Bordering Belonging:
Memory, Migration and the Making of Place

Edited by
Stephen Ansah Addo

INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSES

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MEMORY, MIGRATION AND THE MAKING OF PLACE

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Unit 3A, Gateway Tower
32 Western Gateway
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www.lcir.co.uk
info@lcir.co.uk

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Stephen Ansah Addo

Introduction

Borders are often imagined as lines: drawn on maps, marked by fences, guarded at checkpoints, or crossed with passports in hand. Yet borders are rarely experienced as lines alone. They can be carried in memory, embedded in language, reproduced through institutions, negotiated within families, and encountered in the ways people understand themselves and others. A border may separate territories, but it can also shape relationships, identities, communities and ideas of home. *Bordering Belonging: Memory, Migration and the Making of Place* brings together interdisciplinary perspectives that approach borders not simply as geographical or political divisions, but as lived and continually changing social and cultural processes.

The collection is grounded in the understanding that borders are continually produced and reproduced through practices of bordering. Rather than treating the border as a fixed object, border studies have increasingly examined how boundaries are created through everyday interactions, political institutions, cultural representations and identity practices (Newman, 2006). Borders can therefore exist far beyond the edges of states: within families, communities, welfare systems, cultural encounters, media environments and personal memories. Belonging, correspondingly, is never entirely separate from bordering. To belong somewhere often involves negotiating who is included, who is excluded, and how the boundaries between the two are drawn.

The three parts of this collection explore different but interconnected dimensions of this process. Part I, “Borders of Displacement and Belonging,” begins with people whose relationships with place have been shaped by movement, separation and changing circumstances of belonging. Shira Pinczuk and Nicola Viola’s chapter on Syrian-Druze women who marry across the Golan Heights demonstrates that a border can become part of a person’s life long before and long after the physical act of crossing it. For these women, the border is embedded in childhood memories, family relationships, marriage, motherhood and continuing connections with relatives on the other side. It is therefore not simply a line to be crossed but an enduring condition of everyday life. This perspective resonates with Anzaldúa’s (1987) influential conception of the borderland as an embodied and psychological space in which identities are negotiated between different worlds.

Dorota Rynkowska and Magdalena Pokrzywa’s examination of Ukrainian refugees in Poland approaches belonging through the institutional structures encountered after displacement. The Polish social assistance system provides protection and practical support while also creating expectations around work, independence and integration. For Ukrainian women rebuilding their lives under conditions of war, assistance becomes part of a wider negotiation between different roles – as mothers, workers, refugees, migrants and individuals seeking greater independence. The chapter demonstrates how borders can be experienced not only through immigration controls but also through the institutions and policies that shape life after crossing.

The relationship between displacement, place and belonging takes a different form in Nguyễn Huy Hoàng’s discussion of indigenous cosmology, tourism and neoliberal development. Focusing on the contrasting ways in which tourism imagery and fishermen’s representations of the Holy Whale understand landscape and value, the chapter considers how different relationships with place can come into conflict. Development and tourism can transform cultural and ecological difference into economic value, raising questions about whose knowledge of place

is recognised and whose relationship with the non-human world is preserved or commodified. In this sense, bordering can also occur between different systems of knowledge and different ways of imagining what a place is worth.

Part II, "Borders of Encounter and Representation," shifts from displacement towards the encounters through which cultural and social boundaries are negotiated and reproduced. Fatima Zahra Et-talby and Abdelaaziz El Bakkali bring the discussion into the intimate setting of Moroccan host families and international students. Shared meals, religious practices, gender expectations, household routines and hospitality become everyday sites of intercultural negotiation. The home becomes a space of what the authors describe as "lived diplomacy," where assumptions about culture and identity can be challenged, reinforced or transformed through ordinary encounters.

The question of encounter is closely connected to the question of representation. Othmane Tissir, Zakaria Abdel Mounim and Abdelaaziz El Bakkali examine how Western writers establish their authority to speak about Morocco. Their analysis of travel writing, colonial memoirs, anthropological accounts and expatriate literature shows how claims to proximity, experience, linguistic knowledge and privileged access can be used to establish representational authority. Moroccan people frequently appear not as producers of knowledge but as figures who validate the Western writer's authority. The chapter therefore draws attention to an epistemic border: the boundary between those positioned as observers and those positioned as objects of observation. It connects with Said's (1978) wider critique of Orientalism and the unequal power involved in representing cultural difference.

This politics of representation takes a contemporary digital form in Maria Cristina Nisco and Annalisa Raffone's analysis of readers' comments on the Facebook pages of British newspapers. Their study examines how migration, Brexit and borders are discussed through user-generated discourse, revealing recurring constructions of national identity, sovereignty and threat. The distinction between "us" and "them" becomes a form of symbolic

bordering through which migrants are positioned as outsiders and national belonging is defined against perceived others. Social media therefore provides another space in which borders are produced – not through fences or checkpoints, but through language, repetition and collective identity-making.

Part III, "Borders of Memory and Exile," turns towards the relationship between borders, memory and the experience of separation. Lama Autabashi's comparative reading of Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* explores displacement as a condition that extends beyond physical separation. Memory and return do not necessarily restore a stable sense of belonging; instead, they can reveal the distance between remembered and present places. Exile becomes psychological and temporal as well as geographical, producing identities that remain suspended between places and histories. As Said (2000) suggests, exile transforms the relationship between people and place, making absence itself part of the experience of belonging.

Sally Hamilton's analysis of *No Man's Land* brings the collection into the unstable spaces created by war. Through the concepts of liminality, heterotopia, psychogeography and hauntology, the chapter explores landscapes in which geographical boundaries become inseparable from trauma, memory and disrupted temporality. Trenches, shell holes and devastated landscapes challenge the assumption that borders necessarily provide order. Instead, the frontier becomes a space where established distinctions between place and absence, safety and danger, past and future begin to collapse.

Read together, the chapters demonstrate that borders operate at many levels. They can be territorial and political, but they can also be social, institutional, cultural, epistemic and psychological. They can restrict movement while strengthening attachments to places left behind. They can create exclusion while also producing new forms of identity and connection. They can be experienced through institutions, negotiated in intimate encounters, reproduced through language, or carried across generations through memory.

The title *Bordering Belonging* reflects this tension. Belonging is not simply a matter of being from somewhere; it is continually shaped through relationships with places, people, institutions and memories. Migration can unsettle established forms of belonging while creating new ones. Displacement can make distant places more emotionally present, while return can reveal that the place remembered is no longer quite the place encountered. Cultural encounters can soften boundaries, but representation and political discourse can also reinforce them.

The chapters gathered here therefore invite us to look beyond the border as a fixed geographical line and towards the many ways in which borders enter everyday life. From marriage and migration to hospitality and welfare, from cultural representation and digital discourse to exile and war, the collection asks how boundaries are created, experienced and remembered – and how they shape the places we inhabit and the identities through which we understand where we belong.

Ultimately, *Bordering Belonging* suggests that places are not simply given to us. They are made through movement and memory, encounter and representation, attachment and separation. Borders are part of that making. They divide, but they also connect; they exclude, but they can also create new forms of belonging. To understand borders, therefore, is to understand something fundamental about how people make – and remake – a place in the world.

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Part I:
Borders of Displacement and Belonging

Shira Pinczuk
Nicola Viola

Living the Border: Syrian-Druze Brides and the Border as a Way of Life

Introduction

"Every day when I see a bird, I wish I could be in its place. Birds do not recognise borders, but we, supposedly 'free' human beings, live according to them." (Heba, interview, 2015).

For Syrian-Druze women who married men from the Golan Heights, the border was not encountered for the first time at the Quneitra Crossing. It was already present in childhood memories, family stories, longing, and relationships with relatives who remained on the other side, acquiring meanings that extended far beyond its territorial function. These acquired particular emotional and symbolic density on their wedding day, when marriage entailed immediate and potentially irreversible separation from family of origin and homeland. Yet the significance of the border did not end with the crossing. It continued thereafter to shape relationships with the family left behind, while also entering the experience of home, belonging, identity, motherhood, and the new families the women formed. This chapter argues that, for these women, the border is therefore best understood not simply as a territorial line or discrete moment of crossing, but as an enduring condition lived across the life course.

Border studies have moved beyond understanding borders as fixed territorial lines separating states towards examining borders as lived social realities. David Newman (2006) conceptualises

borders as dynamic processes of bordering through which political boundaries are continually reproduced. Wilson and Donnan (1998) demonstrate how borders shape everyday life, identity and social relations within border communities. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) foregrounds the lived and embodied experience of borderlands. Building on these perspectives, this chapter examines the biographical and temporal dimensions of the border, exploring how it shapes lives before physical crossing, becomes concentrated in the act of crossing itself, and continues to organise relationships, memory, home and belonging long afterwards.

The chapter draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2019, including in-depth interviews with eleven Syrian-Druze women, participant observation, collaborative filmmaking, and family archives. It traces the border across three interconnected phases of their lives: its presence in childhood, family narratives, anticipation and longing before marriage; the wedding-day crossing as a moment of separation and transition; and its continuing presence in family relationships, memory, motherhood and belonging in the years that followed.

The Israeli-Syrian Border and Cross-Border Marriage

Following the June 1967 War, the Golan Heights came under Israeli control, and the newly established border separated Druze families who had lived for generations within a shared geo-social space. Approximately 130,000 Syrian residents fled or were displaced during the war, while around 6,000 Druze remained in the four northern villages of Majdal Shams, Mas'ade, Buq'ata, and Ein Qiniyye (Maas, 2018, p. 45). The separation transformed not only the political landscape but also the everyday lives of thousands of families whose relatives remained on opposite sides of the border. For many years, communication was limited to letters transferred through the International Committee of the Red Cross, telephone calls that

became possible only later, and meetings at the “Shouting Hill” in Majdal Shams, where family members attempted to communicate across the ceasefire line using loudspeakers and binoculars.

Within Druze society, kinship and family ties have long played a central role in social organisation. The division of the Golan did not diminish their importance. On the contrary, the closure of the border transformed marriage into one of the principal means through which relationships between families on opposite sides could be maintained. Despite the hostility between the two states, marriages continued between Druze from the Golan Heights and Druze from Syria, preserving kinship ties disrupted by the partition of the region (Hassan, 2011).

Marriage also became one of the very few legal avenues through which movement across the border was possible. Between 1975 and 2005, 104 cross-border marriages took place, the vast majority involving Druze men from the Golan Heights marrying Druze women from Syria (Hassan, 2011, p. 45). Wedding ceremonies were held at the Quneitra Crossing within the UN-supervised demilitarised zone and coordinated through the International Committee of the Red Cross. From the mid-1990s onwards, an arrangement allowed the families of the bride and groom to meet for approximately one hour at the crossing before the bride crossed the border with her husband. For many families, this was their final meeting.

Cross-border marriage therefore carried sharply different meanings at different levels. For the community, it represented continuity: a means of sustaining kinship ties despite the political division of the region. For the brides, however, it represented rupture. Crossing the border was not merely a geographical transition but an almost irreversible separation from parents, siblings, childhood home, and the everyday life they left behind. Under the arrangements governing the Quneitra Crossing, return to Syria was, in practice, no longer possible and, exceptionally, this restriction also extended to their future children (Russell, 2018, p. 32). Marriage therefore marked not only separation from family of origin and homeland, but the beginning of a new family whose life would itself be shaped by the border.

Living the Border Before Crossing It

"He used to tell me, 'Talk to them.' But I didn't really know them." (Sulaf, interview, 2015)

Sulaf described childhood visits to the Shouting Hill, where she accompanied her father to meet relatives living in the Golan Heights from a distance. Using loudspeakers, family members on both sides exchanged greetings, news and the names of relatives, while children were encouraged to speak to people they had never met. Sulaf's recollection captures a peculiar experience of kinship produced by the border: people she was taught to recognise as family remained, in ordinary experience, strangers. Long before she imagined that she herself would one day cross the border, she had already learned to live with it.

For the Syrian-Druze brides, then, the border did not suddenly appear on their wedding day. It was already present in childhood through fragmented family encounters, distant relationships and the continual awareness that close relatives lived only a few kilometres away yet remained physically inaccessible. The Golan Heights were therefore not an unknown place waiting to be discovered, but a familiar landscape constructed through family stories, photographs, memory and kinship. Occasional encounters with relatives from the Golan and with Druze students studying at Syrian universities gave tangible form to a place otherwise known largely through these relationships. For several participants, such encounters also became the beginning of future marriages.

Anzaldúa (1987) describes the borderland as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (p. 3). For the women in this study, however, what persisted across the boundary was not only emotional. Kinship relations continued to carry expectations of recognition, connection and belonging even when the everyday relationships through which they would ordinarily be lived had become impossible. Sulaf's childhood visits to the Shouting Hill capture this tension particularly

clearly: she was encouraged to speak to people she was expected to recognise as family, despite barely knowing them. The border had disrupted the ordinary experience of kinship without dissolving the relationships themselves. Rabiaa described the possibility of marrying across it simply:

"If I have the possibility to cross there, and I also love someone from there, this is the best."

Her words reveal a paradox already present before marriage. The border represented separation, yet the relationships maintained across it also made it a possible route towards connection and the formation of a future family. Drawing on Ella Shohat's (2006) discussion of rupture and continuity, the crossing is understood here not as the end of homeland but as the beginning of ongoing negotiations between memory, belonging and family life. Cross-border marriage therefore became one of the means through which kinship ties were sustained across the political divide and extended into future generations.

Following engagement, the border acquired a new and more immediate meaning. Crossing depended upon special permits, and the bureaucratic process often lasted months or even years. Waiting itself therefore became part of the border experience. Until permission was granted—sometimes only days before the wedding—the women's futures remained uncertain.

Once permission arrived, anticipation gave way to farewell. The participants described spending their final days saying goodbye to relatives, neighbours and friends and walking one last time through the villages where they had grown up. Preparations for marriage became, simultaneously, preparations for departure from a homeland they might never see again. The wedding therefore carried both celebration and mourning: the beginning of married life coincided with separation from parents, siblings, home and the everyday world they had always known.

Sulaf described arriving at the beauty salon on the morning of her wedding:

"At six in the morning I went to the beauty salon. All the time he put makeup on me, and I was crying, so he had to wipe it off many times. He said: 'Please don't cry. You have to be beautiful in the pictures.'"
(Sulaf, interview, 2015)

The contrast is stark: the rituals intended to prepare and record the beginning of married life were taking place amid the grief of departure. Returning home after the salon, Sulaf recalled:

"I left the beauty salon and came back to my house. I could not look into my mum's eyes. She was crying all the time."

Heba described a similar farewell:

"She was hugging me all the time. I could not comfort her because I did not have the strength to do that. I remember that she was crying next to me, but I did not say a word. I couldn't."
(Heba, interview, 2015)

These accounts show separation as a shared family experience rather than an individual one. Mothers and daughters confronted a parting whose duration neither could predict; silence, embraces and tears became part of the farewell.

By the time the women reached Quneitra, therefore, they were not encountering the border for the first time. Childhood relationships, imagined geographies, engagement, bureaucratic waiting and farewell had already made it part of their lives. The physical crossing marked the culmination of this process rather than its beginning.

The Crossing

For the Syrian-Druze brides, crossing the border marked the end of one world and the beginning of another. Although the geographical distance travelled was short, the crossing produced an almost irreversible social, emotional and political rupture. Participants described it as profoundly disorienting and, at times,

almost out-of-body. Its significance lay not in the distance travelled but in the concentration of multiple transitions within a single moment: between two homes, two families, two political orders and two possible futures.

A unique wedding and farewell ceremony took place within the UN-supervised demilitarised zone. A limited number of relatives from the bride's and groom's families were permitted to enter, briefly bringing together families otherwise separated by a closed and militarised border. Dressed in her wedding gown and surrounded by cakes, sweets and celebration, the bride stood at the centre of a ceremony that marked both union and separation. At its conclusion, she crossed with her husband towards the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights while her family of origin remained behind.

Rabiaa, the first bride to cross after the 1967 War, documented her wedding day in a diary that she later read aloud in the film:

"My family said goodbye to me, while at the same time they congratulated Nasser. At that very moment, Nasser's family welcomed me. Everything became mixed together. These are the mixed feelings of the border."

"Everything became mixed together" describes more than conflicting emotions. Opposing social realities occupied the same ceremonial moment. For Rabiaa's family, marriage entailed the almost irreversible departure of a daughter; for the groom's family, it marked her arrival and the beginning of a new marriage and family. Mourning and celebration, departure and arrival, ending and beginning therefore occurred not sequentially but simultaneously. The demilitarised zone became, briefly, a threshold in which these ordinarily successive moments overlapped.

Van Gennep (1909/1960) conceptualised rites of passage as processes of separation, transition and incorporation, during which individuals "waver between two worlds" (p. 18). The Quneitra ceremony resembles this structure but also reveals how a geopolitical border can reconfigure it. Separation and incorporation, ordinarily

conceived as successive stages, were compressed into the same ceremonial event. The border did not merely provide the setting for the rite of passage; it altered its temporal and emotional structure.

Sulaf expressed the magnitude of this transition in a single sentence:

"I left behind twenty-eight years."

Her words shift attention away from the few metres travelled across the border towards the biography carried through it. What was being left behind was not simply a territory but childhood, family relationships, memories and the everyday world within which twenty-eight years of life had acquired meaning.

Ralia described the crossing through a different metaphor:

"Do you know the feeling during giving birth? When the child comes out of his mother? This is how it was for me. For me it was like I was reborn in a new place. I died, and I was reborn here. That is what I put into my head. It is just a metal bar that is behind me." (Ralia, interview, 2015)

Death and rebirth express the radical rupture of the crossing, but Ralia's qualification—"That is what I put into my head"—is equally revealing. Rebirth was not simply a description of what happened to her; it was also a way of making the crossing intelligible and survivable. Faced with separation from family and homeland, she constructed the beginning of another life out of an experience of loss. Her final observation sharpens the paradox: "It is just a metal bar that is behind me." The material simplicity of the barrier stands in striking contrast to the social and symbolic weight it carries in reorganising kinship, home, memory and belonging.

Turner's (1969) concept of liminality further illuminates the crossing itself as a threshold between established social positions. Within the demilitarised zone, the brides had left their parental homes but had not yet entered the social and familial roles they would assume on the other side. Their previous position had been relinquished, while their new one had not yet been fully established.

Yet this liminal phase was necessarily brief. Once the crossing was complete, the women were incorporated into a new social order as wives, daughters-in-law and, later, mothers. What endured was not liminality itself but the consequences of the crossing and the continuing presence of the border in shaping family relationships, home, memory and belonging. The crossing was therefore pivotal without being self-contained. It condensed within a single event relationships and meanings that had developed throughout childhood and continued to shape the women's lives long afterwards. Rather than initiating their encounter with the border, Quneitra marked the moment at which its social, familial and political significance became most intensely concentrated before continuing to organise the women's lives in the years that followed.

Home, Memory, and Belonging: Life After the Crossing

For the Syrian-Druze brides, the physical crossing took place in a single day, but the border continued to shape everyday life for decades afterwards. As the women established homes and families in the Golan Heights, relationships with families of origin, memories of Syria, and questions of identity and belonging remained organised across the political division. The border was therefore no longer encountered primarily as a territorial threshold but through the everyday practices by which family relationships, memory and belonging were sustained.

Rabiaa, who crossed the border in the early 1980s, described how the border continued to intervene in personal life many years later. When she discovered that she was pregnant with her first child, she wanted to tell her mother. Yet instead of going to her mother's home, sitting beside her or embracing her, she travelled to Ein al-Tineh, also known as the "Shouting Hill," where families on opposite sides of the Israeli-Syrian border communicated through loudspeakers.

Standing several hundred metres apart, Rabiaa told her mother that she was about to become a grandmother. An intensely intimate family moment, which under different circumstances might have unfolded within the family home, instead took place across a militarised border through a loudspeaker. The border did not prevent communication; rather, it transformed the practices through which intimacy and kinship could be enacted. Pregnancy, motherhood and family celebration themselves became border practices.

The preservation of relationships with Syria took different forms. Shortly after arriving in the Golan Heights, Rabiaa began writing diaries and compiling detailed lists of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of relatives and friends who had remained behind. Alongside documenting her new life, she recorded memories of her previous one. Writing helped her cope with loneliness while creating a personal archive through which relationships, memory and belonging could be preserved.

For Heba, the relationship with Syria became particularly visible in the question of citizenship. Shortly after arriving in the Golan Heights, while arranging her official documents, she was asked whether she wished to obtain Israeli citizenship. Her response was immediate:

"If I came yesterday from Syria and the next day I will take the Israeli citizenship, then I would not be the Syrian bride anymore." (Heba, interview, 2015)

For Heba, citizenship represented more than administrative status. Accepting it threatened the identity through which she continued to understand herself. Physical separation from Syria therefore did not entail relinquishing Syrian belonging; instead, that belonging became something she actively sought to preserve within the political and social conditions of her new life.

Such practices of preservation were also collective. Over time, an informal group known within the community as the "Syrian Brides' Club" emerged in the Druze villages of the Golan Heights. United by the shared experience of crossing, the women gathered in

one another's homes for coffee and conversation about the lives they had left behind: their villages, schools, neighbours, relatives and everyday life in Syria. They frequently explained that only those who had undergone the same crossing could fully understand the memories, longing and loss associated with it. These gatherings did more than preserve memories of Syria. They enabled the women to continue living aspects of that homeland collectively through everyday conversations about family, place and shared experience.

At the same time, the Golan Heights also became home. Children were born, families were formed and everyday life unfolded there. This new home did not simply replace the one left behind. The participants instead described forms of belonging oriented towards both: the Golan as the place in which their own families and everyday lives developed, and Syria as an enduring landscape of family, memory and origin. Home was therefore not simply transferred from one territory to another but reconfigured across the border. The women's narratives thus show that the significance of the border changed after crossing without disappearing. What had been experienced in childhood through distant kinship, and on the wedding day through concentrated separation and transition, now entered the ordinary practices of family life, memory, identity and belonging. The women did not remain suspended at the threshold they had crossed; they formed homes and families in the Golan while sustaining relationships and forms of belonging oriented towards Syria. The border endured not as a continuing moment of transition, but as a condition through which these different dimensions of their lives remained connected and divided.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Israeli-Syrian border through the experiences of Syrian-Druze women who crossed it through marriage. It has argued that the border cannot be understood simply as a territorial line or as a discrete moment of crossing.

Rather, its significance unfolds and changes across the life course: it was present in childhood through distant kinship, family memory and anticipation; acquired particular emotional and symbolic density during marriage and the crossing itself; and subsequently entered the homes, families and everyday lives the women established in the Golan Heights.

The women's experiences show that the significance of a border may extend far beyond its territorial function. Before crossing, it shaped how kinship and homeland were imagined and lived across physical separation. At Quneitra, it compressed separation and incorporation, mourning and celebration, departure and arrival into a single ritual moment, reshaping the temporal and emotional structure of marriage as a rite of passage. Afterwards, it continued to organise relationships with families of origin, practices of memory, motherhood, identity and belonging, even as the women formed new families and established homes in the Golan. The border therefore persisted not as a prolonged moment of transition, but through changing social relationships and practices across the women's lives.

Heba's words, which opened this chapter, therefore acquire a broader significance:

"Every day when I see a bird, I wish I could be in its place. Birds do not recognise borders, but we, the 'free' human beings, live according to them."

Her reflection expresses more than a longing for freedom of movement. It captures the central argument of this chapter: although the physical crossing lasted only a few minutes, living with the border began long before it and continued for decades afterwards. The border emerges, therefore, not simply as a geopolitical boundary but as an enduring social condition whose significance is continually formed and transformed through kinship, memory, family, home and belonging.

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Dorota Rynkowska
Magdalena Pokrzywa

The Polish Social Assistance System and Forms of Support from the Perspective of Ukrainian Refugees

Introduction

The armed conflict in Ukraine has most visibly shaped Poland's migration policy and its recent functioning. Ukrainian citizens occupy a particularly prominent position within the country's contemporary migration structure. Transformations in the field of international migration have led to the emergence of diverse forms of population mobility and a wide range of factors driving these processes. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) identifies principal determinants of contemporary migration as: integrative and globalisation processes, the transnational character of social ties, geopolitical conditions, and demographic change. Within this framework, the largescale warrelated displacement of Ukrainian citizens following Russia's fullscale invasion in 2022 has assumed particular significance (IOM, 2026). This phenomenon constitutes a clear example of forced migration, driven primarily by geopolitical circumstances and threats to civilian safety. The influx of refugees from Ukraine after the outbreak of armed conflict in 2022 confronted Polish public institutions and nongovernmental organisations with new challenges related to establishing an effective support system for wardisplaced Ukrainians. The rapid increase in the number of Ukrainian migrants, intensified after 2022, highlighted

the need to develop coherent and longterm integration policy frameworks capable of facilitating the effective social and economic inclusion of this population. The scale of the Ukrainian exodus and its specific demographic profile – marked by a pronounced feminisation of migration (84% of adult refugees from Ukraine in Poland are women, and children constitute 41% of the refugee population) (OECD, 2023) – created an urgent imperative for Poland's social assistance system to ensure adequate social protection for war refugees. This generated a series of challenges across key domains, including housing, education, healthcare, the labour market, social integration, and financial security. The arrival of wardisplaced Ukrainians in Poland triggered a wide range of social support measures and necessitated the adaptation of assistance mechanisms for single women with minor children, with particular emphasis on education, care provision, and social integration. Meeting the needs of such a large refugee population has been carried out primarily at the municipal level through social assistance institutions – most notably local social welfare centres. The war in Ukraine has thus produced the most significant migration crisis in decades (Grabowska & SzawaraPięta, 2023).

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the beginning of 2026, there were almost 5.8 million Ukrainian refugees/forced migrants registered worldwide (including 5.2 million in Europe). In Poland alone, there were nearly 1 million refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2026). Persons crossing the Ukrainian border into EU Member States and Moldova were immediately covered by the provisions of the Temporary Protection Directive, which granted them a wide range of rights, effectively aligning the status of wardisplaced Ukrainians with that of EU citizens in terms of freedom of movement[1]. This significantly contributed to the high mobility of the Ukrainian population. Many

1 - Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, *Official Journal L 212, 07/08/2001 P. 0012 – 0023.*

Ukrainian citizens were forced to seek refuge outside their country's borders, becoming, in legal terms, humanitarian refugees requiring comprehensive and sustained assistance. Poland has emerged as a key destination country for foreign nationals in Europe, particularly for the Ukrainian community. Their substantial presence within Poland's migration structure stems not only from geographical and cultural proximity but also from political and economic conditions. The continuous increase in the number of Ukrainian migrants in Poland underscores the necessity of outlining a coherent framework for the integration policy targeting foreign nationals. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea, Poland and its citizens have consistently demonstrated openness and support towards their eastern neighbours (Tutak, 2018). In 2022, the country admitted a record number of Ukrainian war refugees, opening its borders to those fleeing the fullscale invasion. The refugees were granted temporary protection as well as access to rights and services ordinarily available to Polish citizens (Ustawa o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy..., 2022).

