

Moving Between Worlds: Border Women in Narratives of Forced Displacement in Greece

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Abstract:

In this paper I look at refugee women's narratives of border crossings and inhabiting borderlands. Following tracks and traces of feminist geopolitics, the paper unfolds in three parts: first I explore borders as political, cultural and material practices, particularly focusing on the sea borders of the Aegean islands as gateways to 'the fortress Europe'. Then I consider border situations within symbolic and imaginary spaces inspired by feminist critical poetics. Finally, I turn to women's stories, which were not so much about understanding borders and their contested politics, but rather about the risks and joys of crossing them at any cost, as well as about surviving the borderlands. My argument is that refugee women's stories of forced displacement challenge abstract theorization of borders and illuminate the importance of embedded and embodied practices in understanding the borderlands as liminal and marginalized spaces of transition, thus contributing to a wider project of charting feminist political geographies.

Key words: borders, forced displacement, narratives. refugee women, feminist geopolitics, subjective geographies

It was daytime, a sunny day; it was like a normal journey, but of course I was all white and very anxious: excitement, nervousness. I felt like I would faint, something like that. It was like a 2 hours journey and throughout I was trembling. But at some point the captain said: 'now we are within the borders of Greece'. It was one of the best moments of my life. I felt free after 2 years, I really felt free. (Derya's story)

In this cinematic part of her story, Derya revives the moment of crossing the borders. Since hers was a maritime escape, it was the voice of the captain that marked her passage and filled her with the joy of freedom. Derya is a well-educated Turkish woman in her mid-thirties, who was caught in the persecution of the Gülen movement in the aftermath of its conflict with the Turkish government and particularly after the July 2016 coup attempt. (see, Yavuz and Balci 2018) As one of the most powerful religious organisations in Turkey and worldwide, this movement encourages its followers to master the sciences as a way of engaging with secular modernity. The movement's focus on the importance of education has made it widely popular among young women, who see their organisational involvement as an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and change their lives. (see Tee 2016)

I met Derya in April 2019 through the *Refugee Legal Support-Athens*, a clinic providing free legal support to refugees,¹ and I interviewed her in a café in Athens. At the time of the interview, Derya was waiting to reunify with her husband and two children in Belgium, after two years of persecution, imprisonment and failed attempts to escape. Her story encompasses many elements of the experience of thousands of Gülenist women imprisoned in Turkey because of their connections with the movement.² As Derya told me in the very beginning of the interview: 'Thank you for listening to me, because I need to tell this story; this is not only my story, this is the story of many women and children and many families in Turkey now.'

Taking Derya's narrative moment of defying territorial restrictions as my starting point, in this paper I look into different discourses, practices and lived experiences revolving around borders and border crossings. The paper emerges from a research project in which I have explored the use of 'the nomadic subject' in feminist theory and politics. (see Tamboukou 2018) Taking up the salience of stories not only in recounting experiences, but also in forming an experiential basis for changing the subject and its world, I have interviewed 22 migrant and refugee women about their experiences of being on the move. The research was conducted in Athens and in Lesvos Greece in 2018-2019 and my participants were recruited through a number of international, civic and feminist organizations working with migrant and refugee women in Greece. Most of the women who participated in this research told me that they did it because they wanted their voices to be heard and their stories to be circulated more widely. In this light, I take their narratives as a rich archive of gendered experiences of mobility under conditions of forced displacement. (see Tamboukou 2020a)

The paper unfolds in three parts: first I look at borders as political, cultural and material practices within the realm of 'the real', particularly focusing on the sea borders of the Aegean islands as gateways to 'the fortress Europe'. Here I consider Étienne Balibar's conceptualization of borders (2002) and Michel Agier's anthropological approach to 'the borderland condition' (2016) in conversation with a rich body of literature around feminist geopolitics and beyond (see Hyndman 2019). Then I look at border situations within symbolic and imaginary spaces inspired by the feminist critical poetics of Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Maria Lugones. Here I particularly focus on the concepts of *nepantla*, the *doubleness of the foreigner* and *world travelling*. Finally, I turn to the stories of the research archive, which were not so much about understanding borders and their contested politics, but rather about the risks and joys of crossing them at any cost, as well as about surviving the borderlands. As feminist philosopher Seloua Luste Bulbina (2013) has argued, it is through our entanglement with 'the science of the concrete' that we can make a move towards decolonizing feminist spatial analytics.

My argument is that refugee women's stories of forced displacement challenge abstract theorization of borders and illuminate the importance of embedded and embodied practices in understanding the borderlands as liminal and marginalized spaces of transition. In analysing gendered dimensions of 'the border situation' (Agier 2016), the paper contributes to Jennifer Hyndman's urge for 'unsettling feminist geopolitics' by charting 'feminist political geographies of violence and displacement' (2019).

What do borders do?

