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Crossing riverborderscapes and a view from inbetween: Passenger ferries in South West England

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Abstract

This paper explores the everyday experiences of crossing rivers that form local borders. It proposes and utilises the term 'riverborderscape' to bring together the particularities, complexities, and creativities associated with these border crossings. The term draws on three areas of scholarship. First, the riverborderscape draws on recent scholarly attention to the materiality, and effects on understanding space and place, of watery environments. Second, the term draws on scholarship from within border studies and cognate disciplines that highlights the border as a liminal space. Third, landscape geographies are used to examine the imagination and performance of crossing riverborderscapes. The paper reports on research carried out with passengers, crew, and communities on three rivers in South West England where the ferry routes cross local administrative boundaries. Over the course of the research, participants shared their experiences of crossing these river borders through writing and drawings created while on board the ferry, as well as through surveys and interviews. The research highlights the effects of the materiality of the river on the routes and experiences of crossing, the role of humour in the construction and subversion of everyday boundaries, and the river in-between as a liminal space, a landscape where the imagination may be unmoored and creative licence temporarily set free.

KEYWORDS

borders, ferries, materialities, qualitative research, rivers, South West England

1 | INTRODUCTION

> A border writer knows that the cultural perspective may change entirely by simply crossing a river and sitting on a bench on the other side.
>
> (Magris, 1999, p. 51)

Rivers form common but paradoxical borders. In many places 'long-standing administrative boundaries follow rivers, demarcating counties, parishes and individual properties' (Pooley, 2005, p. 152). Yet rivers are ever-moving, ever-shifting,

and dynamic (Bowles et al., 2019), characterised by currents, tidal movements, and flows of water that seem at odds with the apparent rigidity of borders. Rivers move, sands shift, tides rise and fall, coastlines erode, islands emerge, ice melts, soil is redistributed, and trees grow (Nail, 2016). At the same time, a river's double entendre – as connector and separator (Cooper & Rumford, 2013; Ingold, 2000; Krause, 2016; Roth, 1997; Thomas, 2017) – is also reflected in the 'bridges, gateways and meeting points or barriers, obstacles and points of separation' of a border (Diener & Hagen, 2012, p. 3). As Cooper and Rumford (2013) write:

> Borders create 'channels' or 'conduits' of passage (Paasi, 2009) – even 'rites' of passage (Salter, 2007) – and in doing so provide a means through which facilitated connection, for some and not for others, takes place. Here, borders connect desired mobilities, originating from an outside, to places and locations inside.
>
> (p. 108)

The idea of 'riverborderscape' can be used to understand the shifting and dynamic relationships between rivers and borders. Riverborderscape, as the term suggests, emphasises the materiality of water, a concept that pays attention to how water moves, including flow, current, speed (Krause, 2021; Rhoden & Kaaristo, 2020): the 'material and physical dimensionality of borders' within a landscape (van Houtum & Kramsch, 2017, p. 2). To do so, it provides a confluence between three areas of scholarship. First, 'River' draws on, and contributes to, the watery geographies turn, where the element of water, as opposed to land, is fore-grounded (Krause & Strang, 2016; Peters et al., 2022; Rhoden & Kaaristo, 2020; Ryan, 2016). By acknowledging the materiality and agency of rivers (Brierly, 2020), riverborderscape extends thinking on the spatiality of borders, in particular the recognition of borders as three-dimensional spaces (van Houtum & Kramsch, 2017). Elden (2013, p. 35) has asked: 'how does thinking about volume – height and depth instead of surfaces, three dimensions instead of areas – change how we think about the politics of space?', an approach echoing Steinberg and Peters' (2015) call to understand a three-dimensional perspective of the ocean. In doing so, borders are not simply viewed as clear lines of demarcation but also as in-between, liminal, voluminous spaces, the crossing of which may at times contain creative or generative potential (Nail, 2016; Yildiz, 2016). The deployment of the term 'scape' draws on a geographical tradition of understanding the visual appearance and representation of land (Wylie, 2007) but, more recently, has been widened to understand how people engage with other places, such as sea-scapes or city-scapes, through other senses, including sound and touch (Porteous, 1990). Riverborderscape therefore recognises the dynamic and multi-sensory nature of the river and is a term that encompasses how it is viewed, imagined, and experienced in daily life.