Local governments, central administration, public institutions, social, nongovernmental and churchbased organisations, entrepreneurs, and residents jointly mobilised to provide assistance to Ukrainian citizens. The growing number of migrants from Ukraine in Poland highlighted the necessity of developing a comprehensive and longterm integration policy. An effective response to migrationrelated challenges requires not only emergency measures but also systemic solutions encompassing key areas of social and economic life, implemented through close cooperation between diverse institutions and actors, including sustained collaboration with the nongovernmental sector.

The research procedure focused on: an analysis of the legislative solutions in Poland contained in the Act on social assistance (Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2004 r. o pomocy społecznej) and the special Act on assistance to Ukraine citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of that country (Ustawa o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym

na terytorium tego państwa); a review of the relevant literature, primarily available international documents and reports (UNHCR, IOM); and individual indepth interviews (IDI) conducted with Ukrainian refugee women.

The Refugee Crisis Triggered by the War in Ukraine: An Outline of the Key Issues

According to official data from the Office for Foreigners in Poland (2025), three years after the onset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, more than 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens reside in Poland, and almost one million have been granted temporary protection. Women constitute approximately 61% of Ukrainian nationals, while among adults this proportion rises to 77%. Every second person registered under the temporary protection scheme is a child (Office for Foreigners, 2025). Approximately 15 million people have left the territory of Ukraine, with women, children, and older persons constituting the overwhelming majority (Lisowska & Łojko, 2023). It should be recalled that men aged 18 to 60 are prohibited from leaving the country; as a result, the group of war refugees on the move is overwhelmingly dominated by women. Ukrainian citizens currently constitute the largest group of foreign nationals legally residing in the territory of the Republic of Poland (Office for Foreigners, 2025). The protracted war in Ukraine, as well as the demographic structure of asylum seekers residing in Poland, shape the diverse humanitarian needs of this population. More than 90% of refugees in Poland are women, children, and older persons. This group is particularly vulnerable to numerous risks, including family separation, physical and psychological violence – linked both to gender and age – as well as the risk of human trafficking (UNHCR, 2024).

Migration processes generate a range of economic and social consequences, which become more intense the more dynamically these processes unfold. The consequences may be both positive (strengthening the economy, its development, cultural enrichment,

the development of social integration processes, etc.) and negative (segmentation of residents and an increase in ethnic and cultural tensions, excessive burdens on the social security system, administrative overload, etc.). In order to benefit from migration and minimise its potentially negative effects, an appropriate state policy is necessary, implemented by central administration, but also by local governments, social organisations, local communities, and workplaces. The Ukrainian exodus has become an urgent objective requiring action to ensure adequate social protection for war refugees, which has generated several challenges concerning, among others, housing, education, healthcare, the labour market, social integration, and financial security (Hermanowski et al., 2022). The actual fulfilment of the needs of the large number of refugees from Ukraine is a task carried out primarily at the municipal level through social assistance institutions – mainly social welfare centres (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2023). The influx of war refugees from Ukraine into Poland triggered a wide range of social measures implemented by social assistance entities. It is worth emphasising that the social assistance institution provides direct services to specific individuals or families. This is preceded by a process of identifying their needs, diagnosing the current situation of those requiring support and developing an adequate and optimal assistance plan. Within public policy, the nature of legal and institutional solutions becomes a key element, particularly in social assistance. From the very beginning, the Polish model of assistance and support was characterised by a distinct approach, unique in comparison with other receiving states, to working with Ukrainian refugees, described in the literature as inclusive (Firlit-Fesnak, 2022).

According to FirlitFesnak (2023), the inclusive model of assistance is characterised by the following features:

- openness, which assumes that every Ukrainian citizen fleeing armed conflict who chooses Poland as a destination country for residence or transit will receive shelter;
- solidarity, consisting of cooperation between Polish citizens and the Polish state in organising and supporting

the adaptation of migrants by drawing on the potential of public and nonpublic institutions;

- inclusiveness, manifested in the social and professional inclusion and activation of migrants through the use of appropriate tools and instruments;
- abandonment of relocation, meaning that Poland refrains from seeking assistance from international organisations in determining the final destination of migrants, despite the adoption of the migration pact by the European Parliament.

One of the greatest challenges for the host country is undoubtedly the provision of comprehensive assistance and support in the areas of social care and language, but also education and health. Social assistance is undoubtedly a priority for state institutions involved in ensuring appropriate conditions for Ukrainians.

Social Assistance in Poland for War Refugees from Ukraine – Role and Tasks

Since the very beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, social assistance institutions have sought to provide active support to Ukrainian refugees. Their activities focus on meeting the basic needs of individuals and families affected by the multilayered challenges associated with forced displacement. By design, the assistance offered aims to support persons and households with the lowest incomes or without means of subsistence, that is, those at risk of poverty and facing the most difficult life circumstances (Uścińska, 2022). To establish the principles governing the legalisation of refugees' stay in Poland, to formalise the possibility of providing assistance to regions and communities of other states and to introduce a division of competences between governmental and local government institutions, the Act on assistance to Ukraine citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of that

country, the socalled *special act*, was adopted (Ustawa o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy..., 2022). The adoption of this Act, which sets out specific rules for the legalisation of the stay of Ukrainian citizens who arrived on the territory of the Republic of Poland from the territory of Ukraine, constituted an expression of the strong commitment of the Polish authorities to supporting those fleeing the war. Poland, as one of the main receiving countries for refugees from Ukraine, rapidly developed legal solutions enabling the legalisation of stay, access to the labour market, education, healthcare and social benefits. These measures were implemented both at the central and local government levels, with the support of numerous public institutions. State authorities also undertook initiatives aimed at coordinating humanitarian assistance and facilitating the integration of Ukrainian citizens into Polish society. The scale and pace of the measures introduced testified to the exceptional mobilisation of public administration and to the state's readiness to provide comprehensive support to individuals affected by the consequences of the armed conflict. Ukrainian residents who arrived in Poland and whose stay has been recognised as legal are, under the aforementioned special act, entitled to support within the framework of communitybased social assistance and are eligible for specified cash and noncash benefits on the same basis as Polish citizens[2]. The Act granted refugees from Ukraine a package of rights consistent with the 2003 Act on granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland (Journal of Laws of 2009, No. 189, item 1472), including access to basic social, medical and educational services, the right to establish a business, to take up legal employment and to register as unemployed or as a jobseeker. In addition, the Act announced detailed regulations concerning the

2 - Assistance to refugees was not a new task for social workers, as it had been defined much earlier, before the outbreak of the war, in the binding Act of 12 March 2004 on social assistance (Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64, item 593). Its provisions are set out primarily in Article 5–5a, Article 7 point 11, Article 9, Article 19 point 8, Article 20, Article 22 point 5, Article 36 point 1g, Article 53, as well as in Chapter 5, which addresses aspects of the integration of foreigners who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the Republic of Poland (Articles 91–95).

employment of doctors, nurses, midwives, pedagogues, childcare workers, psychologists, teachers and teaching assistants. It set out the rules for registering migrants through the assignment of a PESEL number (Polish national identification number) and a trusted profile, as well as special provisions in the field of education for children and young people in schools and higher education institutions. Furthermore, refugees are entitled to have the photographs required for documents legalising their stay in Poland taken free of charge (Ustawa o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy..., 2022). Moreover, under the special act, Ukrainian citizens are entitled, among other things, to a oneoff cash benefit of 300 PLN, a parental benefit, a care allowance, a carer's benefit, a childbirth grant, an allowance for the education and rehabilitation of a child with a disability, meals for children and pupils from Ukraine, a social ticket, the right to receive family benefits such as *Family 800+* and *Good Start*, access to healthcare, the right to conduct business activity under simplified conditions, free accommodation for 120 days under the "40+" programme, free housing for socially vulnerable groups (including large families, persons with disabilities, pensioners, disability pensioners, pregnant women and mothers with children) access to free public healthcare and education, as well as other social benefits for parents, guardians and the family care capital. They are also entitled to social assistance benefits of an ad hoc and shortterm nature due to the limited duration of their stay in Poland, such as meals for children and young people granted on an emergency basis for a period not exceeding two months, meals, food products or a targeted cash benefit for food where nutrition is not otherwise ensured, a temporary allowance, care services, sheltered housing, social work, specialist counselling and crisis intervention for various social groups, including older persons and persons with disabilities. Families and children in need of support receive differentiated assistance, the forms of which stem from the specific problems and needs present within the family. Ukrainian refugees are also entitled to the family benefits provided by municipalities as defined in the Act of 28 November 2003 on family benefits (Ustawa z dnia 28 listopada 2003 r. o świadczeniach rodzinnych, 2003).

Under this Act, family benefits include the family allowance and supplements to the family allowance, carerelated benefits consisting of the care allowance and the carer's benefit, a oneoff grant paid by municipalities based on the relevant provisions, benefits paid by municipalities under further statutory provisions, a oneoff childbirth grant and the parental benefit.

Institutional and communitybased assistance is provided throughout the country by social assistance centres, which are obliged to support refugees within defined frameworks but also undertake many additional activities that go beyond the duties arising from the special act. The special act also sets out specific rules for the legalisation of the stay of Ukrainian citizens who arrived on the territory of the Republic of Poland directly from the territory of Ukraine in connection with the military actions taking place there, as well as Ukrainian citizens holding a Pole's Card (Karta Polaka) who, together with their immediate family, arrived in the Republic of Poland due to those military actions. Article 1.3 of the Act, in points 1–8, further specifies the rules governing the employment of Ukrainian citizens, the assistance provided by voivodes, local government units and other entities, certain rights of Ukrainian citizens, the specific rules for extending periods of legal stay, and the rights and operating principles applicable to students who are Ukrainian citizens, as well as broader entitlements relating to the education, upbringing and care of children and pupils who are Ukrainian citizens, including support for local government units in carrying out additional educational tasks in this area (Gąsiorowska, 2023).

The Polish system of social assistance for Ukrainian war refugees, primarily women with children, is multilevel in nature and encompasses legal measures, social benefits, institutional support and the activities of nongovernmental organisations. Its main objective is to ensure social security for those fleeing the war, to meet their basic living needs and to create conditions enabling their social and economic integration (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2023). A particularly significant group of beneficiaries consists of women with children who, due to the wartime situation and the mobilisation

regulations in force in Ukraine, constitute the largest share of refugees. Owing to this distinct demographic profile, marked by the feminisation of migration, the Polish support system offers Ukrainian migrant women comprehensive assistance across key domains: financial and subsistencerelated, integrative, psychological and social. This support encompasses family and carerelated benefits as an essential source of livelihood, the expansion of childcare provision through free nurseries, kindergartens and schools, psychological assistance addressing trauma, migrationrelated stress and the needs of children with migration experience, as well as material support in the form of clothing, meals for children and food parcels. It further includes social services such as collective shelter, temporary accommodation and family assistant support, free healthcare, reimbursed medicines and care during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period, integrative measures including socioоccupational support, individual integration programmes, Polish language courses and the assistance of a social worker, labourmarket measures such as vocational training and activation, access to employment offices and registration as unemployed, opportunities for legal employment, healthcare and protection for persons with disabilities, cofinancing of equipment and rehabilitation, and legal, family and social counselling, including both group and individual therapeutic sessions (Ociepa-Kicińska, & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022; Lisowska, & Łojko, 2023; Necel, 2024, 2025; Zielińska, 2025).

Social work also plays a significant role in supporting refugees. This professional activity aims to help individuals emerge from crisis situations, support them and stimulate their capacity for action. Its forms arise from the specific problems and needs present within the family. Social work is undertaken to improve the functioning of individuals and families within their social environment and is carried out with them in order to develop or strengthen their activity and selfreliance in everyday life. Work with the local community is equally important, as it serves to ensure cooperation and coordination among institutions and organisations essential for meeting the needs of community members (Głąbicka, 2014).

In addition, refugees from Ukraine may receive support in the form of social work and specialist counselling provided in social assistance centres. They are offered assistance in the form of uptodate information, guidance and advice concerning everyday functioning in Poland. Social workers help to handle administrative matters on behalf of Ukrainian citizens, conduct supportive, motivational and activating conversations, and are also involved in organising leisure activities and facilitating contact with the local community (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2023; Necel, 2024, 2025).

It should be emphasised that knowledge of the Polish language is a key factor for the proper course of integration and that the aim of the integration process should be to enable foreigners to function independently in the host country, including in the labour market, and to reduce their reliance on social assistance. Access to the labour market, including the possibility of running one's own business, together with knowledge of the Polish language and the cultural norms that govern social behaviour and their practical application, forms the basis of an immigrant's functioning in society and thus of successful integration, as it allows for the expansion of a foreigner's social relations and the acceptance of the legal and cultural norms of life in the host country.

The Significance of Social Assistance Benefits from the Perspective of Women Refugees

The Polish system of social assistance for refugees from Ukraine after 2022 has become one of the central pillars of managing the migration crisis, with its design and implementation strongly shaped by the demographic profile of those seeking protection. The overwhelming majority of beneficiaries are women with children, a pattern directly linked to the wartime context and the mobilisation regulations in Ukraine that have prevented most adult men from leaving the country. As a result, the refugee population arriving in Poland is characterised by a pronounced gender and age imbalance:

women constitute 84% of the adult refugee population, while children account for 41% of all arrivals (OECD, 2023). This configuration is not merely a statistical observation but a structural feature of forced displacement from Ukraine, producing a distinctly gendered flow dominated by mothers travelling with dependent children. The composition of refugee households also mirrors this broader demographic pattern. Approximately 67% of all refugee families are headed by single mothers, and children represent 57% of their members (UNHCR, 2025). Such a configuration not only underscores the scale of family separation caused by the war but also highlights the specific vulnerabilities and responsibilities borne by women who must simultaneously navigate caregiving, integration and economic survival in the host country. The predominance of single-mother households has therefore become a defining feature of the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland, with direct implications for social policy, labour market participation and the design of integration programmes.

Descriptive data derived from applications for a PESEL number correspond to the figures outlined above and further confirm the demographic structure of the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland. The benefits provided within the Polish system of social assistance play an important role in the adaptation and integration of Ukrainian refugee women, as for many of those who arrived in Poland as a result of the war, financial and material support constituted the primary means of securing basic living needs during the initial period after arrival. From the perspective of Ukrainian refugee women, forced migration has not only an institutional dimension but also a deeply social and everyday one, shaped by gender roles, caregiving responsibilities, employment and the challenges of adapting to a new environment. Women constituted most of those fleeing Ukraine, often accompanied by children, which gave their experience a distinct and specific character.

In the study conducted by the authors, based on individual indepth interviews with Ukrainian refugee women residing in

Poland[3] and on an analysis of numerous reports concerning the experiences of Ukrainian women refugees in the context of migration and integration, the significance of challenges related to single motherhood and the need to secure basic living necessities such as housing, food and hygiene products emerges particularly clearly. Ukrainian refugee women experience a form of double burden, as they carry responsibility for caring for their families (minor children and often also elderly or ill parents) under conditions of a migration crisis. They have assumed responsibility for their children's care, education, health and emotional stability, while simultaneously coping with separation from partners (often remaining in Ukraine due to mobilisation), the trauma of war and displacement, including the experience of uncertainty and loss of resources, as well as the need for rapid linguistic and occupational adaptation. In addition, economic pressure and the necessity of paid employment, combined with the frequent invisibility of their caregiving work within a support system that prioritises activation over the reproduction of family life, intensify feelings of anxiety, insecurity and, at times, even helplessness.

Ukrainian refugee women are not merely "recipients of assistance" but active organisers of family life under crisis conditions. At the same time, they play a key role in maintaining family cohesion, organising their children's adaptation to Polish schools and building networks of social support within the diaspora. Moreover, challenges such as combining paid employment with single parenthood, as well as the emotional consequences of interrupted careers, generate significant emotional and physical overload. In the view of the

3 - The empirical component of the study was conducted between the end of 2024 and the middle of 2026 using individual indepth interviews (IDI) with twenty-two forced migrants from Ukraine who were residing in Poland, selected purposively and supplemented through snowball sampling to ensure variation in age, education, family situation, place of origin and professional experience. The interviews, carried out in Polish and/or Ukrainian depending on participants' linguistic preferences, enabled a detailed reconstruction of their experiences of forced migration, early settlement in Poland and their position in the Polish labour market from the perspective of their own lived realities.

refugee women, social benefits primarily make it possible to meet basic needs such as purchasing food, clothing and medicines or paying for housing. These benefits are particularly important for single mothers, who often have limited opportunities to take up paid work due to caregiving responsibilities. According to the respondents, the most important forms of support included family benefits, the "800+" childraising benefit, oneoff allowances related to children's education and various types of carerelated benefits, as well as the possibility of applying for targeted or periodic allowances and inkind assistance. The importance of these benefits was especially evident for single mothers, who often arrived in Poland without financial resources, housing or the possibility of immediately taking up employment. The system of benefits enabled them to secure basic living needs and reduced the risk of poverty and social marginalisation.

Research indicates that refugee women perceive social assistance not only as material support but also as an expression of social solidarity and a source of security (Janowska, 2024). The benefits received reduce the level of stress associated with economic uncertainty and allow women to focus on learning the language, seeking employment and integrating into the local community. At the same time, some women point to certain difficulties related to using the social assistance system, such as language barriers, complex administrative procedures or insufficient knowledge of the available forms of support. For this reason, providing information in Ukrainian and ensuring support from social workers and nongovernmental organisations is of particular importance.

Based on the indepth interviews conducted with Ukrainian women refugees, it can be observed that:

- the vast majority of them have a positive opinion of Poles and the support they received,
- they appreciate the assistance and support provided, especially material and psychological support,
- they highly value the engagement of the local community, particularly the solidarity shown by Polish mothers,

- they rate the level of safety in their place of residence and the available forms of social protection (free roundtheclock medical care and parental benefits) very positively,
- they emphasise the opportunity for personal development through learning Polish and participating in vocational courses.

Conclusion

The Polish system of social assistance for Ukrainian war refugees constitutes an extensive model of support encompassing legal, social, health, educational and integrationrelated measures and is distinguished by its adaptation to the needs of women with children, who formed the predominant group seeking refuge in Poland. Through the cooperation of state institutions, local authorities and nongovernmental organisations, it became possible to establish a mechanism that provided not only immediate humanitarian aid but also longterm support conducive to the social and economic integration of refugees. The Polish system of assistance for Ukrainian refugee women can be described as a hybrid model, stateinstitutional in character yet strongly reinforced by civil society, and from the perspective of Ukrainian migrant women, this support constituted not only material assistance but also a space for negotiating new social roles as mothers, workers, migrants and individuals rebuilding their lives under conditions of war and displacement. From the perspective of social assistance, however, it is essential to note that state financial support was often linked to the expectation of rapid entry into the labour market, which generated tension between the role of mothercarer and that of worker.

The social assistance benefits available within the Polish system are assessed by Ukrainian refugee women as an important form of support in a situation of forced migration, contributing to improved living conditions, strengthening their sense of security and facilitating the process of social and economic integration in the host

country. In practice, the assistance and support offered by Poland are based on close cooperation between governmental and local authorities and nongovernmental organisations, and the forms of support presented constitute a coherent system of transition from immediate humanitarian aid through stabilisation to independence. An analysis of Ukrainian women's views on support in Poland indicates a shift from a phase of gratitude for rescue to a phase of selfreliance and professionalisation, and although systemic assistance is valued, Ukrainian women increasingly place greater emphasis on equal opportunities in the labour market than on social benefits.

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Nguyễn Huy Hoàng

Where Waves Break Value: Neoliberal Aesthetics and Its Semiotic Technology of Commensuration

Two Domains in Collision: Tourism and Cosmology

In the past 20 years, Quy Nhơn, a city in South Central Coast of Vietnam, has been drawn into national and global development discourse through successive waves of state-led investment in tourism infrastructure and real estate. The associative branding of the city across online news outlets, tourist marketing and government websites is *"the Sea Paradise"* – a mantra washed in images of pristine coastlines with white sand beaches, clear blue waters, and untouched cliffs (Hoang Ha, 2023). On the backdrop of this developmental vision, Quy Nhơn remains a site of dense maritime cosmology, centered on a marine deity called the Holy Whale worshipped for protecting fishermen during storms. Specifically, he is said to be able to induce drowning fishermen into a trance-like state called half-dream, half-conscious (*"mơ mơ màng màng"),* conceal his true appearance and dissipate the waves around his body to turn them into drinkable freshwater. A phenomenon transient in Quy Nhơn and across other South Central Coast provinces of Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2022), the worshipping practices of the Holy Whale include ritualistic ceremonies at the local shrines in moment of the Holy Whale's beaching, annual festivals known as the Festival of the Fish and vernacular belief orientations and divine tribute (Lantz, 2009; Roszko, 2020).

This paper examines the clash between two aesthetic domains, first, state-led and NGO-driven tourism imagery as a site where neoliberal imperatives of tropical fantasy and eco-development are realised, and second, fishermen's iconographic depictions of the Holy Whale on shrine walls, which enact a cosmologically rootedness that binds human, nonhuman, and marine ecology. This notion of ontological discrepancy between neoliberalism and indigenous cosmology is a prominent theme in scholarly discourses of indigenous agency, often presented as an ongoing antagonism "between life projects and development projects" (Blaser, Feit and McRae, 2004, p. 2). Prior to globalisation, the age of globalisation, the cultural and ontological difference of the indigenous life was governed in the homogenising terms of the nation-state, where indigenous peoples were rendered rights-devoid, primitive collectives belonging to nature (Asch, 2000). Globalisation, through its neoliberal apparatus, subsequently takes over the task of administering differences from the nation-state by transforming them into a cultural commodity within transnational markets (Blaser, Feit and McRae, 2004, p. 12). Indigenous communities' proximity to nature (Latour, 1999) and kinship-based alliances with non-human actors (Descola, 2013) is either treated as a raw material for instrumentalisation or as a fetishised form of escapism outside modernity by the rational-economic order and recognition technologies of the market mind (Hayek 1945, p. 526; Honneth, 1995). Working intermediarily through communications with indigenous locals, grassroot program implementation and policy intervention, NGOs and development projects become ideal mediators for reifying differences across what Bruno Latour (1999) would call "the Great Divides" of modernity: the global-local and nature-culture axis.

Of relevance for this paper within this well-rehearsed narrative about the role of neoliberalist organisations and NGOs is first, a question of scale (Tsing, 2011): It is not a heuristic marking of different levels of neoliberalism intervention – for example, the global versus the local (Appadurai, 2000; Dirlik, 2001, p. 24) – but its logic of intervention itself, that is, creating scalable products from

all resource fields for possible markets. One must therefore "provincialize" (Kohn, 2013, p. 38) the scale, treating it not as a neutral analytic category but as a spatially and temporally situated mode of intervention and an object of analysis in its own right in order to understand the specific, instead of over-generalised, intervention of neoliberalist market into every aspects of indigenous life. The second issue concerns the notion of asymmetrical difference. In response to overwhelming encroachment of neoliberalist and capitalist forces, indigenous communities are often compelled to engage these formations. Yet their forms of resistance cannot be reduced to a simple antithesis of neoliberalism but, instead, are emergent processes, situated larger in the pursuit of their life projects and cosmological orientations (Blaser Feit and McRae, 2004, p. 29). Once a shared scale of analysis between neoliberalism and indigenous communities is provincialized, the former's logic of intervention can paradoxically generate conditions for the latter's own projects of self-determination.

Situated among these analyses about neoliberalism's various modes of ontological governance (Povinelli, 2016), which aim to purify, manage, or at best, tolerate difference, this paper examines the aesthetic and semiotic mechanism through which such governance, and indigenous communities' emergent responses to it, take shape. Drawing from Paul Kockelman's book *The Chicken and the Quetzal: Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest* (2016), I argue that neoliberal tourism's coastal representation is a semiotic technology of commensuration that seeks to instrumentalise the Holy Whale's cosmology into "portable values" (p. 1) through aesthetic frames and paths, enabling extraction not only of resources but of life as lived through evaluating agents. Against this mode of value commensuration, the local shrine iconography remains an open non-portable form rather than instrumentalised values. The conceptual gloss I offer for this formal reality is "the aesthetic cut" – a productive rupture between frames that resists commensuration and continually reimagine fishermen-whale coexistence at the borders of instrumentalisation.

The domain of analysis throughout this paper, in both conceptual and empirical sense, is that of Nhơn Lý fishing village, a peninsula extending from the mainland cordillera of Quy Nhơn out into the sea. Occupying the position of infrastructural isolation until the 2000s construction of the Thị Nại bridge adjoining it to Quy Nhơn city, Nhơn Lý serves as a discursive space for examining two competing value-making projects. On the one hand is the fishermen's lived engagement with the sea as the main cosmological, existential and economic occupation, the other being the next tourist destination on the government's and tourist corporation's revamping agenda. Adjacent attractions such as Kỳ Co Beach and Eo Gió ("Wind Waist") have already become iconic sites within Quy Nhơn's tourism economy. The material effects of this transformation are readily visible. Fishing households once deemed "unsightly" along the village coastline have been demolished and replaced by homestays, restaurants, and tourist agencies. Younger generations increasingly venture towards occupations beyond fishing, while the local attitudes of divine tribute and vernacular knowledge about Cá Ông's worshiping practices have declined generationally (Parnwell, 2013). As Sandra Lantz (2019) puts it, "the greatest enemy of [the Holy Whale] is, sadly enough, tourism" (p.55). By attending to the aesthetic "frames" (see Goffman, 1981) that simultaneously build up and "paths" (Kockelman, 2016, p.1) that simultaneously traverses two domains in Nhơn Lý village, this paper reveals the intersecting aesthetic and semiotic complexity in a shared boundaries-drawing project, revealing enclosure of value as concomitant with possibilities of disclosure (Kockelman, 2016).

