Imagined Boundaries and Borders

A Gendered Gaze

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ABSTRACT The article explores various ways collectivity boundaries and territorial borders, as well as the act of crossing them, are experienced and imagined, particularly by women. In doing so, the article draws on autobiographical material collected by email from women in about 25 different countries.

KEY WORDS autobiographies ◆ borders ◆ boundaries ◆ peace activism ◆ situated imagination ◆ transversal politics ◆ women

Women both embody and cross collectivity boundaries and territorial borders. In this article we explore how women both imagine and experience boundaries and borders as children and young adults as well as look at the particular roles women play in peace activism that crosses those boundaries and borders. In doing so the article uses material, including autobiographical statements, collected by email from women in about 25 different countries for our forthcoming book on the subject.

Our focus will be the ways the paradoxical relation of women to the nation affects their imaginings of borders and boundaries. The wider theoretical framework of our project is to extend the feminist epistemological discussion on 'standpoint' and 'situated knowledge' such that the (feminist) standpoint does not merely comprise 'knowledge' but also images and imaginings that – as we argue – need to be taken just as seriously. As we develop more closely in another article (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002), we understand the 'situatedness' of both knowledge and imagination not to mean straightforward 'determination' by social positioning. We consider one of the advantages of the concept of the (creative) imagination (notably in Castoriadis's (1987, 1994) account) that it allows for a varying degree of indeterminacy. As the discussion of the

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autobiographical material confirms, there is a gendered dimension of imagining borders and boundaries, but there is no such thing as 'the female imagination'.

The concepts 'boundaries' and 'borders' tend to be used interchangeably in the literature. Indeed, in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'border' is defined as a 'boundary' and 'boundary' is defined as a 'limit-line'. For the sake of clarity, however, we relate to 'boundaries' when talking about limit-lines of collectivities and to 'borders' when referring to legal/territorial ones. At the same time we also argue that both boundaries and borders are modes of delineating identities and would like in this article to examine some of the ways these two modes of identification relate to one another.

We turn now to consider some of the general issues involved in imagining boundaries and borders. This is followed by a more specific examination of the ways women experience, imagine and are politically active around issues of boundaries and borders.

IMAGINING BOUNDARIES

Both ethnic and national collectivities are constructed around boundaries that separate the world into 'us' and 'them'. As such, they are both the Andersonian 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991). Depending on the objectives of different ethnic and national projects involving members of the same collectivity or people outside it, the boundary lines can be drawn in very different ways (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997b).

Political goals and political values in general, then, can affect the ways boundaries of collectivities are constructed by different people. The boundaries of the German nation were drawn so as to exclude Jews by the Nazis, while the Communists – and most of the German Jews themselves – included the Jews within the boundaries of the nation. Similar debates – although, as of now, with very different political consequences – have been heard in the UK and other European countries concerning what some consider, to use Enoch Powell's words, 'alien wedges in the heartland of the state' causing the nation to be 'eroded and hollowed out from within by implantation of unassimilated and unassimilable populations' (Enoch Powell, 9 April 1976, cited in Gilroy, 1987: 43). Another related debate, of course, is the extent to which people can be included in a national or ethnic collectivity while continuing to preserve legitimately membership in another one – what is sometimes called a 'hyphenated identity'. A famous election poster of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher showed a picture of a young, middle-class, black man under the title 'Labour says he is Black. We say he is British.'

But it is not just political values that affect the ways people draw collectivity boundaries. It is also their differential positionings in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and other social divisions. We expand on this point later in the article. Here it is sufficient to mention, as an example, the way English people have tended to equate Englishness and Britishness. (At least they did so until in recent years the British state took steps towards decentralization with separate parliaments, as well as the fact that there are English, Scottish and Welsh football teams playing international competitions.) At the same time, from the situatedness of Scottish people – not to mention Irish Catholics – the difference between Englishness and Britishness has always been immense.

