiracy record. The ability to strike inland and the temporary authorization to enter territorial waters are both projections of force, but they are not authorized by the same instrument or measured by the same procedure. [16]

Somalia also appears in this inquiry as a claimant capable of instituting proceedings, negotiating access and attaching conditions to cooperation. The court case and the Ankara Declaration belong beside the security record because they make that agency visible. There is a substantial difference between documenting the power of outside actors and writing as though the places in which they act have no political authors. I do not want to replace the older image of empty territory with a more up-to-date image of territory in which only foreign agencies are capable of acting.

14 UN Security Council, Resolution 1816, S/RES/1816 (2008), June 2, 2008, especially ¶¶7 and 9. [source]

15 World Bank, *The Pirates of Somalia: Ending the Threat, Rebuilding a Nation* (2013), executive summary. [source]

16 U.S. Africa Command, "Civilian Harm Report," reporting archive. Used here as an institutional primary source, not an independent casualty dataset. [source]

07 Four external investments

I use *imperial* as a question about the distribution of power, not as a blanket name for any foreign relationship. An overseas base, a port concession, an infrastructure loan and the facilitation of a diplomatic agreement are different instruments. Treating them as equivalent would obscure what each enables and how much room regional actors have to bargain. The following cases are dated observations rather than a current inventory.

01 **United States and China** · In Djibouti, Camp Lemonnier and the Chinese military support base opened in 2017 place two external military institutions near the passage between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The same country also hosts other foreign forces, including those of France and Japan. Proximity does not establish identical mandates or control of the strait. It does establish that basing rights are valuable to more than one external power. [17]

02 **United Arab Emirates** · Assab and Berbera belong in separate files. A 2016 UN monitoring report documented military construction at Assab in Eritrea and discussed the use of the site in connection with the Yemen conflict. In 2021 Dubai-based DP World and Somaliland authorities announced the opening of a container terminal at Berbera. The announcement is evidence of a commercial project and its stated ambitions, not proof that projected trade materialized or that the port agreement settled questions of recognition. [18]

03 **Türkiye** · The Ankara Declaration records Türkiye as facilitator of an agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia. In this instance the instrument is diplomatic mediation. The document does not show that Türkiye acquired the port rights being discussed. Its importance lies in the position it occupies between two governments negotiating the terms of maritime access. [19]

04 **China, Tanzania and Zambia** · TAZARA has to be read in relation to Zambian and Tanzanian objectives as well as Chinese financing and support. The 1967 tripartite agreement and the railway's operation from 1976 gave Zambia an alternative route to the sea that reduced dependence on routes through white-minority-ruled southern Africa. Reading it only as an instance of Chinese projection would miss why the African governments pursued it. [20]

The comparison also makes *investment* less slippery. The investment at issue may be the purchase of operating capacity, the ability to move forces, or the ability to shape the forum where an agreement is made. Those aims do not require the same degree of control. For that reason I keep the actor, instrument and stated purpose attached to each example.

17 Congressional Research Service, *Djibouti*, IF11303, June 9, 2025. [source]

18 UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, S/2016/920 (2016), discussion of Assab. DP World, announcement of Berbera's container terminal, June 24, 2021. [source 1] [source 2]

19 *Ankara Declaration*, December 11, 2024. See note 13.

20 Tanzania–Zambia Railway Authority, "Our History." World Bank, historical appraisal of TAZARA, background on route diversification and operations. [source 1] [source 2]

08 Sudan and the inland reaches of the field

At the northern limit, the difference between the 1899 political line and the 1902 administrative line is visible in the dispute over Halaʾib. A change in administrative treatment could be charted without erasing the earlier line. Both can then be brought forward as evidence in incompatible accounts. This is why I use 22° N as a reference and do not call it the northernmost point of Sudan. The coordinate is precise about latitude and deliberately incomplete about sovereignty. [21]

At the western limit, the historical record describes a different kind of abstraction. A U.S. State Department boundary study traces the delimitation of what is now the Rwanda–DRC border to negotiations among British, German and Belgian colonial authorities in 1910. Lake Kivu and the Ruzizi system do not become colonial inventions because they enter a delimitation. What changes is the authority given to selected features and points. In 1964 the Organization of African Unity resolved that member states should respect borders existing at independence. That postcolonial choice, made in the context of interstate disputes, is not evidence that the earlier lines were naturally or consensually drawn. It does mean their continuing force cannot be explained solely by the intentions of the governments that first negotiated them. [22]

The western and southern limits would be arbitrary in a less useful sense if I could not follow a material relation between them. The Central Corridor gives one. Its intergovernmental agency describes a transport network connecting Rwanda and other member states to maritime trade through Dar es Salaam. The network puts the inland and maritime parts of the research field in the same inquiry without suggesting that Rwanda is in the Horn or that the corridor goes through Mtalika. Dar es Salaam is the port of the network. Mtalika fixes the essay's southern reference. Each answers a different question. [23]

Deborah Cowen's account of logistics helps explain why these passages cannot be treated as empty intervals between important places. Routes have to be built, financed, maintained and secured. A logistics map privileges the movement it is designed to facilitate and can make interruptions appear as defects in the system, even when they arise from competing uses of land or from the people who work along the route. This is one reason not to let a regional corridor map double as an account of the region's inhabitants. [24]

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21 UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, *Egypt Toponymic Factfile*. See note 3.

