

Introduction: Beyond Borders? Interrogating Boundaries in our Twenty-First Century World

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Taking our cue from a 2017 interdisciplinary pedagogy and research workshop on “Border Studies in the Liberal Arts”, supported by the Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA),¹ and held (in conjunction with Kenyon College) here at Franklin University Switzerland, this Volume 6 of *intervalla* seeks to explore some of the very many ways in which we understand, shape, and negotiate borders and boundaries in our twenty-first century world.² In the face of such a vast and multidimensional concept, and such a varied, multidisciplinary terrain, the direction and (dis)order of the volume, its somewhat unruly line of flight, is first and foremost guided by the contributions gathered here, following the threads of the papers present to tease out common themes and concerns in our twenty-first century approach to borders over a variety of fields. Drawing together papers from International Relations, Communication and Media Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, and Psychology, also in some of their broader applications, the ideas collected here suggest possible modes by which to think – and in some cases, rethink – Border Studies, and to collectively express the twenty-first century emphases emerging from this most interdisciplinary of fields.

The original conception of this volume began from the somewhat utopian standpoint that our age is, seemingly, an age in which communications technologies, transnational institutions and markets, and easy mobility – for those in positions of privilege – enable the transcendence of the borders of communities, states, literatures, cultures, and institutions. In this utopian view, border transcendence would give access to other ways of living or thinking, and to “crossings” for visiting, learning, or relocating, and would further enable us to challenge the limitations imposed by borders past, those constructed by wars, by colonialism, by law, by custom, by academic disciplines, or by accepted definitions and categories. And yet. At the same time, we cannot deny that our supposedly post-national world seems to have a mania for representing “in-between” spaces, and for verbalizing the idea of the “crossing”, with phrases such as “cross-cultural contact” and “cross-cultural communication” always already constructing entities, both actual and metaphorical, that implicitly have two sides. Are we capable of thinking beyond the static? Do we even have the conditions to do so at our present point, and in our present world?

While we might think, especially with the technological facet of our world as it is, and the extensive mobility that many academics take for granted (including many of those who traveled to the workshop that sparked this volume), that borders *should* be being broken down, crossed, “removed altogether” (Newman 2011), what we find in comparing and contrasting all of the papers collected here, is that they in fact demonstrate that the articulation of difference is still very much a part of our contemporary communities, worlds, and spaces, in all senses of the word – even those of the technological, as Sugiyama and I both demonstrate in our contributions here. Indeed, the central idea we all share and discuss, in our different ways, is that of “us” and “them” (see for example Newman 2011; Diener and Hagen 2012). We may be able to “see beyond” borders, but that does not mean that they do not exist and that we ourselves are not implicit in making them and remaking them on a daily basis. Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen caution that “determinations of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and ‘in place’ and ‘out of place’”

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² I bear a huge debt of gratitude to my research assistants, Ilumin Mahal Gacayan and Catherine Cravens, funded by Franklin University Switzerland’s LLS Program, for their help in the putting together of this volume. I know Nizar Messari and Irene López will join me in thanking Min for her engagement in the middle stages of this project, and in particular for her thoughtful and incisive comments, and enthusiastic attention to the detail of our arguments. I thank Catherine for her tremendous support in the final stages of this project, and for all the work she has done to make this volume cohesive, and to make it look good.

emanate not from our processed perceptions of supposedly pre-existing “categories” or “cultural characteristics” – they give the examples of race, ethnicity, language, and religion – but rather, from “unequal power relations within and between social systems” (2012, p.6). Identification with a “territory” – again, either an actual space, or one created and shaped around *something*, however ephemeral or nebulous, able to be constructed as shared, possessed in some way by a group – provides us with the “social mechanism” and impetus for controlling this territory by constructing “what is ‘ours’” and “what is ‘theirs’”, and, resultantly, an “us” and a “them” (Diener and Hagen, pp.4-7).

Precisely this construction and management of borders, territories, and different social, political, and communal iterations of “us” and “them” is, perhaps not surprisingly, a further shared concern of the papers in this volume. In their different ways, all of them, and especially Bucher, ask how the borders they interrogate come into being, who manages them, and with what. For many of the contributors, David Newman’s concept of “the bordering process” (2011), a cornerstone of interdisciplinary Border Studies, is either explicitly referenced, or ideas similar to Newman’s are discussed in another way or form. Newman argues that the contexts, environments, grounds, and conditions for the formation of borders may vary across the border situations explored by different fields and disciplines, but the general “themes” of border formation bear striking commonalities (2011, p.33). These themes are the “demarcation” of borders, the “management” and institutionalization of them that immediately follows this and continues as a process, and their borderland-potential – the possibility for future crossings and destabilizations that is inherent in them from the beginning (Newman 2011).