The Tropical Paradise: Aesthetic Enclosure

In 2017, FLC Group, a multi-million dollar tourist corporation, constructed a 1,500-room resort complex in Nhơn Lý alongside eco-tourist infrastructures such as golf courses, safari parks, and wellness tourism (Pham, 2017). According to its marketing materials, the project "inherits the untouched beauty granted for Quy Nhơn, voted

as one of the three most attractive destinations in South East Asia" (FLC, 2019). Rather than an accidental development in Nhơn Lý, this development, per FLC's deputy general director, "leans on the mountain, looks straight to the [Nhơn Lý's] sea, making for a beautiful view" (Pham, 2017), materially realising the branding advertisement billboards across the Quy Nhơn city as *"the sea paradise."*

Such an utopian commodification of landscape, argues Krista A. Thompson (2006), is not merely an extension of the European tropical gaze but produces "tropicality" as a subliminal economy of related values such as "fertility, exoticism, and the overabundance of nature" (p. 98), evident not only in Vietnam but in Southeast Asian region such as Bali (Davies, 2017) or Phuket (Lauzon, 2009). As an arbitrator of development, modernity and neoliberalism distributes such values along the spatial-temporal distinction between nature-culture (Latour, 1993). Paradise appears, on the one hand, as a space of retreat defined by distance from culture; on the other hand, in its parameter, it possesses both natural beauty and cultural utility through thousands of eco-facilities such as nurture spa, zoo safari park and golf course (FLC, 2026). The paradise envisioned by FLC thereby becomes "an infinite artificial oceanic space" that promises no less authentic experience of the tropical sea (Pham, 2017).

Paul Kockelman's book *The Chicken and the Quetzal: Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest* (2016) examines the process of making values "portable," that is, being widely applicable, contextually independent, and scale-free across different ontological domains from which they originate, while treated as valuable or meaningful wherever it "goes" (p. 7). The portability of values points to how the process of value disclosure and enclosure is concomitant with each other (Kockelman, 2016, p. 6), in other words, the possibilities and limits of value-making project are immanent in itself, depending on which conjuncture of semiotic scales that one engages with. Underpinning his intricate arguments is how the question of value needs not be fixed and reified as an essence, as is often the case in the scholar traditions of material culture or political economy, but as something emergent and transformative within linguistic anthropology (Kockelman, 2016, p. 6).

Engaging primarily with Charles Sander Pierce's triad model of semiotics (icon-index-symbol) (Peirce, 1955; Sowa, 2015), Kockelman asks: At which semiotic scale or "shared degree of logical, normative, causal coherence" (Kockelman, 2013, p. 10) one can understand the emergence of value? What values are formed, "enclosed" and eventually "disclosed" through shared semiotic interactions (Kockelman, 2016, p. 6)? A caveat: "Interactions" here is not limited to human's symbolic exchange of words or iconic-indexical multispecies acts of communication (see Kohn, 2013). Rather, it encompasses dynamic processes among self of various kinds (human and non-human), their ontologies and the infrastructure that both enable and are enabled by those relations (Kockelman, 2013)? Given the burgeoning systems of technical vocabulary mobilised by semiotics and Kockelman's book (2013; 2016), my arguments, moving through the same "paths" (Kockelman, 2016) are inevitably (and hopefully, less) technical. As a tour guide to Nhơn Lý, I hope readers, without a comprehensive understanding of the semiotic valences of each term, can tread along without becoming lost in their semiotic undergrowth!

Of pertinence for my analysis here is Kockelman's notion of value enclosure: the processes that capture, carry, and reify value into portable, exchangeable forms, ultimately gaining possession not only of the enclosed product but the boundaries-making process itself (Kockelman, 2016, p. 7). The sea's tropical values are enclosed in one aesthetic frame, for example, the advertisement billboards around the city, whose material stability allows those values to remain intelligible as they move across other frames, such as tourism websites, brochures, and promotional videos.

The final frame that tropical values seek to reach, I suggest, is the tourist's imagination. Used as a conceptual device throughout this paper, the aesthetic frame refers to contingent definitions of reality (see Goffman, 1981) made possible through aesthetic "affordances" (Gibsons, 1979, p. 127). Such frames are not only physical, as in billboards, or digital, as in websites and news media, but effectively mental. Just as "the sea paradise" promises a retreat to nature supplemented by cultural utilities, the enclosure of tropical values as an index of nature transpires in the *par excellence* domain

of culture – the human mind. The mind becomes the ultimate frame, or "a floating signifier" (Lévi-Strauss, 1950) onto which tropical values can continually attach themselves and from which they can be continually elicited. Tropical values therefore mediate between nature and culture (Lévi-Strauss, 1955).

In my own conceptual gloss, tropical values are 'stretched' across this divide. By stretching, I refer to the semiotic labor through which contradictory divides are held together without fully resolving their tension. This heightened state of contradiction, in Marxist formulation (Marx, 1867), is fetishism – a stretched psychological state between the contradictory co-existence of the natural and the cultural. Tropicality must remain sufficiently natural to signify escape from culture while remaining sufficiently cultural to be consumable, governable, and profitable. Values stretch when they move across divides, scales, and domains that are not fully commensurate – nature and culture, locality and globality, authenticity and commodification, while preserving enough coherence to remain recognisable.

Another more technical layer of the concept, per my attempt to specify what Kockelman means when he talks about modes of coherence and incoherence across scales and between frames (2013, p. 10), is that stretching is a reifying and tenuous process through which the modes of incoherence between aesthetic frames are purified for the sake of coherence. If Kockelman's concept of portability explains how values travel and the possible modes of relation of such travelling to scales and frames are coherence and incoherence, stretching explains the neoliberalism's semiotic labor in which incoherences are never eliminated but continually suppressed, displaced, or aestheticised for the sake of maintaining coherence. It is from this premise of displaced incoherence and reinforced coherence across aesthetic frames that the paradise fully functions as an internally coherent typology. Coupled with the stretching state of tropicality as a value, the paradise crystallises into a domain of aesthetic imagination: a neurotic utopia situated at the threshold of modernity and culture. This is the condition under which tropical values become portable, desirable, and available for extraction.

Despite Quy Nhơn's topological completion as a neurotic paradise of tropical values, the neoliberalist aesthetic extends to Nhơn Lý fishing village through the same mechanism of value enclosure, this time effectuated by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) called (PPG) with its flagship program known as "Colorful Communities". "[Having] impacted more than 10.3 million people and completed 635 projects in over 50 countries since the program launched in 2015," the program aims to create "a brighter future", "protecting and beautifying the world" (PPG, 2026). Its primary activity involves painting mural walls across educational institutions, orphanages, cultural centers and outdoor infrastructure. According to its mission statement, "fresh color and paint hold purpose and transform the way people think and feel about their surroundings and experiences" (PPG, 2026). This process, as one volunteer of Colorful Communities explained, "brings viewers from a state of complexity to simplicity" (PPG, 2026).

Paint is not just the NGO's offered product but a semiotic chain production aimed at transforming the local "surrounding" and people's "experience" of it (PPG, 2026). Together, these constitute what Kockelman would call, "infrastructure": the material and semiotic conditions that shape how values emerge and circulate (2013). Through paint, PPG catalyzes a specific mode of aesthetic enclosure, capturing local infrastructure's otherwise fleeting and disparate phenomenological qualities that are defined by "complexity" (PPG 2026) into a rationalised economy of visual coherence and unifying beauty values. Aligning with the larger tropical values of the larger state-led project of Quy Nhơn as "the sea paradise", the NGO's values include "brightened," "fresh" and "alive," all of which are couched its teleological language of a distant, improved future (PPG, 2026). Of course, for such aesthetically ideal values to remain portable across domains, the process of enclosure must accommodate itself to local frames rather than rupture them entirely, which then incur a 'breaking' from within.

In Nhơn Lý, Colorful Communities's intervention took the form of a 700-square-meter mural wall leading from the outer rear of the village into its centre. In January 2024, the local commune

authority collaborated with PPG Vietnam's Colorful Communities program to launch a mural-painting project in Nhơn Lý. Framed as an initiative to promote sustainable eco-tourism, the project brought together hundreds of regional volunteers and artists. Their murals visually represented village life through scenes of busy fish markets, harmonious multispecies interactions, close-knit communal relations, and oceanic tranquility (Le, 2024). These representations do not simply depict Nhơn Lý; they superimpose an idealised economy of values onto its phenomenological realities. The murals stretch across the pungent smell of dried anchovies, the neglected odour of fishing nets, and the material traces of intensive maritime labour that sustain village life. However thin this overlay of paint may be, it attempts to subordinate such rooted sensory realities to a more coherent and abstract aesthetic image of tranquillity and authenticity. What is at stake is not representation but commensuration: the transformation of heterogeneous forms of life into values measurable within a shared aesthetic framework. Not only must the future be comparably bright but be better (PPG, 2026) than the present conditions of fishery smells.

This logic extends beyond representation into infrastructure itself. As mentioned, the previously dilapidated fishery households along the outer rear are replaced with restaurants, coffee shops, homestays and community lodgings, again, with a view "looking straight to the [Nhơn Lý's] sea" (Pham, 2017). This infrastructural replacement materialises tropical values and becomes the evaluative framework (Kockelman, 2016) to which Colorful Communities' success at value enclosure is measured. Any signs of sub-standard – that which creates aesthetic mismatch and breaks of semiotic frames – threaten the paradise's entire existence and its mode of coherence between aesthetic frames, ultimately represents "an ontological leakage" (Kockelman, 2013, p. 64) to its topology. The response to such leakages is typically further investment, further beautification, and further enclosure of Nhơn Lý. Paradise must continuously stretch itself over both nature and culture in order to preserve its own conditions of possibility.

Most significantly, the project produces a specific kind of evaluating agents – an intervention on the possible modes of livelihood and selfhood (Kockelman, 2016) beyond the hitherto imaginable reality of fishing business in the village from its early days. Fishermen become service providers, their sons become tour guides, agency representatives, homestay hosts and the sea becomes an object to be consumed rather than lived with. One no longer encounters the sea directly, but through tour agents' pre-structured invitations to experience it as a tropical value with the lowest price on one's way into Nhơn Lý. In this regard, Sandra Lantz's observation that "the greatest enemy of [the Holy Whale] is tourism" (2019, p. 55) can be reformulated in temporal terms. The issue is not just tourism but its mode of temporal enclosure, collapsing the intergenerational future of the Holy Whale worship into an ever-expanding present of tourism development. Just as the stretching process transpires spatially along Nhơn Lý's outer rear and its mural wall, temporally speaking, the future itself becomes enclosed within a perpetual horizon of improvement, investment, and growth, resulting in a frozen image of Nhơn Lý: timeless, authentic, and endlessly available for consumption. In either case, the interlocking interplay of space-time becomes the most fundamental canvas, or "infrastructure" in Kockelman's usage of the term (2013), where the painting of Colorful Communities completes its enclosure and value topology.

To recapitulate, the State's visual branding of Quy Nhơn as "the sea paradise" and Colorful Communities' project of mural painting both belong to a neoliberalist regime of aesthetic commensuration. Their objective is to render its seascapes, livelihoods, and forms of life intelligible in terms of portable tropical values. The mural wall by Colorful Communities exemplifies what I call "the aesthetic path", adopting from Kockelman's vocabulary (2016): pathway through which values travel across frames and domains while retaining their coherence. Through these paths, tropical values are transported into Nhơn Lý and become the evaluative standards by which local agents increasingly orient themselves. These combined modes of value enclosure, I argue, are the semiotic technology of neoliberalist commensuration. As the next section specifies, Nhơn Lý's domain is

defined by the most un-portable value of all kinds: cosmological values and the iconographically rich world of the Holy Whale worshipping tradition. The semiotic clash between two domains reveals then how any boundaries-drawing project is an immanent one whereby the enclosure of value is concomitant with possibilities of disclosure. The semiotic scale for analysis is, again, a mural wall, albeit different from the one produced by Colorful Communities.

The Aesthetic Cut Underneath Awry Paths

According to Kockelman (2016), paths are defined not only by their capacity to mediate value, but by their "propensity to fail" (p. 158), that is, when the semiotic chains encounter competing interpretants and are diverted from their intended semiotic destinations (Peirce, 1955). Failure of commensuration transpires when paths go awry, when agents go rogue: A case in point is when one of my interlocutors, a 20-year secretary at the local shrine of the Holy Whale and a widely recognised regional artist, known as uncle Vĩ, was commissioned to contribute to tourist-facing murals in the NGO's domain. His depiction of a blue marlin is featured as a part of many mural walls leading from the village's outer rear toward the central cluster of hostels, coffees and eco-facilities. This mural corridor has become a principal tourist attraction due to its photogenic qualities, popularly known as "the path of iridescent-blue rocks."

The aesthetic language of the murals along this path mobilises what are framed as tropical values – "brightness," "freshness," and "liveliness." It does so through an intensified palette dominated by saturated yellows and blues, alongside simplified representations of coastal life, including idyllic fishing scenes and harmonious multispecies relations (VOV5, 2023). At the same time, the murals include depictions of the Festival of the Fish, associated with the Holy Whale worship tradition – an annual event featuring opera-singing performances (*"Bả Trạo"*) and ritual enactments. Yet these

scenes are rendered in a flattened, schematic style, with figures appearing as cartoon-like silhouettes arranged in a rudimentary formation against an abstract yellow sky.

In contrast, Uncle Vĩ's painting of the blue marlin introduces a different aesthetic register. The fish is rendered with greater dynamism and visual density: stylised yellow stripes in motion, splashing water in crisp-white foam-like ripples against the immersive sea. What initially appears as incorporation into the neoliberalist aesthetic's regime of value instead produces disjunction, representing an instance when semiotic chains fail, aesthetic frames break and the attempt at ontological commensuration is exposed. While uncle Vĩ provided no further comment on the drawing process nor intention behind it, a formal analysis of his related artistic products – what effectively becomes the aesthetic reality of the Holy Whale in the fishermen's imagination – helps reveal the non-portable rootedness of local cosmologies.

Uncle Vĩ drew the scene where the Holy Whale saves the fishermen in the *"mơ mơ màng màng"* (half-dream, half-awake) encounter across a three-meter wall at the local shrine. Here, while a storm-torn sky confronts a turbulent sea, three Vietnamese fishing vessels are supported by two black-occulted Holy Whales and one dolphin, which press their bodies against the hulls to steady them. Above, the Buddha Goddess of Mercy presides, her halo illuminating both the boats and the bodies of Cá Ông. Curious about others' opinion on uncle Vĩ's painting, I asked another interlocutor, uncle Hường: *"Contrary to all the mural walls drawn by tourist agencies, uncle Vĩ's painting has its soul. Still, the wave curls should be in one direction, instead of being toppled against each other. This is because even in storms, the wind blows in one direction only."* On hearing uncle Hường's comment as relayed by me, uncle Vĩ responded: *"But the wind is strong, so strong that it pushes the wave [into the other] and makes it coil back. Here, we fishermen have to observe the movement of the wave so as not to sail against it. It will break the saddle, hit your chest, and kill you instantly."*

The disagreement between uncle Hường and uncle Vĩ reveals less about whether the motion of the waves is physically correct than about the forces that underlie such motion. While both eventually agree that wind blows in a single direction, uncle Vĩ's response suggests that this directional force does not exhaust the dynamics of the sea. At moments of intensity, the force of wind exceeds its own direction, enacts qualitative changes and produces collisions between waves that fold the surface of the sea onto itself. The painting, accordingly, renders a perceptual field of collision and diffusion, where orientation falters and multiple perspectives coexist without synthesis. This aesthetic mechanism resembles what Carl Einstein (1915), through Carlo Severi's reading (2018), identifies as "immobile ecstasy," whereby the distinction between the front and background is rendered "zero" (Einstein, 1915; as cited in Severi, 2018, p. 43-44). Unlike the "zero" that results from a freeze of dynamic realist actions in the flattened representation of the opera-singing performance, that of the *mơ mơ màng màng* painting equals to an immobilised gaze in an "absolute intensity" (Einstein, 1915, p. 350; as cited in Severi, 2018, p.44). In this encounter with the sea as the absolute, tension becomes the primary mode of aesthetic experience.

Severi (2018), in his critique of Einstein (1915), argues that such an "absolute intensity" should not be equated with "ecstasy" – a utopian liberation from any optical mechanism but rather, a restoration of unsuspected life in an otherwise flattened image (Severi, 2018, p. 44). The infinite collision of the waves is not merely visual but existential experience, according to uncle Vĩ, a misreading of their motion can result in immediate death. As points of formal antagonism in the painting, waves are simultaneously moments of tension and survival as lived for the fishermen. This visual perspective of formal antagonism re-imagines the phenomenological immediacy (Husserl, 1900) and existential precarity (Sartre, 1938) of being caught in the waves, representing an antithesis to the otherwise top-down visual representation of the sea as a neurotic investment of neoliberalism desire to experience nature as a tropical value.

I call this condition "the aesthetic cut," a latent condition revealed by failed commensuration of aesthetic paths. It names a negative rupture that emerges in-between instances when semiotic frames break, aesthetic paths go awry and neoliberalist regime of value fails to render commensurate Nhơn Lý's otherwise rooted, non-portable and incommensurate cosmological domain. Following Theodor W. Adorno (1973), the cut can be understood as a "non-identical gap" (p. 137) in-between and underneath that resists the stretching of frames and sustains tension in aesthetic paths. In this sense, it resonates with Rizvana Bradley's notion of the "dehiscent cut" as "the negative underside of form" (2023, p. 17) that requires a descent into and a slow attunement to aesthetic possibilities that modernity organises yet cannot fully contain.

To take Bradley's deconstruction of modernity, and by extension, neoliberal aesthetics as a regime of form, seriously is to recognise that the aesthetic cut cannot be assimilated into the operations of tropical development aesthetics, whether state-led tourism or NGO-led visual programming. These regimes work to purify formal antagonism and stabilise lived precarity into legible, consumable coherence. The cut, by contrast, registers an incoherence that resists such translation. It cannot be incorporated into a unified composition, sanitising imagery and an elevated "bird's-eye" formalisation that resolves difference into an orderly totality – a "zero" bordered on an abstractly harmonised aesthetic utopia (Einstein, 1915). Instead, the cut produces a perceptual field of intensity that suspends aesthetic resolution and continually defers the stretching process of tropical values, thereby exposing the limits of value-portability under conditions of cosmological rootedness.

Crucially, non-portability indexes rootedness as a situated mode of value non-portability. It reveals that certain forms of life and life as value are rooted in multispecies entanglements, ritual obligations, and existential risk in ways that cannot be fully extracted or stabilised as transferable value. When uncle Hường remarks that "uncle Vĩ's painting has its soul," this can be read not as metaphorical praise but as an index of the cut itself: a recognition of an irreducible vitality that exceeds formal capture while remaining immanent to

local aesthetic practice. The Holy Whale, as it appears through this cut, is not an object of belief or symbol of culture, but a figure through which the failure of commensuration becomes visible – and through which alternative, incommensurable worlds continue to endure.

Seen in this light, the contrast with neoliberal mural aesthetics becomes more pronounced. By eliminating formal antagonism, NGO's murals and state-led billboards paint together a legible, bounded topology in order to secure value where the sea is calm, life is harmonious, and multispecies relations are stabilised into consumable forms. In doing so, they enclose not only aesthetic objects but the very processes of boundary-making that render them intelligible, for example, the disagreement between two uncles that animates the *"mơ mơ màng màng"* painting. What disappears is precisely the cut – "the negative underside" (Bradley, 2023, p. 17) where formal antagonism, existential precarity, and maritime life persist. And along with it, disappears the smelly phenomenology of Nhơn Lý, however awry their paths are into the anthropologist's nostrils; the space-time fabric of fishing households, however dilapidated they are as infrastructure; generations of believers and their children, however rogue they are and can be as agents.

Treading the Paths Beyond the Paradise of Value

As we approach the destination of this paper, it is perhaps helpful to retread several of its analytic paths: First, neoliberal tourism is not simply aesthetic representation or economic development, but a semiotic technology of commensuration that aims to convert other ontological worlds into domains of value, enabling extraction not only of resources but of life as lived through evaluating agents. As a result, its boundary-drawing project through aesthetic paths becomes a form of ontological governance: deciding what exists, what matters, and what can circulate as value or non-value in its given topology. A note of clarification, however: Deployed as a heuristic frame of analysis, topology or domain is

not synonymous with a spatial enclosure that cleanly partitions one community or mode of life from another. Anthropology as a discipline has had a long path treading beyond ethnocentric imaginaries of discrete "zones of being" (Fanon, 2004; Wynter, 2003, pp. 260-61), as well as beyond the assumption that ontological difference maps neatly onto geographic separation. Rather, a domain names a configuration of forms – of coherence and incoherence – through which worlds are rendered partially commensurable. It is defined less by spatial continuity than by the relational dynamics of form. The disagreement between uncle Vĩ and uncle Hường, for instance, already demonstrates that Nhơn Lý cosmology itself is not internally unified as a romantic image of indigenous coherence would posit, but animated by ongoing formal antagonisms and ontological disjunctions.

Second, it is aesthetic paths that hold possibility for growing awry. As Kockelman (2016, p. 6) suggests, value-making is an immanent analytic framework that involves concomitantly both enclosure and disclosure. The point being is to tread on the most appropriate and conducive semiotic scale for analysis in order to reveal the conjecture where values disclose themselves and are enclosed. Methodologically speaking, this paper has attempted to follow this injunction by extrapolating ethnographic encounters as semiotic processes through which regimes of value emerge, collide, and partially fail to align. As such, claims about neoliberalist aesthetics as a regime of value are not external impositions upon Nhơn Lý cosmology, but are grounded in the very encounters where that cosmology becomes partially legible precisely through its friction with state-led tourism and NGO-led projects such as The Colorful Communities.

Analytically speaking, the possibility of disclosure of Nhơn Lý's cosmological values are immanent with the failure of neoliberalism's enclosure. Paths that go awry are not accidents, they are the inevitable products of the underlying incommensurability between domains. It is from this locus of incommensurability between frames that "the aesthetic cut" is disclosed as a productive rupture that resists enclosure and commensuration, sustaining boundaries as an

open non-portable form rather than instrumentalised values. The concept of the aesthetic cut is therefore most convincing not as a transcendent theory of resistance against neoliberalism, thus a naive reiteration of cosmology-neoliberalism, nature-culture binaries as an unproductive political terrain to examine indigenous agency. Instead, it is an account of the emergent "life projects," to pace Blaser, Feit and McRae's words (2004, p. 29) or the immanent formal conditions under which incommensurability persists, ontological difference is not instrumentalised by neoliberalism, fishermen-whale coexistence is continually cut, contested, and reimagined at the borders of value enclosure.

As a tour guide, a modern subject and an anthropologist, my strongest recommendation can only humbly be: Tread the awry paths and listen to the rogue agents along the encounters, only then can one imagine otherwise about the paradise of values awaiting us!

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Part II:
Borders of Encounter and Representation

Fatima Zahra Et–talby
Abdelaaziz El Bakkali

Negotiating Social Borders: Host Families, International Students, and the Making of Intercultural Boundaries in Morocco

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Morocco has established itself as a key destination within the global study-abroad landscape, attracting students from North America, Europe, and across Africa. This appeal is largely driven by the country's linguistic diversity, cultural complexity, and its strategic position at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Arab world (Knight, 2020; de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Within these programs, the homestay model occupies a central role, enabling students to reside with Moroccan families for extended periods. It is commonly presented within institutional discourse as a privileged site of "authentic" cultural immersion, fostering experiential learning and interpersonal engagement beyond the classroom (Engle and Engle, 2003; Dwyer, 2004).

However, such representations often rely on an idealized understanding of domestic space. Rather than functioning as a neutral setting, the home operates as a socially structured environment shaped by norms, expectations, and relational dynamics (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Bourdieu, 1977). Within this context, everyday practices such as shared meals, religious routines,

language use, and gendered interactions become key sites where belonging and differences are actively negotiated. These encounters highlight that intercultural engagement is not a seamless process of mutual understanding, but a dynamic and sometimes ambiguous interaction shaped by asymmetries of knowledge, authority, and adaptation (Holliday, 2011).

Existing research on study-abroad experiences has largely focused on macro-level outcomes, including intercultural competence, language acquisition, and personal development (Paige et al., 2009; Deardorff, 2006). At the same time, scholarship on international education has emphasized its role within broader frameworks of public diplomacy and soft power, often concentrating on institutional strategies and national image projection (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2019). While these perspectives offer valuable insights, they tend to overlook the micro-level processes through which cultural differences are experienced and negotiated in everyday contexts. In particular, the homestay remains underexplored as a social space where boundaries are continuously constructed and renegotiated, especially within the Moroccan context.

Drawing on social boundary theory and symbolic interactionism, this study conceptualizes cultural differences as a relational and processual phenomenon emerging through routine interaction (Barth, 1969; Goffman, 1959). In this sense, the homestay can be understood as a micro-social borderland, an intimate yet structured environment where inclusion, exclusion, proximity, and distance are continuously negotiated. Rather than dissolving boundaries, domestic life becomes a key site where they are enacted and reconfigured through everyday practices.

Empirically, the study examines the lived experiences of Moroccan host families and international students in Rabat-based study-abroad programs. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic field notes, the analysis focuses on daily interactions that shape cohabitation. Particular attention is given to practices related to food, religion, gender roles, household authority, and behavioral

expectations, as these constitute key moments through which social boundaries are articulated. These interactions demonstrate how identities are co-constructed over time and how cultural meanings are continuously reproduced and adjusted within the domestic sphere.

By approaching the homestay as a site of lived diplomacy, this paper advances an understanding of international education as a process of everyday negotiation rather than a linear model of intercultural integration. It argues that the soft power effects of study-abroad programs emerge not only through institutional design but also through ordinary domestic encounters that shape students' perceptions of host societies (Nye, 2004; Zaharna, 2020). In doing so, the study contributes to debates in anthropology, intercultural communication, and cultural diplomacy by highlighting how cultural boundaries are continually produced and transformed within the intimate context of daily life.

Considering this, the study addresses the following research question: How are social and cultural boundaries constructed, negotiated, and experienced within Moroccan homestay environments involving international study-abroad students? More specifically, it examines the micro-level interactional processes through which host families and students co-construct intercultural boundaries in everyday domestic settings.

