

Exploring Border Politics and Refugee Narratives in Contemporary Literary Works

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Abstract

Refugeehood—whether triggered by religious intolerance, ethnic strife, political repression, war, or environmental factors—has been a constant throughout human history, but it was not until the twentieth century that refugees were endowed with legal status on an international level. The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees—later consolidated and provided with universal application through the 1967 Protocol—defined the term “refugee” as a status entitled to any person who “is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (United Nations 1951, Article 1(A)2). As a legal category, the status of “refugee” has provided protection to many forcibly displaced people, and yet in its current formulation it falls short of accommodating many other patterns of forced displacement, such as those involving internally displaced individuals or “eco-refugees”—that is, people forced to flee their homes due to droughts, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, and other environmental phenomena (Myers and Kent 1995, p. 14). Problematising this label and its legal application, as some of the articles in this Special Issue do, is an urgent discussion, particularly in a period when the scale of forced human displacement, far from subsiding, has continued to grow. The conflicts raging in the Middle East, the ongoing political unrest in Africa and Latin America, the humanitarian crisis triggered by the ongoing climate crisis, and, more recently, the Russia–Ukraine war in Europe have forced millions of people to flee their homes.

Paradoxically, as some theorists predicted (Balibar 1998; Papastergiadis 2000), the global response to this growing scale of refugees and asylum seekers has often translated into enhanced forms of policing and the fortification of national borders, as exemplified by the policies of the Donald Trump administration, the Brexit referendum, and the image of Fortress Europe. Various European nations presently claim to be “under attack” by new immigrant communities, at which point dominant groups and their racist representatives are construed as occupying a vulnerable condition. As Judith Butler explains in this respect, “the apprehension of precariousness leads to a heightening of violence, an insight into the physical vulnerability of some set of others that incites the desire to destroy them” (Butler 2004, p. 2). In this context, over-celebratory discourse on border porosity, transnational interaction, and transcultural dialogue coexists with the erection of physical walls aimed at reining in unauthorised border-crossings under the pretence of preserving national sovereignty and integrity, which is viewed as being threatened by those who seek to trespass national borders. At the time of writing this Introduction, for example, migration and refugeehood are amongst the most controversial topics in the political agenda of many European countries, including the United Kingdom. Most notably, as part of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s pledge to stop “illegal” border-crossings, in July 2023 the Illegal Migration Bill, first introduced to Parliament in March 2023, became an Act after months of intense debate and against claims that the Bill could breach international human rights and refugee laws, including those in the 1951 Refugee Convention mentioned earlier in this piece.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary critical thinking has widely addressed the nature of borders as a response to a global anxiety concerning mobility, examining border phenomena not only as geopolitical realities, but also as figurations where otherness and difference are negotiated. Kristeva (1991); Agamben (1998); Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000); Butler (2004); Braidotti (2013); and Mbembe (2019), among others, have deeply reflected on the ethical and political implications of the erection of new borders and the consolidation of existing ones, as well as on the repercussions of new and more sophisticated forms of policing, antimigration, and xenophobic discourse, which often results in suspending civil liberties and suppressing political dissent by seriously injuring our “fundamental dependency on anonymous others” (Butler 2004, p. xii). As Judith Butler goes on to suggest, mobility is itself not only a right of the body, but also “a precondition for the exercise of other rights” (Butler 2004, p. 108). Discussing the ethical and political position of those individuals regarded as “vulnerable”, Butler conceives of vulnerability as a form of activism in different forms of resistance: mass movements, civil society initiatives, and the wider political issues informed by vulnerability are

forms of social and political resilience which, at the same time, resist modes of paternalist institutional protection that often re-instate and naturalise relations of inequality (Butler 2004, p. 109). In this context, marked by the consolidation of old geographical boundaries and the erection of new physical and discursive frontiers, the proliferation of detention camps and centres within many European cities works as a clear example of what Rosi Braidotti has termed “the inhuman face of Fortress Europe”, with these borderscapes standing for the “undignified monuments of posthuman inhumanity” (Braidotti 2013, p. 127). The arrival of migrants and refugees, cast as a “threat” to European integrity and well-being, has fuelled large-scale speculations about “social insecurities and national trauma[s]”, giving “racism”, “populism”, resurgent forms of nationalism, cultural prejudice, and homophobia a “free pass” (Koezler et al. 2020, p. 585). As Jacques Derrida has suggested, without the right to hospitality, migrants and refugees are often perceived as “parasites” that are “illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 60), which triggers the nation state’s intervention for the sake of preserving its alleged integrity.

