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THE VIOLENT GEOGRAPHY OF BORDERIZATION

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### The Violent Geography of Borderization

by ARIEL AMBER ANYA OTRUBA

Dissertation Director:

Richard Schroeder

Borderland communities unequally and disproportionately suffer at the altar of geopolitics. Rather than the periphery, borderlands are the epicenter of territorial conflict and contests over sovereignty. This is evident in the Republic of Georgia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, where the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation began incrementally and unilaterally demarcating sections of the boundary line to the disputed and unrecognized territory of South Ossetia. This dissertation uses a feminist geopolitics approach to critically examine the violent geography of this borderization process. In addition to performing de facto sovereignty, borderization is theorized as a biopolitical tool of leverage. Qualitative mixed methods and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in a series of “conflict-affected villages” adjacent to the South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line reveal how the uncertainties of the elastic border impacts the in/security of rural populations, whose pasturelands, homes, and social worlds are now bifurcated by the hardening of this dividing line. Two in-depth empirical chapters illustrate the embodied and emotional experiences of border violence. The first chapter

shows how borderization transforms borderland villages into a "neitherland," which is a type of zone of abandonment. Through an emphasis on gendered mobilities, the second chapter demonstrates how ambiguously demarcated sections of the boundary imperil men vis-à-vis women, putting them at risk of arbitrary detention by the Russian-backed security regime. Attention to the issue of restricted freedom of movement and how men confront the border regime exposes an emerging form of traumatic masculinity, reinforcing an understanding of border violence as a gendered phenomenon.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABL—Administrative Boundary Line

CIS—Commonwealth of Independent States

EU—European Union

EUMM—European Union Monitoring Mission

FSB—Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

FOG—Field Office Gori (EUMM)

GYLA—Georgian Young Lawyers Association

ICC—International Criminal Court

ICRC—International Committee of the Red Cross

IDFI—Institute for Development of Freedom of Information

IDP—Internally Displaced Persons

IIFFMCG—Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia

IPRM—Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism

JCC—Joint Control Commission

JPKF—Joint Peacekeeping Force

KGB—Committee for State Security

NATO—North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NEO—New Economic Opportunities Program

OSCE—Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

SOAO—South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast

SSR—Soviet Socialist Republic

TAT—Tbilisi Administered Territory

TSA—Targeted Social Assistance

UN—United Nations

USAID—United States Agency for International Development

USSR—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## Chapter 1: Borderization

In late May 2011 during the first year of my M.A. program in International Peace and Conflict Resolution at Arcadia University, I travelled to Georgia on a graduate field study program with George Mason University called *Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus* under the instruction of Dr. Susan Allen Nan, an expert on the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. An advertisement for this course read:

This exciting program brings you to the heart of conflict in the South Caucasus. Participants will meet a variety of local specialists, including academics and practitioners who will provide an inside view of each side of the conflict. Students will spend time in Tbilisi and, if possible, Sukhum/Sukhumi. Formal class sessions are complemented by various site visits to encourage a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues affecting societies in conflict.

The program aims to provide context for understanding the changes that the South Caucasus region has experienced during the last 25 years, opportunities for understanding conflict tensions surrounding inter-community relations, and the aftermath of wars involving South Ossetians, Abkhaz, Russians, and Georgians, as well as the conflict over Karabakh. Related dynamics in the North Caucasus and globally will also be considered.

When a faculty member suggested the program to me, I had been studying the challenging international legal dimensions of “frozen conflicts” and post-Soviet *de facto* states in my international law class. The prospect of connecting theory to practice motivated me to join a dynamic group of thirteen other students from the country’s leading conflict resolution programs on the trip. The following recalls an important site visit during the program to a conflict-affected community near the South Ossetian territory and how this became the catalyst for my dissertation research.

### **Karbi**

Peering from the fogged windows of our charcoal marshrutka,<sup>1</sup> I watched intently as we pulled to a stop at a police checkpoint before a small bridge covering the Tiriponi irrigation canal. The checkpoint consisted of a cement barrier and other ramshackle, *ad hoc* structures bearing a Georgian flag: five red crosses on a background of white. Police clothed in camouflage and armed with Kalashnikovs stood waiting to approach forthcoming drivers traveling in and out of the conflict zone. The sky was gray, and it was raining steadily; the rising muddy water in the canal starkly contrasted with a backdrop of green vegetation. I used my shirt to clear away the condensation on the window and watch as a policeman ushered us forward to the Georgian village of Karbi after checking our documents. At the time, Karbi was considered part of a 15 km buffer zone adjacent to the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) of the disputed, self-proclaimed “Republic of South Ossetia” located in the Republic of Georgia. Karbi belonged to an area on the frontlines of the (then) recent 2008 August war between Georgia and Russia.

When we arrived in the village, I carefully rolled the bottom of my linen khakis so they wouldn’t drag in the mud. Dodging a few puddles, I fell in line behind my classmates as a Georgian man escorted us into a garden and up a set of stairs to a concrete and steel balcony overlooking an arbor wrapped in tangled grape vines. A long table was set with mismatched dishes and silverware for lunch. As we ate, the man told us an emotional story of his experience of the 2008 war.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshrutka (მარშრუტკა) is the Russian word for minibus or routed taxicab, which is a common form of public transportation in Georgia and many other former Soviet states.



*Figure 1.* Innocuous shrapnel holes left from the war in the side of a fence, located in Karbi. June 2011.

Afterward, we filed back down the stairs and out onto the main road, where the rain was tapering off. There was nothing seemingly unusual about the village. However, close inspection of the landscape revealed scars from the war; a smattering of rust colored shrapnel holes in the steel fences enclosing the private gardens of the villagers told a story of siege and destruction, as seen in Figure 1. Our host ushered us across the street and despondently pointed to a dilapidated structure. Shown in Figure 2, debris and glass shards from the blown-out windows littered the ground and crunched under our feet. The house had been shelled during the war; the man's aunt was a casualty of the attack. "Look! Look what the Russians did to us!" exclaimed the man, while pointing to the ruins of the crumbled home.



*Figure 2.* A home in Karbi, which was shelled by the Russians during the 2008 war. June 2011.

Witnessing this visceral, violent and intimate rupture of everyday life left me unsettled.<sup>2</sup> As we departed under overcast skies, I was troubled not only by the destruction of the war, but especially by the enclosure of the village between the Georgian police checkpoint to the south and Russian occupying forces to the north. This buffer zone seemed to create a type of spatial hostage; it was a limbo, a no-man's land for residents, bound by opposing security regimes and a sense of protracted uncertainty. An uneasy peace, the haunting threat of conflict, restricted mobility, disconnection, loss, and dilapidation were defining characteristics of this space. This led me to consider the limitations and contradictions of partition, the strategy used to establish a "temporary" line of separation to enforce a ceasefire.<sup>3</sup> The conditions of this buffer zone seemed to call into question the long-term impacts and costs of separation on ordinary people. The experience made me concerned with how spatial and social relations become normalized years in the future and what partition ultimately means for the prospect of a sustainable and peaceful settlement to the conflict.

Since traveling to Karbi in 2011, the term "buffer zone" has become an artifact of the past, replaced by an evolving phenomenon termed *borderization* and *creeping occupation (annexation)*. At the time that I visited Karbi in 2011, the Federal Security Service (FSB) Border Guard Service of the Russian Federation began demarcating

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<sup>2</sup> In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017) discusses how sensation matters. She contends that, "a gut feeling has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling" (p. 22 & 27). This story demonstrates how impressions, affect and emotion, are tools for guiding feminist curiosity and central to feminist questions (Åhäll, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> I was so struck by the spatial and social dynamics of buffer zones that I promptly arranged an internship with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Cyprus in the fall 2011, prior to returning to Georgia. In Cyprus, I studied the governance and long-term impacts of the demilitarized buffer zone that separates the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in the north from the Republic of Cyprus in the south. This experience has greatly informed my understanding of the situation in Georgia.

sections of the South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line (ABL), hardening the separation between the *de facto* Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Georgia. Almost overnight, barbed wire fences and other types of infrastructure appeared in pasturelands, bifurcating property, orchards, cemeteries, and homes. As an elderly man in Khurvaleti has poignantly conveyed to local and international press, “I went to bed in Georgia – and woke up in South Ossetia” (McLaughlin & Shukla, 2017). Borderization had immediate and cataclysmic consequences for local communities, who were still trying to cope with the aftermaths of the war. The violence of the process known as borderization and its consequences for the in/security of local people, are the focus of this dissertation.

### **Creeping Occupation, Creeping Annexation & Borderization**

While the world turned its attention to the Summer Olympic games in Beijing in 2008, tensions mounted and an uneasy peace in the South Caucasus disintegrated. Large scale military confrontation erupted in August following the accumulated decline of Georgian-Russian relations, which many scholars attribute to two precipitating events: the precedent-setting Western recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February of that year, and the NATO Bucharest Summit in April, which sought to further Georgian and Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration efforts (Cornell & Starr, 2009). The European Union-sponsored fact-finding mission, led by Swiss diplomat, Heidi Tagliavini, found that the Georgian government of Mikheil Saakashvili had “fired the first shot” on the evening of August 7, 2008. This launched a military offensive to restore central control over the South Ossetian territory, which was matched by Russian intervention (IIFFMCG, 2009). Justification for the Russian and Georgian positions was promoted based on

accepted international normative principles. Russia supported its right to intercede based on the protection of human rights and the responsibility to protect Russian peacekeeping forces and Ossetians holding Russian citizenship, whereas Georgia asserted its right to sovereignty and territorial integrity (De Waal, 2010).

A Six Point Ceasefire agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy brought the war to an end, but Russian antagonism continued. Following the agreement, Russia defiantly and unilaterally recognized the independence of both breakaway territories within Georgia, the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia. A handful of other countries followed suit.

The Caucasus (Transcaucasus) region has long been a zone of special interest to the Russians. A spectrum of hybrid warfare tactics and increasingly overt interventions within the borders of its neighbors testifies to Russia's revanchist agenda in the post-Soviet space. Yet Russia's system of highly sophisticated tactical tools in Georgia remain largely unchecked and understudied. The Georgia-Ossetian conflict was quickly overshadowed by events in Ukraine: the 2014 Euromaidan protests and the outbreak of conflict over Donbas and Crimea stole the world's attention. These developments made the situation in Georgia precedent setting and vital to understanding emerging patterns of Russian coercive diplomacy in the "near abroad."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Near abroad" (blizhneye zarubezhye) is a phrase applied to the newly independent republics, which emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The phrase was originally used to distinguish between the former republics and the rest of the world. Over time, the phrase has come to have political meaning, representing Russia's vital strategic interests and sphere of influence in post-Soviet states. See Safire (1994) for an early discussion of this term.



Map 1. Republic of Georgia's two disputed territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By United Nations Cartographic Section, with amendments by User:ChrisO - United Nations Cartographic Section, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4547989>

Russian forces remained in Georgia's two breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, following the war. These are represented on Map 1. These territories equal twenty percent of Georgia's entire landmass. The war also meant the additional loss of control over 151 settlements (135 in Tskhinvali region and 16 in Kodori Valley), which effectively increased the size of South Ossetia's territorial claims (IDFI, 2015; Public Defender of Georgia, 2017).<sup>5</sup> This was followed by an increased militarization of these territories. In 2009, Moscow signed a bilateral agreement with South Ossetia supporting the arrival of Russian border guards, whose role would be to defend the "state" border of South Ossetia. Border guard directorates were established and "green beret" units were

<sup>5</sup> The IDFI (2015) published a map showing inhabited areas taken over by the Ossetian separatists and Russian occupational forces in both 1992 and 2008. To view the map, visit: <https://idfi.ge/en/changed-borders-of-georgia-after-occupation>

deployed to checkpoints on the South Ossetian-Georgian Administrative Boundary Line (ABL). In 2011, this Border Service, part of the Frontier Department of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor organization to the Soviet KGB (Committee for State Security), began to unilaterally cordon off South Ossetia and Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia by installing border infrastructure. The term borderization emerged as a euphemism to describe this demarcation process and the seizure of formerly Georgian controlled land, meter by meter. The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), an unarmed civilian contingent, explained that borderization includes “all of the elements that prevent people from crossing from one side to the other of the ABL” (EUMM Field Office Gori, personal communication, 2016). Border security infrastructure installations by the FSB include a plethora of obstacles: fences, green signposts, trenching and ground lines, electrical and optical surveillance technologies, the construction of observation posts and roads, policing activities (such as administrative arrest and detention), and the



*Figure 3.* An example fence and green banner used to demarcate the “border” of South Ossetia, located near Khiviti. August 2016.



*Figure 4.* A border fence that just abruptly ends in a field near the village of Dvani. August 2016.

use of checkpoints and identity papers to control the movement of local populations. When the process began, 1200 Russian border guards had been deployed and only two of 19 planned border posts had been constructed. By 2016 there were an estimated 3,000-4,500 military personnel stationed in South Ossetia, all 19 border posts had been completed, 3 military bases had been built, 30% of all observation posts had been upgraded, and new watch towers had been installed (EUMM Gori Field Office, personal correspondence, 2016).

Concertina barbed wire and metal-bar fences appeared in a slow succession of waves, ebbing and flowing with the rhythms of geopolitics. Green banners in English and Georgian reading, “ATTENTION! STATE BORDER! PASSAGE IS FORBIDDEN!” warned locals of the perils of crossing the newly established border (see Figure 3). The first were installed in the Georgian villages of Didi Khurvaleti, Kveshi, Dvani, and Tamarasheni, all “conflict-affected” communities situated within the former buffer zone.

A notable period of escalation occurred in 2013 when in Ditsi, metal fence posts were installed about 120 meters into Tbilisi controlled territory, sowing suspicions of a slow-motion plan to annex Georgian territory. This triggered discourses of “creeping occupation” and “creeping annexation,” which have come to characterize borderization as an incremental process of encroachment within Tbilisi administrated territory (TAT). Further installations followed in a piecemeal, though limited fashion from 2014 onward. For example, a recent report released by the conservative think tank, Heritage Foundation, used Ministry of Internal Affairs data to provide a list of 56 instances of border installations since 2011 across 48 locations (Coffey, 2018). The problem is ongoing.

The perimeter of the South Ossetian territory is 380 km; yet, 230 km of that boundary is mountainous. Of the remaining 150 km of passable territory, an estimated 55-60 km of fencing has been erected by the Russian Border Guard Service at the request of South Ossetian authorities.<sup>6</sup> This has meant that border fencing is noncontiguous. Fences sometimes abruptly end in the middle of a field, as seen in Figure 4. This generates considerable uncertainty about where risk begins and ends, as well as inspires perceptions about the installation process as somehow arbitrary or random.

Most reports suggest that demarcation activities follow the old administrative borders of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO), which existed under Soviet rule. Public information requests by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (2015) show that the Russian border guards are supposedly using

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<sup>6</sup> Such estimates are difficult to make because borderization is an unfolding process. For example, as I was revising in the fall 2018, installations had resumed in the village of Atotsi. The Public Defender of Georgia (2018) documents “more than 52 km” of fencing.

topographic maps (Scale: 1:50 000 and 1:100 000) of the general staff of the Soviet military published between 1976-1986. However, numerous topographic maps were published by the Soviet general staff throughout this period, differing in the way they defined the boundaries of the SOAO within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Some sources suggest that demarcation activities continue according to the topographic map of 1988, which portrays the administrative boundaries of 1984, yet these maps have not been produced or viewed by stakeholders on the Georgian controlled side of the dividing line. Such a practice creates a layer of opacity to understanding the precise geography of the borderization process.

The boundary's location has never been formally negotiated between the Georgians and Ossetians/Russians. Participating in such discussions for the Georgians would constitute recognition of South Ossetia's claim to sovereignty. As a result, the uncertain geography of the South Ossetian ABL comes to embody a contestation over claims, a tension between recognition and nonrecognition, and the uneasy situation of no-war-no-peace in Georgia. These conditions result in an elastic geography, which enables the use of borderization as a biopolitical technology of strategic leverage and coercion.

### **The Violent Geography of Borderization**

The aim of borderization is political acquiescence; it is intended to create political inertia, to create new facts on the ground, dominate, and enforce submission through deception, violence, and insecurity. This occurs at multiple scales, connecting the ideological scale of the nation and macro-security of states to the micro-security of gendered bodies in their homes, gardens and pasturelands.

When I began this research in 2013, very few researchers were documenting borderization. Of those writing on this issue today, most remain couched within state-centric discussions of geopolitics (see Boyle, 2016 & 2017; German, 2016 for examples). This means that much of the current scholarship often falls short of offering rich empirical insight into the intimate experiences of borderization by local people.

The material enactment of the territorial imagination has a troubling human cost. Borderization occurs at the expense of the living conditions and security of local people. It violates the fundamental principles of international law and infringes upon civil, social and economic rights, namely the right to the freedom of movement. According to the United Nations, the construction of the South Ossetian border affects approximately 66 rural Georgian villages, home to 36,935 individuals and 13,437 households (UNDP, 2015, p.1). The International Crisis Group (2010) describes these ominous conditions of life on the line between South Ossetia and Georgia as rife with poverty, decreased access to essential resources and property, decaying infrastructure and enduring insecurity. Borderization exacerbates the struggles of quotidian life and the widespread destruction caused by the previous two wars (Human Rights Watch, 2014). It has a dramatic impact on social relations and livelihoods, because it severs ties between family and friends, limits access to water sources and firewood, and cuts through homes, farmland, orchards, cemeteries and churches, all of which are central to Georgian social worlds. The scholarship on partition and those who seek to understand the impact of borders on space and people, such as Haselberger (2014), argue that this type of separation hardens social divides and instills enmity, making conflict resolution and integration increasingly difficult as time passes. Furthermore, the securitization of the ABL increasingly limits

and criminalizes mobility and movement. Thousands have been arrested, detained, and fined since the 2008 war for illegal border crossing. Not only are a larger number of detentions linked to locations that have not been fenced, i.e. spaces where the ABL's location remains ambiguous, but reports on the post-conflict situation show how the uncertainties of the ABL increase feelings of insecurity for villagers (Viefhues & Wood, 2010). Such conditions can be tied to the late modern biopolitics of borders, which reveal borderization as a violent geography (Jones, 2016; Gregory & Pred, 2007; Springer & Le Billion, 2016; Springer, 2011; Watts & Peluso, 2001).

### **Dissertation Organization**

The human cost of borderization drives the impetus, as one NGO leader explained, to understand and recognize “the way rural communities are so far removed from decision-makers that their needs simply go unnoticed and unrecorded.” Therefore, this work presents a story of borderization as a violent geography, witnessed through the lens of a feminist geopolitics. This is an approach, which is attentive to the ruptures of everyday life and the seemingly apolitical sites and situations of civilian security (Fluri, 2011; Dowler & Sharp, 2001). This recognizes that geopolitics always take place at the bodily scale. While my dissertation is concerned with addressing questions about the political rationalities and imaginaries performed by borderization, namely how the politics of recognition influence border geographies, my primary concern lies in exploring how local populations experience the violence of borderization. This includes examining how the uncertain and elastic geography of the ABL shape perceptions of space and in/security, and how border dwellers come to maneuver and cope with its contested, creeping, and seemingly ambiguous location.

Chapter 2 presents a historical geography of borderization to establish the context and a conceptual framework for the dissertation. This chapter reviews key literature in border studies scholarship, which emphasizes the global increase in border securitization (Vallet, 2014; R. Jones, 2012; Brown, 2010; Elden, 2009). I use this literature to explore the theoretical relationships between sovereignty, territory, borders, and violence. This informs a conceptualization of bordering as a technology of control and a ritual of hyper-sovereignty attempting to enact a nation-state ideal (R. Jones, 2012). I emphasize contingent sovereignty and the diplomatic and political process of recognition as central to understanding the uncertainty and elasticity of the ABL's geography. Finally, I call for a feminist geopolitical approach to document the lived geopolitics of borderization. I argue that this was key to designing a study that shows the dire material consequences and risks for border dwellers, and how such a violent spatial process robs communities of hope, dignity and the future.

Chapter 3 details the methodology of the dissertation. Elasticity, uncertainty and violence are essential dimensions of the spatial politics of borderization. To create continuity between these themes and the methodology, I emphasize the application of a feminist geopolitics toolkit to field sites, which could be regarded as "conflict zones," "closed contexts," "dangerous," or "authoritarian" fields. Doing so calls attention to the "centrality of macro-political contexts (and their myriad technologies of government) in the conduct of fieldwork" (Koch, 2013, p.394; see also Nordstrom & Robben, 1997). I argue that the opaque, obscure and uncertain conditions of data collection are derived from the same governmental technologies of recognition that contribute to the ABL's elastic geography. This chapter lays out the foundations of my research design and

reflects on the challenges and ethics of research in the post-Soviet authoritarian neighborhood. I consider the obstacles of investigating an issue shrouded in surveillance and frequently obstructed by officials, who render different types of information inaccessible because of “national security concerns.” I discuss how calculations of what is knowable and what is accessible drove many decisions related to the implementation of this project.

The remaining chapters present an empirical analysis of data collected during fieldwork that emphasizes the micro-politics and non-elite/borderlander experiences, which demonstrate how uncertainty defines the violent geography of borderization.

Chapter 4, “‘We Are Forgotten by Everyone’: Experiences of Abandonment in Georgia’s Neitherland,” considers how the material conditions of ruination, disrepair, uninhabitability, and an exclusion from care, produce widespread feelings of abandonment for conflict-affected populations near the dividing line. I use the story of Zardiaantkari to build from Leshem and Pinkerton’s (2015) concept of the “no-man’s land” as a dynamic of abandonment and enclosure. In this chapter, I propose a revision of the no-man’s land to neitherland to rehumanize and re-inhabit our imaginary of zones of abandonment. I consider villagers’ perceptions about the impotence of security actors and the abstraction of villages into the category of “conflict-affected communities” as essential illustrations of the relationship between exclusions from systems of care and abandonment. I end by reflecting on the political value of abandonment as an instrument of affective geopolitics.

Chapter 5, “No (Wo)man’s Land: Traumatic Masculinity and Gendered Risksapes of Arbitrary Detention” further delves into the conditions of the neitherland

through a study of the “geopolitics of mobility” (Hyndman, 2012). The impacts of the uncertainty, violence and legibility of the border are explored through the issue of arbitrary detention and restricted freedom of movement. Detentions occur when people attempt to cross the boundary at places other than official checkpoints, such as through forests, across streams, or even where there are low laying wire entanglements.

According to the South Ossetian authorities, this is considered an illegal border crossing, punishable by fines and detainment. The differential imperilment of gendered bodies along the ABL is central to this chapter, since able-bodied men are detained most of the time. Examining villagers’ stories about detention exposes men’s attitudes toward the border regime and their acts of transgression as evidence of an evolving type of traumatic masculinity, where confrontation and evasion represent gendered violence as much as mundane resistance.

In the conclusion chapter, “From a Geography of Violence to a Geography of Peace,” I review the major contributions of the dissertation and discuss what is at stake with a feminist approach to the lived geopolitics of borderization. I end by recommending directions for future research that continue to amplify and use human stories to re-inhabit and transform this geography of violence to a geography of peace.

## Chapter 2: Bordering as Leverage

During my first summer of pre-dissertation fieldwork in June 2013, I spent a weekend in Bredza, a small village located in the Kareli municipality near the South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line (ABL). At the time, I struggled to even find this village on the map. My hosts, Ana and her partner Bacho, and our friend Mimi, offered to take me Bredza to show me the situation of people who had been affected by the 2008 war. Mimi arranged for us to stay at her grandparent's house for the weekend.

We traveled by marshrutka from Tbilisi and disembarked in Agara, where we located a man with a ramshackle, light gray Lada, which he used to drive us north to the village. When we at Mimi's grandparents' house, I was surprised to discover that the home was abandoned; her grandparents found surviving the conditions of the village too



*Figure 5.* Mimi's grandparents' abandoned house in Bredza. June 2013.

difficult. There was no electricity and no running water. The house was beautifully dilapidated and lost to time; wildflowers and tall grass filled the garden, as shown in Figure 5. A couple of squeaky, metal cots remained inside one room. After sweeping away mouse droppings and a thick layer of dust, we pushed the cots together. Wrapped in bedding we brought from Tbilisi, we drifted into the brisk stillness of the night.

Near Mimi's grandparents' house, the ABL loops down forming an enclave of "South Ossetia" between Bredza and Abano/Gulikaantubani. This is situated between the West Prone and Lamushuristskali river. During the afternoon, we wandered past a shepherd napping in the grass as his herd grazed (Figure 6), before spending part of day with our bare feet in the waters of the West Prone, watching children jumping from a grassy bank into the stream in front of us. In the afternoon, we headed up a hill to a small



*Figure 6. A sleeping shepherd in Bredza. June 2013.*

forest of tall, straight pyramidal shaped pines. Lethargy swept over us from hours in the sun. We collapsed onto a soft bed of warm pine needles, as golden streams of light trickled through the branches. With our heads resting on our backpacks, we drew in deep breaths of terpenes from the conifers.

In retrospect, this seemingly peaceful memory is unnerving. Nothing in this bucolic scene presented as a land under threat. Nothing indicated that we had transgressed any boundaries. This trip to the forest was admittedly one of the greatest risks of my fieldwork, which I did *unknowingly*. Ana later explained to me that the Georgian police at the checkpoint near Bredza had strongly warned us against leaving the village, explicitly instructing us not to cross the river and not to enter the forest. Was this the forest that we had visited, I wondered?

February 2013 marked a new wave of intensified fencing and detentions, according to the Georgian Interior Ministry. By June, a reported 22-25 km-long section of the ABL was marked with wire fences, slightly less than half of the distance that is demarcated today. In Bredza, some villagers had expressed their suspicions to Ana and Mimi about the encroachment of the boundary line and the risk of being detained in the forest. Seventy-eight Georgian citizens had been detained since the start of the year. Sixty people were detained by Russian border guards in April-May, while in the vicinity of the ABL (“Ivanishvili comments,” 2013; “Installation of Fences,” 2013; “Interior Ministry Briefs,” 2013).

Because borderization was still a relatively new phenomenon in 2013, I can only speculate about how seriously my hosts treated the warnings we received. Despite the risk, I now recognize the significance of this experience for appreciating and empathizing

with the perils of uncertainty and how easily local people can mistakenly violate the ABL in unmarked locations. It also reminds me about how the landscape of borderization can be painfully mundane and banal, not spectacularly dramatic like the fortified walls separating Israel from Palestine or the Green Line that divides Cyprus. Perhaps this banality is what makes borderization so sinister.

Over the course of my fieldwork from 2013-2016, I discovered that the uncertain and elastic geography of the ABL is the violence that sows insecurity for local people. This uncertainty is neither arbitrary nor random. Uncertainty offers strategic advantages to the parties of the conflict. Uncertainty is essential to a system of affective geopolitics; the suffering and insecurity of local bodies is instrumentalized to compel the political trajectory of the conflict. In this chapter, I offer a conceptualization of borderization a bordering process designed to foster uncertainty. This in turn is used as a biopolitical technology of leverage, which I develop through a historical geography of the border.

First, I situate my case study of borderization within scholarly discussions of border securitization and borders as violent geographies. Next, I offer a historical geography of territorial conflict over South Ossetia to contextualize the issue of borderization. Here, I recognize two key moments of boundary materialization following the ceasefire agreements in 1992 and 2008. Emphasis is placed on how factors such as contingent sovereignty and the absence of political settlement impact border geography. This contributes to a framing of borderization as an elastic geography, which enables the border to function as an instrument of leverage for the Russians and Georgians alike.

Finally, I argue for an approach centering on lived geopolitics to expose how the elasticity and uncertainty of borderization create a violent geography for local people.

### **Borders and Violence**

Borderization in Georgia emerges within a global context of increasing border securitization, produced by the clash of sovereign fictions and territorial anxieties. The renaissance of border studies that occurred after the Cold War pushed “borderless worlds” theories and the “end of history” (Newman, 2006; Fukuyama, 1992; Ohmae, 1995; Friedman, 2005). However, this was quickly overtaken by the evolution of new security norms in the wake of September 11, 2001. The “global war on terror” helped to show the persisting allure of highly bounded and regulated territories as mechanisms for protecting the nation against the threat of dangerous outsiders. As the number of displaced people exploded after the Arab Spring, states responded with increased border securitization (R Jones, 2016, p.3; see also Vallet, 2014). Scholars in the security paradigm of critical border studies then began raising concern about how democratic societies (in particular) have constructed some of the most heavily fortified, regulated and violent border regimes today (R. Jones, 2012; Brown, 2010; Elden, 2009).<sup>7</sup> Popescu (2012) explains how such states have invented security risks to create an “unprecedented impetus to border securitization by giving it a sense of urgency” (Popescu, 2012, p.97). However, R. Jones (2016) disputes the logics used to defend border securitization, arguing, “the existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it. [...] The hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the violence,

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<sup>7</sup> Brown (2010) and Jones (2012, 2016) seem to be at odds in their analyses. Brown contends that border securitization is an indication of waning sovereignty, while Jones argues that it represents a “rearticulation and expansion, not a retreat, of state power” (p.68).

not a response to it” (p.5). My dissertation positions itself within this conceptual framework by exploring the notion of *violent borders* through a case study of the borderization of South Ossetia in Georgia.

Bordering and borderization are used analogously in this research. Bordering describes a type of territorial social ordering process aimed at social and territorial differentiation and regulating mobility. In other words, borders mark differences in space, “each with various degrees of visibility in the cultural and physical landscapes” (Popescu, 2012, p.1). The field of border studies is committed to denaturalizing, decentering, and problematizing the monopoly that these state borders have over the social and political imagination. Instead of a single unitary theory, this literature conceptualizes borders as complex social constructions, processes rather than just visible lines in space or on a map (Parker & Vaughn-Williams, 2012; Haselsberger, 2014). They are understood to exist only to the extent that humans regard them as meaningful (Diener & Hagen, 2012).

State bordering has sought to create a homogenized and orderly population inside a bounded space, which legitimizes exclusion “by providing a material manifestation of the abstract idea of sovereignty” (R. Jones, 2012, p.3). Territory, argues Elden (2009), is “the spatial extent of sovereignty,” or at the least, the enforcement of this abstraction.<sup>8</sup> In other words, territory is the space in which the sovereign imagination is exercised, and borders represent an attempt to claim and establish a container for such geographic and national imaginaries. This is premised on modernist territorial norms evolving from the

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<sup>8</sup> Sack (1983), Elden (2009 & 2013), and Diener and Hagen (2012) offer further explanations of territory and territoriality. Sack’s work is perhaps most known for his work on territoriality/territory.

Peace of Westphalia, which made territory a principal foundation of the modern political order. Therefore, bordering cannot be conceptually divorced from concepts of territory.

Yet, such norms also promote a fiction of border fixity and inviolability (Murphy, 2013). Agnew (1994) termed this the “territorial trap.” While bordering attempts to materialize sovereignty as an aspiration and a moral imperative for the legitimate right to govern and control a particular population by creating a literal and metaphorical container of the nation-state ideal, close inspection reveals only the “the territorial, national, and geopolitical fantasies and dreams for elites” (Megoran, 2017, p.6) and a “fabricated truth” of national imaginaries (Van Houtum, 2011, p.51). Because social relations and identity are fluid, borders based on the nation-state ideal are never fully achievable (Diener and Hagen, 2012). Furthermore, borders become symbolically loaded, contested objects, which embody claims to sovereignty; as such, borders are not just places where conflict happens, but become the center of conflict itself.

As an abstraction, sovereignty can always be reimagined. In practice, this means that territory and borders are not static objects, though they are so often taken to be. Rather, territory is flexible and unstable (Novak, 2011): borders are situated manifestations, which are shifting, creeping, de- and re-territorializing, conditional, and contingent—defined by the ordering of space across multiple scales and dimensions of social and political life. This means that overlapping and competing claims to space make borders hot spots for conflict and violence.

Though often described as the margins of the state, authors such as R. Jones (2012) assert that borders are sites of exceptional practices of sovereign power and hyper-sovereignty. The enforcement of these sovereign fictions can be volatile, contentious and

potentially violent. Border security seeks to perform and naturalize sovereign power and claims, often through the use of force.<sup>9</sup> Toft's (2014) literature review of scholarship examining the relationship between territory and war reveals violence in territorial disputes emerge when territory is not viewed as a divisible asset. This makes power-sharing attempts unworkable and increases the likelihood of a violent confrontation (Toft, 2010, p.142).<sup>10</sup> In other words, violence manifests when different groups "see the territory as indivisible and represent its control in zero-sum terms" (p.18).

Other perspectives on borders show these technologies of governance to be systematically violent spatial practices. Elden (2009) explains an intrinsic connection between territory and violence—to occupy territory is to exercise violence. Violence is integral to the way territory functions and to its enactment. R. Jones (2016) is central to formulating a theory of violent borders, showing both the visible violence that borders can cause to the bodies of migrants, as well as the "subtle—but also systematic—forms of violence at borders" (p.8). R. Jones (2016) lists five types of violence:

The overt violence of border guards and border security infrastructure is only one aspect of the violence of borders inflict on people and on the environment. The second form is the use force or power—threatened or actual—that increases the chances of injury, death, or deprivation. [...] The third form is the threat of violence necessary to limit access to land or to a resource through an enclosure—for instance, the threat of punishment for trespassing on private land or of arrest for not possessing the proper identity papers. The fourth form is the violence borders do to the economic well-being of people around the world. This is a collective, structural violence that deprives the poor of access to wealth and opportunities through the enclosure of resources and the

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<sup>9</sup> Both Weber (1946) and Hobbes (1929) write about the fundamental characteristics of statehood. Such theories argue that the state has the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory.

<sup>10</sup> Underscoring the role territory plays in ethnic war, Toft (2003) argues "...that the ethnic violence rests on how a conflict's principal antagonists—a state and its dissatisfied ethnic minority—think about or value a disputed territory. Attempts to negotiate a resolution short of war will fail when (1) the ethnic minority demands sovereignty over the territory it occupies, and (2) the state views that territory as indivisible. Ethnic war is less likely to break out if one condition only is met, and very unlikely if neither condition is met" (p.127).

bordering of states. The fifth form of violence is the direct harm borders do to the environment (p.9-10).

Such theorizations of violent borders fit within a broader conversation of violent geographies, which consider the constitution of violence through space and how violence comes to shape space (Gregory & Pred, 2006; Springer, 2011; Watts, 2001). Violence geographies result when difference must be constructed through an ineluctable logic of denial, refusal and exclusion. This is related to Toft's (2010) argument that when control over territory becomes a matter of survival and, consequently, an indivisible issue, it can be understood as a causal mechanism of ethnic violence. In my case study, violence is border violence occurs not just because South Ossetians and Georgians claim this territory as homeland. Russia further complicates the dynamic of this territorial conflict by enforcing South Ossetia's claim and by tying its own survival and security to the meaning of this territory. South Ossetian territory is imbued with strategic and intrinsic worth and the process of borderization is used to exact those particular geographic imaginaries. Violent borders and violent geographies expose both the political rationalities of borderization, as well as the unfolding conditions of exclusion and social death, which impinge on human life, i.e. that "restrict the potential for life to flourish and actualize" (Laurie and Shaw, 2018, p.8). My dissertation focuses on these latter conditions.

### **A Historical Geography of Borderization**

The following uses a “critical geopolitics” (see Dalby, 1991; Ó Tuathail, 1996) approach to explore the history and political rationalities that underscore borderization.<sup>11</sup> Critical geopolitics is concerned with questioning the spatializing practices of power and seeking to disrupt hegemonic and state-centric geopolitical discourses. Toal (2017) explains critical geopolitics as a “form of scholarly criticism of the discourse and practice of geopolitics; it is to geopolitics what literary criticism is to literature, a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence from the speech acts, performances, and practices of the actors it examines” (p.8).

The Republic of Georgia (საქართველო, Sakartvelo), home of the Kartvelian people, heralds itself as one of the oldest Christian nations in the world, despite being a heterogenous state consisting of Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijanis, and smaller numbers of Ossetians, Abkhazians, Greeks, among others. Georgia is part of an isthmus located between the Black and Caspian Seas and sandwiched between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus Mountain ranges. A history of invasions by the Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Russians, and Soviets demands that Georgian history be read as a postcolonial context. Modern Georgia, emerged in the wake of Soviet collapse as a place “replete with paradoxes and puzzles” (S. Jones, 2015), existing as a frontier between multiple worlds of contrasting ideas and social systems, where “Occident” and “Orient” come into contact (King, 2008)--a land in-between located on a geopolitical seismic zone between east and west (De Waal, 2010). The collapse of the Soviet empire “laid bare a series of fragile unsettled territorial disputes between competing power centers across the

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<sup>11</sup> Instead of a historical geography, border scholars, Megoran (2017) and Bornstein (2003), use the term “biography” to describe their approach to showing how border violence has a specific history and geography.

Soviet space” (Toal, 2017, p.58). Toal (2017) characterizes the making of this current geopolitical struggle as between “near abroads,” divided between European Union (EU) and NATO enlargement and Russian and Georgian revanchisms.

In historical accounts of territorial conflict, Ossetians are described as sharing a history of close ties with Russia. The Ossetian population, the Alans, are a mostly Christian (with a Muslim minority) group, which originally migrated to the Caucasus mountains from Persia, the area that is now Iran. Most Ossetians today live either in South Ossetia in Georgia or North Ossetia in Russia. The rugged high peaks of the Greater Caucasus mountains serve a physical divide to this group. Only the Roki tunnel directly connects these lands through the mountains. Despite having arrived over a thousand years ago to the territory that is modern day Georgia, “Georgian popular opinion has tended to see the Ossetians as newcomers who demanded more than their fair share of Georgian real estate,” explains King (2008, p.216).<sup>12</sup> As a result, the South Ossetians built a close fraternity with the Russians during Tsarist and Soviet times. Doing so provided a privileged status as they became reliable “partners in the Russian imperial expansion” (King, 2008, p.216). De Waal (2010) adds that their lands adjoined the main southerly route across the Caucasus, and that “geography and religion” significantly contributed to the Ossetians’ autonomous status under the Soviet regime and undergirds their ongoing strategic relationship with the Russians.

