

BORDERS AND BORDERLANDS

by

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Fig. 1. Images of the border between the Idomeni refugee camp in Greece and the FYROM border, May 2016. © photo credit: Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello.

In May of 2016 while living and teaching in Thessaloniki, Greece, I spent time volunteering in two refugee camps near the city, including a brief visit to the massive and much-discussed refugee camp on the Greek-FYROM border known as Idomeni. On the day I was there – trying to bring some cleaning supplies to a friend of a friend of a friend to help make living conditions more bearable in this devastating place—I found myself navigating a physical landscape unlike

any I had seen before. Picking our way across this vast “camp” (more like a small city) my friend and I ducked under train cars, wove around tents and makeshift barber shops, saw children playing in muddy paths, mothers lined up for food with toddlers and infants in tow, teenage boys standing listlessly near some music...each of these individuals in a place neither here nor there – trapped in a no-mans-land between the lives they had been forced to leave and the future they had imagined—now somewhere beyond the newly “closed” border which was in sight. And as I traversed Idomeni that day I was thinking about borders...and I could hear Gloria Anzaldua’s words ringing in my ears. Speaking of the US-Mexico border, Anzaldua—feminist, queer, Chicana, bilingual, woman, intellectual, tour-de-force—wrote that it “es una herida abierta where the Third World grates up against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (11).

There is a rueful tone to these words. They evoke pain, blood, suffering. Things which were as present in so much of what I had seen and heard from at Idomeni and EKO (the other camp I had assisted at) as they had been in Anzaldua’s life and writing. But Anzaldua’s words speak to another truth as well: to the new lifeblood that emerges out of the co-mingling that border violence and devastation create. Anzaldua ultimately writes about the presence not of a border but of a **borderland**. Anzaldua’s brilliance, in *Borderlands/La frontera*, is *la frontera*, a concept and metaphor she gifted to academic and social justice work. Reframing “border” as *La frontera* exposes the limits of binaries (one side of a border or another; one identity or another) and calls on us to resist the need to synthesize, to simplify, to bury or ignore or erase contradictions. Borders are everywhere in our lives, in our world, in our thinking, yet it is the *borderlands* they create that deserve our attention. Anzaldua’s groundbreaking work about the history, lives, struggles and futures on one particularly fraught border brought to an entire generation of scholars the liberating frame of thinking about borders as sites of transition. In doing so she opened up a way of thinking about contradiction and multiplicity—the very things present in borders, borderlands, border crossings borderlands (spatial or not)—not as weaknesses or negatives but as sources of strength and insight into individuals, cultures, the world. What was once a geographic term referring to lines on a map has become over the past two decades through the work of humanists and social scientists alike, a concept rich with possibility for exploring the complex and non-binary world of twenty first century life as well as cultural production of all sorts.

In this issue of *ECHOES*, emerging scholars have offered profound and moving meditations on the theme of borders and borderlands. Questions motivating their work include: In what ways do borders define or shape people, cultures, identities? In what ways has/does activity in the cultural sphere create, challenge, reinforce or complicate the idea of border as a concept or an experience? What strengths and insights emerge from borderlands or from embracing and holding in tension the contradictions and multiplicity/multivocality of these places (“real” or imagined)? How does activity in the cultural sphere help expose or explain borderlands culture? The four contributors take up the concept of borders and borderlands in four distinctive voices which, together, suggest the range of entry points into this conversation. Vivian Pavlopoulou interrogates a socio-linguistic theory of linguistic relativity as she explores the value and possibilities of language learning to build bridges of cultural understanding in Europe’s refugee borderlands. Christina Galliou too, takes up the dramatic migration and struggles of refugees in

Greece and challenges readers to consider “people over borders” by way of interweaving the voice of a contemporary poet a Reza Mohammadi and the possibilities and failures of the Schengen vision. Isavella Vouza’s rich and multifaceted analysis of Emily St. John Mandel’s 2015 post-apocalyptic novel *Station Eleven* suggests the potential for borderlessness (in cultural, geographic and textual realms) as a way to build a future. And, Maria Giannouli’s original work plays with genre and voice as she imagines and draws us into the complexities of living in and through the transitions of body, heart and worldview that lie at the center of asserting and claiming a transgender identity in Greece.

Since 2016 the world has been deeply embedded in conversations and debates about borders—especially the geopolitical ones. In Europe, the closing of borders trapped refugees, while leaders from many nations pondered the possibly re-establishing border crossing checks post-Brexit. In North America concerns about oil pipelines crossing borders of indigenous lands, calls for a wall along the Mexico/U.S. border and debates over “securing” the border against potential terrorist threats animated both the 2016 U.S. presidential election and continue the opening days a new administration in Washington, D.C. These debates play out even as across the world technology and economic treaties continue to erase barriers to trade and make possible the flow of ideas and goods alike across national borders. In non-geopolitical realms, gender binaries continue to be called into question as the rights and experiences of transgender persons make increasing inroads in “mainstream” discourse even as the deaths of many African American men and women at the hands of police animate critical conversations about the locations of black bodies and the boundaries of “American-ness.”

The insights of those living at/in borderlands or transgressing borders are insights we must heed. The era of binaries has come and gone; contradictions abound in our daily lives. As a scholar-activist, I have embraced Anzaldua’s theorizing of borderlands for much of my professional life. Her work has led me to reflect on my intellectual pathway itself, a journey which has been about crossing and re-crossing borders of discipline, of public/private scholarship, of activism and the academy, of place and culture and understanding. And in the spring of 2016 when I had the honor of living and working in Thessaloniki, her words became more present than ever. Not only in the refugee camps but in this storied city itself where history is marked by both the creation of imposing border walls and the efforts of those who tried to or did transgress them. Furthermore, sites of memory here are sites of a borderland culture: Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Balkan, Ottoman, Greek, Roman...these places and histories co-exist, jostle, reemerge and speak alongside and over one another in every quiet corner and bustling sidewalk. Cypress trees run up against date palms and the sea rises directly to Olympus’ majestic peak. The beauty of the people and the richness of the discourse and the potential of this bustling metropolis lies, it seems to me, in its identity as a borderlands *a la* Anzaldua. Like the city itself, the wonderful contributions to this issue of *ECHOES* celebrate not borders per se, but the profound possibilities and deep soul-searching insights possible only in borderlands.

Works Cited

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/LaFrontera: The New Meztiza*. Aunt Lute Press, 1987.