

Parsing the Aegean affective borderscape

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Abstract

The land- and sea-scape stretching across the Greek-Turkish borders in the Aegean Sea had diachronically been a space where cultures, authorities and mobilities have interlocked and reciprocally reshaped. The advent of the European crisis of refugee reception and asylum since 2015, however, has turned the southeastern Mediterranean into a securitized zone lacerated by disquiet and death, irreversibly affecting the local topography and recasting the sociality and mobility of permanent and itinerant communities in the region. Seeking to contribute to the theoretical and analytical understanding of borders and their effects on the sociospatial landscapes they cut across, this essay offers a narrative analysis of the Aegean borderscape. This is done through the detailed parsing of a photograph depicting an inconspicuous moment of bordering, supplemented with the author's own experiences at the frontline of refugee rescue operations in Lesvos. The unravelling of the manifold storylines interlocked within the still image that is the focal point of this essay reveals the borderscape's materialities, its local and historical specificities, its affective intensities and the uneven power dynamics at play between a variety of actors encountering each other at the border.

Keywords

Borderscape, borders, Aegean Sea, Lesvos, affect, refugee 'crisis'

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This paper unfolds around the borders that stretch along the southeastern margins of Europe and the ways the interplay of various human and non-human actors within this landscape initiates a dynamic process of construction, enaction and contestation of borders from below. This is the region I was born and raised in, and which I prided myself on knowing deeply and on having researched extensively. The essence of the overlapping histories, peoples, materialities and authorities this landscape comprised of remained elusive, however, even when this study was well underway. It wasn't only my words that failed to capture and communicate the fleeting dimensions of borders that I was after: their depth and complexity, their temporality, the intensity of their embedded affects and their spill-over effects, their indeterminacy. Visual representations – photographs, illustrations, infographics – also proved insufficient in spite of the media's inundation of sensationalized refugee imagery since the 2015 refugee 'crisis'.

And yet, there was this dialogue, which had been ingrained in my mind since I first encountered it in writing:

- Would you like to photograph borders?
- You mean things that are invisible?
- Yes.

This short exchange between Sarah Green and the photographer Lena Malm in the opening lines of the book *'Borderwork: A visual journey through periphery frontier regions'* (2013) has been guiding my pursuit of how to portray borders despite their persistent undepictability through images or words.

Two years later, in September of 2015, a similar conversation took place between Anna Pantelia, a photojournalist friend with whom I had collaborated in the past (Tsoni and Pantelia, 2014) reporting on the lives and journeys of migrants in Greece, and myself. Anna had just returned to Athens from Lesbos, where she had been documenting the gathering momentum of the refugee 'crisis'. I was in Malmö preparing a talk on the Aegean borderscape, having just returned from Greece after yet another round of ethnographic fieldwork on undocumented border crossings in Athens (where I was born and raised) and Lesbos, which is a place I have come to know intimately over a long period of time and through many visits, both research-related and not. As such, I have been a first-hand witness of the radical transformation that the picturesque Aegean island has undergone: from a quaint and quiet place, where life and leisure unfolded slowly from day to day for locals and holiday-makers alike; to the first disquieting signs of refugee boats' nightly arrivals picking up more than a decade ago, met mostly with disregard or disaffection both by the authorities and the public; to the eventual toxic combination of the extensive regional turmoil with the inter/national authorities' lasting indifference and unpreparedness, which culminated dramatically into the humanitarian disaster of 2015-2016, dubbed as 'the European refugee crisis', which has been persistently unfolding across the Aegean islands despite the subsiding of media attention, ever since.

Back in that morning of September 2015, however, I was exasperated by days of unsuccessful online search for imagery that could vividly evoke the border's atmosphere to my upcoming presentation's audience. I had been looking for a picture that would convey something of the sensory richness, the material composition, the human inhabitation, as well as the legal and geographical intricacy of the floating borderline along the narrow stretch of sea between Turkey

and Greece. Online search had yielded no results: the vast majority of images coming up with any combination of the terms ‘Greece’, ‘borders’, ‘migration’, ‘refugees’ and ‘Lesvos’ depicted moments of chaos and turmoil framed within a crisis context and were filled with archetypal depictions of ‘refugeeness’. Cameras zoomed in, almost in a predatory manner, on unsuspecting, unconsenting individuals in distress. Through their narrow lenses exaggerated instances of human suffering and abjection were captured in overwhelming detail to please editors and feed the news cycle. Border-crossers were reduced into mass-replicated figures of ‘the refugee’: beings rendered as either indistinguishable parts of the ‘swarms’ that had been ‘invading’ Europe, or as ‘wretched’ existences in need of help – as either enemies, or victims. Their suffering was then broadcast in high-res globally, pushing subtler nuances and narratives of the border out of the frame, displacing peripheral presences and sidelining subdued sensibilities and senses. Such portrayals gradually desensitised audiences and confined the viewers’ perception within the images’ preset communicative architecture. Although seemingly everything laid in plain sight some of the foundational elements that made and mobilised the border apparatus were un/intentionally concealed: other actors and their practices, policies, imaginations and discourses on borders and human security remained obfuscated.¹