Georgia and South Ossetia were absorbed by the Russian Empire in 1801, and remained until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. South Ossetia and North Ossetia

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<sup>12</sup> Hints of this sentiment, that Ossetians are “guests” appeared during my research interviews. A man from Knolevi told me, “They were our guests in the beginning, but then decided to misappropriate our lands.”

belonged to different administrative parts of the Russian Empire at that time; whereas South Ossetia was under Tbilisi's jurisdiction, North Ossetia belonged to Vladikavkaz. Beginning in 1918 and until 1921, Georgia enjoyed a fleeting independent statehood ushered in by a Menshevik socialist government. Shortly after affirming the Georgian Democratic Republic's sovereignty, the Bolsheviks invaded Georgia. From 1918-1920, many Ossetian peasants in the Shida Kartli region, where South Ossetia is located, joined the Russian Bolshevik movement staging multiple uprisings against the majority Georgian Mensheviks.<sup>13</sup> Ossetians seized land from the Georgian aristocracy and occupied Tskhinvali, which is the present-day capital of South Ossetia. Many died in the fighting that broke out between the Georgians and Ossetians, events which became a major source of grievances later. The Georgians were eventually defeated by the Red Army in 1921 and integrated into the newly created Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. Georgia would later become a Union Republic in 1936. Georgians, like residents of the Baltic states, consider the Soviet regime to have illegally annexed Georgia. For example, visiting the Museum of Soviet Occupation on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi today offers a powerful symbol of the seven decades of occupation perceived by Georgians. As part of this historical narrative, Ossetian support for the Russian Bolsheviks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is remembered as treasonous by many Georgians today.

### **Soviet Ethno-Territoriality**

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<sup>13</sup> King (2008) explains that the Mensheviks were mainly ethnic Georgians (p.162-3).

The Soviets created an empire of ethnoterritories. Borders and national boundaries that were never there before provided South Ossetians, for the first time, with their own governing structures. The new Soviet authorities in Georgia gave South Ossetia a separate administrative status as an autonomous region/district (*oblast*) in 1922, which remained until the USSR collapsed. Toal (2017) explains the matryoshka doll-like structure of ethnoterritorial governance of the USSR: “at the top were fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics, and below and within there were twenty different Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, eight autonomous oblasts, and, with the least status, ten Autonomous Okrugs” (p.59). The status of territory, whether it was a Union Republic, Autonomous Republic or Autonomous Region, granted certain rights and administrative powers. Union Republics, such as Georgia, were considered titular nations and had the right to secession based on the constitution, whereas autonomous regions, such as South Ossetia, under the *uti possidetis* (“as you possess”) principle, were not considered to have the characteristics of statehood (Nußberger, 2013). This unique political geography of ethnofederalism was also among the many structural contradictions that ultimately contributed to the USSR’s demise. In particular, this system of governance laid the groundwork for “states-in-the-making, complete with their own borders, elites, national communities, and a full array of economic, political, social, and cultural institutions” after Communist collapse (Bunce, 1999, p.84-85). Some authors suggest that presence of strong ethnic identity only emerged in the South Caucasus during the Soviet era (De Waal, 2010).

### **Post-Soviet Ethnic Conflict**

Up until the late 1980s (and even after, according to many respondents in my research), Georgian and Ossetian communities experienced mostly peaceful relations and shared a high level of interaction and intermarriages. The Ossetians are a small minority, who according to census data, spoke the Georgian language more fluently than any other minority in the state. The level of intermixing could be seen in the geography of ethnic communities within the territory of South Ossetia; it was not territorially contiguous, rather a checkerboard of ethnically Georgian, Ossetian and mixed villages, particularly around Tskhinvali. Being residentially mixed meant that it was “almost impossible to draw territorial lines around Ossetian rural regions or communities in cities” (S. Jones, 2008). Furthermore, as Goltz (2009) writes, of the “some 150,000 Ossetians living in Georgia, over half lived outside the Ossetian Autonomous area” (p.19). However, as conflict progressed in the 1990s and 2000s, forced displacement caused residential unmixing and ethnic segregation, which helped to accelerate the partition of South Ossetia from Georgia. Toft (2010) theorizes that this type of population concentration is essential to an eventual outbreak of “ethnic violence.” The prolonged nature of the conflict contributes to the growth of enmity and distrust. The loss of life defending this territory then serves to intensify each group’s attachment to territory (Toft, 2010, p.143), which in turn feeds perceptions of South Ossetia as an essential part of geobody for Georgians and Ossetians.

Rising nationalism as a result of Gorbachev’s reforms inspired the escalation of interethnic conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. This in turn reinforced a sense of difference between communities in the Caucasus region. The Georgian movement took on an openly anti-Soviet and anti-Russian approach. Tension for the Georgians centered around

maintaining the integrity of the state against Russian colonialism and the prospect of secession by minorities. The failure of a newly independent Georgia to provide adequate political and cultural rights for its minorities played a significant role in the escalation of conflict over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 1989 South Ossetians proclaimed their region an autonomous republic, which resulted in a violent confrontation in Tskhinvali. In 1990, South Ossetians organized a referendum in which the vast majority declared themselves in favor of reunifying with Russia and asserting independence from Georgia. The hostile rhetoric of Georgian nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia's toward non-Georgians at this time deepened tensions and fears of disenfranchisement.<sup>14</sup> Ethnic minorities felt threatened by the assertion of a "Georgia for Georgians." They were unable to escape being regarded as "stumrebi (guests, სტუმრები)." Georgia eventually retaliated against the Ossetians by revoking their autonomous status all together. A state of emergency was announced as the region descended into war. De Waal (2010) describes it as "one of the less bloody post-Soviet conflicts," but nonetheless devastating for region (p.139). Many were displaced, fleeing into other parts of Georgia or across the border into North Ossetia. Today, only an estimated 15% of the original Ossetian population lives in South Ossetia.<sup>15</sup>

### **Boundary Materialization, 1992 and 2008**

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<sup>14</sup> Gamsakhurdia, the first democratically elected president, had a short presidency. The opposition presented him as a dictator and threat to the newly independent state. He was deposed after being forced into exile. His rival, Eduard Shevardnadze, came to replace him as chairman/head of state until the presidency was restored in 1995.

<sup>15</sup> At this time, Ossetians comprised 65% of South Ossetia (the remaining 35% were Georgian) but numbered only 164,000 in the whole of Georgia or 3% of the total population (S. Jones, 2008). The vast majority of Ossetians have always lived in North Ossetia.

In 1992, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze (parliamentary speaker and later president) convened in the Black Sea resort of Dagomys and signed a peace agreement to end the war. The 1992 Sochi Ceasefire Agreement, i.e. the “Agreement on the Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict of 24 June 1992,” constitutes one of two key moments of boundary materialization—occurring in 1992 and 2008—contributing to borderization.<sup>16</sup> The 1992 agreement focused primarily on halting the fighting through demilitarization, not long-term conflict resolution. The ceasefire defined a fifteen-kilometer radius measured from the center of Tskhinvali, which spatially inscribed a “zone of conflict.” It also established a security corridor, establishing an area inside and beyond the former oblast’s boundaries, where peacekeepers could install checkpoints.

Article 1.2 of the Sochi Agreement reads:

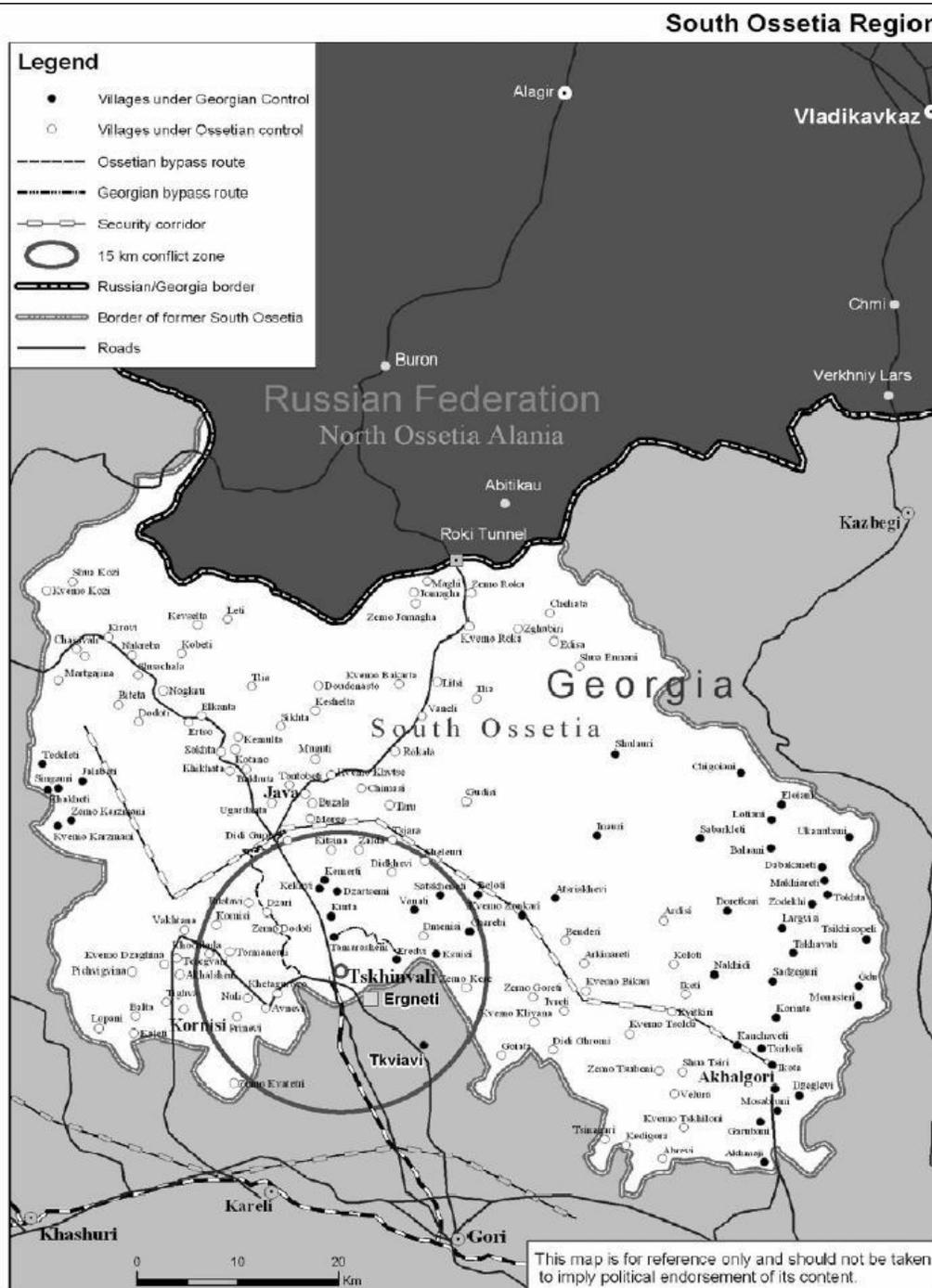
From the moment of termination of hostilities, on 28 June 1992 the opposing parties shall withdraw their armed formation with a view of creation of corridor adjacent to the line of juxtaposition. The withdrawal of armed formations shall be completed within three days. Passage through the line of juxtaposition, corridor and its width shall be determined by the joint group of observers.

Toal (2017) explains, “The security corridor traversed the administrative border and was not divided into separate distinct spaces or areas of control. Russian peacekeeping forces, therefore, could legally establish checkpoints within uncontested Georgian territory, provided they were within the agreed security corridor (although, in practice, they tended not to cross into Georgia” (p.138). The agreement also stipulated the withdrawal of forces and established an internationalized mechanism regulating the internal conflict between

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<sup>16</sup> De Waal (2010) explains, “In early 1991, the first contours had been drawn of a geography of conflict that would recut in 2004 and 2008. South Ossetia is a mixed patchwork of Georgian and Ossetian settlements. Tskhinvali was under Ossetian control but under siege from Georgians on high ground around the town. Three of the four roads leading into Tskhinvali were under Georgian control. The fourth road out of the town passed north through a group of four Georgian villages in the Liakhvi River valley, which in their turn were surrounded by Ossetians” (p.141).

Georgia and South Ossetia, which created a new territorial status of protectable territory (Waters, 2013). As in other cases of “ethnic conflict,” partition was used as a conflict



Map 2. Map of the “conflict zone” established by the Sochi Agreement in 1992. By International Crisis Group-International Crisis Group: South Ossetia Region (PDF), part of Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia (PDF), Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1365811>

management strategy—a containment method intended to minimize human suffering and prevent the recurrence of fighting. However, it also confirmed what numerous partition scholars have theorized: that this strategy fails to address the root causes of conflict (Kumar, 2000; Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl, 2009; Pischedda, 2008; Kaufman, 2008; Kuperman, 2007; Jenne, 2012).<sup>17</sup> Rather, it has served to entrench a territorial divide, contributed to political stalemate, and once integrated communities have been driven further apart as social boundaries become hardened with time (Getso, 1999; Kumar, 2000; Haselsberger, 2014).

One of the other conditions of the Sochi Agreement was the formation of a four-sided “Joint Control Commission” (JCC) to oversee the conflict zone and a peacekeeping force, consisting of Russian, Ossetian and Georgian soldiers. The establishment of the JCC is essential important to the evolution of borderization. The Sochi Agreement gave legal authority to Russian peacekeepers to militarily respond to future acts of aggression, i.e. violations of the ceasefire. S. Jones (2015) explains, “The JPKF [Joint Peacekeeping Force] was dominated by Russian troops, erroneously termed ‘peacekeepers’” (p.239). Even though the agreement established an instrument for dialogue, the creation of the JPKF has been regarded by some as a fatal error, because the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and UN misguidedly relinquished control to Russian peacekeepers (officially a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member mission). Toft (2010) explains how in 1992, Shevardnadze “allowed Russian peacekeeping troops to be deployed to South Ossetia because he believed ‘this senseless

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<sup>17</sup> Partition is often conflated with secession in the literature. Partition scholars use this term describe the “unfastening” or “tearing” of territory in a complete (*de jure*) way that leads to the formation of at least one new state or an incomplete (*de facto*) separation, which renders a piece of territory within the legal authority of the state, but beyond its political control (Sambanis, 2000; O’Leary, 2008; Tir, 2005).

war must be ended at any price.” Toft adds, “To maintain Georgia’s borders, Georgia accepted Russian mediation in its internal affairs and Russian forces on its soil: high prices to pay for a state that only recently had secured its independence” (p.120). Toft contends that it has been Russia’s strategic interest to keep Georgia’s borders together, while also promoting instability domestically in order to afford it the capacity to “mediate disputes, sustain its military presence, and bolster its influence on the region” (p.123). As Diener and Hagen (2017) describe of Moscow’s annexation of Crimea over two decades later, Russia used “a mixture of overt and covert support for secessionist movements” – a “novel” attempt to “both reinforce and undermine the ideal of state sovereignty and by extension the notion of territorial inviolability as a foundational principal of international law” (p.17).

The second period contributing to the materialization of the South Ossetian ABL emerged out of the failure of nearly two decades of confidence-building measures that followed the Sochi Agreement (Starr and Cornell, 2014). Despite intermittent periods of fighting, conditions remained relatively stable until Georgia began deepening ties with the United States. The 2004 ascension of Mikheil “Misha” Saakashvili to power after ousting Eduard Shevardnadze during the Rose Revolution marked a key turning point for Russian-Georgian relations. From the Sochi Agreement to the early 2000s, the “border” between South Ossetia and Georgia had remained relatively open and ordinary people were able to traverse freely. Saakashvili’s strong pro-Western orientation led to stronger military ties between Georgia and the United States and the receipt of millions in economic aid from the EU, which served as provocations to Russian security. Although Saakashvili can be credited with many institutional reforms, particularly anti-corruption

measures, his presidency was marred by criticism of (hybrid) authoritarianism, despite being heralded by then U.S. President Bush as a beacon of liberty.<sup>18</sup> Tensions escalated as Misha aggressively sought reintegration and state consolidation, i.e. “the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity.”<sup>19</sup> One of Saakashvili’s key mistakes was his anti-smuggling campaign, which set up checkpoints and led to the closure of the Ergneti Market. This severed grassroots Georgian-Ossetian relations in a single action—an event which many respondents discuss almost fifteen years later. These actions provoked some of the worst violence the region had seen since the end of the war in the 1990s.

On the evening of August 7, 2008, large scale military confrontation erupted, which some scholars attribute to two international geopolitical events: the precedent-setting Western recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February 2008 and Georgia and Ukraine’s efforts toward closer Euro-Atlantic integration with NATO at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008 (Cornell & Starr, 2009). The proposed expansion of NATO was regarded by Russian officials as a “red-line” issue. The Georgians and Russians then engaged in a series of controversial military maneuvers leading up to the war. This included an intensification of air activities over the zone of conflict and the deployment of additional troops to reinforce the Russian JPKF.<sup>20</sup> Direct negotiations with South Ossetia broke down as the Georgians announced their decision to withdraw from the Joint Control Commission (JCC).

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<sup>18</sup>Today, Saakashvili is a highly divisive figure. Misha left Georgia in 2013. He then became the governor of Odessa in Ukraine for a period but has since lost both Georgian and Ukrainian citizenship. He is currently wanted by Georgia’s new government on multiple criminal charges.

<sup>19</sup>Some authors, such as that Russian leadership had sought to launch the war much earlier between 1999-2001, prior to the Rose Revolution. Some see the appointment of Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister in 1999 (later president) as ending the period of calm that had followed the war in 1992.

<sup>20</sup> This escalation has been well documented in numerous sources (see Asmus, 2010; Svante & Cornell, 2009; Gahrton, 2010)

As the world turned its attention to the Beijing Olympics, Georgian armed forces moved forward to take control of Tskhinvali. Russian troops pushed back-- the Georgian army was forced out of South Ossetia and the Russians moved to occupy the Georgian city of Gori to the south.<sup>21</sup> Many huddled in basements under artillery fire; 122 mm BM-21 GRAD missiles launched from truck-mounted rocket launchers rained down and rockets blazed across the sky. My host sister, Ana, who is from the Kareli municipality near the conflict zone, once described to me how she and her mother, terrified, had crouched underneath their home, praying that they would not die. Considerable damage was caused to civilian targets during the shelling. While Russian troops are said to have behaved with relative restraint, South Ossetian fighters, described as “gangs,” attacked villages, burning homes, looting, and taking livestock. In the end about 850 people died. Others were wounded or went missing. Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes—somewhere in the ballpark of 35000 IDPs were unable to return (IIFMCG, 2009), adding to the number of people who had been displaced in the wars in the 1990s. From 1991 to 2008, residential patterns in South Ossetia changed little. The 2008 war dramatically changed the ethnic map (Kolossoff & O’Loughlin, 2011). Ethnic Georgian homes were destroyed to prevent the possibility of return. In a personal recollection of the war, a forty-seven-year-old man from Dvani describes coming out after the shelling had ended to see the ruins and the cessation of children’s laughter. He states, “You literally felt that life had stopped completely,” a sentiment which persists for many today (“Voice from the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict,” 2019).

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<sup>21</sup> Debates about “who shot first,” “responsibility,” and the legal dimensions of use of force are beyond the scope of discussion. In addition, the legal legitimacy of “claims” to sovereignty will not be assessed, only the way that parties to the conflict seek or project that legitimacy at and through the border.

Fact finding research such as the Tagliavini Report following the 2008 war concluded that essentially all parties violated the original Sochi agreement (IIFFMCG, 2009). Georgia instigated the war under the banner of restoring territorial integrity, while Russian forces took arms ostensibly as “peacekeepers.” Russia justified its intervention as: a “peace enforcement operation”; self-defense against a Georgian attack on the Russian peacekeepers deployed in South Ossetia; a realization of the peacekeeping mission; an answer to an invitation by the South Ossetian authorities; a humanitarian intervention to stop allegedly ongoing genocide of the Ossetian population; and an action to rescue and protect nationals abroad.

On August 12, French President Nicolas Sarkozy flew to Moscow to negotiate a ceasefire. The EU/French (Sarkozy) brokered Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement stipulated: “No recourse to use violence”; a “lasting cessation of hostilities”; Georgian forces “must withdraw to their usual barracks”; Russian forces must return to positions held prior to the outbreak of hostilities; and the opening of “international discussions on security and stability arrangements.” Despite the agreement, Russian and South Ossetian forces continued their advances (IIFFMCG, 2009).

In the absence of the former JCC and JPKF, the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) deployed a 200-person contingent immediately following the war to patrol and manage disputes relating to conditions of the Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement.<sup>22</sup> Their mandate stipulates a commitment to preventing the return of hostilities, “normalization,” confidence building, and informing EU policy in Georgia and the wider

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<sup>22</sup> The most recent figures in 2019 report that EUMM Monitors are selected from all European Union member states and that they currently have a total of 201 Monitors from 27 different EU member states.

region “Our Mandate,” 2019). The EUMM patrols run daily along the administrative boundary lines to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These patrols operate out of Field Offices in Gori, Mtskheta and Zugdidi, as well as the Mission Headquarters in Tbilisi. However, as an unarmed civilian contingent, the EUMM’s capacity to enforce the ceasefire is severely limited, primarily because the EUMM does not have access to the South Ossetian or Abkhazia sides of the administrative boundary lines. Although the EUMM claims to be an impartial source for the international community to gain accurate information about the situation on the ground, their mandate is premised on liberal international norms. Their lack of access also severely limits their ability to uphold a neutral position. These conditions predispose the EUMM to behave in ways that favor Georgia’s point of view and claims to sovereignty.



*Figure 7.* EUMM human security team from the Field Office Gori (FOG) on patrol near Dvani. August 2016.



*Figure 8.* War-damaged Tskhinvali as seen from across the ABL in Nikozi. August 2016.

The conclusion of the 2008 war marked the first time the ABL came to be experienced as a new state edge. The Sochi Agreement established a formal “zone of conflict” and a “security zone,” while the aftermath of the 2008 war led to the creation of a “buffer zone.” Establishing a buffer zone created a temporary demilitarized space by instituting a separation of forces, which was similar to how buffer states aim to create separation of spheres of influence. Novak (2011) explains buffers as imperial strategies brought about through territorial separation, monitoring and enforcement. They are the result of multiple territorializing strategies, contradictory rationalities and calculations. Although the buffer zone around South Ossetia was for all intents and purposes provisional, it helped to formalize the protracted divide that exists today. Moreover, during this period, the buffer zone enabled Russian control of strategically important transit lines and pipelines in areas previously under Georgian government jurisdiction (Felgenhauer, 2009). A map published by the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) (2015)

shows the expansion of territorial control over Akhlagori, Znauri Region, a series of villages near the Baku-Suspa pipeline, part of Java, and some villages near Tskhinvali. Felgenhauer explains how this buffer zone around South Ossetia became a lawless area looted and ravaged by the Ossetian militia in the wake of the war. Thousands of Georgian civilians fled in panic before the Russian withdrawal in October 2008. This was just as unarmed EU observers moved in (p.175).

After the ceasefire, on 25 August 2008, the Russian Federation passed a motion to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, basing its decision on the Kosovo precedent. In response, the Georgian Parliament formally declared South Ossetia to be an “occupied territory,” passing the “Law on Occupied Territories of Georgia.” Despite Russian recognition, South Ossetia is “short of statehood” according to the “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia.” Prior to 2008, no UN member state recognized this territory, despite their declaration of independence in 1992.<sup>23</sup> For example, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1808 in April 2008, reaffirming commitment by UN Member States to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.

Beyond recognition, Russia and South Ossetia entered into an agreement on “Friendship, Cooperation and Reciprocal Support” in September 2008, which declared that the South Ossetian borders would be patrolled by Russian and South Ossetian forces.

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<sup>23</sup> According to the declaratory theory of recognition, recognition is not constitutive of a state. A defined territory, a permanent population, and an effective government are the minimal, but sufficient preconditions for statehood. Despite contestation over the boundary line and a permanent flux of population due to migration and displacement, the first two criteria could be argued for the case of statehood for South Ossetia.

This was followed in the spring of 2009 by an agreement titled, “Joint Measures for Protecting the State Border of South Ossetia,” which placed the South Ossetian Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Border Police Department within the Federal Security Service (FSB) in charge of border management. Border guard directorates were established, and units deployed. The following year, Russia’s Federation Council “ratified the border agreement which outlines how the ‘state borders’ of the region will be ‘defended’” (German, 2016, p.160). These agreements, like the former Sochi agreement, institutionalize a basis for Russian military presence in the region.

A year after recognition, the Russian FSB began to actualize an “international border” between South Ossetia and Georgia by commencing the process of borderization in 2009. Recall that demarcation activities supposedly follow the topographic maps of the general staff of the Soviet military published between 1976-1986 following the former ‘South Ossetian Autonomous District’ boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Boyle writes, “there seems little consensus over whether and to what degree this map, the current administrative borderline, and the fence’s actual route resemble one another” (p.6). Originating with the EUMM, the term borderization has come to represent what the EUMM observed as an increase in “the establishment of physical infrastructure that creates barriers for people moving: fencing, observation towers, surveillance equipment, controlled crossing points, patrolling,” according to EUMM head Høeg. “So the key finding that we saw through these years is the hardening of the ABL, as we call it” (Lomsadze, 2019). Photos of this

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout my research, no one has been able to provide a copy of this map.



*Figure 9.* Russian FSB border infrastructure along the Administrative Boundary Line. Summer 2016.

infrastructure are shown in Figure 9. Tbilisi has regarded this as a type of creeping annexation, asserting that Russia has been moving the border deeper into Georgian territory, though Høeg sees this more as a hardening process, wherein the line has become increasingly impenetrable. In the past, farmers whose property straddled the line moved freely, but border installations have cut through their land. The demolition of property, construction of fences, and encroachments on everyday space as manifested by the detainment of locals has created the perception of a shifting border. “So for the people living there, the border has moved,” Høeg explains (Lomsadze, 2018).

## Using the Border as a Technology of Leverage

The case of South Ossetia illustrates what John Agnew (2017) describes as the “tragedy” of the nation-state. Unrecognized territories have acquired *de facto* independence but have failed to gain (widespread) international recognition. Caspersen (2015), who writes extensively on *de facto* states and the issue of recognition, argues that “A certain level of legitimacy, both internal and external, is in fact crucial if unrecognised states are to survive” (p.184). This initially drove me to ask how recognition politics (as relating to internal and external sovereignty and legitimacy) might influence the border geography of disputed territories, such as South Ossetia. Similar to Caspersen’s (2009) “recognition games,” politics of recognition characterize performances of expressed and tacit acknowledgement of the existence of a new state or denial of such existence, as well as the internal and external legitimization strategies taken by *de facto* states or their patrons.<sup>25</sup> These performances may include counter-recognition foreign policies, which attempt to contest secession or prevent recognition of seceded entities (Ó Beacháin et al., 2016). Performances of recognition manifest in the form of complex, and even contradictory, moralized claims to sovereignty and territory, which are based on an

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<sup>25</sup> The term recognition means a “formal acknowledgement or declaration by the government of an existing state that it intends to attach certain customary legal consequences to an existing set of facts.” In practice though, it can be express and/or implied (tacit). In international law, recognition has a more specialized meaning relating to the “acknowledgement of the existence of a new state, or a new government in an existing foreign state (after a non-constitutional change, such as a revolution or *coup d’état*), coupled with an expression of willingness by the recognizing state to enter into relations with the recognized entity or government. Recognition applies to a broader range of relationships as well: to belligerent communities or insurgents, in connection with the validity of title to territory (e.g., recognition of conquest or other means of acquisition) and with reference to the commission of other acts by governments that have international consequences” (von Glahn & Taulbee, 2010, p. 145). The authors explain that the basic function of recognition is a formal acknowledgement as a fact of something that has been otherwise uncertainty. Granting recognition shows the willingness of the recognizing state to accept the legal consequences of its act. Most scholars regard the recognition of states and governments as a political act with legal consequences.

evolving system of international norms. The politics of recognition are observable in numerous forms, from the elite discourse of policy makers who confirm or deny the “territorial integrity of Georgia” to more banal manifestations, such as the use of a solid or dotted line on a map or a t-shirt that confesses “I’m from Georgia and my country is occupied by Russia.”<sup>26</sup> The toponyms used to describe the area and boundary of South Ossetia exemplify these recognition politics. While Russians and Ossetians adopt the language of the state, using the term “state border,” Georgians deploy terms such as “occupation line.” The EU utilizes what they regard as a more neutral term, “Administrative Boundary Line.” Referring to the territory itself, Georgian authorities most commonly use Tskhinvali region, after the name of its only city. Samachablo has also been revived by Georgians to denote the historical district in Shida Kartli, meaning “of Machabeli,” derived from the Georgian aristocratic family Machabeli. These naming practices are fluid though. A recent, successful referendum to rename the Republic of South Ossetia to the Republic of South Ossetia—the State of Alania, reflects evolving territorial imaginaries, for example, one that envisions the unification of North and South Ossetia.<sup>27</sup> These displays are helpful in showing the geopolitical cultures and affective storylines used by varying parties of the conflict to frame the “crises for their populations” (Toal, 2017).

Russian borderization represents an express act of recognition and a conferral of external legitimacy to South Ossetia. Boyle (2016) characterizes this as *de facto* sovereignty materialized. For South Ossetians, borderization creates sovereign rule on the

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<sup>26</sup> See Thomas De Waal (2018) engagement with the question of “creeping recognition.”

<sup>27</sup> This referendum was supported by 25,123 people within South Ossetia, or 80% of the total number of voters in 2017 (“Referendum to rename South Ossetia,” 2017).

ground: “the fences represent the separation of their territory from that of Georgia and consequently both their supremacy over their own state and autonomy from interference by the Georgian government” (p.12). Yet for Georgia, borderization is a baseless claim. Russian actions destabilize the situation on the ground and undermine their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Kabachnik’s (2012) paper on cartographic anxieties in Georgia explains the loss of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a disruption of the cartographic outline of the nation-state, which is perceived as an amputation or wound to the geobody (p.46-7). Seeing borderization as part of the politics of recognition supports a perspective of border walling practices as “powerful symbolic objects in contemporary political gamesmanship” (Toal and Merabishvili, 2019, p.2). Borderization is imbued with the competing and contested interpretations of the meaning of territory and its use. This is essential to understanding both its uncertainty and elasticity. Referencing Brown (2010), Toal and Merabishvili read borderization as a theatricalized stage for symbolic politics, a spectacularized performance of power and control that is not without real, oppressive consequences for everyday people (see p.3).

I expand upon readings of borderization as “political theater” (Boyle, 2016; Toal & Merabishvili, 2019) by asserting that borderization is also a material, embodied, and affective force that constitutes a multi-scalar novel tool of hard political leverage; it is as much a foreign policy instrument used to effect political outcomes as it is a disciplining apparatus.<sup>28</sup> Although its most recognizable attributes are tangled barbed wire and

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<sup>28</sup>Although written prior to Russian recognition, Kolstø and Blakkisrud’s (2008) analysis of “quasi-states” of the South Caucasus remains salient. In this piece, the authors identify what they refer to as “hard” and “softer” aspects of state construction. State-building refers to “the establishment of the administrative, economic and military groundwork of functional states.” The “hard aspects” discussed include practical issues such as border control and defense, whereas the “softer” aspects involve identity construction.

signposts, practices such as administrative detention mean that local bodies are mobilized as a site of the border and its policing. Borderization constitutes a tool of coercive diplomacy by seeking to influence without resorting to full-scale use of force; instead it wields the oppressive power of uncertainty. This is consistent with theorizations that view unrecognized states as a source of coercive diplomacy (Souleimanov et al., 2018) and understand bordering as a biopolitical technology (or mode) of governance (R. Jones, 2012 & 2016) and modality of power (Diener & Hagen, 2017).

Although it would be easy to attribute the use of borderization as leverage just to Russia, my empirical findings show that Russia is not alone in wielding the uncertainty and violence of borderization for strategic advantage (Toal and Merabishvili, 2019). Georgia and its “Western” allies are both complicit in the use of borderization as a type of affective geopolitics. Borderization is about persuasion. It has been wielded in a manner similar to the conferral of Russian passports to ethnic minorities in the near abroad, or when Moscow cut off the flow of gas and electricity to Georgia in 2006, embargoed essential Georgian exports such as wine and the popular Georgian Borjomi and Kageghlavi brands of mineral water, suspended rail, road, sea and postal links, or stopped issuing entrance visas to Georgian citizens.<sup>29</sup>

The use of borderization as leverage is evident in the timeline of episodes of installation, which appear to follow a tit-for-tat pattern. As with escalating events leading to the 2008 war, moments of border movement and increased securitization appear to

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<sup>29</sup> This process is known as passportization. Obtaining Russian citizenship has become increasingly easy since 2002, especially for those residing in the unrecognized territories of the near abroad. The literature on passportization has brought critical attention to the role of citizenship as an expansionist practice. The conferral of citizenship is used to colonize unrecognized territories by transforming them into *de facto* Russian spaces. For examples, see Nagashima (2017) and Artman (2013).

correspond with achievements of tangible benchmarks on the path to NATO or EU membership or military events, or retaliation to new checkpoints and training exercises. This pattern dates back to US/NATO training operations in Georgia, which began with the Train and Equip Program (GTEP from 2002-2004), and the Security and Sustainment Operations Program (GSOP) in 2005. In other words, increased militarization, detention rate increases, and new border infrastructure occur in response to geopolitical events, which Russia regards as “provocations.” For example, German (2016) explains that it is perhaps no coincidence that the 2015 intensification of borderization corresponded with highly visible military drills across the region as Georgia prepared to open the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC). Even more recently, the resumption of borderization in Atotsi follows the arrival of anti-tank Javelin missiles in 2018. These episodes illustrate how borderization attempts to thwart Georgian integration efforts.

### **The Elastic Geography of Borderization**

Unresolved conflict contributes to the pattern of movement of borderization. Boyle (2016) sees this process as a symbol of disengagement between the sides. He writes, “the culmination of a two-decade long struggle to resolve a problem common to post-Soviet space, that of seeking to bring political and ethnic boundaries into alignment in what had previously been a unified political space” (p.5). A lack of recognition and agreement over territorial boundaries and status means that the ABL is vulnerable to the whims of Russian and Georgian influence alike. This is consistent with Boyle’s (2016) analysis, where he argues that as a “political theater piece,” borderization demonstrates “domestic order and the externalization of disorder, one represented in walls and fences.

It is explicit materialization of a de-facto sovereignty which is ‘all there is’” (p.14). Like German (2016), such a contention supports the claim that “unresolved conflict” has been used “to maintain political leverage over Tbilisi” (p.156).

This indeterminacy is essential to the geography and spatial politics of borderization. Just as recognition is incomplete and fractured, so too is the demarcation of the boundary line.<sup>30</sup> The state of being internationally unrecognized is inherently liminal, which means South Ossetia and its border is intractably held in a state of suspension—in limbo, a “political purgatory,” a second-class statehood or “ambiguous statehood” (Caspersen, 2012).<sup>31</sup> For those who experience them, conditions of being a *de facto* state resemble being under siege. Bryant (2014) explains that *de facto* states may be described as:

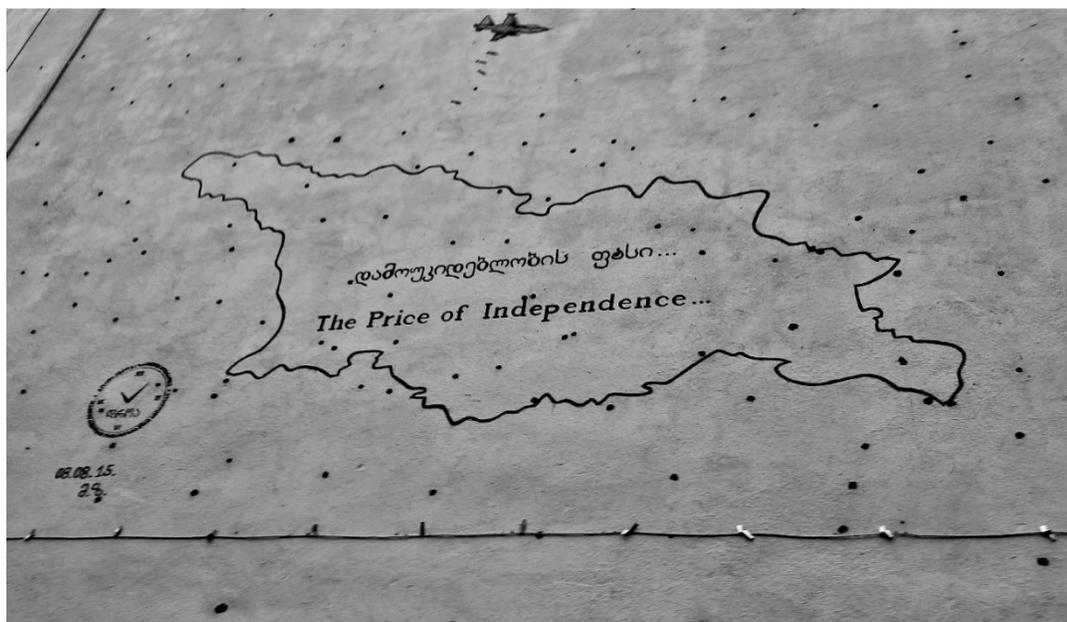


Figure 10. A pockmarked mural in Gori, Georgia, which was damaged during the 2008 war. November 2015.

