

Whiplash: Shifting Positionalities and Disciplinary Cross-Fire in the Study of Borders

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ABSTRACT

How should we engage in the study of borders and what are the ethical challenges involved in the study of migration? In what follows, I discuss the tensions that academics face when trying to study borders, and I describe how a visit to a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece exposed disciplinary fault lines that underscored the difficulties of doing collaborative and interdisciplinary work. This essay describes the whiplash that occurred when academics, humanitarian stakeholders, and asylum seekers met each other to discuss borders. In the end, it is my contention that the study of borders requires work that is participatory, transdisciplinary, and multilingual and that border work must center the experience of asylum seekers and decolonize the gaze of academics.

KEY WORDS

Border Studies, Migration, Positionality, Psychology, Interdisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I attended a workshop and conference on borders in Athens, Greece. This conference, hosted by the Global Liberal Arts Alliance, stemmed from an earlier conference held at Franklin University Switzerland in Lugano, Switzerland, in which academics from various fields got together for a week and discussed (and sometimes argued over) the meaning of borders.¹ In this second conference, a smaller cohort of social scientists wrangled more specifically over the utility of borders, as well as the politics and consequences concerning the mass regulation, warehousing, and processing of people who have crossed borders. In what follows, I discuss the tensions that academics face when trying to engage in the cross talk of borders, and of the ethical challenges involved in the study of migration. In particular, I will discuss the borders workshop that I attended in which we visited a number of sites at Lesbos, including a refugee camp, and discuss the dilemmas that were encountered when we study (or some would say gaze upon) others who have crossed borders. To explore these issues, this paper is organized in four parts - first, I describe the process of how academics engage in such cross talk (looking at each other) and then I detail encounters we had at a refugee camp (looking at others). Following this, I elaborate on the utility of our work as academics (looking at ourselves) and conclude with a review of issues and questions that we should consider when studying people whose lives are in transit (looking beyond).

LOOKING AT EACH OTHER

It had been a very long week. We were a small but diverse group of activists and academics, mostly hailing from the humanities and social sciences, who had all gathered together for a week at the American College of Greece for a workshop on borders. In the humanities, we had individuals representing film studies, cultural studies, geography, and literature; while in the social sciences, anthropology, communication, education, economics, environmental science, geography, international relations, political science and sociology were represented. Additionally, there were scholars from disciplines that spanned borders, such as history and women and gender studies - and then there was me.

The only psychologist in the group, and one whose discipline was squarely located in the natural sciences, I was clearly on the fringe from the onset. Psychology, unfortunately, has not contributed as much to the field of migration, despite the fact that its explicit and detailed focus on understanding behavior does indeed have much to contribute to the field (Palmary 2018). As a clinical psychologist, I was trained to pay close attention to behavior, to try to understand its antecedents and consequences. Schooled as a positivist, my training was not to inquire about the existence of things *per se*, but rather to try to faithfully describe what I observed, so that I could help provide specific and applied interventions that would lead to greater improvement and functioning. This training, with its focus on discrete units of behavior, at once set me apart from my peers who were much more focused on larger structural determinants of behavior.

Given this diversity of disciplines, how was this conference going to proceed if everyone had their own way of framing the issues? For some, the crucial questions that needed to be asked first concerned the very existence of borders themselves: *What are borders? What functions do they fulfill? And why do we need them?* On the other hand, for others like myself, the desire was not so much to discuss the *concept* of borders, but instead to discuss the *consequences* of borders. And more specifically, how do we help those who find themselves in between borders? In fact, it was not only that we all had different questions but that some of us could not even understand the very questions that others were asking or even comprehend their terms of reference. *Was this a migrant*

¹ For Ann, for helping me think about the world in fresher and newer ways. For your boundless energy and curiosity. For our budding friendship. In loving memory.

crisis or a crisis of the state? I don't know, I shrugged, and does it really matter at all? Unable to comprehend the terms used, unable to understand the utility of the questions posed, and unable to follow the discursive loops of my peers, I could feel my patience run thin. Locked in this Tower of Babel, I could see no benefit in these discussions and, indeed, saw them as digressive - and in my least charitable moments, as self-indulgent. Recently, the IRIN, a news agency for humanitarian relief, commented on the tensions that are sometimes experienced between those who are in the field versus those who study the field. At the peak of the migration waves in Europe in 2015, they remarked that “*agonising over labels and language risks overshadowing the need for more coordinated responses and a better understanding of what is driving people to embark on these journeys.*” At what point do our attempts to understand hinder action?

It was as if our own disciplinary practices – borders in their own ways, if you will – were preventing us from discussing borders in the first place. Newman (2006), a geographer who has written extensively about the interdisciplinary nature of border studies, notes that, rather than increase understanding, interdisciplinarity can, in fact, make us “territorially fixed” within our own disciplines. Furthermore, “(f)or the traditionalists among border scholars...these more abstract notions of borders appear incomprehensible, written in a foreign language which the crossing of the disciplinary boundaries has not helped to alleviate” (Newman 2016, p.172). How were we ever going to talk to one another when we could not even agree on the terms we used?