In addressing the question of 'what is a border?' Balibar (2002) points to the complexity of the notion and proposes three ways of understanding it: overdetermination, polysemy and heterogeneity. In their long history, borders have always been overdetermined, he argues: 'no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states, but is always overdetermined, and in that sense sanctioned, reduplicated and relativized by other geopolitical divisions.' (79) Their polysemic nature means that borders are never experienced in the same way by subjects with different, social, cultural, ethnic, political or gender identifications: 'they do not have the same meaning for everyone.' (81) Finally, borders are heterogeneous and ubiquitous and '*some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all* in the geographico-political administrative sense of the term.' (84, emphasis in the text) The Berlin Wall is one of the most well-known cases in the cold war era: it illustrates Balibar's configuration, particularly in highlighting the politically relativized character of borders and the way they are differently experienced by its 'insiders' and 'outsiders', which are also unstable and volatile subject positions. As Trinh has poetically put it: 'Call it a fence "to make good neighbors", but it is still a wall and remember what the Berlin wall was called on the other side; it was an Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier.' (2011, 1) Moreover, despite the jubilation of the western world on the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we have now entered a new era of wall politics, or what Wendy Brown calls a 'desire for walls', which is manifested in four popular phantasies: the fear of the alien, the need to be protected, the demand for insulation and the will for purity. (2010)

What Balibar (2002) highlights in his political analysis of the impossibility of grasping the notion of the border is that borders have different histories and geographies and they are always both real and imaginary, as well as visible and invisible. André Green's pithy observation that 'you can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it is difficult to imagine being a border' (1990, 107) brings the complexity of the multiple and split migrant and refugee subject positions in the assemblage of border discourses and practices that I want to unravel in this paper. But instead of raising the aporetic ontological question of 'what is a border', I rather turn my interest in what borders do. The question of what borders do in expressing the conditions of their existence seems to reverberate with Deborah Dixon's question of 'what can a feminist geopolitics do' (2015, 1). Her configuration of feminist geopolitics as a critical field that illuminates people's lives across the globe, with the aim to understand, but more importantly change the socio-political, economic and cultural conditions of their existence, becomes the plane on which I want to explore gendered experiences of crossing borders and inhabiting borderlands:

Imagine you are standing on the shore of a sea staring across at a landmass opposite, which forms your horizon. You know, although they are not visible to you, that beneath the surface of this sea are the corpses of thousands of people who tried to cross it in order to arrive where you are now standing. Your horizon, then, is a border. This sea has long been viewed as a threshold, and yours is not the first epoch during which it has been crossed by masses of people in a rising tide of desperation, propelled by unspeakable violence. (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017, 405)

What the authors highlight in the above extract from a dialogic art/theory essay mingling photography with theoretical analysis is not only the invisible liquid borders of the Aegean sea, but also and perhaps more importantly the histories of previous crossings. What has dramatically changed however in the Aegean 'refugee crisis' is that 'the solid ground on which you are standing' (ibid.), the island of Lesbos in the case of the above essay, is also the entrance gate to Europe and has thus become a 'hotspot' in the European policy of migration management. Remember that borders are overdetermined, polysemic and heterogeneous in Balibar's analysis (2002), so they need to be mapped within situated histories and geographies.

The formation of 'hotspots' has become a crucial aspect of the European migration policy. According to the 'European Agenda of Migration' (EC 2015) hotspots were conceived as registration and identification centres that would administer and facilitate the relocation of refugees, in all EU member states according to their admission quotas and needs. By dividing those eligible to seek asylum status from those deemed ineligible, the hotspot's main function was initially conceived as a way to manage the waves of refugees at the point of their emergence in the EU borders. In this way, Lesbos along four other Greek islands in the Aegean borders with Turkey—Chios, Leros, Samos and Kos—were eventually separated from their Greek/European context and were transformed into gateways to the Fortress Europe. The border 'is both a threshold and an act of institution' Agier has argued and its action is both internal and external (2016, 18). But what happened in the actual enactment of 'hotspot' policies is that these islands became sites of indefinite detention: the promise of relocation was only partially realised and thousands of refugees found themselves stranded in Greece either on the islands or in the mainland, particularly after March 2016, when Balkan countries sealed their borders. The border regime in and around the Aegean islands, but also in the mainland has thus been radically transformed as a result of the function of the hotspots: 'the national border is moved inward, separating the islands from the mainland, creating a liminal zone of questionable legal status, but also multiplying the border through so-called "mobile hotspots," which follow people on the move who have circumvented the security regime' (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017, 406).

In his political theorization, Balibar has highlighted the instability, porousness and vacillation of European borders. This fluid border condition transforms questions of border policy and policing into philosophical issues and speculations about 'the meaning of defining an "interior" and an "exterior", a "here" and a "there", Balibar argues (2002, 88). In Balibar's analysis then, the vacillation of borders is an important aspect of 'being a border'. Indeed, European borders are still vacillating within the hotspot approaches to the migration and refugee issue. As a matter of fact, this vacillation has eventually exploded to an unprecedented crisis of human mobility management. As I write this paper, thousands of migrants and refugees have been trapped in a no-man's land, in between borders, after Turkey's decision to suspend the bilateral EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016, which gave the right to European border authorities to return to Turkey those refugees who had been deemed ineligible to seek asylum in Europe.³ But while borders are done and undone as the unfolding of war tactics and diplomatic negotiations within local and global geopolitical crises, they create unforeseen effects in the field of geopolitics, within which border lines are drawn, erased and redrawn: there are some people out there who are caught in the interstices of failed political actions and whose lives are at the point of annihilation. What Balibar's analysis

of borders highlights, is that far from being mere geographical limits between territorial entities, borders are complex social, political and cultural battlefields, historically marked by intense power relations at play between practices of border enforcement and border crossing.