For this reason we need to be clear about what we mean when we agree with Ben Anderson that nations are 'imagined communities'. Nations, according to Anderson, are imagined communities 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991: 6). Such an abstract form of community is necessarily based on an abstract sense of imagined simultaneity. However, the nationalist imagination also includes former and future generations. Moreover, as Poole (1999: 10) comments, such a definition seems to assume that if all the members of the nation could meet face to face, imagination would be redundant. However, any construction of boundaries, of a delineated collectivity, that includes some people – concrete or not – and excludes others, involves an act of active imagination. This is so especially in the way Castoriadis discusses imagination (Castoriadis, 1987, 1994; see also Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002). According to Castoriadis, the whole classificatory system of signification is imaginary – we need a notion of the nation before we can determine if the people we meet belong to it or not. For Poole, what distinguishes an 'imagined community' from other forms of sociality is whether or not imagining people as a community informs the way they actually live and relate to each other.

So collectivity boundaries are constructed by the imagination in specific ways that are affected and – to differing degrees – determined by the situated positioning – both socially and politically – of those who do the imagining.

IMAGINING BORDERS

State territorial borders are one major way in which collectivity boundaries are imagined, dividing the people into those who belong to the nation and those who do not. And yet, borders can be experienced – and imagined – in many different ways. As Nugent and Asiwaju state:

> The interplay between official intentions and popular perceptions – between policy and the flow of everyday life – is part of what imparts a paradoxical quality to all boundaries. (Nugent and Asiwaju, 1996: 1)[1]

There is often a marked difference between the ways official discourse constructs international borders and the ways people who live along the border actually experience them.

The conflict, however, can already start on the level of official discourse. In one of the chapters added by Anderson to the enlarged second edition of his *Imagined Communities*, he discusses the way western cartography changed how state borders were constructed. While previously borders tended to be marked in strategic places only leaving major border zones in which belonging to a particular state was ambiguous at best, western maps represent borders as continuous lines that separate absolutely different countries, nations and states. Even today, the interventions of western powers such as the launch of the war against Afghanistan are imposing a much clearer and more continuously constructed border in the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Borders play a central role in the discourse of states and nations. Claims for changing borders, 'retrieving' pieces of 'the homeland', are probably the most popular reason why nations go to war, next to defending the 'womenandchildren' (Enloe, 1990). Sahlins (1989: 271) argued that borders are 'privileged sites for the articulations of national distinctions'.

This central, but contested, facet of borders contrasts with the naturalized images of homelands that assume complete congruence of (or identity between) people, state and territory. The assumed borders are often signified by seas, mountain ranges and rivers endemic to the space of the homeland. It is an open question whether the national and international legality of those 'natural' borders follows from, or rather causes, these naturalized border imaginings: as a case in point, the River Jordan became a 'natural border' only after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The image of England as an island that has the sea as its natural borders does not take into consideration that only England, Wales and Scotland together form an island, 'Great Britain' (although as a political term, 'Great Britain' also includes a large number of small and minute islands, and in everyday usage 'Britain' usually stands for the 'United Kingdom', which includes Northern Ireland).

Often the 'naturalized' borderlines do not correspond to the boundaries of ethnic and national communities who live near the borders. Finnish-speaking people living in the border zone were included within the Swedish rather than the Finnish state, and Kashmir has been included within the borders of the Indian state in spite of being claimed by Pakistan as it is mainly inhabited by Muslims. Again it is an open question, with different answers in different historical cases, whether adherence to such

borders relates more to strategic, military and economic interests (of the states themselves or of an external superpower as is the case in many postcolonial countries) or whether such borders are inherent in collective imaginings of particular homelands.

States maintain borders in a variety of ways: they can be fenced or just marked, patrolled by militaries or just policed in designated crossings with custom officers in place. The personnel who maintain the legal border and its state functions usually differ quite radically from the people who live at the border zone.