I felt frustrated - not only with my colleagues, but also with myself. Why was I reacting this way? Why, as someone who was trained to listen, was I having such a hard time listening? Academia, of course, has its own borders which we reify by using discipline-specific jargon, methodologies and frames. Perhaps my frustration was a way of defending my own discipline's borders and masking my own disciplinary insecurity. More crucially, perhaps I did not allow myself to understand because understanding would mean that I would have to reconceptualize how I thought of borders. Borders, as I understood them, were real, if at times unfortunate realities. But what if, rather than automatically accepting borders as stable realities, I allowed myself to rethink the necessity of borders? What if I could think beyond borders? Furthermore, would reconsidering the utility and function of borders mandate reconfiguring my own discipline's response to this crisis? Where and who, in fact, should the analytical focus be on when we study migration? (Saharso 2019). In other words, perhaps the words we use to describe the mass outflow of people really did (and still continues to) matter, because when we shift from describing it as a *crisis of refugees* to a *crisis of government*, a different set of responses is needed to ease human suffering.

Thinking like this literally hurt my head, so I was quite relieved when, at the end of the week there was a change in venue. Following our week in Athens, we were scheduled to travel to Lesbos to visit a refugee camp. This visit, we were told, would be an opportunity for us to see for ourselves the reality of the issues we were discussing. At the time, I had thought that such a site visit would, to use my peers' lingo, “disrupt” their own academic understanding of borders - so that they would finally understand how the true brutality of these systems mandated quick and efficient responses, *not* long mediated discussions on semantics. And so, I was quite willing to go to a site of such discomfort, to view the suffering of others, in order to validate my own disciplinary perspective. Although I was relieved that we would stop talking and (hopefully) start doing something, I was also uneasy because this would not be my first time visiting people caught in between borders.

A few years prior, at the very beginning of the exodus from Syria, I had interviewed parents and children who had fled from Syria to relocate to neighboring Jordan in the wake of the Syrian war (IMC 2014). The interview experience had been difficult, not only because of the scale of trauma I witnessed, but because of the level of intimate contact I was given with people who had experienced so much disruption: “*I was just like you*” I remember one father told me “*I had a nice house and a pool and after work, I would rush to take my children to after school activities. Now I live in one room with my four children and my daughter cries all the time because she wants to go back. But there is no Syria to go back to because there is no Syria, so what do I tell her now?*” These were my most haunting experiences –

the times when parents made attempts to break the walls or borders that separated them from me by invoking our shared experiences as caregivers. *Do not look away because I am just like you*, they said. Carling, Erdal, & Ezzati (2014) note how migration researchers often reflect on their own positionality by assuming, quite inaccurately, that ethno-national differences between researcher and migrant will always dictate insider-outsider perspectives. However, positionalities are shaped by context and can shift during contact (Ryan 2015). And, in fact, these changes in positionality can often be requested, or demanded, by the very people we hope to understand.

Still, in truth, this father and I were not completely similar. I was as an American observer, who had the privilege to come and go from the camp with ease, while he did not. Hence, while we shared the category of caregiver, I also held a number of other superordinate categories (as a researcher, as an American) that marked me as different and gave me more freedom. I often experienced this same tension when I first began doing psychotherapy as an intern in the U.S. Ohio prison system. I can recall how easily my body could come and go in between such highly regulated spaces and how the system privileged the movement for some and the immobility for others. This whiplash was even greater during the times when I went home to see my family in New York and visit my own brother in prison. During those times, and in those particular spaces, I was no longer a psychology intern observing pain but a grieving sister experiencing it. Still, I told myself, if I wanted to help others, then I needed to go see this camp because, as with those Syrian parents, as with the visits to my brother, there can be no justice done by closing your eyes.

The night before our trip to Lesbos a number of us went out to eat and wondered if there was any sense in going to bed given our early flight the next day. Our flight from Athens to Lesbos was at 5:45 in the morning, which meant we had to depart the hotel at 3:45AM. We did, of course, sleep despite claiming that we would not, and then we slept some more on the rather surprisingly crowded flight. When the migration wave hit the island in 2015, tourists had stopped coming to Lesbos and so I had assumed that this flight would be empty. As one Greek tavern owner recounted to a newspaper reporter, tourists had stopped coming to the island because “They told us they did not feel like seeing all this misery” (Valery 2019). Today, however, tourism is creeping back slowly, and more people, like us, were visiting. But unlike us, they weren’t visiting to see the misery.