<sup>30</sup> The conflict over South Ossetia has been considered one of the “frozen conflicts” of this region (Lynch, 2004; Zurcher, 2007), referring to separatist territories within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) asserting their right to independence and self-determination following Soviet collapse.

<sup>31</sup> Wood (2010), in an article in *Foreign Policy*, characterized South Ossetia among the “Limbo World” countries.

permanently liminal, stuck between the political form they once were and the recognized body politic they wish to become. Such states metaphorically stand in the doorway of the international arena but are not yet able to cross the threshold that would allow them to become real sovereign states (p.126).

Writing about borderization, Boyle (2016) explains how unresolved conflict, where sovereignty is the main stake, impacts border geography:

The absence of agreement between the two sides is indicative of the ambiguity that characterizes these border spaces, where many of those detained at the border claiming to have been seized a long way from the putative territory of South Ossetia. The fencing takes place as part of borderization means that this is a border at once able to represent the fixity of the notion of South Ossetia while also capable of “advancing” into territory previously accessible by local villagers on the Georgian side, an advance which is then extended by the activities of the Russian and South Ossetian authorities in the area (p.17).

The withholding of recognition contributes to the material and spatial fragmentation of the ABL. This is evident in the demarcation process. Tskhinvali authorities and Russian border guards openly declared to the representatives of the Analytical Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of Georgia that the process is irreversible. Instruction to continue the process is directed from the high command of the Russian Federation FSB Border Guard Service. However, these authorities claim that borderization could be regulated if the Georgian side were to officially agree on a delimitation-demarcation process for the ABL. To participate in such a process would contradict Georgia’s approach to the conflict, often described as “engagement without recognition” (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010). To contest the location of a fence or banner in a precise manner would be to tacitly recognize the existence of a border and the sovereignty it hopes to materialize. Georgia unilaterally does not recognize South Ossetian independence, which means all borderization activities are deemed illegitimate. The issue with this approach is that there is nothing on the ground that can functionally contest each maneuver other than the EUMM. Although parties to the conflict meet regularly in Ergneti for the Incident

Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) to air grievances, rarely does this forum serve as functional process for an individual farmer to regain his orchard or a grieving relative unfettered access to the cemetery where his loved one is buried. As long as Georgia continues an approach of “engagement without recognition,” there can be no finality or fixity to the ABL, though even this, according to theory would be illusory. By acting so cautiously about any actions that might grant certain legitimacy to *de facto* authorities, Georgia ends up doing nothing but resigning its border dwellers to a state of liminality. I argue that this state of liminality, and its impacts on the futurity of local people, is the violence of borderization.

Justification for borderization has emerged from the Russian claim to “sovereignty as responsibility” (Elden, 2009, p.156-7).<sup>32</sup> Yet this is premised on an understanding of state sovereignty as “conditional and porous” (Toft, 2010, p.147). The Sochi Agreement laid the groundwork for the Russian mobilization of a narrative of contingent sovereignty that pushes back against the “norm of sovereignty-as-territorial-integrity.” The doctrine of contingent sovereignty has allowed for the erosion of the non-intervention norm. Russia uses the logic of humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect civilian populations and broadens it to include legitimate intervention, when in practice, this merely obfuscates the expansion of control in the region. This actualizes former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s concerns about the dilemma of so-called “humanitarian intervention” (Elden, 2006, p.16). For these reasons, Russia’s securitization of the boundary line should not be limited to explanations of a

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<sup>32</sup> Elden explains contingent sovereignty as the idea that sovereignty is a responsibility to follow certain norms of behavior.

humanitarian obligation to promote sovereignty to a marginalized minority or protect Russian citizens from Georgian aggression. Even statements prior to the 2008 war by Russia are indicative of its goal to prevent Georgia from joining NATO.<sup>33</sup>

Emphasizing the role contingent sovereignty plays in Russian involvement in South Ossetia helps to avoid reducing borderization to a story about nationalism, though the struggle for homeland and ethnic identity undoubtedly contributes to the indivisibility of South Ossetia for Georgians and Ossetians. Nonetheless, too much emphasis on nationalism risks masking the way Russia repeatedly uses this territory in the post-Soviet space, as an instrument of imperialism to protect itself and survive the encroachment of NATO and the ideological threats of the European Union and the west. Russian geopolitical culture grew out of the catastrophic collapse of the Soviet Union (Toal, 2017). The restoration of the empire or at the very least a zone of influence seems to be the priority, while for Georgia, it has been the construction of the nation-state (Gordadze, 2009). De Waal's (2010) assessment of the 2008 war contends, "The two breakaway territories were less important in themselves than as an instrument of influence against Georgia and the West" (p.221). Russia was able to capitalize on the war to score points against the West for grievances it had over Iraq and Kosovo. Multiple historians have argued that the violence that came out of the weakening of the Soviet state was "fundamentally about controlling turf, not more rarefied questions of history, identity, or national destiny" (King, 2008, p.219). According to King (2008), the Caucasus still had plenty of ghosts, but they were not those of ancient hatred among peoples and religions.

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<sup>33</sup> Evidence of such rhetoric was used by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in April 2008. Furthermore, one of the legacies of the Soviet Union is that Russia has retained an abundance of "soft power" resources in Georgia, including migrant labor, religious ties, and Russian as a lingua franca (De Waal, 2010, p.97).

They were much younger ones, born of the Soviet system and now revealing a cold and unexpected paradox—that it is possible to gain one’s freedom and lose it at the same time (p. 242). People who had learned to profit from post-Soviet disorder succeeded at the expense of those who struggled merely to survive in it. In the case of borderization, the uncertainty of South Ossetia’s nonrecognition continues to offer strategic opportunities.

That sovereignty is contingent (essentially fluid) is vital to understanding the ABL as an elastic border.<sup>34</sup> Recognizing the fictive stability of sovereignty is essential to understanding the “constant state of becoming of the border” (Kaiser, 2012) and a conceptualization of borders in motion. Borders’ appearance on the map, stable, final, and static, belies their dynamism and the way they come alive through the intentionality applied to them as their relevance changes.

In short, borders acquire their meanings always contingently, through the activities and practices undertaken around and through them. They are consequential only where and when border practices are at work, making a border out of a fence or digging a border out of a ditch. Thus understood, borders are always ephemeral, never eternal (Soguk, 2007, p.284).

Because borders and borderlands are imprinted by contested power, they are not stable entities. Borderization is an exemplary representation of this, reflecting the multiple pursuits of sovereignty and territory: contingent and never complete—an ideal aimed towards, rather than a fully achieved condition (Sassen, 2013; Storey, 2017). This can be seen all over the global map, from Kashmir to Palestine. Brun (2017), who characterizes the ABL as a “shifting border,” sees borderization as a frontier that is both peripheral and central at the same time, appearing as both a margin of a territory, but also

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<sup>34</sup> Theorizing the border as moving, plastic (Bernes, 2014), shifting (Brun, 2017) are also conceptually useful.

emerging as strategically and militarily significant, central to both Georgian and Ossetian sovereign imaginaries

The contingency of sovereignty and the politics of recognition means that borderization produces an elastic geography, i.e. lacking a clearly defined territory--incomplete, dynamic and fragmented. An undecided border is a frontier vulnerable to exploitation. Just as Weizman (2007) describes in *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, Russia utilizes a strategy of obfuscation for encroachment characterized by a complex mix of chaos and order, the legible and illegible, and the legal and illegal. Weizman's description is applicable to borderization: "The physical organization of the terrain provided to be both rigid and elastic. Rigid in its immediate material effect on every aspect of daily life...elastic in its ability to incorporate further political changes into its organization and form." (p.262). Weizman's notion of elastic geography offers a powerful analytic for explaining the multidimensionality of occupation and encroachment by illustrating how geographies respond to "a multiple and diffused rather than a single source of power" (p.5), just as borderization has come to materialize the politics of recognition. The organization of borderization can be understood "as a kind of 'political plastic,' or a diagram of the relation between all the forces that shaped it" (p.5).<sup>35</sup> I use this to understand the dynamic morphology of how fencing and infrastructure installations serve to shrink and expand the territory at will. Weizman's work is also essential because it emphasizes the violence of such a geography: "elastic territories

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<sup>35</sup> It is important to recognize important distinctions between borderization and the architecture of occupation in Israel/Palestine, described by Weizman (2007). In Weizman's account, walls become permanent fixtures. Nonetheless, the goal is to note the similarities in "politics in matter," i.e. the elements of planning and architecture intended to sabotage prospects of political progress (p.3-6). The aim is to show how South Ossetia has become a frontier battlefield on which various agents of state power confront each other.

could thus not be understood as benign environments: highly elastic political space is often more dangerous and deadly than a static, rigid one” (p.7).

Fostering uncertainty has structural advantages. Even when individual locations and episodes of border fence construction are unknown and uncertain, “arbitrariness” can be interpreted as a strategic calculation. I argue that the Russians, like the Israelis, utilize a strategy that seems to simultaneously obfuscate and naturalize the facts of domination by creating an irresolvable geography. This bears the hallmarks of a technique of the Russian military doctrine called *maskirovka*.<sup>36</sup> This is a nonconventional hybrid warfare tactic developed particularly since World War II. This strategy is historically premised on the manipulation of uncertainties, misinformation and camouflaging. Misdirection is used to covertly undermine the enemy (Roberts, 2015; Keating, 1981; Ash, 2015). The idea is premised on creating a false reality, i.e. new facts on the ground, to take advantage of adversaries. It intentionally creates ambiguity and uncertainty. For example, acting under the guise of peacekeeping, as Russia claimed in 2008, represents one such “masking,” a type of deception and deniability. The confusion surrounding the borderization process seems consistent in this regard and might help to explain what might otherwise be regarded as arbitrary or random. “The idea behind *maskirovka* is to keep the enemy guessing, never admitting your true intentions, always denying your activities and using all means political and military to maintain an edge of surprise (Kramer, 2016).” While incomplete demarcation is a product of the spatio-temporal void between war and peace, it is also likely part of a larger, intentional strategy of *maskirovka*. The instrumental

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<sup>36</sup> Most recently, this doctrine was employed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014. Media reported mysterious “little green men,” soldiers masquerading as local militia presumed to be Russian special forces but denied by the Russian Government. Such was similar in early 1990s in Georgia with the presence of militias from the North Caucasus, who fought in the wars.

usage of the border as a tool of governmentality means that demarcation must remain incomplete and sovereignty unrecognized to continue to deter Georgia's efforts to develop effective relationships with the US and NATO. This reveals a deeper interpretation of the political rationality of maintaining the status quo of this "frozen conflict" and the fragmented demarcation process.<sup>37</sup>

### **Survival and Patronage**

Understanding the political rationality of borderization helps to expose the security of South Ossetia for the Russians, South Ossetians, and Georgians, who "believe their survival depends" on controlling territory.<sup>38</sup> Toft (2014) explains that the "simplest reason for war over territory might be the strategic worth of the territory itself, a value that does not vary among actors, but extends directly from its geostrategic position" (p.187). While there is no abundance of natural resources to make the South Ossetia territory intrinsically valuable, Georgia's orientation toward NATO and the EU is viewed as an issue of national security for the Russian Federation. Many regard Putin's assertive doctrine to restore Russia as a great power, to defend the rights of Russians in the near abroad and expand its geopolitical archipelago and privileged zone of interest in the post-Soviet space as imperial/neo-imperial. In August 2008, Russia went from 'mediator' to "occupier" (S. Jones, 2013, p.250) of twenty percent of Georgian territory. S. Jones argues, the 2008 war was not fundamentally about Georgia, but the eastward expansion of NATO, the recognition of Kosovo, Russia's security in the North Caucasus, and

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<sup>37</sup> Elden (2009) writes, "places are exploited when there is an absence or weakness of sovereignty power rather than an intensification of such power" (p.61).

<sup>38</sup> See Toft's (2002; 2003; 2014) multiple works, which discuss territory and survival.

control over oil and gas supplies in Eurasia. The war presented the opportunity for Russia to assert its power and put others on notice.

Yet South Ossetia is also symbolically valuable to the Ossetian and Georgian nations alike, who have attached historical and identity value to the territory. The latter makes territory particularly indivisible and has likely only increased the symbolic value of territory. Nonetheless, as Caspersen (2009) argues, it is “impossible to understand the creation and continued survival of *de facto* states without reference to external actors” (p. 47). Russia’s revanchism and struggle to strengthen its hegemonic position in the world is done at the expense of both Georgian and South Ossetian sovereignty. Rather than bolster South Ossetian freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, Russian recognition has only served to weaken it. German (2016) argues that “Moscow confers statehood with one hand, using the language and discourse of statehood, but takes it away with the other, manipulating its relations with these actors in order to achieve broader foreign policy objectives, notably the retention of its influence across the post-Soviet space” (p.156).

German (2016), as well as Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008) ask whether South Ossetia would be a viable functioning state without Russia and found that South Ossetian “independence” and “statehood,” i.e. their defense capability, economic survival and state institutions, are deeply reliant upon Russian patronage. Gerrits and Bader (2016) argue that South Ossetia is a protectorate of Russia because of two factors: weak organizational power and density of ties and cross border flows. Their application of Levitsky and Way’s (2010) concepts of linkage and leverage reveals the multitude of ways that South Ossetia (and by proxy, Georgia) is vulnerable to Russian pressure and influence. Gerrits

and Bader (2016) argue that South Ossetia and Abkhazia “occupy a unique position in the post-Soviet area,” because “no other political entities in the region have deeper and more extensive linkages with Russia” (p.299). It is “near-exclusive” (p.300). Linkages are created by the large diaspora of Ossetians living across the border in North Ossetia, who are offered special educational opportunities in Russia, and who share the Russian language as a *lingua franca*, which dominates affairs and media despite the Ossetian language being the state language.

The diffusion of institutions based on Russian design, borrowing from Russian legislation, also constitutes a significant linkage. This has meant the development of an illiberal form of governance, which Moscow has used to exert a decisive influence over South Ossetian politics. For example, Freedom House (2018) reports troubling scores in South Ossetia’s freedom, political rights, and civil liberties ratings. There is systemic and widespread corruption, the media is censored and controlled by the authorities, there is little civil society presence, and the judiciary is not independent. In the electoral arena, political debate and competition is only reported to have occurred within a narrow field of candidates allowed by Russia and pro-Russian authorities, calling into question the ability of local authorities to hold free and fair elections. This relates to what Gerrits and Bader (2016) describe as technocratic linkages, i.e. the training of post-Soviet elites in Russia. Key positions in the South Ossetian government have been occupied by figures from Russia or trained in Russia. Meanwhile in the economic arena, Russia has supplied the majority of the South Ossetian state budget, their primary currency is the ruble, and Russia has acted as main trading partner; “practically all imports to South Ossetia come from Russia” (p.301). Furthermore, citizens of South Ossetia are dependent on Russian

financial aid. Most are Russian passport holders, meaning they are eligible for Russian pensions and other benefits.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, strong intergovernmental linkages were formed, beginning with the creation of the JCC/JPKF and the treaties that followed the 2008 recognition. Numerous key state institutions and services are integrated with those of the Russian Federation, progressively formalizing Russian influence in the territory (German, 2016, p.164). These include the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in September 2008, followed on 20 January 2009 by a Memorandum on Mutual Understanding between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Ossetia, and several other international agreements to fight against criminality, protection of borders, military cooperation, as well as economic and social cooperation. The recent Treaty on Alliance and Integration envisages the incorporation of South Ossetia's armed forces, security agencies and customs authorities into those of the Russian Federation. The ratification of this agreement increases involvement in the support of the economy combined with the provision of defense, control and protection over the borders and territory of South Ossetia. The agreement foresees the formation of a common space of security and defense between the two countries. However, all of these factors demonstrate the relationship between South Ossetia and Russia as one defined by great power asymmetry. Such agreements essentially hands over full control of South Ossetian security and borders to Russia. This has led to the construction of new military bases, observation posts and increased border

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<sup>39</sup> See also Kolossov and O'Loughlin's (2011) discussion of the economic conditions of South Ossetia.

policing, which many argue violates terms outlined in the Sochi and Six-Point Ceasefire Agreements.

Nonetheless, while South Ossetia may be considered a dependent of Russia, it cannot be reduced to it. Boyle (2016) argues that the boundary and the nation were not imposed on the people of South Ossetia; they pushed for its enforcement. The South Ossetian-Russian relationship is not without friction. Russia and South Ossetia share contrasting visions of their integration. This is evidenced by legislation introduced to change names to the State of Alania and Russian dismissals of unification referendum in 2014 and 2015. Expanding influence into the region is not the same as annexation. The reason is not merely deniability; annexation of pro-Russian territories would undoubtedly bolster pro-Western forces in Georgia and undermine Russia's primary objective, which has been to keep its neighbors from full integration into western institutions. Liminality better serves Russia's strategic goals overall. The presence of unresolved conflict effectively blocks Georgian NATO integration efforts, because NATO rejects aspirants with unresolved border disputes, internal territorial conflicts, and insufficient military capacity to provide for a credible national defense. This explains why the term creeping occupation might be preferable to creeping annexation, although pejorative, since Russian actions do not project a desire to officially annex South Ossetia as they did Crimea. Toal (2017) explains, while South Ossetian space has given Russian influence over political life, as nonethnic Russian spaces, they are less central to an imagined Russian geobody than Crimea or Novorossiya (p.280).

But borderization is not exclusively a tool for the Russians. Just as Toal (2017) argues, it has not been about re-creating the USSR or expanding the territorial expanse of

the Russian Federation. While borderization is an instrument of Russian invention, it emerges at the convergence of near abroads, i.e. multiple, overlapping and even conflicting territorial logics, storylines, and territorial anxieties, which is not just utilized by Russia but by Georgia as well. Some of the empirical work of this dissertation will be used to show how the Georgians have also become complicit in the use of borderization as an instrument of leverage at the expense of the security of its citizens and the peacebuilding process. Borderization and conditions of protracted uncertainty it fosters has been a powerful political instrument for cultivating a patriotism built on a narrative of victimhood, which have served its Western integration goals.

### **Lived Geopolitics of Borderization**

Despite increasingly overt interventions within the borders of its neighbors, Russia's complex and integrated tactical tools remain largely unchecked and unchallenged. Ongoing meddling in Ukraine, Moldova, and other former Communist neighbors in the near abroad increases the urgency and relevance of research on Russian territorial aggression. The crisis in Ukraine nonetheless manages to overshadow Russia's interventions in the disputed regions of Georgia, which risks overlooking what can be learned from the 2008 war and its aftermath. Furthermore, it is easy to succumb to analyses of borderization that focus solely on the drama of "big politics" as those who write about this topic often do. However, such analyses obscure the local dimensions of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and its cost on the lives and livelihoods of everyday people. For these reasons, I argue for an approach to studying borderization that emphasizes lived geopolitics.

Recent border securitization scholarship tends to focus on human security, where everyday life becomes the object of security strategies. After all, borders play central roles in peoples' lives irrespective of their geographic location by reaching deep into the fabric of societies in often uneven ways. Border dwellers are understood to bear the burden of territorial conflict because of the increasingly sophisticated ways that state-like entities strive to secure the nation through the control of bodies. A growing focus on lived and embodied experiences of borders within border scholarship and critical, feminist geopolitics have helped to inspire the development of my research questions for this dissertation: What are the impacts of borderization on local populations? Specifically, how does the uncertainty and elasticity of the ABL impact civilian security? How does borderization restrict the potential for life to flourish and actualize? How do local people maneuver and cope with the conditions of protracted uncertainty? In turn, how does borderization affect the peace and reconciliation process? My empirical chapters respond to these questions by examining some of the ways everyday people have come to experience borderization as a tool of leverage, i.e. how their bodies, movements, stories and homes become instrumentalized as bargaining chips within a global system of affective geopolitics. This dissertation is a retelling of the story of borderization, not from the standpoint of the state, but from the perspective of non-elite, border dwellers, or "borderlanders" (Megoran, 2017, p.28).

The decision to focus on the borderland of the ABL as an inhabited space is an expression of a feminist methodological approach to critical geopolitics. I deploy lived geopolitics as an explicitly feminist revision of Toal's (2010) call for "localized geopolitics," where he proposed the establishment of "ground-level critical geopolitics

focused on the disjunctures and contradictions in the relationship between the grounded local and the foreign policy discourse and practices of how local conditions, structures and power struggles mediate and subvert international interventionist practices” (p.263). Lived geopolitics claims that geopolitics are falsely understood as being disembodied. In reality, geopolitics always take place at bodily and material scales, demanding a fundamental shift in understanding geopolitics itself. This also expressly accepts border “violence in its multiple forms, not as either local/everyday or international/political conflict, but as both” (Pain and Staeheli, 2014, p.344). It forces a connection between the militarized violence that occurs before, during, and after war with ground level actualities, not as distinct ontologies. Furthermore, it serves the purpose of disrupting binaries (e.g. civilian/combatant, public/private, masculine/feminine) of sites of conflict and peace, which are ultimately linked (Giles & Hyndman, 2004). These intimate geopolitics can be used to eschew political realisms and forge better accountability to those who are caught in the crosshairs of large-scale geopolitical struggle. Emphasizing embodied, emotional, gendered and phenomenological epistemologies works to connect bodily interactions of seemingly apolitical sites and situations of civilian security to broader imaginaries and geopolitical scripts. In this research, I treat both bodies and materialities as prominent actors in the constitution of geopolitics. Doing so makes for “thick geopolitics,” rather than moralized “stories of empire and freedom,” which are “frequently misleading and open to abuse by promoters of primordial divides and civilizational clashes” (Toal, 2017, p.299). Epistemologically these embodied accounts of conflict more effectively convey and show the political strength of loss, suffering, vulnerability, as well as agency, hope, resistance, and resilience. Recovering these stories

help us to confront paradoxical geopolitical cultures, identify communities and individuals written out of geopolitical scripts, and most importantly, imagine different futures. Furthermore, this approach better recognizes that borderwork is not simply the task of the state or state-like institutions, but that “ordinary people” (Rumford, 2006) play a meaningful role in the constitution of geopolitical imaginaries.

An emphasis on embodied epistemology is also central to pushing an analysis of violent borders past describing the spatial regime to illustrating how performative, material and discursive practices of borderization impact the lived experiences of security, hope, and dignity. I argue that it exposes, as Tavadze (2014) writes, a system that “rests on systematic violent spatial practices” and the colonization of everyday space (p.127).

Russia’s imperial spatial practices rely on systematic violence and destabilization of spaces of adjacent countries making Russia in this sense an imperial parasite which feeds itself from the spaces of putrefaction and zones of destabilization. These violent spatial practices which are completely neglectful to cultural differences erode spaces of everyday movement and action and destroy the links which connects places together (p.128).

The prolonged threat of dispossession and uncertainty of impending conflict is the disciplining power borderization. This is what makes it a violent apparatus. It arrests the order of things, temporality and futurity, into a state of subjection revealing a “terror as usual” as time passes (Bornstein, 2003; Taussig, 1989 & 1994).

Focusing on lived geopolitics exposes the multiplicity of the violence of uncertainty. It calls attention to the unquestioned, normalized complexities of this process, which might otherwise be rendered natural or invisible. The violence of borderization is most evident in the spaces of everyday life at the human level of

suffering, struggle and resilience. In the empirical chapters to follow, I focus on some of ways the uncertainty of borderization inflicts violence on “conflict-affected communities” adjacent to the boundary line. I look to understand how this violent geography infiltrates, poisons and constricts the space between virtual and actual for those who live it, concentrating on the restrictive materialities and spatialities that “truncate life through indifference, exclusion and abandonment” (Inwood et al., 2016 as cited in Laurie and Shaw, 2018, p.10). I also look to understand how local people come to cope with these conditions. My emphasis on how borderization operates at the intimate scale of local bodies contributes to a growing volume of literature on the “geographies of violence,” which Springer and Le Billon (2016) argue deserves greater attention and a more rigorous examination (see also Gregory and Pred, 2007), as well as an emerging literature on the geographies of peace. Borderization, like other border securitization projects globally, is a violence that has become naturalized. This is not always a spectacular violence; rather, it is often routine and “rendered banal and everyday through its repeated exposure and representation” (Laurie and Shaw, 2018, p.9).

## **Conclusion**

Elucidating the violence of this elastic border is among my major contributions to border studies and the scholarship on violent geographies. I explore how and when the border shifts, physically, materially, socially or symbolically, it creates insecurity and radical uncertainty for borderland communities. The borderland has become an ambivalent, unpredictable, and unstable place. Unmarked areas of the ABL has left locals vulnerable to detainment; moreover, they create a persistent and seemingly intractable insecurity, which holds villagers in limbo.

A focus on lived geopolitics moves research on violent borders beyond an intellectual exercise. This is an approach that considers what a feminist geopolitics “can do to help people improve the conditions of their lives” (Hyndman, 2018; Dixon, 2015). This transforms this project into a political pursuit, calling into question the popular adage used by policymakers that “good fences make good neighbors.” I do not take a politically neutral approach in this dissertation. Claiming to do so would be disingenuous. Writing about violence and social suffering makes “being neutral” impossible. My goal is to contribute to decentering popular or privileged narratives about this conflict and its dynamics, and to stimulate debate about borders and violence in order to improve the material and emotional conditions for borderline communities, who have suffered greatly at the varices of geopolitics.

### Chapter 3: Feminist Geopolitics and Fieldwork in a Context of “Not-War-Not-Peace”

A cigarette dangles between the index and middle finger of the driver’s left hand out the window. The ash breaks away as a dry breeze drifts through the back seat, where I sit staring at a small haphazard, checkpoint: an *ad hoc* shack and cement barrier draped in camouflage netting bearing the Georgian flag, a familiar site by this point. A Georgian policeman slowly approaches our vehicle and requests our identity papers. Although a congenial encounter, my heart races with the recognition of the policeman’s regulatory power to decide whether we may go forth to the village. He doesn’t recognize our car and he is required to stop anyone who is not from the area. He asks: “Who are you? Are you a journalist? Are you an NGO? Where are you from? To which village are you going? What is your business?” Though I have done nothing wrong, this enactment of sovereign power makes me feel nervous. I am an “anxious body” from enforced stillness (Bissell, 2007; Joronen; 2017; Griffiths and Repo, 2018). The somatic response to this encounter, the rapid thump, thump, thump of adrenaline pumping loudly in my ears, proves that fieldwork is an anxiety-inducing experience as much as an exhilarating one (Darling, 2014; Browne & Moffett, 2015; Thrift, 2003).

My translator, Tatuli, explains to the policeman that I am an American graduate student researcher from Rutgers University studying conflict-affected communities next to the Administrative Boundary Line of South Ossetia. She adds that I am a fellow at the American Research Institute of the South Caucasus in Tbilisi and that I have visited other villages along the ABL, naming a few to emphasize her point. She then offers information about herself, describing her role as my translator and a student at Tbilisi

State University. Collecting our papers, the policeman excuses himself to the shack alongside the road. When he returns after checking our papers, he repeats some of his previous questions before requesting our phone numbers. Politely, Tatuli restates the purpose of the research and provides our mobile numbers. As he returns our identification papers through the car window, he informs us that we may carry on, but that we will have a police escort to the village. He points to two officers climbing into a white, four-door Toyota Hilux, which has the word Police/პოლიცია marked on the side and rear. Before waving us forward, he smiles and states, “we must protect our American friends,” exposing my privileged political subjectivity and the benefits it apparently affords.

Checkpoints enact corporeal and affective discipline. They are part of the security architecture of the border, which is fundamentally designed as a biopolitical instrument of control. Encounters with checkpoints become a quintessential experience and source of “profound anxiety” for border crossers, especially in situations of occupation (Khalidi, 2010). Fear, excitement, anticipation, nervousness frequently accompany being under surveillance and having one’s identity checked and verified. For vulnerable populations, checkpoints are a place of gender discrimination, detention and humiliation (Griffiths & Repo, 2018). Checkpoints are also notably fickle institutions, inconvenient and riddled with uncertainty and arbitrary decisions, part of an “unstable and unpredictable geography,” which Rijke and Minca (2018) describe as “checkpoint irrationalities.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Although I did not get the chance to study the crossing process through the official South Ossetia/Russian FSB checkpoint in Odizi, multiple informants complained of the confusing and arbitrary process of crossing with permission into South Ossetia. Like other research on border crossing in “occupied” or contested border spaces, the ability to travel is always uncertain. It is instead an aleatory privilege. The regime constantly changes the rules and forms, an evolving system and arbitrary implementation of rules that strategically never guarantees that a permit will be honored, making crossing a precarious and unpredictable experience.

These conditions mean that checkpoints offer a powerful material metaphor for discussing the research process and the unique challenges to accessing information relating to polarizing and security-sensitive topics such as borderization; contexts, which can be regarded as “closed,” “authoritarian,” or even “dangerous.” On a given day, a checkpoint exemplifies the ways in which information becomes highly guarded, protected, and politicized under a banner of “national security” or “peacebuilding mandates.” Passage through checkpoints also offers reflexive insight into the positionality of the researcher as a border crosser and helps to confront vital ethical considerations of risk for all those involved in the research process.

This border checkpoint vignette poses questions about how to conduct fieldwork in a context of “not-war-not-peace.” In this chapter, I frame the methodological approach to the dissertation as a feminist geopolitics, which seeks to examine the lived geopolitics of borderization through ethnographic fieldwork and narrative inquiry. As I present my research design, I explore how the macro-political context came to bear on the research process. This helps me address such questions as: how do you study and tell stories on/of violence? What practical and ethical considerations must be made in the research design and implementation to mitigate risk for the research subjects and the researcher? What are the challenges of completing research in a conflict zone?

### **Methodological Framework: Doing a Feminist Geopolitics**

Studying lived geopolitics means practicing a feminist geopolitics. Feminist politics has increasingly become the cutting edge of political geography; it’s taken to mean “scholarship and practices that pay explicit attention to women, gender and sexuality, and the ways in which other axes of identity are entwined with these in the

relationships of power, oppression and domination that organize and construct the social world” (Brown & Staeheli, 2003, p.247-8). Feminist geopolitics specifically refers to a distinct analytical, epistemological, and methodological approach developing from the marriage of critical geopolitics and feminist geography (Hyndman, 2001; Kofman, 2005). Hyndman (2001) explains it as “an approach to global issues with feminist politics in mind” (p.210). Like critical geopolitics, this subfield is informed by poststructuralist philosophy, which interrogates dominant ways and means of producing geographical knowledge. However, while decentering the nation-state and destabilizing the normative have been important accomplishments, critical geopolitics is criticized for reproducing a masculine view from “nowhere,” heavily relying on discursive deconstruction, and failing to engage in transformative or embodied ways of knowing and seeing (Hyndman, 2010; Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Haraway, 1988). Therefore, feminist geopolitics emerges as a reparative critique aiming to link the discursive aspects of representation to the lived realities of individuals and communities. As a distinct paradigm, it provides a toolkit to help researchers trace

nascent forms of power, oppression and resistance at and between multiple scales (e.g. body, home, and nation-state), which enables an understanding of the operation of various forms of power through situated, embodied, and politically transformative theories and research methodologies (Massaro & Williams, 2013, p.567).

Doing feminist geopolitics has shaped the intersecting dimensions of epistemology, ontology, and politics within my project. I most prominently used feminist geopolitics as an intervention in the scale of analysis, which I refer to as lived geopolitics. As the following chapters will show, this has meant (1) questioning security and violence at the scale of community and individual gendered bodies as opposed to the nation-state, (2) examining how state/national imaginaries of security compare with civilian

experiences; and (3) being attentive to emotion and intimacy as a means of both collapsing binary modes of thinking and constituting geopolitics.<sup>41</sup>

I designed my research to focus on civilian security, and what Enloe (2000) has called the militarization of everyday life. As a result, my research has aimed to show how geopolitical categories of security are gendered (Dalby, 1994), intimate, and emotional, as well as how border insecurity is experienced unevenly across differently situated populations (Hyndman, 2004 & 2008). Focusing on civilian security responds to specifically to the question: Who is made secure? Here, securitization is understood as “the process whereby issues, spaces, and subjectivities become targets of regulation and surveillance by state and non-state actors in the name of ensuring ‘security’ at multiple scales” (Massaro and Williams, 2013, p.572; see also Buzan et al., 1998; Hysmans, 2006). This is not just about juxtaposing concepts of civilian security with state security. It is about linking scales and sites of analysis and showing insecurity beyond the realm of physical harm. This reflects Hyndman’s (2001) definition of feminist geopolitics as “an aim to link scales and analyze the forces that give rise to such human suffering in order to develop a more accountable, embodied, and responsive notion of geopolitics” (p.212). In the empirical chapters to follow, a feminist geopolitics approach draws attention to the processes of exclusion and questions of gendered mobility (Secor, 2001; Fluri, 2011; Dowler, 2001), as well as show how gendered bodies “are constructed as territory and become the sites of public violence on which symbolic construction for the nation and its boundaries take place” (Hyndman, 2016, p.216; see also Giles and Hyndman, 2004; Koch, 2011; Kofman, 2005). Doing so in turn helped to reveal how communities manage

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<sup>41</sup> Nelson and Seager (2005) remind readers that the body is the touchstone of feminist theory.

constitute, challenge, and rewrite geopolitical relations with their bodies (Koopman, 2011).

Attention to lived geopolitics in my research on borderization is also about revealing the everyday forms of violence hidden in the minutiae of the landscape and “normal” social practices. This has aimed to decenter dominant storylines, such as those discussed in Chapter 2, and challenge exclusions inherent in geopolitical scholarship by grounding discourses and performances of territory and sovereignty within the mundane and banal spaces of the village. The aim has been to demonstrate how the otherwise “apolitical”, ‘feminine’ private realm is a key component in the operation of global power” (Massaro & Williams, 2013, p.570). In this way the bodies, homes, gardens, orchards, pasturelands, and cemeteries of rural Georgian villages become essential to the (re)production and contestation of geopolitical relations (Tyner and Henkin, 2014, p.290; Pain, 2009).

Beyond collapsing binary modes of thinking, emphasizing the most intimate and emotional aspects of everyday lives has served to create moral proximity (Smith, 2011; Pain and Smith, 2008) with my research subjects. Tracing the affective dimensions of the post-conflict landscape and border dweller experiences are necessary to understanding uncertainty as the essential element to the violence of borderization. As Pain and Smith (2008) argue, such emotional geopolitics help to challenge hierarchical understandings of fear and risk, instead showing the ways fear and risk are experienced, resisted, and contested. Furthermore, such an analysis shows the political effects of emotional practices and what emotions do (geo)politically (Ahmed, 2004). This is connected to a broader “affective turn” in the social sciences, which emphasizes the ability to affect and

be affected, again reinforcing an emphasis on both bodies and materialities.<sup>42</sup> To neglect the relationship between emotions and space would be to exclude a “key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p.7 as quoted in Tyner and Henkin, 2014).

Creating moral proximity is also tied to the practices of feminist geopoliticians, which demonstrate an ethics of care and a politics dedicated to animating social change. As it applies to the research process, this meant exercising a commitment to the safety and well-being of persons, rather than states. It has meant ask tough questions such as, how can communities and individuals come together to create new forms of security that challenge hegemonic geopolitical powers and make everyday life more livable? It has also been about implementing caring research practices and producing “responsible relational representations of war that convey meaning of loss, pain, and destruction” (Hyndman, 2007, p.38). This ethics of care has included an accountability to questions about subjectivity and being reflexive about how positionality and the research context influences data collection methods and access to information (Radcliffe, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Kobayashi, 1994; Katz, 1992; Staeheli and Lawson, 1994). Koch (2013) explains that the success of fieldwork depends on “careful conceptualization of power and subjectivity” and “incorporating the feminist call for attending to one’s positionality in the research process” (p.394). The following sections of this chapter

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<sup>42</sup> For the purpose of this study, I will not go into depth regarding scholarly debates between “emotion” and “affect” here. Instead, I treat these as interrelated concepts, though I am largely interested in the aspects of this theory that understand emotions as social, something that is broadcast to the world, whereas affect seems to be the body’s grammar, i.e. its responses. In short, affect plays an important role in determining the relationship between bodies, environment, and others, and the subjective experiences of feeling/thinking. For scholarship on this debate, consider: Brennan, 2004; Massumi, 2015.

discuss the design of my research project on borderization through the prism of feminist geopolitics.

### **Research Setting: Fieldwork in a Context of “Not-War-Not-Peace”**

The most apparent way to study the lived geopolitics of borderization was to center my research on “conflict-affected” persons adjacent to the Administrative Boundary Line of South Ossetia. Studying a population living under the threat of creeping occupation presented a unique opportunity to document an understudied problem, population and geographical location. Furthermore, while borderization processes are similar in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian cases, the dynamics of the Abkhaz-Georgian and Ossetian-Georgian conflicts and their border geographies differ. Because the Enguri/Inguri River marks the boundary between Abkhazia and Georgia, borderization along the Abkhazian ABL enjoys greater fixity. This has meant that it does not “creep” as it does in the Ossetian case. It’s the unique elastic geography of the “creeping border” and its impact on local populations near South Ossetia that has constituted the crux of my study. Choosing to focus on conflict-affected communities has also placed my research field sites at the epicenter of geopolitical struggle over the South Ossetian territory; it’s the place where border violence has become a normal dimension of people’s existence. I used this setting as the central focus of a critical case study design, not to emulate natural sciences’ “success in producing cumulative and predictive theory” or even general theorizing (Flyvberg, 2001, p.166), but to use the power of example in a more paradigmatic sense as generative of questions about Russian coercive diplomacy in the near abroad and the micropolitics of border violence.