What I sought that September afternoon, however, was a piece of the bigger picture. I looked not just for presences, but for withdrawals as well, as well as co-presences or selective withdrawals of the Aegean borderscape’s affordances. I searched for imprints of the social, spatial, material and temporal intensities I had witnessed under many capacities around borders myself – as a casual onlooker, a concerned citizen, an academic researcher, a human-rights activist, a volunteer lifeguard rescuer at times – but which I had not yet been able to visually depict in any imagery I had captured myself, neither had I discovered in the photography of others. I was seeking one of those ‘mundane’ and ‘uneventful’ scenes of bordering, of which I had experienced plenty myself, in which, however, the traces of what may have evaded the camera’s split-second **click**, but still remained palpable long after escaping capture, and the universe of their ambivalent outcomes, were still resonant and pulsating.

“I know I’m probably not making it any easier for you now,” I told Anna, after giving her a shorter and more colloquial introduction of what I was after. She would take a look at her most recent material and get back to me, she said. A few minutes later she would text me back: “You mean something like this?” dropping a file for me to download.

¹For examples of such depictions of refugees during the 2015 ‘crisis’ see the second slideshow featured in Rothman and Ronk (2015) in the online edition of *Time* magazine.



Image 1: Sunrise over the Aegean borderscape. Image: © Anna Pantelia

It wasn't something *like* this I was after. It was *exactly* this. Opening the image file, I immediately recognised a location that I had come to know well and had encountered under different circumstances during the last years, which made its deciphering from the multiple perspectives that I embodied easier. Yet, in that moment it appeared eerily unfamiliar. Suddenly I felt disoriented and tried to re(c)enter and position myself within the landscape it presented, as well as outside it.

The complex tensions and intersections taking place within border areas are particularly hard to depict visually and, as touched upon earlier, their prevalent mediated representations often run the risk of obscuring as many of their elements as they reveal. Having experienced the frustration of being unable, despite my best efforts, to source – or to capture myself – representative imagery on borderscapes' composition, Anna's photograph emerged as the most illustrative and evocative visual example of what borderscapes, in my opinion, are: Liminal, overlapping landscapes that function as contact zones and charged fields of interaction between the shifting configurations of relationally-positioned animate and inanimate actors, and the forces, materialities, logics and imaginaries that permeate those spaces, resulting in the co-affectation of all elements involved.

In the following paragraphs I will proceed to justify this syllogism, as I will walk the reader through the diachronic spatial, social, material, cultural, historical and legal aspects of the Aegean border space that this seemingly ‘uneventful’ image pulls together and grounds within the contemporary context of the compounded ‘crises’ unfolding at the European periphery. This will be attempted from the perspective of someone who grew up on the southeastern shores of the Mediterranean and developed a keen interest in the overlapping dislocations and the successive mobilities and layerings of populations and cultures in the extended region. This curiosity fomented into something bigger than just an enduring academic interest: it has developed into a deeply-held affinity with the patterns of these phenomena in the distant past, and a preoccupation with their present- and its possible future configurations. This paper is the outcome of the enduring peregrination of someone who has grappled with borders, both internal and external, throughout her life; someone who has pursued being profoundly moved and constantly moving across spaces where borders erupt and coalesce in search of elusive traces of their history, which is lived and written from below as much as it is from above.

The image’s interpretation remains elusive, however, as most of its striking features may not be immediately noticeable for the unfamiliar, or unsuspecting eye. The answers of people to whom I had shown this picture, asking them ‘what do you see here?’ without providing any further context or introduction, missed the point and were totally unrelated. Some saw a romantic sunrise at an idyllic location. A little cropping around the photograph’s lower side could easily transform it into a tourism-promoting campaign for a few or make it a perfect destination-wedding photoshoot setting for others. In someone else’s, more ecologically-conscious perspective, the amount of plastic trash floating on the sea indicated the alarming levels of sea pollution and warned against environmental degradation.

Among the unsuspecting acquaintances that have been asked about what they see in this image since then, some have even mentioned ‘drifting water lilies’, or ‘floating lanterns on a lake’. Others described ‘flower-wreaths thrown in the water’, ‘stepping stones’, or ‘early morning swimmers that have tossed their clothes in the water while wading in’. Some daydreamed of the view from their dream balcony. As first impressions misled everyone, picking some of the image’s constitutive elements apart and offering readers an in-depth directed viewing becomes essential to providing an entry point to the elusive Aegean borderscape.

No one among those questioned had noticed the black specks dotting the far back of the horizon. None could name the mountain range in the distance, nor where in the world those waters were located. Nobody problematized how far from the nearest shore this scene unfolded, or what conditions enabled its capturing in broad daylight. The potentiality and actuality of the Aegean borderscape remained latent and elusive in this still image, just as it did within the physical landscape it emerged from, concealed even from the photographer’s eye and her lens.