22 U.S. Department of State, *International Boundary Study* no. 52, "Congo (Leopoldville)–Rwanda Boundary" (1965). Organization of African Unity, "Border Disputes among African States," AHG/Res. 16(I), Cairo, 1964. [source 1] [source 2]

23 Central Corridor Transit Transport Facilitation Agency, "Overview." [source]

24 Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). [source]

09 The authority of the picture

The most consequential precedent in Zaid Arshad's *Ginen/Jinan* for this essay is his separation of the official explanation of a design from the account of its manufacture and circulation. A ribbon can carry an authorized description of its colors and then enter a collector's market. A screenprint can reproduce those colors through a different arrangement of labor. Arshad places the commission and his letters to Josias de Gonaïves alongside the chronology of missions. The source object has an institutional history, but the artwork is not obliged to repeat the institution's own account of what the object does. [25]

The source object here does not begin as an official decoration. The Massawa shop photographs and the photograph of a Sudanese woman mentioned in the broader practice notes have different statuses. The first set is documented as source material for this work. The second is described as a press image attributed in those notes to *TIME*, without enough bibliographic detail to establish the issue, photographer or original caption. I do not identify it as a source for this picture, and I do not use its reported contents as evidence about Sudan. To include it under those conditions would let the apparent specificity of a date do the work of a missing provenance. [26]

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's account of historical production is useful here because it places the problem of silence at more than one stage. A person can go unnamed when a picture is made, remain unnamed when it enters a collection, and be described later through the event the collection considers significant. These are distinct omissions, and supplying a name at one stage does not retrospectively repair the others. Ariella Azoulay similarly gives the spectator a relation to the people photographed that cannot be exhausted by the intentions of the photographer or the ownership of the image. The practical implication for this essay is modest: to say precisely what I can recognize, what I can substantiate and what I have no standing to assign. [27]

The painting is not the missing caption to a photograph. Its figures are not evidence about the participants in a documented transaction. What it can do is hold the viewer close to an activity whose terms remain partially inaccessible. In the reproduction, the foreground cuts, the central figure in a head covering and the adjacent turned figure do not yield the same kind of information. The cuts can be recognized as articles of trade. The posture of a figure can be observed. Neither observation identifies what the person was doing there or what they owed to another person in the scene. Recognizability is not the same as identification.

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25 Zaid Arshad, *Ginen/Jinan* (Cooper Union undergraduate thesis, 2025), introduction, 7–9, and first letter to Josias, 114–16. [source]

26 *Bereket art writing*, 2–3. The 1979 attribution is an unverified research lead. The image and caption are not reproduced here as a source for the drawing.

27 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), chap. 1. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008). [source 1] [source 2]

10 Research scores and conclusion

The following scores govern the inquiry around the work. They are ways of reading across records without claiming that all the records tell the same story.

I **Score for a line** · Transcribe the coordinate and record its datum if given. Name the institution or person that selected it. State what the line does. Keep a reference parallel, a judicial line and an artist's station in separate columns.

II **Score for a route** · Write down what moves, who authorizes movement and what instrument governs it. Keep the commodity, the person and the armed force distinct. Compare a port operator's account of throughput with an agreement's account of access. Do not treat a projection as observed movement.

III **Score for an image** · Identify the earliest source available, the known place, and the intended audience if one can be established. Record what changed when the image was reproduced. Leave the name, issue or location blank when it cannot be established. Do not use an unidentified person as evidence for the history of a whole territory.

Three arcs structure the essay. The first, from northern Sudan to southern Tanzania, compares the different procedures by which a parallel and a national extremity enter a geographic description. The second, from the Somali offshore station to Rwanda's western meridian, places maritime rights and inland access in the same field without substituting one for the other. The third begins at the Massawa shop, moves through the records that render the port legible from elsewhere, and returns to the scale of the scene. These are research arcs, not routes taken by the figures or proposed historical continuities.

The title *I Rendered a World Where I Was Wanted* leaves the party doing the wanting unnamed. That omission does not require every use of the word to carry a threat. It does require attention to the conditions attached to being sought, admitted or put to use. The regional research has given me several literal instances in which the conditions of admission are written down. A coastal state can retain authority while granting access. A corridor can be valuable to a country that does not possess the port at its end. A foreign institution can acquire the capacity to act without acquiring the land. Each of those statements names a relation, rather than an inherent quality of a place.

The drawing does not offer a political settlement or a map without borders. It begins with a workplace photographed in Massawa and makes a world whose rules cannot be read off the appearance of its occupants. The essay's coordinates make the inquiry accountable to actual places. The painting gives me a reason to ask what those coordinates leave out.