Seen in this way, the boundaries formed by rivers are not fixed lines but, rather, are dynamic entities that draw together human constructions of borders – whether symbolic, social, economic, or imaginative – with the elemental, more-than-human properties of a river. Crucially, these human and non-human properties of the riverborderscape are relational, constantly changing, and always in the process of making and re-making themselves. Thus, as McMillin (2011, p. 128) notes, the way that people view a border changes as it is traversed: 'crossing over borders between states, whether political states or states of mind, can lead one into entirely new circumstances' even when the physical nature of 'there' is not much different to 'here'. Equally, a river's watery materiality can help or hinder movement across it (Krause, 2021), depending on seasonal and diurnal variations in flow, tide, flood, or ebb (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta, 2013; Pooley, 2005).

Thus, to fully understand the riverborderscape it is necessary to cross it. Each passage across the water assembles the mobility, liminality, technology, materiality, and imagination of the riverborderscape in a unique, unfolding way to form a 'crossing'. The journey from bank to river to bank enables us to look from the border, rather than looking both ways across it (see Rumford, 2014). The sense of being in-between spaces opens up new perspectives on the way borders are imagined and lends weight to the idea that a border is created and performed each time it is crossed (Nail, 2016; Yildiz, 2016). Consequently, there is much significance on the way a riverborderscape is crossed. Whereas a bridge may separate the traveller from the water below, a river's materiality becomes all too apparent in embodied acts of swimming or wading (with potentially dangerous consequences). The nature of crossing therefore shapes how a border is imagined and negotiated.

This paper seeks to further the understanding of riverborderscapes through research situated on and across the river, in the watery spaces between bank and river, where 'facilitated connection' may, or may not, be made. Drawing on passenger ferries in South West England, attention is given to the materialities, experiences, and narratives of the riverborderscape. Three key aspects are examined in this paper. First, we pay attention to the river itself, to the tide and currents, in the passage from one side of the river to the other. Second, we consider how the narratives may distinguish, connect,

or offer something new to how rivers, borders, and the landscape are perceived. Finally, we explore how experiences of crossing a river give meanings to the liminal space of the boundary.

2 | FERRYWORK

It is possible to cross a riverborderscape in many ways, bridges being the most obvious, convenient, and safest. This paper, however, focuses on passenger ferries. Far from being obsolete, ferries provide a communal and vital way of crossing water in many parts of the world (McGrath et al., 2020; Vannini, 2012). Ferries hold particular significance for crossing estuaries, which are often too wide, complicated, or expensive to be bridged. The ferry journey, in moving back and forth across the river, emphasises the materiality of the river itself, as the route of the ferry is dependent on the river's conditions. In so doing, the research centres on the border space constituted by the river and considers the construction and complication of situating rivers in conversation with borders. A focus on small, local passenger ferries within a particular geographical and cultural setting – the far south-west of England – contrasts with the international perspectives in this special section, bringing a fresh, playful, and situated interpretation of rivers and borders that reveals the meanings, creativity, and imaginations engendered in these spaces in-between.

