

Beyond the border. Migration and multilingual signs at European borderscapes

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What do we really know about borders? I mean us, European citizens with passports valid in most of the world's countries. Us, the constantly-on-the-move, Ryanair-addicted, budget-overseas trip dependents, who do not even realise that we have crossed a border anymore: because for us borders do not really exist. Or, in the worst case scenario, they are simply annoying queues at airports. Travelling across Europe – and especially, in the so-called Schengen area – means that we can move freely from one country to the next without so much as the nuisance of showing a passport or an ID card to anyone.

Everything changes if you are a non-European citizen wanting to travel across Europe. If you are from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Gambia, Mali, Sudan then forget what I have just said. Borders have never ceased to exist for you. On the contrary, they have become deadly barriers, locked gates, barbed-wire fences, insurmountable walls. They are everything but a passage in space and time. Because for you space is forbidden, and time will soon be suspended in some kind of identification limbo. The border shows its cruelty. The border's cruel show.

In the last few years, we have increasingly seen not only a return to borders and border controls – for the pandemic, but more generally for a resurgent ferocious nationalism across the continent – but also, as anthropologist Nicholas De Genova argues, a new mediatised “spectacle of borders”¹. What presents itself as a crisis of territorially-defined state powers over cross-border human mobility — in short, what is fundamentally a moment of governmental impasse on the European scale — has been often mobilized and strategically deployed as a “crisis” or an “emergency” for the reconfiguration of techniques of border policing, and immigration and asylum law enforcement. Within this crisis, borders are not just functional, but essential, for they have become crucial factors in the dispute over the most effective and efficient tactics of bordering, i.e. excluding and secluding.

For the excluded, borders are not mere symbols of power. They are power. They can separate what is deemed legal from what is deemed illegal, what is meant to be seen as human from what is meant to be de-humanised. What exists, from what does not, and will not, exist. But the border is also, and fundamentally, a place of relations. A space of fear and hope, of conflict and

¹ Cf. N. De Genova, *The Borders of Europe. Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2017, pp. 4-5.

interaction, of frustration and resistance, of extenuating boredom and fragile excitement. Of unbearable silence and vital communication. It is not just a line: it is a borderscape, a land provided with a socio-cultural framework, a dynamic dispositive shaped by an ensemble of regulations, practices, discourses, semantics. An administrative abstraction for some, a complex material reality for others.

The four borders we present here are exactly such borderscapes. Each one with its geography, its history, its subjects. But all of them sharing some common traits: they all are state-controlled mechanisms to illegalise people, to prevent migrants' mobility, to securitise societies and reassure public opinions and, at the same time, they all are multilingual and multicultural spaces, with their constant passages, everyday needs, layers of signs, voices, and meaningful traces.

Let's take Ventimiglia, i.e the last Italian town before the French border and the Côte d'Azur. It served as a crucial transit point for Tunisian migrants in 2011, when France re-established border controls with Italy. In June 2015, due to the increase in the number of migrants crossing the Italian-French border, France suspended its duties under the Schengen agreement once again and reinstated border checks. The space between the city of Ventimiglia and the French-Italian border was then transformed into a border-zone where most migrants remained stranded for weeks. And still are. In this context, civil society organization and simple activists from Italy and France have often provided support to migrants willing to cross the border, whereas authorities – as a reaction – further intensified border controls. The people on the move have in time learnt how to resist to violence, get organised, become politically active and resilient.

Something similar we found 200 hundred kilometres north of Ventimiglia, between the regions of Piedmont and Hautes-Alpes, where civil society organisations from both Italy and France have for years confronted local communities and police forces to assist migrants, and provide them with some support and shelters, especially during the extreme cold winters; where illegal pathways across the mountains reveal the constant perilous passage of men, women, children, a few meters away from golf clubs and skiing resorts populated by tourists that seem (or pretend) to be unaware of the presence of *others*.

Lesvos looks quite different, however. Not a border per se, but the epitome of a borderscape: an unescapable migrant limbo between Fortress Europe and an orientalised and troublesome Middle East – divided by just a few maritime miles from Turkey – on which hundreds of thousands of people have landed, been stranded, and from which have been illegally deported en masse; where

solidarity has been brought by more than 150 associations since 2015 but where the local population is tired of witnessing the incompetence of national and international institutions in dealing with migration phenomena; where the biggest refugee camp of Europe, Moria, has been the shameful example of the total failure of EU recent migration policies, and the blatant negation of the rule of law for migrants.

