



*William Kutz*

## **Borderlands beyond compare?**

---

The first thing you notice about the Strait of Gibraltar when you are there is the undulating slopes of the coastal mountains contrasted to the flatness of the sea between them. The two peaks, Djebel Tarek and Djebel Moussa, make up a promontory that has been known since antiquity as the “Pillars of Hercules.” Together they constitute a vast natural gateway linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

The second feature that attracts the viewer’s attention is the fences. Whether going by ship, bus, or foot, mobility is strictly controlled on both sides of the Strait. Barriers, checkpoints and surveillance systems channel the movement of people and goods throughout the region. The most well-known of these is the militarized border complex separating the Spanish exclave of Ceuta from the rest of the Moroccan hinterland, which has been a focal point for violent attacks against undocumented migrants and refugees looking to start a new life in the European Union. To prevent this from happening, an extended field of monitoring and control systems reach deep into the coastal region and further afield: nothing moves unobserved and uninhibited into or out of the zone.

For a time, many within the European Union considered the militarization of its external frontier as something exceptional, occurring at arm’s length on the peripheries of its macro-regions. This image contrasted to the Union’s own effort to project an idea of the continent as united by the free movement of people and capital across geopolitical borders. As a result, efforts to draw comparisons between internal and external bordering processes of the EU often appeared incommensurable. In both the popular and academic imagination, borderlands like the Öresund and Gibraltar regions were, like the Pillars of Hercules, seen as dissonant extremes struggling to hold the entire European project together. At one end, the Öresund was considered a pioneer and hallmark of the “golden

age” of post-war European unification, especially after the opening of the Öresund Bridge in the year 2000, which physically linked southern Sweden and Denmark. At the same time, however, Gibraltar increasingly became a metonym for the mass proliferation of border infrastructures into nearly every social and material domain of everyday life in the region.

While these perspectives are important, their emphasis on contrast and distinction have tended to overshadow valuable points of comparison between the two places, in terms how we think about borders as gateways and destinations, in terms of the dependencies and engagements that bind distant peripheries to one another, as well as the physical and symbolic resources by which ordinary borderwork is made possible and enacted. These considerations are vital sources of understanding that inform a wider multi-perspectival turn in critical border studies.

The need to look beyond difference and exceptionalism as the starting point for conversations about EU borders is more than just a theoretical exercise, but shape emerging political conversations over, for example, the normalization of nativist ideologies, the hardening of national frontiers, the aggravation of territorial disparities across regions, and the increasing ‘externalization’ of these problems onto marginalized groups – issues that are at the forefront of both European domestic *and* foreign affairs. Since 2015, the Öresund has been a proving ground for how these questions play out, particularly in regard to rising public resentment expressed towards refugees and migrants, expanded border closures and mobility restrictions, and growing awareness of inequities in socio-economic power and opportunity available to residents in education, transportation, housing and other staple amenities that were once foundational to Scandinavian social democracy. They are likewise key concerns in critical border studies; as they evolve, researchers and the general public alike need to come together to develop a more sensitive eye to the ways that borders are established in, related to, and made meaningful for different groups – a task that is arguably as urgent as ever.

It is in this context that discussions took place to develop a public seminar that explicitly held the interplay between the internal and external peripheries of the EU in tension with each other. Focusing on two ostensible extremes of the EU – the “open borders” of the Öresund and the increasingly “fortified” Gibraltar region – as our starting point, we sought to raise several overarching questions to foster a recurring dialogue on several topics, including:

- How are bordering processes in the Öresund and Gibraltar constituted in practice? What tools and techniques might we harness to identify these landscapes as distinct, but ultimately comparable, borderlands?
- What types of shared material resources, social practices and symbolic representations characterise the two frontier zones?
- How is ordinary borderwork negotiated or contested by different actors in these areas?

- In what ways do bordering practices shape inhabitants' sense of place and belonging?
- How might such bordering tendencies impact different articulations of social and territorial cohesion and political solidarity among inhabitants in each place?

None of these questions was intended to generate definitive answers, but to foster a conversation about the analytical and practical potential that such comparisons might generate. Key to this was a guiding ethos to be open to all relevant disciplinary, artistic and professional outlooks. Sound, text and image were held with equal regard. Through this dialogue our aim was to support wider efforts to *destabilize* taken-for-granted assumptions about the power geometries that underlie bordering practices between the EU and third-countries, to *pluralize* the diversity of actors typically included in discussions of cross-border affairs, to *reaffirm* the porosity and hybridity of social and territorial frontiers, and finally to *critically interrogate* the presumed legitimacy and authenticity of current discourses underpinning wider Europeanisation initiatives.

The texts that make up this special issue are the product of a collaboration between the Centre for Öresund Region Studies at Lund University and the Association Think Tanger – the latter being a civil society organisation focused interrogating challenges that confront residents in the Gibraltar region of northern Morocco through visual arts, design and engaged social practice. The texts are the outcome of dialogue fostered over seven seminars held from September to December 2022.

The first group of articles examines visual representations of identity and belonging in borderlands. Pei-Sze Chow, an Assistant Professor of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, draws on the hit Nordic Noir TV series *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, 2011–2018) and a short film *Out* (2006) as examples of 'regioscaping' – a practice that manifests and crafts a sense of a regional imaginary – of the Öresund as a transnational border-zone. As she demonstrates, film and television are deeply embedded in shaping public perceptions of the Öresund in material and symbolic ways that are constantly in the process of renegotiation. They reflect and refract different outlooks of the Öresund that arise from a complex web of relations that render visible and invisible traces of the borderland as an identifiable, coherent landscape.