At Lesbos, we made a number of stops prior to visiting the camp. Our first stop was to the Observatory of Migration and Refugee Crisis. The Observatory functions, in its own words, for the “systematic and comprehensive recording of multiple dimensions of the refugee and migration crisis, both historically and on a daily basis: demographic, economic, institutional, political, religious, and cultural” (<https://refugeeobservatory.aegean.gr/>). In particular, this organization is interested in using bottom-up approaches that rely on observations directly obtained from migrants and first-responders. When we arrived, we were given a series of presentations about their newest projects and one, in particular, captured the attention of my group. In an effort to document the lives of migrants who were leaving the island, researchers had collected the refuse left behind by migrants to see if this material could be used to reconstruct the lives of migrants. In his book, *Land of Open Graves* (2015), the anthropologist Jason De León documents the paths of Mexican migrants who have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border through an analysis of the personal effects and objects that were left behind or discarded in their journeys across the desert. Although such a research endeavor literally and figuratively runs the risk of objectification, De León has been careful in trying to document and reconstruct the lives of those who have died so that such documentation serves as testimony and tribute.

Still, the point of how objects are used to represent the lives of the dead is an ethically fraught issue, inevitably causing questions to arise in our group about who ultimately owned these discarded objects. Was it fair to assume, my colleagues asked, that just because someone discarded an object that another person could own it? In fact, individuals may have discarded objects precisely because they wanted no one to own, much less, showcase their belongings. Similar questions were raised about the articles on the website. *Who is ultimately responsible for the construction*

of the stories that are put on the website? How are these articles framed? Who is responsible for the framing of these stories? Once again, I felt my frustration level rise at my colleagues' questions. I had thought that some of these questions were rather unkind and accusatory, especially when one considered the very little funds that this organization had received to document these events.

Still, I wondered: what were the effects of so much data gathering? Who was the data for and for what purpose was it being used? Prior to this, I had believed in the power of documenting and witnessing but at what point does observation become voyeurism? Although I left feeling grateful for the work carried out by the Observatory, I was also troubled over the hyper-collection of objects that occurred as a result of border crossings.

In her book, *Undocumented to Hyperdocumented* (2011), Assistant Professor of Education, Dr. Aurora Chang details the intensive collection of documents that she and her family amassed in an effort to become "legal". Her work poses a poignant question: *How does one acculturate without decluttering?* While migration mandates and fetishes the hoarding and collection of certain documents (e.g., passports, green cards), the journey of migration can also lead to the discarding and stripping of other documents and objects. How are our identities, our cultural selves and our sense of belonging, shaped by the hoarding and discarding of such documentation?

Afterward our visit to the Observatory, we headed for lunch at a restaurant called NAN (i.e., Bread) in Mytilene, the largest town and capital of Lesbos. NAN was the brainchild of four women who decided to create a restaurant that could serve as a place where people from different backgrounds could come together and, figuratively and literally, break bread. NAN was conceived as a way to introduce the local community to the variety of dishes from the Mediterranean and the East, which were areas where many of the refugees and migrants from Lesbos stemmed from, while also providing employment for those migrants who could not leave the island. As we were informed, though Greece was once considered a country of transit, migrants are increasingly choosing to stay within the country (Kuschminder 2018), thus creating economic pressure. This restaurant, therefore, served many unmet needs.

At NAN, everything was made from scratch. Tables, made from upcycled pallets, were constructed by refugees, and all the food was made using only local products. As their website pointed out, "No funding has come from any government or EU grant." In short, this local business model was created *for* the community and supported *by* the community, and in this way, appeared to support the two often-stated goals of integration: socio-cultural and socio-economic immersion. Indeed, current research indicates that these types of business ventures can help all the parties involved feel more connected to each other, as they encourage cooperation and exchange in the pursuit of a mutually beneficial outcome (Stoyanov 2018). But could this type of work, founded on horizontal relationships, be implemented by academics? I was intrigued. That is, rather than gazing could we actually do something in full and equal standing with others? Could we move away from observation and charity work to other types of models that were empowering to all? Was it possible to do things differently?

After lunch, I went for a walk with a colleague. A curious, but rather predictable, thing had begun to occur during our workshop. It was not only that people from the same disciplines began to cluster with one another, but also that people from similar ethnic and racial backgrounds, began to seek each other out for company and understanding. And so while I initially felt estranged from others because of my own disciplinary background, I too found myself gravitating towards others like me. It therefore didn't strike me as completely surprising when my colleague announced during our walk - *Don't you think it's funny, that here we are, two Puerto Rican academics, studying borders in Lesbos when we, ourselves, are so far away from home?* Yes, it was funny, I said, but not completely surprising. We are attracted to borders because we, ourselves, are border subjects. As a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico occupies a liminal space that leaves a number of its inhabitants – and second generation descendants, like myself – in a perpetual state of citizenship limbo. It naturally follows that on this tiny Greek island, thousands of miles away from the United States, two Puerto Rican academics would huddle close together to seek comfort and solidarity. To quote Gray "it

may be the case that the practice of migration, which necessarily involves imaginings about how things might have been (had she stayed or left), and constant encounters between migrants and non-migrants, may itself produce an everyday reflexivity” (p.944). And for us, this everyday reflexivity sprang from our shared history of colonization.