Last but not least is the region Bihać, a Bosnian town close to the border with Croatia. Again, another borderscape: an area of movement, interaction, concealment, neglect, where thousands of migrants travelling along the 'Balkan route' to reach the EU have been forced to stop their journey before trying "the game", as the attempt(s) of entering Croatia by avoiding the brutal Croatian police patrolling the border is called with a touch of dark humour (migrants may try 7 or 8 times before succeeding, eventually). In this area, still surrounded by mine fields going back to the 1992-1994 war, where the scarce resources available are used to keep migrants put rather than safe, where a camp hosting hundreds of people – the camp of Vučićak (2019) – was built on a rubbish dump among rats and snakes, the EU secludes its 'others' like enemies at the gate. And signs of passages accumulate layer by layer: ignored by, and hidden to, European public opinions, and only acknowledged by a few Bosnian civil society organisations.

In these four borderscapes, Luca Prestia and I have spent a good amount of time in the last five years, for the ongoing project "Beyond the border. Signs of passages across the European borders". Not with the ambition to fully understand, but with the need to see with our own eyes what was going on – far away from the "spectacle of borders" – through the lens of Luca's camera and my linguistic notes. Beyond any rhetoric, and against the oversimplification of the media system, we have neither tried to propose a coherent epistemology, nor to play with emotions, to forcibly stimulate the viewer's empathy and reactions. We have simply – and *simply*, in an era of visual proliferation and addiction, stands for *powerfully* to us – tried to observe those strips of land and collect and record traces of presences, passages, interactions: acts of resilience, resistance, and existence.

Luca's photography is not emphatic. He has not chosen a punch-in-the-stomach approach aiming at exciting piety or resentment, at easily appealing to senses. He has instead chosen a more logical – and therefore more political – angle, by trying to capture details that would have otherwise disappeared, been neglected or cancelled. His photography is indeed never complacent, neither thematically nor technically. Motifs are often spare objects left behind, unappealing landscapes, and unnamed bodies, for Luca is not interested in conceding a cathartic power to its subjects. Human beings are never 'just' passive victims or heroic figures taking their destiny in their hands. They are

transient, fragile but real, embarked in a journey whose outcome cannot be predicted. That is why Luca's act of recording, when facing the presence of humans, is synecdochic (a hand, a foot, a t-shirt stands for the entire body and physicality): since the act of seeing and interpreting can only be partial, for privileged temporary witnesses like us.

A foot, an abandoned pair of shoes, a small sign of a human presence, in those borderscapes are also the epitome of the journey, of travelling itself, with its challenges, frustration, possibility. And it is not immediately relevant to know to whom those objects, those hands, those signs, those fragments belong. We do not need to *exactly* know, as we do not want to be trapped in the empathy/hostility dichotomy. We do not want to be complacent observers seeking a sparkle of catharsis. We are not supposed to consume a 'packaged' story, ready to be digested. We want – I mean, Luca and I want – to question those pictures, and question ourselves as viewers. We want us to feel uneasy: to see for the first time, not to replicate and stick to an already established frame (as we normally do, when consuming information). We want us to escape the dynamics of discriminating between the drowned and the saved. Those stories are not in our hands: we are not mediatised judges; we do not have any agency in *those* lives. Those stories belong to the people that experience them, like it or not. Either we like them or we do not.

Within this context, and as a linguist, I have asked Luca to also capture linguistic signs, which powerfully fit in this suspension of judgement and commodification. And, at the same time, provide us with an extra level of questions and stimuli. There is a multiform multitude of signs, at borderscapes: indexical (objects left on a pathway), iconic (occasional 'road-signs', maps, drawings), and symbolic (writing on a wall, graffiti, leaflets). They can be easily ignored, but they should be preserved and observed, as the evidence of those passages, of those acts to facilitate or prevent communication, to exclude or include, to acknowledge or reject someone else's presence, anyhow to reconfigure identities and interactions. It is a multilingual and multi-layered material that still needs to be carefully investigated, a sociolinguistic landscape that shows us relentless negotiation and adaptation by all the people that at those borders live and coexist also through their languages, via their shared multilingual competence and awareness.

Recomposing these resources, and swinging the spotlight to them may be a purely academic exercise. But it also may be an alternative way to look at the borderscapes as a crucible of humanity, and see languages – any language – and multilingualism as a possible way to unseal cultural, if not geopolitical, borders.

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