This notion of “crossing”, and what happens afterwards, is the final common thread of the volume contributions that I will address here. The twenty-first century borders we discuss can crack, they can rupture, and they can be fuzzy around the edges – there is always “a degree of movement within [our] border zones” (Newman 2011, p.37). This movement is inherent in Bucher’s “border as process”, in Sugiyama’s “emoji borderland”, and in my contribution’s focus on the “how” of imagining and effecting border crossing in cultural texts. There is also movement inherent in Messari’s migrant stories, but he and López focus on the aftermath of border crossing: on the borderlands of the migrant as a surprisingly static, limbo state. Crossings do not always bring answers, nor do they promise resolution.

Moving from the conceptual, to the social and technological, to minings of cultural texts, to two inherently topical, moving, and experience-driven calls for action, the volume both begins (with Bucher) and ends (with López) with explicit calls for new ways of thinking and of doing the study of borders, and plenty of material for setting us on that path.

In “Boundaries, Inequalities and Legitimacies”, Bernd Bucher opens the volume by putting forward a framework for understanding and usefully working with the intersections between boundary demarcation (as process), the production of inequalities, and the normative assessment of the “legitimacy” of both in a variety of situations. Bucher is particularly concerned to demonstrate that any process of boundary drawing necessarily produces difference, and that boundary *redrawing* renegotiates it. As such, he sees borders and boundaries as a process, rather than as any kind of static entities, they are never ontologically implicated, that is, they do not begin by merely “existing” as entities, rather, they are continuously drawn and redrawn: in a constant state of becoming over time, they in fact *precede* nation states (Jackson and Nexon 1999). This also means that the borders and boundaries Bucher discusses cannot simply “stop existing”, rather, they would eventually give way to other boundaries or borders over time. They are also always already multiple, and Bucher is adamant that we must see borders “in the plural”, ultimately calling for “border studies.” Moving to his second dimension, Bucher is careful to point out that differences and inequalities are not – indeed, are never – synonymous, even if the latter may emanate from the process of boundary drawing, and here, he explores how difference can “translate” into inequality, and how this process is always already enmeshed with other, multidimensional social processes. Bucher’s third dimension is the construction of “(il)legitimacy”,

entailing an exploration of how we normatively adjudge whether boundary-drawing processes are “just” or “fair.” Teasing out the relationships between the three dimensions, Bucher reflects on the “multidimensional space” that their interrelations produce, and concludes on suggested implementations of his framework as a resource and a connect for collaborative teaching and research practises at liberal arts (here, specifically GLAA) institutions.

Satomi Sugiyama also addresses the ways in which boundary-drawing produces difference and forms social groups, but for her, it is important to remember that these (communicative) boundaries are always already blurred at the edges. Beginning with the idea that mobile communication has blurred many boundaries in our contemporary lives, Sugiyama introduces the centrality of the emoji to our twenty-first century communication processes. Exploring the various ways in which the emoji is communicatively employed, Sugiyama’s paper is particularly notable for demonstrating the process whereby accepted definitions of social categories can actually be made via emoji use, and the way in which the social and the semantic intersect in this process. Asking how people, and especially the young, university-going women she has interviewed, demarcate and manage (Newman 2011) their relationships via their use of emojis, Sugiyama goes into depth on the construction and implications of norms, supposed “right ways” and “wrong ways” to denote meaning to various, inherently polysemic emojis and to build groups – whose “belongingness” networked individualism has rendered always already unstable – via the management of a shared understanding of these meanings. Identifying a number of different boundaries at play in the shaping of the semantic boundaries of emoji use, Sugiyama focuses in particular on three of these – relational boundaries, gender boundaries, and generational boundaries – exploring how her interview subjects maintain these boundaries by focusing on the differences in the ways others (parents, grandparents, male friends, colleagues, etc.) use emojis, creating themselves as insiders and these “others” as outsiders to the group in question. In so doing, Sugiyama uncovers an interesting dichotomy: where mobile communication emphasizes the fluidity of boundaries, her subjects are seeking precisely to fix them (again), a challenging task in the space of the “emoji borderland”, where multiple social boundaries intersect, and multiple semantic possibilities are produced.