As Wilson and Donnan (1998: 4) point out, borderlines simultaneously separate and join states. Such borderlines are more or less permeable in different political situations. However, as Berdahl (1999) emphasizes, borderland cultures cannot be seen as simple hybridizations of the cultures on both sides of the borders. Talking about people living in a village on the border between East and West Germany she claims:

> As in most borderlines, this one is characterized by an uneven and asymmetrical intersection of cultures . . . residents of Kella are not 'halfway beings'. Nor are they . . . passive East Germans who have accepted and internalized Western projections of them as inferior. Instead, through a dynamic and subtle interplay of imitation, resistance and *Eigen-Sinn* (one's own sense, or one's own meaning), these borderliners are creating and articulating new forms of identity and alternative notions of 'Germanness'. (Berdahl, 1999: 181)

It is important to remember, however, that many international borders have not been a formalization of national imaginings of homelands. Rather, they have resulted from negotiations between superpowers controlling a particular part of the globe, often without any consultation with the national movements involved. Such negotiations took place secretly, for example, towards the end of the First World War between Britain and France concerning the ex-Ottoman Middle East (known as the Sykes–Picault agreement), in the Balkans, around the same time, after the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in the Versailles peace agreement) and in Eastern Europe during the Second World War as a result of a series of meetings between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. (These borders were mostly maintained even after the demise of the Soviet empire, although there has been some strong resistance to some of them, such as in the case of Chechnya.) Similar processes in Africa, Asia and Latin America usually paid even less regard to the composition and the interests of the local populations.

Whatever their origin, national borders acquire highly significant meanings to nation-states, if not in direct relation to myths of national origin, then as an expression of the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state. In this way, national borders become a specific form, spatially

bounded, of collectivity boundaries, dividing the world into 'us' and 'them'. As such, however, they would often have different meanings, contextualized in varying degrees, not just to those outside and inside the nation, but also among different people within each of these categories. Political outlooks, personal values, class and ethnic positionings would all play their roles and affect images, attitudes and experiences of borders.

Gender also deeply affects people's gaze at borders and boundaries. Since 'natural borders' only become such following social, political and historical events that are 'man-made' (usually in the double meaning of the word 'man'), we can expect to find that women perceive such national borders differently from men. And not just borders.

THE PARADOXICAL RELATION BETWEEN WOMAN AND NATION

Women reproduce the nation biologically, culturally and symbolically (Yuval-Davis, 1997a, 1997b). The mythical unity of national 'imagined communities' which divides the world between 'us' and 'them', is maintained and ideologically reproduced by a whole system of what Armstrong (1982) calls symbolic 'border guards' (but which, in our use of the terms, should better be called 'boundary guards'). These 'boundary guards' identify people as members or non-members of a particular collectivity. They are closely linked to specific cultural codes of style of dress and behaviour as well as to more elaborate bodies of customs, religion, literary and artistic modes of production, and, of course, language. Before Michael Billig (1995) talked about 'banal nationalism', Anne McClintock (1993) had pointed to the everyday dimensions of reproducing the 'imagined community' and characterized their non-rational, namely fetishistic features:

> Despite the commitment of European nationalism (following Hegel) to the idea of the nation-state as the embodiment of rational Progress, nationalism has been experienced and transmitted primarily through fetishism – precisely the cultural form that the Enlightenment denigrated as the antithesis of 'Reason'. More often than not, nationalism takes shape through the visible, ritual organization of fetish objects: flags, uniforms, airplane logos, maps, anthems, national flowers, national cuisines and architectures, as well as through the organization of collective fetish spectacle – in team sports, military displays, mass rallies, the myriad forms of popular culture, and so on. . . . nationalism is a symbolic performance of invented community . . . a fetishistic displacement of difference. (McClintock, 1993: 70ff.)