The borderscape perspective foregrounded in this paper is based on a relational, processual and dialogic understanding of borders as mobile spaces that extend beyond the imaginary of the line and consist of performative, participatory and senseable dimensions of bordering processes (Perera, 2007; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007; Brambilla, 2015; Brambilla et al., 2015). To convey the borderscape’s modular composition and make the forces and affects at play within this space visible it is necessary to indicate, and relationally position its constitutive elements.

Some are clearly noticeable, even if misinterpreted, while others remain concealed, although in plain sight. At the same time, while contextualising the content of such a setting and putting it into perspective, it is crucial to remain attentive and account not only for what is readily present but for what might appear as absent, too.

Content analysis and compositional interpretation of this image could help uncover the selectively- or less visible, or the downright invisible aspects of life and vitality at- and of the Aegean borders. That, in turn, can open up inquiries on the borders' construction, enaction and contestation from below, and the generation of affect not just intersubjectively but also out of environmental and material interactions, to be then often utilised and (re)produced for political expediency. In this direction, a spatialised understanding of affect is proposed (Reeves, 2011; Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015). In this view, affect is not reducible to feelings or emotions (Massumi, 1995) – as affects are 'not simply emotion' (Thrift, 2008, p. 116) and they 'are not feelings', either (Deleuze, 1995) – they are states of body and mind, which from a Spinozan perspective act as circulating forces and forms of encounter within and between bodies that have the capacity to both affect and be affected, whose impact extends beyond –yet does not preclude– subjectivity. As such, a spatialized understanding affect embraces the changeable and complex relations between the entire configuration of motion, emotion, intellect, materiality, landscape and the spectral, as well as the potential of individuals to both be affected and to affect their social and spatial environments.

It appears rather counter-intuitive to initiate an inquiry into something as fundamentally nonvisual and visceral as the affective composition of borderscapes with the dissection of an image. A closer reading of the initial image as it appears in the field-diary sketch that follows can be helpful, however. Stripped of the photograph's evocative atmosphere, this sketch focusses on the bare essentials, offering only the outlines of its constitutive shapes, and handing viewers the red thread that will help unravel this landscape.

Despite everything within this image appearing serene, this is a borderscape deployed in full action. Firstly, a need to attend to space and spatiality emerges: Where was this picture taken? This landscape unfolds just off Lesbos island, right along the eastern maritime borders of Greece with Turkey, somewhere on the long continuous beach extending across the island's southeastern shoreline. The photo was taken in a space of paradoxically intersecting mobilities: near the island's airport, which lies on its easternmost coastline, just off its capital city, Mytilene. It is one of the many locations along Lesbos' southern coast where migrants departing from Turkey in their flimsy escape-boats would land on, only a two-lane street and a short barbed-wire topped fence away from the landing strips and airplanes bringing in holiday-makers all year round.

Although seemingly lacklustre and rather plain, this is a space of unpredictability and charged contingencies. It is a landscape rife with the violence of demarcation lines that have been drawn and redrawn in the course of centuries, affecting the lives of millions. Lines which have nowadays been reanimated and, like in their not-so-distant past, are being tenaciously – and at the same time routinely – trespassed, inhabited and guarded.

For the moment, however, the only evident line we notice is that of the horizon, indicated on the sketch as (1). The Greek noun 'orizōn' (Gr: *ὀρίζων* = a separating circle that encloses a series of

units), from which the English word horizon originates, derives from the verb ‘orízo’ (Gr: *ὀρίζω*), which means ‘to order’, ‘to define’, ‘to control’, and which in turn stems from the root word ‘óros’ (Gr: *ὄρος* = *boundary, landmark*). The Greek word for border ‘*sýnoro*’ (Gr: *σύνορο*) derives from the compound verb ‘synorízo’ (Gr: *συνορίζω*). Synorízo stems from the same root word as horizon does (*ὄρος*) and the prefix syn (Gr: *συν* = *with*), which underlines the synergetic formation of a borderline, giving the verb the following meanings: *bring together, give one’s consent to a boundary*.

In the absence of the sociality and consensus attributed by ‘syn’ in the delimitation of the boundary, however, it is the horizon that takes on the natural ordering and bordering of space unilaterally and non-negotiably, as opposed to the common agreement implied by the border-as-*sýnoro*, which postulates a joint agreement over b/orders. This is the first of many subsequent orderings that will be taking place in this space and is of primary importance: what, and who, exists past the horizon in the unknown otherness beyond the contours of its ‘separating enclosure of related units’, and what lies right here, close to our hearth and heart and all that is perceived as ‘ours’². The image’s spatiality also draws in its temporality. What we now witness, was quite different in the past. What lies beyond the horizon while gazing out from the Greek shores – the distant hazy mountain range of Madra (2), solid and symbolic barriers at once, in what is now Turkey – would also be considered ‘ours’ (if you were Greek) less than 90 years ago, before the so-called ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ (*Mikrasiatiki Katastrophi*) of 1923 swept across the Aegean coast of Turkey.