In my contribution, I also mine borderland spaces, here those of the central Mediterranean, exploring challenges to boundary drawing in (state) memory through the Deleuzoguattarian concept of “holey space” and the works of three practitioners, French writer Leïla Sebbar, Tunisian artist Farah Khelil, and Italian filmmaker Martina Melilli. I argue that holey space, that in Deleuzoguattarian terms is both striated (formed and policed by the state) and smooth (a deterritorialized space of escape), is a particularly useful concept to help us understand how Sebbar’s, Khelil’s, and Melilli’s imagined Mediterranean is marked up with colonial pasts and the socio-political residue of the present, and yet still offers some form of escape from striation in the various border “openings” their works’ connections make possible. Indeed the combination-in-process of the elements in their work, I argue, functions to redirect and open up meaning and “frustrate the state apparatus” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p.458, Hantel 2012). Suggesting that specific formal features of Sebbar’s Franco-Algerian alphabet book, Khelil’s obscuring and piercing of Franco-Maghrebi tourist paraphernalia, and Melilli’s Italian-Libyan memory fragments and mediated presents in her film *My Home, in Libya* (2018), in particular the virtual and actual collages, holes, and points they work with, produce a statically-intense holey fabric matter of the border, I look at how historical striations and cultural systems are disrupted by the active reshaping of memory and its folding into the present at the border.

Also focusing on the Mediterranean region, Nizar Messari seeks to problematize the current popular discursive notion of migration as one of exclusion and the contemporary understanding of a migrant as a threat to the state. Telling stories, and thereby both acknowledging and highlighting the voice and agency of migrants he has interviewed in the specific, and arguably little-studied, context of contemporary Morocco’s role as a transit (and latterly, residence) country of Mediterranean migration, Messari posits a dynamic understanding of space (specifically, of the

space of North Africa and the Sahel) and how it is altered by being moved through by the migrant. Arguing that non-state actors such as violent extremist groups, smugglers, and migrants redefine the ways in which “space matters” and borders are crossed or reshaped altogether, thereby prompting the reactions of the state to their movements (rather than the state being the actor imposing the meaning and relational framework), Messari explores movement through three narrational categories he has identified in migrant stories: stories of hope, stories of suffering and hardship, and stories of resilience. Messari discovers how migrants in and of the region of North Africa and the Sahel themselves narrate their “push and pull” factors and their journeys, and how their resultant narratives (and the commonalities between them) shape their world around them and encourage them to continue “acting and moving.”

In the final contribution to this volume, “Whiplash: Shifting Positionalities and Disciplinary Cross-Fire in the Study of Borders”, Irene López identifies the ethical challenges inherent in the study of migration. Like Messari, López believes that we must start with the individuality and experience of the migrant, but not only there – indeed, while migration studies must place the migrant at the center, for López it is also fundamental for migration researchers to take a long, hard look at themselves, reflecting on their own positionality. Using a borders workshop she attended in Greece – which included an organized visit to a refugee camp, Kara Tepe, in Lesbos – as her case study, López begins by formulating a scathing critique of academics more concerned with squabbling over “correct” border terminology and semantics than reshaping the on-the-ground, lived realities of their “field.” Both the presentation of the camp to the academics (as “village”, when its restrictive architecture and regulations suggested otherwise), and the reactions of the majority of these academics in automatically accepting the descriptor, are telling, López posits, and demonstrate a very different notion of the importance of semantics in the description of real, lived spaces, our resultant perception of them, and the very different understanding of those who actually inhabit them. López reflects on how the group’s subsequent return to the hotel and the relational and spatial contrast this produced, led to her whiplash, and its ephiphany of the importance of taking account of (her) multiple identities ((her) job, (her) gender, (her own) immigrant background) and how they always already inform and fundamentally infuse any approach to border research. López ends her paper on a call to action. We must understand migrant stories as told by them to better acknowledge their agency. This calls for a coming down from the ivory tower and a “collaborative walk” on the ground. Centering the experience of the movers themselves effects a decolonization of migration study that actually listens to the voices of migrants.

At its outset, this volume sought to further develop an interdisciplinary framework of the border (and boundary). If there is any shared impetus to come out of this volume, it should be the inherent plurality, multidimensionality, and instability of borders and boundaries and the involvement of different actors, states, individuals, and literary and artistic works in all of the levels of their shaping – and of their shaping anew. And yet. The siting of López’s paper as the volume’s final contribution, its last reflection, is a deliberate choice. It is all very well to for us to theorize and seek to understand the machinations and permutations of the border on a cerebral level, but Messari and López bring us into contact with the stories, lives, and lived experiences of refugees, and suddenly these theories that frame our academic worlds and disciplines do not matter so much anymore in the face of – and in the faces of – the on-the-ground, lived reality of the border. Ultimately, we must, as López writes, “prioritize the voices of those who move”, and ask ourselves what it means to be arguing over definitions of borders, and how we might instead “collaboratively walk” at the border, to better understand its lived reality and make our understanding count.

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