Theoretical Background

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together social boundary theory, symbolic interactionism, intercultural communication, and scholarship on soft power and cultural diplomacy to examine how cultural boundaries are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within Moroccan homestay environments. Rather thanconceptualizing culture as a fixed repertoire of values or traits, the study adopts a relational and processual perspective that understands cultural differences as emerging through social interaction and everyday

practice. In line with anthropological approaches to meaning-making, cultural norms and identities are consequently treated as dynamic constructs that are continuously interpreted and reproduced within specific social contexts (Geertz, 1973; Wimmer, 2013).

A central pillar of this framework is social boundary theory, particularly the seminal contribution of Barth (1969) in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, which reconceptualizes cultural boundaries not as inherent divisions between groups but as social processes sustained through interaction. From this perspective, the persistence of cultural differences is less a matter of internal cultural content than of the social mechanisms through which boundaries are maintained, negotiated, and reproduced. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this approach by emphasizing the role of institutions, power relations, and social networks in shaping processes of boundary formation (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013). Applied to the homestay context, this theoretical lens positions the Moroccan household as a socially structured environment in which boundaries related to hospitality, authority, gender relations, privacy, and moral conduct are continuously enacted through routine practices and interpersonal expectations.

This boundary-oriented perspective is further enriched by symbolic interactionism, particularly Goffman's (1974) concept of interactional "frames," which highlights the implicit rules that organize social encounters. According to this approach, everyday interactions are structured by shared interpretive frameworks that define appropriate behavior, regulate expectations, and give meaning to social conduct. Routine practices such as gestures, spatial arrangements, conversational norms, and patterns of politeness function as subtle mechanisms through which social order is reproduced (Goffman, 1959). Within domestic environments, these interactional dynamics become especially pronounced, as prolonged co-presence limits opportunities for disengagement and intensifies the interpretive work required to navigate difference. Homestays therefore constitute a particularly revealing setting for examining how cultural boundaries are experienced, embodied, and negotiated under conditions of sustained interpersonal proximity.

Anthropological scholarship on globalization and everyday life further reinforces this perspective by emphasizing the importance of localized settings in shaping global encounters. Geertz (1973) famously argued that cultural meaning is produced through the interpretation of everyday practices embedded in specific social contexts. Similarly, Appadurai (1996) demonstrates that global cultural flows are experienced and negotiated within intimate spaces where individuals reinterpret broader cultural imaginaries through daily interaction. When international students enter Moroccan homes, global cultural narratives intersect with locally embedded moral frameworks, producing complex processes of identity negotiation that unfold not through abstract discourse but through routine domestic practices.

Complementing these anthropological insights, intercultural communication scholarship highlights the relational and interpretive nature of cross-cultural interaction. Rather than viewing intercultural learning as the simple acquisition of cultural knowledge, contemporary research conceptualizes it as a dynamic process of interpretation, adaptation, and reflexivity shaped by uncertainty and ambiguity (Deardorff, 2006; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). Within the context of international education, scholars have emphasized that intercultural competence develops through sustained interpersonal engagement that requires individuals to interpret unfamiliar norms, negotiate expectations, and reflect upon their own cultural assumptions (Jackson, 2018; Vande Berg et al., 2012). However, much of this literature has focused primarily on student outcomes, often overlooking the interactional labour and interpretive responsibilities assumed by host families within homestay arrangements.

By situating intercultural communication within the domestic environment of the homestay, this study extends existing scholarship by conceptualizing intercultural learning as a co-constructed process embedded within asymmetrical relationships shaped by hospitality obligations, moral responsibility, and household authority. Host

families emerge not merely as passive transmitters of culture but as active mediators who regulate interaction, manage potential tensions, and negotiate the boundaries of acceptable behavior within the home. Intercultural learning thus unfolds not simply through exposure to difference but through ongoing processes of negotiation, accommodation, and relational adjustment.

At a broader level, this research also engages with scholarships on soft power and cultural diplomacy to situate homestays within global processes of perception-building and international influence. Nye (2004) conceptualizes soft power as the capacity of states to shape the preferences of others through attraction and cultural legitimacy rather than coercion. Building upon this insight, scholars of public diplomacy have increasingly emphasized the role of informal, people-to-people interactions in shaping international perceptions and narratives (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). Educational exchange programs, interpersonal encounters, and everyday cultural experiences therefore function as important mechanisms through which national images and cultural understandings are constructed.

Within this framework, host families can be understood as informal cultural mediators whose everyday practices contribute to shaping international students' perceptions of host societies. Although operating outside formal diplomatic institutions, host families transmit cultural values, social norms, and moral expectations through routine interactions that influence how students interpret and narrate their experiences abroad. This perspective aligns with broader scholarship highlighting the growing role of non-state actors and educational exchange in contemporary cultural diplomacy and international education (Knight, 2012).

The Moroccan context provides a particularly relevant setting for examining these dynamics. As Morocco increasingly positions itself as a regional hub for international education and intercultural exchange, homestay programs have become an important component of educational mobility initiatives. Yet existing scholarship on Moroccan cultural diplomacy has tended to focus

primarily on institutional strategies and policy frameworks, paying limited attention to how these processes are enacted within everyday domestic environments. The Moroccan household, structured by norms of hospitality (*diyafa*), religious practice, gender relations, and moral obligation, therefore represents an underexplored yet analytically significant site where cultural diplomacy is lived and negotiated through daily interaction.

By foregrounding the domestic sphere, this study bridges macro-level analyses of Moroccan soft power with micro-level ethnographic attention to everyday social interaction. It conceptualizes the homestay as a social and symbolic borderland in which anthropological boundary-making, intercultural communication, and cultural diplomacy intersect. Cultural boundaries are not erased through proximity or immersion; rather, they are continuously produced, softened, and renegotiated through routine domestic practices.

In synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, the study advances the concept of lived diplomacy, proposing that homestays function as micro-social arenas in which national narratives, cultural norms, and interpersonal expectations are enacted and renegotiated. Through everyday practices such as shared meals, religious routines, gendered expectations, and hospitality obligations, hosts and students engage in ongoing processes of boundary negotiation that shape both individual learning trajectories and broader perceptions of Moroccan society. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarship on intercultural communication, the anthropology of everyday life, and cultural diplomacy by demonstrating that the diplomatic implications of international education emerge not solely from institutional design but from the intimate and often ambiguous dynamics of everyday domestic interaction.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographically informed research design to explore how social and cultural boundaries are constructed, negotiated, and experienced within Moroccan homestay environments involving international study-abroad students. In line with qualitative research principles that emphasize the centrality of participants' lived experiences, particular attention is given to the ethical representation of participants' voices. Accordingly, participants are anonymized and referred to using coded labels (e.g., Student 1, Student 2), host family members are anonymized as well and referred to as "Host 1", "Host 2", etc. in order to protect confidentiality while preserving the qualitative depth and authenticity of their narratives.

Rather than relying on predefined indicators of intercultural learning, the research seeks to understand how meanings, expectations, and forms of adaptation emerge through everyday domestic interaction.

The study is grounded in theoretical perspectives on social boundary-making (Barth, 1969), symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1974), and cultural diplomacy and soft power (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005). These frameworks inform an interpretive and inductive research orientation that views culture not as a fixed system of values, but as something continuously produced and negotiated through interaction. In this sense, homestay is approached as a socially structured environment in which everyday practices such as communication, routines, and interpersonal expectations become key sites of boundary negotiation.

Participants' narratives further illustrate the relevance of this methodological approach. Many students described their motivation for choosing a homestay in terms of immersion and lived experience rather than academic learning alone. For example, one participant

explained that they wanted “daily immersion, not just class,” while another emphasized a desire to understand “family life, not just student life” (Student 1; Student 3). These perspectives highlight that the homestay experience unfolds through ongoing interaction rather than discrete learning outcomes, reinforcing the need for a qualitative and process-oriented approach.

The research therefore prioritizes participants’ lived experiences, with particular attention to moments of adjustment, ambiguity, and negotiation. Early encounters within the homestay were often described as emotionally and socially intense. As one participant noted, their first days felt “warm but exhausting,” while another described a sense of “comfort and confusion” during the initial period (Student 8; Student 11). Such accounts demonstrate that intercultural interaction is not a linear or uniform process, but one shaped by evolving interpretations and relational dynamics.

By focusing on these everyday experiences, the study is able to capture the micro-level processes through which social boundaries become visible and meaningful. The qualitative and ethnographically informed design thus enables an in-depth understanding of how intercultural encounters are lived, negotiated, and adjusted within the intimate setting of the home.

Field Site and Research Context

The empirical component of this study is situated within study-abroad programs in Morocco that integrate international students into Moroccan host family households during their academic stay. This setting provides a particularly relevant context for examining intercultural interaction, as it brings together individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds within a shared domestic environment. Morocco’s linguistic plurality, cultural heterogeneity, and geopolitical positioning at the intersection of Africa, Europe, and the Arab world further reinforce its significance as a site for analyzing everyday intercultural encounters (Knight, 2020).

Within these programs, homestays constitute a central pedagogical component designed to facilitate cultural immersion through sustained engagement with everyday family life. Rather than limiting learning to formal academic settings, homestays enable students to participate in daily routines, social interactions, and domestic practices that shape lived cultural experience. This approach aligns with scholarship emphasizing the importance of interpersonal engagement and situated experience in the development of intercultural understanding (Deardorff, 2006; Jackson, 2018).

Participants' accounts reinforce the significance of this immersive environment. Many students described their choice of homestay as a deliberate effort to access everyday life beyond institutional frameworks. For instance, one participant explained that they "didn't want a foreigner bubble" and instead sought "real daily interactions," while another noted a desire to experience "local culture in a real way" rather than through a "hotel-style program" (Student 4; Student 5). These perspectives highlight that homestay is not merely a logistical arrangement, but a central site of experiential learning and cultural engagement.

From an analytical perspective, the homestay environment is conceptualized not as a neutral setting for cultural exposure, but as a socially structured and morally regulated space. Anthropological approaches to domestic life emphasize that households function as key sites where social norms, authority relations, and cultural values are reproduced through everyday interaction (Douglas, 1966). In this sense, the Moroccan home operates as an active field site in which interpersonal expectations, moral frameworks, and social hierarchies shape the dynamics of intercultural encounter.

Students' descriptions of daily life further illustrate this structured character. As one participant observed, "it's structured by meals and family rhythms," while another described the home as "communal… even small moments happen together" (Student 7; Student 14). Such accounts indicate that the domestic environment is organized around shared practices and collective routines, which both enable interaction and establish implicit expectations regarding participation and behavior.

Conceptualizing the homestay as an active and structured field site aligns with the broader theoretical framing of the study, which understands the home as a micro-social borderland. Within this space, cultural norms, interpersonal roles, and moral expectations are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and adjusted through everyday interaction. The Moroccan household, therefore, is not simply a place of residence for international students, but a central arena in which intercultural dynamics unfold and where broader questions of belonging, difference, and social boundary-making become visible in practice.

Participants and Sampling

The study draws on two interrelated groups of participants: international study-abroad students placed with Moroccan host families, and host family members directly engaged in their day-to-day accommodation and support. In total, the research involves 30 participants, including 15 students and 15 host family members. This sample size is well-suited to qualitative inquiry, as it enables a detailed examination of lived experiences while reflecting a diversity of perspectives across different homestay contexts. By incorporating both groups, the study adopts a relational perspective that captures how intercultural boundaries are jointly shaped through ongoing interaction rather than experienced separately by hosts and students (Wimmer, 2013).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy commonly employed in qualitative and ethnographic research to capture a diversity of experiences, perspectives, and interactional contexts rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2013). Sampling decisions were guided by the study's analytical objective of examining how social boundaries are negotiated within domestic environments across different homestay arrangements.

Among international student participants, variation was sought in terms of gender, cultural background, prior intercultural experience, language proficiency, and length of residence with the host family. This diversity enabled the study to explore how differing positionalities and levels of familiarity with cross-cultural environments shaped students' interpretations of everyday domestic practices. Differences in the duration of stay also allowed attention to the temporal dimensions of boundary negotiation, including processes of initial adjustment, gradual adaptation, and longer-term accommodation.

Host family participants likewise reflected a range of household configurations and hosting trajectories. Families differed in terms of household composition, including nuclear and extended family structures, generational dynamics, and prior experience hosting international students. This variation provided insight into how hosting practices and expectations were shaped by family organization, accumulated experience, and differing interpretations of hospitality, responsibility, and cultural representation.

By including participants across a range of homestay contexts, the study was able to examine how boundary-making processes varied across domestic settings rather than assuming a uniform homestay experience. This approach strengthens the analytical depth of the research by situating individual narratives within broader patterns of interaction while remaining attentive to the specific dynamics of each household and relationship.

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and focused participant observation, enabling an in-depth exploration of everyday interaction within Moroccan homestay environments. This multi-method qualitative approach allows for the capture of both participants' articulated experiences and the implicit practices through which social boundaries are enacted in domestic settings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The primary data source consists of ten semi-structured interviews conducted with international students and Moroccan host family members. Interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of everyday life within the homestay, with particular attention to moments of adaptation, misunderstanding, tension, and negotiation. Key themes included household routines, expectations surrounding hospitality, gender and religious norms, communication practices, and perceptions of cultural differences. The semi-structured format provided flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency across participants, allowing individuals to highlight aspects of the experience they considered most significant (Kvale, 2007).

Findings: Negotiating Social Boundaries in the Homestay

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, examining how social and cultural boundaries are enacted, negotiated, and reconfigured within Moroccan homestay environments. Rather than portraying homestay as a uniformly immersive or harmonious setting, the analysis reveals it as a socially regulated domestic space in which sustained proximity intensifies processes of boundary-making. Drawing interview narratives and observational data, the findings demonstrate that boundaries do not operate as fixed or predetermined lines. Instead, they emerge as situational outcomes of everyday interaction, shaped by household authority structures, norms of hospitality, moral expectations, and the adaptive practices developed by both host families and international students as they navigate daily coexistence.

The Domestic Space as a Social Border

Findings indicate that the Moroccan home functions as a structured social environment governed by implicit hierarchies and normative expectations rather than as a neutral site of cultural exchange. While many students initially assumed that living with a

host family would involve flexibility and informal coexistence, host families frequently framed the household as a space requiring order, respect, and adherence to established routines.

Daily routines such as mealtimes, sleep schedules, and expectations regarding visitors revealed clear asymmetries of authority within the household. Host parents often positionthemselves as responsible not only for students' physical well-being but also for their behavior and integration into family life. As one host explained, "We treat them as part of the family, but they must respect the house rules" (Host 1). This perspective was echoed by another host who emphasized a parental role, noting that "we guide them, especially at the beginning, so they understand how things work here" (Host 7).

For students, this dynamic generated an ambivalent experience. On the one hand, many described a strong sense of care and inclusion. On the other hand, they reported moments of constraint when household expectations limited their autonomy. For instance, one participant noted, "I expected to feel watched and restricted…I was anxious about making mistakes" (Student 10), while another expressed concern about feeling like "an outsider the whole time" (Student 3).

Observational data indicate that students frequently adjust their behavior in response to these expectations. These adjustments included modifying daily routines, informing hosts about their movements, or adapting personal habits to align with household norms. As one participant explained, "I adjusted how I talk about personal topics and my late outings… I became more discreet" (Student 9). Hosts also recognized this process of adaptation. As one host noted, "At first they observe a lot, then slowly they start to adapt to the family rhythm" (Host).

Belonging within the household was therefore not automatically granted but developed over time through processes of adjustment and interpretation. As one participant reflected, "At first, I felt like I was performing politeness… I didn't know what was expected" (Student 5). Similarly, another participant described the need to

interpret everyday practices, stating that early experiences required "watching how people greet, eat, and speak" before feeling comfortable (Student 11).

From the perspective of host families, this gradual adjustment was seen as part of the integration process. As one host explained, "With time, they become more comfortable, and we also adjust to them little by little" (Host 4). This mutual adaptation highlights how inclusion within the household is negotiated rather than automatically established.

These findings suggest that the domestic environment operates simultaneously as a space of inclusion and a space of regulation. Participation in family routines and alignment with household expectations became central to maintaining a sense of belonging. Rather than being communicated through formal rules, these expectations were embedded in everyday practices and interactions, shaping how students understood their role within the household.

Hospitality, Obligation, and Control

Hospitality (diyafa) emerged as a central organizing principal structuring homestay relationship. Within Moroccan host families, hospitality was consistently framed as a moral obligation emphasizing generosity, care, and responsibility toward the guest.

Hosts frequently described welcoming students into their homes as a responsibility that extended beyond accommodation to include emotional support and daily care. As one host explained, "When a student comes, they are part of the family… we take care of them like our own" (Host 6). Another host emphasized the importance of inclusion through routine practices, noting that "we always eat together so they don't feel alone" (Host 2).

Shared meals played a central role in structuring these relationships, functioning as key moments of interaction and belonging. Several students described meals as the main space of

connection within the household. As one participant explained, “Meals were the main bonding time… eating together felt like being part of the family” (Student 3).

At the same time, findings indicate that hospitality was accompanied by implicit expectations regarding participation and behavior. Host families often encouraged students to engage in shared routines, particularly around meals and family activities. For example, one student noted, “I learned that refusing directly can sound harsh,” highlighting the need to adapt to communication and behavior to avoid misunderstanding (Student 13).

Hosts also expressed expectations of engagement and reciprocity. As one host explained, “When we offer food, it’s not just food… it’s respect, so we expect them to accept, even a little” (Host 3). These perspectives indicate that participation in hospitality practices was understood as part of maintaining a positive relationship within the household.

From the perspective of students, hospitality was often experienced as both welcoming and demanding. Several participants described situations in which they accepted food or participated in activities despite discomfort in order to maintain harmony. As one participant stated, “Sometimes I said yes even when I wasn’t comfortable, just to avoid seeming disrespectful” (Student 8). Another participant described hospitality as “generous and constant,” but also noted feeling “guilty because I couldn’t give back equally” (Student 2).

These experiences highlight how hospitality shaped not only interaction but also behavior within the homestay. Participation in shared meals, acceptance of food, and presence in family routines became important elements of maintaining social harmony.

Findings suggest that hospitality functioned as both a practice of inclusion and a mechanism through which expectations were communicated and reinforced. Rather than being expressed through explicit rules, these expectations were embedded in everyday interactions, shaping how both hosts and students navigated their relationship within the household.

Gendered and Religious Norms as Sites of Boundary Negotiation

Gendered and religious norms emerged as significant sites of boundary negotiation within Moroccan homestay environments. While host families rarely presented these expectations as strict rules, everyday practices related to modesty, social behavior, and religious routines shaped how students navigated daily life within the household.

These norms were typically communicated indirectly through advice, reminders, and everyday interaction rather than explicit instruction. As one host explained, "We don't impose, but we guide… especially in how they present themselves outside or with the family" (Host 4). Another host emphasized the importance of maintaining social expectations, noting that "we explain what is appropriate, so they don't feel uncomfortable or judged outside" (Host 8).

Female students, in particular, reported heightened awareness of expectations related to clothing and behavior. Several participants described adjusting their dress or presentation based on feedback from host families. As one participant explained, "I adjusted my dress at home and when going out… I understood it was about respect, not control" (Student 2).Another noted that suggestions about clothing were often framed as advice, stating that "they would tell me gently what is better to wear in certain situations" (Student 15).

Religious practices also shaped the rhythm of everyday life within the household. Students described adapting to routines influenced by prayer times, fasting periods, and shared meals. While participation in religious practices was not explicitly required, many students adjusted their behavior to align with household expectations. As one participant explained, "I was mindful during prayer times and tried not to interrupt… it felt like a way to show respect" (Student 6).

Hosts similarly described religion as part of everyday life rather than something imposed. As one host stated, “Religion is part of our routine… they don’t have to follow, but we expect respect” (Host 3). Another added that students often adapted naturally over time, noting that “they learn by observing how we live, not by being told what to do” (Host 10).

Observational data indicate that these norms were negotiated gradually rather than through direct confrontation. Students often balanced respect for household expectations with their own habits and identities, leading to subtle adjustments in behavior. For example, some participants described modifying schedules, adapting social interactions, or negotiating levels of participation in family routines.

These findings suggest that gendered and religious norms function as ongoing sites of interaction and adjustment within the homestay. Rather than being experienced as fixed constraints, they were continuously interpreted and negotiated through everyday practices, shaping how both hosts and students navigated expectations, respect, and personal autonomy within the shared domestic space.

Language, Silence, and Communication as Boundary Negotiation

Language emerged as both a bridge and a barrier within the homestay environment. While host families often emphasized linguistic immersion as a key benefit of the experience, communication challenges frequently created moments of hesitation, misunderstanding, and ambiguity in everyday interaction.

Students with limited proficiency in Darija or Arabic reported difficulty expressing discomfort, clarifying expectations, or navigating sensitive situations. As one participant explained, “Sometimes I didn’t know how to explain what I felt, so I just stayed

quiet" (Student 6), while another noted that communication required constant adjustment, stating that "I learned to ask more carefully and not assume things" (Student 9).

In many cases, silence became a strategy for maintaining harmony within the household. Rather than openly challenging expectations, students often chose to avoid confrontation by limiting verbal expression. As one participant described, "Even when I didn't agree, I preferred not to say anything because I didn't want to seem disrespectful" (Student 12), while another explained that "it was easier to stay quiet than risk misunderstanding" (Student 7) .

From the perspective of host families, however, silence was often interpreted differently. As one host explained, "If they don't say anything, we think everything is okay" (Host 2), while another noted that students who spoke less were often assumed to be comfortable, stating that "when they are quiet, we believe they are adapting well" (Host 5). These contrasting interpretations highlight how communication gaps could reinforce misunderstandings within the household.

At the same time, findings indicate that communication patterns evolved over time. As students became more familiar with the language and the household environment, they developed greater confidence in expressing themselves and engaging in dialogue. As one participant explained, "After some time, it became easier to explain what I needed or didn't understand" (Student 1), while another noted that "with time I became more confident speaking and asking questions" (Student 10).

Hosts also observed this progression. As one host stated, "At the beginning they are quiet, but later they start to speak more and interact more with the family" (Host 3), while another added that "over time they become more comfortable and communicate more openly" (Host 8).

This shift often enabled small adjustments in everyday routines and interactions. Students described gradually negotiating aspects of daily life, such as meal preferences, schedules, or participation in

family activities. As one participant noted, “With time, I could explain myself better, and we found small compromises” (Student 5), while another explained that “later I felt more able to express what I preferred” (Student 14).

These findings suggest that communication plays a central role in shaping how boundaries are maintained and renegotiated within the homestay environment. When communication is limited, students tend to adapt quietly to existing expectations. As communication improves, opportunities for dialogue and mutual adjustment increase, allowing for more active participation in shaping everyday interaction.

Discussion: Homestays as Everyday Borderlands of Cultural Negotiation

This study challenges dominant representations of homestays as seamless sites of cultural immersion by demonstrating that they function instead as everyday borderlands where social boundaries are continuously produced and redefined. Rather than dissolving cultural differences, sustained cohabitation often intensifies boundary work within a morally structured domestic environment. This supports anthropological perspectives that conceptualize boundaries as processes emerging through everyday social practice (Barth, 1969; Wimmer, 2013).

The findings show that belonging within Moroccan homestays is not automatically granted but gradually established. Students’ sense of inclusion depends largely on their ability to interpret and adapt to implicit norms governing behavior, authority, and daily conduct. Host families shape this process by balancing care with supervision, often framing their role in familial and moral terms. Boundaries are therefore maintained less through explicit exclusion than through routine practices that define what is considered appropriate within the household (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

Closer examination reveals that these dynamics are rarely enforced through formal rules. Instead, they are conveyed through subtle cues such as tone, gestures, timing, and silence. Students frequently rely on indirect communication to navigate uncertainty or discomfort, which shifts the emphasis from explicit dialogue to interpreting unspoken expectations. This aligns with symbolic interactionist perspectives emphasizing that social meaning is produced through interaction rather than fixed cultural scripts (Goffman, 1974).

The findings also highlight an asymmetry within homestay relationships. While study-abroad discourse often presents intercultural exchange as reciprocal, host families typically occupy positions of greater authority within the domestic space. Students' learning therefore involves adapting to existing norms rather than negotiating them on equal terms, indicating that intercultural competence develops through navigating unequal relationships shaped by dependence, hospitality, and moral responsibility (Jackson, 2018).

These micro-level dynamics extend to broader considerations of cultural diplomacy and soft power. While attraction and international perception are shaped through cultural experience (Nye, 2004), the findings demonstrate that such outcomes are neither automatic nor uniform. Students' perceptions emerge through a combination of care, hospitality, ambiguity, and discomfort, highlighting that soft power is a contingent outcome of lived interaction rather than a stable effect.

Similarly, cultural diplomacy is not limited to institutional actors. Host families play a central role in shaping how students experience and interpret Moroccan society through everyday practices such as shared meals, advice, correction, and care. In doing so, they act as informal cultural mediators, even without explicit intent (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2009).

However, these interactions are not always smooth or unidirectional. Homestays are not controlled environments for projecting a fixed national image but spaces where meanings are

continuously negotiated and occasionally contested. The Moroccan home, shaped by norms of hospitality, religion, and family structure, becomes a site where cultural identity is constructed through interaction rather than simply transmitted.

The homestay can therefore be understood as a liminal space positioned between public and private, institutional and informal, and cultural representation and personal experience. This in-between position gives it analytical significance as a setting where boundaries are not removed but continually reworked.

By focusing on these dynamics, this study contributes to border studies by shifting attention from geopolitical borders to their domestic production. It demonstrates that boundaries are not only located at the edges of states but also within homes, routines, and relationships, thereby reframing international education as a process of everyday boundary formation with broader diplomatic implications.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social and cultural boundaries are constructed and negotiated within Moroccan homestay environments involving international study-abroad students. By focusing on everyday domestic interaction, the research moves beyond dominant representations of homestays as seamless sites of cultural immersion and instead highlights their complexity as socially structured spaces shaped by norms, expectations, and relational dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that the homestay operates as an "everyday borderland," where boundaries are not eliminated through proximity but are continuously produced and negotiated through routine practices. Across domains such as household authority, hospitality, gender norms, and communication, both students and host families engage in ongoing processes of adjustment, interpretation, and accommodation. Belonging within

the household emerges not as an automatic outcome of participation, but as a negotiated process dependent on alignment with implicit social and moral expectations.

At the same time, the study highlights the relational and asymmetrical nature of these interactions. While homestays provide opportunities for cultural learning and inclusion, they also position host families as key actors in shaping the terms of interaction within the domestic space. Students' experiences are therefore shaped by the need to navigate expectations related to respect, participation, and behavioral adaptation. In this sense, intercultural learning is not simply a matter of exposure to difference, but a process embedded within everyday negotiations of authority, responsibility, and social norms.