In this context, we consider ferry crossings of three rivers in South West England that demarcate local boundaries between different administrative areas and form important imaginative borders between places: the Torridge (Devon), the Helford (Cornwall), and the Tamar (Devon and Cornwall). These ferries were chosen as they follow the route of rivers that are used to demarcate and distinguish administrative areas at different spatial scales, but within the broadly shared cultural and socio-economic context of South West England. The Tamar is described as the 'oldest cultural boundary in Europe' (Biscoe, 2020, unpaginated): it was 'fixed' as the boundary between Devon and Cornwall in the year 937 (Whitelock, 1996, p. 304) and, running almost the length of the border between the counties, has been widely recognised as a contributing factor to a sense of Cornish distinctiveness and cultural identity (Willett, 2013) that is based partly on its Celtic roots, officially recognised national minority status and language (Hayward & Fleury, 2020), and mining and industrial heritage. There are various crossing points but, at its mouth, it is traversed by the Cremyll Ferry, linking Devon and Cornwall. The River Torridge forms a boundary line between two district councils, both within North Devon but with Torridge more westerly, peripheral, and with slightly higher overall levels of deprivation than North Devon District (Devon County Council, 2019). A volunteer-run ferry crosses the Torridge between Appledore (west), with its strong tradition of shipbuilding and seafaring, and Instow (east), a beachside tourist village. In Cornwall, the Helford river is the borderline of the Lizard peninsular and distinguishes two administrative parishes – Helford Passage, characterised by holiday homes and tourism, and Helford, a popular area for fishing – that are linked by a foot ferry operated by Helford River Boats. These communities rely on the ferry to connect them as the journey by land takes around 40 min by car. In contrast, ferry journeys across all three rivers take around 10 min. These river borders may be described as forming administrative borders at different scales – county, district, and parish – and as holding varying historical, political, and cultural resonance. While each crossing is distinct, commonalities in how these riverborderscapes were experienced, narrated, and imagined emerge from the research (Figure 1).

The lead author conducted research between 2018 and 2019 in which she partnered with each of the ferry companies and conducted participatory research on board their vessels, inviting passengers travelling from one side of the river to write and draw their thoughts and emotions on a card while on board. This methodology aimed to capture thoughts and reflections of passengers in the moment of crossing the river, and many responded creatively through drawing, poetry, and recollection of stories and songs while on board. Reflections were therefore situated on and across the river, to capture the emotional and affective experiences of crossing the riverborderscape. Over 300 reflection cards were collected from passengers, roughly one fifth of those interacted with. In addition, she also interviewed passengers and crew, travelled regularly on the ferries, and charted her own responses through poetry, video, and photography. Data was analysed thematically using grounded theory methods. Although differences between the rivers and geographical locations were apparent, overriding themes cut across them. The datasets were analysed spatially, focusing on the land, river, and crossing the river on the ferry.