Further explanations for choosing this research setting are based on key gaps in the literature. Most of the research on post-war Georgia presents either (a) disembodied discussions of geopolitics; or (b) studies on internal displacement (IDPs) (Singh et al., 2018; Brun, 2016 & 2015; Seguin et al., 2016; Koch, 2015; Dunn, 2018, 2016, 2014, & 2012; Kabachnik et al., 2015, 2014, 2013, & 2010; Mitchnek et al., 2009). When I began this project, few if any academic publications dealt directly with borderization.<sup>43</sup> Today, while overseas and mainstream media coverage of the issue grows, scholarly treatment remains limited, especially in comparison to other intractable border conflicts in the world. Furthermore, of the research that concerns borderization, discussions have tended to focus on “big politics” and not the lived experience of this conflict. The caveat to this is the literature on IDPs, which maintains a focus on dimensions of civilian security.

Research conducted on IDPs has meant that “conflict-affected communities,” i.e. those who remain merely under the threat of dispossession, are often un/under-examined. This case study tries to create distinctions between “conflict-affected”/“borderline communities” and internally displaced persons (IDPs). “Conflict-affected communities” in Shida Kartli were central to this case study because they are often marginalized in the discourse about the conflict and subordinated to the interests and status of IDPs. It is important to note that while “IDP” and “conflict-affected/borderline” communities experience many of the same social, material, economic, and psychological hardships, conflict-affected communities are categorically different in policy and law. This is not just a difference in semantics. I assert that the category of being an IDP is a distinct type

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<sup>43</sup> The following are some existing examples of scholarly articles written about borderization: Boyle, 2016 & 2017; Toal & Merabishvili, 2019; Lundgren, 2018; Malek, 2017; Brun, 2017; Tavadze, 2014; Lewington, 2013; van Peski, 2011; and Sinkkonen, 2011.

of political and legal recognition. This means that those who are regarded as merely “conflict-affected” or as belonging to a “borderline” village are not recognized in the same way as IDPs, resulting in an ineligibility for the same assistance and programs made available to displaced populations. Furthermore, the location of “conflict-affected communities” directly adjacent to the ABL makes their geography distinctly unique as a specific population category compared to IDPs. They are on the frontlines of the borderization process, which no other population can claim. While both communities admittedly experience protracted insecurity and uncertainty, conflict-affected persons must contend with an ongoing threat of dispossession from their homes and the experience of being neither within nor totally outside the law and humanitarian systems of governance. Drawing attention to the distinct spatial and social experience of conflict-affected populations demands direct intervention to address questions of justice related to their collective experience of peripheralization.

Focusing on conflict-affected populations should also be viewed as a continuation of previous research. My dissertation seeks to extend a series of research reports published by Saferworld with local partners, who assessed the community-based security needs of such conflict-affected areas in Georgia (CIPDD, GYLA, & Saferworld, 2010; Viehues & Wood, 2010; Mears & Wood, 2011; Saferworld, CIPDD, & GYLA, 2011; Patariaia & Wood, 2011; Huseynov, 2012). These reports offered important initial insight into a range of daily challenges, from reduced opportunities to earn a living to concerns about unexploded ordnance, which undermine both perceptions of security and the peaceful development of communities. However, as these were primarily written in the four years after the 2008 war. I was motivated to examine how conditions have evolved

over time in the face of protracted partition. This was especially important, since borderization was early in development at their time of publication. My other motivation was to contribute to knowledge about borderization by examining the relationship between uncertainty and the ill-defined boundary and its impact on local responses and feelings of in/security. Throughout the dissertation, I theorize these conditions as a violent geography.

Pragmatic considerations relating to feasibility also impacted the decision to study conflict-affected communities along the South Ossetian ABL. This was based on five basic questions about the research problem and context (Helbardt et al., 2010): (1) Is it feasible? (2) Is it useful? (3) Is it permissible? (4) Is it mandatory? (5) Should it be published?" (p.356). As I began planning for my project, I turned to literature by scholars conducting research in volatile conditions for strategies and approaches to respond to the unique methodological and ethical challenges of navigating "red lines," in other words, topics too sensitive or taboo to discuss in securitized contexts. The following brief anecdote helps to illustrate the practical considerations that underlied my decision to conduct fieldwork in conflict-affected villages.

While presenting a paper on arbitrary detention at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting, members of the audience questioned whether my research sample was biased. One person asked why I didn't collect the perspectives of Ossetians and Georgians from the South Ossetian side of the ABL. The question was frustrating because I believed the reasons for not interviewing this population were implicit. However, it became evident that the complexities of the border regimes for Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia needed to be explained. To interview respondents on

the South Ossetian side of the line would require special permissions by multiple governments to cross the boundary line through Georgia, a nearly impossible task. Conversely, I would need to apply for a visa from the South Ossetian government and take the route directly from Russia, a choice that would violate Georgia's Law on Occupied Territories. Because crossing the border from Russia is regarded as an illegal border entry, this could jeopardize my travel to Georgia for future research. While collecting the stories of those on the Ossetian controlled side of the boundary line would undoubtedly provide invaluable insight and new perspectives, the challenges, complexities, and risks were far too great for the scope of this dissertation. Future research might tackle such a challenge with the collaboration of researchers and informants already residing within the borders of South Ossetia, although the risk would be significant. Informants or collaborators on the South Ossetian side must contend with restricted freedoms and a culture of surveillance under the illiberal South Ossetian regime.<sup>44</sup> Civil liberties are not protected. Information is highly regulated and controlled by the state. Ethnic Georgians and civil society activists remain extremely vulnerable to intimidation and state sanctioned violence.<sup>45</sup>

While my decision to study conflict-affected villages on the Georgian side helped to circumvent serious concerns about safety and access, this was nonetheless a study of violence within an unstable geographic area emerging from a period of widespread open conflict, crisis and political turmoil. Borderization is a manifestation of the ongoing,

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<sup>44</sup> South Ossetia's parastate is considered part of the "The Authoritarian Belt in Europe's East" (Minakov, 2018). Watchdog organizations such as Freedom House (2018) consider South Ossetia "not free" with a 10/100 aggregate score, with 0 equaling the least free and 100 meaning the most free.

<sup>45</sup> Some notable examples include the 2010 attack on Timur Tskhovrebov and the recent controversy over journalist and activist Irina Kelekhsaeva, as well as commentator Tamara Mearakishvili (Edwards, 2017;

protracted conflict over the territorial status of South Ossetia, which is not without its own challenges and risks. Some might regard the situation as a war that never ended except on paper. Nordstrom's (2004) discussion of "not-war-not-peace" seems most apt to characterize the context of borderization, since has been used in the articulation of references to no-man's lands, which I discuss in my next chapter. Nordstrom explains not-war-not-peace as "a time when military actions occur that in and of themselves would be called "war" or "low-intensity warfare," but are not so labeled because they are hidden by a peace process no one wants to admit is failing" (p.167). Although no active fighting or skirmishes occurred during the time of my research, minor security incidents, such as detentions, military exercises, and a few deaths, were not uncommon. These provoked inflammatory rhetoric from politicians, though never all out military confrontation. While risk to myself and villagers seemed negligible, I embraced Glasius et al.'s (2018) warning, "we must accept a small risk that things go horribly wrong" (p.26).

I found it useful to conceptualize my fieldwork within the uncertain conditions of "not-war-not-peace" using a framework that examines "fieldwork under fire" (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995) and field methods in "closed contexts" (Koch, 2013) or within "dangerous" (Kovats-Bernat, 2002) and "authoritarian fields" (Glasius et al., 2018). These terms describe field sites, "where social relationships and cultural realities are critically modified by the pervasion of fear, threat of force, or (ir)regular application of violence and where the customary approaches, methods, and ethics of anthropological fieldwork are at times insufficient, irrelevant, inapplicable, imprudent, or simply naïve" (Kovats-Bernat, 2002, p.209). Such concepts emphasize the "centrality of macro-political contexts (and their myriad technologies of government) in the conduct of fieldwork"

(Koch, 2013, p.394), which can be applied to many scales, not just the national or subnational level. Controllable conditions rarely exist and expectations of what can be achieved must be constantly reevaluated in such situations. Instead, researchers must be flexible and creative and adopt an improvisational approach (Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Darling, 2014) to account for, in my case, the (literally) shifting complexities, uncertainties, and barriers of examining a security-sensitive research topic.

Among the concepts presented above, the research on “closed contexts” proved productive for confronting the methodological dilemmas of accessing information, risk calculus, and fieldwork ethics. In a special issue of *Area*, Koch (2013) asks, “In what ways are field methods themselves informed by particular notions of power, agency, and freedom, and how might these differ between more- or less-closed settings?” (p.390). Koch’s question prompts researchers to consider how information is accessed behind closed doors, where closure refers to something that is “selectively enacted” (Koch, 2013; Blecher & Harting, 2013). Practices of closure unfold at a multitude of scales, which works beyond a liberal/illiberal binary (p.390). Anything related to the security state can be defined as “a paradigmatically totalitarian collective, hierarchical and disciplinary, requiring submission to rank and authority, and institutionally equipped with its own legal systems and adjudication producers (Belcher & Martin, 2013, p.403). In other words, the concept better accounts for “liberal” techniques of government used in despotic regimes and the pockets of despotism used in “liberal” regimes.

The above framework highlights the careful navigation required to maneuver through the interstices of the overlapping and contrasting security regimes governed by the Russians/Ossetians and Georgians, as well as NATO and the EUMM. Next, it helps

to recognize borderization as a “redline” issue among security actors. As such, it was “never quite so clear what you can do and what you cannot do” (Glasius et al., 2018, p.9). However, rather than reading these institutions “in sinister and conspiratorial terms,” it offered insights into the challenge of maneuvering these institutions, when decisions were made on an *ad hoc* basis and riddled with paradoxes and contradictions. Transparency of information was always a major obstacle in the research process, in part because transparency mechanisms and accountability have been slow to develop, since Communist times in Georgia. This was made worse by the securitized nature of the research topic itself. Getting access as a researcher meant participating “in a complex discursive regime laden with conflicting norms of state transparency” (Belcher and martin, 2013, p.405). Even in “liberal” societies, security driven institutions are “murky and impenetrable,” exempting themselves from open and public information for national security reasons. This meant that many of my encounters with officials were highly constrained or scripted.

Gender, age, race, and nationality (citizenship) were also among the factors that “opened” and “closed” doors to information or impacted risk. Being a younger woman, a United States citizen, a graduate student; this all mattered in the conduct of my research. I found that these factors could prohibit or enable access to information. Unconscious bias and perceptions grounded in cultural assumptions about gender, race, and nationality influenced who talked to me, how they addressed me, whether they trusted me and whether they took me seriously. This reminded me of England’s (1994) *Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research* critically questions whether certain information “would have been so readily revealed to an older, more established

male academic”...adding further a reflection on McDowell’s assertion “that because women may be perceived by men that they interview as “unthreatening or not ‘official,’ confidential documents [are] often made accessible, or difficult issues broached relatively freely” (p.85 [citing McDowell, 1998 & 1992]). Other authors have referred to this in terms of being an insider/outsider (Dixit, 2012; Hellawel, 2006; Leone, 2011; Kusow, 2003). In my own case, I sometimes felt easily dismissed or overlooked, while at other times I felt as if my gender and nationality created opportunities or trust, as illustrated by the anecdote that opens this chapter.<sup>46</sup> During interviews, being a woman meant that the women that I interviewed might have been more comfortable talking with me or research subjects may have revealed information they might not have otherwise disclosed.

### **Research Timeline and Sample**

Following the field study course to Georgia in 2011 as a master’s student, I made four research trips to study borderization. I carried out pre-dissertation fieldwork during the summers of 2013 and 2014, networking with actors whose interests concerned the borderization issue, exploring potential field site options, and conducting a feasibility assessment, which informed my research design and protocol. I also used these opportunities to build a basic competency of the Georgian language, which I accomplished through lessons with private tutors, living with a host family, and volunteering with some local organizations.

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<sup>46</sup> This was most pronounced when I used different modes of transportation to villages. For example, every time I took a marshrutka to a village, my identity papers were not checked. This appeared to be an error of the police at the checkpoint, likely because it is uncommon for foreigners to take this type of local transport. Surprisingly, the bus drivers would never indicate to the police that I was on board. I often wondered if this would have changed if I were a man. However, if I used a driver or drove myself to an interview, I was always subject to more rigorous identity checks.

After advancing to candidacy, I carried out my dissertation fieldwork in two parts. During the fall of 2015, I interviewed “elite actors” from local and international organizations, collected documents and went on my first of two patrols of the ABL with the EUMM. I field-tested interview questions and made a public presentation of my preliminary findings in Tbilisi for “Works-in-Progress” (WiP), which is an “ongoing academic discussion series” co-organized by a group of research and educational organizations. This presentation offered the chance to receive critical feedback from the public and introduced me to some key experts, who later helped me with my data collection.

I undertook the second part of my fieldwork between May and September 2016, when I made daily trips to villages adjacent to the administrative boundary line to interview local people about their experiences with borderization. I also completed a second EUMM patrol and continued interviewing representatives from organizations and government ministries.

Two distinct populations (groups), elites and local border dwellers, were interviewed for this project. Non-random, convenience sampling procedures were used to recruit participants for both groups. Thirty interviews with elite actors aimed at understanding conflict narratives, as well as collecting existing data on the Russian-backed security regime and its effects on local populations. These elites occupied top positions within government, international and local organizations, and research institutions, working on the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict.<sup>47</sup> Interviewing elites

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<sup>47</sup> This list includes but is not limited to officials from the EUMM (Head of Analytical Reporting and Outreach Department, Political Adviser, Gender Adviser, and Head of Field Office Gori), NATO, UN Women, ELVA Community Engagement, Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information,

established a basis of comparison for connecting top-down narratives to the experiences of local people

Snowball sampling helped me recruit sixty local border dwellers from conflict-affected villages, whose subjective experiences exemplified the conditions of everyday life along the ABL. Interviewing in these communities provided evidence of the emotional, quotidian, and embodied experiences of borderization. Sampling goals included gender parity to produce gender disaggregated data, as well as, research participants with detainment experiences as a means to better understand specific mobility issues. Many of the interview participants were older and identified as ethnic Georgians, though some identified as Ossetian or belonging to a mixed household. However, ethnicity and age were not formally collected in the interview procedure. The final sample almost achieved gender parity but included far fewer people with detention experiences than expected. This meant that some of the stories that I received about detainment were told secondhand from friends, relatives or community leaders.

Village interviews took place in 21 communities spanning three municipalities in the Shida Kartli region: Kareli, Gori, and Kaspi.<sup>48</sup> This was a rough, geographically stratified sample of the southern edge of the ABL, where most borderline communities

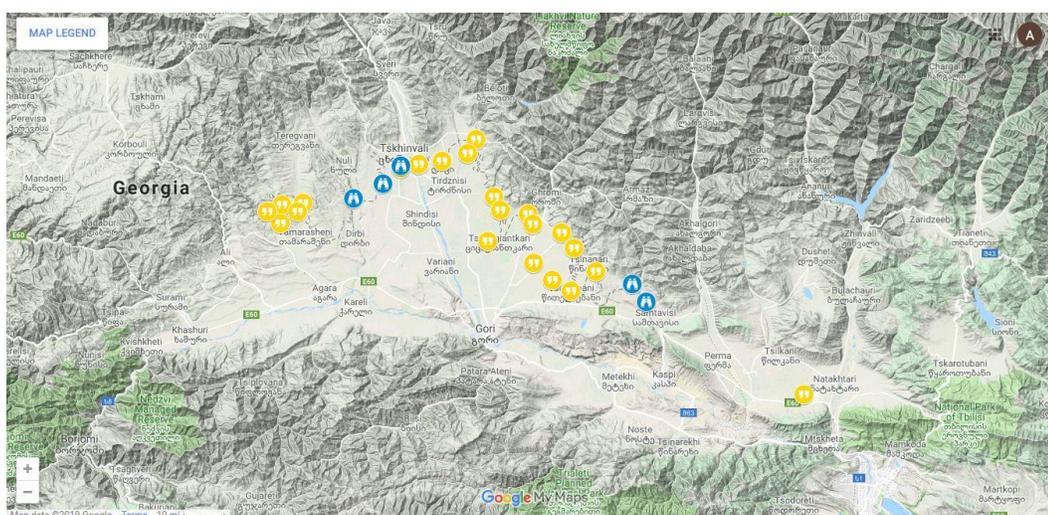
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Saferworld, Gori Information Center, TASO Foundation, Democracy and Freedom Watch and OC Media, US Embassy, USAID, Chemonics International, European Union Eastern Partnership Integrated Border Management, United Nations Development Program, Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), Ivane Javakhisvili Tbilisi State University, Iliia State University, the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, and the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure. Numerous additional requests were made to other organizations and actors, especially within government ministries in Georgia, but these requests were often unfulfilled. Either requests were ignored, or meetings were cancelled after they had been scheduled.

<sup>48</sup> Field sites included, from west to east: (1) Koda, (2) Bredza, (3) Atotsi, (4) Avlevi, (5) Knolevi, (6) Dvani\*, (7) Zemo Khiviti\*, (8) Zemo Nikozi, (9) Ergneti, (10) Ditsi, (11) Mereti, (12) Zardiaantkari, (13) Plavismani, (14) Kveshi, (15) Satemo, (16) Adzvi, (17) Mumlaantkari, (18) Kirbali, (19) Kvarkhiti, (20) Bershueti, (21) Zegduleti, (22) Tsitelubani, (23) Khurvaleti, (24) Akhalsheni/Kvemo Chala\*, (25) Sakorintlo\*, and the (26) Tserovani IDP Camp. Map data ©2019 Google.

are concentrated due to the rugged and mountainous physical geography of the area. To help assess the impact of uncertainty, the sample included villages both directly adjacent to and offset from, the ABL, as well as villages with and without border fence installations and signposts. Within this sample, I included a small group of respondents from the Tserovani IDP camp, who were displaced from the Akhlagori municipality during the 2008 war. Map 4 shows the locations of the villages, where I conducted my fieldwork interviews.

A snowball sampling method was used as the primary means of recruitment for village interviews because it helped to penetrate what might otherwise have been a closed research population. Also known as chain-referral sampling, this technique is where one subject gives the researcher the name of another, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on. Writing about field research in conflict environments, Cohen and Arieli (2011) argue that the use of snowball sampling methods “directly addresses the fears and mistrust common to the conflict environment and increases the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network” (p.423). They argue that it is



*Map 3.* Field sites. Locations where interviews were conducted are marked in yellow. Locations marked with the blue binoculars show locations of EUMM patrols.

useful in conducting explorative, qualitative or descriptive research on marginalized societies or hidden populations (p.427), though a “second best” methodology when it comes to representativity. I started establishing a network of contacts during my first summer of pre-dissertation fieldwork. I asked for contacts from my adviser and former professors, who work in the region. Each meeting, each friend that I made, whether it was my Georgian language tutor or my host sister, became a “gatekeeper,” which led to an ever-expanding network (Nelson, 2013).

Along the way I gained an initial set of referrals of potential participants from a contact at Chemonics International, who had been contracted by USAID to run the New Economic Opportunities (NEO) program in Shida Kartli. Recruiting informants from among recipients of NEO grant money represented what Goodhand (2000) describes as a practical way to gain access to conflict zones “through aid agencies who are already working on the ground” (as quoted by Dixit, 2012, p.134). Many of these contacts served as the first link in a village network. Some agreed to participate in interviews; others would refer me to relatives, neighbors or friends, who they believed could contribute important information. Working from the NEO list was essential to gaining cooperation from the research population. Although a potential selection bias in the sample, only a handful of the initial research participants came from this original list. The subject pool increasingly diversified with time as I gained new referrals and engaged with an evolving range of gatekeepers.

Although I deployed a feminist geopolitics from the beginning, the impetus for seeking alternative knowledge increased as discussions with everyday people generated the most meaningful and insightful information about borderization. I was never turned

down for an interview; nor did any participants ask to withdraw. I was rarely greeted with suspicion (at least in the sense that it was detectable), and I was not on the receiving end of any overt anti-western sentiment. Almost all encounters were friendly, cooperative, passionate; people were notably gracious. One concern with this is whether cooperation could be a sign of another form of bias. Snowball samples risk being biased toward more cooperative participants who are willing to participate in the study. Power differentials are also of concern as a foreign researcher studying marginalized communities.

Alternatively, Georgian cultural norms about hospitality are powerful, wherein Orthodox Christian Georgians believe that guests are a “gift from God.” Such factors risk obfuscating respondents’ attitudes toward willing participation. Second, there is also concern with how snowball sampling methods might compromise the ability to keep subjects anonymous, since village populations are relatively small and their relationships spans across multiple villages. Concern for maintaining anonymity also often butted up against my participants vocal desire to be known for participating in the research; most seemed unconcerned about the “protection of human subjects.”

### **Data Collection and Procedures: Border Ethnography**

Among feminist political geographers and critical border studies scholars, questions about borders and border violence are often studied using ethnographic methods, centered on the experience of mobility and movement (Vila, 2003). Much of the leading research in the development of violence theory has also been achieved by ethnographers and anthropologists. Ethnography involves the systematic collection of diverse types of data through observation, conversation and textual study conducted *in situ* for the purpose of discovering the inner life and texture of a particular social group or

locality (Johnston et al., 2000, p.238). Donnan and Wilson (2010) explain that the anthropology of borders is distinctive because of its focus on the local people and communities who live, work and cross borders. An ethnography of border societies sees border communities, not just as passive victims of world statecraft, but as integral to the creation and maintenance of sovereignty and security. Moreover, this literature distinguishes itself through an attention to the “frontier effect,” where frontiers extend and span across borderlines and are “culturally and otherwise constructed zones of meaning and interactions at the extremities of the state” (Donnan & Wilson, 2010, p.7-9).

My ethnographic fieldwork of borderization included interviewing and participant observation as the primary modes of data collection, while the analysis of policy documents, reports, maps and media offered supporting primary and secondary source analyses. I conducted semi-structured, narrative interviews one-on-one and in small groups in the villages listed previously. Semi-structured interviews describe “discussions, usually one-on-one between an interviewer and an individual, meant to gather information on a specific set of topics” (Harnell & Bradley, 2009, p.6). This was preferable to other methods because of the depth that can be reached by asking open ended questions. It was also advantageous to discussing sensitive topics and treating informants as “experts” or knowledgeable agents of their experiences and perceptions. Though my preference was to complete one-on-one semi-structured narrative interviews, closer in form to oral histories, interview participants would often invite, unannounced, neighbors and family members to join the conversation, rendering interview sessions more conversational and dialogic. This meant that small groups participated in the co-generation of knowledge, which was especially beneficial to sorting through conflicting

information. Most of these interview sessions lasted 30-120 minutes and occurred within the homes or private gardens of informants.

One of the major barriers I faced during interviewing was language. Although I invested considerable effort in learning the Georgian language, my proficiency was not adequate to complete these interviews independently. As a result, translators were needed.<sup>49</sup> The majority of interviews with institutional, “elite” actors were done in English, while village interviews were completed using on-site simultaneous Georgian to English or Russian to English translation. Translation was supplemented by my own knowledge of the language and whenever possible, I communicated with my informants directly and independently.

All village interviews were digitally recorded for high fidelity, while only some of the elite interviews were recorded, exposing some of the challenges of studying a security-sensitive topic. In addition to self-censorship, it was common for elite actors to add conditionalities to the interview process, which included requests for limits on recording or notetaking. Most of the officials I encountered were unable to speak freely, which at times resulted in being told information was “off the record.” These official interviews were like playing a game, but without knowing the rules. It was often unclear

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<sup>49</sup> I would argue that the term “research assistant” might be more fitting to describe the relationship I shared with Tina and Tatuli. In addition to translation, both played an important role in the coordination of interviews by phone and helping with the organization of logistics for travel. Nonetheless, research assistant might imply contributions to the intellectual design of the project, which would be misleading. Positionality of both translators is also noteworthy. Both were female, ethnic Georgians studying sociology at Tbilisi State University. Tina was a PhD student, who studies migration issues, while Tatuli was an undergraduate student at the time, who was interested in pursuing an academic or research-based career. Both have prior experience and training in qualitative methods. Neither are from the Shida Kartli region where we completed the interviews. Both demonstrated an exceptional command of the English language as a result of living in the United States through the American Councils Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program. Their interpretative abilities and attention to detail helped to decode, decipher and communicate cultural meaning during interviews.

what questions I could ask. I often felt discouraged by being denied answers to what seemed like straightforward questions. Some information turned out to be highly politicized. For example, at least once an EUMM official explained how sharing certain types of information would violate their role as a neutral intermediary. Moreover, on at least two occasions. I was advised to contact former members of the Saakashvili administration, which had been ousted when the Georgian Dream came to power. I was told that these former ministers would likely share security-sensitive information as a transgressive and retributive act against the current regime. These politics made me uncomfortable. As a result, I turned to public information requests as a more ethical approach to data collection. However, an interview with a representative of the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information reinforced the challenges of accessing “public” information in Georgia. Attempts to make requests on my own were generally rebuffed or ignored. To borrow the words of Blecher and Martin (2013), these institutions “customarily muddy the line between publicly accountable and bureaucratically opaque policies, between openness and closure.” (p.403).

In terms of interview questions used, I began with a general plan of inquiry, which then developed into a set of more formal questions related to understanding in/security, spatial knowledge of ambiguous parts of the boundary line, impacts of borderization on livelihoods, gendered experiences, and crossing or detainment experiences. Although the precise wording and order of questions varied, certain types of questions were pro forma, tools used to draw out the participant to reflect on the experience of borderization and its implications for his or her life. As the interviews

progressed with time, my translators and I would implement revisions to improve the procedures and the flow of dialogue.

I used participant observation and interviewing as my primary methods of data collection. Hand-written and typed field notes, as well as took photographs were used to document my observations.<sup>50</sup> Participant observation in a violent social context, as Dowler (1999) explains, is when one “not only observes the behavior of the group that she or he is studying, but also participates, as much as possible, in the daily lives of the community members” (p.195). Being embedded within the field allowed me to acquire local, situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and become invested in the mundane. EUMM patrols, attending public forums and events, walking with villagers to see border infrastructure and their homes, and traveling to and from conflict-affected villages were among the richest sources of information I collected. However, at times it was necessary to practice Magana’s (2013) argument that the border contexts sometimes require the disambiguation of participation from observation. The often “shifting” conditions and populations of border research create a social field full of complex webs of relations and risks, “the kind of unqualified full immersion that participant observation is predicated upon can be methodologically problematic and ethically irresponsible” (Magana, 2013, p.89).

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<sup>50</sup> Visual methodologies offer a lot this research project, but as Sontag (1997) argues, “to photograph people is to violate them” (as quoted by Dowler, 2001, p.415). Like Dowler’s work in Northern Ireland, most of my photos are of landscape elements. As a rule, I only took photos of respondents or their properties with permission and when photographing would not generate an increased risk for either myself or my informants. On a handful of rare occasions, through invitation and permission, respondents requested to have their photographs taken by or with me.

Finally, I triangulated observational and interview data with documents and media as a means of cross-checking and corroborating evidence, as well as extracting further support for the narrative themes that emerged during interviews. These documents included reports, legal or policy briefs, photographs, social media, maps, and a range of news sources that were either available in the public domain or were given to me directly by informants or local experts.

### **Data Analysis: Narrative Analysis**

In conflict settings, where enmity is deeply entrenched, violence fragments truth and lacks a fixed form; it is not “somewhere else” but an inescapable part of life (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995, p.3). That violence is shrouded in unknowns and always essentially contested makes it a challenging object to study. Nordstrom and Robben (1995) explain, “Its manifestation is as flexible and transformative as the people and cultures who materialize it, employ it, suffer it, and defy it” (p.4). Furthermore, that violence is essentially contested means that there are as many viewpoints as there are people affected by it (Nordreson and Giraldo, 2002). Therefore, as a critical case study, my research design was primarily idiographic and aimed toward exploring the phenomenological experience and processes of meaning-making within a context of violence. Narrative inquiry was well suited for such a task because it better accepts that “truth and understanding are always conditional and situated, even though historical understanding may deepen with the progress of time and the study of new instances of violence” (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995, p.13). Tyner and Henkin (2015) explain that narratives endow meaning to lives through “an intimate, situated knowledge that is often rendered invisible by hegemonic discourses that likewise provide meaning.” These

discourses tend to be essentializing, whereas personal narrative conveys particularized, locally experienced, and emotionally rich forms of knowledge” (p.290). I used narrative inquiry to understand how meaning is constructed through borderization and the material conditions of partition. Stories from villagers provided subjective assessments of the impact of this process on their lives, identities and worldviews. Stories conveyed how conflict-affected villagers come to grips with life under siege, while also revealing sustained patterns of organization and coping strategies. As much as I focused on the harm of violence, I also tried to remain attentive to the transformative dimensions of how worlds were being remade through violence.

Narrative-centered approaches are a powerful tool for feminist scholars to study those whose perspectives have been traditionally marginalized. In this research, narrative analysis served as the primary instrument for understanding the particularities of everyday life embedded in stories about borderization. Wiles et al. (2005) explain narrative analysis as a “form of interpreting a conversation or story in which attention is paid to the embedded meanings and evaluations of the speaker and their context” (p.90). After transcribing interview recordings, I analyzed these text documents using a coding scheme aimed to organize, label and draw out major narrative themes, regularities and irregularities, patterns and paradoxes. Because interview questions were designed to elicit certain types of information, the questions served as the basis for this coding scheme. I looked for a sequence of connected events or some kind of thematic or structural coherence that could be used understand the way people learn about, explain or organize experience of borderization. Savin-Baden and Van Niekirk (2007) explain this type of narrative inquiry as a constructivist project wherein the participant creates his/her own

reality. Borderization is thus conceptualized as an unfolding series of stories and emotions, true to those who live them. Doing narrative analysis also meant being attentive to the contextual nature of the talk and the performativity of narratives (Wiles et al., 2005). Narration and storytelling performances provided a way to assess the emotional and psychological registers of the violence of borderization. I also practiced “emotional fieldwork” (Woon, 2013) through autoethnographic reflection as a way of critically assessing these performances, as well as how I processed my own sense of danger, ethics, and responsibility related to borderization. I demonstrate what Drozdowski (2015) calls “retrospective reflexivity” or “self-narrative” (Shahram, 2010) in the opening vignettes and anecdotes of each chapter, which I use to introduce chapter themes.

In addition to the critical discourse analysis of texts, I also used a form of narrative analysis that included looking to landscape with a feminist attention to the encoding of imaginative geographies, public/private, masculine/feminine spaces, and moral geographies (Dowler et al., 2005). This recognizes the inseparability of the border's material and discursive operations and a refusal to decouple discourse and materiality (Vila, 2003). An emphasis on material borderwork helps trace how the lives of villagers congeal around “things,” i.e. the material features of the landscape, such as mines, barricades, or fences. This approach considered how certain people project certain forms of affect onto those features and how those material objects exude affect (Navaro-Yarshin, 2003 & 2012).

### **The Challenges of Collecting and Telling Stories on Violence**

The ethical challenges of writing violence are manifold. Avoiding harm is the principal guiding ethic of research. This is essential because “Fieldwork is an extractive industry” (Peritore, 1990, p.362). Justice demands that researchers must consider reciprocity for the participants’ role in sharing their experiences. This not only means adhering to the formalities of audits and review boards, but considering practical ethics, i.e. the “situated judgements,” which exceed procedural models of ethics (Darling, 2014). Interviewing subjects in vulnerable communities is especially fraught with power asymmetry. Conflict zones greatly intensify the ethical imperative of research “to do no harm” because of “political polarization, the presence of armed actors, the precarious security of most residents, the general unpredictability of events, and the traumatization through violence of combatants and civilians alike” (Wood, 2006, p.373).

I used informed consent procedures at the start of each interview, which were redone if new persons entered the conversation. This was one method of formal ethics. Written and oral consent acquired before recording offered an important way to recognize the autonomy of participants and underscore the respect for confidentiality and privacy, even when participants felt it was unnecessary. In addition to collecting informed consent, I also limited and/or completely removed personal identifiers during notetaking. In addition to detailing how respondents would be protected, the procedure also informed participants about the conduct of the interview, stressing voluntary participation and the ability to skip questions or end the interview at any time. Because of concern for potential re-traumatization or emotional distress, questions that might have asked directly about the war were generally omitted. Instead, questions focused on post-war conditions and the direct impacts of borderization. However, many participants opted on their own terms to

discuss the war, since realistically the war cannot be disentangled from the issue of borderization. Many did so without signs of discomfort during interviews. Although when signs of distress did emerge, my translator and I would pause the interview and check-in with the respondent, restating that they could stop the interview, or we could move on to other questions.

Contexts of violence mean that the researcher must always employ a moral calculus of risk versus desired data. Sluka (1995) describes this as the “methodology of danger management.” Fortunately, just as Wood (2006) writes about her fieldwork in El Salvador, “I was never caught in the wrong place at the wrong time” (p.377). I managed to circumvent real danger and risk through careful awareness of emerging events/security incidents, trust in the expert knowledge of my respondents, keeping a low profile, and maintaining transparency in order to not behave “like a spy,” which scholars of this genre advise as a method to avoid state surveillance and suspicion (Ghodsee 2017; Dowler, 2001; Glasius et al., 2018; Peitore, 1990 and others).<sup>51</sup> For example, I only observed the physical infrastructure of borderization under the protective umbrella of patrols with the EUMM or when villagers felt confident that risk was minimal.

The risk of re-traumatization was real for my informants, as well as the risk of creating a pornographic spectacle of their experiences. I used reflexive practice as a way to circumvent these risks as much as possible. Failure to do so would have been to ignore

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<sup>51</sup> Within the span of my dissertation research on borderization, a series of major events have occurred ranging from NATO military exercises, a naval blockade in the Black Sea, the Syrian war, and most importantly, the Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk. Each of these events posed direct threats to the stability of the region that I study. Reflecting on the escalation to the 2008 war shows that these are not isolated events. Monitoring regional and local events and their impact on the decline of security conditions between Georgia and South Ossetia/Abkhazia or Georgia and Russia was an important part of my research praxis for determining the safety and feasibility of interviewing.

how power relations are embedded in the interpretive categories that form the basis of our research questions and processes. While reflexivity alone cannot rectify the ethical hazards of researching in a conflict zone, it can make us cognizant of bias, exploitation, and risk. Demonstrating an ethic of care was not only intrinsic to deploying a feminist methodology or a required aspect of an institutional review board; it is an important aspect of my personal ethics. Nonetheless, I remained concerned about exposing and exploiting vulnerability, suffering and violence. Helbardt et al. (2010) write, “The dark glamour of war seems to exert its fascination more than ever,” adding that scholars are not “totally immune to this glamour.” Dowler’s (2001) reflection on why scholars choose to focus on the frontlines of conflict best reflects my own motivations. She writes, “I believe that academics who conduct ethnographic studies of violence are not on a quest for adventure; rather, they hope to foster social change” (p.416). She explains, “I wanted not to speak and write of violence as something extraordinary but, rather, to examine the day-to-day construction of it. It was my hope that by examining violence “on the ground” I could destabilize the intractable explanations of this violence...” (p.417). Much of my education and professional experience has been in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, which has fostered an interest in emancipatory projects and approaches, which might contribute to real social change. I have tried throughout this project to utilize my training to maneuver tricky politics and represent the vulnerable communities I study in a way that helps return dignity to their lives.

Some question whether “giving voice” to the research participants is enough (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 11; Scheper-Hughes 1995). For Scheper-Hughes (1995, 419) the privilege of ethnographic research comes with the responsibility to be

“personally engaged and politically committed” to the people and communities under study. Robben and Nordstrom (1995, 12) argue that the tension between the researcher’s desired objectivity and their obligation to expose repression and injustice is not easily resolved, but has to be carefully managed and considered by each researcher.

Practitioners of action research reject “the position that research should be objective and value-free and that researchers should remain detached and neutral. Instead, they aim to place researchers and marginalized groups on equal footing and engage “in a collaborative initiative to bring about social justice and social change” (Lundy and McGovern 2006, 51).

One of the first interviews that Tatuli and I completed in Tselubani really challenged me to think about the ethics of reciprocity. In this interview, a man had confronted Tatuli about her own interests in borderization as a fellow Georgian citizen, accusing her of only participating in the project because I had “paid her to care.” We both were deeply troubled by this interview, because of it what it revealed about privilege, positionality, and exploitation. We both wondered what could be done to help ameliorate the highly asymmetrical relations of power imbedded in the research encounter (Wood, 2006). Beyond writing and publishing, I consider the following as important responses to this concern. First, I sought to interact with my informants, to listen and write compassionately in a way that shows how words give voice, validate, mourn loss, construct a tomorrow, and challenge the war stories of politico-military institutions and vested outsiders. The act of compassionate listening is one step towards a more ethical conduct of research. Nordstrom (1997 & 2004), Das (2001 & 2007) and scholars such as Scarry (1985) show how it is common for people to “reconstruct their world after

violence has deconstructed all they hold dear” (Nordstrom, 1997, p.79). Through the process of listening we helped to return agency. Second, my translators and I began to act as an information and resource hub for respondents for programs and services in the Shida Kartli region. I would frequently ask research subjects about things that I could help them with. I always carried information about USAID programs or would offer to connect research participants with the proper authorities to address their concerns about specific issues. With permission, I would offer to raise some individual cases with the public defenders or ask questions on their behalf. Such measures were more consistent with an activist-perspective, aiming to move beyond noblesse oblige and the preoccupation with “giving back.” The focus instead was on contributing to empowerment, albeit in small ways.