But beyond geopolitical contexts, impositions and limitations, borders always raise philosophical questions and issues at the level of the symbolic and the imaginary for Balibar. They are dynamic and mobile, and their heterogeneous manifestations include cultural, linguistic, political and existential boundaries that need to be charted and analysed. In Balibar's analysis then, the border has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon (according to its conceptual and cartographic representation as an edge and as a limit) and has been transported into the very centre of the public space, into the middle of our experience' Sandro Mezzadra has argued (2019, 2). In this context the role of 'internal borders' in the construction of 'foreign bodies' is a useful tool in feminist geopolitical analytics, as I will further discuss, drawing on feminist spatial poetics in-between and across borderlands and borderlines.

On being a border woman

Cuando vives en la frontera

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice

[...]

To survive the Borderlands,

you must live *sin fronteras*

be a crossroads

(Anzaldúa 1987, 194-195)

Published in 1987, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has become an influential intervention in configuring social, political and existential entanglements of living and moving in between countries, cultures, languages, identifications and subject positions, a critical celebration of radical difference par excellence. In her preface Anzaldúa draws the geographical lines of her 'actual physical borderland' as 'the Texas-US Southwest/Mexican border', but she is quick to observe that the psychological, sexual and spiritual borderlands she is dealing with are not specific to her geographically situated position. (ibid., i) What is also significant in the poetics of being 'a border woman' (ibid., i) is that difficulties, pains, traumas, pleasures and joys are entangled in the mestiza experience: 'It is not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza* and certain joys.' (ibid.)

Anzaldúa's ambivalence vis-à-vis the existential condition of being 'a border woman' runs like a red thread not only through her *Borderlands* book, but actually throughout her whole corpus. 'Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks), she wrote in the last sentence of the preface to the second edition of *This Bridge Called my Back*, a collection of writings by women of colour (Moraga

and Anzaldúa 1983). With this poetic ending, she reconfigures the Spanish poet Antonio Machado's famous verse: 'Caminante no hay camino, Se hace camino al andar' (Traveller, there is no path you make your own path as you walk). As Norma Elia Cantú has commented, in choosing the trope of the bridge [el puente] to replace that of the path [el camino] in Machado's verse, Anzaldúa's traveller does not just open a path for himself or herself, but actually builds bridges that connect.

Among the many insights and ideas that emerge from Anzaldúa's border theory I have been particularly interested in the concept of *nepantla*, as a liminal transitional space. As Cantú explains the concept's roots are in Náhuatl thought: 'to be in *nepantla* meant to be in a space—theoretical and abstract—where two seemingly opposed views must be negotiated and synthesized' (2013, 182). Anzaldúa interprets the Náhuatl notion somehow differently however, highlighting transition rather than synthesis: 'an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race or sexual position to another, when travelling from a present identity into a new identity' (2009a, 180) Thus, in Anzaldúa's conceptual vocabulary, *nepantla* is a space in the intermezzo, wherein ruptures and shifts happen: 'nepantla is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transformation' (2009b, 310), which she also calls 'a transitional nepantla space' (2009b, 310) This transition is not always internal and it is always harsh and risky, as for example the moment when the immigrant crosses the barbed wire fence (2009a 180) In Anzaldúan spatial analytic then 'one does not remain in nepantla, but rather one lives that moment of in-betweenness and moves on' (Cantú 2013, 182). It is in the *nepantla* that cultural identifications and subject positions are created and negotiated. Put in Foucauldian terms, the *nepantla* becomes a spatial components of 'technologies of the self' (1988), practices and discourses that Anzaldúa deploys in becoming a subject. If the border 'is a place, a situation or a moment that ritualizes the relationship to the other' in Agier's thought (2016, 6) it is also an instance that crystallizes the relationship to the self, I would add: 'I had to leave home so I could find myself' wrote Anzaldúa (1987, 16).

