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Reading from the Border

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He opens his eyes. The floor is shaking. He has the feeling that the area has very recently been full of voices and laughter. Maybe he was just dreaming. He's lying between two rows of seats. The stars move slowly in a window above him. He is lying in a train compartment. He gets up and sits in one of the seats. His body is sore; his joints are stiff. He looks down at his hands, at his knuckles, his thin fingers; he turns his head, tries to get a glimpse of his reflection in the glass. He doesn't remember what has happened to him, what he's doing on this train. The full moon hangs low above the horizon, a grey disc. He can see the craters, the sandy seas. He doesn't remember who he is. The moon, it reminds him of something. Of clouds. Of the wind. He doesn't remember. He doesn't remember his story.¹

Into a Landscape

We're standing there again, we who read stories, about to cross the borders of literature; standing on the threshold of a text, about to dive into a world, a landscape.

We have crossed the border; we awake in to the world of a novel, remembering voices, as if in a dream. We are a man on a train, in a landscape in motion, travelling from one place to another. He, or *we*, try to orientate ourselves, but with difficulty; as often on the border, we are bewildered and disorientated. He/*we* search for recognizable points or lodestars; we turn our head, looking for our reflection. He/*we* look out of the window, into the landscape that it frames, but it is night. He/*we* see only stars and the moon, the latter an alternative image of the self, a cratered face full of sandy seas. But this reminds him/*us* of another, earlier landscape, which we can hardly remember: a landscape of memory in which we find ourselves in daylight, a landscape of clouds and of wind. Forgetting lies like a veil or a border between us and his story; in the Swedish original of this text, "his story" is *historien*, "the story" or "history".

Before I continue, I would like to reflect for a moment on the word *landscape*, which designates in English both a physical topography and a painting of such a topography; which is to say that the landscape can both be the thing itself and a representation of the thing. Moreover, a landscape as a representation of a topography is representation which portrays the topography as seen from a specific perspective. Through this figuring of the gaze it is connected to power,² the power to select, to frame, to divide up and to draw boundaries. In the language of the text, Swedish, a landscape or *landskap* can also be a geographical administrative unit. Later on in this chapter I will be elaborating on the connection between the word landscape and a new term in border studies, the "borderscape", constructed out of the words *border* and *scape*.

We're standing there again, on the threshold, still disorientated. Directly after the colophon of the book, we find this short text quoted above, placed at, or even before, the beginning of the text: turning the page, we find a new page announcing Part I of the text itself.