The paper first turns to how the materiality of the river as a watery space influences the border crossing. The second section turns to the ways in which the participants experience, construct, and subvert through humour the river as a border or boundary. The third section deals with the scape of the riverborderscape and explores how the perspectives from the water may support a creative re-envisioning of the riverborderscape. All participant names used here are pseudonyms chosen by the author.
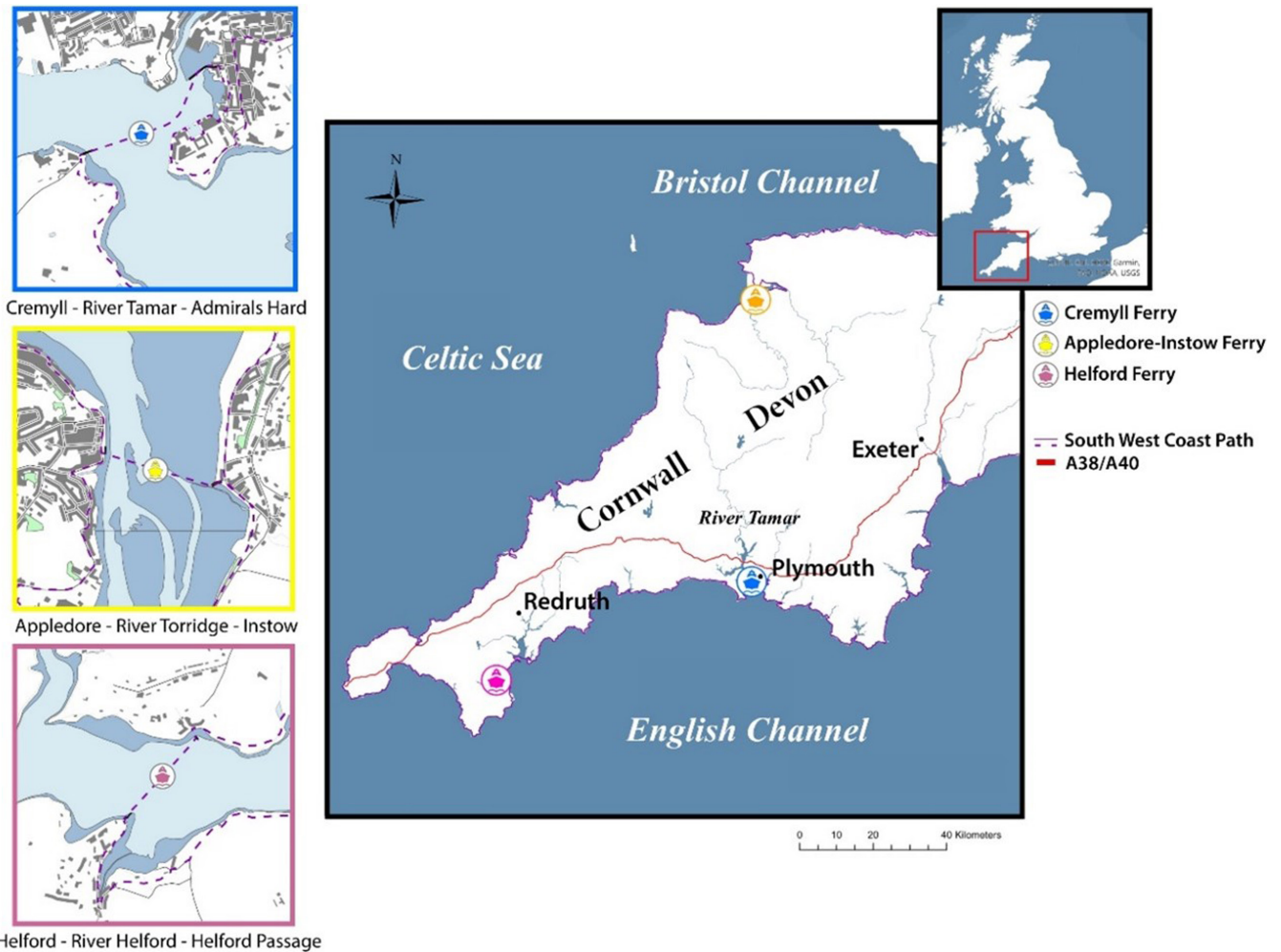
Cremyll - River Tamar - Admirals Hard

Appledore - River Torridge - Instow

Helford - River Helford - Helford Passage

FIGURE 1 Map of Devon and Cornwall showing the ferry crossings.

3 | THE RIVERBORDERSCAPE: THE MATERIALITY OF WATER

> The movement of the border is not a metaphor; the border is literally and actually in motion.
>
> (Nail, 2016, p. 6)

Ordnance Survey maps portray ferry crossings as a straight, dotted lines, connecting one bank to another. The river between is represented in a block colour, usually light blue, symbolically unfluctuating, stable.[1] While recognising the need for cartographers to simplify and symbolise the movements between places, this mapping convention does not represent the materiality of the river, including its flow, current, and speed (Krause, 2021; Rhoden & Kaaristo, 2020). In tidal rivers, the borderline itself is in flux, and the boundaries between water and land are blurred. The rising and falling tide attunes our attention to depth and volume of the border crossing (Elden, 2013) and in-between the tides, the terrain shifts between water, sand, and mud. For those who live, work, and cross the riverborderscape, these emerging and concealed surfaces muddy the boundary between the two bankside places on either side of the river.