In contrast to the fast-paced narratives of *Bron/Broen* and *Out* elaborated by Chow, our second contribution is an interview with Randa Maroufi over her slow, cinematic portrait of Moroccan porters who traffic goods between Morocco and Spain, at a site known as *Bab Sebta* (Ceuta Gate). We discuss the autobiographical circumstances that inspired the making of the film, the techniques used to depict the border complex while being physically prohibited from filming there, and the ways in which her portrayal of the border shares commonalities with events in the Öresund, particularly in regard to violence, gender relations, and the temporality of movement, which offer telling insight into bordering trajectories underway in Southern Scandinavia today.

The second theme explored in the issue concerns the ways that borders both impinge upon and are shaped by geo-economic life. For Christer Persson, an economic geographer and former Director of Strategic Development at the City of Malmö, he argues that no meaningful strategy has ever been put in place to adequately govern the cross-border movement of people, goods and capital in the Öresund region. As he writes: “To promote integration, we need governments to acknowledge that the cross-border region has added value for both countries from different perspectives – the general economy, the labour market, the housing market, the environment.” However, Persson describes the evolution of cross-border relations in the region as marked by a steady decline away from cooperation, in favour of more aggressive place-branding campaigns that undermine the ability for local authorities on each side of the Sound to respond to regional challenges. In Gibraltar we see a very different set of machinations at work in the text by William Kutz, a geographer at Lund University. Cross-border relations in the region have long been coloured by the violent history of Spanish colonisation of Morocco up through the 1950s; since then, various forms of symbolic cooperation have occurred, especially over precolonial cultural heritage initiatives. Yet, in the early 2000s this began to change as the collapse of the European housing bubble encouraged city and regional authorities to reconsider Morocco as an untapped resource for a host of investment opportunities that could no longer be found in the domestic economy then in ruin. As private real estate becomes increasingly important for household financial security in Scandinavia, the economic history of Gibraltar offers valuable lessons for future planners and policy makers.

The third topic of the special issue focuses on the ways that spaces within borderlands come to be appropriated, modified and transformed by both elites and inhabitants alike. Professor Cecilia Fredrickson, from the Department of Service Studies at Lund University, begins this discussion with her article on the social and historical significance of seaweed in the Öresund. Once a prized commodity, seaweed provided the basis for an important micro-economy in southern Sweden, with its own cultural rituals and ways of life. Though many of these traditions are no longer practiced, seaweed is today again showing promise as an environmentally sustainable resource for future food supplies, building materials, as well as habitat for marine life. Fredrickson illustrates the complex interplay of different temporal, geographical, social and cultural borderings around which renewed interest in seaweed plays out across popular and scientific discussions about the plant and its place in confronting our uncertain ecological future. Back on land, and by way of contrast, the Moroccan-born visual artist, Hicham Gardaf, offers an intimate, autobiographical photo-essay of landscape change in northern Morocco. Inspired by the work of Georges Perec’s 1974 classic, *Species of Spaces and Other Places*, he reflects on the forgotten and taken-for-granted areas of his hometown, Tangier – abandoned buildings, construction sites, vacant lots, unfinished housing projects – he reveals how these sites are never as overlooked as they may seem. Showing us the ‘species’ of these spaces, Gardaf challenges us to question the paradoxical link between the urban borderland we no longer see and the way we actually look at it.

In our fourth and final section of the issue we explore the more-than-human entanglements of land and sea at the peripheries of the European Union. First, we have Lisa Babette Diedrich, Professor of landscape architecture at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, and Gini Lee, Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Melbourne, who team up to discuss a methodology they have developed for the comparative study of contemporary borderlands. Drawn from the work of Alexander von Humbolt, their “travelling transect” approach offers a framework to stitch together diverse social, environmental, material and symbolic worlds across an archipelago of global borderlands in order to “elaborate on the connections, dynamics, and shared understandings of liminal landscapes, and to amplify the types of encounters and landscape works that propose ways of adapting to change through design.” Following this, our final contribution by Eugénie Denarnaud, architect and researcher at the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage in Marseille, tells the history and continued importance of ‘pirate gardening’ on the southern shores of the Strait of Gibraltar. Amid unprecedented urbanization and social transformation occurring across the region, these gardens have become a crucial link for inhabitants to maintain an attachment to something durable and lasting in the landscape – knowledge of plants and animals, cultivation and breeding techniques, and the use of tools become “strong markers of one’s connection to the land and to gardening practices even when they take place outside the site of the garden itself.”

By way of conclusion, the Centre for Oresund Region Studies would like to extend their sincere thanks to all participants and discussants who joined us for the *Mobile Bodies, Travelling Theories* seminar, whose insights vastly enriched the quality of the discussions held during the meetings. Beyond those already present in this special issue, we would like to extend a special thanks to Hicham Bouzid from Think Tanger who co-sponsored the event, as well as Medine Altiok, Marie Northrup Christensen, Sarah Green, Annette Hill, Marco Mogiani, Nina Grønlykke Mollerup, Kristian Olesen, Lina Olsson, Mathilda Rosengren, James W. Scott, Christophe Sohn, and Burcu Yigit Turan.