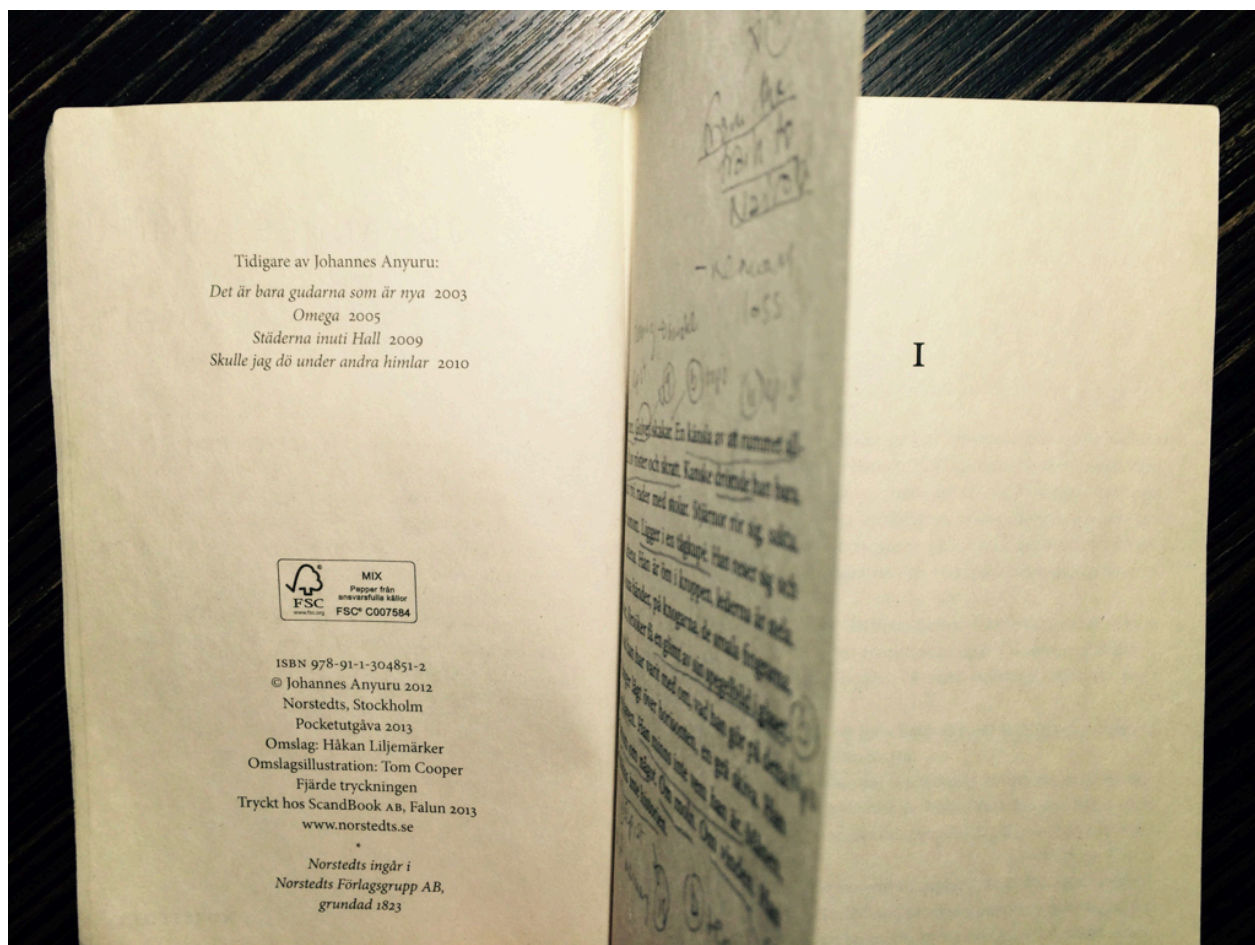


Figure 1: Colophon, text, part I (photo: Johan Schimanski)

This short text is a miniature landscape, which will later be revealed as being part of a much larger landscape, the setting of the novel in Africa and Europe. It is only on page 234 of the novel, at the end of part I and as the protagonist is about to cross the border into Sweden, that we

learn that we have been on a train to the Kenyan border,³ and that we are in this opening fragment in the middle of a story of a life which has reached the bottom. In this scene, the protagonist gets up off the floor and begins a life on the way up, though also irretrievably loses a life: for he is a pilot who has lost the skies, traded in the clouds and the wind for the moon. This short scene from the inside of the novel has been folded out and placed on the border to the text.

This turn from centre to periphery, from text to margin, could be used as an image of a turn taking place within literary studies, the border turn. Where we before – and I am generalizing here – focused on parts and wholes, characters and motifs, themes and meanings, works and texts, authors and national literatures, we have for quite some time now been concentrating increasingly on border phenomena: divides and fragments, margins and supplements, paratexts and protocols, dialogicities and receptions, minorities and contact zones, the in-betweens and third spaces of deterritorialized, transnational and postcolonial worlds.

Also outside the literary field, the border is no longer an epiphenomenon; it is not just a useful representation or delimitation of a territory. It is a signifier which has been loosened from its signified, subjected to a “play” or *jeu*, like the “play” of a steering wheel, technically speaking a hysteresis. In 1903, Georg Simmel wrote: “The boundary is not a spatial fact with [symbolic] consequences, but a [symbolic] fact that forms itself spatially”.⁴ I have replaced the word Simmel uses, “sociological”, with the more general “symbolic”. By making this claim, Simmel posits the symbolic (or sociological) as primary and the spatial as secondary, but at the same time acknowledges the necessity of spatial form in any border. In doing this he makes the boundary into what Jacques Derrida would call an “originary” supplement,⁵ allowing for a certain materiality of the border, for its potential to cause effects, for what literary scholars might call its intertextuality. The border disturbs the territory; it is its constitutive outside.

The border turn, like all “turns” – the linguistic turn, the temporal turn, the spatial turn, the material turn, the performative turn – embodies a desire to see everything through one lens or to project everything onto one place. That is, the turn is a wish to see the landscape from a privileged position, reduce it to a visual surface like a map or a painting. One way of counteracting the reductive tendency of thinking in terms of turns is to invoke Arjun Appadurai’s term “scapes”, from his 1990 article “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, in which he sees the world made up of at least five global scapes (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes).⁶ These scapes are not only envisaged as multiple, but also as flexible surfaces, linked and folded into one another like networks or the rhizomes of Deleuzian/Guattarian theory,⁷ and allowing through their loose fits *jeu* or play.

