CHOOSING PEOPLE AND UNITY OVER BORDERS AND LIMITS – BRIDGE AND DOOR

by

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Despite the many efforts throughout history to transcend borders, they remain a salient characteristic of our world. In 2016, the theme of borders assumed a vital role in Europe and other parts of the world due to the mass migration movements that started after the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011. It is estimated by the UNHCR that more than 4 million people have fled the war seeking refuge elsewhere. Those mass movements have created an immigration crisis in Europe as European countries weren't prepared to deal with so many immigrants. A few months after the outset of the crisis, Europe responded by closing its borders. First only partially as some countries refused to accept immigrants or limited the number of immigrants they were willing to get—and then completely by reintroducing border controls and militarizing their borders to keep the immigrants out. Consequently, migrants were trapped in Greece and Italy, Europe's borderland countries which function as a gate to Europe. Moreover, the problem was enlarged as these borderland countries lacked the infrastructure to host such a large number of refugees. This was particularly apparent in Greece. Mainly, the refugees have created a new dimension to the reality of austerity in Greece, a country amid a severe economic crisis. As a Greek living in Greece, I have a first-hand experience of this crisis as well as of the overwhelming obsession with borders seen in Europe since the Syrian War broke out.

In my search for how crossing borders feels and is experienced, I read and re-read the words of Reza Mohammadi in his poem "You crossed the border; your homeland had no language." The poem depicts an immigrant's experience when crossing borders, accommodating the immigrant's feelings and struggles. It also highlights the fact that when a person crosses a border, that person has a homeland and an identity. The poem answers the question of what happens when a person crosses a border, providing insight on the migrant experience, an insight that is crucial when one considers Europe's migration crisis. At the same time, the poem encourages a possible solution to the perceived crisis a solution that hinges on Europeans' reengagement with the values and ideas that fueled the creation of a "European" identity more than thirty years ago.

The poet begins by saying that "You crossed the border; your homeland had no language / Or did but had nothing to say" (n.p). Those lines suggest that from the moment a person crosses a border that person loses a part of him/herself. The poet also comments on the loss of language at borders. At the moment of crossing, that person is no longer able to communicate in his/her own language. Additionally, the reference to loss of language at a border crossing hints at a claim that at that moment the person no longer has a voice. This voicelessness marks them as other. Let's consider what happened with the refugees in Europe. These people are not only the victims of a war beyond their power that stripped them of their homes, their lives, their belongings, but they are also trapped in camps where the struggle to survive in poor conditions—over which they have little or no control becomes their daily

reality. These people didn't choose to leave but were rather forced to. They had little say in the forces that pushed them from their homes. And if they have lost their language and their voice at the border, do they have a say about what is happening to them now? Do they speak a language that the receiving country will understand? Will they be able to express themselves properly in a language that is not their own? Will their language stand in their way of adjusting to the new place? Will they be allowed to have a voice—in any language—concerning their future?

In the next lines, Mohammadi poses a question that is crucial in understanding the migrants' struggle regarding the difficulties encountered when one crosses a border. Particularly he writes, "What did your homeland have that the world didn't?" (n.p.). A person's homeland is an important component of that person's identity and from the moment one crosses a border, one feels a void in his/her heart as a part of him/her is missing. True, maybe that person will eventually find a new place to call home, but the memories of their homeland won't completely vanish. That is something that the world usually fails to understand. Too often, when people encounter immigrants they have in mind certain pre-conceptions and often disregard the fact that it is as hard for the immigrants to cross a border and to be forced to settle down in an unknown and often unfriendly place as it is for Europeans to incorporate the immigrants into their society. Mohammadi reorients a reader's attention to the loss that has occurred and to the reality of the assets left behind in order to merely survive. This is a message that needs wider circulation. If we consider Europe's case, many voices focus on the losses Europe might incur because of the arrival of migrants: claims—often unfounded—such as migrants financially burdening already struggling economies, stealing jobs, raising criminal rates or just being incapable of adjusting to the western mode of life as they come from different cultures and backgrounds.

Where do those beliefs come from, though?—I believe that this is the product of fear of the unknown and an unwillingness to learn or demystify. After all, representing anything different in such a way so as to detach any scary elements from it has been a long used western practice. As a matter of fact, it is traced back to the Colonial period of British and European domination in the Middle East. Edward Said has been the one to challenge this preconception that formed cultural borders. Particularly, he challenged the belief that the Orient was inferior merely just because it was different. This belief was formed out of fear for what was unknown, and Europeans adopted these beliefs that lead to the representation of the "other" in a way that resulted in its exclusion from society. As Noel Salazar argues when discussing Stuart Hall's theories, "cultural representations help form the images people have of others" (172) and it is those images to be blamed for the turn the world took towards migrants in 2016. The migrants are perceived as representatives of the Nation they come from and not as individuals, not as people who might have a different ethnic background from Europeans but who are no less people than Europeans.

