

When I asked Franca López Barbera to respond to my map-making practice she immediately unsettled my premise: “Your map is not reimagining; you are redrawing the same colonial lines.” That single remark reframed the project. Up until then my iterative drawings felt like a method of opening up the map, but her intervention forced me to see them as a repetition of a colonial grammar. The conversation moved quickly from technique to ethics. If maps are operations of authority, who consents to those operations? And what, or who, is erased by drawing the same lines again and again?

Franca offered three linked provocations that suggested an alternate way of approaching my enquiry. First, she asked me to distinguish between *borders* and *boundaries*. Borders act as political limits, while boundaries can be places of exchange. She drew on ecology to illustrate the point, noting that ecosystems thrive where two environments meet and trade energy, not where hard limits are enforced. This biological perspective disrupted my default reliance on political cartographies and suggested a different priority: instead of sharpening lines, I might map flows of water, species, and ideas that spill across those lines.

Her second challenge was disarmingly simple: “Would you draw the border at all?” If the border is itself an imposed operation, in the context of partition being an act rather than a mere event, then perhaps my work should refuse the operation altogether. She described Partition as a moment when people resisted the paper line, carrying objects, fabrics, and songs across the prescribed limits, as exemplified in one of my references named “Remnants of Partition: 21 Objects from a Continent Divided”. Those migrations reveal that the territorial mark is a bureaucratic gesture at odds with lived reality.

The third provocation concerned form and data. Franca pointed to “queering the maps,” another one of my projects that privilege stories and relationships instead of numerical metrics. These queer cartographies elevate *qualitative* information, like oral histories and reverse the usual hierarchy of mapping. Building on her research into consent and more-than-human entanglements, she urged me to treat rivers, topography, and even radio waves as legitimate participants in any new map. She reminded me that climate and topographic charts ignore national borders completely, an insight that invites me to layer those systems into my own work as a strategy of critique.

This dialogue has three clear implications for my enquiry. First comes a methodological shift: I will experiment with qualitative mapping, creating visual layers that perhaps centre stories, memories, and exchanges rather than administrative divisions. Second is a material reorientation: I will borrow the logic of topographic and climatic mapping to reveal how rivers, rainfall, agricultural zones, and radio or Internet signals cross and quietly dismantle imposed borders. Third is an ethical protocol: guided by Franca’s emphasis on consent, any collection of personal narratives will be negotiated and reciprocal so the map becomes a host for voices rather than an act of extraction.

The conversation also left me with sharper studio questions. What is the territory of my family? Is my map in fact my family’s? If borders are artificial impositions, what visible phenomena can I

highlight to show lived permeability i.e., the in-between spaces where species, languages, and people belong to neither side or to both? Franca's critique has prompted me to shift my focus from re-drawing colonial lines to investigating the mechanisms that make those lines porous or even absurd. My next experiments will highlight exchange, story, and consent, revealing how radio waves, rivers, songs, and everyday objects quietly refuse the limits of the nation-state.

Reference

López Barbera, F. (2025) Personal interview with Haris Mahmood, [video call], 2025.