These materialities are understood and negotiated by ferry crews on a daily basis, but always in differing ways. Although the route of the ferry from a skipper's perspective is not discussed here, what is clear is that the materiality of the river can influence local perceptions of how individuals distinguish the 'border' between places:

> When the tide is high, obviously the boundary is a very solid one, it's the quayside and that's pretty obvious. But when the tide goes out, particularly on a very low tide, you've got a very narrow shallow channel in the middle, and you've then got this space which is quite ephemeral between the channel and the hard boundary

of the quay; and I think it's interesting to see how people perceive that. Do they see that as part of Appledore, it's their space, and the way people claim that space? I mean for example there are boat moorings there for practical reasons, but people go down there for recreation, dog walking, digging lugworms for bait, that sort of thing but's it's very ephemeral. When the tide comes in, that temporary space has gone. So is there a momentary change in your feeling of the boundary? Between Appledore and Instow? Is it that channel? Or is it the quayside? And what you've got really is almost a section of no man's land which people will look at quite differently or use in different ways.

(Interview Vince, Ferry Volunteer and resident)

This quote reveals the shifting nature of a riverborderscape. While the boundary is described as 'solid' or 'hard' at high tide, such a certainty is muddied as the water recedes to the middle channel of the river. Vince muses on how place-identities and the defined markers at the edges of a territory may shift in the temporality and movement of water. The expanding and contracting of this fluid riverborder is a rhythmical, elemental process in this geographical location. It reveals the influences of the imagination in the construction of boundaries between land and water and the places on either side of the river (McCaffrey, 2019) at the local scale. The space in-between is a changeable, unpredictable space. Its shifts and changes reflect how time, space and materiality create the riverborderscape and shape its crossing.

Yet, in contrast to the fluidity of the river, ferry routes are mapped, demarcated, owned, and restricted to specific spaces and crossing points, as one participant explained:

Water is absolutely political, in terms of it can't be owned, but the river-bed surface below can. Nobody has the right to prevent you travelling on water – I can float my boat wherever I like but it's the questions of who owns the land directly adjacent on the bank edge.

(Interview Reuben, Helford)

The disjuncture between property rights held over the relatively stable areas of riverbed and the freedom to access the mobile waters above suggests a tension on the riverborder between fixity and flotation, permanence and temporality, and ties into a broader theorisation of border spaces being between 'fixity and unfixity' (Rumford, 2014, p. 52). Although a boat can float and move on the surface of the water, if the owners intend to anchor the boat, affix it to 'ground', 'pin it down' (Interview, Rita), then they may transgress lines of ownership and may be trespassing on somebody's property. While elemental processes such as tide, wind, and currents play a factor in influencing the navigation and movement of the ferry, routes across the river reflect and correspond to legal lines of ownership. As one skipper explained when asked what route they take across the river: 'we follow the owning of the riverbed to the other side'. The river as border is therefore at once a demarcation, a line to be crossed, a route of crossing that is governed to a large extent by patterns of land ownership, but also a space that is subject to the flux and movement of the materiality of the river as the tides and weather change the volume and the flow of the water and the experience of those who make the crossing.

4 | RIVERBORDERSCAPE: NARRATING THE BORDER

A river may create a border between people and villages, the ferry may over cross it. Connects people, land and dogs.

(Reflection Card Helford 76)

Newman (2006, p. 152) argues that it is 'at the level of narrative, anecdote and communication that borders come to life'. The research reveals how the river as border was frequently revealed in passengers' humour, jokes, and stories that sought to 'make sense of and communicate their ideas and experiences of borders' (Prokkola, 2009, p. 21). One recurring joke referred to whether a passport was required to cross the river. For example a passenger asked if they needed his passport to get across the river. The skipper joked back: 'You don't need a passport to get to the other side, but you need one to return' (Helford notes 25 June 2018).