Described by Georg Simmel as “invisible anthropological constellations” (Simmel 1993, p. 55), borders simultaneously connect and separate, divide and welcome passage, and entail sites of friction and conflict but also of hope and new possibilities. Borders constitute a central human activity and create, both socially and symbolically, dynamic sites where mutual exchanges amongst heterogenous entities can occur and where other-ness, difference, and identity are constantly negotiated. Currently viewed as culturally construed—rather than naturally given—categories, borders have increasingly been theorised as processes “caught in a relational net of power and meaning” whereby “territorial boundaries [are connected] to the borders between economies, classes, gender, ethnicities [. . .] discourses and so on” (Nyman and Schimanski 2021, p. 5). This “cultural turn” in border studies implies a shift from spatial fixity to a preoccupation with the cultural and symbolic dimension of borders, which opens new possibilities for analysing the fluid nature of borders as categories that can be renegotiated and rethought through counter-hegemonic practices. This cultural approach to borders has fuelled, in turn, research on border studies from within the humanities and social sciences (Newman 2006), as exemplified by recent work on “border aesthetics” (Schimanski and Nyman 2021; Schimanski and Wolfe 2017). Border aesthetics—on which some of the articles in this Special Issue rely—contends that borders also have an aesthetic dimension and works of art contribute to scaping border imaginaries: artistic manifestations engaging with borders “can reinforce the symbolic difference that created them [borders], or even cause changes in these symbolic differences” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 2). Against this backdrop, concepts such as that of the “borderscape”—a neologism indebted to Arjun Appadurai’s resignification of the suffix -scape (Appadurai 1996)—have gained increasing currency in analyses of border-crossing phenomena, including refugee literature. Referring, *inter alia*, to the ways in which the area around a border is perceived, imagined, and represented, the notion of the “borderscape” opens the possibility of “interrogating the ordinary functioning of b/ordering processes and practices” (Brambilla 2021, p. 86); it allows us to examine all the practices and forms of representation “through which the imagined border is established and experienced as real” (Strüver 2005, p. 170). Borderscape approaches favour, therefore, “a performative viewpoint on borders” (Brambilla 2021, p. 87) as sites where new ways of “belonging and becoming” might eventually be forged (Brambilla 2015, p. 24).

As a highly heterogenous body of works concerned with border-crossing phenomena, refugee literature often entails negotiating the dualistic nature of borders themselves (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 2) and, in the process, it also interrogates the boundaries of the nation state and the politics of belonging and exclusion. Often displaying a conspicuous sense of transterritoriality, literature by and/or about refugeeism has proliferated in recent years, as exemplified by titles such as Abu Bakr Khaal’s *African Titanics* (2014), Gulwali Passarlay’s *The Lightless Sky* (2015), Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees* (2017), Christy Lefteri’s *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019), and Dina Nayeri’s *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), amongst many others. These narratives address border-crossing experiences across different geographies and, whilst depicting the interstitial nature of borders and borderscapes, they also constitute narratives of genre-crossing (Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2019). The resurgence of past fears regarding the integrity of the nation state has also, and concomitantly, given way to a shared sense of hope and to an urge to find new forms of collaboration, as illustrated by the appearance of a number of collaborative projects built upon the use of storytelling to give voice to the unheard and thus turn hostility into hospitality: collections such as Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes’s *Breach* (2016), Lucy Popescu’s *A Country Called Refuge* (2016) and *A Country to Call Home* (2018), Meike Ziervogel and Suhir Helal’s project *Shatila Stories* (2018), and the four volumes of the *Refugee Tales* initiative (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) are cases in point. In attending to the borderline nature of refugee experiences, the social and performative role of literature becomes especially relevant in triggering a sense of social awareness and reflectivity,

eventually aiming to question migrant marginality, exclusion, and invisibility, whilst challenging the “authenticity of historical narrative” (March-Russell 2009, p. 115) by foregrounding multiple perspectives, complex kinship structures, and communal affiliations. These narratives ultimately question the established assumptions endorsed and enforced by dominant ideologies by inviting readers to welcome heterogeneity, hybridity, and undefinable identities within the boundaries of the nation state. Refugee narratives not only deny essentialisms regarding identity but also signal possible locations for the negotiation of new “structures of authority” and new “political initiatives” (Bhabha 1990, p. 211) by posing alternatives to conventional, assimilationist, and homogenised models of migration which involve multiple movements and ongoing global engagements.