This historical disaster was the final result of the dissolution of the Ottoman empire and the eruption of the Greco-Turkish wars, followed by the sweeping advancement of the Turkish army onto areas occupied by large numbers of Greek-speaking, Christian Orthodox populations after a catastrophically unsuccessful irredentist military expedition (Tsolainos, 1923) of the Greek army to ‘redeem’ the Anatolian territories, led by the so called concept of *Megali Idea*, or ‘Great Idea’³ (James, 2008, p. 3; Bechev and Nikolaidis, 2010, p. 80). When those lands came under Turkish rule, more than 1.5 million Greeks were uprooted and forcefully displaced, as were other minorities, either fleeing the atrocities that ensued, or through the subsequent compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece (Hirschon, 2003; Özsu, 2011). These events and their aftermath are some of the most traumatic landmarks of Greek historical memory (Hirschon, 2004), their reverberations echoing deeply in collective representations and constructions of national identity until today.

² For definitions and etymology of Greek words see the Greek English Lexicon by Liddel et al. (1996) or the links to its online version by the University of California, Irvine at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lj/>:

óros: Liddel et al. (1996, pp. 1255–1266); or TLJ (2011c)

orízo: Liddel et al. (pp. 1250-1251); or TLJ (2011a)

orízon: Liddel et al. (p. 1251); or TLJ (2011b)

syn: Liddel et al. (p. 1690); or TLJ (2011d)

synorízo: Liddel et al. (pp. 1723); or TLJ (2011a)

³ This expansionist national myth of nineteenth-century Hellenism, fueled by narratives of former national glory, victimhood and resistance, envisioned gaining access to the Anatolian heartland of the Byzantine Empire and to recapture its capital city, Constantinople/Istanbul, transforming the then nascent Greek state into a hegemonic power.

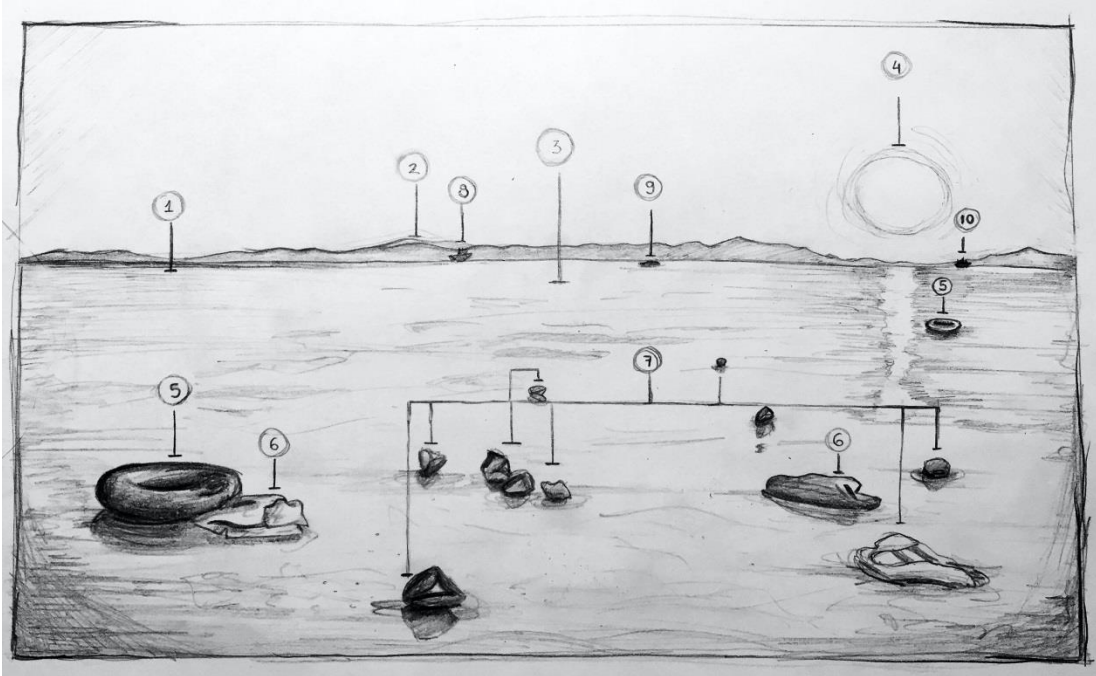


Image 2: Fieldnote sketch of Image 1. Drawing by the author (2015).