We were now ready to go to Kara Tepe, the refugee camp at Lesbos. All aboard the bus.

LOOKING AT OTHERS

Winding up dusty roads, our bus moved along the rocky path toward Kara Tepe. I knew we must have been approaching it when I began to see people walking pass our bus. “Those people are leaving the camps and going to do their shopping in town” we were told. *Oh, they can leave the camp?* I thought, *well, that must be a good sign.* But it was a long walk to the center of town and it was *extremely* hot. In fact, at the time of our visit, it was the hottest June *ever* recorded for both Europe and the world. (Climate Copernicus Change Service 2019) How hot? Well, according to the popular news site BuzzFeed it was so hot that roads in central France buckled and a bicycle in Berlin melted, leading one meteorologist in Spain to tweet: “Hell is coming” (No 2019). But I could not feel the heat, as I sat there in our air-conditioned bus, with my nose pressed against the window, watching the many women and children walking along the dirt road to do their shopping. From my seat, I could see them, but they could not see me. Masked in anonymity, this did not feel like an auspicious start.

Up past some further roads, we turned past the sign for another camp: Moria. Moria is what is known as a “hotspot”. Created during the height of migration influx by the European Commission, hotspots were facilities designed to help European member states, specifically Greece and Italy, with the initial reception and processing of migrants (European Commission 2015). Within these member states, hotspots were specifically constructed on islands such as Lesbos in Greece, where migratory pressures were more intense due to their respective proximities to other countries. For example, at its closest point, Lesbos is only approximately six miles, or ten kilometers west from the eastern coast of Turkey, making it a prime site of entry for those fleeing the wars in Syria and Afghanistan and seeking entry into Europe. Indeed, in 2015, over half a million migrants traveled through Lesbos, the most in Europe at that time (Jauhiainen 2017). This proved difficult for the island to handle because, despite being the third largest island in Greece, Lesbos is rather small, consisting of only 1,600 square kilometers with only 86,000 native residents.

Hotspots were, therefore, constructed in order to relieve such migratory pressures. However, instead of decreasing this pressure, the hotspot approach led to an increase in the number of applicants seeking asylum (Papadopoulou, Maimone, Tsipura and Drakopoulou 2016), and caused greater delays in the registration of new arrivals than ever before (Scammell & Rantsiou 2015). Additionally, for many asylum seekers, the construction of these hotspots did not relieve suffering, but instead created it. (Human Rights Watch, 2016) As a recent report by the International Rescue Committee (2018) noted:

Moria has been problematic from the outset. Currently, more than 8,500 people are crammed into a site which only has the capacity to host 3,100. 84 people are expected to share one shower. 72 people are expected to share one toilet. People must rise at four in the morning to stand in line to get food and water, which is distributed at eight. The sewage system is so overwhelmed, that raw sewage has been known to reach the mattresses where children sleep, and flows untreated into open drains and sewers.

Thus, rather than ease pressure and suffering, the construction of these particular sites caused greater pressure and pain. And so, in such a relatively short amount of time, Lesbos

transitioned from an island of leisure to an island of suffering. Still, we were told that borders at this site were being used to *protect* this population, because crime in Moria was quite high. According to news reports, and reports from NGOs such as *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Moria is rampant with sexual assaults and other forms of violence. For example, there are stories of migrants setting fires to the camp and children as young as ten attempting suicide. (MSF 2018; Nye 2018) But where does this violence stem from? Are we constructing borders to save us from violence, or does the construction of borders instigate violence? A recent study by Eleftherakos et al. (2018) found that “the main camp authorities, who are responsible for the provision of accurate information on asylum procedures, security and proper living conditions did not fulfill their protective role. On the contrary, as was repeatedly expressed by most of the participants, their behavior was more of an abusive kind.” Thus, in this case, border agents did not prevent, but rather initiated violence. It is therefore these kinds of institutional abuses that contribute to violence of all kinds, ineffably impacting not just the body but one’s mental health as well.

To be clear, however, Kare Tepe, is *not* Moira. Located only three miles away from Moria, Kara Tepe is a much smaller camp which functions primarily as an overflow center run by the local municipality in Lesbos. Smaller in scope, Kara Tepe (ware)houses far fewer residents than Moria, although all asylum seekers who arrive in Lesbos must first be screened at Moria before being placed at Kare Tepe. If migrants are identified as being “in high need” they are then sent to Kare Tepe, indicating Kare Tepe’s primary purpose is to house those who are considered “vulnerable populations” – namely, women and children. *This camp is different*, we were told. And, indeed it was. A recent survey indicated that residents at Kara Tepe felt safer than those at Moria and that close to a majority (46%) felt that they were treated well (Jauhiainen 2017).