By situating these dynamics within broader discussions of intercultural communication and cultural diplomacy, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how international education operates as a form of everyday boundary work. It shows that the impact of homestay experiences extends beyond formal learning environments, shaping perceptions, relationships, and cultural understanding through lived interaction.

The study underscores the importance of examining the micro-level dynamics of domestic life in order to better understand the broader implications of study-abroad programs. By conceptualizing the homestay as a site of ongoing negotiation rather than passive immersion, it offers a more grounded and realistic perspective on intercultural experience, one that reflects both its opportunities and its tensions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a context-specific sample consisting of 15 international students and 15 Moroccan host family members within study-abroad programs in Morocco. While this sample size is

appropriate for qualitative inquiry and allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to other cultural or institutional contexts. The specificity of the Moroccan setting, with its particular social, cultural, and linguistic dynamics, may shape interaction patterns in ways that differ from other homestay environments.

Second, the study relies primarily on semi-structured interviews and focuses on participant observation, both of which are interpretive methods. Participants' accounts may be influenced by memory, self-presentation, or a desire to provide socially acceptable responses, particularly in relation to sensitive topics such as respect, cultural differences, or household norms. While triangulation between interviews and observational data was used to enhance credibility, the findings remain shaped by the perspectives and interpretations of both participants and the researcher.

Third, the researcher's positionality may also have influenced the data collection and analysis process. As with all qualitative research, the interpretation of interactions, behaviors, and narratives is not entirely neutral but is shaped by the researcher's background, assumptions, and engagement with the field. Although efforts were made to maintainreflexivity and analytical rigor, this influence cannot be fully eliminated.

Fourth, the study captures participants' experiences at specific moments within the homestay period, rather than tracing how these experiences evolve over time. As a result, the analysis focuses on processes of adjustment and negotiation as they occur during the stay, without examining how participants' perceptions, relationships, or intercultural understandings may develop after returning to their home contexts.

Finally, the research concentrates on the perspectives of students and host families, without incorporating the views of program administrators or institutional actors who play a role in structuring homestay arrangements. Including these perspectives, it could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how homestay experiences are organized and managed within broader frameworks of international education.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for further research. One important direction would be to examine whether similar patterns of interaction and boundary negotiation emerge in other study-abroad contexts. While this research focuses on the Moroccan homestay environment, future studies could explore comparable programs in different cultural and regional settings in order to assess the extent to which these dynamics are context-specific or more broadly characteristic of intercultural cohabitation. Such comparative work would be particularly valuable in identifying how variations in social norms, family structures, and cultural expectations influence the organization of everyday interaction within host households.

Another important area concerns the longer-term implications of homestay experiences. This study captures how students and host families negotiate boundaries during the period of cohabitation, but it does not examine how these experiences are later interpreted or integrated into participants' personal and intercultural development. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach, following participants after the end of their stay to explore how their perceptions of the host culture evolve over time, and how these experiences influence their attitudes, behaviors, and relationships in subsequent intercultural contexts.

In addition, further research could extend the analytical scope by incorporating the perspectives of institutional actors involved in the organization and management of homestay programs. Program coordinators, administrators, and support staff play a key role in structuring the conditions under which host–student interactions take place. Examining their perspectives would provide insight into how homestay arrangements are designed, how expectations are communicated, and how challenges or conflicts are managed within institutional frameworks. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between program design and lived intercultural experience.

Finally, future studies could explore in greater depth the role of host families as active participants in shaping intercultural encounters. While this study highlights their importance, further research could investigate how hosts themselves understand their role, how they interpret their responsibilities toward students, and how they navigate the balance between care, authority, and cultural representation. Such work would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cultural meanings and social norms are transmitted, negotiated, and sometimes contested within the domestic sphere.

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Othmane Tissir
Zakaria Abdel Mounim
Abdelaaziz El Bakkali

"Proof of Passage": How Western Writers Certify Their Right to Speak About Morocco

Introduction

In most Western books about Morocco, there is a moment that the writers take to legitimize their authority of writing about Morocco. It appears in the dedication that names an influential host, in the preface that announces a gap no previous writer has filled, in the opening chapter that establishes how many years the writer spent in the country or how fluently they spoke the language. These moments are easy to read past for they seem like context, like the polite clearing of a throat before the real subject arrives. This paper argues that they are the subject, or at least, an equally important part of it. Before Western writers describe Morocco, they certify their right to describe it, and the certification follows patterns that are recognizable and revealing about how cultural authority is manufactured and sustained.

The study of Western representations of Morocco has generated a substantial body of scholarship. Researchers have examined the Orientalist imagery embedded in travel accounts, the colonial logic shaping anthropological fieldwork, and the persistence of exoticizing tropes in contemporary expatriate writing (Rddad, 2025; Benaissi,

2023; El Aidi, 2023). What has received considerably less attention is the pre-representational act that precedes this. To illustrate, the paper deals with the moment when the Western writer explains, explicitly or through implication, why they are the right person to be offering a representation at all. The question of who has the right to speak about a place is, of course, not new to postcolonial scholarship. Said's Orientalism (1978) established that Western discourse about the East is inseparable from the institutional and political structures that authorize it. However, authorization is not just a structural phenomenon, it is also a textual one, performed in specific zones of specific books by individual writers making individual choices about how to present themselves to their readers.

The paper's corpus consists of prefaces, dedications, introductions, acknowledgements, and opening chapters drawn from Western travel writing, colonial memoirs, anthropological accounts, and expatriate literature about Morocco, including works by Edith Wharton, Walter Burton Harris, Paul Bowles, Peter Mayne, Paul Rabinow, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Gavin Maxwell, Suzanna Clarke, and Tahir Shah. These paratextual and threshold materials are analyzed as a coherent body of evidence about how Western writers construct their authority before their narratives begin. The theoretical anchor for this analysis is Gérard Genette's (1997) concept of the paratext, the prefaces, dedications, and framing materials that surround and condition the main text. This paper also applies a postcolonial question that Genette's framework does not address. It asks the question of what happens when the vestibule of a book is also the space where colonial and postcolonial power relations are textually rehearsed.

The method combines qualitative content analysis with close reading as Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argue, qualitative content analysis enables the systematic interpretation of textual data through coding, categorization, and the identification of recurring patterns and themes. Applied to this corpus, the method helps identify the recurring ways Western writers present themselves as qualified to write about Morocco. These include claims of long residence, knowledge of local languages, friendship with Moroccans,

access to dangerous or forbidden spaces, and the correction of earlier Western accounts. Close reading then looks more carefully at how these claims are built in individual texts through word choice, narrative order, tone, and framing.

The paper is organized into two main sections in which the first examines the paratext itself as an authorization space, focusing on how writers like Wharton, Harris, or Rabinow use prefaces and opening chapters to establish their credentials before the representation of Morocco begins. It also looks at how claims of residence, language, and local friendship extend this authorization into the body of the text. The second section examines a more intense register of the same logic. It deals with the claims of danger, secrecy, forbidden access, and corrective truth that position the writer as having gone further than ordinary Western observers could or would go. Together, these sections argue that the authority to represent Morocco is not assumed in these texts as it is rather performed, through a grammar of self-certification that has proved remarkably stable across more than a century of Western writing about the country.

The Vestibule of Authority: Paratext, Self-Positioning, and the Threshold of Morocco

One must think that a travel narrative, an ethnographic writing, or a missionary book starts obviously with its first page. However, in a more politically loaded sense, it begins earlier, in the zones that surround the main text before the narrative opens. For instance, the dedication, the preface, the acknowledgements, and sometimes the introductory note that explains why this book exists and why its author was qualified to write it. These threshold spaces are not treated as analytical material as much as they tend to be skimmed as orientation, read quickly on the way to the real thing. Therefore, what this section argues is that for Western writers on othered geographies, in this case Morocco, these zones are among the most ideologically consequential parts of the writings. Before the first

description of a street or a face or a market, the Western writer has already performed a critical rhetorical act: they have established, to varying degrees of explicitness, their right to be writing at all. The two subsections that follow examine this performance in two stages. The first focuses on prefaces and opening chapters as places where Western writers establish their right to write. The second looks at how that right is proved through specific claims made across the body of the text in elements like long residence, knowledge of the language, and personal relationships with Moroccan people.

The Preface as a Space of Authorization

In his study *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette (1997) developed the concept of the paratext to describe those elements of a published work that surround and frame the main text without quite belonging to it. That could be the title page, dedication, epigraphs, prefaces, introductions, notes, back-cover copy. Genette describes the paratext not as a peripheral margin but as a threshold, a "vestibule," in his word, that offers the reader "the possibility either of entering or of turning back" (Genette, 1997, p. 2). This image of the vestibule captures something important about how these zones function rhetorically. A vestibule is not a neutral space, Genette looks at it as the place where a visitor decides whether to proceed, and it is typically arranged to encourage that decision in a particular direction. The preface, Genette argues, carries a specific persuasive function establishing why the text deserves to be read and, crucially, how it ought to be read. He calls the paratext "always the bearer of an authorial commentary... legitimated by the author." (Genette, 1997, p. 2) In other words, the space where the writer speaks directly to the reader before the narrative takes over.

For Western writers taking Morocco as the center of their work, this vestibule is not simply dealt with as just a reading guide, it is an authorization claim. The question that structures the preface to a great many Western books about Morocco, whether stated or implicit, is why should you believe that I have something worth

saying about this place? The connection between this question and the broader politics of colonial and postcolonial representation is not incidental. As Sadik Rddad (2025) argues in his work entitled *Dis-orienting the Maghreb: Morocco in British and American Travel Writing*, the production of knowledge about the country by Western writers has always been entangled with the production of authority, with establishing who is positioned to speak and on what grounds (Rddad, 2025). Claire Lindsay, writing on travel writing and postcolonial studies, notes that the relationship between textual authority and geopolitical power has been central to travel writing scholarship since Said's Orientalism, but that the specific mechanisms through which authority is established at the level of individual texts have received less focused attention (Lindsay, 2016). Said himself defined Orientalism partly in terms of authorization: it is a corporate institution for "dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said, 1978, p. 3). The preface, as this paper proposes to show, is precisely where that authorization is textually performed.

Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* (1920) offers an instructive case. Before the preface begins, the book's dedication page does considerable paratextual work. It reads: "To General Lyautey, Resident General of France in Morocco, and to Madame Lyautey, thanks to whose kindness the journey I had so long dreamed of surpassed what I had dreamed" (Wharton, 1920, dedication). The dedication is typically read as courtesy, a gracious acknowledgement of a generous host. However, in paratextual terms, it names the source of access before a word of Morocco has been described. Lyautey was the supreme representative of French colonial administration in the Protectorate. To dedicate the book to him, to place his name, with its military rank, on the first visible page, is to announce, publicly and permanently, the institutional machinery that made Wharton's journey possible. The dedication certifies her before she has begun. The preface then extends this certification through a specific rhetorical move revolving around the claim of firstness. Wharton opens with the statement that "Morocco still lacks a guide-book" and that she had "wished to take a first step

toward remedying that deficiency" (Wharton, 1920, preface). To be the first to write properly about a place is to hold a kind of representational title over it. No previous Western account, Wharton implies, has adequately mapped Morocco for the reader who wishes to understand it; her book arrives to fill this absence. The claim does two things simultaneously, initially, it establishes the book's necessity and it positions Wharton as uniquely qualified to fulfill it; not despite her access through French military and colonial channels, but because of it. Rddad (2025) notes that Wharton's account is caught between American nationalism and French imperialism in ways that shape its representational logic; the preface's authorization of the book through Lyautey's name is a compressed expression of exactly this entanglement.

Walter Burton Harris's *Morocco That Was* (1921) constructs authority through a different strategy but toward the same end. Whilst Wharton relied on institutional access represented in the French military and the colonial Residency, Harris relied on biography given the fact that his authorization is temporal and personal. Harris arrived in Morocco as a correspondent for The Times of London in 1887 and remained there for nearly half a century, becoming confidant to at least three ruling sultans and witness to the country's transformation from independent empire to French protectorate. Harris's opening chapters do not explain Morocco so much as they explain Harris in Morocco, his decades of presence, the trust he earned among men who trusted few outsiders, the scenes he witnessed that no other Western journalist could have observed which makes the book far from being an analysis and closer to a testimony. Additionally, Benaissi (2023), in a postcolonial reading of both *Morocco That Was* and Wharton's text, notes how these colonial accounts constructed "distorted realities" of Morocco that served imperial legitimation; but the specific mechanism of that legitimation in Harris's case is biographical intimacy, which the opening chapters deploy as persistently and deliberately as Wharton's preface deploys official access. The rhetorical logic in both works is related, the premise is that Morocco requires a special kind of witness, and the opening pages establish that this writer is that witness.

On top of that, what both Wharton and Harris share is an understanding that the paratextual threshold is not neutral ground as both writers use the space before the narrative to make the case for themselves. James Clifford's 1983 essay "On Ethnographic Authority" provides a useful analytical frame here, even if Clifford is primarily concerned with academic anthropology rather than travel writing. He argues that the authority of ethnographic accounts produced through specific textual conventions, above all, through what he calls the foundational claim of "You were there because I was there" (Clifford, 1983). To have been present, to have inhabited a field site long enough, deeply enough, and with sufficient investment to know what is written about. In other words, this is the master credential of ethnographic writing, and Clifford shows that it is constructed in the text through a set of recurring rhetorical gestures rather than self-evidently demonstrated by the research. The same structure operates in travel writing and colonial memoir. The preface and opening chapters of Western books on Morocco are precisely where this "You were there because I was there" claim is established, and where "there" is qualified, through evidence of duration, access, or privileged proximity, into something more than ordinary presence. Carl Thompson, editing the Routledge Companion to Travel Writing, contends that the problem of authenticating travel accounts is not unique to any period; rather, "the procedures and rhetorical gestures" through which travel writers establish credibility have been a persistent feature of the genre from its earliest recognizable forms (Thompson, 2016). What the Morocco corpus illustrates with particular clarity is how these gestures carry postcolonial weight.

Paul Rabinow's Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, first published in 1977, occupies an unusual position in this tradition. The book makes the production of anthropological authority its explicit subject as Rabinow is interested in how the conditions of his fieldwork shaped and constrained what could be learned. This reflexive stance, rare at the time and still relatively uncommon in the primary corpus examined here, might seem to dissolve the authorization logic yet it does not. When Reflecting on his position

in the field, Rabinow describes himself as occupying "a rather ideal 'anthropological' position": fluent in the language, familiar with the culture, concerned with related issues, and yet "unquestionably an outsider" (Rabinow, 1977, p. 19). The phrase "unquestionably an outsider" stages a kind of integrity; Rabinow does not claim to have become Moroccan, or to have crossed fully into the culture. He maintains his foreignness as an acknowledged fact yet the acknowledgement is itself a credential. The writer who admits the limits of his position, who foregrounds the constructed and contingent nature of his knowledge, is implicitly claiming a methodological honesty that previous ethnographers did not consider. Transparency about the conditions of knowledge production becomes, paradoxically, a new form of authority, and it is established, again, in the paratextual and opening materials of the text. Jennifer Wawrzynek, examining how paratexts function as authorization devices in postcolonial contexts, observes that the "authenticating paratextual material" surrounding a narrative can simultaneously validate and constrain the voice it purports to frame (Wawrzynek, 2020, pp. 389–390). It becomes clear that Rabinow's reflexive preface operates in precisely this double register. It frames the account as more honest than its predecessors all while reinforcing the author's claim to a superior form of understanding.

Strategies of Proximity: Residence, Language, and Local Friendship

As the preface is where Western writers on Morocco declare their right to write, the opening chapters take on the role where these writers begin to prove it. Long or repeated residence in the country, linguistic access to Moroccan Arabic, Darija, or French, and genuine personal friendship or intimate acquaintance with Moroccan people is often used as proof. Separately, each of these carries weight but together, they construct what might be called the intimacy credential. Simply, the argument that the writer has not merely visited Morocco but has, in some meaningful sense, entered it. The

aim here is to create a contrast that gains rhetorical momentum from an implied comparison between the tourist, the brief visitor, the person who passed through without truly knowing the place, the well-meaning but ultimately superficial observer.

The structure of self-differentiation from the tourist has deep roots in the genre. Holland and Huggan, writing about contemporary travel writing, observe that "the genre as a whole has tended to define itself against tourism," that travel writers construct their authority partly by reaching places the tourist doesn't consider, often staying longer, and perceiving more (Holland and Huggan, 1998). In the Morocco context, this anti-tourism posture carries specific historical freight. For instance, Morocco has been a destination for Western tourism since at least the mid-twentieth century. The country was packaged often in response to the exotic expectations that earlier travel accounts helped generate as an accessible encounter with a picturesque and enigmatic Other. Aammari (2018), in a study of British colonial travel writing on Morocco, notes how the rhetoric of authentic versus superficial knowledge structures these texts from early in the colonial period. Additionally, writers have consistently positioned themselves as capable of the deeper understanding that shorter or less committed visitors could not achieve.

Paul Bowles is an interesting case in this corpus; having first visited Morocco in 1931 on Gertrude Stein's recommendation, Bowles settled permanently in Tangier in 1947 and remained there until his death in 1999, fifty-two years. In the opening essays of *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue (1957)* and across the paratextual materials associated with his travel writings, the sheer duration of this presence becomes the primary credential. Bowles does not argue for his right to write about Morocco as the accumulated decades he spent in Morocco serve that job. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "anti-conquest" is useful here, Pratt describes the narrative mode through which European bourgeois writers sought to legitimize their presence in colonized spaces by presenting themselves as simple observers diminishing the fact that they also were agents of power, people who happened to be there and looked carefully (Pratt,

1992). Bowles's half-century of residence functions as an extreme version of this strategy. This displays him as a man who lived there, and that is presented as something categorically different, less presumptuous and therefore more authoritative.

Another claim that Bowles utilizes to further legitimize his work is linguistic proximity. His working knowledge of Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and his sustained editorial relationships with Moroccan writers, including Mohammed Mrabet, Mohamed Choukri, and Larbi Layachi, are regularly cited in the paratextual apparatus around his work as evidence that his Morocco is not the Morocco of the tourist or the passing visitor. Yet the structure of these relationships is worth examining carefully. Bowles served as the transcriber, translator, and editor of Mrabet's and Choukri's oral narratives, which he then presented to Western literary audiences. The Moroccan writers authenticate his access, their presence confirms that he had genuine local relationships, while the published texts move under his editorial and curatorial authority. Youssefi (2024), in a detailed study of these collaborative dynamics, argues that while Bowles gave marginalised Moroccan voices a Western platform, the arrangement was also structured by significant asymmetries of power. As such, there were questions of authorship, representation, and editorial control that remained, throughout these collaborations, predominantly on Bowles's side. The Moroccan collaborators appear in the paratextual record as validators of Bowles's access and commitment; they do not acquire his authority. Clifford's argument in *The Predicament of Culture*, that ethnographic texts persistently position indigenous interlocutors as sources rather than as authors, applies with considerable precision here (Clifford, 1988).

Peter Mayne's *A Year in Marrakesh* (1953) makes the anti-tourism gesture explicit and organized. Mayne's opening pages establish, with careful deliberateness, that he did not come to Morocco as a tourist. We see that Mayne rented a room rather than staying in a hotel, lived in a Moroccan neighborhood rather than a European one, and structured his daily rhythms around his street rather than around an itinerary. The distinction Mayne constructs between the visitor who moves through Morocco and the writer who

dwells in it is one of the fundamental rhetorical binaries in the genre. The epistemological claims that Mayne is trying to lay ground for in his work are duration and rootedness as opposed to being merely biographical. The person who stayed long enough to learn the neighborhood is, by implication, the person qualified to explain it. El Aidi (2023), analyzing French literary representations of Morocco, observes that Western writers on the country consistently seek to distinguish their relationship to the material from that of "previous studies" using a Saidian binary framework, and that the claim of deeper, longer, more personal engagement is the central mechanism through which this distinction is made.

Suzanna Clarke's *A House in Fez* (2007) carries these patterns into contemporary expatriate writing with a self-consciousness absent from the earlier texts. Clarke and her partner Sandy purchase and restore a dilapidated riad in the Fez medina, and the narrative of physical restoration becomes the vehicle for a sustained claim of genuine belonging. The opening chapters frame Clarke as a learner, someone adapting to the medina's rhythms, building relationships with local craftsmen and neighbors whose expertise she explicitly honours, and not as a Western buyer extracting value from Moroccan property. The riad's restoration is presented as an earned presence, in other words, the claim being that living through the difficulty of this project in this neighborhood has produced a legitimate relationship with the place. Kuehn and Smethurst (2015), discussing self-presentation in contemporary travel and expatriate writing, note that the performance of integration and difficulty has become increasingly important to the genre's authority claims as more straightforwardly Orientalist self-positioning has become discredited. The authority Clarke constructs is more anxious, more provisional, and more alert to its own potential bad faith than the authority Wharton or Harris constructed, but it is authority nonetheless and Clarke's text exemplifies this shift.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's *A Street in Marrakech* (1975) introduces a further dimension by making access explicitly gendered. Fernea, an American woman accompanying her anthropologist husband to Morocco, discovers that her gender grants her entry into

domestic and feminine spaces that male Western writers cannot reach. The opening chapters frame this not merely as biographical circumstance but as a form of methodological privilege, a type of access specific to her position, irreplaceable by any other means. Lhoussain Simour, in a study of gendered narration in Morocco travel writing, notes that women travelers in the British and American tradition have persistently used their gendered access to domestic and private spaces as a marker of superior authenticity, the implicit argument being that the world behind the household threshold, invisible to male observers, is the more real and more revealing Morocco (Simour, 2020). Fernea's self-positioning in her opening chapters consciously exploits this logic, offering the reader a form of intimacy with Moroccan domestic life that is framed as unreachable through any other route.

Across all of these texts, Moroccan figures play a structurally consistent role. Initially, they appear, with notable regularity, at precisely the moments when the Western writer's authority most needs confirmation. They are the friends whose warmth proves acceptance, the craftsmen whose expertise proves authentic engagement, the neighbors whose hospitality proves community membership, the collaborators whose participation proves linguistic competence. The Moroccan presence in these texts is not the same as absence, Moroccan people speak, act, and shape the narrative. However, their function within the authorization logic of the opening chapters is confirmatory rather than authorial. Rddad and Aammari, in their edited collection Mirrors of Morocco, observe that Western travel texts on the country have consistently positioned Moroccan subjects as objects of representation while they could be agents in the production of knowledge about themselves. Moreover, the contemporary texts are more self-conscious about this asymmetry without fully escaping it (Rddad and Aammari, 2023). The self-awareness itself, the anxiety about representation, the acknowledgement of colonial legacies, the provisional framing of one's authority is, in these later texts, one more credential. The writer who knows that their position is complicated, and who names that complication in the opening pages, is staking a claim to the

most durable form of Western authority over Morocco, positioning the work on the authority of the honest, self-critical observer who has thought carefully about what it means to write the country at all, and has written it anyway.

The authorization strategies examined in this section operate primarily through proximity and presence. They act through the claim to have been in Morocco in ways that depth, duration, and intimacy can verify. On the other hand, Western writing on Morocco constructs authority through another set of moves that are, in a sense, the intensification of a similar logic that claims to have been present in dangerous, secret, or forbidden spaces that most Western observers, and virtually all Moroccan subjects, could not or would not enter. It is to these strategies, and to the authority manufactured through danger, secrecy, and the correction of previous writers, that the following section turns.

The Grammar of Access: Danger, Secrets, and the Hidden Morocco

The proximity credentials analyzed in the preceding section such as long residence, linguistic knowledge, local friendship, represent the foundational layer of Western authorization in writing about Morocco. They establish the writer's right to be in the country, to speak its languages, to be known by its people. A significant proportion of Western books on Morocco, however, build their authority through a second, more intense set of claims that revolve around the assertion that the writer has *penetrated* the country. The final having gone where others could not go, witnessed what others could not see, and knew what the ordinary observer, tourist, or predecessor was incapable of knowing. These claims involve danger, secrecy, forbidden access, and the recovery of hidden or suppressed knowledge. They are, in rhetorical terms, the escalation of the same problem that the first section identified. The logic behind the second part of this paper is simply that if proximity certifies the right to speak about Morocco, then access to its hidden interior certifies a

higher order of authority. The two subsections that follow examine this escalation across the corpus. The first focuses on the authorization of danger, the way that physical risk, cultural hostility, and proximity to the forbidden are converted into markers of superior knowledge. The second examines a closely related strategy, that is the correction of previous Western writers, through which the current text constructs itself as setting the record straight against a field of inadequate predecessors.

Risk and Revelation: The Authorization of Danger

Embedded in the long tradition of Orientalist discourse, as Said argued in *Orientalism* (1978), is a persistent fantasy of the East as a space that must be *penetrated* in order to be made available to the Western eye. It is a space of concealment, resistance, and secret interior life that yields its meaning only to those willing to go beyond the surface (Said, 1978). This is not simply a metaphor: in the prefaces and opening chapters of Western books about Morocco, it takes concrete textual form. Morocco is regularly figured, across different periods and genres, as a place with a hidden interior; a city within the city, a room behind the room, a world behind the tourist facade, a place that requires courage, persistence, or unusual credentials to enter. The authority manufactured through this kind of access is qualitatively different from the authority of long residence or local friendship. It is the authority of the discoverer, of the person who went where it was impossible to go. Jouay, in her *Narratives of simplicity and danger* (2024), identifies this as a structural feature of the genre. He argues that Western writers construct Morocco as a space of "simplicity and danger" that is simultaneously attractive and threatening, and the writer who navigates this danger successfully emerges from it authorized to speak about the country in ways that safety-seeking tourists cannot.

Walter Burton Harris's account of his entry into Chefchaouen, published in *The Land of an African Sultan* (1889), is perhaps the earliest and most textually explicit instance of this authorization strategy in the Morocco corpus. Harris explains that what drew him

to attempt the journey was "the very fact that there existed within thirty hours' ride of Tangier a city in which it was considered an utter impossibility for a Christian to enter" (Harris, 1889). What is striking about this formulation is not the fact of the danger, as much as the structure of the motivation which makes the impossibility itself the attraction. Harris is not drawn to Chefchaouen despite the prohibition; he is drawn precisely because of it. He gives the image that the inaccessibility of the city is what makes penetrating it valuable and if the city was simply open, his account of it would carry no special authority. This logic, wherein what the writer cannot easily enter becomes what most deserves to be entered, and wherein entering it proves a form of superiority, runs through a remarkably stable tradition of Western writing about Morocco. Rddad (2025) notes how the construction of Morocco as a space with forbidden or hidden dimensions is inseparable from the authorization of the Western writer who claims to have breached those dimensions. Benaissi (2023) further observes that colonial writing about Morocco consistently targeted institutions of power like the royal court, the tribal stronghold, the walled city, as sites of mystified access whose penetration served to legitimize the writer's broader claims.