Yet, “all facts ... in world history occur, as it were, twice... the first time as a tragedy, the second as farce” as Marx’s (1972, p. 10) oft-quoted maxim goes: Asia Minor Greeks (*Mikrasiates*) had desperately sought refuge on the Greek islands and onto the mainland in the same way that refugees of other backgrounds do today. They were departing in panic and with only what they could carry in their hands, if anything, on unseaworthy fishing boats and rafts from the very same towns: Izmir and Ayvalik, under the aloof gaze of the Great Powers’ navy forces as Turkish troops under the command of Mustafa Kemal pillaged and slaughtered behind them (Neyzi, 2008). Sadly, Greek refugees of the time were received in a climate of similar repudiation and hostility as today’s displaced populations are: unaided, marginalised, scorned and turned away by Greek townsfolk and authorities⁴.

Somewhere along the narrow waters between Greece and Turkey in this image lies today’s liquid border (3). This border, however, has been mobile in itself. It is a line that has been drawn and redrawn through centuries of strained relations between the two liminally-positioned countries (Rumelili, 2003). It is a heavily patrolled border that both countries’ air and navy forces provocatively violate on a daily basis, and where multiple layers of national and inter/supra/national authorities and interlocking sovereignties coalesce – Greek, Turkish, EU, FRONTEX, NATO among others – wage biopolitical wars against migrants (Voutira, 2013; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2018).

⁴ For a general overview of the events around the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ of 1922 and the long term difficulties experienced by the displaced peoples themselves see the work of Rene Hirschon (1998, 2004, 2009), and Giannuli (1995).

It is a border that has been exhaustively regulated through copious volumes of national and international law, its sociospatial particularities producing their own range of unheard-of legal terminologies which are literally unpracticable elsewhere in the world⁵, in an effort to bring eventual compromise between the two irreconcilable neighbours. It is a border that has been crossed in different historical times, towards different directions, by different populations with the same, or similar, urgencies. Greeks that fled the Nazi occupation during World War II left from the Aegean islands towards the Turkish shores even on makeshift rafts, or clinging onto floating barrels, to find safety in the refugee camps of Middle East: at Moses-Wells in Egypt, Aleppo in Syria and Nuseirat in Palestine among other locations⁶. This is a border which has connected, as much as it has divided, the peoples and cultures that have lived around it throughout millennia, as the Aegean islands have featured as century-old sites of arrival, co-existence and resistance for the forcibly displaced (Giannuli, 1995; Tsimouris, 2001; Hirschon, 2007; Myrivili, 2009). And yet, it is not only people that cross the border. Like elsewhere in the world, it is the border that crosses people, too – from the US-Mexico border to the Thai-Burma one and beyond (Burke, 2002; Lamb, 2014), mixing their pasts and futures, their ancestries, histories and cultures.

The objects that lie scattered in the foreground start hinting at an entry point to the scene. Those shapeless heaps and bobbing bits that seem like garbage at first, were treasured lifesavers just minutes earlier. They are not just plastic flotsam and jetsam: according to the gaze that is cast upon them they are peace symbols, deathtraps, tokens of solidarity to migrants and refugees, reminders of an ‘ominous invasion’, orange representations of hope and despair, universal symbols of the voyage of refugees (Tyrikos-Ergas, 2016). What we see are lifejackets (6), inflatable lifebuoys and even inner car-tire tubes (5). They are children’s swimming armbands – way too many of them – and child-sized life vests for poolside play (7). Those had been people’s lifelines during their perilous crossing and were now discarded and drifting with the current. Each one of them a person. Missing.

The bodies around which those knock-off, non-buoyant orange life jackets with the intentionally misspelled logos were tightly fastened are nowhere to be found. The absence of the material objects’ humans is palpable, eerie and disquieting. Even though they are missing, however, a residual sensation lingers, which keeps them persistently interfolded with the other human and non/more-than-human bodies that constitute the social, material, spectral, administrative, technological and legal aspects of this borderscape.

Spatiality once more becomes inescapable, this time on a micro scale: “How far from the beach can we possibly be as we witness this scene? Has their boat capsized? Are they alive or dead as we speak? Are their bodies below the water or have they gotten off safely on a shore?” Temporality kicks in, too, as the mind strives for an explanation, a reassurance: “What happened right before the moment we are witnessing?”, “What is happening to them right now that we cannot witness”, “What will happen to those absent bodies soon after?”

⁵ For an overview of the outstanding maritime boundary issues and specialised terminology attempting to bring a resolution between Greece and Turkey see Van Dyke (1996), Sultan (2001), Acer (2003), and Vassalotti (2011).

⁶ For the reverse movement of Greek refugees during the Second World War see Abou Mrad (2016), Taparata and Kuang (2016), Tharoor (2016).

The viewers' affect intensifies and sharpens, as they break through another perspective playing out in parallel over the serene Aegean waters: would one trust their lives to a flimsy contraption that costs less than 5 euros in the back streets of Izmir? What would be the cost of ensuring the life and safety of one's own children? Would they set them afloat on unknown high seas, their small arms pushed through yellow floaties with happy octopus cartoons painted on them, while the label's fine print warned: "Will not protect against drowning. Use only under adult supervision. Not for use in boating. This is not a lifesaving device. Do not leave child unattended while device is in use⁷". If we would choose not to, then what would that tell about the presumed value of the lives of others, and their ranking against ours, when forced to take perilous paths to safety? And what would their predicament teach us about the nature and of our privilege and the conditions of its permanence?