Structurally, the camp at Kara Tepe was also different from Moria. At Kara Tepe, as opposed to Moria, families are housed together and in shelters designed by the social entrepreneurial company BetterShelter.org, in partnership with the UNHCR and Ikea. These award-winning shelters are sturdier than typical refugee tents, with some even being air conditioned. Additionally, at Kara Tepe, families were now allowed to cook their own food rather than having to form long lines to secure food as many do in Moria. Thus, in many ways, Kara Tepe’s model made attempts made to restore the privacy and autonomy of individuals at the camp. People were being housed in homes rather than tents – because, after all, the typical displaced person lives in these types of accommodations for a number of years. So why would we provide tents if these people are not going camping?

Yet, as a number of architects have noted, there are problems with even with these newly designed “homes,” as cultures differ in how they believe a home should be organized. For example, in cultures where women are typically sheltered from the public eye, a home that is equipped with large windows to promote ventilation would be frowned upon (Jacobs 2017). Additionally, as one of my peers noted, if the focus of Kara Tepe was on restoring a person’s dignity why was this camp located next to a garbage dump? Furthermore, if this camp was supposed to help embed and center these individuals in the local community, then why was this camp located on the outskirts of town? Architecturally and metaphorically, then, these camps belied their true intentions.

Similar to the rise of Kirkbride mental asylums of the early 20th century, with their emphasis on incarceration and regulation, refugee camps are just another iteration in the long line of punitive architecture for those who break and cross borders (Anderson 2017). Similarly, whether guided by the principles of moral treatment (as asylums were) or built for the protection of the most vulnerable, refugee camps, like asylums, are just another means of warehousing humanity. And so, while Kara Tepe is different, it is still a site of containment and suffering. Additionally, we were there at Kare Tepe to view the most vulnerable during a point in their lives when they *were* the most vulnerable - a point that made me feel even more uncomfortable once I found how different Kare Tepe really was.

After driving past Moria, we turned up to the gates of Kara Tepe. Here, we were greeted by the camp director. A large and imposing figure, dressed in green military fatigues with yellow combat boots, he welcomed us heartily to the camp. We were his *invited guests*, he told us, and put out chairs for us to sit on. He wanted to introduce us to this place and then proceeded to give us a long and rambling speech about the site... right after telling us first how much he did not like to make speeches. *What was the purpose of this place?* he asked us, *and what was it for?* Curious to hear his answer, I leaned forward in my chair, to hear him say, quite slowly: *to help establish normality for these people and to make them human again.* I then sat back fully into my chair trying to process what he just said when he continued.

A commanding figure in the fullest meaning of the word, our camp director explained how this camp is different because, indeed, it was not a camp. *“We do not use the word ‘camp’ here. Instead, this is a village and, in this village, people have neighborhoods.”* As I was learning, the words we use matter because words can either clarify or obfuscate reality. Was this really not a camp? I wondered. Did the people housed here really believe that? Then why was it that when one of our Arabic-speaking peers spoke directly to one of the inhabitants of this site, she was told *“No, this is indeed a camp and not a village.”* Why? Because in a village, one is free. But at Kara Tepe, a camp, one is not. However, by using such language the camp director could manufacture an alternative reality for us that envisioned “his camp” and borders, in general, as benevolent and caring, *not* as physical structures that curtailed movement and reduced autonomy.

Still, while the camp director may have had his own personal reasons for using such coded language, a more urgent question for me was why were there still so many of us ready to believe him. Could it be that we too were eager to use such a term because “village”, in effect, dissolved us of our own responsibilities? Consider, for example, what would have occurred if we were told that we were visiting a detention center and not a village. In such a reality, we would have had to acknowledge that we were there not only to see this site of containment but that we were, in various degrees, in tacit agreement with its function. For you see, when we visit a detention center we become observers, but when we visit a village we become guests devoid of any reporting responsibilities. In effect, by using such coded language and calling the refugee camp a village, it helped blind us to the effects of such a totalizing institution and mandated that we think differently about the function of this site and the purposes it serves.

Before this workshop, I would have considered the aforementioned discussion a clever game of semantics. And yet here at the camp, I began to see how the words we used did indeed affect the reality I perceived and how this knowledge began to reshape and reconfigure the way I envisioned the solutions provided by my own field. Case in point: Are the boats that people take to cross the sea life boats or death boats? Are we visitors or intruders? As I was to later find out that, almost two years to the day of our visit, a young Kurdish woman, who was interviewed about her experience living at Kara Tepe, replied *“I’d rather you put me in a plane and fly me back to Syria than keep me here indefinitely or take me back to Turkey. I know I’d die, but I’d rather die in my homeland than live this life without dignity”* (Hoe 2017). No amount of semantic wordplay could, therefore, disguise the effect that such restrictions in movement could have on a person.

