



EastBordNet

**COST Action IS0803**  
**Scientific report in realm of Photography Project**  
**Remaking Eastern Borders in Europe:**  
**a network of exploring social, moral and material relocations of**  
**Europe's eastern peripheries**

**“One State Various Borders (Or East Meets West)”**  
Various Locations in Israel from Sep. 29<sup>th</sup> until Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>

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The opportunity to join the research team made me feel excited, but also humble, and even anxious about my own fragmented knowledge in regards to the research site and my ability to embrace the multitudes of multiple borders and boundaries in a country of so many border disputes and plans.

However, the way the research project was organised, it led us to think about borders in many different ways, beyond our own pre-fabricated realities and normative judgements. We tried to experience the border distinctively through group interactions and by looking at the border and ourselves through Lena's camera lens.

My aim was to try to deepen my understanding of the time-space dimensions of borders and boundaries in a seemingly very different borderland than I have previously researched, the Latvian - Russian border, which also changed and moved, and was demarcated and disputed within a length of time. In a country with a multiplicity of walls, fences, barriers, and checkpoints of various kinds, as well as, many invisible boundaries, I also wanted to enrich my theoretical thinking about the concepts of *gated* and *punctuated* borders –these were the notions of the physical closing of borders. Invisible locked and closed gates could help me to better conceptualise bordering processes and how power diffuses in relation to these processes and divides people's lives.

Border checkpoints, walls, fences, and other border infrastructures become a part of the daily lives of so many people, that almost the whole country becomes a *frontier* zone. Borders and invisible boundaries are spatially so close to one another. With a tourist's gaze, I would have seen and felt some of them, but only local knowledge helps to see and understand how many bordering processes there are in Israel. For example, we visited one house in Ajami, a neighbourhood in Yaffo. The house owners were in a dispute with local authorities over the 'illegal' construction of staircases. Residents could be expelled for building staircases 'illegally' but the residents cannot use a house without staircases. A temporary solution was reached through the help of a lawyer: the family attached wheels to their staircases and whenever the inspector visits, the staircases can be pushed away. Where we could see *static*

staircases in superficial observation a local man, who is knowledgeable of strategies of resistance, sees *mobility* and conflict [staircases with wheels].

Our group consisted of researchers from various disciplines, but we did not argue about methodological approaches nor about the various disciplinary boundaries within which we usually operate. The fieldwork taught me that there are frames of reference within which we can see, hear, feel, and interpret a border in our own way and still truly understand each other.

The most enriching element of the project for me was the *felt* dimension of the border. In Tel Aviv-Yaffo, boundaries only become visible when we *talk* about them – a historical port or a street corner resuscitates through a narrative and the very same spatial point has a dramatically different meaning in people's lifeworlds, literature, historiography, art etc. A port becomes a lifeworld's *gateway*, the last or the first step on the land. Emotionality, attached to the land – fertile, redolent [oranges and orchids of Yaffo!], a prayed and cherished imagined homeland is deeply embedded in the historical narratives from either side. The human made physical borders and the socially constructed ones made me think in new ways about the interaction between nature and people. A fertile land, sweet water basins in the ground, good climate, and the sea are natural assets for power struggles, but also symbols of a good life and one's 'natural' place to live.

It inspired me to rethink the paramount importance of art in place branding and in the making and remaking of borders – texts, poetry, cinema, paintings etc in and about Israel become engraved into people's mental maps and carry discursive power.

As I saw and experienced the border and viewed Lena's pictures, I also rethought the importance of spatial hierarchies on making and remaking borders. I was encouraged to think about spatiality, movement, and the felt dimension in a wider context and *relationality* – how distance, spatial hierarchies and mobility are intertwined and interrelated. People live so close, yet they can remain so far away and maintain such a disregard and ignorance of each other. Apart from a horizontal plane, the *spatial* in bordering processes is multidimensional and recursive in time-space and can make a literally small, *absolute* space in a very large social space that is far beyond its physical borders. Israel is a subject of the global media almost daily, and the holy land is deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of billions of people due

to its symbolic nature as the eternalised homeland in the pages of the Bible. The dominant national narratives, intrinsically linked to the borders, are ‘about the place’ and need not to be written ‘in the place’, as the narrative of the imagined homeland reminds us.