At this point it might seem as if this has been all this picture depicts. Upon closer observation, however, a few black specks can be discerned across the horizon. In the middle, like a smudge towards the left, a Hellenic Coastguard ship on patrol – easy to tell from its characteristically-poised outline (8). Like a small ripple to the right, a refugee dinghy that has crossed the borderline and is slowly approaching Lesvos slogging through the waters, laying low as it faces the shapely composure of the coastguard boat (9). Far off to the right, factoring in the size which distance understates, a large commercial or passenger ship, or maybe a yacht, gliding unproblematically across a designated, well-governed and regulated route (10). Although almost entirely confident about the accuracy of these details, absolute certainty regarding the vessels' typology and logistics is impossible, even after examining them up close in the high-resolution version of the image, The analysis that follows is, therefore, based on informed guesses based on first-hand knowledge and collected material obtained through my extended ethnographic fieldwork in the area. To recreate the borderscape's atmosphere as witnessed by its many actors, including the researcher herself, and shape the contours of its landscape and affective charge, a certain degree of poetic license has also been employed, to help interweave the diverse pieces of information into a coherent, composite narrative.

The coastguard boat's presence in this image stands both as an apparatus and an apparition of the state: a fiduciary of its sovereignty, an implementer of its political will, and an enactor of its monopoly of violence within its (maritime) territory. It is a human/material assemblage in possession of special authority and executive power that has the power to act, often arbitrarily, on its behalf. Transposing the example of the state-embodying police helicopter offered by Laszczkowski and Reeves (2015) onto the Hellenic Coastguard vessel:

[...] it embodies many of the attributes of the state as depicted in recent anthropological writing [...] It is abstract and remote, yet simultaneously tangible and concrete. It is empowered through technology, yet seemingly possessed of an autonomous organicity, able to affect its subjects in ways at once denigrating and elevating. It is capable of prodigal displays of violence. It is inimical, awe inspiring, and irresistible. It overpowers the senses and turns human lives on the ground into a confusing, insubstantial tangle dependent on the state's force for sense and substance. (ibid., pp. 1–2)

⁷ Actual warning label inside children's lifejackets found across Lesvos.

In the words of a Hellenic Coastguard captain, who was interviewed informally in Lesvos and wished to remain anonymous, when asked about the chain of command and decision-making process upon the sighting of an unauthorized boat during a night patrol: “[...] what law? In the dark of night, in the middle of the sea I am the law” (Anonymous Hellenic Coastguard Captain, personal communication, July 10, 2013). With this matter-of-fact statement, the Captain admitted the de facto fusion and personification of the (supposedly discrete) executive, legislative and judicial powers of the state during a critical incident, while also succinctly verifying Radcliffe-Brown’s contention that the idea of an overarching, abstract Leviathan State as something that exists over and above the human individuals that comprise its society and political organisation is merely a fiction. What does exist, instead, is a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations, possessing different roles, powers and authorities that converge around the control and regulation of the use of physical force (1950, p. xxiii).

Both the coastguard vessel and the distant commercial ship are navigated by trained, experienced captains, and have their high-tech telecommunication, navigational, and safety systems in place. The latter one carries *bona fide*⁸ travellers; the citizens of enduring states, in possession of passports in the ‘right’ colours, with the right stamps on the right pages granting them legal passage. Refugee dinghies, which have already started deflating, or their knock-off ‘Made in China’ engines have started taking in seawater halfway across the barely 8 nautical miles separating Lesvos from the Turkish shores, are customarily steered by one of their prospective passengers, instead. As migrants and refugees who have arrived to Europe in these flimsy inflatable boats have attested to me in the numerous border-crossing narratives I have collected through the years, it is usually when the whole group of border-crossers has been assembled at the departure point on a Turkish beach that a guy gets randomly picked to steer the boat by the smugglers – often at gunpoint if they are unwilling or they resist. Other times, someone might volunteer himself on the spot, bargaining for a better price. Their training does not exceed roughly five minutes of barking orders (fuel is limited and too precious to waste on perfecting boating skills), while being demonstrated the most basic of a motorboat engine’s functions: how to crank it on again if it dies, how to accelerate and turn. That random guy is then left responsible for a boatful of strangers’ lives, who are often told they are going to cross a river – not the open sea, and who are given no other option but to step aboard and trust him to bring them ashore.

The travellers, state agents and commercial products on board of authorised vessels are standing in stark contrast to the dinghy passengers who are struggling to reach the shore. The first ones are the beneficiaries of an all-enabling assemblage of governance, technology and law apparatuses, which dictate who is deemed worthy of saving in case of an emergency and who is to let die under the EU’s unofficial maritime version of the Prevention Through Deterrence doctrine (De León, 2015, pp. 23–37). Those privileged passenger bodies and cargo are classed as the rightful receivers of proclamations regarding the ‘free movement of people, goods and services’, while the deployment of search and rescue operations is imperative in case of distress.