Anne McClintock develops this argument out of her reading of Benedict Anderson (1991). She stresses, however, that Anderson does not suggest the 'imagined community' to be 'false' or 'illusionary': the faculty of the

imagination is here understood as one of social and political 'creativity'. The national community is based on the creation of 'institutional practices' which are imaginary but 'not simply phantasmagoria of the mind' (McClintock, 1993: 61).

In a similar approach to Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989; see also Yuval-Davis, 1997b), McClintock points out that gender relations often come to be seen as constituting the 'essence' of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation. The construction of 'home' is of particular importance here, including relations between adults and those between adults and children within the family, ways of cooking and eating, domestic labour, play and bed time stories, etc. Constructions of manhood and womanhood, as well as sexuality and gendered relations of power need to be explored in relation to these processes. Any one concept of the nation relies on and utilizes specific images of gender.

At the same time, however, membership in the nation is also gendered. Women's membership in national and ethnic collectivities is usually ambivalent. On the one hand, women belong to the nation and are identified as members of the collectivity in the same way that men are. Nevertheless, there are always rules and regulations – not to mention perceptions and attitudes – specific to women (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989: 6). Such constructions involve a paradoxical positioning of women as both symbols and 'others' of the collectivity: women symbolize the nation's identity while at the same time they are a non-identical element within the nation. For example, the well-known paradox that nationalism at the same time looks back on traditions and forward to its particular political project usually comes in a gendered form: while men usually are active agents in the national project (and its future), women tend to represent its tradition (and the past) (Koontz, 1986: 196; Yuval-Davis, 1997b: 45).

IMAGINING BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

As we hope to be able to show in the following, this paradoxical relation fundamentally affects women's situated imaginings of (state) borders and (national) boundaries as well as some practical-political conclusions that at least some women draw from their specific relation to the nation.

In the autobiographical statements that we collected we found that borders and boundaries were imagined in a great variety of ways, often contrasting, shaped by the particular social and political context in which the autobiographers grew up. At the same time, it was striking how similar imaginings would sometimes be constructed by people who grew up in very different parts of the world but under similar conditions.

One such example is that children who grew up at the centre of large and powerful states and societies tended not to feel bounded at all:

> As a native to the US, boundaries and borders were not part of my consciousness as a child or indeed through my adult life.

Similar sentiments were felt growing up in the midst of the hegemonic British political environment, even when physically the vast horizons of the American landscape were absent:

> I was born to a couple in the middle of the middle class, in the middle of the country of Leicestershire in the middle of England – so I came to territorial and social consciousness feeling myself to be at the centre of the universe. The question then is, where did I feel my place and my people to end? Where were they bounded? And the answer is, the edges were obscure and didn't bother me over much.

However, the border was imagined completely differently by this Israeli girl:

> I can still remember the special feeling the border gave me as a child, it was like looking at the end of the world. We were here, protected from the people there, who wanted to kill us all.

This very different permeability of borders in the West and in the Middle East has been experienced with particular poignancy by a contributor of Iraqi origin who grew up in a small town in West Germany near the Dutch border:

> It would be something we would do for a day, even an afternoon. Cross the borders to eat Chinese food in Venlo (the closest town on the Dutch side), buy groceries which were cheaper there, particularly coffee, cheese and vegetables. Oh, and I loved their vanilla pudding. Crossing the borders was easy, except on the weekends when there were traffic jams at the border. Often the border guards would not even check our passports, if they did we, that is us children, liked it. It was exciting. But I also recall the first time when they had abandoned border-guards altogether, and one could just drive through the border. On one of these first occasions we went with my uncle who had come from Iraq for a visit. I will never forget his face when we told him that we were already in the Netherlands. He was totally amazed by this, since the borders he has been crossing are heavily guarded and quite an ordeal to cross.

GENDERED IMAGININGS OF BORDERS

When the narratives of the nation and its borders are articulated in a masculinist fashion, and maybe even narrated by men, this is bound to have a differential impact on girls and on boys, as one woman testifies:

> I grew up knowing that stories of struggles or victory over borders were conducted and also told by men.