The poetics of 'the border woman' fleshes out Balibar's 'internal border' as an analytical tool of dissecting gender and race relations within feminist geopolitical analytics: 'The woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits' (ibid., 20). More importantly for Anzaldúa, the border experience is corporeal and visceral: 'The body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to "real events"' (38). The body as a plane of internal borders then, can either become 'foreign' as in Balibar and/or a site of resistance. Pain itself transposes itself into a tactic of resistance: 'pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It's a kind of survival tactic that people caught between the worlds unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us.' (39)

Writing from the heart, Anzaldúa's poetics beautifully express the contradictions and aporias of what Agier (2016, 17) calls 'border situations', that is time/space conditions within which borders are lived and experienced. And whilst she does not idealize the nomadic condition of life as an incessant wandering in between the striated spaces of nations, empires, capitalism and patriarchy, she does choose resistance as the coda of her stanza:

In the Borderlands

you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back; (1987, 194)

Anzaldúa's poetic figuration of fighting back reverberates here with Trinh's observation that despite its immanent sadness, exile 'can be worked through as an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new ground in defiance of newly authorized or old canonical enclosures'. (2011, 35) Having experienced a series of displacements and dislocations from the time she left Vietnam, her country of origin, as well as through a series of movements of her own choice, Trinh also takes up the question of 'the foreigner' and 'the other' in relation to migration and forced displacement. But instead of bridges, she has turned her attention to walls, the stories that have revolved around them, as well as their peculiar seductions: 'whoever is tempted to climb up the wall to look at what lies on the other side, ends up happily jumping over it, never to look back again' (2011, 1) The wall then is a border that incorporates the desire to cross it. It is there not to restrict and confine, but to be circumvented, a material trace of resistance, or what Agier calls 'the paradox of the wall, which is at the same time an imitation and a negation of the border' (2016. viii). Kapka Kassabova has expressed this double function of the border in a most forceful way: 'Once near a border, it is impossible not to be involved, not to want to exorcise or transgress something. Just by being there, the border is an invitation. Come on, it whispers, step across this line.' (2017, ii) In this state of ambivalence, 'outside' and 'inside' are always labile spaces, particularly so for those living in border situations: '*the high wall that keeps out is the same wall that keeps in*' (Trinh 2011, 3, emphasis in the text). It is through travelling that borders are crossed, but also redrawn: 'every voyage can be said to involve a resitting of boundaries' Trinh has written (*ibid.*, 27). In her critical poetics then the internal border takes a centre stage:

The traveling self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following 'public routes and beaten tracks' within a mapped movement; and, the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere. (*ibid.*)

Trinh is very sceptical about the wandering self however, and her analysis exposes what she articulates as the doubleness of being a stranger: 'as a foreigner on foreign land and as a stranger at home'. (*ibid.*, 55). The experience of forced displacement has made her uncomfortable with what used to be her home country: 'their country is my country' (*ibid.*) The feeling of being a border, a split self is disorienting and painful. Having left her country behind, she cannot escape the condition of being a stranger: 'if it is problematic to be a stranger, it is even more so to stop being one'. (*ibid.*) Within this incessant process of being or rather perpetually becoming a stranger, 'every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic' for Trinh (*ibid.*, 39) as it follows the rhythms of movement: 'the departure, the crossover, the fall, the

transformation' (39-40). The power relations that enforce displacement are also entangled with forces of desire for detours and wanderings.

Trinh's take of travellers' tales and the entanglements of sadness and joy that they entail make connections with Maria Lugones' (1990, 390) articulation of 'world'-travelling, as the outsider's experience of playfully moving among different modalities of life, albeit in the ruins of failed love. As a feminist philosopher perpetually moving in between real, symbolic and imaginary borders, Lugones' argument is that it is through loving each other that we can travel to each other's worlds. Here it is important to clarify Lugones' conceptual vocabulary and particularly her materialist approach to a what 'a world' can be or become: never a fixed entity, but rather an assemblage of real and imaginary bodies and/in places. (395) In the same materialist vein, travelling is a modality of existential transformation: 'the shift from being one person to being a different person' (396). Home is thus configured as a map of cultural, political and affective relations beyond geographical borders and spatial limitations, an assemblage of 'here', 'there' and 'elsewhere' in Trinh's analysis above, an Anzaldúan *nepantla*, a place where Lugones can feel playful in saying: 'that's me in there' (396). It is such unfoldings of transitional spaces that I want to consider next, drawing on migrant and refugee women's lived experiences of inhabiting borderlands.

Borderlands as lived spaces

Living at the borders means that one constantly treads the fine line between positioning and de-positioning, Trinh has thoughtfully commented. (2011, 54) Derya's joy of crossing the sea borders soon turned into the nightmare of a detention centre in Athens, when her subsequent attempt to cross the borders at the airport failed, and she was arrested:

I tried to cross the borders and fly to the US, but they arrested us. They kept us for 3 weeks in some kind of detention centre. The conditions were really very bad there [...] There were bugs everywhere and it was very crowded. There was not enough water, enough food [...] There was redness and wounds all over my body and they took me to emergency [...] So, after all these things happened, they let me go. (Derya's story)

Crossing borders cannot thus be idealized, not even within the limits of a single narrative, as in Derya's story. For people who have been forcefully displaced and turned into wanderers with uncertain futures and destinies, borders become marks of shifts and traumatic events in their lives, but also zones of indeterminacy and endless waiting, refuges of their desire to be accepted. 'I am grateful to Greece because they accepted us' said Derya while also giving an account of the horrible conditions of her detention. As Trinh has noted, being accepted is a fundamental problem of the refugee condition, a means 'to overcome the humiliation of bearing the too-may-too-needly status of the homeless-stateless alien.' (2011, 29) What does it mean to inhabit such zones, where life is suspended while waiting to be accepted? Moreover, what if living in borderlands has been your life?