On their antipode lie those ‘other’ bodies, whose illegitimate passage and presence within such border landscapes spark the borderscape into motion and illuminate the political and legal

⁸ Ablative case of Latin phrase ‘bona fides’, meaning ‘in good faith’, often used as an adjective to signify ‘legitimate’.

paradox of our times, wherein access to justice and universal human rights, such as the right to seek and enjoy asylum, remain only black letter law (Lendaro, 2016; Terlouw, 2017). Contrary to the case of *bona fide* travellers, the prevention of refugee deaths at sea – an indiscriminate obligation under international maritime law – has become a discretionary option for states, and individuals who infringe it have been addressed with increasing punitiveness, in European coastal waters and beyond (Heller and Pezzani, 2016; Watson, 2016; Fekete, 2018; Ghezelbash *et al.*, 2018).

Among the numerous other compounded injustices afflicting different populations all across today's world, migrants' and asylum seekers' inclusion and exclusion from arrival societies and their structures – including their access to justice, and even their very ability to safely reach and remain within the spaces where these presumably universal rights could be claimed – is not just yet another issue. Within the European/EU context this is a very topical question, which remains in urgent and persistent need of being addressed, lest the ruptures that have started appearing across its social and political architecture should keep rifting ever wider apart. This question gets usually oversimplified by its framing as a 'migration/refugee crisis', yet as it has been argued before (Heller and Pezzani, 2016), it is a structural crisis that reaches far deeper, into the EU's changing political and economic geography, and has been preceded (and is likely to be followed) by a range of other 'crises' and polarizations. To understand, and perhaps amend or reverse, the logics and forces that drive this process it is, in my view, vital to pay attention to the specific bordering practices implemented in a routinised and unremarkable manner at the continent's peripheries: The tremendous loss of human lives on the way to- and at Europe's doorstep, or their wasting away under subhuman conditions in peripheralized/externalised migrant camps; the politically strategic normalization of basic affects in relation to migrants and border crossing – such as fear, compassion, anger, distress, contempt and humiliation, among others – for ideological and political expediency; the widening contradiction between what the formal laws and proclaimed value systems of supra/national authorities prescribe on the one hand, and a reality that is far grimmer when encountered by people on the ground – or in the middle of the open sea – on the other.

The legal, political and technological networks that are intertwined and firmly emplaced within this space move not only outwards, but also inwards, embedding themselves into bodies that then become polarized and coded with- and *as* symbols of otherness to be systematically decoded thereafter (Synnott, 1993; Hamilakis, Pluciennik and Tarlow, 2002). The workings of borders might appear deceptively abstract. However, as this image illustrates, their filtering mechanisms determine a priori the distance and proximity allowed between different bodies, and between them and their surrounding: who to let through, who to detain, and who to expel, how, when and why.

“Borders portend to offer comfort and safety through simultaneously producing violation. And borders are never what they seem” as Zalewski (2013, p. 134) argues. This dormant dipole of tranquillity and terror that borders conjure, and which animates this scene, is rife with the presence (or absence) and the action (or inertia) of a multitude of actors: human and material assemblages who dwell in or defend the landscape whose demarcation lines irregular migrants defy. They are brought together, or are pulled apart by different necessities and forces, and their affective interactions stir up the borderscape. This border materiality pertains to the entire

configuration of politics, law, administration and technology that underpin its ground operations from a distance – not merely the rickety boats, razor wire fences and orange life vests; neither the courtrooms, press conferences, refugee memorials, nor the flags, passports, checkpoints, walls, drones and motion sensors that conclude this top-down effected borderwork on the ground. All those ‘things’ come together in a mesh of socio-spatial relations, representations and practices, which produce spatialities with specific material and lived dimensions, mental conceptualisations and specific social and political effects.

Returning to the image that set off this reflection, it is important to pay attention not just to the previously delineated historical temporality, which is tightly enfolded within it, but to the proximate facets of time, too. The hour of the day this scene occurs is in itself significant: it is early morning, as we are standing on the shores of Lesbos facing towards the east we see the sun barely risen 4) and we are observing a succession of unauthorized border crossings in full development (one concluded and one underway), while national authorities stand by and observe. This is a cluster of events that has moved from its habitual chronotopic frame of occurrence (the dark of night) into plain daylight. What thresholds of need, hope, or desperation had been reached by the prospective border-crossers to overcome the fear and trepidation that characterized crossings not so long ago, and what political processes and decisions have made this temporal and attitudinal shift towards border-crossing possible, or necessary?