The signs of the border and its infrastructure in today’s Israel, high concrete walls in populated areas and barbed wire or other transparent fences around the roads, are reminders of the *aesthetic* dimension of the border and of the constant tension caused by these walls and fences. The transparency of the fence still allows a person to connect with the place ‘over there’, it does not break the visual perspective and it encourages movement, which I later noticed so vividly in Lena’s pictures. We move hands and we point towards physically, yet visibly, unreachable places (e.g. Gaza) due to the transparent fence. However, a concrete wall brings to us a full stop. In some places, I noticed how the wall was decorated (the Israeli side, towards the Gaza strip) and how human creativity tried to make the violence of the wall more bearable.

In other sites, especially, closer to the West bank region, I thought about power relations in spatial hierarchies -- who lives ‘on the top’ of the hill, who has the privilege of a horizon, unbroken by concrete walls in front of their eyes. High/low spatial hierarchies are the most striking in the infrastructure of roads, where one’s daily mobility cements the asymmetric power positions of Israelis and Palestinians – either top or bottom. Similarly, it led me to think about the metaphors and several conceptual meanings of routes and roads that we have in border and migration literature: a road becomes a road only if it has a *connection*, if it leads somewhere. Power relations are produced and reflected in the physical infrastructure of the roads and due to border planning and deplaning, there were some roads in Israel that led to nowhere.

I also thought about the spatiality of knowledge in relationship to borders and boundaries. Through not knowing ‘the other’, even if he is our close neighbour, parallel narratives develop and lead to ‘not seeing’, ‘not hearing’ and, ‘not feeling. In other words, it leads to the cognitive dissonance of parallel *Gesellschafts*, in which there still is room for many smaller *Gemeinschafts*: ‘safe islands’, sometimes ‘insular’ and surrounded by walls, but also stability points and a richness of multiplex relations, for example, a transnational Methodist church in Tel Aviv for temporary migrants in Israel. These conceptual ‘safe islands’ release hope and

productivity; they carry the potential of connectivity, yet, they are very different from the physical ‘safe rooms’ [shelters] I saw in Israeli dwellings, which felt like constant reminders of a possible threat.

Apart from being visual, the *sensed* border involves also sounds, textures, and smells. On the first day of the mission we were at the historical border between Yaffo and Tel Aviv. Sami, an Arab activist, told us about the separation of Arabs from Jews. It was easy to observe both Yaffo and Tel Aviv from the spot where we were standing. Then, within a short moment, I *heard* the living border in multiple ways: spindrift in the sea, Islam’s songs of prayer, Sami’s accented English and the ironic laughs in reaction to his interpretation of the history by a young couple passing by. Later, I noticed the difference of not being able to hear the border: e.g. the borders at the highest points. The borders closest to Gaza and at the Erez crossing with the Gaza strip, were very silent, not only due to the holidays, when the checkpoints close, but also due to the high-tech characteristics of the checkpoints that minimise human contact and presence. It seems to me that pictures are able to *speak to* us and we can unconsciously feel whether it was a border full of tinkles and sounds or a stiff silent one. Meanwhile, I was also thinking about how the rhythms of the border discipline border dwellers: there are certain working hours, when a checkpoint is open and it might close on the holidays, so the rhythm of the borders’ checkpoint subordinates the other multiple rhythms of human life.

Furthermore, despite the uniqueness and the specificity of the country, there are underpinning mechanisms of borders and bordering, which might manifest differently in local contexts and can be interpreted differently, but which can also be recognised in seemingly very different places. However specific the case of Israel is, it reminded me about my other research site on the European margins, the Channel Islands, semi-dependent territories of the United Kingdom, yet neither a part of the European Union nor the European Economic zone. Like in Israel, Guernsey, one of the islands, justifies its strict regulations towards migrants with the uniqueness and small size of the place and the need for a permanent flux of temporary migrant workers, whose ‘man power’ is needed but not as full human beings.

I was also reminded how connected the countries in Europe are when it comes to border crossing and migration. In another research study, I looked at new immigrants in Latvia in the mid 2000s. There were groups of Thai migrants coming to Latvia through the help of Israeli-based middlemen. It was not that the Latvian employers could choose the particular ethnicity

of their workers, and possibly, neither could the migrant workers choose their next country of destination. They were channelled through the powerful middlemen recruitment networks stretching beyond national borders.

Israel – old, yet ever new and under reconstruction in a very literal sense of the word – so vividly reminded me that all places are *becoming*, that they are never ready, finished, or static. Viewing from the perspective of the impact of borders on everyday life, Israel is also a great place to break the illusion of the ‘borderless world’.