

Introduction

Borders and Migrations

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In close connection to the 2018 edition of the UU Humanities Graduate Conference, this special issue of *Junctions* arises from a common sense of urgency within the humanities to rethink paradigms of borders and migrations today. Western society is witnessing, on the one hand, a collapse of certain naturalized narratives, such as that of human rights when faced with the fleeing of refugees, and, on the other hand, the emergence of other narratives we believed had been buried: strict nationalisms and fundamentalisms. Due to this, the topic of migration is under increasing academic and public scrutiny. In light of these circumstances, we consider it vital to address and evaluate the discourses, categories, and concepts regarding borders and migration from a critical humanities perspective. However, even if *Junctions* takes a stance in this debate from a humanities perspective – generally known for cultural analysis, discourse analysis or critical theory – some of our authors also engage in theorizations based on personal experiences in this field.

Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities
 Irene Alcubilla Troughton and Jessie Wei-Hsuan Chen. 2018.
 Vol 3(2): pp. ISSN: 2468-8282
<http://junctionsjournal.org/>



In its most rigid and literal definition, as described in the Oxford English Dictionary, the word border refers to “a line separating two countries, administrative divisions, or other areas” or “the edge or boundary of something, or the part near it”.¹ As shown on the cover of this issue, however, the definition of borders can be much more fluid. The image captures a loosely formed border with wooden posts and rolling waves on a beach. The border creates distance and separates the onlooker from the people in the picture, yet it seems all too easy that one could simply move past the posts to reach the other side. Similarly, this “movement from one part of something to another” is the simplest and most fundamental definition of the word migration. While the use of the term, in many narratives today, refers to the disenfranchised refugee or economic migrant in Europe, the “stereotypical” migrant, the implications of what the word can entail are much richer and more diverse. An exploration of this undefined and changing nature of borders and migration is the aim of this issue. The articles included point to a broader understanding and interpretation of the two words, with a more specific goal to reexamine the status quo and contribute to a potential critique of European public images of migration.

As Balibar and Williams (2002) convincingly argue, borders nowadays do not follow the same patterns as they did before: they do not serve to preserve the functions of a sovereign state, nor do they mark the limits of territories. Instead, from marginal positions, borders have come to occupy the center of the public space, with a dialectics of inclusion and exclusion that responds to both politico-economic power and symbolic interests (2002, 72-73). Contemporary borders and migrating practices follow an unprecedented rationale that needs to be addressed from several sides, that influence their creation and maintenance. In an attempt to expose the underlying assumptions of how migrations and borders are conceptualized in a global world, scholars of philosophy, social science, and humanities have moved away from geographical and traditional borders and have turned their attention to identity formation and the recognition of subjects. Sara Ahmed (2000)’s analysis of strangers and Amartya Sen (2006)’s examination of the intrinsic violence of identitarian categories have built a solid ground from which to establish critiques on both borders and migrations. Similarly, these new circumstances have propelled new ideas regarding our understanding of hospitality (Derrida 2000) or the conflation between tolerance and fear of harassment in contemporary Western societies (Žižek 2008). Furthermore, scholars are trying to debunk a homogenized image of migrants, offering accounts of different modes of living on the move, such as queer diaspora (Gopinath 2005; Wekker 2006) where geographical, political, sexual and racial borders are at play. Finally, it is essential to

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘border’, accessed June 1, 2018.

consider those strands of thoughts that seek to conceptualize the border as a productive site of emerging cultures (Bhabha 2004).

When discussing migrations and borders, the global economy also becomes central, with authors like Arjun Appadurai (1990) describing the effects of globalization and its relation to transnationalism as far back as 1990. More recent studies have questioned the overt scholarly focus on the agency of the individual human across nations, arguing that these previous approaches neglected the power of other types of transnational flows. Capital and ideas, as Ana Dragojlovic (2008) argues, also participate in a constant movement which influences the lives of people who seem, at first, less mobile, such as those who do not participate in migratory practices themselves. Furthermore, discourses on transnationalism may incur reinforcements of colonial and imperialist ideals, as Walter D. Mignolo points out (2015).