The humour around passport control is light-hearted and the analogy between international and local borders gestures to the shared knowledge of the significant differences between them in terms of border restrictions. Nonetheless, it suggests that within this discourse, and for some passengers, the river is constructed as some indeterminate form of

border. The passport humour is enacted on the ferry, an exceptional space in which the skippers' rules and regulations apply. Here jokes are a means through which the territorial extent of the ferry is expressed, and where the authority and control of the skipper is brought to the fore. It also draws attention to the communal nature of the ferry crossing and the ways in which interactions with other passengers and crew mediate the experience of crossing a border (McGrath et al., 2020).

Humour was also used to highlight the border qualities of the river, most notably the River Tamar that forms the boundary between Devon and Cornwall. Stories were fondly told by interviewees about individuals who would never choose to cross the border. On the River Torridge and Helford, a number of individuals characterised one side of the river as the 'dark side', and the other the 'light side', while two individuals described how humour underpinned significant geographical separation between the villages on either side of the river:

John: We're sometimes even called the dark side and I do think it's good humoured, but nevertheless there's *very clearly* a different feeling

Betsy: I think that this side is far more remote in the fact that the Lizard itself is quite barren and the North side is much more near the big cities like Falmouth, far more populated. People come out from towns, probably to go to Helford Passage. They would very rarely drive all the way round to this side because you would have to go all the way round

John: Well it's a 40 minute journey

Betsy: So we're slightly more isolated here

A sense of subtle cultural difference emerges from this account, as residents describe their more 'remote' and 'barren' lifestyle in Helford Village to the other side, which is better connected to larger cities and towns. In this context, jokes reflect the river-border, which is at once 'barrier, bridge and gateway' (Diener & Hagen, 2012; Roth, 1997; Unwin, 2003).

What aids jokes about passports and different sides of the rivers is the way in which the storytellers are themselves usually cross-border citizens (Durrschmidt, 2002), comfortable to cross the river, which enables their mobility, and experience what both sides have to offer. The humour is extended into the physical demarcations within the landscape in the form of signs such as 'Last pub in Devon' and 'Welcome to Cornwall' on either side of the Cremyll Ferry that signify and emphasise the river as a border. These stories and signs show how laughter is used in 'everyday life to reproduce and negotiate existing borders' (Durrschmidt, 2002, p. 125), but draw our attention to the river in-between.

5 | THE RIVERBORDERSCAPE: EXPERIENCING THE BORDER

> I was thinking about Hades, transporting souls across Styx in Greek mythology. Crossing rivers always means transition and crossing borders, so something you might need a guide for – even a translator, maybe.
>
> (Reflection Card Tamar 42)

There is a rich literary canon in which crossing water, whether rivers, streams, or seas, is 'not an end in itself but a means of creating possibilities' (Ciccarelli, 2012; McMillin, 2011, p. 127). Ferry passengers often used the word 'transition' to describe the crossing, suggesting that crossing a river leads individuals towards a 'liminal landscape' (Andrews & Roberts, 2012, p. 6), a shifting terrain of ebb and flow over water, mud, and sand. Fragments of writing, creative outputs, and conversation are used in this section to explore what happens when the threshold of a boundary is crossed (McConnell, 2017), recognising that 'our main experience of borders is by confronting or crossing them' (Szary, 2015, p. 13) (Figure 2).

People used the ferry for diverse reasons and their affective and emotional engagement with the crossing was equally varied. Some used the ferry regularly to commute to work: one side of the river was 'home', the other 'work', with the ferry a transition space between two ways of being. For recreational users the ferry journey was characterised as being an exciting mode of transport and travelling on the river was valued for being peaceful, calming, and a connection to nature. The ferry, which holds these diverse journeys and purposes, is a meeting point in the liminal space between the banksides, a literal and metaphorical link between them.

Travelling from one side of the river to the other, across the borderline, was given a range of meanings (McGrath, 2023). Passengers described their journey through creative writing, including short stories, limericks, poetry, and references to mythology. Drawings (for example, Figure 3) documented changing views as the ferry moved from land to water to the land beyond. The imagination of this journey moved beyond the physical space of the river to encompass, in some cases, an imagined realm of sea-creatures, sharks, and monsters. Others made connections with other spaces, other

FIGURE 2 Response on a participant card from the Helford River crossing.