As I sat there in this existential malaise, our enthusiastic camp director continued his speech. Unlike me, he was not full of self-doubt, but rather exuded a messianic confidence that was equal parts electrifying and terrifying. He spoke loudly and clearly, modulating not only his voice but body, and clearly illustrating that the manner in which we deliver a message can influence how much others believe in that message - even if the message is factually incorrect. To this end, we are more likely to be persuaded by speakers who use louder, rather than softer, voices (Kimble & Seidel 1991) and speakers who end their sentences with falling, rather than rising, intonations because we interpret such moves as vocal and bodily confidence and conviction (Brennan & Williams 1995; Guyer, Fabrigar, Thomas & Vaughan-Johnston 2019). Additionally, since he expressed no vulnerabilities, and since he welcomed us so warmly, how could we have any doubts

about his virtue and the virtue of this enterprise? He was there, he said repeatedly, to restore normality and give people dignity – and who could object to that?

After his speech, he took us on a tour of the village so that we could see just how clean and beautiful the village really was. However, before our tour began, we were told that while we were free to take pictures of the various facilities that were used for programming, we were asked not to take pictures of the residents in their homes. These were their homes, after all, and would we want someone coming into our home and taking pictures? I already felt ashamed, but now I was also feeling confused. Historically, NGOs have supplied the public with a steady stream of poverty porn in order to generate our concern and increase our donations. From a psychological perspective, however, we donate not only because we believe ourselves to be good people but because we wish to decrease the discomfort we feel when we view these images. However, at this camp, we were specifically asked *not* to take pictures of others in an effort to preserve the dignity of the recipients. So, did this mandate against taking photos have another function, I wondered, and was this request not to take pictures, in fact, a new way to generate funds? That is, were we now presented with images of self-sufficiency and hope because these types of images solicited more donations than images of despair? Did we donate now, not because we wished to diminish our discomfort, but because we wished to support the empowerment of good people? And did we donate now because it solidified our own world view that we are good people helping other good people? While I didn't believe it to be good practice to take pictures in any case, I did become suspicious of the way the camp director configured the mandate. However, in either case, it didn't seem to matter to others because no sooner were we told not to take pictures when someone in our group took a close up shot of a woman in her home. So much for creating safe and dignified spaces...

We rounded the camp and came across children playing in the street. Unlike the adults, many of the children wanted to come talk to us, as we seemed like a welcome diversion to their day. *See, the children laugh and play here, like in a village*, we were told. No, this was not a village because life here felt regimented and segregated. Additionally, if they were so happy, then why were so many of us nervous to be there? Without a common language, many of us felt lost, unable to communicate with *them*. It was as if all of those metaphorical borders that we had been talking about earlier in the week had crystallized - and there we were, all in the same space and yet separated by our positionality and accrued privileges. And to make matters worse, I not only felt alienated from them, but I felt alienated from myself.

Our tour ended once we reached the community tent. A large circular enclosure, with bench style seating, we were led to one side of the tent and asked to sit down. Here in the tent, we were able to get shade from the punishing sun, and were given refreshments. But as soon as we entered the tent an invisible border quickly arose - on the one side of the tent sat all the migrant men, the furthest away from us, followed by a small group of boys and girls who served as a buffer between our group. Ours was a small mixed group of men and women, mostly White American and Greek academics, alongside a few professors of color like myself.

It was not lost on any of my peers that the very space we were invited to sit in and connect with the migrants resembled a circus tent. As the camp director sat us down to once again speak of his little village, some of my peers could not help but dryly comment, "This circus is constantly repeated". *Here in this village, there is no them, there is no us*, he explained *because we are all people*. "Neighborhoods" in Kara Tepe were not stratified by religious affiliations but rather were purposefully integrated so that people were made (forced?) to establish kinships across different groups. Additionally, neighborhoods were intentionally named after Greek heroes so that the residents could be introduced to Greek culture. But can effective intergroup contact be established in such a coercive environment? Can integration occur without choice and power? Moreover, as one of our peers commented, insisting that everyone at the camp was the same was a form of epistemological violence that was grounded on erasing difference. To her, this concept of humanness meant that people were stripped of their identity, and for some of my peers, it appeared

as a Christian intervention meant to destabilize Muslim sectarianism. Thus, in an effort to increase group cohesion, groups were denied their own respective identities and forced to live apart from their community members, in neighborhoods named after the very people who constrained their movement. Most troubling, however, was that by enforcing a commonality based on a distilled essence (*we are all human*), the camp was operating under the presumption that these individuals were perhaps never human to begin with.

His speech, meant to evoke compassion and concern, was redolent with a benevolent racism that denied the agency and personhood of others at the camp. In his theater in the round, he consistently sought assurances from the crowd, calling on men randomly to offer their support for his enterprise. And to be sure, similar to a call and response in an apostolic church, people did give testimony, with some men even using the word “father” to describe the camp director. And so, paradoxically, while he talked about not wanting to dehumanize others, he ended up doing just that by the very way he would pick on men in the crowd to stand up and bear witness. These men, who had risked so much, were thus reduced to obedient and grateful subservients.