Gavin Maxwell's *Lords of the Atlas* (1966) extends this authorization logic from the individual journey to historical narrative as he positions his book in its opening pages as a recovery of knowledge that has been suppressed or inaccessible to previous historians. The story of the Glaoua dynasty, which Maxwell describes with remarkable freedom to construct its own generic frame, part history, part adventure, part romance, is presented as a story that could only be told by someone who had gained access to surviving participants, secret documents, as well as the testimony of those who were present at events that official histories had either ignored or deliberately obscured. The authorization in Maxwell's work is archival as well as biographical; he does not merely claim to have been to Morocco, he also contends to have recovered knowledge from within it that would otherwise have been lost. Rddad and Aammari (2023) note that the rhetoric of recovered or uniquely accessed

knowledge is one of the genre's most durable conventions. The writer who knows what no one else knows occupies the highest position in the Western Morocco canon's implicit hierarchy of authority.

The contemporary version of this danger credential has become, in the most recent generation of expatriate writing, more domestic in scale but structurally identical in logic. Tahir Shah's *The Caliph's House* (2006) does not claim access to a forbidden city or a secret history; instead, it claims access to a dangerous domestic world of jinns, neighbourhood hostility, and building-site mishaps that surrounds the renovation of Dar Khalifa in Casablanca. Shah's opening chapters establish that the house is a ruin that hosts jinn on the edge of a shantytown, in a neighbourhood that is initially hostile to his presence, surrounded by a culture whose informal structures he must learn to navigate without clear guidance. The persistence through difficulty and the willingness to stay in the dangerous, uncomfortable situation rather than retreating to more familiar or hospitable territory, is presented as the evidence that his account is worth reading. Jouay (2024), whose analysis focuses precisely on Shah's Morocco writing, argues that his texts reflect "a common Western fascination with Morocco because it offers a retreat" from Western modernity, and that his "obsession with the hazards and unpredictability of Morocco" structures his claim to authentic immersion. The jinn narrative that runs through the book's opening sections functions as a specific authorization device by taking seriously a supernatural belief system that a rationalist Westerner might be expected to dismiss, Shah demonstrates a proximity to Moroccan popular culture that constitutes a form of insider credential.

What these texts share is a rhetorical structure closely related to what Pratt identifies in the European tradition of imperial travel writing as the "monarch of all I survey" scene. In this trope, the traveller claims authority over it through an elevated position of vision, turning landscape into an object of description, mastery, and potential possession (Pratt, 1992). Lindsay (2019), analyzing this trope in its contemporary applications, notes that it persists in modern travel writing in more subtle forms, where the spectacle of

the forbidding or the secret takes the place of the dramatic landscape. In the Morocco corpus, the forbidden city, the concealed dynasty, or the jinn-haunted house serve the function of being spaces that the writer has commanded. They're basically areas that the writer endured and survived them well enough to write about them. In this sense, danger becomes an element that accompanies and legitimizes truth. The knowledge produced by this ordeal is implicitly more reliable than knowledge produced by easier means.

Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence is useful here for understanding the psychic structure of these authorization narratives (Bhabha, 1994). The forbidden space exercises its authority over the Western writer through a doubled logic. Initially, it is fascinating precisely because it excludes, and its exclusion, once overcome, generates a particularly potent form of credential. This ambivalence between attraction and fear, between the desire for entry and the consciousness that entry is transgressive; it is visible in the texture of many of these opening chapters. Harris's framing of his Chefchaouen entry as a mission into impossibility, Maxwell's framing of the Glaoua story as suppressed and dangerous knowledge, Shah's framing of his Casablanca house as a site of spiritual hostility all are expressions of an authorization logic in which traversing to the that ambivalent and exotic space is necessary.

Correcting the Record: Positioning Against Previous Writers

The authorization strategies analyzed so far in the likes of proximity, danger, and secret access operate primarily by establishing what the writer *has done* in relation to Morocco. There is, however, a second and equally revealing strategy that operates relationally, by establishing what the writer *knows* in relation to previous Western accounts of the country. This strategy, which appears in prefaces, introductions, and opening chapters with striking regularity, might be called corrective authority. The latter stands for the construction of a field of error, inadequacy, or

superficiality in earlier Western writing about Morocco, against which the current text positions itself as more reliable, more thorough, or more honest. For Genette, the preface is one of the privileged paratextual sites through which a text manages its own reception. It guides the reader's approach to the work, often by explaining its purpose, situating it in relation to previous writing, and shaping the terms under which it should be read (Genette, 1997). In Western books on Morocco, the preface or introduction positions the current text as *better* than what preceded it.

This corrective gesture is central to Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* (1920) from the opening of the preface. Her claim that "Morocco still lacks a guide-book" does not simply identify a bibliographical absence. It constructs a space of representational insufficiency, suggesting that Morocco has not yet been made properly legible for the reader Wharton imagines. Her stated wish to take "a first step toward remedying that deficiency" positions the text as an intervention into an incomplete field of knowledge, and places Wharton herself in the role of the writer who arrives to correct and authorize that knowledge (Wharton, 1920, Preface). In contrast, it is also a dismissal of all previous Western writing on Morocco as insufficient for the purpose of genuine orientation. Whatever has been written before was not a proper guide-book; whatever tourists and travelers have thought they knew, was deficient and unorganized, in comparison to what Wharton will now provide. The corrective gesture does not name the predecessors who are being surpassed, that would require a more explicit argument, but their inadequacy is implied in the framing of the text's necessity. Rddad (2025) notes that Wharton's account is caught between different political and national frameworks in ways that complicate its representational authority, but the paratextual move of positioning the text as filling a gap is, regardless of those complications, a straightforward authorization strategy in which she is the writer who arrived when no one had arrived properly before.

Walter Burton Harris makes the corrective gesture more explicit in his work *Morocco That Was* (1921) that as the only Western observer whose proximity and trust granted him access to

truth that different travelers like journalists, diplomats, and occasional visitors could not obtain. His long presence in Morocco is framed as methodological superiority; Haris was the traveler or correspondent who spent six months in Tangier and filed dispatches could not know what Harris knew, because knowledge of Morocco required the kind of accumulated relational trust that only decades could build. The implicit correction in this case is of a traveler type, the short-stay observer, the official diplomat, the correspondent who never left the European quarter. Against these figures, Harris constructs himself as the indispensable witness. Aammari (2018) argues how such texts deploy "ethnocentric" interpretive frameworks under the cover of superior access. The point is that the claim to know better than anyone else is inseparable from the authority structure through which that claim is made.

Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (2007 [1977]) offers the most epistemologically sophisticated version of this corrective move in the corpus. Rabinow's correction is not of journalists or guidebook writers but of the dominant tradition of positivist anthropology, a mode of fieldwork that presented its findings and methodology as neutral and its representations of Moroccan life as unmediated by the researcher's own position and assumptions. By writing a reflexive account that foregrounds exactly what positivist anthropology concealed, the relationships, power dynamics, confusions, and contingencies of fieldwork, Rabinow implicitly corrects the entire discipline's claim to authority over Moroccan culture. The earlier anthropologists against whom Rabinow implicitly writes are not named as individual errors to be corrected. Rather, they appear as a methodological background, the practitioners of a form of ethnography that too easily separated cultural knowledge from the conditions of its production. Rabinow's text does not simply reject ethnographic authority, but relocates it in reflexive disclosure, in the careful exposure of the fieldworker's limits, misunderstandings, dependencies, and situated encounters. Clifford's account of ethnographic authority helps clarify this shift. Writing in the same critical moment, and treating Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* as one of the important

examples of a newer fieldwork account, Clifford shows that reflexive ethnography does not abolish authority so much as recast it through different textual strategies (Clifford, 1983). In this sense, to confess the limits of one's knowledge becomes a way of claiming a more disciplined form of knowledge. The corrective gesture reaches its most self-conscious form when it appears not as mastery, but as the refusal to claim mastery too easily.

For Paul Bowles, the corrective authority is embedded in biographical contrast. His fifty-two years in Tangier are implicitly positioned against the shorter visits of every other Western writer who has written about Morocco, and the opening essays of *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue* establish this contrast without the need to name the writers being surpassed. The logic his work takes is comparative; it seems that he is claiming that he knows what other travelers don't, because they simply did not spend enough time as he did. Conversely, there is a further dimension to Bowles's corrective stance that is worth noting, which is that his authority is also a correction of the Western reading public's expectations about what Morocco is. The Morocco that tourists visit, the Morocco packaged for European and American consumption, is not, in Bowles's framing, the real country. The real Morocco is accessible only through the kind of sustained, linguistically grounded, relationally dense immersion that Bowles has achieved. Forsdick, Kinsley, and Walchester (2019), discussing the genre conventions of travel writing in their critical glossary, observe that the claim to access a "real" version of a place that is distinct from the version available to tourists is one of the genre's most enduring rhetorical conventions. It is also, in the Morocco corpus, one of the primary mechanisms through which corrective authority is established.

What is most revealing about the corrective gesture across these texts is what it leaves outside the field of correction. Western writers in the Morocco corpus often position themselves against earlier Western mediators of Moroccan knowledge such as journalists, diplomats, tourists, guidebook writers, colonial observers, or older ethnographic voices. They present their own accounts as more accurate, more honest, more intimate, or more

complete than those that preceded them. Yet this corrective movement rarely takes Moroccan accounts of Morocco as its primary interlocutor. The authority being revised remains largely Western, and the debate over Morocco's representation is therefore staged less as a dialogue with Moroccan self-knowledge than as an internal correction within Western discourse.The Moroccan scholarly tradition, the accounts of Moroccan historians and intellectuals, the perspectives of Moroccan people who know their own country in ways that no Western writer can fully replicate appear as validating presences in the corpus, as we noted in the first section, but not as corrective ones.

El Aidi (2023), examining how French literary representations of Morocco have tended to construct a "singular lens" even when appearing to offer pluralized perspectives, notes the structural difficulty of Western accounts that claim superior knowledge while remaining blind to the alternative archive that Moroccan intellectual production provides. Es Siddiki and El Kirat El Allame (2024), reading Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh* (1954) as a case study in linguistic imperialism and colonial discourse, argue that the text "marginalizes the Other's indigenous languages" while privileging colonial languages. Their analysis is useful here because Canetti's work presents itself as an attentive act of listening, yet the voices it gathers remain filtered through a Western interpretive and linguistic frame. In this sense, the corrective authority of such texts is not only a matter of setting the record straight about Morocco. It is also a matter of deciding which voices are allowed to count as knowledge, and under what conditions Moroccan discourse becomes legible to the Western reader.

The cumulative picture that emerges from both subsections is that the grammar of access in Western writing about Morocco is not incidental, but structural and generic. Whether the writer claims danger, secrecy, privileged access, or corrective truth, the textual logic tends to follow the same pattern: the knowledge offered by the book is presented as having been produced under conditions that most Western observers could not easily reproduce, and therefore as carrying a credibility unavailable to less authorized accounts. Across

the corpus examined here, this grammar proves strikingly durable: from Harris's 1889 account of his 1887 entry into Sheshouan, through Wharton's colonial-military access in 1920 and Maxwell's reconstruction of the Glaoua dynasty's rise and fall in 1966, to Shah's persistence in a jinn-haunted Casablanca house in 2006. It appears in colonial memoir, literary nonfiction, reflexive anthropology, and contemporary expatriate writing. What changes from one period to another is the idiom that serves the claim of authority, and the degree of self-consciousness with which that claim is made.

Conclusion

Taken together, the two main sections of this paper have traced the authorization of Western writing about Morocco across two related but distinct rhetorical registers. The first showed how the threshold zones of the book, the preface, the dedication, and the opening chapter serve as spaces where credentials are presented and authority is established before the representational work begins. The second section showed how that authority is engraved through claims of danger, secrecy, and corrective superiority that position the writer at the summit of an implicit hierarchy of knowledge about Morocco. Most importantly, what both sections have revealed is that the authority to represent Morocco is constructed through a set of recognizable and analyzable textual rituals that have their own grammar, their own conventions, and their own historical durability. These findings matter for cultural studies, postcolonial scholarship, and the study of Morocco's place in Western textual production because they shift attention from representation alone to the prior question of authorization like who is allowed to speak, about whom, and on what terms.

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Maria Cristina Nisco
Annalisa Raffone

Negotiating Borders in the Post-Brexit UK: A CADS Analysis of British Tabloids' Readers' Comments on Facebook[1]

Migration and public concern in the post-Brexit UK

In January 2025, the Migration Observatory published the briefing *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern* (Richards et al., 2025), offering an overview of British attitudes toward migration based on representative polls and surveys conducted by professional polling firms and academic organisations. The briefing confirmed that opposition to immigration in the UK is far from new. Concerns about 'New Commonwealth' immigration prompted the British Election Study (BES) to begin monitoring public attitudes toward immigration as early as 1964. At that time, and for several decades thereafter, a large majority of

1 - Although the article was conceived as a collaborative effort, Maria Cristina Nisco authored the following sections; 'Migration and public concern in the post-Brexit UK', 'Building the UK-Migration Corpus', and 'Findings and Discussion: 'Brexit'; Annalisa Raffone authored the following sections: 'Methodology', 'Findings and discussion: 'Border(s)', and 'Conclusion'.
By analysing how migration is framed and negotiated in the comment sections of British tabloids, this chapter supports the FOM@Play project's aim of understanding contemporary narratives around freedom of movement and the public attitudes that shape, challenge, or constrain it.

respondents believed that there were too many immigrants in Britain. BES data show particularly high levels of opposition in 1964, 1966, and 1979, when 85-86% of respondents endorsed this view. Although this proportion declined to 71% in 2015, 66% in 2017, and 52% by the 2019 general election, immigration has remained a salient and divisive public issue.

In the year preceding the Brexit referendum, between June 2015 and June 2016, immigration was repeatedly identified as the most important issue facing the country, peaking at 56% in September 2015. Its salience declined after the referendum, falling below 20% by mid-2018 and 2019. However, from the second half of 2022, immigration began to regain prominence, reaching 38% in October 2024 and becoming once again a major public concern for the first time since 2016. During the same period, migration-related issues also returned to the centre of news coverage and political debate. Brexit represented a major divide in British society, and immigration appeared central to the opposing visions of the UK's future held by 'leave' and 'remain' voters.

Starting from this premise, the present study investigates perceptions and attitudes toward migration in the UK a decade after the Brexit referendum. Migration was one of the key factors shaping the Brexit debate, alongside sovereignty, economy, demographic and cultural change, nationalism, and populism. The 2016 referendum, which resulted in a narrow majority in favour of leaving the European Union, initiated the process that formally ended the UK's EU membership on 31 January 2020. The close result revealed deep political, cultural, and social divisions, making Brexit one of the most consequential political events in recent British history.

Against this background, monitoring public perceptions of migration is deemed particularly important, since it allows for the examination of public beliefs, misconceptions, and possible gaps between perception and reality. Indeed, the main research question addressed in this study concerns the current status of migration- and borders-related narratives in the UK ten years after the Brexit referendum. This period offers a valuable temporal perspective from

which to assess whether expected shifts in attitudes towards migration and borders have materialised and how public opinion has responded to major political events. While migration remains one of the most polarising issues in British political and social life, intersecting with economics, culture, national identity, security, governance, border policies, and public expectations (Benson et al., 2022), social media have further intensified the dynamics of opinion formation by amplifying polarisation and facilitating the circulation of misinformation.

This study focuses on the Facebook profiles of three major British tabloid newspapers: the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mirror* (Ofcom, 2024), and it specifically analyses readers' comments and replies to Facebook posts concerning migration.[2] Despite the ideological bias often associated with tabloid reporting, tabloids and their social media pages were considered highly relevant objects of study for a number of reasons. They have historically played a significant role in shaping public attitudes toward migration, partly because of their large readerships and their overlap with key electoral demographics (Johansson, 2025), which makes them crucial actors in the process of opinion formation. Their cultural and political significance also lies in the "particularly rich vistas they offer into British politics, society and culture" (Bingham & Conboy, 2015, p. 20). As tabloid coverage was central to the mobilisation of anti-immigration sentiment during the Brexit referendum (Simpson & Startin, 2023), analysing readers' reactions in the post-Brexit period can shed light on whether earlier narratives have persisted, changed, or declined.

Social media have transformed the production, circulation, and consumption of news, creating a more immediate and participatory media environment (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). Platforms such as Facebook allow users not only to access news but also to react to it through comments, likes, and shares, thereby

2 - As is well-known, the above-mentioned tabloid newspapers feature opposing political affiliations: the former two are the most right-wing papers, while the latter has a left-wing orientation (Smith, 2017).

influencing visibility, engagement, and editorial strategies (Napoli, 2019; Schulz et al., 2022). For tabloid newspapers, a strong social media presence is therefore essential to maintain relevance, expand readership, increase visibility, and compete in the digital news market (Chadwick et al., 2018).

Facebook is especially significant, in this respect, because it offers tabloids an interactive space in which readers can actively participate in news circulation and discussion. Through likes, shares, comments, groups, and live streams, Facebook transforms news consumption into a social and affective experience, strengthening the emotional appeal typical of tabloid journalism. At the same time, algorithmic prioritisation can amplify engagement and reinforce the visibility of polarising content (Chadwick et al., 2018). By enabling readers to express their views publicly and react to migration-related news in real time, Facebook comment sections provide a valuable site for examining how migration is linguistically and discursively constructed in post-Brexit Britain (He, 2023; Chmielewska-Szlajfer, 2024).

Research design and frameworks

Building the *UK-Migration* Corpus

To investigate Facebook comment sections associated with the three selected British tabloids, a corpus of readers' comments on migration-related posts was compiled. The resulting *UK-Migration Corpus* consists of 517,679 words and 574,734 tokens, collected over the five months following the publication of the Migration Observatory briefing, from 25 January to 25 June 2025. This timeframe was selected in accordance with the principles of newsworthiness and salience (Bednarek & Caple, 2017), in order to capture the period in which migration-related coverage was most prominent and concentrated. Since newsworthiness is closely tied to

timeliness, impact, and perceived significance, media attention typically intensifies around specific moments in the news cycle; similarly, the salience of a topic tends to peak during key phases of public debate. Restricting data collection to this interval therefore allowed the corpus to reflect the framing and intensity of migration discourse at its height, while avoiding the inclusion of residual or marginal references.

Facebook comments are particularly valuable for academic research because they constitute a rich source of spontaneous public discourse and contribute to processes of meaning-making in digital environments (Matthes, 2012). As user-generated responses, they reveal how audiences interpret, negotiate, and react to news content in real time. They also function as engagement cues, making it possible to identify patterns of agreement, dissent, irony, and emotional response. In this sense, comments are useful for examining audience framing and interpretive communities, as readers actively participate in the construction of meaning and contribute to the dialogic framing of news (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Winter et al., 2015). Moreover, comments may both reflect and shape public cognition and opinion, as they express values, attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies surrounding migration and migrants. They are therefore especially relevant for the analysis of polarisation, public narratives, emotional salience, and affective framing at the intersection of discourse and social interaction (Ziegele et al., 2017).

Methodology

This study draws on a combined approach that integrates Corpus Linguistics (CL) (Baker et al., 2008; Baker, 2023) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Van Dijk, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). This approach is grounded in Baker et al.'s (2008, pp. 277-279) influential work on the value of a methodological synergy between computational and qualitative analyses (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). While CL enables the researcher to focus on

linguistic and repetitive patterns, CDA allows for the contextual analysis of how language is used to produce and reproduce power dynamics in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Therefore, this paper adopts a Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CADS) approach (Partington et al., 2013), with the aim of uncovering discourse(s) that otherwise might remain concealed (Baker & McEnery, 2005). The CADS methodology was chosen for several reasons (Baker, 2023). First, to reduce researchers' bias, the selection criteria were assisted by the chosen corpus analysis software, Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2004, 2014). Secondly, numerous examples per lemma were collected to observe what Baker (2023) calls the 'cumulative effect' of discourse construction, in which the repetition of specific evaluative patterns enables the identification of recurrent shared meanings within the specific discourse community of Facebook commenters on the chosen tabloids' social media posts. Additionally, switching from quantitative to qualitative measures enabled triangulation, yielding more robust interpretations and explanations in the analysis.

Following Nisco and Raffone's (in press) work on the construction and representation of migration in general and migrants in particular in the *UK-Migration Corpus* and with the objective of contributing to the studies on the freedom of movement in and outside the EU, this paper specifically focuses on the discourses surrounding the interconnected notions of 'Brexit' and 'Borders'. These lemmas were qualitatively elicited as keywords since, despite indicating the former, an act of disruption from a European past, and the latter, a geophysical limitation on a territory, they carry semantic and pragmatic weight, being connected to ideologies and mental models whose pervasiveness can be reflected in societal practices and structures.

As previously highlighted, the quantitative part of the analysis was conducted through the text analysis software Sketch Engine. Through its Word Sketch tool, which automatically groups collocates according to their grammatical relationships, the elicited keywords were analysed from a collocational viewpoint. Collocates – words which frequently co-occur – of the two lemmas were retrieved

through collocational statistics to identify recurring discourse constructions around them. Through collocational analysis, the discourse prosody (Stubbs, 2001) of such terminology, highlighting readers' stance on the relationship between migration, Brexit, and borders, was analysed and discussed. Concordance analysis[3] was performed to identify context patterns, and the findings were refined using the CDA framework. In particular, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, along with his research on migration (2011, 2014, 2016, 2017), was considered for the analysis as it suggests that a corpus-assisted method for examining discourse around migration can be valuable, especially for studying actors and action descriptions. It helps to highlight how racist ideologies are propagated and how individuals of different nationalities are portrayed or mentioned, including elements such as group affiliations, polarisation (Us vs. Them), attitudes, and behaviours of different countries. The socio-cognitive approach posits that discourse, cognition, and society are closely connected, with shared ideologies forming social cognition and being reproduced through discourse among group members. Additionally, social media significantly influences the spread of prejudice and harmful stereotypes (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016), particularly through user-generated comments, which play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and opinions. In line with Baker and McGlashan (2020) as well as KhosraviNik (2017, 2023), the analysis of the comments was also conducted by considering the significance of the dimension of readers' digital engagement with news. Analysing online discourse with a social media socio-cognitive approach enabled the decoding of discourse structures that expose and uphold prejudiced attitudes and perspectives underlying mental models and socially shared ideologies behind current discussions about migration, Brexit, and borders in the post-Brexit UK (KhosraviNik, 2010; Van Dijk, 2017; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015).

3 - All the excerpts in the paper were not edited for transparency purposes.

Findings and discussion

'Brexit'

The lemma '*brexit*' was selected for analysis because it functions as a key discursive node in post-referendum debates on migration. It is not treated merely as the name of a political event, but as an ideological signifier through which readers interpret the current state of migration governance in the UK, while retrospectively negotiating the meaning of borders, sovereignty, and political responsibility. Since immigration was central to the referendum campaign and closely associated with promises of sovereignty, border control, and the recovery of national autonomy, references to *Brexit* in Facebook comments provide insight into how these promises are currently evaluated. The lemma '*brexit*' appears, therefore, analytically relevant because it links contemporary migration discourse to the symbolic and affective legacy of the 2016 referendum; as such, it is a crucial interpretive resource through which readers make sense of migration in post-Brexit Britain.

Within the *UK-Migration Corpus*, quantitative investigation allowed the identification of a relevant number of occurrences of the lemma 'brexit', with some additional occurrences of the wider Brexit-related lexical family, including evaluative and derisive variants such as *brexshitter(s)*, *brexiteer*, *brexitear(s)*, *Brexpress*, *brexiiiiiit*, *brexhit*, *#Brexitdisaster*, and *brexshit*. This suggests that *Brexit* is not merely used as a neutral chronological marker referring to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, but rather as an ideologically saturated term around which tabloid readers organise narratives of blame, betrayal, and national decline.

Following a CADS approach, quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed that one of the most recurrent patterns frames Brexit as an unfulfilled promise of border control. In fact, Brexit is mentioned as a political project that was supposed to restore national sovereignty and reduce immigration, but which was allegedly

obstructed, diluted, or never properly 'delivered' by a variety of actors, among them political élites, the Home Office, the Conservatives, Labour, or the EU itself. Indeed, a collocational analysis allowed the identification of some of the most frequent collocational patterns occurring with the lemma under investigation, including: 'blame/blamed', 'EU', 'betrayal/betrayed/duped/traitor(s)', 'illegal(s)', 'Tories/Conservatives', 'stop/stopped'. Instances retrieved from the concordances and exemplified below, illustrate how commenters reinterpret Brexit as an unfinished bordering project which betrayed their expectations.

1. Brexit was a huge betrayal of the British people
2. *Brexit was meant to get us out the EU to stop the illegal problem*
3. *the Brexit was to control our borders, but more invaders came in after*
4. *Brexit was never properly delivered*
5. *Tories not giving me the Brexit I was told I was getting*
6. *TRAITORS, Brexit is making us poorer, you numpty!*
7. *Brexit is to blame*
8. *WE ARE STILL WAITING FOR BREXIT TO HAPPEN!*

Indeed, the language of betrayal, delivery, and implementation, appears particularly significant: Brexit is treated less as a completed constitutional event than as a promise whose legitimacy depends on its capacity to produce visible territorial control. In this respect, *Brexit* becomes a retrospective benchmark against which subsequent governments are judged and found wanting.

A second, competing pattern construes Brexit itself as a cause of the contemporary border crisis, especially in relation to the loss of return mechanisms and cooperation with EU Member States, as

collocation analysis revealed with the following lexical terms co-occurring with 'brexit': 'France/French', 'Europe/European(s)', 'return/returning/returned/returns', 'ECHR', 'agreement'. These collocates support the idea that Brexit clusters with a semantic field involving the EU, France, and return policies and agreements. Comments explicitly link Brexit to the difficulty of returning asylum seekers or irregular migrants to France or to the EU more generally, as shown by examples 9-16 below.