Individuals have names and their names mark them as individuals. But names seem problematic in our current migrant crisis, as is with Ibrahim, Salya, Halima, Mohamed. These are middle-eastern names; they are the names parents have given to individual beloved children. Perhaps too they are the names of some of the migrants entering Europe. But they are not traditional Christian names—and in Christian Europe, these names define and perhaps even haunt the people who have them. These names mark individuals not as individuals in Greece, in Europe, but as "other." These names denote an identity, a non-European identity that, in turn, denotes a non-European culture. True, these names could be names of individuals born and raised in Europe. The first thing that will come to mind, though, is more

likely to be the first scenario. What is it like to have your name mark you not as an individual worthy of respect but; as a representative of a Nation or a region or a religion that has negative connotations for many in the rest of the world? How does that feel as you navigate borders?

The poem's next stanza comes to answer this question. There are several stages that an immigrant goes through when crossing borders, and those are "grief," "sadness," "identity struggle" as they are "greeted by tears" and "embraced by [sorrow] … out of dirt and dust" (n.p.), Mohammadi writes. By no means do things come easy for the immigrants as they are faced with extremely hard conditions during their whole border crossing experience, both before and after.

Considering Mohammadi's description of the way an immigrant feels now, in our time, as s/he crosses Europe's borders raises many concerns about Europe's and Europeans' attitude about migrants and the migration crisis. As a result, I've been led to want to revisit and reassert some of the fundamental values of European "unity." The reason for doing so is that those values call for a challenge to the current ideas about the status and integration of Syrian migrants. The idea of European unity began with the Schengen Dream. Particularly, this dream refers to the erasure of European borders and simultaneously to the reframing of the European identity so that the similarities were privileged over differences, and people were privileged over geographical borders. That became a reality in 1985 when France, Belgium, Germany, Luxemburg and the Netherlands decided to open their borders to travelers, and this idea of border-free travel was later adopted by twenty-six European countries. Under this agreement, citizens from Schengen states are not required to have their passports checked at checkpoints or border controls, and the same applies to imported and exported goods which are not taxed. This idea of a "borderless" Europe was one of the most significant efforts to bridge the gaps between European countries by acknowledging that all citizens of all member states are equal and share a common identity, the European one, and thus should be able to enjoy the same freedoms and exercise the same rights. The erasing of the European borders, though, established a new set of borders that marked "Europe vs. Non-Europe" and those people were in a sense subjugated to that new set of borders. Ironically, in erasing European borders Schengen reasserted other borders.

Europe might have erased borders internally but, as mentioned, a new set of borders has been established externally. What happens to those outside the European Union? These people, the non-Europeans, have to cross the European borders to get to any EU country, and they are not entitled to the same rights as Europeans. The presence of borders for non-EU citizens makes some border crossing (and border crossers) illegal. But the human drive to survive persists and when migrants were denied asylum some resorted to unlawful ways to get to Europe. Saving yourself, saving your family was a draw more than borders were a deterrent. As Mohammadi says, these people have to buy their happiness from smugglers: "you longed to buy happiness / but only smugglers offered it for sale" (n.p.). Shouldn't it be different, though? If we take into consideration the fact that the European Union was built on the principle of free movement across its member states, shouldn't migrants be granted the right of free movement once in Europe?

One possible solution to the problem may be found in the thinking of Gloria Anzaldua who, in her book "La Frontera" discusses a new consciousness that eliminates the struggle of borders. I assert that the solution to the problem of today's migrants will be possible only if—drawing on the idealism of EU formation—people are prioritized over borders. Anzaldua

promotes unity and strives to bring change in the world with this new consciousness, a consciousness that I will call being a global citizen. It is this possibility of global citizenship, of identifying as a citizen of the world that emerges in Mohammadi's poem. In the struggle to be human in a world of borders, migrants imagine something more.

Mohammadi introduces the idea of imagination as a coping mechanism often employed by immigrants as a means to keep them going. "You crossed the border: imagine it's your homeland" (n.p.). He is reflecting the strength of the human mind to imagine a homeland where there is none, and to regain placed-ness/citizenship through this psychic act. That is necessary due to the fact that with the current situation, a new place is often perceived as a "kingdom of misery" and a "land with no sky" (n.p.). The solution the poet offers to that is for the new place to become a homeland through imagination. And yet, there is a haunting call too for the material conditions of the new place to allow the imagined global unit to become a reality. This work is the work of Europeans.

With this reflection, I wish to raise awareness about the struggle of the people caught in borderlands and caught crossing borders, and have it serve as a reminder of how disconnected the values upon which Europe adopted an open borders policy and the closing of borders are in the face of the "other." An immigrant is not a threat to national sovereignty but rather a human being, a person striped of his/her life but with passion, skills, ideas, and spirit that the world needs. Listening to the words of migrants and reflecting on the values Europe has long held dear, one can appreciate that there is not an easy understanding of the "need" to close borders or exclude those seeking refuge. This article is an illustration of a system that is failing but also a reminder of how we might begin to develop a new response no matter how unsettling such a process may appear to be. If similarity prevailed over difference in the European imagination some two decades ago, why can't it now?

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