The articles in this Special Issue engage, in various ways and through different perspectives, with all these topics, examining a wide variety of texts that testify to the heterogeneity and border-crossing quality of much refugee literature. In his article, Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo combines cultural studies, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the epistemology of trans culturalism to examine a very specific typology of refugee writing: refugees’ personal narratives featured on refugee NGO websites. As de Gregorio-Godeo argues, this story-telling modality, which results from various collaborative efforts and which several NGOs mobilise to raise awareness, is endowed with a transcultural dimension that manifests itself both in the discursive construction of refugees’ transcultural identities within such narratives and the way in which website consumers are urged to take action and reassess their position transculturally. Also engaging with texts that complicate issues of voice and authorship, Francisco Fuentes-Antrás draws on refugee and border studies to examine a communal literary project—*Shatila Stories* (2018)—made up of fictionalised stories written by refugees from the Shatila camp in Beirut. This article analyses how, here, the Shatila camp is portrayed as a distressing but also empowering site. Moving across the liminal boundaries of this “campscape”, the refugees in *Shatila Stories* undergo, as Fuentes-Antrás contends, a transformation from “bare lives” (Agamben 1998) to “agent lives” and, as a result, the text produces a renegotiation of refugees’ selfhood by portraying them as autonomous, active, and humanised individuals. Relatedly, and similarly drawing on border studies, Carmen Lara-Rallo’s article explores how the humanitarian crisis involved in displacement, refugeehood, and detention has both a spatial and temporal dimension. Providing a close analysis of a selection of stories collected in *Refugee Tales IV* (2021), the author examines how the articulation of these two parameters in the featured texts contributes to exposing the injustices surrounding detention and refugeehood.

The urge to find bonds of collaboration through acts of welcome and hospitality also finds echo in Maria Jennifer Estevez Yanes’s contribution. In it, Estevez Yanes examines the nuanced discourse of hospitality in Dina Nayeri’s *Refuge* (2017) and *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), exploring the complexities of locating home after forced displacement and the (dis)connection between belonging and identity, which are particularly evident in the negotiated spaces of vulnerability and resistance that refugees inhabit. In a similar vein, Carolina Sánchez-Palencia regards the active mobilisation of solidarity as an empowering, transformative force to shift our perception of migrants’ bare lives into one of migrants’ agency. Drawing on the political dimension of mourning and on the concept of “slow death”, Sánchez-Palencia proposes a necropolitical reading of *All They Will Call You* (2017), where Tim Z. Hernandez revisits the 1948 plane crash that killed 28 Mexican deportees at Los Gatos (California) and the subsequent oblivion that prevented their memorialisation except for a mass grave containing their remains and a protest song (“Deportees”) composed by Woody Guthrie.

Precarity, vulnerability, and dispossession are notions that also surface prominently in those contributions engaging with the experience of Vietnamese refugees in the USA and Canada. Thus, María Porrás-Sánchez’s article explores how Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) revisits the Vietnamese experience in the USA under the prism of heroic vulnerability. The memoir, Porrás-Sánchez contends, emerges as a site of resistance against precarity and points towards a restorative futurity which might allow for the overcoming of intergenerational trauma. In the process, as the article shows, Thi Bui’s memoir also challenges dominant accounts of the Vietnam War, a question also explored by Sara Soler i Arjona. Drawing on Vinh Nguyen’s notion of “refugeetude” (Nguyen 2019), Soler i Arjona’s article provides an analysis of queer temporalities in Ocean Vuong’s novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The author does not simply discuss the queer identity of the main character but also explores how Vuong queers the notion of “refugee” as a temporal and temporary category. Moving from the USA to Canada, Pedro Miguel Carmona-Rodríguez examines Philip Huynh’s *The Forbidden Purple City* (2019) in relation to its engagement with the nativity–territory–citizenship triad on which Western socio-political communities ground the principles of affiliation of their members. More particularly, Carmona-Rodríguez addresses the collection’s boundary-crossing ethics, which interrogate any sequential relation between past and present, Vietnam and Canada, and which usually structure refugee narratives in which literal and

metaphorical polymorphous borders unveil the bases of the contemporary Canadian socio-political community.

Finally, the question of migration and refugeehood in a contemporary European context marked by the 2015 “refugee crisis” and the Brexit referendum links the remaining three contributions. Thus, Kristian Shaw argues that Jenny Erpenbeck’s novel *Go, Went, Gone* (2015) provides an incisive cautionary tale about the politicisation of both EU and non- EU migration in Germany, illustrating literature’s potential to challenge institutional power dynamics and debunk myths surrounding processes of racial othering. Racialisation, stereo- typing, and Europe’s disputed borders are also central to Isabel María Andrés-Cuevas’s article, which focuses on Agnieszka Dale’s *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* (2017). In it, Andrés-Cuevas examines, inter alia, how Dale’s short story collection problematises the tensions brought about by the Brexit referendum and their impact on the Polish community living in Britain, arguing that Dale’s stories issue a call for conviviality aimed at preventing the gloomy outcome the author presents in the dystopian futures that some of the stories recreate. Engaging with dystopian fiction, María Alonso Alonso’s article connects John Lanchester’s novel *The Wall* (2019)—written in the wake of Brexit—with processes of re-bordering due to global warming and their impact on human mobility. Focusing on alien configurations of refugeehood in contemporary British speculative fiction, and on Lanchester’s novel in particular, Alonso Alonso examines the way in which these texts question Brexit rhetoric.

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