9. *you lost the right to send them back with your idiotic Brexit vote*
10. *By leaving the EU with Brexit, we had no more return agreement*
11. *hasn't Brexit made it harder to return people? They've already fooled you once*
12. *your mate Farage and his Brexit fiasco stops us returning them to France*
13. confirmed that Brexit made immigration even worse
14. Bloody idiots, and who was the cause of EUROUPE being invaded, Brexit as well
15. Should of left the ECHR the moment brexit happened, but we got a half baked brexit because the government were too weak
16. We shouldn't be in anything to do with Europe if we had had a proper Brexit [...]

These comments explicitly challenge the pro-Brexit promise of 'taking back control' by suggesting that withdrawal from the EU weakened, rather than strengthened, the UK's practical capacity to manage its borders. In this context, Brexit is framed as a self-inflicted policy failure: rather than enabling sovereign control, it is

said to have removed institutional arrangements that previously facilitated cross-border cooperation. This interpretation is particularly visible in comments that refer to return agreements, France, and boat crossings, which position the UK border as relational rather than purely national. In fact, within the *UK-Migration Corpus*, this concept seems particularly relevant because it complicates the nationalist fantasy of unilateral border control. The border is not imagined only as a line that the UK can close at will, but especially as a site of international dependency, negotiation, and failed cooperation. The ECHR seems to belong to a broader but adjacent legal-constraint frame in which Brexit is represented as incomplete because it allegedly failed to remove human-rights-based obstacles to deportation.

A third pattern seeks to deflect responsibility away from Brexit by attributing the perceived migration crisis to a range of alternative actors, institutions, and political decisions. This counter-frame is supported by the collocational profile of the lemma 'brexit', which includes frequent references to the 'EU', the 'Tories/ Conservatives', 'France/French', 'Tony Blair/Blair', and the 'ECHR'. The presence of such terms should not be interpreted as automatically belonging to a single semantic pattern, since many of these collocates also appear in competing frames. However, qualitative investigation of the concordance lines shows that they are often mobilised in comments where Brexit is defended as either irrelevant to the current situation or as a project whose aims were sabotaged, as emerging in the instances 17-25 below. In this frame, commenters reject the causal connection between Brexit and the perceived failure of border control, redirecting blame towards other agents or institutions. The EU and the ECHR are represented as external constraints on national sovereignty; France is invoked as a failed or unwilling partner in stopping Channel crossings; the Conservatives and Labour are accused of not using the powers allegedly restored by Brexit; and Tony Blair is positioned as the historical origin of a more permissive immigration regime. What can be inferred is that the problem is not Brexit itself, but the fact that it was never enacted in its authentic or intended form.

17. *EU and ECHR are to blame not Brexit*
18. *It is nothing to do with Brexit. It is not our problem if the French don't like us just because we left the EU*
19. *ECHR is contrary to International Law so why are we still tied to this post Brexit ? Disgraceful*
20. *Brexit restored immigration powers to Westminster. Con now lab failed to use those powers.*
21. *There was already a migrant crisis even before Brexit so how can Brexit be to blame?*
22. *it was Tony Blair who opened the flood gates to immigration & prior to Brexit*
23. *also the elites for not allowing a proper brexit that the British people wanted to be implemented.*
24. *The one thing we should have done at Brexit was to exit the archaic ECHR and protect our borders. We were duped. EU is to blame not Brexit nonsense*
25. *unfortunately tories did not do what brexit was supposed to do.*

These comments show that *Brexit* is frequently embedded in a struggle over causality: tabloid readers do not simply disagree about migration, but rather about who or what should be held responsible for the failure of border control. In this respect, Brexit becomes a defensive identity marker, in the sense that it is mobilised to protect the symbolic legitimacy of the Leave vote and of the political community associated with it. When migration or border-control failures are linked to Brexit, some Facebook users respond by rejecting the causal connection and relocating responsibility onto actors such as the EU, the ECHR, France, Labour, the Conservatives, Westminster, Whitehall, or some liberal élites. Such a pattern is particularly significant because it separates an idealised version of *Brexit* from its actual political implementation. The former is associated with sovereignty, border control and democratic self-

determination; the latter is associated with compromise, betrayal, weakness or sabotage. Defending Brexit therefore also entails defending the self-image of Leave voters as rational democratic subjects whose political choice was legitimate but whose aims were later frustrated by external or internal obstruction. Conversely, criticism of Brexit is often interpreted as an attack on Leave voters or on the democratic legitimacy of the referendum. The contrast between a 'proper Brexit' and an allegedly compromised or incomplete version thus allows commenters to preserve the promise of sovereignty while explaining away its perceived failure in practice.

These patterns indicate that *Brexit* clusters around a dense argumentative network involving electoral legitimacy, border sovereignty, migration management, and party-political blame.[4] *Brexit* functions as a discursive hinge between past political promises and present anxieties about migration. It allows tabloid readers to connect the 2016 referendum to contemporary debates over small boats, asylum, the ECHR, France, Labour, the Conservatives, Farage, and the alleged loss of national control. The Facebook comment sections of the British tabloid newspapers under investigation show that Brexit is not merely mentioned as a political event; it is constantly reactivated as a symbolic resource through which commenters construct borders as failed, betrayed, sabotaged, reclaimed, or impossible to control. The term indexes struggles over who belongs, who should be excluded, who has the right to decide, and who is blamed when the border is perceived as porous. What emerges from the *UK-Migration Corpus* is that post-Brexit border narratives are not simply about migration policy, but about the contested meaning of sovereignty itself. In this sense, comments reveal how social media users transform Brexit into an everyday explanatory frame for narrating national decline, political betrayal, and the perceived erosion of the boundary between Britain and its external others.

4 - It is worth noting that even the repeated phrase '*Brexit is working*' appearing in comments such as '*UK is open for illegal migration Brexit is working'*, rather than celebrating Brexit, shows an explicitly sarcastic value: it uses irony to expose what readers see as a contradiction between the promise of border control and the perceived reality of continued or intensified migration.

'Border(s)'

As research (Lewicki, 2024) highlights, the post-Brexit UK has been characterised by a "re-focus on the nation and return to ethnocentrism, isolationism and the closure of borders", thus making immigration one of the key topics to gain analytical attention.

Following the CADS approach, the lemma 'border' was examined closely using the quantitative and qualitative methods presented above. It is also worth noting that this term is n. 67 in the first 100 content words of the corpus word list, meaning it has resonance across the dataset. Therefore, considering the tone of the comments and the polarisation signalled by the speakers between 'the Brits' (native English people having the right to live in the UK) and 'them' (migrants/immigrants, invaders of their borders), the lemma 'border' was subjected to collocational and concordance analyses.

The most common modifiers of 'border(s)' are 'open' and 'sea', which are closely linked to UK borders. As the concordance analysis suggests, opening borders is viewed as harmful to the country due to the influx of migrants, with the EU blamed for favouring the 'freedom of movement', while British sea borders should be safeguarded against such arrivals:

1. If you have open borders you get the people you don't want.
2. The EU wanted open borders We all know the EU and their echr are to blame. Also the elites for not allowing a proper brexit that the British people wanted to be implemented.
3. I only hope the penny drops we don't want them, open borders is a failed experiment full stop.
4. Get the army out on the seas and protect our sea border we have border security for air ports why not our seas deport all illegal immigrants

5. Forget attacking business models or gangs… just turn the boats back, set up some of kind sea border if need be and deport all those who are here illegally….simple!

Article 67 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU) establishes the EU as an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ). This aligns with the EU's mission to provide citizens with freedom of movement within internal borders, harmonise tourism and markets, ensure people's rights, and deliver benefits to EU members (Klugman, 2018), while simultaneously establishing appropriate measures for internal border control, immigration, and the prevention of crime (EUR-Lex, 2024). As it is outside the EU, the UK is not part of this area. While in the comments, people blame open borders for enabling unwanted arrivals (1), they also criticise the EU (2) for promoting freedom of movement, which they view as a risk to the UK's stability even after Brexit. Moreover, the government, collectively referred to as 'the elites', is accused of failing to carry out a "proper Brexit" as per the expectations of "the British". The user creates a cohesive national identity for the British population based on shared beliefs and needs, while implicitly assigning a negative identity to immigrants, perceived as invaders. Whereas the juxtaposition between 'them' and 'us' in the context of immigration is typical of dominant and subordinate groups (Van Dijk 1998, 2011), in this instance (2), the polarisation expressed by the speaker primarily concerns institutional power and the people from Britain who, according to the user, had all agreed to require the coordination and management of Brexit to avoid immigration. The use of the discursive strategies of generalisation and collectivisation (*a proper Brexit that the British people wanted to be implemented*, 2) in discourse has been recognised as a means of the self-positive and other-negative presentation of 'actor descriptors' (Van Dijk, 2006, 2011, 2017). Here, the expression 'the British' serves as an ideological tool to construct a positive collective identity for those who sought a Brexit that would liberate them from immigration, and a negative one for the government that failed to deliver it. Brexit is described as a

'failed experiment' (3), and the institutions are criticised for prioritising "business models" or "gangs" in the country over immigration, which the speakers instead frame as a major shared issue (3, 5).

The 'Us vs. Them' dichotomy, bringing into reality the opposition between "illegal" immigrants and the British population, is clear in instances (3, 4, 5). The collective pronoun 'we' and the possessive adjective 'our' are used in an inclusive way (Van Dijk, 2011) to express the rejection that 'the British people' have towards migrants' arrival due to 'open borders'. Additionally, calls are made for the government to defend British sea borders and deploy the army to stop and deport migrants, as illustrated by imperative clauses (4, 5). Directives – authoritative speech acts associated with the functions of giving orders, issuing instructions, or making a request to elicit a responsive act (Frascarelli & Jiménez-Fernández, 2021; Kaufmann, 2024; Abdusalomov, 2025) – are generally expressed in discourse through the imperative mood. They carry a strong illocutionary force, as reflected in instances (4, 5), where speakers expect the addressee (i.e., the institutional authority) to act accordingly, such as by removing illegal migrants and safeguarding the UK's marine borders.

From a syntactic perspective, 'border' primarily modifies 'force' and 'control', adding detail about people's reactions to the current migration phenomenon in the UK:

6. If the border forces stopped going out and bringing them to land, this would stop.
7. It's the fault of the border forces for letting them cross into UK waters, that is the problem when they should be returning them back to France
8. The only way to stop this is for our border force to pick them up in French waters notify the French border force and let them know that they are helping them to stop people drowning in your waters and take them back

9. The British people wanted robust border control.
10. [...] Then realise why they are allowing them to illegally enter countries without border control and not sending them back!

Concordance analysis reveals a clear, stronger stance among the British public regarding the need for stricter border controls. On one hand, users blame the Border Force (i.e., the UK law enforcement responsible for border management) for allegedly helping migrants (6, 7). On the other hand, they propose solutions for managing immigration and accuse the force of (a) failing to effectively defend the country against migrants arriving from France and (b) being incapable of deporting them (8, 9, 10).

As objects of verbs, 'border(s)' are described as needing to be 'closed', 'protected', 'shut', 'controlled', 'defended', and 'patrolled'.

11. All the main parties totally ignored our pleas to close our border and make it less attractive by giving Islam everything it needs to fully colonise us.
12. Protect OUR borders, turn the boats back, tow the boats back if necessary, stop them landing on OUR beaches.
13. Close the borders stop them coming in!
14. Time to shut our border, send them all back
15. The Brexit was to control our borders, but more invaders came in after Brexit, it was a failure.
16. Where are our troops to defend our borders this should not be happening
17. Is there a reason that our navy can't patrol our borders? We have technology that can track everything Why can't we stop the boats.

The speakers emphasise how politicians have never responded to their requests regarding closing borders, revealing a specific attitude towards migrants as a group associated with a specific religion, "Islam" (11). Research in sociology (Allievi, 2005) has highlighted that as immigration has increased over the years, the construction of the ideal type of the 'other' has become the Muslim. This association is driven by factors including the considerable arrival of Muslims in the EU in recent years and the role of Islam worldwide, which is frequently marked by negative connotations due to terrorism and fundamentalism. Consequently, a mental model has spread according to which every immigrant is a Muslim, presumed to be ready to expand into new territories and impose their beliefs, traditions, and ways of living and behaving (Bruno, 2016; Bir, 2024). Between 2010 and 2015, a – now closed – petition aiming to "Stop the invasion of Islam and their forced beliefs" was even submitted to the UK Parliament and Government. This narrative equating migrants to Muslims appears to be fuelled by far-right anti-immigration (social media) disinformation, Islamophobic rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and protests (Knowles, 2024; Business and Human Rights Centre, 2025). Such discourse encourages the population to engage in politics about the perceived "danger of Islam" and the "Islamification of the UK" (Camino Gonzalez, 2026), despite recent data indicating that Muslims currently comprise only 6.5% of England and Wales's population (Office for National Statistics, 2022;[5] Farazi Saber, 2026). According to the latest briefing from The Migration Observatory (Sumption et al., 2026), Christians are the largest religious group in the UK at 46.5%, followed by those with 'No religion' at 37.8%. Additionally, the report shows that, for the first time in census history, the majority of Muslims in the UK are UK-born, accounting for 50%.

Figurative language is also used by the speaker to delegitimise migrants' arrivals by portraying them as invaders, aiming to steal the country from natives, rather than as asylum seekers. The metaphor of colonisation in relation to immigration has been

5 - This is the latest statistics release on the religious composition in England and Wales.

frequently applied in the UK and beyond (Delouis, 2014; Ross, 2019). In recent times, in particular, anti-immigration discourses are relying upon the association of 'migration' as 'colonisation', which has been described as a means to "erase [...] history and to weaponise a word that carries the weight of invasion and domination" (Lamb, 2026) with the aim of representing migrants only in a negative, harmful way.

The polarisation between "our" borders (i.e., the UK's borders) and the external 'enemy' represented by migrants is further accentuated through capitalisation (Zappavigna, 2012), a prosodic feature that commentators use to express their demands and concerns loudly (12). The speaker describes migrants' arrival in the UK through the verb 'to land', evoking the image of movement from a ship to the shore (Etymonline, n.d.). In recent years, this imagery has frequently been linked to migration, with landings becoming a symbolic representation of it (Binotto & Bruno, 2018). This association likely stems from media portrayals that depict migrants and their journeys as "always in transit, always temporary and, of course, always an impetuous and catastrophic emergency" (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 138). Such framing tends to represent the 'migrant' as the 'enemy', emphasising the need to contrast and move them away (Binotto & Bruno, 2018). This representation of migration as 'landing' is particularly tied to the notion of 'borders' (Bruno, 2016), and it appears pervasive across all instances in the corpus (11-17), especially those that employ the imperative mood to stress the need to impede border crossings. As Van Dijk (2011, p. 403) points out, the threat posed by migrants is often discursively represented through such metaphors, casting migration as a "security issue" for the lands they arrive in and indicative of a specific "underlying nationalist ideology".

Finally, Brexit is once more criticised for 'failing' to solve the 'migration problem', despite having previously been considered as a means of controlling borders against the "invaders" (15). Through the discursive strategies of denomination and overgeneralisation,

the speaker constructs a generalised criminal identity for migrants, presenting them negatively as 'the threatening Other' and strengthening racist ideological polarisation between the 'good Brits' (*Us*) and the 'bad migrants' (*Them*).

In contemporary UK discourse, the concept of 'borders' has shifted from being considered as a "monolithic symbolism of security and protection" to being mostly associated with "war, territory or migration" (Vollmer, 2019). This shift fosters insecurities within civil British society, which is increasingly focused on the arrival of non-native populations (Mayblin et al., 2024). The rhetoric of invasion and country 'securitisation' is evident in the questions posed in instances (16, 17), where speakers employ military imagery and lexicon, talking about defending the UK territory with "troops" and the "navy". These interrogative speech acts – likely echoing the late Governmental policies of ex-PM Boris Johnson and US President Donald Trump's suggestions to ex-PM Keir Starmer – advocate using UK military assets to stop migrants crossing the Channel in small boats. They not only criticise the UK armed forces for being unable to protect the nation but also reinforce a dominant narrative framing migration as a needed "war on refugees" (Schofield, 2026), portraying migrants' arrivals as illegal invasions requiring urgent and drastic measures to safeguard British national identity and security.

Conclusion

This study analysed people's reactions to migration news in the comment sections of the Facebook pages of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mirror*. Drawing on the tenets of Corpus-Assisted (Critical) Discourse Analysis, the investigation focused on the discourse(s) surrounding the concepts of 'Brexit' and 'Borders' in the *UK-Migration Corpus*, analysing the two lemmas through an integrated quantitative-qualitative approach.

Although restricted to the corpus under analysis, the findings shed light on how people currently frame the interrelationship between migration, Brexit, and borders. Brexit is discursively constructed not only as a political event but also as the starting point of a national decline, caused by specific political and governmental actors who have been unable to protect the UK's sovereignty. In particular, three discursive patterns have been identified in relation to Brexit: (a) Brexit as an unfulfilled promise of border control; (b) Brexit as the cause of the contemporary border crisis; (c) Migration as the result of political inability rather than a cause of Brexit.

On the other hand, borders are framed as sites of political and social tensions, with the EU, in general, blamed for allowing freedom of movement, and the UK government, in particular, held primarily responsible. Commenters specifically criticise the idea of 'open borders', which they believe worsened after Brexit. They urge political parties and the UK Border Force, responsible for border control, to defend the country against 'illegal immigrants', who are depicted more as invaders than asylum seekers. Specifically, by equating migration to colonisation, they are consistently portrayed as a threat to national security and cultural identity. The comments reflect a strongly negative attitude towards all immigrants, often based on racist stereotypes portraying them as belonging to a specific community, Muslims, which enhances Islamophobic hatred. Moreover, as previously underlined, while Brexit is not blamed for causing the migration crisis, it faces criticism for failing to resolve it, thus leaving the country vulnerable to unwanted non-native populations and hindering efforts to enhance national security.

The investigation has shown, on the one hand, how user-generated reactions to news can profoundly shape and impact general worldviews and fuel racist ideologies, which can reflect in real-life social structures and power dynamics. On the other hand, it has highlighted how, although migration and migrants are continually seen as a threat to UK stability and management, most of the criticism when dealing with 'Brexit' and 'borders' is directed at politics and prominent social actors, who are accused of prioritising their interests over those of the British people.

The discursive strategies employed by the speakers, including the 'Us vs. Them' dichotomy, directives, and figurative language, are not only symbolic representations of personal stances but also powerful tools for spreading harmful mental models and ideologies, which are then fuelled by the discourse communities formed on social media platforms. These digital environments thus become echo chambers of identity performance, the negative construction of diversity, and political contestation.

While, at the time of writing, the dynamics of migration and Brexit are evolving – with a new discussion on a possible 'Brentry' (Franceschini, 2026) – this study has hopefully contributed to current research on the matter by providing insights into the discursive construction of migration at its intersection with socio-cultural and geopolitical dimensions.

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Part III:
Borders of Memory and Exile

Lama Autabashi

Oscillating Between Exile and Existence: Displacement and Identity in Two Palestinian Memoirs

Palestinian displacement, beyond being a fixed event in history or perpetual history in the making, has become part of a growing literary body of work that portrays it as an enduring condition that reshapes the relationship between self, place, and memory. Through a comparative reading of *I Saw Ramallah* (2003) by Mourid Barghouti and *In Search of Fatima* (2004) by Ghada Karmi, this paper explores how that condition is negotiated through memory, reconfigured through return, and ultimately etched in fractured identities. Referring to Edward Said's concept of exile as an irreparable rupture and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, this paper argues that displacement is not only a physical relocation process, but more importantly, an enduring psychological, temporal, and spatial condition. Within this framework, both memory and the physical return do not restore the lost sense of belonging, but rather they expose its instability. This paper demonstrates how return rearticulates exile rather than resolve it, producing a sense of identity that remains fragmented and continually suspended between borders of memory and geography.

Removed from immediate history and written decades after the Nakba and after years of exile, both Barghouti and Karmi trace the long-term consequences of exile on both personal and collective histories. Mourid Barghouti left Palestine in the aftermath of the 1967 war and was separated from his motherland for three decades

due to the political realities of the occupation and exile. His return to Ramallah was only possible because of the openings created by the Oslo Accords in the 1990s; hence, he only gained access to his homeland thanks to a historically contingent moment of partial political mobility rather than a full access and an uncomplicated return. In contrast, Ghada Karmi, who resettled as a child with her family in Britain in 1948 during the Nakba in an involuntary displacement, ironically gained access into the Palestinian lands decades later only after receiving the British citizenship, which granted her different conditions of legal and national access. The two memoirs narrate different experiences of exile, Barghouti's is shaped by prolonged separation and restricted return under occupation, and Karmi's is marked by early childhood displacement and diasporic resettlement. This has allowed them to navigate different waves of loss and belonging.

Nevertheless, this difference is anchored by a shared dependence on memory as a means of confronting rupture. As is the case for many peoples who have lost their lands and who stand against historical and cultural erasure, memory assumes a central role in articulating loss and confirming belonging, thus functioning as both a mode of resistance and a means of cultural preservation. In doing so, a memoirist is thus not simply recollecting fragments of a lost past and a stolen land, but also practicing resistance through historical and cultural documentation in the face of that systemic erasure. This establishes a connection to a fragmented past which "becomes the key for the preservation of a collective memory" (Varma, cited in Seangthong, 2017, p.3) that can be read as "written testimony" in parallel with the oral testimony (Hammer, cited in Mattar, 2014, p. 106).

Viewed in this light, both memoirs, *I Saw Ramallah* and *In Search of Fatima,* participate in a broader tradition of Palestinian writing where personal memories render forced migration comprehensible, foregrounding the human cost of political displacement and resisting abstract or depersonalized representations of exile. As such narratives demonstrate, these memoirs "humanize the Palestinian problem" (Rogers, cited in

Hussein et al., 2025, pp. 224–225), shifting the discourse of displacement away from political abstraction and toward a lived experience. Indeed, Karmi explicitly states that an important objective of her life narrative is to present the Palestinian tragic story "in a human, accessible form, in order to get away from the political treaties, research studies, economic analysis and dry histories which have become the norm for conveying the Palestinian experience" (Karmi, cited in Hussein et al., 2025, pp. 224–225). Within this framework, displacement is not only a geopolitical condition, but also a deeply intimate experience registered through fragmented memory.

To situate this experience within its broader scale, it is necessary to consider the scale of Palestinian displacement in quantitative terms. According to recent statistics, Israel was founded in 1948 on the "deliberate and systemic act of ethnic cleansing" and mass expulsion of approximately 750,000 Palestinians, known to them as the "Nakba", Arabic for 'catastrophe'. This was followed by further military operations, resulting in an estimated 9.17 million displaced Palestinians worldwide (as of 2021) according to BADIL, including refugees and internally displaced persons, many of whom "live in stateless limbo in impoverished semi-permanent camps under brutal Israeli military rule" where many rely on UNRWA for survival. New reports show that "since January 2023, 45 Palestinian communities have been fully displaced across the West Bank due to settler attacks… including nine communities in 2026" (Humanitarian Situation Report, 23 April 2026).

The enduring consequences of these events are reflected in Palestinian cultural and literary production where the Nakba is positioned as a point in time when everything changed, marking everything thereafter with a formative fluidity where memory, identity and exile flow together. Edward Said explains in *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986) that the Nakba is the "singular defining event of modern Palestinian history, one that has caused both the fragmentation, dispersal and destruction of Palestinian society and the formation of a new, exilic national identity" rendering Palestine as an exile with "the inaccurate memories of one place

slipping into vague memories of another" (cited in Mattar, 2025, p. 103). Karmi laments in her memoir, "[w]e never set eyes on Fatima or our dog or the city we had known ever again. Like a body prematurely buried, unmourned, without coffin or ceremony, our hasty untidy exit from Jerusalem was no way to have said goodbye to our home, our country and all that we knew and loved" (p. 123). The passage captures the irrevocability of the Nakba through a child's recollection of seemingly ordinary losses, Fatima, the family's beloved helper and the memoir's titular character, the family dog, and familiar urban spaces that are later reinterpreted by the adult narrator as inseparable from the larger loss of homeland. By juxtaposing intimate memories with national dispossession, Karmi demonstrates how the Nakba transformed everyday life, converting a temporary departure into a permanent condition of exile.

For the Palestinian intellectual, this necessitates reclaiming muffled narratives and affirming the right to speak up and narrate his experience as a form of resistance. Such narrative reclamation is not just conceptual; it arises against concrete acts of historical denial and is realized through the memoirs themselves. Barghouti's attention to minute, solid detail exemplifies this worldly engagement, transforming personal memory into a form of political testimony. Karmi, in turn, narrates in her memoir that in 1969, Golda Meir, the 4th Prime Minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974, stated, ""[i]t was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering themselves as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them" she said. "They did not exist"" (p. 383). Provoked with such statements, especially after the defeat of 1967, Karmi's memoir, alongside her other writings and lectures, can be seen as a direct negation of that claim (Aamir, 2022, p. 179). As Ahmad Qabaha (2024) observes, Palestinian memoirists "embark on a physical (as well as textual) journey into the past in search of the sites of their memories to maintain the historical continuity of Palestinians that is obscured by their permanent dislocation" (p. 1065). In both memoirs, the reader becomes acutely aware that something is lost forever, and more importantly, that there actually was something to be lost. Hence, the act of remembering in memoirs extends beyond personal recollection and becomes a means of

historical recovery. As Qabaha (2024) explains, "[t]his act of remembering allows them to feel 'at home' in a way they cannot conjure physically, inhabiting a space where they feel a lack of belonging" (p. 1068). In both cases, the Palestinian memoirists narrate their personal memories as a means of asserting not only their identity and nationality but also the history of the nation from which they came, and their natural subsequent rights to live, to return, and to belong there, against all political action.

In addition to narrating memories, through their return journeys, both Barghouti and Karmi seek not merely to revisit lost places but also to reconstruct a fragmented national history. Their personal memories hence function as an archive of Palestinian collective memories of displacement that are documented evidence of the legitimacy of their right to exist and to return to a land stolen by Israeli settler colonialism. In this regard, memory becomes inseparable from history itself, and consequently, "the quest for memory is the search for one's history" (Nora, cited in Qabaha, 2024, p. 1067). By revisiting places that have become inaccessible, transformed, or erased, Karmi and Barghouti resist the disappearance of Palestinian history from public consciousness. Their memoirs thus exemplify what Paul Ricoeur identifies as one of the principal aims of remembrance, "struggling against forgetting, wresting a few scraps of memory from the rapacity of time … from sinking into oblivion" (cited in Qabaha, 2024, p. 1069). Through this process, personal memory is transformed into an act of historical preservation that challenges erasure and reasserts Palestinian continuity across imposed borders, against displacement, and in spite of exile.