Another contributor points out that many of the more traditional ways of invoking national identity just do not work for a little girl:

> Both the borders of Greece and the national identity of its people always had to be defended against a multitude of enemies, the Turks (mainly), the other Balkan people, the communists, the decadent Westerners: this was the essence of history. Where does a girl, however, fit in the chain which links together Homer, Pericles, Alexander the Great, the last Byzantine emperor and the heroes of the Greek Revolution of 1821? Can a little girl identify with 'Basil, the Bulgarian-slayer', the emperor-hero of a popular children's novel (written by a woman author nonetheless)? These questions started forming in my mind as I performed the last dance of Zalongo, dressed as a 19th-century peasant woman, in the school theatre during one of our many national celebrations (all the women and children of this village committed suicide dancing off a precipice as the Turks approached their village).

However, another contributor, a Turkish Kurdish woman, was aware that nationalist projects are imagined and constructed around the defence of the honour of the nation's women:

> I imagined the Turkish state as protective, because we were taught that Turkey is surrounded by enemies and if there hadn't been Ataturk we wouldn't have been alive today and our mother would have been raped by the enemy.

Narratives and constructions of 'the other' over the border might very well appeal to a girl and give her compelling reasons to identify with the nation and its borders. This is from a statement by a Finnish woman contemplating life behind the nearby Russian border:

> I get a bit nationalistic in a gendered, embodied way when I think of it all. I hear of other small town girls' lives just a few hundred kilometres away from where I'm sitting, of the necessity of prostitution at the stage when all the family's belongings have been sold on the black market, of assembly line abortions as the only available means of birth control, of giving birth to premature weak babies and suffering from anaemia throughout the pregnancy and ever after. These grim images are the only ones we basically see, and one must be critical of the one-sided representation, but still we know that the people on the news reports do exist. It is so close and so far away, and I feel lucky to be a mother and a worker here inside Fortress Europe, in the gradually disintegrating Nordic welfare state.

This contributor seems to be struggling with herself while writing, negotiating between her perception of what looks like the obvious advantages from a woman's real-life perspective and a more general distrust of the

nationalist discourse. The ambivalence culminates in her formulation that she is lucky to be 'inside Fortress Europe' – the formulation betraying some malaise about this form of 'luck'.

In crossing the borders a woman can get away from constraints within her society and become constructed via the double-edged sexualized 'othering' processes that make her into 'the exotic woman':

> As if by magic, my dark looks and distinctive name shifted from denoting a 'nice Jewish girl' (the death knell to seduction) to an 'Exotic Woman'. Even my flea market and theatrical costumes metamorphosed from weird to chic (and kept their French allure upon return to the US). I revelled in my new sexual status. It took me years to grasp the meaning of 'exoticization' and the depths of antisemitism that lurked behind the process.

Borders, however, can be imagined, not just as an opportunity to get away, but also as an opportunity to link in. A woman living in Norway who had been a migrant from a Sami community in Sweden reflects on how the border between Sweden and Norway reproduces itself within her new Sami community in Norway. In a strangely ambivalent way she describes her husband as both a border and the means to bridge that border at the same time:

> I am married to a quite 'well-known' (in Sami and Norwegian society) TV producer and journalist who works in the Sami media in Karasjohk. My and our family's life works through him, the kindergarten (when the kids where small), the school, the whole system works through him. I don't think this is special for me, I think the situation is the same for other women that are not born in Karasjohk. But I feel I can't speak about it, ok, they agree, but but . . . So one border is 'the man'. This can also be because he speaks Sami language and has a position in the society.