Condescending? Yes. Sexist? Yes. But were there still other ways to understand the camp director’s behavior? That is, could it be possible to explain this person’s actions and behaviors using an even wider lens that took into account his own unique circumstances? In other words, rather than only see his actions as a product of toxic masculinity, or of his domineering or authoritative personality, could we also understand it in the context of other forces as well? For example, how much of his behavior was a reaction to other pressures that he was facing from other stakeholders? To be sure he was giving a performance, but to whom was he performing and why? Who were his typical audiences? And what was he trying to convey and gain? And how often does it happen that a group of foreigners come to “visit” this “village”?

Furthermore, were there other ways to explain the behavior of the migrant men in the tent? Much of the work on refugee subjectivities has focused on their subjectification. That is, attempts to understand the inner world, experiences, and perspectives of refugees has focused on their experiences as the dejected, disenfranchised, and discriminated. But, of course, the subaltern can speak and asylum seekers, in particular, may be motivated to present a particular picture of themselves in order to get access to resources. As Häkli, Pascucci & Kallio (2017) note, we can all become attentive to our positions and refugees are no different. In this way, “refugeeness” is also a performance. However, what are the psychological consequences when subjectification becomes objectification?

Following the camp director’s speech, we were then introduced to a group of young NGO volunteers, all young White American women, possibly fresh out of college, who told us about the various initiatives that their respective agencies were running at the camp. As they spoke my mind wandered. *How does this work?* I wondered, *how do these women do programming with these men?* when I then noticed, that very startlingly, that there were no migrant women in the tent. Perhaps it was the intense heat, or the intensity of the toxic masculinity that filled the space, but I felt like I was suffocating and knew that I had to leave this tent quickly. Fortunately for me, it was at this precise moment when the young group of American women announced that everyone in the tent was going to play a game together based on American trivial pursuit. And since I could not think of a more pointless and agonizing way to spend my time, I capitalized on the moment and quickly slipped out of the tent.

Once outside of the tent, I found another fellow female academic who similarly escaped just a few moments before. This professor was sitting outside the tent nursing her own baby who she had brought to the workshop. *I just needed to get out of there*, she told me as she sat beside a refugee mother who also had her child with her. And it was there, in this outdoor space, outside of the tent, that I sat and watched these two mothers interact quietly without many words. This young mother, I was told, had just given birth at the camp, and her main concern was the heat. And I sat there and marveled. What a different experience this was – sitting with these mothers outside of the tent, versus sitting inside of the tent watching all of the men perform for us. I

thought of the parents that I had met in Jordan and how we had sat together, once, many years ago, and also talked about the fate of our children.

The “visit” at Kara Tepe then ended and we all headed toward the bus.

On the bus, there had been some discussion that perhaps we could make another stop to visit Moria. Let’s go and see. *Oh no, let’s not*, I thought. As we approached Moria, some of us stood up in the bus to take pictures of the camp. *Why?* I wondered, *why are they taking pictures?* and I just looked away. When we finally arrived at Moria, we were turned away. I was relieved because, with our entry denied, what more would there be to see? While no justice can be done by closing your eyes, at a certain point witnessing can just become voyeurism. The rest of the ride from the camp back to the hotel was a blur. There could have been conversations or there could have been silence but I just don’t remember because all I know was that I just wanted to sink deeper and deeper into my seat, and just disappear.

We arrived back at the hotel well before dinner, though that evening at the hotel was disorienting for everyone. Here we were being housed at this lavish hotel, when only miles away people were locked away in camps. What was this feeling about and what did it mean? This is whiplash, I thought, and I have felt it before. Part of the reason that many of us felt such discomfort in visiting this site is because we were, in essence, reifying the border with our visit. To cope, some of us went swimming afterwards, but I just went to sleep. It had been an early morning and I hadn’t slept much the night before, but the truth be told, I think I just needed to shut down. I felt disoriented and tired. The whiplash hurt.

LOOKING AT OURSELVES

Social scientists have long written about the importance of reflexivity in our academic studies. However, with regards to migration research, only recently have there been focused discussions on the role of reflexivity in border studies. This workshop proved so powerful, not only because of the disciplinary borders encountered, but also because it forced me to think about the multiple borders that I straddle – my own positionality as an academic, as a female academic, and more specifically, my status as a professor from an immigrant background who is interested in studying borders. These multiple identities sometimes worked against each other so that I sometimes approached the border work dispassionately and sometimes felt so engulfed in the work that I had to step outside.

I, however, was not alone in my discomfort, as there was an extended discussion among our group as to whether we should have approached our visit to the refugee camp differently. For example, should we have brought items or gifts to the camp? But what were the specific needs of the camp? And what did the camp residents themselves need at this site? Additionally, there were still a number of us who believed that our visit was a “missed opportunity” for us to really know what camp life was like because, in fact, the camp director had put a limit on our participation and set the frame for our participation as well. Hence, rather than be subjected to such an orchestrated exhibit, a number of us had wanted an opportunity to talk more in depth with migrants at the camp to hear their stories.