A usual starting point for travelling stories is the beginning of a journey: 'where do you want me to start?' most women asked me in the beginning of the interview. My answer was always

the same, 'start wherever you want'. But while, most women would choose to start from an event that had radically disrupted their life-course as adults, Warda looked at me in a pensive way and after taking some time to think, she started her narration, way back in her early childhood:

I will speak from the beginning: I was born in Somalia, in Mogadishu. When I was born, there were many troubles in my country and when I was four there were many problems with my family, because of the troubles. So my father and mother took the decision that the whole family had to move to Yemen. We went to Yemen and we stayed there for a year, at my aunt's, my father's sister house. I was very young at the time and I did not understand why my family had taken the decision to move. One day, my family sent me out to play with the children of the neighbourhood. I was out all day, but well before the afternoon, I went back home, just before the sun set. When I went into our house, there was nobody there, it was empty, there was no furniture, nothing. I could not understand: how had they just gone without a word? It was a very difficult time for me. This incident became a traumatic experience in my life for ever. (Warda's story)

Warda is a young Somalian woman in her early twenties. I met her through *Iliaktida*, a Greek civil non-profit company providing accommodation and protection for vulnerable asylum seekers⁴ and the interview took place in their premises in Mytilini, Lesvos, in April 2019. At the time of the interview Warda was learning Greek and she was enrolled in the local secondary school. Her dream was to go on with her studies and become an airhostess. She was also participating in the intercultural adult choir *CANTAlaloun* [CANTAλλουιν]⁵ and when I visited Lesvos in June 2019, I attended one of their beautiful performances. Hers was one of the harshest stories of serial borders crossing and gender-based violence that I listened to in Lesvos. Warda has lived her whole life in borderlands, in-between zones as a 'sans papier' stateless person. After spending 10 years in Yemen with her aunt, she moved to Saudi Arabia, so that she and her siblings could apply for reunification with her mother, who had got asylum in Sweden:

So, I went to Saudi Arabia to prepare my papers for Sweden. But the Swedish Embassy had taken the decision not to take any more refugees. I thus stayed in Saudi Arabia for some time, as there was no other solution for me, and I had found myself in a limbo. I know Arabic very well, so while in Saudi Arabia, I would gather the neighbours' children and help them with their school study as a kind of job. I didn't have any other means, so I had to earn my living. (Warda's story)

Warda's story sketches a subjective geography, which defies state borders. Her trajectory unfolds as an Odyssey of forced displacement, an assemblage of countries with different legislations and administrative arrangements vis-a-vis, migration, illegal crossings and residencies, diverse spatial practices and tactics, adverse economic conditions, complicated family relations and obligations, as well as unpredicted effects. But her journey also differs from the real Odyssey in the sense that her Ithaca was not meant to be her native town, but rather her mother's settlement in Sweden. Warda had found herself in conditions of what Hyndman calls, 'extended exile' (2019, 7) and her journey was meant to be without return:

I stayed in Saudi Arabia for 2 years and then my mother tried to take me to Sweden again, together with my siblings. But we had been staying in Saudi Arabia illegally and I had to pay a lot of money, more than 40,000 riyals as a penalty for staying there without papers. My mother could not possibly gather this money, and we didn't have it either. So, my mother told us, don't go on with this process in Saudi Arabia because there is no way I can collect so much money to send you. You should rather go to Ethiopia, where there is a Swedish Embassy and it will be easier, you can definitely go there. You see, there was no Swedish Embassy in Somalia. But first we should go back to Somalia as they would deport us from Saudi Arabia without paying any money for the transportation, via the process 'go home'. (Warda's story)

In moving between countries, Warda had to adapt to a range of cultural practices and ways of thinking, communicate in different languages and succumb to different modalities of government. Her condition is that of what Alfred Schuetz (1944) calls the 'labyrinth of the stranger', a condition of disorientation in which she cannot find shelter in what is being offered to her and even worse, she cannot find her way out, despite her continuous 'zigzagging between prohibitions' (Agier 2016, 2). In a tragic way, the maze of her wanderings did bring her back to her birth city:

Since there was no other solution then, we decided to go back to Somalia first. But when travelling back to Somalia we decided to get off at a town that is very near the borders with Ethiopia, rather than go to Mogadishu. From this town it was easy to cross the borders to Ethiopia, illegally of course. We finally reached Ethiopia and when we got there, we applied for reunification at the Swedish Embassy, but we were rejected, so we finally had to go back to Somalia after all. (Warda's story)

