



Book Review of Helms,
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of desire: Gender and
sexuality at the eastern
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BOOK REVIEW

PAULIINA LUKINMAA

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In their seminal monograph *Borderland – La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987: 19), Gloria Anzaldúa stated that borderlands are physically present ‘when two or more cultures edge each other, people of different races occupy the same territory, classes touch each other and where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.’ The anthology *Borders of Desire: Gender and Sexuality at the Eastern Borders of Europe* (2023) revisits these layered borders and expands Anzaldúa’s ideas by examining how various people in different settings and times aspire to cross borders and how these crossings form their lives, leading the reader to witness the active role of borders in this process.

The editors Elissa Helms and Tuija Pulkkinen observe how borders are present in physical spaces, discussions, and people’s imaginations, taking different forms and causing various effects (pp. 1–2). Instead of seeing borders as obstacles or hindrances, the book – seventh in the series *Rethinking Borders* – analyzes the processes where people affected through and by the borders become desiring subjects. Thus, the anthology claims that borders can be productive in forming desires. Editors approach desire as the will to do or become something, rather than simply a reflection of sexual desires.

This anthology consists of an extensive, theory-driven introduction and eight empirical chapters. Six chapters employ ethnographic research methods, while two chapters analyze texts, such as folkloric material and media. The geographic focus is mainly on the Baltic states and the Balkan area. All the studies cross geographical borders as well as symbolic and temporal ones. For example, they look at the legacy of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in people’s lives and imaginations today. The chapters cover the years 2000s–2010s, including the largest EU enlargement thus far, with 10 new member states in the year 2004.

Through their focus on different locations and movements, the chapters reveal the translocal character of any given location and their varying types of borders, often being intermeshed and layered in daily lives. Particularly the chapters based on long-term

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR:

Pauliina Lukinmaa

Postdoctoral researcher,
Department of Humanities,
Faculty of Philosophy,
University of Eastern
Finland, Finland

pauliina.lukinmaa@uef.fi

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or complemented ethnographic works vividly capture people's ways of attempting to establish the lives they imagine for themselves through their engagement with borders, both as an idea and as a concrete reality in their landscapes.

The journey begins in Southern Europe. Focusing on the Greek island of Lesbos, Sarah Green examines, on the one hand, the desire-driven tourism of women who visit the island because of the lesbian poet Sappho and, on the other hand, its permanent residents who take day trips to visit the Turkish coastal town of Ayvalik for shopping and sexual relations with local men (Chapter 1). Green's chapter tangibly reveals how the same space turns out to be many worlds that at times coexist and intermingle, being connected and disconnected in various ways. Rozita Dimova also approaches desire through border crossing, this time as a transgression to a new reality (Chapter 2). Her ethnographic study was conducted in casinos located in the borderlands between the Republic of Northern Macedonia (RNM) and Greece. Dimova observed Greek farmers gambling in the casinos located in the RNM and interviewed clerks working in these casinos. Her research reveals how crossing the border enables the farmers to experience temporarily becoming the desired other in fairytale-like casinos, whose locations are simultaneously meaningless and vital for this process.

Aija Lulle (Chapter 3) deals with Latvian women's desires for a better life that they imagined pursuing via migration to the UK. Lulle's analysis engages with socio-spatial and temporal lines of class, age, and gender differences in these migrant women's new lives, depicting different practices of ethnosexualization, a process of cultural, social, and political bordering within which a migrant woman is seen as a sexual being. Lulle looks at the ways these women were controlled and restricted in the UK by both local employers through imposing morally 'proper' behavior and fellow Latvians through gendered moral standards 'from home'. May-Len Skillbrei analyzes border-crossing prostitution between Eastern and Western Europe, namely Estonia and Norway (Chapter 4). In a similar vein to Lulle, Skillbrei pays attention to changing desires and opportunities by engaging with a longitudinal perspective on migration as imagined, experienced, and reflected within the borders between the post-Soviet space and Western Europe. Much as with Lulle and Skillbrei, Anastasia Diatlova and Lena Näre's chapter looks at the role of imagination as a driver for migration, this time to Italy and Finland among women coming from post-socialist countries (Chapter 5). Diatlova and Näre point to spheres of intimate labor, such as commercial sex, domestic work, housework, and elderly and childcare in Western Europe, where women from post-Soviet countries are fantasized to fill gaps and are desirable as 'innately skilled' in the feminine forms of labor. For women themselves in these three chapters, migration consisted of both desires for the other and desires to be other, which were inseparable drivers in their experienced necessity to migrate.

Michaela Schäuble's chapter examines Croatia as a narrow and tense strip that separates Europe from the 'Orient' (Chapter 6). Drawing on folklorist accounts, Schäuble carefully constructs a narrative of identity formation since the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, particularly between the two abovementioned powers. Despite the prevalent dichotomies in folklorist material – such as self-orientalization/Balkanization and feminized notion of 'surplus country' in the EU – these borders prove to be both porous and constantly resurfacing in everyday conversations and public discourses, providing rich material for the formation of national identity. Olga Davydova-Minguet

and Pirjo Pöllänen (Chapter 7) discuss the nostalgic and resentful border desire and practices in Karelia, the northern borderland of Finland and Russia. Crossing the border with the 'new and unknown' is organically intertwined with collectivist and nostalgic elements associated with the past. To scrutinize this temporal interplay, Davydova and Pöllänen pay attention to small gestures in border crossings connected to gender differences, such as women reuniting with the materiality of the ancestors' lands and Finnish men visiting war memorials in Russian Karelia.

Katja Kahlina and Dusica Ristivojevic's chapter redirects readers back to the Balkans, to Serbia, which was involved in long membership negotiations with the EU (Chapter 8). Much like in Chapter 6, the authors ask to what extent and in what ways does the border-making practice of associating the EU with gay tolerance produce a desire to claim national and cultural differences in Serbia. According to Kahlina and Ristivojevic, the EU's conditionality points to improving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) rights in Serbia, which on a local level, however, may relate to the sense of powerlessness that is reminiscent of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of Serbia at the mid-1990s. The chapter illustrates how local resistance can expose the hierarchical, sexualized borders that marginalize differences, particularly in the context of the EU's efforts to prepare Serbia for membership, which has simultaneously fueled violent anti-EU and anti-LGBT sentiments in the country.

The book makes empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of Gender Studies, Human Geography, and Border Studies, among others. Through a diverse collection of cases, periods, geographical focuses, and varying degrees of border 'hardness,' it explores gendered and sexualized borders, illustrating how these borders shape desires in everyday contexts related to difference. The anthology tangibly shows the intersecting messiness of power relations between perceived margins and peripheries with majorities and centers (see also [Gupta & Ferguson 1999](#)). While doing so, it decenters the nexus of power and shows its presence in various settings, intermingled with desire. Unarguably, one of its most important contributions is the conceptualization of borders as porous and contingent. Under the current geopolitical tensions and the hardening of state borders between the EU states with Russia and Belarus as well as the symbolically hardening of borders between Israel and the Middle East, reflecting the 'othering' processes, the book reveals how border territories that Anzaldúa (1987) and Vila (2003) describe as being infiltrated with hatred, anger, and exploitations, may at the same time create and be filled with various forms of desires. These desires inevitably make the borders porous, revealing their artificiality, yet importance in forming identities and communities and imagining other ways.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Pauliina Lukinmaa  orcid.org/0000-0002-2317-7103

Postdoctoral researcher, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

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