## **Conclusion**

Borderization is an ongoing, unfolding story of violence and uncertainty. Conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected, borderline villages has offered an incredible vantage point to learn and represent the intimate and emotional experiences of how communities encounter the creeping border regime. Emphasizing the category of “conflict-affected” persons in contrast to IDPs contributes to an understudied dimension of the Georgian, Russian, and South Ossetian conflict dynamics. It is a way of capturing those lived geopolitics for a community that continues to suffer from peripheralization. Choosing these field sites intrinsically accomplished some of the important political work of the feminist geopolitics project by re-centering the study away from the words and performances of the elites of statecraft. Rich, thick description and localized stories offered both a powerful counterbalance to dominant storylines and a privileged position

to record, examine, and question the relationship between borders and violence. Border ethnography and narrative analysis methods were essential to gaining nuanced empirical insight into how vulnerable populations navigate life in the face of uncertainty. Such findings are foundational to how stakeholders of the conflict might work toward increasing regional stability and improving living standards.

The feminist project has also been instrumental to providing a toolkit for tackling and navigating the challenging questions of security for whom, who counts, and how do they count in a system of affective geopolitics. Key literature from the feminist geopolitics project provided guidelines and techniques for maneuvering the complex context of “not-war-not-peace” and contending with those metaphorical “checkpoint irrationalities” of security sensitive data. This has helped me to practice greater reflexivity and understand the power differentials embedded in my positionality and the research process. It was also important to developing a protocol and set of practices for conducting caring encounters with communities, whose lives have been irrevocably changed, structured, and marked by violence. In the next chapter, I use the stories collected through this border ethnography with local men and women to understand the emotional and lived experience of abandonment as a lens for confronting the uncertainty and violence of the border.

#### **Chapter 4: “We Are Forgotten by Everyone”: Experiences of Abandonment in Georgia’s Neitherland**

My translator and I sat on the low, green bench on the sidewalk across from the driver’s license center on the outskirts of Gori as we waited for the local driver that we had been using recently—he’s a jolly, bald and toothless middle-aged man, whose lispy speech slurs together slightly and whose small green cab fails to defrost properly, leaving the upholstery smelling vaguely of mildew. Using this driver for interviews was advantageous because he grew up near the dividing line and had a network of friends and family, whom he shared with me in my pursuit of borderline stories. When he arrived, we fumbled into the backseat and headed east on the E60 motorway, only to later learn that we had traveled to the wrong village.

Zardiaantkari or Zadiantkari? The former is in the Gori Municipality and the latter is in the Kaspi Municipality; as the crow flies these villages are only 30 km (19 miles) apart and both are adjacent to the South Ossetian Administrative Boundary Line on Tbilisi administered territory. The problem with organizing interviews by phone is that such distinctions are not always coherent through mumbled speech, poor cellphone connections, and assumptions about local geographic knowledge. When I set out to conduct interviews about the impacts of borderization on civilian security in August 2016, the distinction between Zardiaantkari<sup>52</sup> and Zadiantkari were unclear.

Arriving at the wrong village is not just a novice mistake. The residents of Zardiaantkari that I interviewed quickly studied the map that I was using to navigate

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<sup>52</sup> Zardiaantkari is a historically mixed village of Ossetians and Georgians located in the Gori Municipality in the Shida Kartli region.

between different field sites. Pointing to the text, a group of lively women explained how Zardiaantkari was missing at that scale on the map. With great scrutiny, they proceeded to explain that cartographic misrepresentations of their village were common. Either they were left off the map entirely, or as Map 4 shows, the location of Zardiaantkari is misidentified. “Yes. You can see Khelchua, Mereti, Gugutiantkari and no Zardiaantkari. We aren’t shown even on this map,” one woman explained. “Okay, now listen to me. The previous government did this on purpose.” After I asked whether she meant the Saakashvili’s administration, she continued:

I don’t know. Maybe. I always argued with NGOs which had such kind of maps. On such maps Zardiaantkari is written after Khelchua. And by this mistake they wanted to justify the following--Khelchua is Ossetian village, it is controlled by Russians and of course, it is impossible for villagers to go to Zardiaantkari. And we argued about this a lot. Gugutiantkari is written here. Here’s Zardiaantkari and after our village comes Khelchua. We were telling them that they were mistaken, and they had to check everything by actually coming here. Someone benefited from this mistake. Zardiaantkari is followed by Khelchua, not vice versa... This mistake has to be corrected. Government knows that this is not true, right? We indicated this mistake many times...Gugutiantkari is located next to Mereti. Kulbiti is above Gugutiantkari. Zardiaantkari is above Mereti. And Khelchua is above Zardiaantarki. This mistake was intentional. They said that Zardiaantkari was located after Khelchua, an Ossetian village, and thus, they were unable to return us back. I don’t know, maybe financial assistances were intended for our village. When we asked government for help, they did nothing. I don’t know who benefited from this mistake.

Consulting maps collected throughout my research confirmed this as a consistent misrepresentation.



Map 4. Screenshot from April 2018 confirming cartographic misidentification of Zardiantkari. Map data ©2018 Google.

Zardiaantkari residents posit the exceptionality of their forgotten village.<sup>53</sup> “This small village is the most discriminated one,” a woman told me. This costly cartographic error is faulted for dispossessing families for years after the end of the war. It is also associated with a shared sense of protracted abandonment. Most Ossetians fled Zardiaantkari during conflict in the early 1990s, though some returned in 1997. In 2008, 95% of the population was forced to leave because of the war. Russian forces left the territory after October 10, 2008, and it was only in the spring of 2012 when Georgian police began intensive patrolling of the village. At the start of 2016, approximately 18 Georgian and six Ossetian families occupied the village, though the Ossetian families

<sup>53</sup> Xuchishvili (2016) and the Public Defender of Georgia (2014) argue that Zardiaantkari is a “micro-portrayal of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict,” though I tend to agree that it represents one of the more unique and extreme cases of abandonment.

were situated between the Georgian and Russian posts in an area that the Public Defender of Georgia (2014) describes as “uncontrolled” (p.3).<sup>54</sup>

Many of villagers of Zardiaantkari were unable to return due to the absence of basic living conditions and fear of renewed hostilities. In an interview recorded in “Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in Peoples’ Lives” (2016), a seventy-year-old man from Zardiaantkari explains the cost of conflict on the village: “The relationships have been lost” and “everything was destroyed” (p.48). His powerful story details how many of the properties in the village had been set on fire in 2008, even after the ceasefire agreement had been signed.<sup>55</sup> Xucishvili (2016) adds to this image of Zardiaantkari by describing how, “Today, the village is almost empty. Most of the residents have left, there is no gas, water, shops, pharmacies, nothing is left. And no one now needs the apples that used to earn a living here.”

To complicate matters further, Zardiaantkari was never considered to lie within “occupied territory,” despite the misrepresentation of the map; therefore, families from

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<sup>54</sup> In 2015 these Ossetian families requested that South Ossetian authorities create a new crossing point from Zardiaantkari to Khelchua, even though residents can freely pass through the Georgian police checkpoints. The establishment of this checkpoint would increase the number of checkpoints between Georgia and South Ossetia to four, five if Ergneti crossing point, used for humanitarian purposes, is included in the count (Gori Information Centre, 2016, p.13). In defense of reorganizing the border zone and creating a new checkpoint, the South Ossetian president at the time, Leonid Tibilov, explained, “It is important to consider the family ties of people who live on opposite side sides of the border. These are our citizens, and our duty [is] to care for their well-being” (Georgia Today, October 2015).<sup>54</sup> This statement contrasts the sentiments villages have about the withdrawal of care by the Georgian government.

<sup>55</sup> Peace scholars from George Mason University involved in the Points of View process and the Alliance for Conflict Transformation released two publications called the “Cost of Conflict.” The second of these publications, “Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in Peoples’ Lives,” is a collection of “human stories” told by people directed affected by the conflict. In addition to narratives of loss, pain and resentment, these testimonies provide insight into perceptions of the political context and suggest potential for confidence building between the communities. For this chapter, I draw on one of the stories from a resident from Zardiaantkari to supplement the interviews I conducted myself, since his story further reinforces the themes discussed in this chapter.

Zardiaantkari were not granted the status of being Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). Instead, they are simply categorized as “conflicted affected,” which means this that residents are not eligible for IDP social assistance, even though they were and continue to be functionally displaced. To gain better recognition for their circumstances, one informant requested: “Yes, but if you are going to write an article, you should emphasize the fact that even though these villages are forgotten, locals weren’t forced to abandon their homes for five years, unlike us.” Continuing, she said:

But you should outline the fact that the villagers from Zardiaantkari lived in kindergartens for five years. No one paid attention to them. They didn’t have IDP status and they couldn’t receive assistance intended for IDPs. This village became controlled in 2013 and when villagers came back, they saw robbed houses. People here start their lives from zero, but no one is paying attention to them even now.

After recalling the dire conditions of the village, one woman from Zardiaantkari exclaimed: “We are forgotten by everyone,” a theme that resonates across conflict-affected villages adjacent to the ABL. With a sardonic laugh, this was followed by, “Maybe they [government and NGOs] are helping this village in Kaspi’s region, Zadiantkari, instead.”

### **Abandonment**

That villages are becoming abandoned emerged as the most prominent and powerful theme conveyed by research participants about the violence of borderization. Almost every interview included discourses about being forgotten or the death of the village. Like the story above, feelings of abandonment are tied to various losses and dislocations. Villagers express deeply emotional and multi-faceted discourses of the slow death of their village. Feelings of being forgotten are performed through a range of emotions such as frustration, anger, forlornness, and cynicism. Mears and Wood’s (2011)

report, “Understanding and Responding to Security Needs in Conflict-Affected Areas,” also documents this finding. One of the major impacts suffered by villagers is that they “feel that their concerns are not taken seriously by relevant actors, and hence feel ‘abandoned’” (p.28). The frequency and spatial extent to which I listened to discourses of abandonment prompted me to dig deeper and uncover the conditions that make villagers’ feel this way.

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the emotional geographies of abandonment expressed by rural villagers from conflict-affected communities, such as Zardiaantkari. This is consistent with current trajectories in feminist political geography scholarship, which ask: “What possibilities are there for developing a geographical agenda sensitive to the emotional dimensions of living in the world?” This chapter will explore the materiality and policy/legal dimensions of abandonment to understand this as a condition of being. This framework is well suited for the discussion of borderization, because borderline communities constitute emotionally heightened spaces filled with anger, grief, loss, frustration, uncertainty, and even laughter. This approach also recognizes the feelings and perceptions of forsakenness as valid and constitutive, even if the retelling of events is not always factually accurate.

This chapter proceeds by framing the discussion in terms of key literature in geography and anthropology on abandonment with the intention of introducing my own concept to help convey the violence of borderization. The conceptual framework of the chapter is premised on an abandonment-enclosure dynamic (Leshem & Pinkerton, 2015, p.44), which transforms conflict-affected communities along the borderline into a liminal, neitherland. This is a space that embodies the uncertainty of being neither at war nor at

peace. Evidence from fieldwork is used to trace the conditions of this neitherland first to the materiality of being forgotten. It then links the production of abjected space to how being “conflict-affected” results in exclusions from care. Reading abject space and loss of care as a type of necropolitical (Mbembe, 2003) violence demonstrates how abandonment constitutes a key dimension of the violent geography of borderization.

Tracing the genealogy of the concept of abandonment, particularly in geography and cognate disciplines, reveals its emergence at the nexus of discussions of sovereign power and biopower, particularly around questions of how the sovereign governs, disciplines and controls life and death--who matters/counts and who is disposable (Mbembe, 2003, p.27)? This literature is greatly informed by a canon of philosophical writing by authors such as Nancy (2003, 1993) and Agamben (1998, 2005). The latter sees care, control, and the rendering of “bare life,” i.e. human life reduced to its biological features, as fundamental to modern sovereign power. The sovereign possesses the power to “ban,” i.e. to place life outside of human sociality (Agamben, 1998). Building from this literature, I apply Leshem’s (2017) conceptualization of abandonment, which defines it as: “at once a political technology and a material economy, a juridical category and a sphere of intimacy” (p.621).

The conceptual framework I deploy in this chapter centers on conceiving conflict-affected villages (the former buffer zone) as neitherland, which is akin to a type of no-man’s land or as Agamben (2005) explains, a “zone of undecideability.” It is a space which Leshem and Pinkerton (2015) argue is the product of the simultaneous operation of abandonment and enclosure (p.44). This dynamic distinguishes no-man’s lands from other types of spatial configurations and will be key to the organization of this chapter. In

a genealogy of the concept, Leshem and Pinkerton trace its application to “spaces that feature disrupted orders of governance” (territorial ungovernability), war decomposed landscapes, the “spatial conjuncture of liminality and death,” and where organized political power has been either “intentionally withdrawn or significantly curtailed” (p.43). These defining features constitute a critical dimension of the violent uncertainty of borderization.

The literature on abandonment indicates that social death is among the consequences of liminal incorporation (Patterson, 1982). Residing within a no-man’s land means still “being part of society although socially dead.” Cacho (2012) explains social death in relation to the rights and eligibility of personhood. Kralova (2015) argues that social death is at times ambiguous, because it can be applied to understand anything from dementia, racism, slavery to genocide. However, she also states, “Analysis of repeatedly occurring structural similarities in diverse studies of social death reveals three underlying notions: a loss of social identity, a loss of social connectedness and losses associated with disintegration of the body” (p.235). These extreme and profound losses often overlap and can result in an individual or group becoming disconnected and alienated from social life. This implies a condition of precarity and vulnerability resultant of the withdrawal of protections, exclusions, deprivations, and neglects, which produces a disenfranchised citizenry and leaves lives open to necropolitical violence (Mbembe, 2003; Ophir, 2007). This loss of value, a process of dehumanization, is often concerned with the role of the body and its deterioration in social death. This produces a living dead population, which has been labelled by various authors as “non-persons” (Goffman, 1961), “homo sacer” (Agamben, 1998), or “ex-humans” (Biehl, 2005). These are “living nonbeing” --

“precarious lives” who are prevented from flourishing (Butler, 2006). Like Butler, Kralova’s (2015) work contrasts social death with notions of social vitality, well-being (p.243) and security, bringing into focus considerations about what makes a life meaningful, socially valuable and/or worthy of protection?

### **Neitherlands as Zones of Abandonment**

Consistent with Leshem and Pinkerton (2015), I consider the spatiality of abandonment first. According to Leshem (2017), biopolitical abandonment is not placeless (p.625). Familiar sites of abandonment often include the extraterritorial or extralegal camp, prison, island, and border. Importantly, each represents a space of enclosure, whose occupants, the (im)migrant, the stateless, the displaced, the prisoner, are exposed to structural and physical violence suffered as a result of neither being inside nor outside of the juridical order. This myriad of “zones of social abandonment” (Biehl, 2005, p.2) is distinct from other sites of exclusion because abandonment is an “active, relational process” (Pratt, 2005, p.1054), i.e. a state of “becoming” as opposed to “being” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). This means that it “assumes an ensuing, derivative process of deprivation, abdication and exposure” (Leshem, 2017, p.625).

Biehl’s (2005) *Vita* is particularly instructive to understanding abandonment in “in-between” (Yundt, 2015) borderline villages. Biehl introduces the term “zone of social abandonment” as the space of social death, where those who have lost their place in the social world, yet who are living, are left to die (Mbembe, 2003). The sociality of this zone is characteristically liminal and can be equated with similiar spatial concepts beyond

the no-man's land (Leshem & Pinkerton, 2015; Navaro-Yashin, 2003), such as exclusion zones or "deadzones" (Papadakis, 2005).<sup>56</sup>

Nonetheless, I argue that our vocabulary to describe liminal spaces, such as the former buffer zone in Georgia, is limited. To truly "re-inhabit" those subjectivities and spaces that are, to use Turner's (1967) words, "neither here nor there," I propose the term neitherland as a distinct alternative to Agamben's concept of "bare-life" and more Foucaultian notions of biopower. The neitherland is term coined by fantasy fiction author Grossman (2009) in his book and television series, *The Magicians*. Grossman uses "the neitherlands" to describe a transition place that exists between all places and worlds, which is defined by an altered sense of temporality.<sup>57</sup> I argue that the term neitherland more effectively captures the lived geopolitics and materiality of abandonment. I do this to trouble the term no-man's land for its metaphoric suggestions of un-peopled or dehumanized landscape. Furthermore, I use it to illustrate its distinctions from the carceral geographies of "the camp." Even though Leshem and Pinkerton (2015) argue that no-man's lands are lively places, the concept, along with other types of exclusion zones, deadzones and the like, create an imaginary of total depopulation or a complete reduction to "bare life." There is an impetus for a term that better humanizes our

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<sup>56</sup> Liminalities, most often tied to the work of Turner (1967), include multiple levels of meanings and intertemporal transitions, but generally are conceived as of being "betwixt and between," "both" and "neither," ambiguous, ambivalent, indeterminant, fluctuating and yet suspended in time and space. Spatially they are described as neither here nor there, often concerned with the space of the border itself. Originating in the work of cultural anthropologist, van Gennep (1960), the concept has been applied to identity negotiation, to describe border concepts such as frontier, and used in relation to the metaphors margin and periphery. In human geography, the concept has most recently been applied to theoretical landscapes of travel and mobility, particularly issues related to refugees and asylum seekers, IDPs and various types of carceral geographies.

<sup>57</sup> Grossman's neitherlands is akin to Lewis' (1955) "Wood between the Worlds" in *The Magician's Nephew*. Grossman's transition zone of fountain portals offers a vocabulary for a place that is neither here nor there.

imagined geographies of in-between and extraterritorial spaces, especially because real people within no-man's lands often experience a denial of dignity and loss of humanity. To use no-man's land is to add to the epistemic violence of borderization. For this reason, borderline villages along the ABL, both spatially and socially, might be better described as a neitherland—for example, villages are neither occupied nor immune to the threat of annexation; the population is not internally displaced but often suffers the effects/affects of dispossession. This concept also usefully conceptualizes life as conflict-affected as a story of multiple, overlapping and at times competing social and spatial liminalities, and losses.

The first task is to establish the spatial and material conditions or losses (Kralova, 2015), which foster liminality and social death in the neitherland along the ABL. While all rural villages in Georgia experience varying levels of precarity, conflict-affected communities adjacent to the ABL should be regarded as having a heightened state of precariousness, since rural poverty is exacerbated by the prolonged impacts of ongoing conflict. As Koch (2015) explains in reference to the perceived forgotten experience of IDPs, “To be clear, poverty and unemployment are widespread in Georgia [...] limited and ineffective government assistance and an erratic, alienating bureaucracy—are not unique to them” (p.136).

Feelings of abandonment are rooted in the geography and materiality of the landscape—chiefly an invisible violence that thrives on ambiguities produced by two interlocking conditions. First, the securitization and regulation of mobility by competing security regimes creates an experience of enclosure. The offers a key distinction between conflict-affected/borderline persons and IDPs. Second, the condition includes the multi-

sensory and emotional experience of structural violence, i.e. miserable living conditions produced by spatial abjection, poverty, poor development and the partial or lack of rehabilitation from the destruction caused during the 2008 war. Discourse about depopulation, material loss, struggle and ruination are among the most salient themes across these village interviews. With great affect, the presence of these conditions saturated most of the homes, gardens and communities I entered—almost as if the war had been frozen in time.

The strongest expressions of abandonment were also located in the poorest, rural and geographically remote places along the ABL. This was most perceptible in the hard to reach villages such as Koda, Knolevi, Avlevi, Kirbali, Kveshi and Zardiaantkari, which are farthest from Gori and Tskhinvali and mainly accessible by lesser roads. As a man in Zemo Nikozi, which is adjacent to Tskhinvali explained, “They pay attention to this place [Nikozi]. They do not want anything bad to happen here. But take a look at other remote places,” implying that the progressive worsening of conditions was related to location.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that those who have reported feeling abandoned were also among villages that suffered great damage during the 2008 war. The heaviest damage was exacted on villages around and between Tskhinvali's government center and Gori, but particularly in villages along the ABL. The damages in Tskhinvali occurred on or before August 10, while many Georgian-majority villages near Tskhinvali were damaged after major hostilities ended. During the war, airstrikes and a range of artillery was used. BM-21 Grad (anti-aircraft) and Iskander missiles launched during shelling campaigns affected many civilian infrastructures and residences. More importantly,

Human Rights Watch (HRW) also reports the use of M85S and RBK-250 cluster bombs (anti-tank aircraft bombs) by the Russians and Georgians, though the Russians deny use of this type of artillery. While fragmentation bombs were far deadlier, cluster bombs left behind dangerous debris. The discovery of these unexploded cluster munitions after the war continues to pose a threat to rural communities. Ongoing Halo Trust operations in Shida Kartli continue to work in service of removing these and other unexploded ordnances.

In addition, evidence was presented of the systematic destruction of homes in former majority ethnic Georgian and mixed ethnic villages in and near the demarcation line to South Ossetia. Amnesty International, HRW photos and UNOSAT satellite imagery show that the former Georgian villages of Kekhvi, Kurta, Achabeti, Tamarasheni, Eredvi, Vanati and Avnevi, which are in South Ossetia, were virtually erased.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, looting and arson attacks were prevalent in Georgian villages along the ABL on the Georgian side, presumably by Ossetian volunteer militias and supposed kontraktniki (volunteer Cossak/Chechen mercenaries from the North Caucasus). These attacks continued in the Gori district throughout August after the ceasefire. Although interview questions did not directly request information about informants' experiences during the war, a measure designed to mitigate potential risks of re-traumatization, multiple respondents nonetheless articulated their experiences during August 2008. Respondents commonly discussed the damages exacted upon their homes, describing damages and looting in detail.

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<sup>58</sup> See the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) (n.d.) report for comparative satellite imagery showing damage.

Ten years on, homes in ABL village offered a living archive of these events. Varying degrees of disrepair were evident. Rehabilitation works and the issuance of compensation for homes damaged during the 2008 war were carried out on an intensive basis immediately following the war, but as of 2015 part of the population of Shida Kartli has still not received aid from the state. A February 2018 report from International Federation for Human Rights (FDIH) described current conditions: “Some houses had no glass-windows, and plastic bags were used instead. Parts of houses had not been reconstructed, and the yards bore the signs of bullet-holes from air and ground assaults” (p.5). In Zardiaankari part of the houses in the village were shelled, while other were burned. Almost all the houses were looted and today many of the roofs remain at least partially collapsed, blackened by the soot and fire of flames, and rotting from water damage. Walls crumble unsteady under the weight of the war and time; shattered windows and fragments of furniture lay as if the bombs were dropped yesterday. These are indicative of varying degrees of disrepair. A woman in Ergneti described how she and her husband had lost everything. “Our house is also affected. Our roof is damaged. When it rains, all the rooms are wet.” She hopes that there is something that I can do to help her fix the problem. The woman informs me that despite requests, she has not received assistance to repair the house. She is left waiting. As a result, she is dislocated, forced to take up residence in Gori, though their preference would be to rebuild her home and business in the village.

These conditions of disrepair reflect Navaro-Yarshin’s (2003 & 2012) concept of “abjected space” (see also Ferguson, 2002). Persistent dilapidation entrenches liminality, because ruination creates a stasis, a “purgatory,” and spatial and temporal surreality

(p.110). States of disrepair make it so “life is kept on hold” (p.121). The supposed temporariness of being conflict-affected becomes permanent, a catastrophe woven into the fabric of daily life, which prevents families from moving forward.

Over 95 NGOs and intergovernmental agencies deployed aid in the immediate aftermath of the war. Yet most villagers that I interviewed perceive the varying degrees of assistance they received, especially to repair damages, as partial or short-term. Critiques of the humanitarian response in Georgia also note inadequacies. For example, Hansen (2009) regards the humanitarian response to be “demonstrably more political than humanitarian,” and “skewed toward the Georgian side.” Hansen explains that “The UN’s lead role in the humanitarian response suffered from lackluster management from the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator in Tbilisi” (p.7-8). Meanwhile, Dunn (2012) situates her critique within a concern that humanitarian responses were but the “continuation of politics by other means,” “the left hand of empire,” and a “regime of violence as well as care” (p.1-2). One of Dunn’s chief critiques of the humanitarian response in Georgia was that aid was premised too strongly on donor priorities, instead of the real needs of affected communities. Moreover, donors and operational agencies alike concentrated attention and assistance toward the newly displaced, which materialized in the construction of IDP settlements such as Tserovani. I argue that such policies left out those who were not permanently or completely displaced, i.e. those who fell beyond this categorical recognition. While residents in borderline communities may have been

eligible for one-time cash assistance, many have complained that these funds were insufficient, or worse, they were never received.<sup>59</sup>

For those families returning to the village of Zardiaantkari and others like it, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provided some limited temporary assistance, such as firewood, medicine, and food. For example, a program called the Shelter Interior Improvement Project by the Georgian Red Cross Society in 2013 helped renovate one room each in 150 homes, ensuring that their occupants had at least "one warm room" during winter.<sup>60</sup> However, at least one respondent expressed frustration that the damage to the larger structure meant that water leaks quickly compromised the renovated space. Others complained about being excluded from such programs because their home had only been partially burned or bombed; their liminality meant that they were ineligible for assistance.

During my interview in Zardiaantkari, I sat in the kitchen of one such house, where only a few rooms were habitable. This was a one-story structure, divided in two parts. One part of it remained scorched and blackened from fire, while the other remained usable. Tatuli and I sat scrunched together surrounded by a group of women within a small kitchen, which seemed to be one of these few habitable spaces in the home. After the interview, our host showed us the rooms in the house that she had watched burn, as she and her husband hid. She implored us to take in the acrid smell that remained in one

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<sup>59</sup> From what I understand, GYLA monitored/monitors how local administrations distribute humanitarian assistance.

<sup>60</sup> See "Georgia: One Warm Room" (2014) for a video made by the ICRC with reactions to the one-room rehabilitation project.



*Figure 11.* Tarpaulin covers the fire damaged roof a home in Zardiaantkari. August 2016.

of the scorched rooms.<sup>61</sup> Her story is indicative of one of the key problems with the rehabilitation process: because her home was not completely burned down, she was told that she was not entitled to any compensation. This is among the caveats in the criteria that has prevented villagers from receiving social assistance in the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, this highlights an inherent shortcoming of ICRC humanitarian response in Georgia, whose express purpose was “to enable people living in war-affected areas to sustain themselves over the short-term and regain their pre-conflict levels of economic security.” The measures implemented fail to reasonably account for the impacts of protracted partition, which has prohibited the return to pre-conflict economic security.

Damaged roofs as a result of shelling and arson emerged as one of the most overt and powerful symbols of ruination and decrepitude in the interview process. These conditions are tied to varying degrees of somatic distress. Further questioning might

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<sup>61</sup> Her story also has been recorded by journalists, who have visited Zardiaantkari.

better capture the emotional and psychological effects of existing in a constant state of disrepair, since research on substandard housing indicates that the home environment is often a source of chronic stress and poor health outcomes. Beyond psychological distress, these conditions undermine the formation and maintenance of social ties, since families are fully, or partially displaced and village networks are disrupted.<sup>62</sup>For most Zardiaantkari residents, uninhabitable living conditions have meant remaining in Kindergarten N1 in Gori (Figure 12). School-age children in particular prefer to learn in Gori, where they can receive a better education in a “more peaceful environment” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2014, p.4). Yet, even the conditions in Kindergarten N1 are also considered deplorable and “miserable” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2014, p.6). Xucischvili (2016) explains that the windows are broken, the sewage system and plumbing have issues, there is lack of sanitation, there is garbage everywhere, the basement fills with water, the floors are damaged, and the hallways have no windows. Only one room is allocated per family that serves as a kitchen, living room and bedroom. The kindergarten does not have gas heat and tenants must cover the electricity charges themselves. It seems that villagers cannot escape abjected space wherever they go.

In addition to the stress and loss associated with contending with dilapidated, unsanitary and declining living conditions, villagers also experience the material loss of land due to borderization. Without access to their fields or orchards, many feel as if they have “nothing.” Having “nothing,” e.g. the ruination of homes and the loss of property, results in “doing nothing, which evolves into being nothing” (Dunn, 2014, p.299 & 305).

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<sup>62</sup> This type of distress is described in Burdette et al. (2011); however, conflict-affected villages come from a different development and cultural contexts than the American neighborhoods examined in this longitudinal study. I use this source to compel readers to imagine the compounding experience and trauma of the war along with the everyday poverty that is prohibitive of repairing and remaking the home.



*Figure 12.* Kindergarten N1, a collective center in Gori, houses 30 families displaced from Zardiaantkari. August 2016.

These conditions limit the capacity for human agency. Compromised livelihoods contribute to the loss of meaningful social roles in the family and community (Kabachnik et al., 2015, 2014, 2013, 2010; Mitchnek et al., 2009). The Shida Kartli region and the districts adjacent to the ABL consist of an agricultural sector that includes numerous households reliant to some degree on small and fragmented land plots for subsistence with limited links to markets and limited resources and growth potential. Beyond the destruction caused by the war, abandonment must therefore be linked to different types of disconnections. This includes the disconnection from farmlands, noted above, as well as the disconnection from urban centers caused by poor road conditions and a lack of connection to major roadways. Disconnection also relates to other infrastructural and development conditions, such as fewer ambulatories and schools, as well as poor access to potable and irrigation water. Many also complained how the partition of the state severed important markets; the closure of the Ergneti market in 2004 by the Saakashvili

Administration was regarded as perhaps one of the most crippling economic problems for local farmers. Villagers must now travel farther distances at higher cost to places such as Kashuri, Gori, Tbilisi or even Kutaisi in order to sell their products at lower prices in already crowded markets. To afford to continue farming, villagers must also borrow at high risk. Villagers frequently complained that they had been victims of predatory lending by banks.<sup>63</sup> Of course, this only matters if they were still able to undertake agricultural activities in the first place.

When asked why villagers were abandoning their village, a respondent in Tsitelubani explained: “There are no workplaces. How can they earn for living?” Annexation and borderization has meant that lands have been “taken away,” this in turn meant that people were unable to continuing farming or raising their animals. Furthermore, the water situation has also been regarded as dire. In Zardiaantkari, only one tap provided potable water for the entire village, despite multiple attempts to drill wells. Insufficient depth meant that water was not reached. Access to irrigation water has also been problematic. Even after the construction of an irrigation pipeline system by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure in 2015, it was unclear if this system would ever become operational. So many years without irrigation water caused most of the fruit trees to dry up. Locals have lost their only source of income and trees were turned into firewood. Plans for gasification were made, though as other interviewees

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<sup>63</sup> When asking about the impacts of the war, respondents sometimes discussed access to credit as a major barrier to development. Barriers to access include property registration. Those that spoke of this issue believed that because they were a borderline village, they were considered high risk by lenders. As a result, interest rates for seasonal loans and personal loans (which villagers used for agricultural purposes) were extremely high—some reported upwards of 30%-40%. Multiple people spoke about “being tortured by the banks.” These concerning stories makes this an area of research that requires immediate further investigation.

who have been gasified explained, families typically lack the income to update their heating systems to accept gas and even with vouchers and subsidies, the cost for gas is too high.

These material conditions of abjection make for a landscape of despair (Petee, 2009; Dear & Wolch, 2014), which ultimately has meant higher levels depopulation. The build up to the war meant that most of the younger men, women and children, already left the villages at the time of the conflict and sought safety in other parts of Georgia. Villagers report that among those who stayed behind during the war were the oldest residents in the village. They remained either because they were too infirm to leave, or because they wanted to defend their homes and livestock. Elderly residents recount stories of staying in the burned shells of houses, being unable to eat, and contracting illnesses such as pneumonia as result of sleeping outside. In a story documented by a survivor in Avlevi, a woman explained how her elderly father-in law was shot, because he was deaf and did not hear the soldiers shouting instructions at him. The soldiers interpreted his lack of response to their commands as deliberately disobeying them (FIDH, 2018, p.18). Most of these stories show that those who remained were particularly vulnerable elderly people whose living conditions only worsened after the conflict. One man in Didi Bershueti explained to me, “Only elderly and people who have nothing to lose are left there.” Even today, the demographic make-up of these villages consists of such orphaned pensioners.

These demographic developments mean that abandonment is not just a governmental or humanitarian problem, but an intergenerational one. Older residents experienced abandonment, not just by their government, but also by younger generations,

who no longer choose to live in the village. This seems consistent with Biehl's (2005) discussion of abandonment, which shows that family is a key site where the withdrawal of care occurs. Elderly residents during interviews often rhetorically ask why anyone would want to live here, pointing to their surroundings. The village is dead (Intini, 2018). "It's unrealistic to live here, in the buffer zone," stated a woman from Ditsi. "Those who have a little money saved, leave this village. This mostly concerns youngsters." For these abandoned communities, life on the edge of the ABL becomes about surviving, not thriving. Koch's (2015) research on protracted displacement offers a similar argument about the first wave of IDPs in Georgia from the 1990s, who she calls "existing, not living."

**“No one is helping us at the moment”: Exclusions and Losses of Care**

Abjected space is directly tied to the loss of care. Citizens consider themselves to be abandoned when they become enmeshed in a “fight for access” (Biehl, 2001) or have little or declining welfare services or humanitarian aid to recover from a catastrophic event such as war. Recorded in a Human Rights House Foundation report written by Janelidze (2014), a man states, “Nobody takes care of people. See where wire-fences were set up! [...] We are wretched people and what shall our children do?! How could they [government] abandon population without attention?!” The “state’s systemic withdrawal of care and renunciation of obligation toward a population under its governance” makes abandonment a disaster-producing apparatus (Leshem, 2017, p.630). But Leshem (2017) reminds us that this is not a “spectacular” violence, rather a “gradual myriad of acts of inaction, systematized apathy, or indifference that becomes

commonplace and normalized” (p.632). Davies and Polese (2015) similarly describe this type of welfare failure as a “stealthy violence” (p.39).

A Zardiaantkari woman’s claim, “We have no patroni in this village,” can be equated with perceptions of the withdrawal of care, since the translation of the word “patroni” (პატრონი) means “lord/master” or colloquially, some form of protector. Concerns about needing patroni are common in stories from the ABL. Evidence of how villagers perceive their loss of care were revealed in responses to questions about different actors and the role that each play in providing security and protection for the village. Interview questions specifically asked about the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), Georgian police, NGOs, international development or humanitarian organizations (e.g. USAID and ICRC), banks and even journalists. Initial responses to these questions often posited broad generalizations such as the following: “No one is helping us at the moment” (Plavismani, Woman) or “They do nothing,” before continuing to elaborate on the factors shaping their attitudes and perceptions of these actors and what they do.

A conversation shared with a married couple in Bredza illustrated how most respondents discussed the EUMM as a security provider. Speaking in a matter of fact way, the husband stated, “People from the EU Monitoring Mission ride a car.” That’s all he initially said before I prompted him further, to which he replied jokingly:

Nothing, really. They come and go. They look through binoculars and then return to their homes. Yes, yes, they do nothing. What do they do? They just come here. They do nothing. That’s my opinion. I can also look through the binoculars and then sit back in my car and go home.

In rebuttal, his wife revised the claim by suggesting that *maybe* they help people. Arguing back, he said:

Okay, would these people not have told us if they had done something good? They do nothing. They aren't allowed to cross the border, right? If so, I can say that I also do something. I'm telling the truth. They do nothing. They go, look through the binoculars and then come back. They aren't allowed to get on the other side of the border. This means they can't really do anything, right? [...] Yes, they look right, then look left, then take notes. That's it. And then they return back. If I had such kind of job...I would only be asked to look right and left, and I would get a lot of money for that.

These responses were the most animated because informants would often mockingly imitate the EUMM by gesturing the use of binoculars as they proceeded to tell me that they did nothing, except drive through the village, wave, and leave. Figure 13 offers a picture of what respondents tended to mock during interviews. Informants' often added to this, "They aren't interested in our problems" (Ergneti, Woman). In addition, the implication that monitors' "pockets are getting thicker" was also not uncommon. Many seemed to believe that the EUMM patrolled for "their own good" (Kirbali, Man), to get a salary, or as one person in Mereti suggested, "They're having fun." One woman in another interview even thought that maybe there were rules that prevented them from interacting with the villagers. She was not alone. Meanwhile, others admitted that the "The European Union Monitoring Mission has done a good job: "They visit us, find out about our problems and needs and try to help us" (Atotsi, Man). However, these responses tended to include a temporal element; the EUMM doesn't seem to communicate as much with villagers *anymore*, suggesting that the practices of the EUMM have become more passive and as a result, their relationship with the villagers has evolved, unfavorably, with time. Nonetheless, even when villagers perceived that the

EUMM did nothing, they also suggested that the monitors brought security to their village simply by their presence.

Comments about the Georgian police were like that of the EUMM,<sup>64</sup> though more emphasis was placed on the impotence of the police. However, it is unclear to what extent these comments account for the complex politics of recognition, which influences the police and other security actors' capacity to act and respond to incidents along the borderline. A Plavismani resident explained:

After the war, sometimes we had these tensed situations, but even policemen cannot interfere. If herdsman is kidnapped, you cannot really ask them for help. [...] I don't know about the EUMM, as I'm not sure what their job is or what they do here. The border is pretty close. If Russians want to attack us at night, no one will save us. They can burn the whole village down in a moment. Policemen at checkpoints have to stand there, it's their job. They cannot save the village from Russians.