But it was in the short period that she resided in her 'home country' that the most horrible events in her life happened: being brutally raped at her friend's house and being forced to stay silent and undergo abortion and infibulation by her father.⁶ While Warda's life has unfolded in crossing and recrossing borders, it was in the in-between spaces of movement and temporary residencies that escape routes also opened up. As Trinh has noted, the middle ground in Chinese theories of art and knowledge 'is where extremes lose their power; where all directions are (still) possible and hence where one can assume with intensity one's freedom of movement' (2011, 70). Warda did not exactly become free to move, but she did manage to escape the striated spaces of violent patriarchy through her elder brother's help: 'My brother was saving for his wedding, but he told me you can take this money and go. When you find another country and settle down and get a job, then you can send me back money for my wedding and my family. So, this is how I went to Turkey'. In seeking and accepting her brother's help, Warda has made an agential cut in negotiating 'her own protection, but not under conditions of her own making', as Hyndman has aptly observed. (2019, 6)

Warda's narrative is underpinned by a reflective mode that emerges from the experience of what Luste configures as 'between-worlds' (2013) But Turkey was a different local world from the countries that Warda had previously lived in: it was very difficult to find a job and impossible to socialize: 'When we were in Saudi Arabia, Somalian girls who didn't know Arabic could find a job. They would become cleaners, or work in restaurants, doing the washing-up, but in Turkey it wasn't like that at all.' Warda's previous experiences of being a stranger had

created a condition of what Agier calls 'banal or ordinary cosmopolitanism' (2016, 9). His argument is that cosmopolitanism should not be restricted to the practices of a globalized elite, but rather the consolidation of 'the experience of the roughness of the world by all those who, by taste, necessity or compulsion, by desire or by habit, are led to live in several places almost simultaneously and, in the absence of ubiquity, to live increasingly in mobility, even in an in-between' (ibid., viii). Agier's notion of 'banal cosmopolitanism' as a condition enforced upon stateless subjects like Warda, makes connections with a body of feminist literature that has introduced gender analytics in the discussion of minoritarian cosmopolitanisms, including the experience of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. (see Vieten 2012; Schiller and Irving 2015) It was through this enforced mode of gendered 'banal cosmopolitanism' that Warda fell out of place in Turkey and sought alternative ways to emerge from the labyrinth: 'Then I talked with my mother; she didn't know why I had gone to Turkey in the first place. I just told her that I was in Turkey and that I wanted her to invite me to Sweden. She sent me some money and I found the smugglers who took me to Greece by boat'.

Borders in Warda's condition are thus endlessly redrawn, negotiated and resisted: they become central in her lived experiences, thus fleshing out what Agier has identified as 'the centrality of the border' (2016, 8) Borderlands however, are time/space blocks with multiple and diverse functions and manifestations, even when their geographical territories are the same. While Lesbos became for Warda a refuge from extreme regimes of gender-based violence, for other refugee women it would be experienced as a zone of settlement: remember Balibar's (2002) notion of the polysemic nature of borders. Once arriving in Lesbos by boat, Linda took the decision not to move on to Europe at a time when she could still do it, but instead find a job as an interpreter and experiment with a new beginning in her life:

So when we reached there [Lesvos], they left the group with other people and they only took me to their offices. They prepared coffee, they called a doctor to examine me, they offered me cigarettes and they even called my family, to say that I had reached Greece and I was fine. They told me I was safe and that I shouldn't be afraid and then they asked me: 'What are you going to do now? Are you going to leave? I said 'I don't know' and then they told me 'since you know Greek, you should stay here and work as an interpreter'. I still said 'I don't know what I am going to do' and it is true: I had nothing in my mind. That was on February 6, 2016. So they told me, 'ok, think about it'. Because at the time, most people were leaving—going to Germany, France and other European countries. But I didn't have anything in my mind. I hadn't thought about anything. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to leave Turkey, just this. (Linda's story)

Linda is a Syrian woman in her early forties, who escaped the war first by going to Turkey to live with her brother but disillusioned with the situation in Turkey she got in a boat and found herself on a shore in Lesbos. I met her through a doctoral student at the University of the Aegean and I interviewed her in her flat in Mytilini Lesbos in April 2019. In her story, she recounted the process of her decision to settle in Lesbos in a cinematic narrative mode: scene after scene, line after line. In reviving her dialogue with the border authorities in Lesbos, it was as if she was contemplating her decision once again. While recounting her story, Linda repeatedly referred to her experience in Lesbos as 'living a dream', which at some point in her narrative became identifiable with a specific seascape: 'I had a dream some years ago that I

was on a small rock near Thermi and when I went to Thermi and saw the rock I knew I had seen it before in my dreams.' Lesvos became Linda's *ne pantla*, an in-between space wherein she re-imagined herself as a subject in transition, exploring her possibilities and experimenting with new beginnings.

