

## **BORDERS AND BORDERLANDS**

### **Interview with Associate Professor Stephen Wolfe**

*Interviewers Tuulikki Kurki & Kirsi Laurén*

Associate Professor of English Literature, Stephen Wolfe, has a prominent position in cultural research on borders and has lead several national and international research projects on borders and borderlands. He has published the article collection *Border Poetics De-limited* (2007) with Johan Schimanski.



*Stephen Wolfe in Mekrijärvi Research Station, Ilomantsi.  
Photo by Kirsi Laurén 2011.*

Together, they co-ordinate the Border Poetics research group at the University of Tromsø.

Stephen Wolfe is currently studying Trans-Atlantic writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His focus is on the border crossings and literary negotiations between writers, genres and the contemporary politics of the period. Professor Wolfe was an invited keynote speaker in the seminar *Theories on Borders* in 2011. The seminar was organized by the research project *Writing Cultures and Traditions at Borders*, and held at the University of Eastern Finland (Mekrijärvi Research Station). After the seminar, we took the opportunity to interview him for the theme issue *Borders and Life-Stories*. The interview was conducted in writing.

## INTERVIEW

**You have had several research projects that study borders and borderlands. Could you briefly describe them?**

Our first grant began in 2010 and runs throughout 2012. It is entitled *Border Aesthetics* and is funded by the KULVER Programme of the Norwegian Research Council. This project investigates how the changing perceptions of borders relate to the shifting practices of aesthetic production and evaluation.

The project draws upon two guiding observations that must inform any notion of border aesthetics: (a) that aesthetic theories and practices regularly invoke and engage with notions of the border; and (b) that borders are in turn capable of producing aesthetic effects and can themselves be conceived as aesthetic objects. We are perusing these two objectives through theoretical reflections and a sequence of interlocking case-studies that focus on literature, film and video art produced by creative artists either working in, or imagining border regions and the Barents Region in particular (*Border Aesthetics*).<sup>1</sup>

In the process, researchers within the grant explicitly address the question of how

[---] aesthetic activity participates in the processes by which people relate to the real and conceptual geographies in which they live and through which they move. This focus is both socially engaged and inquisitive about the dynamic ways in which cultural phenomena are ascribed value

through aesthetic practice. At the same time, it situates the project at the vanguard of current thinking about aesthetics (ibid.).

The concentration on border regions enables the project not only to explore and further develop the relatively new field of migratory aesthetics, but also requires the formulation of what might provisionally be called zonal aesthetics. Indeed, one of our principal goals will be precisely to establish a new 'aesthetics of space' of a kind likely to be required in the study of the divergent groups, objects, values and activities that inhabit and pass through the border zones, and how it might exemplify, negotiate and evaluate such an experience.

The project addresses both territorial and symbolic borders as aesthetic phenomena, asking how these borders acquire value and what values they are assigned. Borders are a well-established field of study in the social sciences, in particular within what is known as 'border studies' in social geography and related fields. Recently, social geographers working with topographical borders have been calling for cultural and narrative perspectives on the way in which borders are perceived by state actors, borderland populations, and border crossers such as migrants. Within literary and cultural studies and also sociology, the border concept is often used for more symbolic types of borders, such as those between cultures, genders or classes. Such symbolic borders contain within them a spatial dimension; they are manifested as spatial borders either within the real, topographical world, or within a mental map, an imaginary geography or a more intimate topology, for instance, of the body. In fact much of my own research is centred on the ways in which racial borders have been constructed both on the bodies of African slaves and also on the enslaved bodies of captive white seamen; on how Barbary Coast pirates ransomed white sailors, taking them as possessions that could be traded, bought, and sold. The white sailors were not 'masters' but slaves themselves and their skin colour was changing with exposure to the desert sun and lack of food and water.

The body is one form of border and it is presented in both its physical and figurative manifestation in the texts I am studying. However, if we turn our focus to national and territorial borders, they are essentially both aesthetic and symbolic phenomena: they are constituted and expressed on the plane of the senses, as in Jacques Rancière's reading of aesthetics as being a "distribution of the sensible".<sup>2</sup>

A number of recent writers on aesthetics also argue that borders have a key role to play in the production of culture; however, we have become aware that aesthetic objects within the field of culture are themselves structured by various kinds of borders. For example, during the Renaissance any number of

maps, paintings, or literary works used borders between a classical past and a modern present; between pagan and Christian; between the civilized and the barbarous. But the presentation of these borders is likewise bordered through compositional division, genre and framing, or in the relationship between the perceiver and the object.

Taking these various kinds of borders – topographic, symbolic and medial – together, our first research project hopes to pin down a complex circulation of the border concept from one discourse or register to another. Any one of the registers – national territory, cultural difference, gender, medial form, and so on – can be mapped onto one of the other registers, in either figurative or symbolic transfers of meaning. It is this kind of circulation that constitutes the historicity of the border concept, i.e., which allows the border concept to change and develop in different cultural and historical contexts.