Nevertheless, some interviewees would recognize occasions when the police accompanied villagers into the field during harvest or when police "patrol in the village and make sure that no one dangerous from the other side sneaks in." When probed, many admitted to feeling safer because of the police, just like the EUMM, even if their role was perceived as relatively inactive, passive, or constrained. Speaking on the topic, a man from Knolevi said, "Well, yes. They come here almost daily, and I think that Russians are still careful because of them. We feel safer with the police and the EUMM around us."

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<sup>64</sup> Historically there has been a general public mistrust of the police in Georgia due to corruption, particularly after the Soviet collapse. Saakashvili introduced policing reforms in the mid-2000s, which has helped to restore some public confidence in the institution, though I got the impression that many villagers remained skeptical.

In contrast, more contentious attitudes were expressed toward government; opinions conveyed deep frustration through sarcastic laughs and loud scoffs. Structural similarities in the narratives offered a consistent script. “When it’s needed. For instance, during elections. They’ll [politicians] come and shake our hands and promise us that they’ll do everything after the election,” described a resident of Koda. Laughing he added, “All the running parties will visit us during the pre-election period.” The comment attributed something disingenuous to visitations by politicians. More often than not, villagers were disappointed in their government’s attention to their problems. Their disillusion with both the United National Movement (led by President Mikheil Saakashvili until 2012) and the Georgian Dream (led by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili post-2012) parties was palpable. For example, a woman in Ditsi claims that she “used to be an active supporter of our current government,” but became disappointed in them. She explained, “We had big plans, great future, but nothing happened [...] They



*Figure 13.* A EUMM monitor stops to use his binoculars to assess Russian border activity. August 2016.

used to report our problems very actively. But after the elections, they haven't come here. Now we are forgotten.”

It's no surprise that the only respondents that spoke favorably of local and nation government, were government agents themselves. These insights provided parity to the other responses. Such interviews elucidated some of the infrastructural improvements that had been made, despite claims that government was doing nothing to improve the villages. A representative to the governor in the Bredza administrative unit, which includes seven villages, four directly adjacent to the boundary, discussed several projects paid for by the municipal government. She explained:

They have done a lot of things for these villages, including paving road, supplying us with water and gas, building dispensary and school, and etc. We have built such a nice school in Abano. Now, we're building another one in Atotsi. What I have said is the reality. No one can deny these facts...Everything was financed from our region's budget. We have a great governor. If every region had governors as such, Georgia would be revived very soon.<sup>65</sup>

The conversation revealed concerted efforts by the local government to “try to prevent these villages from becoming empty.”

Finally, international development and aid organizations such as USAID and the ICRC were discussed most positively, since their programs provide material, tangible support to residents.<sup>66</sup> However, complaints still emerged about information deficits, i.e. not knowing about new projects, strict requirements for qualifying for aid, or finding the

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<sup>65</sup> During the field site visits, I was able to see the new construction of the schools and the roads. Road conditions through Bredza had indeed been significantly improved since my first site visit in the summer of 2013 during pre-dissertation research.

<sup>66</sup> As my original sample of interview participants came from USAID/Chemonics and I, the investigator am American, it was not surprising to receive positive feedback about USAID. As interviewing progressed through snowballing though, I was able to expand beyond this original group to hopefully help balance this as a potential bias.

application process too difficult to complete. This is just “too much for a peasant” (Zemo Nikozi, Woman) some complained. Meanwhile, other villagers suggested, “there are some people, who don’t believe that we can really get help from such organizations and there are others, who are just too lazy to write projects. There are Georgian organizations that can help us, but, unfortunately, people do not show interest and willingness to be helped” (Avlevi, Man). Much like the comments about the government and EUMM, many villagers seemed to believe that these organizations had done much more in the past. These comments about temporal changes help to demonstrate perceptions of withdrawal of care over time.

Despite ongoing infrastructural projects in borderline villages, the socio-economic conditions for the population near the ABL were grave.<sup>67</sup> Interview participants provide only limited recognition of these improvements and instead employed the word “nothing” (ანაპერო/araperi) to describe the actions of security actors and the receipt of care and protection by the government. This resonates with Dunn’s (2014) work on the “politics of nothing” in postwar Georgia. The use of the word “nothing” becomes symbolic of perceived absences experienced by villages as a result of a complex regime of humanitarian and bureaucratic violence after the war (Dunn, 2014).<sup>68</sup> In Dunn’s use of this concept, she reveals that even when respondents are “surrounded with all this physical evidence of aid,” IDPs still insisted that they have nothing. Dunn argues “that nothing is a social phenomenon with its own existence that disrupts the process of social

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<sup>67</sup> Projects included gasification in 50 villages between 2013-2015, the installation of irrigation and drinking water reservoirs, 29 schools were rehabilitated or built, hundreds received funding for higher education, and 200 GEL aid was provided to each family in villages near the ABL for the winter.

reconstruction and the making of meaning” produced by the practices of the international humanitarian system (p.288). This creates a series of voids, which leave conflict-affected populations in a limbo, preventing them from “inhabiting a lifeworld in which they can make plans and take actions to socially reintegrate” (p.289). Nothingness is

a void of unfilled time, long stretches with nothing to do but wait, and the absence of normal routines and activities. Despite its best intentions, humanitarian aid routinely creates this kind of void, pinning people down not only in space but in time and holding them in an extended state of torpor and stasis (Dunn, 2014, p.294).

One of these voids can be seen in interviews about the EUMM, government and international aid organizations.

### **“Conflict-affected” as a “Killing Abstraction”**

Exclusions from care were expressed in addition to perceived withdrawals of care. The case of Zardiaantkari introduced at the beginning of the chapter helped to illustrate this. Frequent complaints about the exclusion from care related to loopholes and overlapping, confusing and at times conflicting and competing regimes of social responsibility set by the government or aid agencies, whose task is to provide for socially vulnerable populations/Targeted Social Assistance (TSA); Internally Displaced Populations/People (IDPs); conflict-affected populations/borderline villages; and “mountainous” villages. Borderline communities and individual residents were often eligible for more than one type of assistance. At least in the case of IDPs, it is important to stress that the current system of social assistance consists of a mix of status-based and targeted social assistance, in which conflict-affected populations can choose either type of assistance but not both. Nonetheless, it was common to receive stories that discussed the various ways villagers would fall short of critique required to qualify for certain

programs and regimes of care. Many specifically expressed their belief that being “conflict-affected” was a type of exclusionary categorical recognition that did not adequately provide assistance matching the unique conditions of liminality they experienced.

One of my first interviews early on in the process in Mumlaantkari demonstrated how abstraction into categories that don’t match lived realities results in a type of misrecognition and dislocation, which can render a population “not worthy of protection” (Cacho, 2012, p.5) and often positioned beyond legal recourse. Cacho (2012) calls this a “killing abstraction,” which “creates spaces of living death and populations ‘dead to others’” (p.7). One of the men that I interviewed in Mumlaantkari discussed how the status of their village had changed, which impacted their access to aid. “They have changed the status of our village. It was called the village in the conflict zone but now it is called the village near the borderline.” He states that when he asked about this to municipal leadership, he was instructed that it would change what kind of aid was available to him.

Unlike the Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons, there is no legal or clear policy framework that governs the rights of the conflict-affected/borderline villages. Instead, a temporary interagency working group under the Office of the State Minister was created and called “Temporary Government Commission for Response to the Needs of the Affected Population Living in the Villages of the ‘Dividing Line.’” It has also been referred to as an “interim government commission” (the Commission), which began meeting in June 2013 (The Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2014). This working group includes participation from a number of

ministries/agencies including the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), the Public Defender of Georgia, the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, Ministry of Agriculture, and the Office of the State Minister for Reintegration (recently renamed), and includes coordination with other partners on the ground, such as municipal Gamgeoba leaders (State Security Service of Georgia, n.d.). This was established to help identify the needs of the population affected by the installation of barbed wire-fences and other barriers near the dividing line and responding to them. Activities performed during the reporting period covered the study of the existing situation in 77 villages of Gori, Kareli, Kaspi and Sachkhere districts located near the dividing line. Needs were identified based on first-hand information before priorities were set. Based on the Commission's recommendations, various infrastructural projects were planned, including construction of out-patient clinics/ambulatories, rehabilitation of water supply systems and irrigation canals, construction of boreholes, gasification, metering, and schools. Besides, in accordance with the recommendation of the Commission, each family living near the dividing line, a total 11 475 families, was issued 200 GEL for heating during the winter. The Commission introduced the needs of the population to the Diplomatic Corps and the representatives of international donor organizations and asked support for rehabilitation of damaged roofs, schools, kindergartens and ambulatories. Donors expressed willingness to assist these projects.

One of the major issues with the Commission has been that details remain scant about its operations; how it works, who are its participants, how is it funded, and which villagers are included remains nebulous. In discovering this, I've often wondered how villagers understand their entitlement and access to benefits and care. This nature of the

Commission seems emblematic of Dunn's (2012) concept of "adhocracy," defined as a "form of power that creates chaos and vulnerability as much as it creates order. Whatever aspirations humanitarian agents and their funders have to power, adhocracy transforms the humanitarian ideal of social reintegration into a partial project, fosters instability, and sharply limits the reach of domination" (p.3). The decision to make this an "interim" interagency working group as opposed to creating a more defined framework remains puzzling, since the borderization issue is an ongoing problem. It is likely a reflection of the optimism that the post-war situation is somehow temporary, or denial that the impacts of the war are in fact protracted. Either way, the being "conflict-affected" imitates the broader context of unresolved conflict and "not-war-not-peace"

Recall that Zardiaantkari did not receive IDP status prior to the police gaining control of the village in 2012, which means that they could not receive benefits even though they were actually displaced. In partnership with the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), villagers have made multiple unsuccessful appeals to the former Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia. Requests were denied under Article 6 of the Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons. In 2013, the Constitutional Court did grant consideration of GYLA's petition, which led to revisions to the law. The most recent version of the law will now grant status to those whose homes are on territories lacking effective control by Georgian authorities but are not included within the boundaries of the "occupied territories" (Xucishvili, 2016). The changes that took place in 2014 enable the government to consider "those people whose houses may not be on the other side of the ABL but it's not safe for them to live there as IDPs" (Kakitashvili, Project Monitor

UNHCR at the Ombudsman in Gori). The law expands who may be enfolded into the category of IDP by creating a more fluid notion of IDP status, which can continue to incorporate those who become victims of borderization. However, dispossession must unequivocally occur. Herein lies the issue for many.

Despite the expansion of the law, it is still premised on the idea that villagers must be forced to abandon their homes because of the occupation regime. Conditions must be deemed unsafe for their return. Yet this is based on a limited definition of “security.” What about those whose homes have not be annexed, but still remain spatially abject? As of interviews in 2016, residents were still claiming that they had been promised money to repair their homes, but had not received funds. Investigating specific cases revealed that residents were often being excluded from aid because of conditionalities. Multiple cases shed light on the conditions for qualification for benefits within different regimes of care. For example, a woman from Ergneti mentioned earlier in the chapter showed me the damage to her roof (Figure). She complained that she had yet to receive assistance to fix the roof, even though many of her neighbors had gotten some form of help. When I asked about this woman’s case during a meeting with a public defender at the Ombudsmen in Gori, I was informed that this woman didn’t qualify for assistance because she was not considered a permanent resident of the village, i.e. she didn’t live in the village for at least nine months of the year. Kakitashvili explained, “If a person lives in Gori and has an estate property, such as a dale, near the border, of course this person will not be considered IDP” nor eligible for the benefits of created for borderline villages. The conundrum here, at least with the woman in Ergneti, was that she couldn’t live in her home for 9 months of the year; the damage to her home made her house uninhabitable



*Figure 14.* A woman from Ergneti struggles to obtain financial assistance to repair the roof of her home. July 2016.

during the winter months. As a result, she, like many villagers along the ABL, spent part of the year in Gori, Tbilisi, or with family in other villages. This was especially the case with Zardiaantkari residents, who remain at the Kindergarten N1, and only return on weekends or over summer.

One of the more frustrating aspects of my line of questions, especially when it came to the inclusion and exclusion of populations within these legal categories, was the argument that “the law is the law.” Proving permanent residency as a condition of status was described by villagers as harmful. When I asked about whether exceptions should or could be made to account for this, the response was, “*The law is the law.*” This was similarly expressed when I asked about those who opt to take Russian and/or Ossetian passports in order to cross the line. Unless granted dual citizenship, when caught, these individuals must surrender their Georgian citizenship along with their entitlement to the

benefits of being an IDP, socially vulnerable or conflicted-affected. The law does not consider the complex ways mobility and the pursuit of daily need impacts status. I argue that this resonates with Leshem's (2017) explanation:

Yet what is exposed here is form of abandonment that no longer holds any pretense of care nor can it be simply explained as an unintentional error or oversight: the witnesses' statements rationalize and justify the act of abandonment, even when these justifications are utterly banal and mundane (p.631).

Similar frustrations were expressed when it came to the conditions of Targeted Social Assistance (TSA). Prior to 2006, social assistance was given only to particular categories of people, such as: single retired pensions, children with disabilities, orphans, large families with children under 18. Recent reforms introduced Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) as a pecuniary disbursement with the goal to improve the social-economic state of the extremely vulnerable families identified under the assessment system, to reduce the level of poverty and/or to prevent it in the country. A welfare aggregate (score) is calculated based on a set of measurable characteristics reported by households on demographic, income and expenditures data. Geographic and quality of life standards are also used to determine eligibility. The score is the linear combination of these characteristics complemented by a subjective assessment of the household's living conditions. Households are then ranked based on the aggregate score of a subjective assessment of households' socio-economic standing (Social Service Agency, 2013). These included weights for a set of indicators— for example, higher weights for luxury goods, such as Plasma TV, CD stereo cassette receiver, satellite antenna, individual heating system, etc. As with the woman from Ergneti, villagers seeking TSA complained that the weighting system is arbitrary and discriminatory and does not provide the care needed to survive in the village. In a highly memorable interview in Knolevi, a woman

told me how she had saved her pension money to purchase a new washing machine. As a result, she was later denied TSA. She also talked about how the square footage of her home being used against her, even though her home suffers considerable disrepair. She explained:

People live in poverty in here. For instance, I bought this carpet 25 years ago. I think that everyone in this village should have a social aid. I don't have one, because of the washing machine, which I bought by collecting pension money. Official figures tell us to approach them if we experience any problems, but these are just words. The head of our municipality tries to help us, but he cannot solve our problems on his own... People from the social agency pay attention to every little detail. In accordance to them, we should not have washing machine or curtains. The fact that I am poor, doesn't mean that I shouldn't look after myself, right? We lived well in the past...

Echoing others in prior interviews, she too claimed, "Our village is becoming abandoned."

Finally, a new law was just coming into force in 2016, which will likely influence perceptions of abandonment in the future. Some villages along the ABL were applying to be classified as a "mountainous village." My conversation with Deputy Head of Local Self-Government and Decentralization Policy Division in the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure (MRDI), who also sits on the Commission, helped explain how the "mountainous" law would impact borderline villages. He explains, the new law is not only for villages which are conflict-affected:

It's a law about developing mountainous regions, which aims to foster improvement of social and economic conditions of those people who live in mountainous regions of Georgia. Unfortunately, we have a lot of problems migration-wise as mountainous regions are becoming abandoned. Social and economic conditions in such places are really bad and people prefer to leave their birthplaces.

The new law on Development of Mountainous Regions provides benefits to Georgia's alpine communities, who are considered vulnerable. To qualify, communities must be 1,500 meters above sea level, however in some exceptional cases this can be reduced to

800 meters. Some 66 percent of Georgian territory consists of high mountains, with residents facing high unemployment, poor infrastructure and the threat of natural disasters. Current trends showed that people had been leaving these villages in pursuit of careers in larger urban centers, leaving remote villages deserted.<sup>69</sup> According to an article from Agenda.ge (2015), the “Latest figures from 2002 revealed 164 villages in Georgia were deserted and 152 villages were barely inhabited, with 10 families or less.” Because of the care deficits experienced by ABL villagers, many are applying for this new status. Villages along the ABL are situated at the foothills of the greater Caucasus mountains, so many but not all, meet the 800-meter mark. This law provides subsidized electricity, increased pensions and social assistance, and increased salaries for teachers and medical professionals. It also provides 100 GEL aid for two years following the birth of a child (and an increase to 200 GEL for every third and subsequent child), a non-taxable income if their salary is less than 6,000 GEL, exemption from profit tax for 10 years, and state-funded schools. Villagers in mountainous regions will also enjoy increased educational vouchers. However, like benefits for IDPs and borderline villages, to qualify villagers must be permanent residents. The Deputy Head explains the relationship between different levels of government, noting importantly that his ministry can help administer resources and make recommendations, but ultimately, they cannot interfere in the local municipalities decision of how to allocate the funds towards projects

Many were excited about the prospect of the new law of the mountain and how it might help them, especially when TSA and other assistances have underwhelmed. I

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<sup>69</sup> In 2002, there were 2,087,000 people living in rural areas, making up 47.7 per cent of the total population. Twelve years later, this number had fallen by 497,000 to represent 42.6 per cent of the total population. It is predicted that the most recent census will show these numbers to have grown.

wonder though if the Mountain Law will simply overwrite the “conflict-affected” status for those whose statuses overlap? As with the conditions within the IDP law requiring that citizens must be dispossessed, does this undermine the unique challenges that borderization imposes? Will the Mountain Law just transform border dwellers into “regular, unmarked, nonspecial citizens once again” (Dunn, 2014, p.295)?

In the end, what seems to trouble villagers most is the circuitous conditions of exclusion, which Broglio (2013) captures in his discussion of Nancy’s “deserted existence.” To be deserted is not to be alone but to be alone with the thought that it could be otherwise. [...] Deserted and in an environment that feels inhuman, scarcity provides a lack, and absence by which we feel vulnerable and exposed (p.33). Broglio adds, “We are the center of our world but feel decentered and out of place or as if standing outside ourselves” (p.34). Later adding, “In the desert, we are never quite at home and there is no orientation by which to point elsewhere in order to find, to make or “to return” home” (p.35).

### **Affective Geopolitics and the Violence of (De)valuation**

Discussion of abjected space and exclusions of care resultant from being categorized as conflict-affected resonates deeply with Butler’s (2009, 2006) ideas of “precarity” and “livability” as they relate to conditions of social intelligibility, i.e. the normative conditions which shape who may be recognized within contingent socio-political cultures as a subject capable of living a life that counts. How is value made intelligible? More importantly, for whom does certain valuations benefit or hurt? Since these questions render determinations of value and “body counts” complex, I can’t help but return to the seemingly rhetorical question posed by the resident of Zardiaantkari

introduced at the start of this chapter. In this story, a woman asked for whom do the cartographic misrepresentation of her village benefit? Her question begs: Why do villages remain abandoned? A lack of resources or political will? The comments of this respondent and ones like her suggested that her experience of devaluation, her loss of personhood and dignity, was somehow intentional. Their misidentification was not just an oversight. There was compelling evidence to show how the Georgian government, to some extent, surrenders the livability of villages for the purpose of framing the violent ruptures of the conflict in a way that contributes to collective and geopolitical grievability/mourning within Georgia, which can be shared with Western partners to garner their support.<sup>70</sup> The following example helps to exemplify this point.

Tina and I met three generations of men for an interview at their home in Adzvi. After going through the necessary formalities of the interview process to receive informed consent, I posed a series of questions about how borderization has impacted their lives. These men spent most of the time discussing the loss of livelihoods after their pasturelands were seized when Russian border guards annexed 30 hectares in their village. No wire fences have been installed. However, the Russians have paved a road, cut down trees, created a trench, and installed a signpost to demarcate the border. Restricted freedom of movement and access to their land meant that these men were unable to harvest their crops and thus, unable to pay back the loans they borrowed for cultivation. This further resulted in the loss of their other property in Gori, which they were forced to sell after a protracted legal battle with the bank.

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<sup>70</sup> Butler (2003) asks readers to consider who counts as human, whose lives count as lives, and what makes for a grievable life?

To help illustrate the gravity of their loss, these men took me on a short walking tour of their property to show me the part of the garden, which is now located in “South Ossetia.” To the left were several rows of fruit trees that have been cut down. In the distance a break in the trees reveals a cow chewing on grass, which the men use as marker for where they cannot cross, where the so-called border begins.

The interview was exceptional because one of the men curiously described our location as the “public relations space.” He drew my attention to the tire tracks in the dirt as evidence of where journalists, politicians, and the EUMM return time after time to observe and report on Russian aggression. He mimicked the same gesture as others have done to describe the EUMM, holding up a pair of imaginary binoculars. He explained how these various actors drive up to the ABL, take photos or record a video, and leave shortly after. Their presence is ephemeral and exploitive. Over the course of my interviews I learn that this is just one of many locations recognized by informants, which function as a “public relations space.” Toal and Merabishvili (2019) present areas of physical border construction such as this as a theatre of symbolic (geo)political gamesmanship, “a background prop for political competition between Georgian domestic parties and a pilgrimage site for visualizing Georgia’s victimhood to international audiences” (p.).

Media coverage of borderization has masterfully demonstrated how abandonment and the larger context of liminality has been transformed into an instrument of political leverage, much like border advancements into TAT are used to influence political outcomes. Images of elderly Khurvaleti resident, Dato Vanishvili, shaking hands with various diplomats and dignitaries, such as John McCain or Angela Merkel, through

barbed wire has made him a charismatic, flagship figure of the borderization issue. Photos and videos of Vanishvili, such as Figure 14, have appeared in hundreds of articles from agenda.ge, CNN, VICE News, and even including an episode of Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown*. Behind rolls of concertina wire, his body has served as a highly visible icon that triggers sympathy, awareness, and the public's attention. This coverage is tactically reductive, framing the struggles of villagers as the direct result of Russian occupation, which obfuscates broader rural development issues and the stagnated recovery process following the war, for which many are responsible. As one respondent bluntly argued, "nobody gives a damn about Dato or his home or the conflict." Showing bleak and dystopic living conditions of villagers near the occupation line is merely designed to collectivize grief and transform border dwellers into a spectacle of



Figure 15. In Khurvaleti, Dato Vanishvili, is met by a group of journalists and Estonian FM Keit Pentus-Rosimannus. By Estonian Foreign Ministry - Estonian FM Keit Pentus-Rosimannus visited the administrative boundary line in Khurvaleti., CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37425384>

victimhood, which makes them symbolic heroes of the nation. Such staged encounters transform villagers into a “living dead” which prevent “us from understanding them as anything more than potential humans awaiting salvation by the international community” (Gregory, 2012, p. 327). Respondents view the government’s sacrifice of their livable conditions as a type of biopolitical technology. The Georgian government manipulates the affect of abandonment in ways conducive to conflict dynamics, eliciting an ethical demand for intervention. This is as Mbembe (2003) writes, how martyrdom transforms the body into a weapon (p.36). “Power and value result from the process of abstraction based on the desire for enmity” (p. 39).

This means that abandonment is not just a symptom of borderization or the war. Informants argued that the plight of villagers is only told (publicized) when it is politically potent, though the narrative itself remains temporally stagnant and their conditions of precarity seemingly unaltered. As such, the Georgian government becomes a co-conspirator, complicit with the Russians in strategically wielding the affective and punitive forces of borderization as a type of leverage. The spectacle of continued suffering, the compounding violence of uncertainty—precarious lives and abjection—are exchanged within a global market of international norms, of Westphalian territorial sovereignty, of post-Cold War geopolitics, and NATO readiness drills. Borderline communities have seemingly replaced the “old” IDPs from the 1990s as a pawn in “reminding Georgia’s friends of the imperative to facilitate their return by reasserting Georgian control in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Hansen, 2009, p.18). This is because, “humanitarianism in Georgia was intrinsically a state-building project,” argues Dunn (2012), “one that promulgated “capacity building” for the nation-state as a means to

deliver aid more effectively, bind Georgia more tightly to the West as a client state, and create a bulwark against Russian expansionism” (p.4).

## **Conclusion**

Abandonment was identified by my informants as one of the most devastating and pervasive impacts of borderization. Abandonment is a spatio-temporal condition of loss and exclusion related to the uncertainties fostered by the creeping border. Uncertainty characterizes the enclosure of borderline villages between checkpoints, which isolates communities and creates a neitherland, a geography of being “neither here nor there.” Destruction, poverty, and the threat of renewed aggression from Russian forces have led to the flight of young men and women to other parts of Georgia. These primarily elderly residents left behind must contend with the disappointment of security providers and the exclusionary forces of being merely, “conflict-affected,” a categorical recognition of their liminal status as not an IDP. Not being able to access the assistance needed to repair homes over a decade after the war contributes to an altered sense of futurity for these borderland communities, as they struggle to make plans and create more livable conditions.

I argue that critical intelligibility is needed to further and better rehumanize the neitherland and recognize the agency of its inhabitants.<sup>71</sup> Like Kallock (2017), Nancy’s

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<sup>71</sup> This relates to Butler’s claim (2003), “A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the “unrecognizable,” but when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (p.30).

work on deserted existence invites us to hear the voices of the others. The request by Zardiaantkari residents to have their story told, to be published, shows how “Voice is the attempt to communicate, the desire to be other than abandoned. It is a utopic venture—the attempt to not be alone but rather to imagine community through communication.” (Broglio, 2013, p.37). This is why telling the story of villages such as Zardiaantkari is so important. A Mumlaantkari man reinforced the need for recognition and legibility with the following:

It doesn't matter whether Georgian government or NGOs, but someone should pay attention to people who live in adjacent villages. As I have told you already, people who live there [South Ossetia] still manage to sneak in here. They see how we live and tell this to others on the other side. If our living conditions were improved, they would tell others about this. I think due to this fact, more Ossetians would want to live here and the chances of resolving the conflict would increase a bit.

Diagnosing, destabilizing, and reworking the exclusionary social category of conflict-affected would be a first step to contesting and reclaiming personhood. Doing so would pave the way for villages to receive the support they need to make their homes more habitable. Another might be to emphasize the productive forces of agency in the face of abandonment to show that it is an active and critical space of the living and not just a space of dying. This could help us better consider how people negotiate, and resist their vulnerable status. Until then, this neitherland along the ABL will continue to function as a type of “sacrifice zone” (Lerner & Brown, 2010), proof that fence-line communities are unequally exposed and disproportionately suffer at the “altar of national security” (Lerner & Brown, 2010) and the avarices of geopolitics.<sup>72</sup> The loss of dignity,

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<sup>72</sup> Lerner and Brown (2010) explain sacrifice zone as “an Orwellian term coined by government officials to designate areas dangerously contaminated as a result of the mining and processing of uranium into nuclear weapons” (p.2). Their rendition expands the concept to include broader array of “fenceline communities or hot spots of chemical pollution where residents live immediately adjacent to heavily polluting industries or military bases (p.3).

poor development, poverty and fear in the face of a persistent military threat have become acceptable collateral damage to the political benefits and maintenance of a powerful dialectic of victimhood and resistance to the Russian state.

## **Chapter 5: No (Wo)man's Land: Traumatic Masculinity and Gendered Riskscapes of Arbitrary Detention**

On a brisk early winter day in 2015, Tina and I visited the Tserovani IDP settlement to conduct interviews about border crossing experiences. Outside of one of the gray cinder-block cottages with red roofs, we found an older man making chacha with a home-made distillery; it looked like a large Russian Samovar of welded metal, with a small fire underneath. Chacha is a strong, clear spirit—an often-homebrewed distillate made from grape pomace. Curious about the process, I asked how he determined whether the chacha had reached its desired potency. He took a small glass of the liquid, which had been dripping into a clear jar and tasted it before dramatically throwing the remaining amount on the fire. He laughed gregariously as the flames blazed and released a giant whooshing sound. Afterwards, he invited Tina and me to join him over a small lunch, where he agreed to tell us about his experience crossing the ABL.

The man explained that he had once been detained, because he had simply become too frustrated with the “legal” avenues of crossing through the checkpoint. As an Akhagori resident, he met the qualifications to traverse the border through the official South Ossetian checkpoint at Odzisi. Unwilling to wait for his No. 9 form to be approved, he made the attempt to cross the ABL undetected through an adjacent forest. He was on his way to harvest his grapes to make wine when he was detained. Unfortunately, because of this arrest, this man will be disqualified from future “legal” avenues of crossing the Russian backed border regime. Nonetheless, what stood out to me was his assertion that it had been worth the risk. His story offered emotional insight into the denial of dignity to local people to pursue important livelihood strategies and cultural traditions related to

their sense of national identity. Rather than something that happened accidentally, his story showed villagers' agency and willingness to risk crossing, despite the chance of detention.

There are limited ways to officially enter South Ossetia from Georgia today. Five checkpoints connect the region to Georgia. Residents of certain areas of South Ossetia, such as Akhagori (Lenigori), Zardiaantkari, Znauri, Sinaguri and Kardzmani are able to commute the ABL if they possess the correct registration documents such as proof of residence, which includes the No. 9 form. The majority that pass to and from South Ossetia reportedly do so through the Mosabruni/Odzisi crossing point to the Akhagori district. This serves about four-hundred persons daily. The fifth crossing point in the vicinity of Ergneti village, however, is exclusively used for humanitarian purposes, such as emergency medical assistance facilitated by the ICRC or for representatives of the *de-facto* government to participate in regular Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings.

Non-residents are not permitted to enter through these official checkpoints. Those who wish to enter or leave South Ossetia must hold a Russian passport or Russian visa and make a circuitous and time-consuming trip around and through the Russian border at Verkhny Lars checkpoint near Kazbegi/Stepantsminda. Respondents also refer to this path as traveling through Orzonikidze/Vladikavkaz. They must travel through Russia to enter South Ossetia via the Roki Tunnel and vice versa. However, Georgia's "Law on Occupied Territories" views entry via South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel from Russia as an illegal border crossing. Villagers who travel this route usually use multiple passports. This is at great risk, since dual citizenship, except with certain exceptions, is

prohibited by the Georgian government. Recent discussions by the Georgian government have considered de-criminalizing first time violations of entry procedures to the territories that are not under the control of the central government by treating them as administrative offences.

One of the major barriers to the freedom of movement is that many local people continue to struggle to fully understand the procedures of crossing officially or are simply frustrated, because the rules relating to permits change often. Closures of the border are also common, typically related to domestic political events such as elections.<sup>73</sup> Uncertainty of the rules of crossing have been described by different security actors during interviews as an increasingly deliberate tactic to prevent people from commuting the boundary.

“Arbitrary detention” occurs when people are caught attempting to commute the boundary at places other than checkpoints, such as through forests, across streams or even where low laying wire entanglements can be easily traversed by foot or car. Detention is an important illustration of the ABL as an embodied border, where the bodies of those who are detained become the border itself. Popescu (2012) explains, “The body makes the ideal border, as it is always at hand, ready to be performed whenever circumstances require” (p.107). Villagers commonly used the term “kidnapping” to describe detainment by Russian FSB border guards. This figure of speech aptly characterizes the way people are “taken by force” for violating the “border rules” (Man and Woman, Mumlaantkari) in exchange of fines—what some compare to ransom money

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<sup>73</sup> For example, Tskhinvali announced the closure of all crossing points ahead of the presidential runoff elections in 2018 (“Tskhinvali to Close Crossing Points,” 2018).

and frame as part of an economy of hostage taking, since it serves as one of the coercive bargaining mechanisms of borderization.

This type of illegal border crossing is not illegal by nature, explains Lundgren (2017), but it is considered illegal according to *de facto* state regulations. These restrictions are arbitrary and an onerous burden, especially for those who live in rural areas close to the boundary, whose property has been bifurcated by borderization. Physical abuse and poor conditions are reportedly common in South Ossetian prisons and detention centers; nonrecognition allows the South Ossetian administration to act without impunity (Freedom House, 2017), though my informants reported mostly humane conditions.<sup>74</sup> Since the authority of South Ossetia remains largely internationally unrecognized and Russian presence in Georgia is considered in violation of prior ceasefire agreements, the detention of local populations from both sides of the dividing line has constituted a type of arbitrary detention according to international human rights law, which stipulates that no one can be detained without legitimate reason and anyone accused of a crime has the right to a fair trial. Arbitrarily depriving an individual of their liberty is strictly prohibited by the United Nations in Article 9 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>75</sup> The restricted freedom of movement resultant of the

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<sup>74</sup> See claims Kakha Innadze, Permanent Representative of Georgia to the United Nations, about at human rights violations in South Ossetia. Innadze is among many who claim that there is a climate of impunity driving armed conflicts along Russia's border (SOA, 2018; Borchgrevink & Nanuashvili, 2019).

<sup>75</sup> According to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the state that exercises control over the territory is responsible for guaranteeing human rights protections. The absence of oversight has transformed the disputed territories in Georgia into "the space for arbitrary and uncontrolled actions of the Russian Federation and the de-facto political regimes controlled by it." Nonrecognition means that detention by South Ossetia, from a legal standpoint, is always arbitrary. Although those detained undergo trial proceedings, a lack of oversight and right to representation mean no safeguards are in place to protect detainees, such as Archil Tatunasvhili (see GYLA, 2018).

hardening of the border deprives populations of the right to move, the right to residence, and the right to return to their homes or visit family and friends in a dignified manner.<sup>76</sup>

Many describe the risk of detention as one of the primary sources of insecurity created by the uncertainty of the borderline's location. Detentions are most likely to occur in the unmarked areas of the borderline. As a result of these types of unsanctioned crossings, border enforcement has become stricter with time. A representative from the Ombudsmen in Gori explained that detention experiences and conditions are evolving:

The first thing that has changed is the length of detentions. In the past, people usually weren't released in three to four days' time. It took much longer. What happens now is that the detention is more standardized: once a villager is arrested, he/she is taken to an isolator and trialed at court afterwards. He/she then has to pay fine. The amount of fine is 2000 rubles [~33 USD or 90 GEL]. The amount of fine changes after every second or third detainment. There have been cases when people got criminal penalties of up to one-year imprisonment. [...] You can imagine how hard it is for villagers to pay this fine. If you are detained for the second time, this amount doubles and it becomes 4000 rubles and so on.

For villagers, the fine is substantial, equivalent to half of a monthly salary or more, especially for pensioners. Fortunately, because many maintain contact across the divide, fines are usually paid by relatives or friends on the Ossetian side. Rate of release depends on how quickly families manage to pay the fine for the individual detained and any additional fines incurred due to the seizure of cars or tractors. Fines can be paid by wire transfer or someone will travel to South Ossetia through Vladikavkaz to pay the fine. The quicker fines are paid, the sooner the villager is released. Without contacts in South

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<sup>76</sup> The position that restricted freedom of movement constitutes a rights violation rests upon narratives of "mobility-as-liberty." This is discussed extensively in the "open borders" debate (See Jones, 2016). The mobilities turn is generally differentiated from other approaches because it holds that moving is a fundamental geographical fact of life (Cresswell, 2010, p.551).

Ossetia, it is rumored that some families end up paying opportunistic Ossetians, who charge a fee to assist with the payment of the fine.

Since the 2008 war, arbitrary detentions, i.e. the illegal deprivation of freedom of civilians from both sides of the line, has progressively intensified. The Public Defender of Georgia (2018) reports a total of 2,978 cases of administrative detention occurring between 2009 and the first five months of 2018. Of those detentions 1128 were from the area along the South Ossetian ABL. These figures do not include the number of Ossetians, who are detained for attempting to cross the ABL from South Ossetia into Georgia.

Uncertainty is the lynchpin of arbitrary detention. Ambiguously marked areas mean an increased risk of crossing, intentionally or otherwise. Therefore, detentions constitute one of the major violent uncertainties of life along the ABL. This is what makes the neitherland along the ABL a *riskscape*. Gee and Morten (2017) define riskscape as “the structures, people, relationships and policies that shape, and are shaped by, perceptions of risk.” Lundgren (2018), who examines the strategies and practices that young people employ to cross the *de facto* border to Abkhazia, explains: “Crossing the border entails the “doing” of riskscape, acting in relation to possible risks embedded in the physical landscape” (p.638).

But for whom is the border a riskscape? Early findings showed that the majority of those detained are men. This led me to investigate variations in border crossings and questions about the conditions that put villagers at risk of arrest and whether some bodies were regarded as political subjects that posed greater threats to the border regime than others. In this chapter, I aim to explore the problem of arbitrary detention through the

lens of a “geopolitics of mobility” (Hyndman, 1997 & 2012). I review key observational data and local stories collected during interviews, which demonstrate the formation of local spatial knowledge and how locals maneuver the ambiguity of the ABL. Stories specifically about detainment are used to convey gendered narrations of risk and imperilment. I use these stories to explore how performances of risk by men constitute an emerging form of traumatic masculinity and mundane resistance to the social and economic upheavals of borderization.

### **The No (Wo)Man’s Land**

Studying the human security dimension of borderization in Georgia makes it a prescient site for feminist engagements with (in)security and mobility. This work is paramount to understanding how borders have varying permeabilities. Recognizing such leads to questions about who can cross borders and under what conditions. Scholarship on the geopolitics of migration and mobility demonstrate how the “regulation of mobility is fundamentally a geopolitical exercise” (Nagel, 2002) and that differential mobility is influenced by structures of power and position related to race, gender, age and class (Tesfahuney, 1998). Furthermore, this literature is essential for demonstrating Cresswell’s claim that human mobility is an irreducibly embodied experience. This is a case in point of how border security itself manifests as the bodily scale.

The geopolitics of mobility (See Hyndman, 1997 & 2004), i.e. the recognition that “mobility is inherently political,” should be situated in relation to the “new mobilities paradigm/mobilities turn.” Cresswell (2007) explains that mobility involves a “fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices” and that these have traceable histories and geographies (p.18). This constellation of mobility involves

“getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and finally, the experience and embodied practice of movement” (p.19).