These critical insights on the topic of borders and migrations are the ones that we want to follow, expand and contest in our current issue of *Junctions*. Young scholars are finding their voices with renewed vitality and with an awareness of the importance of both theory and practical work. Some of our authors reflect on the liminal position of being an emerging scholar and, at the same time, being engaged in volunteering or in artistic practices. In this sense, they embody *Junction's* aspiration to bring interdisciplinarity not only to discussions within academia but also, and most importantly, to a blurring of boundaries between academia, art and activism. However, in this issue, we also want to call for a pause. Our authors are aware of the risks of continuing to generate discourse on unspoken assumptions, on uncontested terms. That is why, instead of relentlessly marching forward, aligning ourselves with a misguided ideal of progress and complying with the acceleration of Western society, our issue also aims at stopping, looking back and reflecting. Only then we will be able to open other paths, to propose alternatives that are fruitful albeit partial and situated.

With this introduction, we would like to point towards several threads that traverse the articles of this issue, as a way of framing a possible reading of this volume of *Junctions*. In a gesture of guidance, we will trace three paths that can help navigate through our authors' work. Nevertheless, we encourage our readers to take this as one proposition among many and to look also to themselves for other connections between our articles and, more broadly, the debate around borders and migrations today.

MIGRATING SUBJECTS IN A "BORDERLESS WORLD"

Discourses around the flow of capital, people and ideas in a highly mobile and globalized world often risk depicting contemporary society as a "borderless space". This "borderless space"

should be comprehended not as an absence of borders, but forms an impression of borders as invisible, even redundant. The image of a transnational subject that engages in highly mobile practices across borders resonates with this idea. However, who do we refer to when we talk about a “transnational subject”? Who is granted the opportunity of carelessly crossing borders? Who is conceptualized as a lawful subject in this framing? The subject that holds the status of citizen, even when outside the confines of their original nation-state, retains the right to travel, to volunteer, to re-locate. As Sara Ahmed argues, the interplay of recognition of subjects ultimately follows a “legitimation of certain forms of mobility or movement within the public, and the delegitimation of others” (2000, 29). In her contribution, Maria Chiara Coppola reflects on these issues in an analysis of different capacities for mobility in Lebanon, taking into account the invisible borders that are at play when categorizing a subject as a refugee or a volunteer. The two types of subjects traveling in a van through the streets of Lebanon are either criminalized or associated with a supposedly unmarked identity that embodies the characteristics of whiteness, Westernness, and privilege.

If borders are made redundant in a globalized world and differences between migrating subjects cease to matter in a transnational economy, we have a chance of treating our world and its inhabitants as a universal whole. Yet this “universal whole” has been identified by specific traits from the start – namely, being a white, western, able-bodied, straight man (Braidotti 2013, 24). The more human beings expose themselves to new challenges – such as climate change – or new ambitions – like establishing settlements on other planets – the more we appeal to the universalizing discourse of “we are all just human”. As Rosi Braidotti highlights, “humanity is re-created as a negative category, held together by shared vulnerability and the spectre of extinction” (2013, 187). This, according to her, needs to be contested as it exposes the manipulative and narcissistic characteristic of a society only preoccupied with cosmopolitan connections when in danger. Furthermore, Braidotti asserts, this maintains an unquestioned category of the “human” whose benevolent scope can be extended to others if strictly necessary. This seemingly all-encompassing category, however, works through continual exclusions, as shall be pointed out in the next section.

Similarly, the conception of the contemporary world as a “borderless space” may incur an indifference to those individuals who are excluded in order for the “lawful subjects” (Ahmed 2000) to freely move. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2013) has theorized the status of those individuals, naming them “*homini sacri*”: those who can be killed and yet not sacrificed during a state of exception. According to Agamben, a “state of exception” would be a situation where laws can be suspended in relation to individuals deprived of their rights. Furthermore, in the same way that the bare life of the *homini sacri* constitutes the system through an inclusive

exclusion, the sovereign law is confirmed by its suspension in the state of exception. As Marc Villanueva Mir argues in an interesting parallel between contemporary society and dystopian fiction, the borderless space of classical dystopia paradoxically leads to the thematization of the border as a state of exception. Following Villanueva Mir's argument, it might be suggested that the impulse to disregard borders in a supposedly globalized "borderless space" has as its counterpart the suppression of laws in a self-reproducing state of exception that neglects its *homi sacri* (Agamben 2017).

