

On Boundaries and Boats

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Boundaries are not simply physical demarcations forged in sand or soil. Boundaries can be virtual, imagined, or internal. Boundaries are powerful. The boundaries that separate one state from another can shape opportunities and possibilities for those living within its bounds. As a student studying migration, I am well aware that boundaries are not deterministic; we all possess agency. Yet, this agency must act within the parameters of structure – namely, that of boundaries.

Undeniably, boundaries are often taken for granted. For those of us born in Western Europe or North America, international doors open without much effort. Access to the global playground is simply granted. What is more, for those with significant resources, this access need not even be granted; such access is simply available.

Surely, we all face bureaucratic hurdles in accessing the global sphere. Passports, visas, and other documentation are often required. Yet, for those born in states at the top of the global hierarchy, these “hurdles” are mitigated by boundaries that confer an elite belonging in the global sphere, one that ultimately renders these hurdles largely symbolic - formalities that simultaneously espouse equality while perpetuating inequality on the basis of supposed difference.

In recent weeks, images of migrants stranded at sea have become ubiquitous. From the tragedy in the Mediterranean to Rohingya migrants packed on boats on the shores of Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, recent history seem to be replaying itself, like a scratched CD skipping on the first line of a chorus that has become painfully familiar.

As these events unfold, journalists and scholars clamor to share their solutions with respect to the “migration problem”. “Close the borders”, they argue. “Increase restrictions”, they bellow. “Development holds the key to stemming migration from the developing world”, they claim. Yet, what each of these assertions fail to recognize or acknowledge is that migration is not a *fait accompli*. Migration has historically been and will continue to be an essential part of the human experience. We are an inherently migratory people.

Yet, despite this, the desire of migrants from the developing world to move is perceived as aberrant, problematic, and without precedence. Migrants are

viewed as the problem, while on other, distant shores those deemed “expats” are welcomed with open arms. Boundaries problematize *some* migrants but valorize others.

A shift in perspective is needed; we must realign our perspectives about migrants and migration with the realities of boundaries - particularly their power to vilify and to valorize. If we continue to view migrants, and not the inherent inequality of boundaries, as the problem, the lives of migrants will continue to be lost at sea.