Another contributor pointed out how, in Israel, women had a differential access to the border and how adventurous and thrilling she found living in the border zone (which at this time, pre the 1967 war, was not usually a focus of military confrontation):

> I was living then in Neot-Hakikar, which was then a small co-operative farm on the southern borders of the Dead Sea marshes, not far from Sodom. I lived there because, after a year in the military I had asked to be moved to an 'alternative service' in a border settlement, a possibility which was open to female, but not to male Israeli soldiers (parallel to the way that women, but not men, could refuse to serve in the army for 'religious and conscience grounds'). Being south of the Dead Sea, there was no more the lake or the river Jordan to act as a natural border. Being a desert, at that time (before the 1967 war), the border at that part became only an imaginary one, with no fences or 'Stop' notices, relying only upon patrolling military units on both sides. My boyfriend at the time, who worked in maintenance in the settlement yard and had one of the jeeps at his disposal, would take me for long

> rides into the desert, long beyond the line of the formal border, to the 'forbidden land'. I was fascinated and thrilled.

Borders and boundaries can be imagined as the way out from traditional gender roles in the society where a woman lives. In the following excerpt the contributor was passed these imaginings from the older generation of women in her family:

> Writing this for me is a travel back in time when as I child I listened to the testimonies of my mother and grandmother. . . . A Hindu mother who had been shackled by Islamic society in an undivided India she had lived in. Who migrated from the conflict of a newly formed State (Pakistan) to a splintered nation, a place alien to whatever she had been brought up in. At the same time a migration which enabled her to break some barriers for her children if not for herself. Two daughters who were educated and could walk the earth with equal steps as her two sons. What did the border and boundaries mean to that daughter who crossed it, not still aware of a world she was inheriting?

Imagining different territories with different gender and sexual relations may even change the relational position that a geographical place – a country – holds on a map. The national narrative was so little successful in its attempt to make the following young woman identify with the nation and its borders that the whole country moved for her from the centre of the map to its margins:

> As a teenager my country, its tradition and culture, as well as my own family started to suffocate me. As a young woman I also sought a different territory, where boundaries between men and women would not be so carefully and painfully grafted. Greece was no longer the centre of the world (as I had learnt at school) but an insignificant dot in a little corner of Europe. I wanted to meet the 'enemies', to lose this precious identity in anonymous crowds and places where stones were just stones instead of signifiers of history. I started to travel, to aspire abroad, and finally I left for New York, which represented for me liberation, possibility, heterogeneity, multiculturalism (my very own American dream).

A similar account by a woman of another Mediterranean country, Malta, imagines the process of going abroad as a process of finding 'herself':

> I grew up always in search of opportunities of the 'international', 'abroad'. In my early university student days, I searched for exchange visits and visited Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Munich, Brussels, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bruges, Turin, and Sicily amongst other places. I realized that Malta was too small for me and I felt much more 'myself' when I was away from 'home'.

WOMEN CROSSING BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

Women, then, can have deeply ambivalent attitudes, as well as positionings, vis-a-vis borders and boundaries. Women are constructed as symbolic border guards of the collectivity and as representing the collectivity's honour. At the same time they are usually marginalized in the public, political and military spheres, or even excluded from them. In some cases this might force them, in order to survive, to leave behind them all that is dear. In other cases, they are inspired to cross borders and boundaries, both individually and collectively, and reinvent their lives. Women, however, can cross boundaries and borders even when they do not move physically from the places where they grew up. One such cross-border and boundary activity has been women's peace activism, that in recent years has been recognized more internationally, as we can see from the shortlisting of the international women's peace movement, Women In Black, for the official Nobel Peace Prize 2001.

In *Gender and Nation*, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997b) argues that the specific positioning of women in peace movements can be explained by a number of reasons. First, unlike men, women are virtually nowhere drafted and forced to fight in wars that they do not approve of. They always join the military as volunteers. Even in Israel, where they are drafted, they are not drafted to the reserve army that constitutes the bulk of the military, nor are they usually allowed to serve in the battle frontlines. Second, some women prefer to organize autonomously within the anti-war and anti-militaristic movement as part of their more general feminist convictions. Working in this way, they would be able to be more assertive and not shadowed and intimidated by men in a mixed organization, although they would tend to cooperate and work closely with men's and mixed groups and organizations with similar political goals. And third, some women's anti-militaristic and anti-war groups would see their anti-militaristic fight as a spearhead in their fight against the patriarchal social system as a whole that they see as dominated by male machoism and violence. 'Take the Toys from the Boys' – one of the slogans of the Greenham Common women could typify such an approach (Yuval-Davis, 1997b: 112–13).