Border Poetics

This conceptualization of flexible surfaces underlies the practice of border poetics, an attempt to read texts and other forms of presentation from the border. Border poetics connects borders on the level of *histoire* (a man awakes on a train) to the level of *discours* (a reader begins reading a novel). Every border-crossing is an event which can be expressed in the form of a minimal narrative, the transition from one state to another. Indeed, Michel de Certeau has argued that every narrative *is* a travel narrative, *is* the narrative of a border-crossing.⁸

Every border-crossing is furthermore a crossing of borders on several different scales, planes or scapes. Five planes or scapes are often met in reading narratives of border-crossing. The topographical border, the crossing of a border in space, manifests (pace Simmel) the crossing of a symbolic border. It is simultaneously an epistemological border, the crossing of the border

between the known and the unknown. Every border crossing is also a transition between a before and an after, a turning point, a temporal border. Finally, on the formal level of the discourse, every border-crossing crosses a textual divide of a literary, narrative, medial or generic nature.⁹

We're standing there again, analyzing a text. A man awakes and stands up, crossing the temporal and symbolic divides between sleep and being awake, which is also the epistemological divide between unconsciousness and consciousness. He then crosses the topographical border between the floor and an upright position, which symbolically is a divide between being down and being up. He is caught in an in-between on border of sleep as the text evokes a dream, and positions him in a state of disorientation.

The man looks at the window, the topographical divide between inside and outside, but does not only see the outside, but also the inside: a reflection, indicating an epistemological border to be crossed to his own identity. He appears to be a man without a past or a future; instead of the clouds and the wind, which symbolize the lost freedom of the pilot, he sees their symbolic negation, the moon. The symbolic border is that between a lost utopia and a melancholic dystopia: the grey disc, seas of sand, the cratered face.

He is on a train, travelling to Nairobi from the Tanzanian border, part of a larger-scale topographical border-crossing from Africa to Europe, or from Uganda to Sweden. This border-crossing is a labyrinthine one, disseminated across space and tracing a bewildering itinerary from Uganda to Greece to Italy to Zambia to Tanzania to Kenya to Tanzania to Sweden.

The border he crosses is also a temporal border on a larger scale than just his story of loss; it is also part of a historical transition involving decolonization, Idi Amin's coup and of emigration to Europe. This border-crossing also involves the epistemological borders of forgetting and remembering, revealed on one level through the scenes of interrogation by the

Tanzanian police in the novel, and on another through the reconstruction of his story by his Swedish son.

Border concepts

Through this border poetics reading, I have isolated a number of figurations of the border: awakening, standing up, disorientation, mirroring, flight, trauma, loss, melancholy, turning point, labyrinth, dissemination. Here I will step outside of literature and into culturological analysis, arguing that such rhetorical figures and narrative configurations can be used as keys to border concepts circulating and changing in discourse. We know from etymological shifts, for instance that in languages such as German and Swedish from the Germanic word *Mark* (in English, *march*) signifying a zone to the Slavic loanwords *gräns* or *Grenze* signifying a line, that border concepts and the ways in which such concepts construct or imagine borders are constantly changing. Not only do borders change historically, but the concept of what a border is historicizable, and may compete with several contemporary border concepts, resulting in paradoxical ambivalences such as the conception of the border as both a wall and a bridge, or both a barrier and a contact zone.

The circulation of different border concepts necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to borders. The border as a modern academic topic is constituted through two fields. On the one hand we have “border theory” in cultural and literary studies, which goes back to the late 1970s with key figures such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Jacques Derrida providing important impulses.¹⁰ On the other we find a more robustly established tradition of “border studies” coming out of political geography, a field which lately has exhibited a recent shift towards to the cultural.

As an academic field, border theory is only partly constituted, bringing together work in philosophy, the history of ideas, conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), critical theory, literary theory and cultural studies. Within this meandering thread of research, border theory has produced its share of new conceptualizations of the border. Recently, however, border studies, partly through opening up to the influence of border theory, but also through the development of critical geography (one speaks also of “critical borders studies”), has also become a major deliverer of new border concepts.¹¹ Beginning with *bordering*, the focus has shifted from treating borders as historical (or even natural) givens, to seeing borders as processes, as always under negotiation, as always the product of ongoing *borderwork*.¹² The term *b/ordering* has introduced to this discourse a critical analysis of power,¹³ while the processual nature of bordering has gone hand in hand with a focus on *mobile borders*.¹⁴ Mobile borders today have been seen as a product of globalization, in which territorial borders are experienced as in flux and continually displaced. Thus borders are internalized when the external border pops up within state territories (in urban space, or in an airport, for example), and externalized when we meet the border even before we cross into foreign territory (at the visa office of an embassy, for example). This in- and out-folding of territorial borders has been conceptualized within border poetics as a dissemination of the border over larger spaces, *border zones*, which may in fact be in themselves borderless and stretch across whole territories. Mobile borders express the increasing difficulty we have in differentiating between centres and peripheries in the contemporary world. Recently, border studies has developed the concept of border zones into that of *borderscapes*, a new “scape”, which allows us to understand better the entanglement of many different and flexible spaces, discourses and actors in bordering processes.¹⁵ The borderscape is a network binding together everything involved in the bordering process. Like the term *border*, it also has a verbal form, *borderscaping*, implying an active form of what has also been called *border design*.¹⁶