At the time of the interview Linda had already worked three years in Lesvos as an interpreter, she had fallen in love and got married and she was living in a rented flat with her partner. She had settled, or had she? When I visited Lesvos again in June 2019 and we met, she was trying to get an official recognition of her sociology degree in Syria, while also thinking about moving to the mainland with a rough entrepreneurship project in mind. Linda had become 'a border woman', although her border situation cannot fit into Agier's three figures of the border dweller—the wanderer, who seeks an entry to Europe, the *mètèque* who works without documents and the pariah, who resides in camps. (2016, 58). Hers is rather a gendered banal cosmopolitanism, 'a prolonged time and a border space, in which people learn the ways of the world and of other people [...] a place where a new cosmopolitan subject is emerging' according to Agier (9). Living in this in-between place, the borderland leaves open possibilities for future real and imagined journeys. The border becomes the space of the adventurer, as Agier has aptly observed. (62)

But 'there are different degrees of foreignness depending on the border situation and the moment in the situation' Agier has argued. (59) Linda's ambivalence around her decision to stay in Lesvos was very different from the majority of my interviewees, who expressed their frustration of being stranded in Lesvos without anything to do but wait, or just 'push time' (36). Their experience is a manifestation of spatiotemporal borders at work, since borders are simultaneously spatial (here and over there), temporal (before and after) and socially constructed (us and 'the other') Agier has maintained (23). It is precisely the experience of being in-between places and times that pushes border dwellers in the margins of the social: 'all I do here is sleep, wake up, go to the bathroom, do kitchen chores. I will go mad, if it goes on like that', Anna told me in frustration at the end of her story, while expressed her desire to do something: 'my life cannot go on like that, 7 days a week stuck inside this flat. It is not easy to live like that, day after day, this is my life. But how long can I live like that? How long?' Anna is a refugee woman in her early twenties. She escaped Congo after a gang rape at the house where she was working as a domestic and while in Turkey, she also realized that she was pregnant. I met her through *Iliaktida* and interviewed her in a flat in Mytilini Lesvos, where she lived with her baby daughter, in April 2019. 'I will tell my story of travelling to Greece. I had never travelled in my life before. I knew it would be very difficult', she told me in the beginning of her story, but as her story unfolded, her greatest difficulty seemed to be the endless waiting in the margins of social life. As Jennifer Hyndman and Werona Giles have argued the material conditions and depictions of refugees waiting endlessly for some sort of legal recognition contributes to 'a feminization of asylum' (2011). Moreover, this endless waiting is a form of 'slow violence' (Hyndman 2019, 7).

The uncertainty of a life in suspension, the liminality of border situations is also, always, already political, depending on both local and global geopolitical situations. Somi's story emerges from the atrocities of the Iran/Iraqi war machine. Somi is an Iranian woman in her late thirties, who I met through the *Refugee Legal Support* and I interviewed her in a café in Athens in December 2018. At the age of twenty-one, Somi found herself in an Iraqi refugee

camp for Iranian dissidents fighting for the dream of a secular democracy. But when Iraq was invaded in 2003, everything changed and Somi found herself entangled in a war machine that was beyond her control and comprehension:

I was there for 6 months and in the first 6 months I was learning the background of this organization and stuff like that. After 6 months, that was the year 2003, the US attacked Iraq. I had never seen a war in my life [...] we were very scared [...] we could hear the noises of the war, everything was around us [...] I was never injured [but] a lot of my friends, particularly those travelling from one camp to another, were either injured, or got killed at that time. (Somi's story)

Borders are bound up with lasting regimes of violence and states of war. But the atrocities and impasses of the Iraqi war in its multifarious entanglements with histories of colonialism and imperialism have created an extremely oppressive state of domination not just for the Iraqi people, but also for the various groups of its migrant and refugee population. Thus, global wars have transformed, shifted and multiplied borders, rendering them riskier and more uncertain. The transition to the US occupation seemed to be the end of violence, but was it? Somi's story vividly recounts the frustration of being enclosed 'in safety':

After the war the US took over Iraq and they didn't have a problem with the organization. So they took complete control of the camp, they brought the food, they did the security and there was no problem. However, this was a closed camp, you didn't have the permission to leave, to go outside [...] we were all in this closed camp, with no internet access [...] we didn't even have mobiles; we didn't know mobiles existed. We were completely disconnected from the outside world [...] we didn't know anything. (Somi's story)

The proliferation of walls and of confinement technologies mark new border situations of a supposedly globalized world. By making the interns of the Iranian dissidents' camp invisible the Iraqi occupying forces prolonged the time and space of the interns' border lives, while at the same time creating pools of human ammunition for future wars. Somi found herself caught in a border trap, unable to communicate with the outer world both physically and virtually. Moreover, there were internal borders within the camp itself and a harsh regime of gender segregation in place: 'men and women were separate from each other, they were not in the same area and they were not allowed to communicate; any communication between men and women would have been severely punished'. This regime of 'proliferating borders', as Balibar has observed (2002) was finally blown up after 2006, when the US army handed over power to the Iraqi government, who took control of the camp, but this time under new relations with the Iranian regime: 'at one point the Iraqi government started attacking the camp through the Iranian Cat forces, as they called them. The first time [...] they were only using clubs, sticks and whips. During this first attack they didn't kill a lot of people'. But there were more fierce attacks with machine guns, tanks and many victims. In the end the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had to intervene recognizing all the residents of the camp as persons of concern and that's how a long process of relocation started which eventually took Somi to Albania and through 'illegal' border crossing to Greece. Somi repeatedly expressed her disillusion for having lost her life in the borderlands: 'I had a lot of stress because I had lost my whole life, I was not allowed to go to university, I was not allowed to

get a job, I lost my family, I had lost everything'. Somi's experience of the borderland situation was a disillusion with life: how relevant can therefore cosmopolitanism/cosmopolitanism studies be to women's real experiences of forced displacement, particularly when it comes to violence situations and war regimes in the borderlands within feminist geopolitics and beyond?