Given the preceding, women often feel freer to cooperate with other women across ethnic and national conflict boundaries than men in a similar situation would.

In a post-Cold War world, marked by a growing number of local ethnic and national conflicts, there has been a growing salient place for women's peace political activism aimed at crossing and transcending ethnic and national boundaries and borders. It is not that women have not been active in international peace movements in earlier periods, but the rise of the second wave of feminism has given impetus for such autonomous

women's peace activism. Most renowned among them has been the Greenham Common movement, which has struggled for nuclear disarmament in general and the removal of the American cruise missiles from British soil in particular (Roseneil, 1995). There were many other such local groups, fighting global causes in local spaces. In the post-Cold War era, more and more of them became directed towards resisting local national, ethnic and religious chauvinism, working with women on the other side of the conflict divide, and forging international alliances with other women's groups engaged in similar struggles. The best known of these international women's peace movements is Women In Black, who started in Israel, spread via Italy to feminists in former Yugoslavia and around the time of the Gulf War started to spread to all corners of the globe. During the UN conference on women in 1995 at Beijing, women from most of the countries represented in the conference participated in the international Women In Black march there. Currently they are engaged in many different countries all over the globe, holding regular vigils, both on local issues, in protest against the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and against the war in Afghanistan.

Many other women's organizations have been working across borders and boundaries in many countries and for many different reasons. Cynthia Cockburn (1998) has studied three such groups in Northern Ireland, Israel and Bosnia and is engaged at the moment doing similar work with women in Cyprus. When theorizing the nature of the political work these women do, Cockburn found it useful to adopt the notion of 'transversal politics', first used by Italian feminists and then developed by Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997b) into a framework of dialogical politics across difference. To quote Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter (in their special issue of *Soundings* on the concept), transversal politics

> . . . answers to a need to conceptualize a democratic practice of a particular kind, a process that can on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other hand affirm difference without being transfixed by it. Transversal politics is the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicised differences. (Cockburn and Hunter, 1999: 88)

There is no space here to expand on the nature and importance of the 'transversal politics' that different feminist groups are engaged in. Central to it is a dialogical process in which the situated differential positioning and gaze of each participant in the dialogue is acknowledged, including that of the reflective self (what the Italian feminists call 'rooting'). At the same time, there is also a process of 'shifting' in which the participants empathetically imagine themselves in the other's positionings and the resulting situated gaze. A necessary condition of this process is a common value system, being part of the same 'epistemological community', to use

Alison Assiter's (2000) terminology, although the specific political priorities emanating out of this value system might be different from different positionings. As Patricia Hill-Collins (1999) points out, the construction of women as a group differs from the construction of national and ethnic collectivities, because boundaries of belonging pass within and not between them and other people. This is why transversal politics is so central to women's political work.

A CONCLUDING REMARK

Women embody borders and boundaries but also the possibility of crossing and transcending them. No political agent is progressive 'inherently'. It is up to us to promote some imaginings of women, borders and boundaries and actively work against others. The agency of women is particularly important because so often images of women's position in society is used more to degrade the men of the 'other' side than as part of a comprehensive egalitarian gender perspective. This has never been more important than in these days when a 'global war against terrorism' is dividing the globe and in which imaginings of women are used – in different ways – to promote the very masculinist aims of either side.

NOTES

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1. Nugent and Asiwanju use the term 'boundaries' in the meaning we attribute in this article to 'borders'. Sahlins (1989) did the same in his text, which discusses territorial borders.

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