The challenge to literary theory is that border concepts travel between literary discourses and other discourses – e.g. medial, political, juridical and academic. What can concepts coming from other discourses tell us about literary borders?

A recent major EU research project on “evolving border concepts” and how they might affect the border challenges afflicting Europe today, *EUBORDERSCAPES*, did find space for some literary researchers.¹⁷ A work package investigating “border-crossing in cultural production” focused partly on border concepts in published narratives of migration.¹⁸ Part of that focus was a corpus of Norwegian and Swedish material, autobiographical testimonials and novels by “second generation migrants” and what has been called “1.5 generation migrants”, i.e. migrants who have come to their new countries as children or youth, who have been born elsewhere, but have grown up with access to a new culture and education system.¹⁹ Indeed, when tracing the figurations of borders which appear in their publications, it appears that borders are for them precisely mobile. Their acts of border crossing are multiplied and disseminated across a wide topographical and temporal border zone. They are not limited to the aeroplane journeys which typically brought them to their new countries, but also become part of a process of cultural education or *Bildung*. These zones may contain strong elements of disorientation as they are figured as labyrinthine paces of back-and-forth movement, and these sometimes traumatic border experiences can be set against more utopian images, often of flying (across borders, etc.). Most importantly in the current context, many of these published narratives are also the stories of entering-into-writing, which is often figured as the last border to be crossed. Becoming a writer is to acquire a voice, to participate in the public sphere, i.e. to cross the symbolic and epistemological border between private and public. The publication of such book-length narratives is also a way to counteract the media spectacle focused on borders which underpins the production of a “migration crisis”. Books belong to a different level of discourse than that of

journalism, and allowing a different, more *longue durée* temporality and a deeper understanding of the exigencies of cultural border crossing.

Textual borders

We're standing there again, we who read stories, looking for markers of style and genre which may help us to cross into the text, that is to say, negotiate a textual border, this short text at the beginning of a novel. Is it the first in the collection of prose poems? Probably not, if we have noticed the Swedish genre indicator *Roman* ("novel") on the title page. Is it a fragment, in a novel of fragments, what one in Norwegian would call a *punkroman* ("a point novel")? This threshold to the text casts a net of lyrical symbols, or to invoke Derrida's famous metaphor for a poem, this short text is like a hedgehog, with spines reaching into the rest of the novel.²⁰

En storm kom från paradiset is one of these global, lyrical novels of memory and historiographical metafiction in the style of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Ann Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* or Teju Cole's *Open City*.²¹ The short text at the beginning of Anyuru's novel provides the first of a series of frames for memory, like layers in an onion, connected through a series of remediations, as the son of the protagonist reconstructs the protagonist's story. The short text is followed by the interrogation scene which mixes confessions and memories; memory objects (or umbilical border objects, to use Debra A. Castillo's term) such as a pilot's jacket, a flight log book, photographs and various official documents;²² the protagonist's memoirs, and narrative reflections made by the son himself, thus entangling his own writing and life into the novel's borderscape.²³

Notes

¹ Johannes Anyuru, *A Storm Blew in from Paradise*, trans. Rachel Willson-Broyles (Breda: World Editions, 2015), p. 9. Original text: “Han öppnar ögonen. Golvet skakar. En känsla av att rummet alldeles nyss var fullt av röster och skratt. Kanske drömde han bara. Han ligger mellan två rader med stolar. Stjärnor rör sig, sakta, i ett fönster över honom. Ligger i en tågkupé. Han reser sig och sätter sig i ett av sätena. Han är öm i kroppen, lederna är stela. Han tittar ner på sina händer, på knogarna, de smala fingrarna, han vrider huvudet, försöker få en glimt av sin spegelbild i glaset. Han minns inte vad han har varit med om, vad han gör på detta tåg. Fullmånen hänger lågt över horisonten, en grå skiva. Han ser kratrarna, sandhaven. Han minns inte vem han är. Månen, den påminner honom om något. Om moln. Om vinden. Han minns inte. Han minns inte historien”. Johannes Anyuru, *En storm kom från paradiset* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2013), p. 5.

² Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, “Walls and Border Art: The Politics of Art Display”, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 27 (2012), 213–28, p. 3.

³ Anyuru, *En storm kom från paradiset*, p. 234.

⁴ Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Space”, in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 137–70, here p. 142. Original text: “Die Grenze ist nicht eine räumliche Tatsache mit soziologischen Wirkungen, sondern eine soziologische Tatsache, die sich räumlich formt”. Georg Simmel, “Soziologie des Raumes”, in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908: Band 1*, ed. Rüdiger Kramme, Angela Rammstedt and Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 132–83, here p. 141.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), eg. pp. 313–314.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7 (1990), pp. 295–310.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 6–25.

⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 115, 122–23, 126–28.

⁹ Johan Schimanski, “Crossing and Reading: Notes Towards a Theory and a Method”, *Nordlit* (2006), 41–63; Hein Viljoen, “Introduction”, in *Crossing Borders, Dissolving Boundaries*, ed. Hein Viljoen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. xi–xlvii.

¹⁰ Anzaldúa in Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Derrida in many texts, but see for example Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”, trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 55–81.

¹¹ Noel Parker, Nick Vaughan-Williams, Luiza Bialasiewicz, Sarah Bulmer, Ben Carver, Robin Durie, John Heathershaw, Henk van Houtum, Catarina Kinnvall, Olivier Kramsch, Claudio Minca, Alex Murray, Aleksander Panjek, Chris Rumford, Andrew Schaap, James Sidaway, and John Williams, “Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies”, *Geopolitics*, 14 (2009), 582–87.

¹² Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering and Othering”, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93 (2002), 125–36; Lena Malm and Sarah Green, eds., *Borderwork: A Visual Journey through Periphery Frontier Regions* (Riga: Jasilti, 2013); James W. Scott and Jussi Laine, “Borderwork: Finnish-Russian Co-Operation and Civil Society Engagement in the Social Economy of Transformation”, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 24 (2012), 181–97.

¹³ Nick Megoran, “‘B/Ordering’ and Biopolitics in Central Asia”, in Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *A Companion to Border Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2012), pp. 473-91; Houtum and Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering and Othering”; Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch, and Wolfgang Zierhofer, eds., *B/Ordering Space* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

¹⁴ Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Frédéric Giraut, eds., *Borderities and the Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁵ Chiara Brambilla, “Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept”, *Geopolitics*, 20 (2015), 14–34; Elena dell’Agnese and Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, “Borderscapes: From Border Landscapes to Border Aesthetics”, *Geopolitics*, 20 (2015), 4–13; Prem Kumar Rajaram, and Carl Grundy-Warr, eds., *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Johan Schimanski, “Border Aesthetics and Cultural Distancing in the Norwegian-Russian Borderscape”, *Geopolitics*, 20 (2015), 35–55; Anke Strüver, *Stories of the “Boring Border”: The Dutch-German Borderscape in People’s Minds* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005).

¹⁶ Strüver, *Stories of the “Boring Border”*, p. 170; Chiara Brambilla, Jussi Laine, James W. Scott, and Gianluca Bocchi, eds., *Borderscaping: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

¹⁷ www.euborderscapes.eu.

¹⁸ https://en.uit.no/go/target/344773/?p_document_id=344750.

¹⁹ Johan Schimanski, “Changing Borders in Published Migration Narratives in Norwegian”, *EUBORDERSCAPES working papers*, (2016),

<http://www.euborderscapes.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Working_Papers/EUBORDERSCAPES_Working_Paper_12_Schimanski.pdf> Accessed 7 June 2016.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Che cos’è la poesia?”, trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 221–40.

²¹ Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Pan/Picador, 1993); Ann Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2001); Teju Coles, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

²² Debra A. Castillo, “Borders, Identities, Objects”, in *Border Poetics De-Limited*, ed. by Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2007), pp. 115–48.

²³ This chapter is the product of research within work package 10, “Border Crossing and Cultural Production”, of the EUBORDERSCAPES research project (Bordering, Political Landscapes and Social Arenas: Potentials and Challenges of Evolving Border Concepts in a Post-Cold War World, 2012–2016), which was funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme (FP7–SSH-2011–1, Area 4.2.1 “Evolving Concepts of Borders”, grant number 290775). I wish to thank interlocutors in Karlstad, Oslo, Joensuu, Strasbourg and Vienna for their useful and inspiring comments.