FIGURE 3 Reflection card from the Cremyll Ferry across the River Tamar.

international river or sea crossings, or noted wider environmental concerns about pollution or the fragility of sea grass. For some, the space of the crossing was deeply personal: some shared their stories about marriage proposals being made on the ferry, another how they had scattered a friend's ashes at the mid-point of the river. The staging on the river of these intimate markings of important life passages suggests the construction of the river as a significant site of movement from one life stage to another – a threshold or boundary crossing space.

In the temporary movement away from land and the fixed associations of 'this side' or 'that side', this in-between space of the river allows new identity constructions of self and others to be made. This point was detailed by a volunteer on the Appledore–Instow ferry:

> The fact is, in the middle of the river, you are not necessarily of Appledore or of Instow, or of anywhere in particular but you are where you are – part of something bigger. And obviously being on the water – the waters are a major connective element for all life. So I was open to a greater resonance whilst crossing the river and a sense of belonging. Just being on the water. It's only a five-minute trip across but there's a sense of neutrality.
>
> (Interview Ed, River Torridge)

The wateriness inherent in the riverborder, and the temporal and physical suspension experienced in the floating ferry between the banks, enhances its liminal character – here is a space where the quotidian is suspended, new identities embraced

or life stages embarked on, and even the border between real and imaginary blur as improbable sea creatures emerge onto reflection cards and playful analogies with international borders discursively gesture to other spaces of physical and political separation.

6 | RIVERBORDERSCAPE: A REFLECTION

Rivers and ferries offer a 'binary structure of connecting and disconnecting and whichever situation a person is in, they might use one side or another, depending on what they want to say' (Interview Rita, Tamar ferry passenger). Rather than seeking to untangle the paradox of connection and separation, the idea of the riverborderscape draws attention to the in-betweenness of borders. As the research in this paper has shown, centring attention on the space of the border, rather than the places either side, emphasises the liminality, temporality, and fluidity of a border. Far from being fixed, borders are as much imagined spaces as physical entities. As such, borders should be considered as 'more than political' and, instead, as ideas that are produced and reproduced through situated historic and contemporary cultural practices of crossing. Centring research on crossing a river, in this case by ferry, has shown the importance of understanding the materiality of borders and how these are narrated and experienced in different ways by different people. Like the water in a river, a boundary is continually shifting, changing, and adapting to different circumstances.

The research presented in this paper suggests that the in-between space of a border is significant for many people. The river crossing inspired imaginative and creative responses that revealed how individuals reflect and connect with the places either side of and between a boundary. In foregrounding the river, the authors have shown how rivers play a significant role in place-making and the differentiation of bankside spaces at the parish, district, and county level, and how the routine and recreational crossing from one side to the other is inhabited with social life and meaning. While each river crossing was situated within a particular geographical context and represented the separation of administrative borders at different scales, there were nonetheless commonalities in how passengers experienced these spaces. This is important to recognise as rivers have historically been used as place markers, as the boundary between parishes, counties, countries, and nations, and they continue to hold much significance for individuals, albeit in different and differentiated ways. While there are many ways to view a river (see Kanesu, Lamb & McGrath's introduction to this Special Section), the idea of the riverborderscape can help geographers to bring rivers into conversation with borders. This can be through engagement with the materiality of the space and the changes in volume and flow that affect the crossing, and that facilitate a sense of suspension in time and space in which new states of being may be entered into or imagined, and in which borders, real and imagined and at different scales, are foregrounded, deprecated, and crossed.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE
[1] The only cartographical acknowledgement of a river's movement are the high and low tide lines of estuaries that are marked on Ordnance Survey maps. On the Admiralty charts, a combination of blue and white markings illustrate the tidal variance of rivers.

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