Borderization can be interpreted as a risk management strategy, where mobility is securitized, but for the purpose of forcing certain types of political outcomes. Popescu (2012) writes that borders are security constitutive—they use a territorial logic of othering to define security risks, i.e. risky bodies. It is not about the identity of a person as a social being, but the identity of an object that has been rendered knowable (p.120).

Risk-based border securitization practices have brought the human body into the spotlight. If borders are about achieving power through the ordering of difference in space, then the dispersion of border-making strategies to the smallest and most personal of spaces—the body—appears natural. In this logic, bodies are imagined as spaces to inscribe borders on. They become border bodyscapes (Popescu, 2012, p.107).

The idea of embodied borders is salient with the work of feminist political geographers such as Hyndman, Fluri (2010; 2011) and Dowler (2001), whose work “raises pressing questions about the scale at which geographical analysis should occur, the primary unit(s) of analysis, and whose security is at stake” (Hyndman, 2004). The recognition that mobility is shown to be “highly gendered, politicized power relations” is intrinsic to this conversation. “Gendering” is ultimately about understanding the politicization of bodies and determining which bodies “count” (Fluri, 2010; Hyndman, 2007) within the border security regime. The geopolitics of mobility (and feminist geopolitics more broadly) is not just about incorporating the perspective of women and men, but more generally thought to include the marginalized, disenfranchised, and frankly just “everyday people” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001). This helps to reconfigure the local scale as the frontline of the border security regime. Dowler (2013) describes the feminist methodology as “attentive to researching the day-in-and-out visibility of pain

and injury stemming from militarisation and violence, while being mindful of how the everydayness of violence is rendered banal in the context of global power contexts”

(p.781-2).<sup>77</sup>

The title of this chapter uses a play on words, musing with the idiom “no-man’s land” to understand the issue of selective detention. This builds from both Dowler’s (2001) article titled, “No Man’s Land: Gender and Geopolitics of Mobility in West Belfast, Northern Ireland” and the discussion of the neitherland in the prior chapter. Dowler explains no-man’s lands as “a phenomenon whereby the boundary lines [...] not only separate two communities but two nations” (p.163). In my application, the concept is used to represent the differential imperilment of men’s bodies and the view of detention by villagers’ as a “man’s issue.” Focusing on gender and detention helps to reveal how when men and women “cross this boundary they are also ascending from the space of the home as well as that of the nation” (p.163). Detention becomes both an encounter with violence and insecurity, as well as a performance of how “resistances are assembled out of the practices of everyday life.” These need not be overt acts but exist as “mundane acts of everyday living,” according to Dowler (2001). Her article has helped to inspire an examination of mobility, which reveals how a heightened sense of identity

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<sup>77</sup> This conversation is tied to the formative agenda for studying gender, security and international politics set by authors such as Tickner (1992), Enloe (2000 & 2004), and Cockburn (2013 & 2010). Tickner (1992) wrote in *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, “War is a time when male and female characteristics become polarized; it is a gendering activity at a time when the discourse of militarism and masculinity permeates the whole fabric of society” (p.96). At the time of writing, she contends that generally “Little material can be found on women’s roles in wars; generally, they are seen as victims, rarely as agents.” Her work asks readers to consider the following: How do men and women speak, write, think about and experience security differently? This work is in conversation with Enloe’s trailblazing work on the roles of women in combat and understanding how militarization during conflict relies on dominant ideologies of masculinity and femininity and reinforces masculinized social orders. This work has been especially important in showing how seemingly mundane activities are the stuff of global politics.

becomes attached to territory, who is considered a political subject and how that impacts mobility, but most importantly, how mundane acts of border transgression function as performances of masculinity, which are scaled up and serve as symbols of the maintenance and protection of national imaginings.

Emphasis on mobility and masculinity addresses important lacunas related to cross-boundary movements into South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as broader gaps on post-conflict masculinities in the post-Soviet region.<sup>78</sup> Lundgren (2018), who has written one of the few studies on cross-boundary movements in Georgia, investigates the strategies and practices used by young migrants crossing to Abkhazia. She argues that the existing literature (See Kukinidze, Kupatadaze, & Gotsiridze 2004; Mirimanova & Perikainen 2011; Weiss 2012) is “primarily concerned with trade, smuggling, and criminal activities.” Dunn’s current research on checkpoints on the South Ossetian ABL also follows this trajectory, though may share commonalities with my project as well.<sup>79</sup> This chapter can be distinguished from Lundgren and the others in two ways. First, it deviates from the study of young IDP movements and their strategies and instead, emphasizes the local spatial knowledge of adjacent conflict-affected communities. Instead of studying the practices for crossing, as Lundgren has done, my goal is to

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<sup>78</sup> Cross boundary movement is one of many understudied phenomena related to borderization and the conflicts in Georgia: “There is no consistent oversight on the rights of women and children in the conflict-affected regions. Nor are there quantitative surveys, statistics, or other data available to paint a realistic picture of local trends and needs. The lack of reliable data was a challenge for the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia in the course of preparation of the present report, as the Public Defender has no direct representation in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and, hence, no direct access to the regions. Consequently, the report does not fully cover the range of problems and challenges that affect women and children in the regions” (Public Defender of Georgia, 2017, p.4). The section titled “Women, Peace, and Security” (p.11) – draws attention to Abkhazian women who cross border, but not much on the Tskhinvali region.

<sup>79</sup> Dunn’s recent project focuses on IDPs unique relationship to borders allows them to circumvent checkpoints. Her work focuses on the South Ossetian case, though follows closely to the trajectory taken by Lundgren and those she has cited. See Dunn’s (2019) American Association of Geographers abstract, “Displacement and Illicit Livelihoods in the Republic of Georgia”:

interpret the meaning of risk and confrontation for villagers dwelling on the dividing line, whose daily paths involve “a landscape characterized by risk and uncertainty” (Lundgren citing Muller-Mahn & Everts, 2013, p.638 definition of riskscape). Secondly and most importantly, this chapter interprets risk through the lens of gender.

### **The ABL as a Gendered Riskscape**

For many villagers adjacent to the ABL, borderization has made it so that being on your own land is regarded as trespassing. Fear of crossing the dividing line developed after 2008, when the ABL began to function as a *de facto* state border. In the absence of fences, green banners often stand alone, creating confusion for locals about border enforcement. This is likely a dimension of Russian maskirovka. For example, a woman commented during interviews that “There’s no specific border. They [the Russians] drew it the way they wanted it to be. We cannot enter those places where our Georgian army used to stand. Now Russians are standing there” (Ergneti). In Kveshi another woman says, “in other words, they have drawn a border. If you cross it, you will be caught. It doesn’t matter whether the area is fenced or not.” Meanwhile a respondent in Avlevi explained the history of insecurity relating the ABL:

We did not have wire walls in 2008 and people knew which land belonged to whom. When the wire fences were installed, some parts of the land that we thought belonged to Ossetians appeared to be on our side, while other parts of the land that we knew for sure belonged to Georgians appeared on the other side of the fence. However, we could not work some of our lands near the ABL even before 2008, because of the fear factor. This conflict did not begin in 2008, it began in the 90s. That’s why people were afraid to work in the vicinity of Ossetian lands. I am not sure, but from what I have heard, these lands were divided in accordance to the map created in 1921.

The situation today is exceptionally precarious for villagers on the Georgian side of the ABL, because crossing is not necessary to be detained. Regular patrols and optical

surveillance by the FSB increase the likelihood of being captured. A man in Satemo told me that he knows that spaces that “aren’t fenced are more dangerous than the fenced ones.” These are the places people are usually arrested in. These unmarked areas near forests and dales are very “confusing” places (Man, Mereti). In Zeghduleti another man explained that even if villagers do not cross but come as close as 100-200 meters to a banner or fence, then they can be arrested. “Russians cross and take them from Georgian territories.” On multiple occasions, villagers described how border guards attempt to “trick” villagers into approaching closer, before grabbing them. Photos are taken as evidence of the illegal border crossing before border guards transport alleged transgressors to a holding facility or straight to the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, for trial. “They even take photos of you crossing the border and then detain you based on that. In the end, it looks like you have indeed crossed the border,” explained a man from Didi Bershueti. The knowledge that a Russian FSB may cross into Georgian controlled territory to abduct someone deepens villagers’ sense of insecurity and mistrust in boundary marks, and this and can contribute to feelings of powerlessness.

Conversation with a group from Didi Bershueti helped to illustrate this issue: “We just went there. There are fields. It’s not easy to cover 1 km, you can cross 10 meters. Sometimes, you forget and just cross unintentionally. It’s not legalized what is ours and what is theirs,” said one man as we join around a long wooden table outside in the garden. “You may be standing on your territory, but Russians may still capture you.” As women from the household began to bring out dishes of food, two of men elaborated on their detainment experiences.

I didn't cross it. I was working in the cornfield when two armed soldiers went up to me. I was on my territory. When they came, I thought they wanted to drink some cold water. How could I think that they wanted to arrest me? This one soldier left and the second one came without holding a gun. Then there were 6 people standing approximately 100 meters away from me. One of them was a sniper and the rest were holding guns. They called me, and I started trembling. I grabbed my phone and approached them. They asked me why I had crossed the border. I told them: 'How have I crossed the border? If you allowed us to plough and sow here, why aren't you letting me harvest now?' I was 100 meters from signpost and they were standing on the other side, 5 meters away from it. They were hiding in bushes. [...] At first, they took me to the military base. A Russian captain wrote down my name and surname, asked me where I was from. Afterwards, we went to Tskhinvali.

When asked what happened in Tskhinvali, the man replies:

Nothing. They just questioned me for 5 minutes. They asked who I was, where I was from and what I was doing there. After that day, I was locked in an ordinary room with a wooden door, which didn't even close completely. I had food in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening. I ate the same things as officers did. They asked us if we wanted to use a restroom. They even allowed us to walk in the yard for some time. We received new newspaper every morning. Russian newspaper. Where could you find Georgian one there?

Contrary to popular perceptions created in media accounts, villagers are not clueless about where risk begins and ends. Instead, villagers demonstrate with precision, down to the meter, and understanding of where border enforcement begins. "We, villagers, do know these territories pretty well," stated one woman from Zardiaantkari. Others made similar claims such as, "I can easily recognize where it starts," and "Old people know these territories by heart" (Man, Didi Bershueti). It's easier to maneuver the border when it has been marked with fences of course. Nonetheless, it is clear from my conversation and walking with informants that this often invisible border becomes legible through physical landmarks, such as tree lines, hills, the construction of roads and trenches, as well as irrigation canals, churches and cemeteries, which are often located on the margins of the village. These offer ways to navigate the landscape. For example, "Both in Kirbali and Bershueti [...] there were grasslands followed by forests. They [the



*Figure 16.* A line of stumps in Adzvi offers a marker for villages to use to identify the ABL. June 2016.

Russians] left the grasslands on Georgian side and took forests away. That's how people know. They cannot go into the forest" (Man, Zeghduleti). Whereas in other locations, such as Gugutiantkari, villagers understand that the border starts after their gardens. Villagers discern where the boundary is located because how gardens are cared for; the areas that are clearly overgrown and neglected serve as indicators for the location of the border. In some cases, some gardens were even burned to help with identification (Man, Mereti). This was the case in Adzvi, where I took a walking tour with my respondents and they showed me the charred tree-line (Figure 15), which used to be their orchard. Now those black, burnt stumps, which are shadows of my informants' former livelihoods, offer a marker for where risk of detainment begins.

Villagers also seemed knowledgeable about the frequency and nature of military exercises and patrol patterns by Russian border guards, as well as methods to escape or

avoid detention.<sup>80</sup> This knowledge meant that some villagers were able to identify lower risk crossing points; however, they were naturally hesitant to disclose any such places in our conversations.

### Borderization as a “Man’s Issue”

If villagers have developed a sophisticated, complex spatial knowledge to maneuver the ambiguous areas of the ABL, then why do they continue to take the risk? Responses to interview questions about risk and detention provided gendered ways of understanding the borderization issue. Interview questions helped to expose the role that

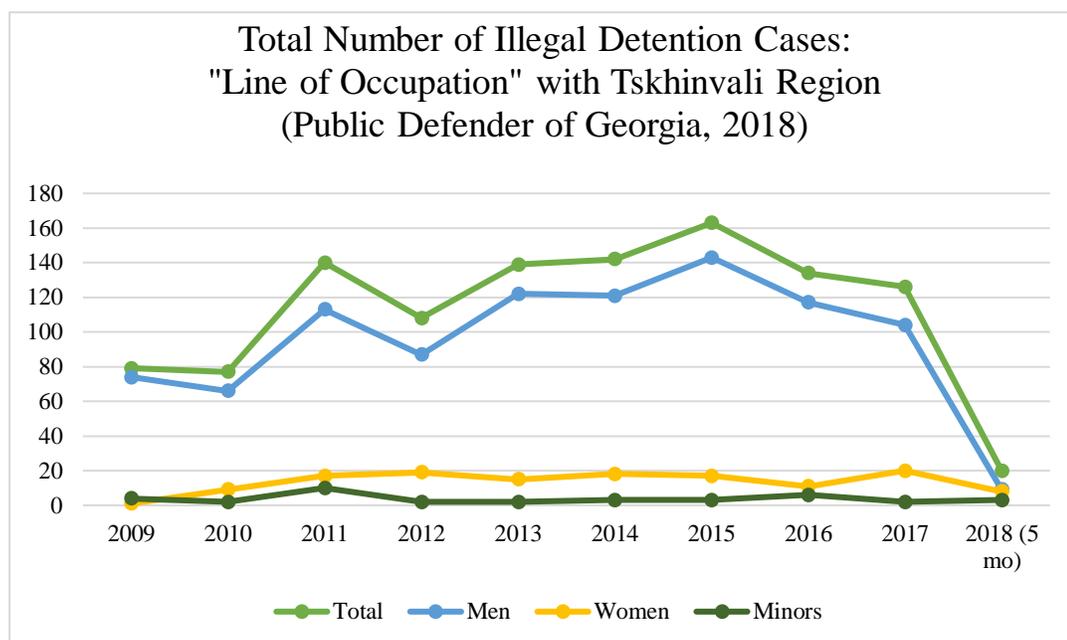


Figure 17. Total Number of Illegal Detention Cases: "Line of Occupation" with Tskhinvali Region. Data from the Public Defender of Georgia (2018).

<sup>80</sup> Although the documentary *I Swam Enguri* is about crossing into Abkhazia near Khurcha-Nabakevi, this film offers insight into crossing the ABL secretly and “illegally.” One scene shows a group of men, women, and children quickly crossing the river and another group running not far behind, followed by an FSB border guard. After safely getting to the Georgian side, the voices in the background can be heard taunting the border guard for not catching them. Despite being a valuable source of evidence, I have ethical concerns about sources such as this, which reveal too much about the strategies and locations used for crossing. I worry that such documentation could endanger those who attempt to traverse the boundary line or it how it could lead stricter border controls. To protect my research subjects these places will not be disclosed.

various social positions impacted villagers' risk of detention. To elicit such information, I asked questions about the types of activities that brought people close to the border, how or whether they thought borderization and detention affected men and women differently, and whether (and if/why) they had been detained.

Women were identified as being detained far less than men. In other words, men were disproportionately impacted by the issue of arbitrary detention. Figure 17 shows data released in a report by the Public Defender of Georgia (2018) between 2009 and 2018 for the Tskhinvali region. Of the total cases of detention, 137 were women and 37 were minors. This means that adult men accounted for 85% of all detentions. To understand why villager's men were differentially imperiled, I looked at the narrative structure of interviews and the repetition of certain patterns, which helped provide explanations of gendered mobility.

When asked if a respondent crossed the ABL (intentionally or unintentionally) or knew of someone who had, most villagers, unsurprisingly, would deny that they had ever done so. These responses often included statements such as, "No, never and never will. Everyone is so scared. We are under constant fear" (Woman, Zardiaantkari). Responses such as this felt like a dead end. However, despite initial claims that "No, nobody crosses," as interviews progressed and trust was established, respondents would eventually remember either a time they had crossed or a story about someone they knew that had a detention experience. One interview respondent called attention to the under-reporting of crossing stories in our interview session. In the group interview that I conducted in Zardiaantkari, one woman refuted another woman's claims that no one from

their village crossed the border. “People do cross even today. Of course, they do. Why are we telling lies?” she rhetorically asked the group.

Questions about whether men or women are differentially impacted by detention and borderization were also met with initial resistance and denial. Respondents would strongly insist that borderization was not a gendered issue. Referring to detention, numerous villagers asserted that the Russians do not discriminate when they kidnap people. “They [the Russians] do not care whether it’s a man or a woman. They capture anyone they can. Anyone who crosses the conditional border is detained” (Man, Koda). Some even jokingly described how detention impacted more-than-humans living along the ABL. For example, one respondent explained that detention “doesn’t concern only to a human being. Even if a cow crosses, it cannot be returned back.” The same woman further explained, with amusement, a story about her dog, who had been “captured” by an Ossetian boy. In the interview, she explained, “I went to the border every day for the duration of a week. I didn’t cross the border, of course. And I was shouting at them that I wanted my dog to be returned back. Finally, his mom gave the dog back,” as pictured in Figure 18 (Zardiaantkari). A woman from Plavismani was among a number of other respondents to discuss how detention impacts non-humans and their relationship with local farmers. In the interview, she explained about how cattle crosses the border:

But if a cow crosses and a herdsman runs after it and crosses the border himself, he can be easily captured. They try not to get close to the fence but there are no



*Figure 18.* A dog from Zardiaantkari that was “kidnapped.” August 2016.

grasslands and animals have to be fed somehow, right? So, they go a bit far away and if they cross, they are captured...It’s a big village. It’s surrounded by mountains. Some people take their animals in those mountainous areas, where there are grasslands. The area near these mountains is fenced. The fence isn’t that high. In fact, it’s pretty low and an animal can easily get over it. Sometimes the fence can be damaged and then it’s even easier for a cow to cross.

Responses to questions about activities that bring villagers within proximity of the border were helpful in establishing who (or what) is at greatest risk of detention. The division of labor in rural Georgian villages offers the clearest explanation of why men are more vulnerable to detention. Detention numbers rise in the summer and early fall, as well as around important religious holidays, such as Easter, when villagers attempt to cross to visit churches and cemeteries. Lewington (2013) describes, “there are certain times of the year when detentions across the ABL are almost guaranteed: in *jonjoli* season; at harvest time in the orchards; and when mushrooms and walnuts are ready, or when villagers collect winter firewood (most of the woodland is on the Ossetian side of

the ABL)” (p.60).<sup>81</sup> Reasons related to livelihood, such as collecting firewood, herding, hunting, and fishing were the most common explanations. Several times, I was told that someone had been detained for wanting to sell “beans and stuff like that.” The desire to attend weddings, funerals and visit cemeteries or even picking flowers were also commonly mentioned.

Respondents attribute the division of labor to the increased risk of detention for men and in the process also reify gendered public/private binaries. For example, one respondent from Avlevi explained, “Men work the land. Men are shepherds. Women do not do such kind of stuff and they are afraid to go to the ABL.” Another woman provided a similar answer. “I think that men’s work is more external than women. Women do not take care of cattle. I mean, they do it here, but their work does not bring them closer to the border. As for men, their work is different. They have to walk a lot” (Woman, Bredza). Men similarly explain how the division of labor, i.e. working in gardens or dales, contributes to their risk of detention. “We have to go harvest barley; we have to go to our dales that are located close to the ABL.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests there might also be a differential and inconsistent enforcement of the border by Russian FSB, which signifies gendered biopolitical border security practices. Consistent with literature on gender and border crossing, certain bodies appear to be regarded as more suspicious or dangerous, while others are benign. The examples discussed in my interviews which demonstrate the variable permeability of the ABL include women, children, the elderly/infirm, and the inebriated.<sup>82</sup> These are the

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<sup>81</sup> Jonjoli (ჯონჯოლი) is a plant called bladdernut, prized by Georgians as a salad vegetable.

<sup>82</sup> Citing multiple sources, Lundgren (2018) writes, “However, Georgian men who participated in the 1992-1993 war and who the Abkhaz suspect participated in war crimes or were involved in guerrilla movements

bodies that most often populate stories about people, who were not detained for crossing the ABL. These examples can be used to understand the differential encoding of bodies within the Russian border securitization scheme, particularly how these bodies “provide a corporeal layer of security due to their noncombatant status” (Fluri, 2011, p.290).<sup>83</sup> These categories of subjects seem to fall within the parameters of a gender subordinating, masculine protector-protected dichotomy, which imagines them as vulnerable or helpless, in need of protection, or as not posing a credible security risk. This essentializes certain bodies as benign objects and political innocents. Able-bodied males, however, are perceived as a much greater danger to the regime and thus more often the target of detention practices.<sup>84</sup> Some men have been told that detentions of younger men happened because they took part in the war (Man, Mereti). One man explained, “They treat badly those people with who they didn’t have good relationship before or those that resisted at the time of capture. Other than that, ordinary citizens are treated in a civilized way” (Didi Bershueti).

During visits to the villages, informants sometimes described instances when a border guard had permitted a woman from the village to visit the cemetery. For example, a married couple invited us to sit under an expansive arbor draped in grapes next to a

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risk imprisonment if they enter Abkhazia (Human rights Watch 2011; UNHCR 1994; Weiss 2012). Consequently, troops at the border crossing and along the boundary line have viewed men of certain ages with suspicion (Human Rights Watch 2011; Weiss 2012).” Describing the flow of goods across the boundary, the author explains, “Women played a central role in these movements because they crossed more easily than men, who might otherwise be suspected of smuggling arms (Weiss 2012)” (p.639).

<sup>83</sup> Dowler’s (2001) observation about the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, when during the 1960s there was an agreement whereby women and children were not considered legitimate targets of the conflict, serves to support this assertion.

<sup>84</sup> Using a “military mobilities” (Merriman et al., 2016) conceptual framework also would work to consider embodied experiences and movements in militarized settings. Not only does it consider the military technologies associated with regulating mobility and military personnel, but could be used to analyze the role of rural men as ‘collateral’ bodies, people on the margins, “who are subject to state sanctioned violence” (See Forsyth in Merriman et al., 2016).



*Figure 19.* Hospitality and food prepared by research subjects in Mumlaantkari. June 2016.

greenhouse full of ripening tomatoes; a project funded by USAID. Light was filtering through the gaps in the arbor, letting bits of sunshine onto the grass. Our hosts set up a small folding table for us and filled it with khachapuri and fresh watermelon, as seen in Figure 19.<sup>85</sup> At one point in the interview the couple exclaims while chuckling, “I wish Marina was here, you would be able to talk to her too.” I inquired about Marina and the couple responded, “She is Ossetian. She sneaks in here.” The wife then tells us that she crosses every Easter to visit her mother’s grave and that she has never been detained. The husband says that anyone who does this will be reluctant to tell us about it though (Mumlaantkari). During a different site visit, I was shown another instance that anecdotally implied differential enforcement. Along this stretch of fence was a door between two villages. An informant described how a woman, a teacher from the village

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<sup>85</sup>Khachapuri (ხაჭაპური) is a traditional Georgian dish of cheese-filled bread.

on the Georgian side, was permitted to cross back and forth to teach the children on the Ossetian side. Such stories were often accompanied by comments such as, “If a nice woman is captured, they do not even ask her to pay money” (Man, Didi Bershueti, 2016). Similar support is also documented in stories elsewhere. For example, the 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the US Department of State document says:

On June 3, Russian border guards detained two herders who crossed the South Ossetian administrative boundary near Karbala while trying to round up their herd; one was released immediately because of ill health, while the other was released later that day. In mid-August, a resident of the South Ossetian village of Sinaguri tried to cross the administrative boundary into her village from undisputed Georgia, but Russian border guards stopped her because it was after the curfew of 8:00 p.m.; she eventually reached her home by another route, but her husband was later arrested by *de facto* officials reportedly for assisting her “illegal” crossing.

As further evidence of these exceptions, some also allude to a history of women smuggling contraband, such as caviar or household goods, across the ABL. This aligns with what Schemenauer (2012) describes in her study of female drug couriers across the US border. The author describes how notions of femininity and womanhood can be used to thwart suspicions by authorities of illegal activity. Women perform and strategically use gender by employing images of motherhood as innocent, caring, domestic and vulnerable to evade detection. There is at least partially true along the ABL. However, most of the stories I received were less about this kind of intentional deployment of femininity/masculinity and more about the assumptions that border guards carry about who presents a threat to the border regime and the nation. This supports an interpretation of policing and enforcement, which operates under a “masculinist logic of protection” (Young, 2003).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Prokkola and Ridanpaa (2015) stress the importance of paying attention to the bodies that carry out border surveillance and control in addition to bodies that cross borders. Their article on the Finnish border guard

Meanwhile, other narratives chronicled how some had not been detained because they were either too old, too young, too ill of health, or even too drunk. One respondent tells me, “The border guards avoid detaining elderly people and children by the way. Well, they didn’t capture Kazbega [referring to another villager]. The border guards came and told him that he had crossed the border, but he was too old and that’s why they didn’t take him to Tskhinvali” (Woman, Zardiaantkari). Numerous times, I was provided stories of “drunk men” crossing the border. In Zemo Nikozi a woman explained that “There were times when people just couldn’t tell where the border was drawn, so... We had a guest who got drunk and went to Tskhinvali by mistake. He stopped a car there—he thought it was a taxi and told the driver to take him to Kutaisi.” In this story, the man was taken to Tskhinvali’s prison instead. This was right after the war before the system of fines was established, so the woman explained that he was detained for a long period of time. Most of the stories that I was told about men who had mistakenly crossed while inebriated were not detained.

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service helps illustrate the role that gendered imaginations and rationalities, i.e. how the production of knowledge, plays into the domain of border guarding. Recent scholarship by other authors such as Vaughn-Williams and Basham (2012), assert similar claims, arguing that scholars should be attentive to the way sovereign power works on bodies in different ways at the border. Border policing is itself a masculinized regime in Georgia. Monitoring and policing the border consist of forces composed primarily of men. Russian FSB border guards and Georgian police are exclusively composed of male forces, especially compared to the “softer borders” at the airport, where visa control checkpoints are largely composed of women. Information from the EUMM also shows that while they aim to gender mainstream their personnel and the composition of their patrols, these also remain highly masculine. The “Special Annual Report on Gender Mainstreaming (2016)” states that Field Office teams aim to “strategically use female monitors and language assistants for interviewing women” and “providing a greater sense of security, particularly by women and children” (p.3). Despite this, only 25% of the international staff are women, thus making it difficult to plan the composition of patrols. Furthermore, men and women in the mission have different professional backgrounds. The document states that “men are overrepresented among those with a military background and women among civilians” (p.5). In addition, when I asked about the number of women serving as Georgian police officers at border checkpoints, the information was unavailable, though participant observation offered no observable women in these posts. When I asked about the FSB, no women border guards had been observed.

Stories about children were also illustrative of differential imperilment. For example, a person in Plavismani described a case where two herdsmen were detained, but only one was taken to Tskhinvali because the other was underage. During the interview, the respondent explained, “You can tell that he’s underage. They asked him how old he was and when they found out he was 17, they released him.” Releasing children was described by my informants as one of the unwritten rules of the border regime. Interestingly, together these stories begin to call into question claims that Russians will simply detain anyone that crosses the ABL.

After learning about the idiosyncrasies of who gets detained, I began to deliberately request women’s stories about detention and borderization, though I quickly learned that women deferred to men to discuss the detention issue.<sup>87</sup> Comments by villagers on numerous occasions described detention as a “man’s issue.” This was most evident in one of my first interviews in Atotsi.

Sitting on a small rickety, make-shift wooden bench, along a newly paved road under the swaying limbs of a large tree on a dry, drowsy summer afternoon, I began to interview an elderly woman, hunched over and clothed in black, about her life adjacent to the ABL. A young man squatted in the nearby grass, taking refuge in the shade from the midday sun. Together we enjoyed some small green sour plums called alucha, tossing the pits off into the distance. When I began asking about border fences and detention, the elderly woman was hesitant to respond. She eventually began calling to a man to join the interview. “Come here,” she shouted! “They are asking where the Ossetian boundary line

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<sup>87</sup> My original intention was to collect and tell women’s stories of borderization to address the demand for more of women’s stories of conflict.

is located and I'm not sure what to answer. You are a man, you sometimes go there, right?" Despite asking for *her* experience and thoughts on the issue, she stated further, "Yes, but I am a woman. I do not go there."

On numerous occasions, women deferred to men to answer questions about detention and crossing. Even when only women were present, they described their knowledge of the issue as limited. When men were present, it was common for women to exit interviews during the conversation, despite requests for them to participate and to learn more about their perspectives. Even for those women who remained during interviews, their voices were often reserved and quiet, chiming in occasionally to correct information reported by someone else in the conversation. Furthermore, their contributions to conversation concerned broader "domestic" issues and economic challenges characteristic to rural Georgia, rather than concerns related directly to border construction, security, Russian policing and detention. I paid close attention to the way they carefully slipped in and out to care for children, to make tea, or to prepare khachapuri. The echoes of babies crying and dishes clinking together can be heard in the background of my recordings.

Examining literature on the constructions of conventional gender roles in Georgia helps to explain the privileging of male speech within conversations about detention and border security. For example, analyses of the Georgian tradition of supra as discussed by Tsitsishvili (2006) and Linderman (2011) provide some useful insights. Supra is a Georgian feast, where typically men assume the role of tamada (თამადა), i.e. toastmaster, and drink copious amounts of alcohol. The traditional supra feast has long been a site for the public display of male bravado. The active, loud and unrestricted

boasting of men at supra is contrasted to women's relatively quiet, reserved presence. This tradition highlights how women's right to speak in public has been silenced over time. While these norms are continually evolving, these codes of behavior may nonetheless impact who has the right to speak about this issue.

Despite borderization being framed as a "man's issue" by many of my informants, the effects of detention and border security for men and women are deeply entwined. For example, insecurity was discussed in relational terms through the co-constitution of risk and vulnerability. This is evidenced by how borderization has impacted household economies. For example, in one interview a woman insisted, "Being a woman has nothing to do with this problem. We are being affected the same way as men are!" However, as she elaborated, she began to show the relationality between the impact on men and women. She explains, "When we cannot cultivate land and take care of cattle anymore, the whole family is affected: a man, a woman and a child. Does it really matter how a man, or a woman is individually affected?" (Woman, Zardiaantkari). Another woman, a widow from Ditsi, explained the need for strong men. "We do not have men and we have to do everything on our own. Those who have strong men in families can water their gardens. But who will allow me, a woman, to water a garden? I have two huge gardens and I haven't watered them since the beginning of the war [when her husband died]." In cases when a husband has passed away or sons have moved to the city, some women expressed how their own precarity increased. For example, when Tatuli and I arrived in Ditsi to interview this woman and her family, the sky was darkening with rain clouds. Our informant was concerned about her hay. She was scared because it was cloudy. The rain would make her hay wet and useless. She was not able to locate a man

or a tractor to assist her. “These are the problems we have in our village. I have three children. How can I feed them when we live such kind of life? It’s impossible. We cannot even bring the hay at home. It’s unbearable for young people to live here” (Ditsi). I read this moment as an important erasure of the binaries between the public battlefield and private home front (Dowler, 2001). When villagers cannot earn money for a living, then they cannot feed their herds and they cannot provide the necessary things for their children. “When a man is unable to earn money through his work, a woman is unable to use this money properly, right? This causes an economic crisis in families” (Woman, Zardiaantkari). When a man is unable to fulfill his role as breadwinner, everyone in the family suffers, according several of my informants.

Yet, such simplified storylines should be challenged. This narrative tends to overlook the key role women have played in adapting and adopting more flexible roles due to new and changing economic conditions in society, either because of displacement, transnational migration, or democratization following Communist collapse. Women participate in much of the agricultural labor in the village, though the stories I was told did not convey this. However, women’s gender roles and agency in Georgia have been thoroughly analyzed by a number of authors, such as Torosyna et al. (2016), Zurabishvili and Zurabisvili (2010), Zurabishvili et al. (2009), Sumbadze (2008), Sabedashvili (2007), Kandiyoti (1988) Mars and Altman (1983), among others. Some of this literature specifically focuses on IDPs, as in Kabachnik et al.’s numerous articles. Such sources have noted how upheaval has displaced women and men’s identity and agency in Georgia. This literature is important for showing how gendered displacements are deeply entangled. Women play a significant role in shaping male perceptions of their

masculinity. For example, Regulaska et al. (2017) explain, “Both men and women indicated that they thought women have adapted better and have had an easier time doing so” (p.147) (See also Brun 2000). This literature is essential to understanding the gendered dimensions of borderization, because the expansion of women’s roles as breadwinners and caregivers must be considered within the bounds of traditional (and hegemonic) gendered power structures. This change in women’s roles has left men feeling defeated, humiliated, and emasculated. This is compounded by the humiliating forces of the creeping border.

### **Traumatic Masculinities: Risking Detention as Resistance**

Why risk detention? Is it worth it? Responses to these questions offer embodied, emotional and gendered perspectives on mobility and helped to unpack the structural vulnerabilities of conflict-affected communities. In one emotionally powerful interview, a woman described how her mother, who she had not seen in years, had died in South Ossetia. Devastated by the prospect of not attending the funeral, she traversed the barbed wire fence in her village. In the interview, she and a group of women were laughing as she described how low the barbed wire was to the ground, and how easy it was to step over. She recounted how she had not made it very far across the ABL before being caught by Russian border guards. This makes her one of the very few stories of detention by woman collected for this project.

Her story was striking, not because she was permitted to attend the funeral after being detained, although that was striking, but because of the meaning projected by her story. I was moved by her abrupt transitions from laughter to tears, as she gently squeezed my hand during the interview, concluding her story by thanking me for

listening. When I asked her if it was worth being detained to go to the funeral, she firmly said yes. "I saw my mother for the very last time and cried on her grave. I hadn't seen my mother for years and then..." Her words trailed off as she began to cry. She would do it again without question.

By continuing to undertake labor and social activities at the risk of detention, men and women from adjacent villages practice a type of resistance to the economic and social changes caused by borderization. This is both a way of constructing livelihoods strategies and attempting to build a normal life in the face of ruination. It also represents a way that villagers contest the geopolitical claims to territory, which borderization performs. For example, when asked about South Ossetian independence or sovereignty, most asserted that South Ossetia is "our territory." One woman explained, "We'll never admit their independence." One way that villagers perform this claim is by taking on activities that place them across or near the border.

I argue that the meaning of Georgian masculinity in particular is inflected by the need to run new risks of being detained. Men's narrations and encounters with the border offer evidence of a kind of mundane resistance or even a banal nationalism.<sup>88</sup> Dowler's (2001) work shows us that resistance does not need to be overt. Rather, resistance is locatable within the mundane acts of everyday living. For example, by continuing to undertake labor at the risk of detention, men in adjacent villages have asserted a refusal

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<sup>88</sup> Michael Billig (1995) coined this term to differentiate everyday, omnipresent symbols and expressions of how the nation is 'flagged' from extremist variants. The flag is useful literally and metaphorically to understand the concept, e.g. the "flag hanging unnoticed on the public building." The concept has been recently taken up by a number of political geographers, exemplified by the special issue of *Political Geography*, which features a series of ways in which the concept is useful to political geographers. This includes the introduction article by Koch and Paasi (2016), "Banal Nationalism 20 years on: Re-thinking, re-formulating and re-contextualizing the concept."

of the dispossession and the demasculinizing forces of monotony, passivity and resignation that has resulted due to conflict and even the social fragmentation that preceded this after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Masculinity in the post-Soviet region has received relatively little attention (Frederiksen, 2011); therefore, studying men's performances as they encounter the border provide important insights into masculinities in the region. While a growing body of research, such as Barkaia and Waterston's (2017) edited volume on women in Georgia, offers an important contribution to understanding how conflict and political and economic restructuring has transformed gender roles and relations for women, a comparative collection on masculinities does not exist. Nonetheless, I worry that by emphasizing men's experiences with detention and confronting FSB border guards that I will participate in the reification of the peripheralization of women's knowledge, role and experience in the story of borderization. Women's accounts of detention, attempted abductions, like parts of the ABL, were often rendered invisible in the interview process, as these issues became circumscribed as a "man's issue." If I were to undertake follow-up work for this segment of the project, other tactics—changes to interview questions, organization and even location—would be pursued to better approach questions about women's mobility.

One of the most important studies on post-Soviet masculinities that provides a framework for understanding gender and detention is Kabachnik et al.'s (2013) research on traumatic masculinities in IDP populations in Georgia. This work can be situated among other scholarship on the psychological stress of war and how it impacts the construction of identity and masculinity. Alternative concepts include "post-traumatic

masculinities” and “displaced masculinities” (Khosravi, 2009; Kalmar, 2018). Traumatic masculinities capture some of the lasting impacts of the war on displaced men in Georgia. I argue that it can also be applied to conflict-affected communities impacted by borderization, since like IDPs, many men have been dispossessed of their livelihoods as a result of creeping annexation and similar trauma-producing conditions, which disrupt gender roles and men’s privileged patriarchal status. “Traumatic masculinities become an alternative set of gender performances which still cling to dominant notions of maleness in Georgia” (p.774). Kabachnik et al. add, “Traumatic masculinities are not a replacement for hegemonic masculinities,” but instead “both can exist simultaneously” (p.777). Borderization offers an additional site of traumatic masculinities production.

