The goal of this book is to explore how we wound up with the current arrangement of countries on the planet, why that arrangement has stayed relatively static for so long, and whether changing the arrangement would be possible or advisable. The book looks at some of the forces keeping the current map of the world in place as well as some of the forces—economic, cultural, and environmental—pressuring it to change. The idea to write a book about why it’s so hard to start a new country—or alter the shape of an existing one—came about long before a confluence of events driven by Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, ISIS, and Brexit made the topic far more timely and applicable to some of the world’s most pressing ongoing crises than it had been.

The case studies in this book are examples of places, both real and virtual, where our comfortable view of the world’s landmass as divided into neat, mutually exclusive territorial units called countries breaks down.

Each of the five “countries” (all of which I traveled to in 2016) described in this book’s main chapters illustrates a problem with the world map as currently drawn. Abkhazia, a Russian-backed breakaway enclave, recognized by most of the world as part of Georgia, shows how geopolitical rivalries shape which countries achieve full independence. Akwesasne, an indigenous political community that
straddles the U.S.-Canadian border and predates the countries that have emerged on either side of it, challenges the notion that only one kind of nation can be sovereign. Somaliland, a semi-autonomous region in northern Somalia, has achieved all the trappings of countryhood but is simply ignored by most of the international community. The same can’t be said of Iraqi Kurdistan, a place regularly in global headlines but continually frustrated in its efforts to challenge the Middle East’s geographical status quo. Finally, Kiribati, a small island country in the central Pacific, has become a poster child for the imminent political disruptions caused by climate change, raising the question of whether a country can continue to exist when the piece of land it is associated with no longer does.

Interspersed with these primary chapters are small sections I call “outliers”: examples of people refusing to be confined by the world map as currently constructed. They discuss the Sovereign Order of Malta, Estonia’s electronic residency program, the free-market utopian political experiment known as Liberland, and the struggles of stateless people to have their human rights recognized in a world where national citizenship is all but mandatory.

My hope is that these examples, some well known, some obscure, will lead readers to think more critically about the contemporary map of the world and to consider more creatively what it might look like in the future.
Invisible Countries