In our second grant-funded research work, we are operating within the EU Seventh Frame Programme, in a grant entitled *EUBORDERSCAPES*. In this project, the University of Tromsø is heading a work package on borders and cultural production. The grant itself is administered and led by the University of Eastern Finland. The main objective in our work is to analyse

[--] the ways in which national and European border issues are framed by cultural and literary works and within artistic expression. We are seeking to understand and then demonstrate how artistic expression addresses borders and border crossings (migrants, people living at borders, etc.) and their social consequences (e.g., cultural tensions, cultural hybridisation).<sup>3</sup>

We will be working with other universities in Europe to analyse how contemporary literature, cultural works and informal cultural performances reference borders in terms of identity and belonging, citizenship, cultural hybridisation, and cultural tensions, but also to demonstrate how contemporary national cultural debates about state borders and Europe are often formulated within and against the historical constructions of borders. We also ask what is the significance of national borders within the EU discourse of transnationalism and what historical experiences are used to frame the national and transnational debates. The border or border zone is often also a place of memory – of remembering or forgetting, to the extent that it is perceived as a place, and as such is made up of traces of previous material borders as well as discursive formulations.

The representations of borders provided in novels, short stories, poems, films, plays, videos, artworks, and museums are very often traces in the sense that

they present attempts to hold on to historical figures and figurations within the landscape of the border zone. So, various kinds of border narratives, with their figurative representations of the border, can function as a community of practices. As I have suggested, each border carries within it the archaeology of previous borders and this archaeology can play an active part in the renegotiation of borders if they are opened to new border concepts, narratives, or practices.

**You are Associate Professor of English Literature and Culture. How did you become interested in border studies?**

I began working in this field in the United States in the 1990s when I was scheduled to teach a course entitled *Imagining Africa, 1700–1900*, with a group of interdisciplinary scholars from anthropology, comparative literature, political science, and English. As we worked together to create a reading list of both articles and books for the course, we found that the way in which we could gain a coherent approach to the material was through asking questions about the presented and represented ‘bordering processes’ within each of the suggested texts we were reading or within the constructions of African societies. We found that a number of different texts presented the geographical ‘borders’ of African exploration within a history of colonialism or ethnographic/anthropological history, while the imaginative representation of ‘Africa’ we had selected could be best discussed geographically, historically or colonially within literary texts by looking very closely at both the uses of traditional literary genres and new forms of medial representation and the framing of the people and history of Africa.

Also, at that time I was spending a great deal of the summer holidays, roaming the tidal estuaries of the Pacific Coast with my family, and found the shifting boundaries of land, coast, and sea a source of study and fascination. I was teaching at a place in which I had been asked to organise a discussion of the future of interdisciplinary studies in the curriculum of a seven-college consortium. Thus the metaphoric and material exploration of natural and created borders was a lead into academic debates about the canon, the uses of evidence, research and teaching methods, and a changed curriculum.

**Multidisciplinary approaches are very popular and important in border studies. Each discipline studying borders has its own research history, theories, and concepts, which may either benefit or create challenges for research. How do you see the multidisciplinary co-operation between the various disciplines? What are the challenges and possibilities in these approaches?**

Not to put too fine a point on it: I do not know what our research group would do if we did not study the research strategies of our colleagues in political and cultural geography, for example, or in political science. Their work in opening their own fields in Border Studies to the uses of border narratives, and to the changing concepts of the border zone and borderscapes has had very important consequences for our work. In a sense we have stretched the border and the ways in which we can talk about 'bordering' practices and policies so that the border can either fold inward or be directed outward. Also, in political science and history, writers following on from Edward Saïd have opened the discussion of borders and state authority in asking what it is that we are 'walling in' and also 'desiring' to keep out.

For example, to demonstrate how contemporary media and literature address borders and their consequences for everyday life in Europe with regard to citizenship, cultural tension, identity, belonging and cultural hybridisation, we have to study events such as border festivals, and those spaces within cities which are occupied by immigrant communities and often monitored by border guards or state authorities. To differentiate the contemporary responses into and the perceptions of border crossings and border crossers within the context of national cultural debates, we need to use the tools of social linguistics and anthropology. These fields as well as others have investigated how border crossers are represented in European discourses of ethnicity, nationalism, and hybridity. But we also need to locate, historically and culturally, the origins of these discourses to see how they have played out over time. The most challenging element, however, is to analyse the border crossers' perceptions and experiences of Europe in their own cultural narratives: in what ways are cultural identities of the EU being transformed from within Europe as well as from the perceived influx of immigrants from outside Europe.

**How do you see the role of cultural research in border studies in general (in Norway, Europe, or globally)? What are its strengths in research?**

I want to try and merge this question with the one above to suggest that by using a cultural studies and interdisciplinary approach, border studies have moved toward the spatial turn in a number of disciplines (English, History, Political Science, and Cultural Studies more generally) by engaging more explicitly with the historic, cultural and medial dimensions of specific topographies and imaginary geographies. It has introduced new spatial models from geography and sociology into cultural studies, but most importantly, this spatial turn has seen a rapid transformation of the ways in which border spaces

are being both conceived and analysed in Europe and North America. James Scott, at your conference *Theories on Borders* in August 2011, suggested that we should interrogate “borders as elements of the cultural landscape” and this is what is happening. The medial spaces of history and culture are changing in rhythm with changes in topographical spaces and are also participating in those changes, so the challenge now is to trace creative potentials for new and as yet unknown ways of remembering, imagining and forming the places we live in together with others.