Frederiksen’s (2011) anthropological study on young men in Batumi also offers important conceptual tools for understanding the impact of social fragmentation and continual crisis on the once time-honored male role of family provider. Living in a situation of loss because of civil war and a fragile economic climate (e.g. caused by the 2008 global financial crash and the Soviet Collapse) have had a tremendous impact on how men see their role in society. Frederiksen calls this “dispossession” (Humphrey, 2011) and “gender damage” (Kideckel 2008). This emasculation is “the sense of having lost formerly well-established ways of proving oneself as a man” (p.167). I apply this work to help show how “gender damage” becomes observable in the ways that men risk and confront detention along the ABL.

The result of ongoing forms of humiliation, argues Frederiksen, are pursuits of manliness through “self-destructive endeavors” and hypermasculinity. For example, confronting the border regime could be regarded as one of these self-destructive acts that

men along the ABL undertake. Like Frederiksen, when I encountered men for interviews to talk about how borderization and detention had impacted their lives, it was sometimes “in birdja—hanging out” in seemingly small drinking parties with men fumbling over their words. Many offered stories that showed how deliberately challenging the border regime constituted a pursuit of manliness and Georgian identity. Border transgression thus offers an “arena” in which rural villagers could be or become men (p.178). I also argue that the act of storytelling in groups, as I witnessed during interviews, also offers a platform for men to perform their masculinity to other men (Kabachnik et al., 2013, p.784).

Stories about confronting the border regime and abating capture can be read as aggressive acts of resistance that not only push back against the Russian border regime, but also the sense of shame tied to the evolution of gender roles as a result of social upheaval. It is a way to redeem hegemonic constructions of masculinity. This was best illustrated during fieldwork in the village of Kirbali, where men’s stories of their encounters with FSB border guards exemplify physical strength, endurance, and bravery, all of which are central to historical notions of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>89</sup>

There is an important adage in the village of Kirbali, “You are not a real man if you haven’t been detained in Tskhinvali once” (Man, Kvarkhiti). This saying came to life when Tatuli and I pulled our faded red, two-door Mitsubishi Pajero into Kirbali. We hadn’t planned to visit this village, but our contact from an earlier interview in the day encouraged us to make the trip. He even caught a ride with us, traveling in the tiny back

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<sup>89</sup> This could potentially be interpreted as “weapons of the weak,” which James Scott (1985) describes as forms of everyday resistance available to those who have not consented to the dominance of the Russian regime.

seat and chatting as we jostled along a potholed filled road. When we arrived, we found a large group of men under a tree in the center of the village. A single woman eventually joined the conversation after we introduced ourselves and the project. It was obvious that some of them had been drinking. One man's speech slurred; he was also belligerent and visibly stumbling around.

As we talked, the theme of this interview became confronting the border regime. Several men had stories about their encounters with the Russian FSB border guards. Sometimes these villagers would go to St. George's church and knowingly cross into disputed territory. There are only signposts; no fences have been built in Kirbali at this time. Half of the cemetery had been annexed and the FSB routinely patrolled this area. One man explained the significance of the demarcation location: "By occupying half of the cemetery, they have trampled down our ancestors."

In this interview, a couple of men explained how the quantity of people present at the ABL impacts safety and how group size is used as a deliberate strategy to abate capture and confront FSB border guards. I am told that larger groups are more likely to be spared from detention.<sup>90</sup> One man from the group in Kirbali explained, "We were ten [later we are told 14] men yesterday and they couldn't detain us. But when they saw one man, they beat him." One man ended up staying behind. The Russians wanted to detain him. When he resisted arrest, he was assaulted. The group describes how villagers have

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<sup>90</sup> This was implied on other occasions. For example, some men in Didi Bershueti also explained, "If they see you alone, they'll capture you. They can capture 2-3 people as well." Following up, "But when they have to deal with the masses..." When we asked about this in another village, a local representative explained groups are often safe from detention. Recalling a story about Kirbali, when a large group from the village visited a cemetery and church on the other side of the dividing line, the man explains, "When there is a religious holiday and the whole village goes there, then Russians do not react. In other cases, they always react" (Zeghduleti).

been forcibly taken, grabbed and dragged across the line. One of the respondents even described how the FSB take photos as “proof” of border transgression. Then the man who was most visibly drunk exclaimed, “Russians come here, forcibly take Georgians to another side and then detain them. We can beat them but then our policemen will arrest us. What should we do?” He added that “injustice happens in Kirbali! I was almost detained while I was taking care of cattle. If they caught me, I would beat them!” Another man in the group helped to clarify the story to us. “He wasn’t taken to Tskhinvali. They wanted to arrest him on Georgian territory, but he beat border guards and took away their guns. Then he managed to escape.”

The drunk man followed up by commenting, “If we go up to that hill, they’ll come momentarily. The hill is called Zariaantgora. They have built a signpost there. They want us not to come closer than 200 meters to the signpost. We do not do so. But why do they cross and violate their own rule? That’s what I’m interested in.” The man explained that he has strength, just like the Russians: “I went up there one day and tore the signpost down. No one was there when I did it. So, if we do not go closer than 200 meters, why do they do so? I have strength too and I can beat them if needed!” I remember feeling the energy of group intensify with every word; the man’s story emboldened the others to share similar narratives. One followed this by claiming, “By the way I was almost detained three times.” When asked how he managed to escape, he described, “I have run away; I have lied to them; I have beaten them.”

Interestingly, extolling men’s heroism and bravery during these interviews was also constituted by inflating/conflating the fears of women vis-à-vis men. Women are described as not being as vulnerable to detention as men because “women are afraid.”

This relational construct persisted in almost every interview. It reveals an underlying construction of masculinity, which implies a juxtaposition between men and women's roles, a protected/protector dichotomy, in relation to risk. One of the men in Kirbali rhetorically asked me, "What are women going to do near the border? Nothing." Another man in a different village explained, "Only a woman cannot go there, a man has to accompany her." He added, "Men do physical work. We take care of our women" (Man, Zemo Nikozi, 2016). As with the previous comments, in Atotsi, other men also claimed: "A woman doesn't go there. We take care of our women." Others elaborated: "Women do not get close to the fence. They are afraid. Capturing man is one thing and capturing woman is a completely different thing. I don't even remember a woman being detained actually. Women do not take care of cattle. Men do." Women are framed as being more afraid and embodying fear, even though there is evidence of women crossing the ABL and even being detained.<sup>91</sup> This reflects important gendered power relations; because of men's emasculation at the border, in order to show their strength, they must demonstrate through their storytelling that women are weak and afraid.

The themes presented so far are prevalent beyond Kirbali and the village interviews that I collected. For example, the Tatumashvili affair and the emergence of the Strength in Unity movement also offer examples of the convergence of detention, risk, masculinity, and national identity.

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<sup>91</sup> Participants did not elaborate on the origins of women's fears, though some alluded to the traumatic experiences of the previous wars. Specifically, several references were made to reported instances of rape during the wars. Human Rights Watch (2009) has documentation of these instances. Some expressed distress about the risk of Ossetian men kidnapping Georgian women. The potential of physical and sexual violence to their bodies could represent a symbolic threat to Georgian constructions of feminine purity.

The gravity of the human rights situation along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) is perhaps most strongly conveyed by the recent deaths of David Basharuli, Giga Otkhozoria, and Archil Tatumashvili. All three instances involved Georgian men, who had “illegally” crossed the ABL from TAT and were subsequently detained. The most recent and highly publicized case occurred in the first quarter of 2018, when thirty-five-year-old Tatumashvili and two other men, Levan Kutashvili and Ioseb Pavliashvili, were arrested in the Tskhinvali region by the Russian-backed Tskhinvali Security Committee (KGB). On February 22, Tatumashvili crossed the dividing line with his car to transport and sell fruits and vegetables in the Akhalkgori Municipality, an area of Georgia annexed by South Ossetia and Russian authorities during the 2008 war. The KGB accused Tatumashvili of “genocide” and “ties with Georgian security agencies,” and detained him based on suspicion of “preparing an act of sabotage” in connection with the presidential elections in the Russian Federation. Unclear and conflicting information about his arrest emerged after the case hit the media. Some reports explain that he was detained after a verbal disagreement with a South Ossetian officer, while a broader narrative suggests that charges levied against Tatumashvili related to supposed retribution for his participation in the August 2008 war as a junior sergeant of the Georgian Armed Forces. However, Tatumashvili was supposedly not present during the 2008 war because he was serving alongside multinational forces in Iraq.

While in custody for questioning at a detention facility, Tatumashvili sustained injuries, which led to his death. These circumstances were hotly contested. Controversy first escalated when appeals for the repatriation of his remains were refused by the South Ossetian authorities. Only after twenty-six days was Tatumashvili’s body returned to

Georgia proper. On March 20, after the Tskhinvali administration had completed a "comprehensive autopsy," the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), acting in its capacity as neutral intermediary, transferred Tatunashvili's body in the border village, Ergneti.

One of the principal concerns about this incident was the inhumane treatment of Tatunashvili during custody. According to a report prepared by Georgia's National Bureau of Forensic Expertise (Levan Samkharauli Forensic Bureau), Tatunashvili sustained over one hundred injuries of different types while detained. The findings classified the incident as "unlawful deprivation of liberty" and "murder," as well as indicated wounds consistent with "torture." However, no one injury in the autopsy report was identified as fatal. In addition, multiple news outlets reported that some of Tatunashvili's vital organs were missing from the body, a similarity shared with the earlier Basharuli case. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin, later confirmed during the Geneva International Discussions (GID) that Tatunashvili's remains were taken to Vladikavkaz just over the border in Russia for an independent laboratory examination. South Ossetian authorities refuted the Georgian forensic findings, claiming that Tatunashvili's injuries resulted when he struggled during questioning and tried to grab a gun from a security guard. He lost his balance during the confrontation and then fell down some stairs. He was taken to the hospital, where he died a couple of hours later. Tskhinvali's forensic experts concluded that Tatunashvili died of acute heart failure caused by ischemia. The report also indicated that Tatunashvili had cirrhosis and chronic hepatitis, which could increase the probability of a heart attack if this were the cause of his death.

Outrage and calls for accountability mounted after the incident. The case became a central subject of discussion during the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) and Geneva International Discussions (GID). Local organizations such as the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), Article 42 of the Constitution, Democracy Research Institute (DRI), and others called for Georgia to utilize international legal mechanisms and lodge an inter-state application against the Russian Federation before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) with respect to the deprivation of life and the restriction of freedom within South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Thousands of people also rallied in Freedom Square in Tbilisi on March 4 for a "Peace is More than War" (Peace > War) demonstration in solidarity and protest of the occupation regime. Signs, the Georgian flag, and flowers adorned St. George's monument as candles flickered under the night sky while crowds gathered.

The critical attention given to Tatumashvili quickly elevated him to a symbol of national martyrdom—an embodiment of Georgian sovereignty claims and their victimhood in the face of Russian aggression. After the forensic examination, Tatumashvili was laid to rest in Tbilisi's Mukhatgverdi Brotherhood Cemetery with full military honors. Video footage and photos of the funeral show crowds of mourners in dark clothing. Images of the hearse arriving, and the procession of pallbearers appeared on Georgian state websites. The body, which was viewable to the public, was laid rest as traditional polyphonic music filled the air. The Georgian flag was carefully folded and presented to the family. Hundreds of mourners including the president, government and parliament officials attended the funeral. President Giorgi Margvelashvili posthumously awarded Tatumashvili the Order of Honour, "Today we have buried our honourable

compatriot Archil Tatunashvili. At the same time, we have seen the real face of the occupant, which is a kidnapper and torturer.” He explains further the valor of Tatunashvili’s transgression of the so-called border:

We thank Archil Tatunashvili's family for raising a hero; a brave soldier who has been defending our dignity and interests outside Georgia; a man who has tragically and heroically died while guarding our homeland. Thank you for bringing up such man. We award Order of Honor posthumously to Archil. I strongly believe that enormous pain that we have gone through will be at least partially relieved when Archil’s case is investigated and perpetrators are punished. God bless Archil’s soul. Generations to come will be raised following his example of heroism.

The “Tatunashvili Affair,” albeit an extreme case, testifies to several important themes in this chapter. First, it shows the insecurity, violence and vulnerability fostered by the uncertainty and indeterminacy of living within the neerland adjacent to the dividing line. Moreover, it captures the way detainment and masculinity become entwined in nationalist narratives.

Strength in Unity, like the Tatunashvili case, also offers demonstrations of the relationship between resistance and masculinity. This organization was founded by David Katsarava. Katsarava recently emerged as a hero archetype in Georgia, reaffirming the dominant masculine ideals and behavior described by the men of Kirbali. Strength in Unity is a self-funded group founded in 2017, which is dedicated to de-occupation. The functions of the group include monitoring the dividing line, capturing evidence and informing the public of the occupation regime by sharing this information. These activities can be followed through daily postings on Facebook. Besides civilian patrols, they are also activists, appearing prominently in recent de-occupation demonstrations. Unlike the banal expressions of resistance performed in Kirbali, Strength in Unity projects an overt form of resistance and nationalism in response to

Russian occupation. At various events, whether protesting in the village or in Freedom Square, their posters read “I remember August 2008” and “I am from Georgia and my country is occupied.”<sup>92</sup> In more recent protests, the demonstrators have been seen displaying photos of Tatumashvili and Otkhozoria. Jardine (2018) writes, “Strength in Unity believes the government is failing to address the crisis and is taking matters into its own hands. Members conduct patrols along the *de facto* boundary while drawing public attention to the troubles faced by people who live near the line.” In response to Tatumashvili's death, Strength in Unity blocked the main highway to Russia, chanting “Get [Russian] barbed wire out of Georgia!” The few articles written about the group have described it as a form of vigilante justice.

It is not the organization alone, but its leader, Katsarava, who has come to exemplify the way gendered bodies act as key sites of geopolitical performance and resistance to Russian revanchism. Katsarava is a recognized risktaker; he is an action star and sportsman who leads Georgia's National Rafting Federation.<sup>93</sup> His critics accuse him of being a populist, a nationalist, and a “Gruzini,” which Jardine explains as “a hyper-masculine traditionalist, a stereotype in line with his carefully crafted action-hero image.”<sup>94</sup> Regarding the Tatumashvili affair, Katsarava states, “The aim of this killing

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<sup>92</sup> See Rayhan Demytrie (2017) short article, where Katsarava is interviewed in a short video clip.

<sup>93</sup> See Katsarava's IMDB page: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4172618/>

<sup>94</sup> Torosyan et al. (2016) refers to Georgia's gender regime as one of “classic patriarchy.” Georgian males are constructed as aspiring the status of strong and honorable men. Custom has long cast Georgian men as wage-earners and the unchallenged heads of households. The division of labor is very clear. “Male” tasks include activities such as herding, collecting firewood, and growing food. One term that I have found to exemplify ideal masculine qualities emulated by rural Georgians is კაცური კაცი (katsuri katsi), literally translating to male man or “true man.” Katsarava's “Gruzini” shares parallels with katsuri ktasi, which refers to a man who exhibits the following qualities: Katsuri katsi is a heterosexual, heroic character, who offers exceptional respect to women. He is a strong, large, brave, gregarious and virile man. His heroism is central to the defense of the Georgian nation and enshrined in collective narratives of Georgia's history of resistance to various imperial powers. The performance of katsuri katsi thus represents a type of hegemonic masculinity. It is important to note that some young and progressive Georgians that I have spoken with in

was to kill us as a nation.” Such rhetoric once again shows how the suffering and losses of border dwellers are scaled-up and enveloped within a powerful system of affective geopolitics. Like the men in Kirbali, Katsarava flaunts the group’s perception of risk: “Most of us are on a wanted list. If they [the Russians and South Ossetians] ever get the chance, they will grab us,” Katsarava has said. “But it’s better to take action – to be patriotic – than to sit back and do nothing. Even if it puts us in danger” (Jardine, 2018). Katsarava seems to be suggesting that doing risk is tied to national duty. Moreover, the group sees themselves as addressing the issue of abandonment within borderline communities: “People in border villages are just scared: they feel like they’re all alone.”

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, the above examples go beyond illustrating how the seemingly invisible and elastic “border” functions as a riskscape. This chapter began simply by introducing detention and restricted freedom of movement as a consequence of the creeping border. By investigating experiences of detention and local spatial knowledge, I was able to discover how men are differentially imperiled under the border regime when compared to women, children, and the elderly/infirm. It is important to stress that that both men and women fully experience borderization and detention, albeit in different ways. This chapter primarily focuses on men’s embodied experiences with selective detention. This means that more research must be done to better understand how women come to encounter the border regime.

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Tbilisi stigmatize katsuri katsi as a traditional and conservative ideal that clashes with the adoption of modern and “Western” values.

By focusing on the men of Kirbali, the case of Archil Tatunashvili, and the Strength in Unity movement, I was able to begin showing how local people are pushing back against the forces of abandonment and transforming conflict-affected communities into a site of resistance as much as a site of violence. These types of border stories are told as a symbolic chest beating, a bravado that exclaims how pushing back or overcoming the occupation regime helps reclaim men's roles as defenders and protectors of their family, village, and nation. Sibley (as cited by Dowler, 2001, p.169) explains that crossing borderlands is an exhilarating experience. The thrill of transgression comes from the way crossing the line constitutes an act of bravery in front of one's peers. I argue that this could be read as an empowering situation for people who experience loss and whose prospects have been compromised by poverty and other types of structural violence. Detention could thus be regarded as more than a condition of violence; it can also be read a symbolic engagement and validation of agency.

## Chapter 6: From a Geography of Violence to a Geography of Peace

“When looking at the interviews once they all were transcribed I realized that after eight years peoples’ views of the events were more sober, less emotional and pragmatic approaches prevailed. The feelings of hatred and desires of revenge were gone. I was surprised to hear these people talk about reconciliation, rebuilding of trust and rekindling of relationships. They remembered relatives, friends and acquaintances living on the other side. They remembered the years spent together” (Aptsiauri in Alborova, et al., 2016, p.9).

Tatuli and I find our driver leaning against the green sedan, chain smoking cigarettes, while cracking jokes with the local police, who escorted us to Zardiaantkari. We climb into the back seat, arms laden with fresh sunflowers given by our host as a sign of gratitude for bearing witness to her story. The voyage home is made in silence; our hearts are heavier than when we set out that morning. Zardiaantkari is one of the last installments of interviews scheduled before I am supposed to return home to the United States. The culmination and immensity of the research experience feels overwhelming; I mirror the grief, frustration and helplessness communicated by the deeply intimate and emotional lived geopolitics that I have encountered over the months and years prior. I feel grief for the many dimensions of loss and abandonment that I have observed, and helplessness to offer tangible relief for such conditions. Nonetheless, I am encouraged by the ephemeral moments of laughter and hope expressed over homemade wine in recycled soda bottles and small, but potent glasses of chacha in the gardens and homes of my informants. As I stare out the window, our car serendipitously passes through Karbi, returning to the site that first triggered my feminist curiosity about the impacts of partition on civilian lives in Georgia. My eyes search frantically for the home, where my classmates and I stood in the rain eight years ago, eager to learn about the 2008 war and its costs.

This research has ultimately been an attempt to convey a story of borderization from the frontlines. I began this dissertation with a historical geography of borderization in Georgia, which presented some of the dominant narratives of geopolitical struggle over South Ossetia rehearsed and practiced by scholars, media and intellectuals of statecraft. Next, I then situated the emergence of borderization in relation to theoretical discussions that consider the relationship between borders, territory and violence. Investigating the political rationality of borderization enabled me to expand conceptualizations of borderization beyond the realm of political theater and understand how recognition politics and unresolved conflict create strategic advantages for the disputing parties. A hardened boundary has allowed South Ossetia to perform a claim to sovereignty, which Russian defends using an evolving system of international norms. Maintaining an irresolvable geography and a system of patronage has provided hard and soft levers over Georgian and Ossetian political destinies, which serves to project Russian power abroad and act as a bulwark to the west. However, emphasizing borderization as leverage at the scale of macro-security risks being “blind to the agency that Georgians and South Ossetians have to create their own futures” (Nan, 2015). To resolve this tension, I have used a feminist geopolitics to recover embodied stories of how the elastic and uncertain geography of the boundary line violently ruptures the fabric of everyday life. This has exposed key dimensions of the post-war situation and its humanitarian concerns for border dwellers, as well as how the geopolitical is (re)made on and through individual bodies. This was essential to exposing the complexities of how the Georgian government has become complicit in the violence of borderization, utilizing the victimhood of its own citizens for political advantage.

The perpetuation of uncertainty as a deliberate dimension of the borderization process should not be understated. Situating borderization within the Russian doctrine of maskirovka has helped to illustrate the powerful use of deceit, obfuscation, and disguise as a coercive force. Acting under the guise of peacekeeping and demarcating based on old Soviet maps are the types of techniques needed to establish deniability and create a façade of legitimacy. These strategies have helped to portray the violence of the border, not as deviant, but as virtuous actions in the service of what might otherwise be regarded within conventional political norms.

In this brief concluding chapter, I recount the primary findings of my research and argue the significance of a feminist approach to understanding the violent geography of borderization. The chapter ends by asserting an agenda for future research, which considers prospects for reconciliation across the line. Many villagers have lamented the violence of separation by stressing the role it has played in hardening social divides, instilling enmity, and carving away at future possibilities, making the potential for reintegration increasingly difficult with time. Despite this, villagers have also offered tangible recommendations for how to mend the wounds of war and transform the divided landscape from a geography violence to geography of peace.

### **Uncertainty as Violence**

The impacts of the struggle over South Ossetia for local populations exemplifies the tragedy of the “territorial trap.” A senior adviser of the Public Defender of Georgia on human rights in conflict-affected regions poignantly explains, “Some conflicts can be characterized as zero-sum or win-win games, but, there are conflicts where both parties are going to lose and it is just a matter of question who is going to fare worse” (Alborova,

et al., 2016). Over twenty-five years of unresolved conflict has exacted a tremendous cost for the progress and human development for people living on both sides of the dividing line. The Sochi Agreement in 1992 and the Six Point Ceasefire Agreement in 2008 have only perpetuated the illusion of peace and stability. If anything, these key agreements have widened and hardened the division between Georgians and Ossetians, rather than paving the way to a durable political solution.

When I began this project, my main question was to understand how borderization has impacted community security. I've learned that the consequences of the war have far exceeded the tragic loss of life and uprooted families. ABL communities have lost up to 50-60% of village lands as a result of borderization, incurring significant financial costs; they have lost business and employment opportunities, experienced compromised livelihoods, and received lower levels of investment. The human costs of partitioning the state have also included demographic declines, widespread trauma, loss of educational opportunities, and significant barriers to important social practices such as connecting with relatives and friends, attending funerals and weddings, and visiting graves. These mundane details are what make up daily life and social worlds; these are the practices that make life meaningful. An IDP from Kareleti describes the effects of disconnection as "soul pain" (Alborova, et al., 2016). The inability to remember one's home and the loss of important social ties across the line create deep cavernous divisions and mistrust, where there might otherwise be connection, family and friendship. Older residents worry that such divisions have meant that young people "grow up knowing only them [Ossetians] as the enemy, as killers" (Alborova, et al., 2016, p.33). As a respondent in my project warned, "children grow up with hate in their heart" (Woman, Koda). Such

comments powerfully convey what is at stake in the partition of the state and materializing the boundary line. Borderization has hardened “divisions in ways that prevent populations from developing linkages that could help maintain a sense of integration that, in turn, could facilitate future efforts at reunification” (Welt in Alborova, et al., p.68).

The conditions for local South Ossetians have been equally unfavorable. The denial of recognition by Georgia and the international community has meant a lack of stability and security, a poorly developed economic sector, limited access to markets, a weak banking system, a failure to protect human rights, restrictions on the freedom of movement, and a lack of standing in the international arena, where unrecognized states are barred from participation (Alborova in Alborova, et al., 2016). While recognition from Russia has resulted in deeper integration, this comes at the expense of independence. This integration has brought little in terms of improvement to the lives and rights of local Ossetian people, who remain isolated from the rest of the world.

The above conditions begin to illustrate how borderization is a violent geography for those living on both sides of the dividing line. Understanding border violence has been a question about how this unique, elastic creeping border has altered villagers’ potential for their lives to flourish and actualize. This coercive spatial engineering process encompasses a complex web of direct, structural, cultural and symbolic violences (Galtung, 1990), like those described by Jones (2016) in his definition of violent borders. I argue that it is the conditions of uncertainty in its multitude of forms that impacts villagers’ sense of futurity. In the dissertation, I’ve explored the manifestation of this uncertainty through two primary lenses: (1) abandonment and (2) gendered mobility.

First, an emphasis on abandonment showed how the creeping morphology of borderization has created a type of carceral geography, confining and enclosing residents within a neitherland, where mobility is regulated, and material conditions are abject. Conflict-affected villages are trapped between opposing security regimes in a space defined by the uncertainty between war and peace, past and future, hope and desolation. Unrecognized sovereignty claims and unresolved conflict have created the perception of living in a permanent state of emergency (Alborova in Alborova, et al., 2016). This has been fostered by a prolonged and stagnant post-conflict recovery process and a system of disrupted governance, which has led to exclusions from care. The consequences of this liminality exemplify Philo's (2017) "less-than-human geography," i.e. that which "subtracts from the human in the picture, what disenchant, repels, repulses – what takes away, chips away, physically and psychologically, to leave the rags-and-bones (and quite likely broken hearts, minds, souls, spirits) of "bare life" (after Agamben, 1998)" (p.257-8). Shots ringing out and explosions in the distance, unexploded ordinances, and the ominous presence of advanced surveillance infrastructure provide material reminders of a constant expectation of impending hostilities and imminent military confrontation. All the while, the boundary line has continued to creep through gardens, dales, and forests. This threat of annexation is perhaps more powerful than actual dispossession for many. At least under the latter conditions there would be certainty; lives could move forward despite tremendous loss. Yet, fear and uncertainty continue to be atmospheric, permeating the fabric of village society.

A neglected, war ravaged landscape, and the liminal status of being "conflict-affected" has also created miserable living conditions. Perpetual states of dilapidation,

loss of livelihoods, and exclusions from care, has gradually chiseled away at the future and prohibits communities from thriving. Over time, these conditions have created a new normal, which is perhaps one of the most insidious dimensions of borderization.

Nordstrom (2004) writes, “Unbearable circumstances become bearable only if there is some belief that they will come to an end” (p.67). Being attentive to the emotional experiences of abandonment has demonstrated how uncertainty assaults personhood and dignity. It undermines hope and the ability to actualize dreams. In the face of ongoing violence, the future has become one of the main casualties (Nordstrom, 2004, p.66).

Many of the elderly residents that I interviewed worried about the long-term effects for future generations. Villages were described as dead; there is “araperi” (nothing) here for young people to make a future. “Why would anyone want to live here?” so many asked rhetorically. A woman in Ditsi explains:

Those who have a little money saved, leave this village. This mostly concerns youngsters. Without doing such thing, my children may die with hunger...It’s unbearable for young people to live here [...] My heart aches when I see that young people cannot develop in this village. There are no resources, no jobs available, nothing necessary for living and raising children in a normal environment.

This has helped to illustrate how the neiterland put lives on hold and alters villagers’ very sense of a meaningful outcome of life’s plans. In this way, borderization has worked to kill the very notion of a tomorrow; it has obliterated any sense of future. This has further entrenched the conflict and its institutions, making people become habituated to thinking in terms of the conflict. This has served to cripple political will, which is why it is so militarily strategic.

Second, the ambiguity of the noncontiguous yet highly securitized creeping border has produced a riskscape for border dwellers. The biopolitics of borderization, i.e.

the use of discipline, intimidation, and force to manage mobility and deny the freedom of movement, exemplifies the physical and symbolic dimensions of border violence. The issue of arbitrary detention has shown how the elasticity of the border is not just about the location of demarcation; rather, it has expressed how the border itself becomes embodied. The security regime moves with individual, gendered bodies. Among those impacted by detentions, men have been disproportionately imperiled, leading to a new form of masculinity defined by trauma. This trauma is seen to work at different scales. Social fragmentation and the literal and symbolic loss of territory has not only jeopardized men's perceptions of their role in the home and community, but as protectors of the nation. Yet, studying the experience of administrative detention has also offered a way to respond to my research question about how communities maneuver and cope with protracted uncertainty. Men's stories of confronting the border regime has served as evidence of agency and resistance in the face of great loss.

This context of limited and restricted mobility resembles a broader, albeit complex and varied, international landscape of technologized physical and virtual barriers, which are designed for confinement and expurgation. Mbembe (2019) explains that "borders have become nothing other than the violence underlying our world's order, a war against mobility," which he (coincidentally) names "borderization." He describes this a computational force leading to the disposability of bodies, interminable waiting and humiliation, suspended time, and the deliberate multiplication of spaces of loss and grief, "where so many people, deemed undesirable, see their lives shatter into pieces." Borderization in Georgia is a case in point, exemplifying the "major contradictions of the liberal order," which have "always been the tension between freedom and security." This

case study is not only applicable to understanding Russian revanchism in the post-Soviet space. The lived geopolitics of this violent border offers insights into other neiterland spaces and contexts, as well as places where elastic borders serve as tools for forcing political acquiescence.

### **The Importance of a Feminist Geopolitics Approach**

What is at stake by not studying the lived geopolitics of borderization? I argue that emphasizing one dimension or scale exclusively risks simplification or degenerating the issue into a theater or spectacle violence, which would undermine witnessing, critiquing, and writing against injustice and suffering. Most importantly, focusing on the theater of borderization as other scholars are tempted to do fails to account for how borderization works across and at intimate, bodily scales. Focusing on statecraft would mean missing the very real and material consequences of borderization for local people. Feminist interventions such as this are necessary to contest the dangerous half-truths that emerge from dominant narrative paradigms, whose security referent is the state. Such marginalize and discount the complex and frequently paradoxical experiences, agency and ingenuity of local populations living on the frontlines.

A feminist geopolitics has been necessary to trouble the uncertainties of borderization and draw attention to the blurriness between public and private, citizen and combatant, visible and invisible, legitimate and illegitimate, and places in time that can be neither described as war nor peace. Doing so has been necessary to prevent the border from becoming so naturalized within the political imagination, that the structural, mundane, everyday dimensions of violence are rendered invisible by comparison to more spectacular performances of violence. Lived geopolitics has served to constantly

juxtapose the routine, ordinary, normative violence of everyday life with extraordinary, excessive or other types of gratuitous violence, in order to remind us that surviving is not thriving.

Furthermore, the feminist research agenda, which emphasizes embodied and situated knowledge, has helped me to better succeed at exemplifying complex power dynamics by considering power differences that exist along various axes. This is most evident in the chapter on arbitrary detentions, where gender was not just an embodied social position but a power dynamic that infuses all spheres of social life.

Finally, we cannot expect to rehumanize and re-inhabit no-man's lands without a focus on human security. Redefining the no-man's land as a neitherland has figuratively helped to confront dehumanizing discourses and perceptions of extraterritorial spaces as unpeopled and exclusionary landscapes. In addition, feminist praxis has conveyed the significance of listening and amplifying voices in ethnographic and narrative methods. This underscores the important relationship between testimony, storytelling, and healing for otherwise living dead populations. For those who have perceived themselves as forgotten, interviewing has provided a method of data collection, as well as an important tool to combat the epistemic violence of narratives of the conflict, which have marginalized and robbed these vulnerable or subaltern communities of their voice. Storytelling itself also had a humanizing effect for research subjects. Being afforded the opportunity to express their experience of the conflict is regarded by some scholars as cathartic and restorative-- it is relief to the heart.<sup>95</sup> Even if no policy changes come of this

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<sup>95</sup> This has been expressed both in my interviews and in other recorded interviews by villagers by other researchers. For example, in *Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in Peoples' Lives*,

research, at the very least, the act of compassionate listening has offered many villagers this, albeit ephemeral, opportunity. This is one way that interviewing alone served as a tool and intervention of reconciliation. Making public the findings of this dissertation, in articles and verbal/written reports to the security actors I collaborated with, will further support an effort to finding durable political solutions and restoring dignity to the lives of these local people.

### **Imagining a Geography of Peace**

An approach that centers on lived geopolitics has also offered a way to amplify the ideas of ordinary people and use this information toward transforming this geography of violence into a geography of peace. I believe this research is the first step to an agenda recently outlined by geographers concerned with developing solutions to the war and violence we conscientiously seek to critique (McConnell, Megoran, & Williams, 2014; Williams & McConnell, 2011, p.930). Geography has a long history associated with territorial and imperial conquest and war-making (Godlewska & Smith, 1994; Kearns, 2009). It is time that we dedicate further attention to conceptualizing the spatiality of peace (Loyd, 2012; Springer, 2014) and reconciliation. I believe that this agenda helps to signal future directions for the research on borderization. It is not enough to just critique border violence—we must endeavor to discover the way communities rebuild, as well as imagine alternative futures and new possibilities in the face of violent spatialities.

During my 2011 field study course in Georgia, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist pulled me aside at the Gori Information Centre after a meeting to ask

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one of the authors describes how an elderly man explained to him that telling his story had “relieved his heart” and that he had wanted to tell his story to somebody.

what I thought should be done about the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. The journalist seemed disappointed when I opted not to comment, explaining that it was not up to me to decide. As a western outsider, I've been cautious about offering concrete prescriptions for conflict resolution. Changes to the dynamic of this conflict are dependent on a fundamental change of attitudes and political culture. This is necessarily to institutionalize non-violent methods of dispute resolution by the parties of the conflict. Ultimately, Georgians, Ossetians and the Russians will have to be satisfied with the arrangements for their relationship to ensure the longevity of the peace process (Nan, 2015). Like my colleagues at the Georgian-Ossetian Point of View Process, I argue that conflict resolution and confidence building are impossible without the participation of those people who carry the heavy burden of conflict. Yet their human stories and perspectives are usually the most neglected, overlooked and peripheralized. Aptsiauri (2016) argues,

People working on the processes of reconciliation and confidence building should listen to the people who went through the war more. This is because people living at the epicenter of conflicts see and feel the environment better, including the opportunities for conflict transformation (p.9).

There are no better experts to recommend political solutions than those who experience borderization every day. During my research, I found that many of the villagers had concrete ideas for how to improve the conditions of their lives and contribute towards reconciliation. However, most complained that their ideas were rarely taken seriously. In Knolevi a man explained to me, "What can we, ordinary peasants, do about this conflict? No one asks for our opinion. We used to have a very good relationship with Ossetians in the past. Now everything is ruined."

Following feminist goals to better recognize subaltern agency and voice, I asked each informant about their perspective on the conflict and conflict resolution at the end of each interview. Did they believe there would be another war? What did they think could be done to work toward reconciliation? Despite often overwhelming narratives of despair, this question exposed an otherwise hidden optimism about the future for some border dwellers on the Georgian controlled side of the Administrative Boundary Line. While some do not believe it is possible to restore relations with the Ossetians, others remain optimistic. The assertion, “We want peace,” seemed pervasive.

Among those who discussed the prospect for reconciliation, two major themes emerged about how to work toward this goal. My respondents often began by addressing Russia’s role in the conflict. Either “Russia must leave this territory” or contrary to polarizing public discourse, relations must be restored with Russia. For example, a man in Adzvi explained, “When our relationship with Russians is restored, Ossetians will return back on their own. Russians will calm them down.” These solutions centered on reunification, though few elaborated on whether this would mean abandoning integration attempts with the EU and NATO. Primarily, suggestions about restoring relations with Russia centered on rebuilding economic ties and reestablishing a common market. “We, peasants, need our goods to be sold. Our main market is Russia.” (Adzvi, Woman). Requests to reopen the Ergneti Market have come to symbolize this argument.

Second, one of the major findings of this project has been a widespread sense of abandonment. At first, villagers describe being satisfied with the response of security actors in their village. The EUMM and other humanitarian organizations visited often and asked about their problems. However, over time, villagers have become disillusioned

with these actors' ability to adequately respond to their needs. Nonetheless, these stories show how local development projects and investments in infrastructure might offer local people a way to regain their dignity. This is evident in the excitement expressed by those who discussed municipal or regionally funded projects, such as the construction of new schools, roads, and boreholes, or the money and resources they have received from USAID, the Red Cross, and other organizations to support their businesses. The photos in Figure 19 exemplify some of the rural, agricultural development projects that villagers



*Figure 20.* Grant funded, agricultural development projects that support rural households along the ABL. Summer 2016.

discussed with me. Many imply that improving development conditions would help to facilitate reconciliation. Better efforts to address poverty and strengthen rural infrastructure to combat the issue of depopulation are regarded as a potential tool for peacebuilding. A few expressed the belief that if the quality of life in Georgia improved, then it would entice Ossetians to return to the Georgian fold.

These are the conditions under which we might begin to imagine the prospect for conflict resolution. Over ten years have passed since the 2008 war and some villagers believe a peaceful future is possible. Therefore, those of us invested in the transformation of this conflict should advocate for learning from conflict-affected populations about how to imagine different futures. More research must be done on the ways in which local communities are involved in building a geography of peace. Politicians, activists, journalists, researchers—we all must listen to the stories of everyday people, “because resolution of conflicts, confidence building, and establishment of sustainable peace will be impossible without participation of these people.” I believe this is what is meant when Nordstrom (2004) argues, “peace starts at the epicenters of violence” (p.177). As Aptsiauri explains, “These people survived the war, they know the price of conflict and better than anyone they know the price of peace” (Alborova, et al., 2016, p.10).

Reflecting on the ideas of local people for how to transform the conflict illustrates an important lesson about the uncertainty and elasticity of borderization. Uncertain and elastic geographies are just that; uncertainty has meant that the future is *yet* to be determined. Elasticity has meant that the boundary line *can adapt* to new political developments. Borders *can be* renegotiated. For all the harm and violence, uncertainty

can also generate hope and present an opportunity to imagine and assert new spatial and social realities. Therefore, uncertainty and elasticity *are* also geographies of possibility.

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