BEING ON THE BORDER

As has been mentioned in the previous section, the possibility of carelessly crossing borders, rendering them invisible, derives from certain rights to mobility that ultimately divide who is conceptualized as a proper citizen and who as an immigrant (Ahmed 2000). Individuals who fall outside the category of the proper citizen and are delegitimized in their mobility are consequently more exposed to precarious situations, to a greater vulnerability. Judith Butler (2004) indicates how vulnerability is unequally distributed, thus creating a situation where some lives are more grievable than others, which highly affects subjects of migration. Nonetheless, the recourse to vulnerability comes with some dangers. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (2016) demonstrate this in a double aspect. On the one hand, vulnerability tends to be regarded through a paternalistic lens as a position that needs to be protected by someone more capable of doing so. On the other hand, it can also be claimed by those positions of power that aim to rationalize the subjugation of minorities, such as when states proclaim their hyper-vulnerability to the arrival of immigrants.

Both positions, even if clearly distinct at first, cooperate in maintaining the binary that Giorgio Agamben (2013) theorizes between *bios* and *zoè*. In Ancient Greek philosophy, the latter implied natural life, while the former comprised a particular way of life, one that could be considered to be "qualified". In this way, simple natural life (*zoè* or bare life) was excluded from the *polis* and remained associated with reproductive life in the sphere of the home. However, the Aristotelian *polis* does not just imply an opposition between life and good life, but an implication of the first into the second, of bare life in qualified life. Western politics since then has constituted itself through an inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*) of bare life. Both positions regarding vulnerability, then, collaborate in maintaining this division and inclusive exclusion inasmuch as they consider this vulnerable bare life in need of being either protected or controlled by *bios*.

To create connections based on vulnerability, as Butler proposes in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), does not seem like a straightforward task, as the

aforementioned divisions tend to re-emerge in the use of those concepts. Butler has dedicated much of her scholarship to the destruction of those binaries in order to create a collectivity in difference that would surpass inclusive-exclusions. In a different field but with a related aim, Walter D. Mignolo (2000) explores paths of dealing with a globalized world through a critical cosmopolitanism. According to Mignolo, for cosmopolitanism to be able to create a community that does not fall back into Modernist exclusions, one first needs to address how colonialism constitutes the double-side of Modernism. As cosmopolitanism has tended to critique modernity from the inside, it has not been fully able to escape its logics and to address its embedded colonialism. In this way, through a critical cosmopolitanism that works from the borders, from an exterior that is a necessary condition for the interior, a new approach can emerge that departs from paradigms of benevolent recognition and pleas for inclusion (Mignolo 2000, 724-725).

In this line of thinking, our authors, while acknowledging how being on the border comes with the risk of exposure to a precarious situation, also engage with this condition of liminality as a site of possibility. These lines of argumentation search for moments, attitudes and ideas of resistance within migratory practices and border thinking that would allow for creative paths to be constructed. Amidst the many preoccupations that surface in this mode of understanding borders and migrations, apart from the previously addressed issue of communities, is the fact of dwelling.

A number of scholars have mulled over the idea of the migrating subject and its condition of rootlessness as an asset for new ways of conceptualizing the home. Homi Bhabha (2004) addresses this in terms of homeliness, Edward Said through exile: “what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (2000: 55). In this issue, Eline Reinhoud’s comparative literary analysis takes up this renewed impulse to reconsider cosmopolitanism and transculturality in light of new ways of dwelling in migratory experiences. To be immersed in a transcultural world, she proposes, necessarily implies a negotiation of diverse understandings of dwelling, consequently asserting that “cosmopolitanism has not only changed the meaning of home: it has become a condition of home”.

REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY

When dealing with borders and migrations through an artistic lens, questions of representation become essential. How to represent migration? Who is entitled to do so? How to represent the border itself and search for new conceptualizations? All of these interrogatives are well-known to humanities scholars, and we can all agree that clear-cut responses to them are an impossible

task. However, and without forgetting the previous controversies, other meanings of the word “representation” come into play in the articles of this issue of *Junctions*, predominantly those regarding the distinction between “representation as delegation” and “being a representative”. As theatre scholar José A. Sánchez (2015) puts it, in the latter sense representation has an aesthetic purpose situated in the field of imagination and observation, where someone complies with the general requirements to stand for a whole group; representation in the former sense, on the other hand, has a political intent. “Representation as delegation” therefore is linked to an action – to represent someone – while “representation as being a representative” is connected to an essence. This distinction becomes relevant in the analysis of NASA discourses on space travel by Lena Quelvenec, in which North American astronauts posit themselves as representatives of the whole of humanity. However, instead of acting as delegators of a diversity of groups and collectives, those individuals perform as representatives of the category “the human”, which, as aforementioned, is intrinsically exclusive.

These discourses also need to be understood through the framework of performativity (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990). It is crucial to take into account the performative power of the border, which creates the possibilities of its existence, in the same way that a cut is previous to a division of parts. By the act of establishing a border, for instance “in the name of safety”, those agents that try to cross it can immediately be conceptualized as potential dangers, as illegal threats that consequently support the necessity of having such a border, as Maria Chiara Coppola addresses in her article. In the same way, discourses on migration will have a performative effect on the realities they describe. As an example of this, we can turn again to our ultimate migrating practice, the last possible border crossing: that of space. NASA discourses, as Felipe Cervera points out, frame the space narrative in a neo-colonial and transhumanist way inasmuch as they “try to master the limits of our planet, and therefore our own physical limits” (2016: 262). Our authors engage with the conflicting narratives that surround borders and migrations today with critical insight and a desire to develop more creative, more self-reflective and, ultimately, more just discourses.

ARTICLES

To further investigate the notions established in this introduction, this issue selected four articles, each focusing on a different topic and context. The arrangement of the articles moves from contemporary social issues to the literary and visual worlds of imagined borders and migration. Regardless of their connection to the real world, the articles examine situations and ways in which human beings understand, interpret, and respond to the two concepts.

In her article “Destabilizing Borders: Possibilities of Solidarity in the Encounter Between Volunteers and Forced Migrants”, Maria Chiara Coppola reflects upon what borders, migration,

and mobility mean to a group of Italian volunteers and Syrian refugees traveling in a van together on the streets of Lebanon. By analyzing what happened inside the shared space of the van, the author questions if solidarity with refugees is built on a foundation of white privilege and rethinks the paradigms of describing the two groups from a more equal position.

Moving into the literary realm, Eline Reinhoud demonstrates how the ideas of home and cosmopolitanism are closely related in “No Place Like Home: Cosmopolitanism and the Notion of Home in *The Namesake* and the *Parable Series*”. The author analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable* series to explore definitions of and boundaries between the two concepts. By studying three characters from the two works, she investigates how they migrate in the post- or super-modern transcultural, digital and mobile world.

Marc Villanueva Mir’s article, “From the Island to the Border: The Problematization of Space in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction”, proposes a renewed perspective on the treatment of space in dystopian fiction. He applies the theories of M.M. Bakhtin’s chronotope and Yuri Lotman’s spatial model to conceptualize utopian literature as an island and dystopian fiction as a border. Through commentaries on classical and contemporary dystopian works, the author analyzes spatial conflicts in the selected literature and relates them to broader political questions.

Last but not least, Lena Quelvennec takes a visual turn to the final frontier in “Outer Space Narrative and Humanity’s Limits: Will the Space Traveler Meet Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*?” The author outlines the impact of space conquest narrative on perceptions of Earth’s borders. She questions the representation of humanity by those who take humanity outside of its original boundary of the Earth, such as NASA and Mars One projects, by studying the portraits of three space travelers and finding parallels in Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*.

From the UU Humanities Graduate Conference to this issue of *Junctions*, students from across the Humanities have explored the theme of borders and migration alongside current scholarship. From the migration of volunteers and forced migrants crossing real-life borders to metaphorical borders in fictional works, this issue has also attempted to present a variety of discussions and viewpoints. However, as the theme is highly complex, with many as-yet-unexplored avenues of discourse and debate, this issue also aspires to serve as a springboard, as an inspiration for further research.

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