In terms of our own project, we are looking at the relationship between the changing perceptions of borders and the shifting practices of aesthetic production and evaluation by examining not only different border places (the Mediterranean as well as the Barents) but also different border and aesthetic concepts (such as those from the Hellenistic world, the nineteenth century British empire and International Modernisms, as well as more recent formulations). By looking at what might ostensibly seem to be the same border places and the same concepts from different periods of time and from different societal and intellectual traditions, we will be able to understand the role that history plays for the cultures and cultural practices of the relevant border regions. The project also tries to evaluate several of the different lived experiences of groups who have moved across or within border zones. In so doing, it explores a variety of forms of reception theory and, in particular, it will assess the reception of artistic productions that have been produced, focusing both on and about the border. Thus we are making an attempt to address this question: How do changing perceptions of borders relate to the shifting processes of aesthetic practice and evaluation?

**Nearly all disciplines in humanities, social sciences, and geography are studying topographical and metaphorical borders in some way at the moment. What do you think are the most important reasons for the popularity of border studies?**

I would like to give two responses to this question. First, there is a need to see that not only migratory, refugee, and immigrant populations find themselves caught in the web of the borderscape, but we all bring the border with us into any territory we enter. We have become increasingly aware of the diffusion of the border across other territories such as airports, travel offices, CCTV cameras in our cities, and almost every government office. It is in this space that we come before the law: forced to place ourselves within ‘the imagined community’ of the nation and disciplined by our internalisation of its laws. We

must relate to established narratives of the state that are enacted at a distance from us, usually in metropolitan centres, and often forcing our decisions into an algorithmic order calculated for ‘threat’ risk and ‘terror’ potential. As we resist these dominant narratives, we also live inside them, making us very aware of the provisional nature of the boundaries placed around our communities.

These stretched border zones or borderscapes are not only potential sites of negotiation, but are also constantly being negotiated over. The view that borders are processes – *borderings* – rather than fixed lines is clear, and this includes figurative or imaginative borders, which both surround us and are created for us and by us. We are, as Henk van Houtum (Radboud University Nijmegen & University of Bergamo) has argued, caught between a schizoid desire for and a paranoid fear of borders. Often in these processes, however, a moment of intervention is reached or a space of negotiation is opened. This space is part of the borderscape, and is often far away from the geopolitical national border. It may also be located away from the urban centre but always retains some link to the territorial border, even if at a distance. For the migrant or citizen waiting to cross the border or come before it, this border zone represents the space of the border and leaves us always already before the law.

My second response is that there is a real interest in the ways in which borders, in both the material and figurative sense, intersect with the lives we live today. Whether crossing borders in cyberspace or moving through the edgelands of our cities, both the spaces and places of borders have captured our imaginations, leaving us often betwixt and between. Also, we have created a culture of journeys; the naming of spaces and the impulse to record and recall the spaces and places which haunt the present.

**What do you regard as the most relevant research themes and questions in border research at the moment? Are there some themes that could possibly become important in the near future?**

1. I think that focused attention will be paid to aesthetic questions in border studies: What kind of genres fit with, or represent the border zones and spatial configurations we have created within the borderscapes of our state and nation?
2. Another possibility is asking how historic changes in topographical perceptions of both North and South intersect with an equally resonant East-West axis in the evaluation of how the cultural inscription of space relates to issues of identity and belonging.



3. Since 9/11, spatial changes in the conduct of warfare have had and will have a major effect on the study of national and international borders in political and cultural contexts.
4. Another question might be: What specific genres fit border zones and other spatial configurations in the borderscape?
5. Will new technologies of textual creation lead to the making of rewritten culture histories using alternative maps as forms of intervention with which to defamiliarise and make more visible the disorientation of the border itself?

**How do you see the future of the border studies? Is it a fashion trend that is going to lose its popularity within the following decades, or is it so tightly connected with the global changes at various topographical borders and borderlands that it will further strengthen its position?**

My quick response is that I would hope that we are not just a fashionable accessory but a force for investigating the role of material culture in the study of art, cultural and political formations, the discourses of authority, border narratives themselves ... the list could go on and on.

**Is there something else that you would like to add?**

I would like to thank my interviewers and the *Folklore* journal for giving me this opportunity to make people aware of our work. Much of what I have said here echoes with the concepts, phrasing, and the inventive suggestions of the researchers within our research group: at the University of Tromsø, in the three cities in Norway of Bergen, Kirkenes, and Volda; and the five European countries where our European colleagues work: Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and, of course, Finland.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Border Aesthetics, Project Description, 1. Unpublished text.

<sup>2</sup> Rancière, Jacques 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London and New York: Continuum.

<sup>3</sup> EUBORDERSCAPES, Work package description 10, p. 41. Unpublished text.