As with every visual representation, the cover image can only suggest just few of the borderscape’s qualities among those visible to the eye. It is the aspects that refer to the layout, colour, texture, form, volume, size, pattern and inhabitation of the landscape that can be directly communicated here, at best. The sensory richness of this environment remains elusive. Vision lingers restricted in the compartmentalised area of the frame, while the remaining senses – taste, smell, sound and touch – and all their resulting emotions are wiped out. If you have ever been on the receiving end of border’s full affect, however, those lingering sensations may drag you back to it, in the most unsuspecting of moments. These are the only devices which can help open it up and make it accessible for others, too. Having been there myself, on the frontline of refugee rescues in the winter of 2016; having been profoundly and irreversibly affected by this borderscape ever since; and having seen and smelled and heard and touched its grounds and waters, and the flotsam and jetsam of its things and its people, I will attempt to piece together and share a fleeting image, a passing impression of this interfolding landscape. Within it, the contours between the subjectivities, sensibilities and senses of its various human occupants and the ecologies and materialities that enfolded them merge, spill over, and transubstantiate.

The iodine sting of the Aegean seawater. The sour smell of spilled petrol on rotting seaweed. The exhausted silence while huddling in the dark surveying the horizon; a volunteer rescuer perched on a hill in January, freezing to the bone. The hissing static of the VHF radio from time to time. And then: the nightly wails coming from the pitch-black sea. Your yells back in the dark against the wind. A dim flicker of flashlights and mobile phone screens in the distance. A sudden rush of blood to your head. A shiver down the back of your neck. Flashbacks. **TAK** — the portable floodlight’s hard switch is pressed on: in your hands now a makeshift lighthouse calls travellers to an uncertain harbour. The loud whirr of the electric generator, powered with leftover fuel from refugee dinghies ran aground. Feet shuffling on the sharp gravel. Cold wetsuits clinging to the skin, jammed zippers, a barking command “hurry up!”. A grey bobbing smudge on the light

beam's end, closing in. The shudder upon January waves' first bite on your naked feet. The cold. The cold. The cold. The texture and weight of other people's bodies when you carry them ashore, uphill. Their musky smell; their suppleness; their respiration's rhythm: the only identity markers during your brief encounter. How frigid children's skin, wet for hours, felt to the touch. Their pallid, wide-eyed faces you, thankfully, cannot see in the dark. The rustle and sparkle of Mylar emergency blankets unfolding and wrapping bodies in an other-worldly sheen. The acrid smell of varnished broken boatwood smoke seaside-stationed volunteers burned to warm up, highly toxic but who cared – it clung on clothes, on skin and hair, it made throats hurt and voices hoarse. Weeks after, far from the island, its waft would still come off an already washed sweater or a scarf. An inescapable reminder. These sounds and sensations are all things by their own right; deeply personal aspects of borders with animate and inanimate facets; visceral affects that cannot ever be fully conveyed, only experienced first-hand and thereafter hinted at and invoked, at best.

Through these weaving of borderlanders' affectively-charged narratives – be them migrants, rescuers, coastguard officers, volunteers or local inhabitants – and the use of visual material as “aide-memoires” to help trace the clustering and interfolding of ‘borderly’⁹ bodies, things, places and atmospheres, the notion of affective borderscapes emerges. Affective borderscapes allow the exploration of borders not as singular lines, but as multidimensional sites of affective and emotional investment, where fear, hope, longing, desire, despair, indignation, disorientation, death or rebirth converge and are implicated in various ordinary and exceptional encounters between migrants, citizens, humanitarian volunteers, state agents, and the dispersed material traces of both state power, and the undocumented migration apparatus.

Their traces are often found within the ‘anticipated’ distance from state borders. But they also erupt unexpectedly in random locations far removed from national frontiers. These eruptions span spatial scales: from global events through local milieus (a neighbourhood, a city block, a street corner), reaching all the way down to the “geography the closest in – the body”(Rich, 1986, pp. 212–213): a corporeal mobile border carrying within it emotional, mental and often physical marks and traumas embedded under their skin like shrapnel from borders past. Inner city neighbourhoods, rural locations, and digital expanses that seem to be diametrically different, and far removed from anything border-like remain connected by similar dynamics and intensities, as well as cross-locations¹⁰ and mutual affectations between the places, people, politics and powers that constitute them.

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⁹ Sarah Green describes as ‘borderly’ the qualities that give a place a sense of borders at work. It is an often indescribable sensation that emerges from the general atmosphere, the physical landscape, the people and the objects present around a place (Green and Malm, 2013).

¹⁰ The crosslocations approach foregrounded by Sarah Green (2017b, 2017a) builds upon an understanding of location as a form of political, social, economic, and technical relative positioning resulting from the workings of diverse ‘locating regimes’ (such as law, bureaucracy, borders, infrastructure, digital technologies, trade, finance, environment, language, social relations and religion) that calibrate the relative value, significance and meaning of locations. As a result, locations may have multiple and historically variable manifestations, and can overlap or coincide within the same geographical space, especially in crossroads regions, such as the Mediterranean.

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