As I have already shown in this section, there were several stories conveying experiences of 'banal cosmopolitanism' (Agier 2016), but my counter argument is that despite its porousness and flexibility, 'banal cosmopolitanism' is still a theoretical abstraction that cannot be stretched in cases of displacement under conditions of war and destructive violence, wherein both 'cosmos' and 'polis', as its two main etymological parts, are simply annihilated. 'Can war be the vehicle of growing cosmopolitan consciousness of the world?' Galin Tihanov has succinctly asked (2015, 29) In response to this question, what I argue is that extreme circumstances of displacement might foreclose possibilities for being open to the world and can also disrupt dreams of mutual understanding and hopes for acting in concert. Here I agree with Hyndman about the need 'for a larger project of *feminist political geography*' (2019, 6, emphasis in the text), since feminist geopolitics may have reached its limitations as a methodological and epistemological framework.

Lines in the map of feminist political geographies

In responding to Hyndman's call for 'a wider range of feminist interventions related to embodied geopolitical phenomena, materialism, violence, displacement (of all kinds), and scale' (2019, 4), in this paper I have focused on gendered dimensions of 'the border situation' (Agier 2016) By recounting their stories of escaping war machines and brutal patriarchal violence, refugee women have materialized and enacted the argument of feminist political geographers that 'the asylum seeker-migrant-refugee who decides to flee is at once an expression of transnational and international power relations and protagonist of her journey and diasporic formation' (Hyndman 2019, 5).

Women's travelling stories have revolved around their experiences of tinkering with what they encounter as they passed through places and spaces, charting subjective geographies of 'between-worlds' (Luste 2013) Indeed, they did not so much focus on places of departure or arrival, but rather in the in-between, places they crossed and passed through. It is when relations with places and spaces are broken that one starts to think about them, Luste argues: 'to migrate is to wander, to remove obstacles, to bounce' (2013, 21). In Luste's configuration then, mobility under conditions of forced displacement is not just physical and geographical, taking you from one place to another, but also imaginary and symbolic, marking ruptures and 'shaking the ghosts of the past' (21) Migrant and refugee women's storyworlds were made up of mobilities, which were either chosen or compelled, of ruptures with roots, of absences of 'home', as well as of temporary and uncertain anchorages. It is by following tracks and traces of such mobility trajectories, left behind in novellas and stories, that we can perhaps start mapping a feminist political geography, 'that is responsive to postcolonial critique and goes beyond 'feminist geopolitics' with all its variations.' (Hyndman 2019, 7).

In looking at these stories, my analysis has used a theoretical toolbox of concepts, ideas and insights from feminist philosophies, epistemologies and poetics, political theory and cultural anthropology. As Hyndman has argued 'feminist political geography eschews any singular terminology or theoretical framing' (2019, 7). By deploying a diffractive mode of reading women's stories, theories and literary reflections through one another, I have drifted away following 'the sound of narratives' (Tamboukou 2020b). It is thus through the force of stories that I have assembled the theoretical tools that helped me recognise and understand something in the stories I was listening, reading and effectively rewriting. In doing this I have followed Rebecca Maria Torres' pithy observation that it is on the plane of feminist geopolitics that we can make connections between global processes and marginalised voices and experiences and that 'through narratives from the margins on the intersection between the global and intimate, both collective and individual responsibility may be elucidated to diverse audiences'. (2018, 33)

I can only imagine what the protagonists and narrators of these stories would think of seeing their stories through my analytical lens, but also in concert with other women's. What I do know however is that all of them wanted their stories to be out in the wide wild world, which is what I have tried to do, by highlighting the importance of listening to these stories in grounding abstract theorizations and sketching feminist political imaginaries. As Susan Bickford (1996) has powerfully argued, the way we are heard (or not) by others charts our presence or absence in the political arena: I am heard, therefore I exist as a political subject. It is this desire to be heard that I have tried to interweave in the textual transposition of refugee women's stories, knowing that it is only traces of their experiences that we will ever be able to discern. (see Tamboukou 2020b) And yet these pigments of lived experiences of displacement and violence within border situations can become lines in the map of a feminist political geography in becoming.

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¹ See, <https://www.refugeelegalsupport.org/athens>

² See, 'Persecution of women in post-coup Turkey', retrieved from https://silencedturkey.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AST_presentation_Persecution-of-women-in-Turkey.pdf [28-2-2020]

³ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> [Accessed, 1-3-2020]

⁴ See: <https://iliaktida-amea.gr/en/about/>

⁵ See <https://www.facebook.com/CANTALALOUN/>

⁶ Infibulation is the most severe type of female genital mutilation. See <https://www.endfgm.eu/female-genital-mutilation/what-is-fgm> [Accessed, 5-3-2020]