But for whom was this a missed opportunity? Wasn’t this visit, in truth, more for us than for them? More to the point, why did we feel that we should have such intimate access to the most vulnerable? In reflecting back on this experience, I believe that many of us yearned for a more personal connection with the people at the camp because we wish to reduce the guilt that came with gazing and objectifying others. Still, while it may be understandable that we wish to have more personal contact with others, we also needed to realize that seeking such intimacy could also be inherently problematic and voyeuristic.

Additionally, I believe that there can be a value in being uncomfortable, and that we should not always be trying to reduce our discomfort. As one peer noted: “If we are not feeling it then we are not in it.” Moreover, when we feel this need to reduce our guilt we often do so by engaging in charity, but does engaging in charity overly simplify the solutions needed for such complex problems? Perhaps what we need to do is to come to terms with the fact that our role, as academics, is not only to witness and document, but to also engage in active collaboration – *not* in charity – with those directly affected. By engaging in more participatory and collaborative work, we can perhaps mitigate the very violence that occurs when people of unequal status encounter one another. Margaret O’Neil has written extensively on how we need to reimagine how we do migration research and has documented how simply engaging in a collaborative walk with someone, where they lead the way and document to you their path, their struggles, and triumphs, can help us understand better the lives of migrants. Walking becomes the method by which we can conduct interviews and gather data (O’Neil & Roberts 2019). In this way, we use our methods to get closer to our participants, not farther away. Using more ecologically valid methods also means that further ensure the validity of our findings. Such methods are not only more collaborative but also have the potential to be more emancipatory. What I learned from this experience is that our visit, or more accurately, our intrusion, was itself a violent encounter where effective intergroup contact could not occur because of the power differential between the groups. The group encounter was not based on equity.

Furthermore, even within our group of academics each of us came from different backgrounds, and thus viewed our own roles differently in this encounter. Namely, for those of us who had come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, we engaged in this viewing with the understanding that, if things had been only slightly different, it could have been one of our own family members at this camp. To this point, a fellow academic and I wondered whether our own experience (and discomfort) with this trip was further moderated by our own respective backgrounds. In psychological research, one’s group membership, or more specifically one’s attachment to your group, affects not only what you see but how you interpret the actions of others. As a result, we interpret things differently based on how much skin (literally) we had in the game. Hence, it was not only the whiplash of being in such different spaces that proved difficult for many of us, but also the awareness and the fear that the reality we saw could have been our own if only under slightly different circumstances. Thus, while our positionality does not only depend on our ethno-national backgrounds, as my earlier experiences have noted, it is no doubt that these categories can and do shape how we view and frame the world.

The worst experience, however, was that once these specific concerns were voiced, many of us felt that the academics who expressed this were just being rude. Initially, I was chief among that group who, in the beginning, felt that we should have shown more restraint in our critiques. But as the workshop progressed, I began to wonder what is the right space to express this outrage? And, as one of my peers noted, why aren’t academic spaces the space to express these issues? Rather than consider this a form of navel gazing, why couldn’t we listen to these critiques and understand them for what they were meant to be – a more urgent call to arms?

LOOKING BEYOND

At the very end of our trip, one of our group leaders noted something very strange. As we were approaching the end of the visit, and we were getting ready to leave the camp, she noticed that the children in the camp were putting down the mats on the ground and shouting “Cinema! Cinema!” at *us*, as if they were watching us were a movie. Thus, we were not only viewing them, but they were viewing us as well. The circus, does indeed, constantly repeat.

As we continue to study the lives of migrants, we need to understand more about how they view their own agency. To do so we need different ways of understanding migrant stories. Rather than viewing migration as a process that occurs to migrants, migration can be

conceptualized as an active and embodied form of protest, where individuals are constantly trying to maximize their chances for survival. In this vein, migrants are not passive but are engaged, and engaged in viewing.

So what are the alternative ways that we can engage in border studies? Perhaps the first step is to investigate the very terms we use. When we say borders what do we mean? When we speak of integration what does this mean? Integration is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and indeed, a number of researchers have been critical of the very concept of integration because such policies (camps included) are there not for the benefit of the refugees but rather to produce good European subjects. The study of borders requires a closer look at such integration programs. What are the goals of these programs? Are these programs truly aimed toward empowerment? To this end, a newly proposed model of relational integration defines itself as “the process of boundary change towards more relational equality” (Klarenbeek 2019). Perhaps, rather than do away with borders, (a project which currently provokes massive political resistance), we should be engaging in border movement and transfiguration. What is needed then, is a new way to study borders that would be transdisciplinary and multilingual and would center the experience of border crossers so they could speak directly to the experience of migrating. By prioritizing the voices of those who move, and engaging in more participatory research, we can then help to decenter and perhaps even decolonize the gaze of academics.

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BIOGRAPHY

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