Memory, in such narratives, is linked with the question of return, whether that return is imagined through crossing the threshold of memory and stepping into the past, or experienced through physically crossing the border into the occupied land, and every mental, emotional, and physical distance in between. While physical return promises closure through presence, mental return sustains a sense of continuity through memory; yet the encounter between the two ultimately destabilizes both. In both memoirs, return to the lost paradise of idyllic childhood neither resolves nor

gently folds years of exile; instead, it aggravates estrangement by exposing the gap between that idyllic past that lives in memory and the lamentable lived reality that threatens to erase that memory. As such, solidifying that memory acquires existential significance. As Said argues, "perhaps the greatest battle Palestinians have waged as a people has been over the right to a remembered presence and, with that presence, the right to possess and reclaim a collective historical reality" (Said, 2000, p. 184). Qabaha notes that this struggle over memory is marked by an inherent paradox, for "no return to the past is without irony, or without a sense that a full return, or repatriation, is impossible" (Said, cited in Qabaha, 2024, p. 9). Return, thus, ceases to be a recovery of origin and becomes a recognition of its irretrievability. In this sense, as Said concludes in his foreword to Barghouti's memoir, "despite its joy and moments of exuberance this narrative return at bottom reenacts exile rather than repatriation" (Barghouti, 2003, p. xi). Together, these ideas suggest that the act of return is structurally bound to displacement. It neither undoes the experience of exile nor finds closure for it. Instead, it reconfigures it, transforming the native land into a site where memory and reality remain irreconcilably unharmonious.

Barghouti's narrative of his return captures this irreconcilable, simultaneous return and retreat as his physical return to Ramallah after decades of absence exposes the limits of mental return. The homeland, which was long preserved as a coherent, constant and emotionally charged memory, appears fractured and unfamiliar upon his re-entry. The physical act of crossing the border into Palestine does not instantly restore belonging but rather solidifies the distance between past and present, producing a sense of dislocation that mirrors what is soon to be realized as the only actual constant, his exile. As Barghouti (2003) reflects on his return, he shifts the discussion from individual movement to collective belonging: "After how many more thirty years will the ones who never came back return? What does my return, or the return of any other individual mean? It is their return, the return of the millions, that is the true return" (p. 38). This redefinition already destabilizes the idea of return as a personal or resolved act, situating it instead

within a broader, deferred, and collectively suspended horizon. This fragmentation becomes even more pronounced in his description of the experience of crossing itself:

> Here, on these prohibited wooden planks, I walk and chatter my whole life to myself. I chatter my life, without a sound, and without a pause. Moving images appear and disappear without coherence, scenes from an untidy life, a memory that bangs backward and forward like a shuttle. Images shape themselves and resist the editing that would give them final form. (Barghouti, 2003, p. 18)

This passage perfectly captures the moment of return not as newfound clarity or resolution, but rather as persistent, overwhelming fragmentation. As Barghouti crosses the bridge, memory does not directly organize itself into a coherent narrative; instead, it erupts in disjointed, uncontrolled images that "resist editing", suggesting that the past cannot be neatly reconciled with the present. The act of "chattering" his life internally, yet "without a sound", reflects simultaneous determination and impossibility, the urgency of narrating experience alongside the inability to fully articulate it. The inner, mental fragmentation is directly translated into linguistic disintegration, ultimately hindering any chance of articulating that lived experience. If memory collapses into discontinuous images at the moment of crossing, then that place itself, physical and linguistic, is crumbled by competing systems that seek to define it. The bridge, as both threshold and transit point, thus becomes not a fixed geographical marker but a site where historical, political, and emotional claims intersect. At this intersection, language no longer functions as neutral description but rather operates as an instrument of belonging, exclusion, and ideological inscription. As such, the text itself becomes linguistic evidence and enactment of a collapse of mental return at the exact moment of physical return. In this sense, what was sustained imaginatively as a continuous life is exposed, in crossing the border, as fractured, unstable, and resistant to closure.

This instability is directly seen in the act of naming itself. As Barghouti crosses the border bridge he describes,

> Fayruz calls it the Bridge of Return. The Jordanians call it the King Hussein Bridge. The Palestinian Authority calls it al-Karama Crossing. The common people and the bus and taxi drivers call it the Allenby Bridge. My mother, and before her my grandmother and my father and my uncle's wife, Umm Talal, call it simply: The Bridge. (Barghouti, 2003, p. 18)

These multiple names of the bridge in Barghouti's memoir expose how the bridge itself becomes a site of competing political and historical inscriptions where each label encodes a distinct authority and ideological claim over the physical space. The multiplication of names thus turns the bridge into a linguistic border. However, within this plurality, the family members' refusal to use a politically charged name becomes an act of resistance in itself. By simply calling it "the Bridge", they strip it of institutional ideology and reclaim it as a familiar, lived space. Their choice of naming, or rather, un-naming, rejects the abstraction of place into political symbol, affirming instead an intimacy in their everyday lives, much like addressing a friend by his first name.

In another instance, Barghouti reflects on the proliferation of competing names assigned to a single geographical space. He wonders, "now I pass from my exile to their… homeland? My homeland? The West Bank and Gaza? The Occupied Territories? The Areas? Judea and Samaria? The Autonomous Government? Israel? Palestine? Is there any other country in the world that so perplexes you with its names?" (Barghouti, 2003, p. 20). This accumulation of labels exposes the extent to which the land is subject to continuous political and ideological inscription where each name attempts to impose a distinct spatial and historical order. This increasingly detaches the land from its material and lived reality. Against this instability, Barghouti resorts to the concreteness of a detailed description. Although ownership is lost, he reclaims presence through the act of precise narration, as if attentiveness itself could counter erasure.

In a similar vein, Karmi also reveals a contestation of naming over her native land. She confirms, “Palestine. That’s what it was called when I was born there”, and replies in face of political erasure, “‘what you call Israel was once called Palestine and is my homeland. However, people like you came over from all kinds of places, took it over and threw us out’” (Karmi, 2004, p. 392). In her memoir, naming becomes inseparable from competing narratives of legitimacy where each name asserts a different historical truth. Together, Barghouti and Karmi reveal that the conflict over Palestine is not only territorial but also linguistic. While the multiplication of names erodes the Palestinian history and sense of belonging, their narratives stand as acts of recollection in an attempt to restore material and historical presence.

Karmi’s return, much like Barghouti’s, foregrounds the irreversibility of any sort of physical or temporal retrieval after years of prolonged displacement. Having left Palestine as a child and spent most of her life in Britain, her imagined homeland, sustained through memory and familial narratives, collides with a present that no longer recognizes her, producing a condition of profound alienation. She sadly observes, “I felt invisible as a Palestinian” (Karmi, 2004, p. 386). Her sense of invisibility deepens into an ethical and emotional displacement in which even the right to mourn becomes contested, as she reflects that she had “not only lost [her] country, but that [she] had no right to grieve over it, or resent the fact that it was seized by others” (Karmi, 2004, p. 387). In her case, exile extends beyond territorial loss to become a condition in which grief itself is rendered illegitimate. The sense of loss that engulfs her is overwhelming; upon her return, she becomes acutely aware that she has also lost the core of her identity, irrevocably. This memoirist’s return, much like Barghouti’s, does not restore a lost sense of belonging; instead, it exposes the gap between remembered identity and lived reality, intensifying alienation rather than resolving it.

The persistence of such alienation can be understood through what Saloul terms as “ongoing memory”, namely “a memory that harks back to a traumatic originary event (al-Nakba) and, at the same time, is constantly reworked, reactivated by new events and

rearticulated in new acts of memory" (cited in Qabaha, 2024, p. 1072). Accordingly, both Karmi's and Barghouti's return journeys do not put out an internal fire of historical rupture but reignite it. Border crossing, revisiting transformed spaces, and juxtaposing memory and lived reality all re-inscribe the original experience of dispossession rather than bringing it to a close. The Nakba, thus, far from being a self-contained event in the past, is constantly re-evoked, being an ongoing condition that continues to shape Palestinian subjectivity. As Saloul further observes, even the "second and third generation of post-Nakba Palestinians" remain inside the event itself, "living the catastrophe every day" (cited in Qabaha, 2024, p. 1072). The memoirs of Karmi and Barghouti, both written long after the catastrophe, exemplify this continuity, revealing how displacement is sustained through physical borders, and more importantly, through the determined evocation of memory.

After an ebb and flow of soft memories and sad realities upon return, Karmi's narrative ultimately moves from the hope of return to the recognition of a more enduring form of displacement. Her encounter with Israel's Law of Return exposes the asymmetry at the heart of belonging and exclusion. While "any Jew anywhere in the world" could immigrate to Israel, she, a native to Palestine, remained denied that right and could enter only "on a tourist visa like anyone else" (Karmi, 2004, p. 398). The irony of this situation reveals how return has been transformed from an inherited right to a politically regulated privilege, rendering the native a visitor in her own land. Confronted with this reality, Karmi is compelled to acknowledge that she is "truly displaced, dislocated in both mind and body, straddling two cultures and unable to belong in either" (p. 422). Even when she finally succeeds in relocating the family home, she finds no solace. Faced with the realization that the house "wasn't [theirs] anymore and had not been for fifty years", she experiences a "numbing emptiness" that signifies not merely the loss of property but the collapse of any imagined continuity between past memory and present reality (p. 450). Towards the end of the memoir, although her return remains a source of hope to her, Karmi comes to realize that her exile is "undefined by space or time," an exile from which "there would be no return" (p. 451). Perhaps when Barghouti

called his memoir I Saw Ramallah, he also realized that the mere act of seeing is exactly what happened upon his visit, not 'return', not 'recovery', not, 'reconciliation'; he simply 'saw' Ramallah, through his inward eye for what it has been, and through his physical eye, what it has sadly become.

The internal conflicts brought about by such colliding visions and experiences leave the identity suspended between opposing binaries. This suspension, as seen in both Karmi's and Barghouti's memoirs, can be best understood through Homi Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, a state in which one is "not at home even in one's own home" (1994, p. 9). For Bhabha, the unhomely subject inhabits the "beyond", a liminal space of transit where distinctions between home and exile, past and present, and self and other are continually unsettled and renegotiated. This framework highlights the predicament of the return of Palestinians in both memoirs, where crossing a fixed, physical border triggers an internal instability. The resulting rupture in the identity, argues Alrashid (2025), can be imagined as a "sentence with endless commas but no periods", resisting narrative closure. Home, consequently, no longer stands as a solid space but rather functions as a series of stations, where one is always departing, but never fully arriving. This condition produces a sense of self-estrangement, as seen in Barghouti's reflections on return, where he presents himself as a stranger whose "memory resists ordering" and who occupies the paradoxical position of both belonging and non-belonging (Barghouti, 2003, p. 13). Neither fully inside nor outside, he emerges as a Bhabhaian "unhomely subject", perpetually inhibating a borderline existence in which exile persists even in the moment of return, or maybe more ironically, exactly in the moment of return. Barghouti's memoir closely aligns with Said's assertion that exile is "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Said, 2000, p. 173).

In his memoir, Barghouti describes the exiled subject as a stranger who remains internally displaced even after the supposed return. Barghouti describes the exile as someone who must constantly present "proofs" of existence (Barghouti, 2003, p. 12), reducing identity to documentation. Confronted with a system that marks him

a stranger in his own land, much like Karmi, Barghouti is compelled to inhabit an unstable and continually negotiated identity. For an exiled subject, as exemplified by the two memoirists in this paper, this instability becomes a defining feature of his identity. As Barghouti ironically comments, "a person gets 'displacement' as he gets asthma" (Barghouti, 2003, p. 101). This metaphor suggests that similar to asthma, exile is chronic and implants itself into every facet of life, becoming impossible to ignore or forget. Defined as an outsider while internally operating as an insider, the exiled subject thus occupies an in-between space where competing histories, names, and affiliations converge, rendering identity itself a site of constant negotiation.

Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial framework, the King Hussein Bridge becomes an incarnation of the Bhabhasque "third space of enunciation", a liminal, in-between area where cultural identities are always being negotiated but never actually fuse (Bhabha, cited in Umar & Lawan, 2024). The Bridge, from Barghouti's perspective, becomes a "boundary between two times, two histories, two faiths, two tragedies," where he is suspended in a state of uncertainty. It is on this fragile structure that Barghouti's internal structure collapses beyond his control. The moment crystallizes into a rush of unanswered questions: "Is he a visitor? A refugee? A citizen? A guest?", an unravelling that mirrors the inability of self-definition within the conditions of exile (Barghouti, 2003, p. 18). This crisis is essentially inseparable from his resentment toward the bridge itself, a silly stretch of a few meters of wood assembled by ordinary laborers, physically insignificant yet standing in grotesque disproportion to catastrophic consequences, scattering Palestinians across the world.

In addition to the complexity of the physical versus the psychological border, causing the rift in the exilic identity, the encounter between remembered and present landscapes further exposes the fragmentation of identity produced by exile. In *I Saw Ramallah*, the most intimate rupture is seen in Barghouti's narration about the fig tree. In his childhood, the tree always had a solid presence with "spreading branches" and a "massive trunk," anchoring rootedness and providing sustenance by having "fed our grandfathers

and fathers" (Barghouti, 2003, p. 53). Such objects function as anchors of identity, and their destruction intensifies displacement. On the other hand, the present Israeli settlements symbolize the antithesis of the anchor of identity. The replacement of the tree by a cement block also marks the violent shift from organic life to the sterile reality of the new-world occupation, further underscoring how the homeland changes beyond the reach of the exile, shattering any probability of spatial or temporal continuity (Alrashid, 2025, pp. 87-88). This loss transforms into an inherited grief that becomes a narrative anchor for the Palestinian identity. Similarly, visiting her childhood home in Palestine after years of exile in England, Karmi observes that even though the lemon tree under her parents' bedroom was still there, "the vine had gone and so had the apricot trees". She remembers herself as a child playing under the mulberry tree, which is also gone now, whereas a "large palm tree which had never been there before" now stands in their place, reconfiguring the garden into something it was not (Karmi, 2004, p. 448).

Taken together, these altered or absent trees reveal that the rupture of displacement is registered most acutely not through abstract loss, but through the transformation of intimate, lived spaces. If these natural elements function as anchors of identity, their disappearance exposes the instability of that anchoring. In *I Saw Ramallah*, the missing fig tree marks a void that cannot be filled, while in *In Search of Fatima*, the altered garden produces a disorienting coexistence of memory and unfamiliarity, a real-time cognitive distortion unfolding in front of the reader. In both memoirs, the landscape no longer reflects the self and reinstates an identity but rather mirrors a harsh confrontation with its own displacement, turning return into further retreat rather than recovery.

Furthermore, Karmi's search for Fatima, the titular character, extends beyond the recovery of a childhood relationship and becomes a search for the Palestine that existed before displacement. As Qabaha (2024) argues, Karmi's attempt to understand her present condition of exile is inseparable from her effort to recover memories of pre-Nakba Palestine and to locate Fatima, who arguably functions as an allegorical figure for the lost homeland (p. 1070).

Throughout the memoir, the two become increasingly intertwined: Fatima embodies not only a personal connection to Karmi's childhood but also a vanished world disrupted by the Nakba. Significantly, when Karmi finally envisions her in the family home, Fatima is depicted resting on the floor with her eyes closed (Karmi, 2004, p. 448). The image may be read as a quiet yet powerful confrontation with irretrievable loss. On a literal level, it marks the aging and physical decline of the woman who helped raise her; symbolically, it evokes the fate of the homeland itself, no longer accessible in the form preserved by memory. In this sense, the constructed image offers neither recovery nor closure. Instead, it underscores the distance between remembrance and reality, suggesting that both Fatima and the Palestine she comes to represent can be revisited but never fully reclaimed.

Through their negotiations of memory, displacement, and return, both *I Saw Ramallah* and *In Search of Fatima* reveal that exile is not a temporary interruption to be resolved through physical return but a continuing condition that reshapes identity and sense of belonging. The border crossings undertaken by Karmi and Barghouti do not lead to recovery or reconciliation. Instead, they expose the irreversible transformations produced by decades of displacement, giving a human voice against a new history as re-written by the victors. Through contested names, altered landscapes, absent figures, and fragmented memories, both memoirs demonstrate that return only mirrors an irrevocable loss. Nevertheless, these narratives do not only document dispossession. By revisiting sites of memory, reclaiming personal histories, and bearing witness to experiences threatened by erasure, Barghouti and Karmi transform remembrance into an act of resistance. Their memoirs challenge the borders, both physical and political, that seek to sever Palestinians from their past, asserting instead the continuity of a collective history that survives displacement. Ultimately, the significance of return in these texts lies not in its ability to recover what has been lost but in its capacity to stand witness to that loss and to preserve a Palestinian presence that refuses disappearance.

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Sally Hamilton

‘There’s no frontier, just a bleeding edge, trenches’: Liminality and Heterotopic Spaces in No Man’s Land

Novelist and nurse Mary Borden’s collection of autobiographical vignettes and poems, *The Forbidden* Zone (1929), is based on her experiences working at field hospitals in Belgium and Northern France in the First World War. Her unusual composition of poignant recollections and meandering poetry provides a graphic and candid account of the author’s experiences on the edge of the conflict. The reader follows her trajectory from shocked innocent to hardened practitioner, losing her sense of self and questioning the position and validity of her gender. From nurses’ encounters with human and mechanical detritus behind the lines, to the hellscape of No Man’s Land depicted by war artists, we are compelled to experience the breakdown of social and physical boundaries within the heterotopic spaces of war.

The war’s borderlands of disputed territory provide a powerful chronotopic motif, in which temporal and spatial order are disturbed. The trenches are a waiting room, time suspended while their displaced occupants wait for the call to move into an unknown future. The ten-kilometre stretch of road from the battlefield to the hospital is a production line, transporting the wounded to be repaired before they are returned to the conflict. The field hospital is a pause between battles, a purgatorial holding station. Nurses — neither soldier nor civilian — are trapped within the boundaries of this forbidden zone.

With the outbreak of conflict, women found themselves in a new and unique position: striding enthusiastically into previously male-dominated functions at home and taking on indispensable responsibilities abroad. However, this taste of freedom came at a cost. Driving ambulances and working in front-line hospitals, they were witness to a continual barrage of horrific injuries, living under constant pressure in meagre conditions, poorly resourced and understaffed. Neither active participants nor passive observers — simultaneously experiencing the benefits of liberation while being eyewitnesses to the war's atrocities — they existed on the fringes of the conflict.

On the surface women were liberated by war, but ingrained prejudice remained, at least initially. In June 1915, 78,000 women volunteered for war service, but of that number, only 1,800 were given work. The length and socio-economic drain of the war changed this statistic, and by 1918, one and a third million women were working, almost half of that number in roles previously held by men. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1989) offer a feminist critique which poses the war as highly advantageous for women and their liberation. However, while gender roles did become 'more fluid' during the period (Bourke, 1996, p.133), with women expected to fill the employment void left by male enlistment, they were still expected to serve, and were predominantly placed in reactionary and subservient roles.

Meanwhile, in the male world of the trenches 'men took over the roles of mother, sister, friend and lover' (Das, 2006 p.133). Santanu Das's research into intimacy and gender compares the supportive touch between comrades with that of a nurse caring for the wounded, reading the nurse's hand as a bridge between the genders. The touch of a nurse differs from that of a lover, wife, daughter or mother, the former indicating their active involvement in the intensely private sphere of male trauma, something which other female figures can only observe from the sidelines. Das notes a recurrence of the trope in nurses' texts: 'Hands dress wounds, clean instruments, habitually comfort, may even cause fresh pain, are often disgusted and in rare moments of leisure, the hand writes its varied

life' (2006, p.26). The reassuring contact of the nurse bridges the gap between the touch of a comrade and that of a lover, her hands providing a comforting yet authoritative connection with her subject.

Hands feature prominently in *The Forbidden Zone*. In 'The Regiment', the general keeps his gloves on, saluting his men and bestowing medals while avoiding direct physical contact with the men he is responsible for. In 'The Beach', the woman covers her face with her hands, shutting out the visions of torment the man regales her with, for 'he could never touch her again' (Borden, 1929a, p.36). In 'Moonlight', 'Enfant de Malheur' and 'Rosa' nurses change dressings, hold hands, make cocoa and take soldiers' pulses, their hands busy with the minutiae of daily tasks. In the hospital, women possess the power. They must hold soldiers down, restraining their limbs while they fight to get away, clasping ether to their mouths to quiet their screams:

> We lift him onto a table. We peel off his clothes, his coat and his shirt and his trousers and his boots. We handle his clothes that are stiff with blood. We cut off his shirt with large scissors. We stare at the obscene sight of his innocent wounds. He allows us to do this. He is helpless to stop us. [...] We conspire against his right to die. We experiment with his bones, his muscles, his sinews, his blood. We dig into the yawning mouths of his wounds. (119-120)

The hospital is a liminal space in which staff work under relentless pressure, confined within the boundaries of temporary sheds and makeshift operating theatres. Under Borden's dispassionate gaze, we examine how the male body is dissected and put back together. It is at its most vulnerable here. Her vignettes display little differentiation between the ward and a butcher's slab. The worst injuries are identified purely by condition, diminishing the individual and intensifying the tone of fetishist fascination. Men are both cannon fodder for the war machine and sustenance for the

earth. Likened to clothes being repeatedly washed and mended before eventually being discarded through overuse, their corpses are the detritus of war. Every injured body represents the relentless destruction of the war machine, and the inexorable forward march of patriarchal hegemony, epitomised by the ruthless advance of ominous, armour-clad tanks. In Borden's world, bodies are unceremoniously discarded, mutilations of the flesh generating sinister, and even humorous asides:

> We throw them on the floor — they belong to no one and are of no interest to anyone. (Borden, 1929a, p.41)
>
> 'Take that leg away, will you? There's no room to move here'. (89)
>
> 'His brain came off on the bandage'. 'Where have you put it?' 'I put it in the pail under the table'. (94)
>
> 'Where's that knee of mine? I left it in the saucepan on the window ledge. I had boiled it up for an experiment'. (100)

Hospital staff remain disassociated from the people they seek to mend, complicit in feeding the insatiable war machine. Borden views herself objectively, brutally aware of the futility of her work and unable to let herself become emotionally connected to it. They are not patients, they are merely limbs and organs. 'She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am — really dead, past resurrection' (43). To survive, she has extinguished her senses — deafened her ears, blinded her eyes and shut out all that makes her female in this desexualised sphere. The corpses are simply rubbish, part of the detritus of war, eventually sinking back into the mud in a macabre parody of the cycle of life. If men have been disfigured and destroyed by the war, what have women become? If our notion of humanity has been extinguished, what are we left with? The idea of an 'us' and 'them' of the sexes has been overturned, and now the alien to be feared — the 'other' — is the technological advancement

that prolongs this annihilation. As Laurie Kaplan states in *Deformities of the Great War*: 'in effect, Borden blurts out the truth: war de-sexes men and women, and the machines of war truncate, dismember, and atomize' (2004, p.36).

Bodies at war, both injured and dead, consume war writing — unsurprising, given that half of all British dead left no identifiable trace. While bodies on the battlefield — whole or in parts — were intensely distressing for those still fighting, they were also useful and even comforting. Indeed, with half of all British dead leaving no identifiable trace, those that remained ended up serving further use. The trenches simultaneously provide both a haven and a grave, with the living and the dead coexisting in their subterranean world. War memoirs describe ghoulish scenes of long-deceased comrades holding up trench walls, separating soldiers from the unknown dangers in the expanse beyond the trench parapet. Petrified limbs protrude from seams of hardened mud, a border between the living and the dead, lingering and not to be forgotten. The composition of the landscape shifts as bodies are buried and resurface. The remains of previous battalions are as prevalent as the rats. Unburied, they create a connection with the landscape and serve as a perpetual reminder of the stalemate of war, where months and years are spent fighting over the same small stretch of decaying soil.

While a corpse was a reminder of the man and of the life he lived, the absence of these reminders leaves only questions and memories. Nurses like Borden came into contact with some of the worst horrors that war could inflict on the human body, and in turn, their bodies bore witness to these appalling violations: 'Her feet are lumps of fire' (Borden, 1929a, p.99).'My apron is stained with mud and blood; I am too tired to take it off. My feet are burning lumps as I hobble to open the door' (Borden, 1947b, p.8). Just as men have been destroyed, so too have women; gender is invalidated in the sterilised environment of the hospital: 'There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened' (p.43-44). Borden's assertion that she is no longer a woman both negates

her sexuality and provides her with the means to free herself from the boundaries of gendered class-based stereotypes. She is a cog in the war machine, an automaton.

Borden goes on to describe what she sees — faces torn apart, no longer identifiable as men, soldiers reduced to the vulnerability of an animal — and suggests that, by association, women do not exist either. 'It is impossible to be a woman here. One must be dead. Certainly they were men once. But now they are no longer men' (60). Soldiers and the landscape combine in Borden's depiction of a dark harvest, in which fertile crops of men have been mown down, thrashed with scythes, and jabbed with pitchforks, 'flung into ditches and scattered by storms' (61). In Borden's world, men are dissected and emasculated, not by surgeons but by the personification of War. Pain lies in wait while nurses rush to provide medication, plump a pillow or hold a hand. War is a rabid dog, Pain is a lascivious monster, Life is an injured animal, and men are reduced to disfigured limbs. Women hold the power: the nurse is a 'ghost woman', and Pain is in control. The latter is presented in pejorative terms, for Pain is female, 'a harlot in the pay of war [...] plying her trade' (62). Within these diametrically opposed depictions of women, the harlot is as much a victim of patriarchy as her angelic sister in the house. The societal boundaries of gender-based expectations have blurred, but women remain complicit in man's downfall.

Distortions of cognitive and geographical space are found in hastily built environments within the war-torn landscape, where dugouts, trench systems and temporary hospitals are required in a conflict focused predominantly on vast swathes of the French and Belgian countryside. These new locations reorder the environment to adapt and prepare for an unexpected purpose. Within these heterotopias, men live in barracks and learn the skills of warfare. While preparing for mobilisation, they remain a part of, yet are physically separated from, their former lives. This is their liminal No Man's Land.

In her article 'Constructions of "Home", "Front", and Women's Military Employment in First World-War Britain', Krisztina Robert considers the construct of heterotopic space, in which recognised locations are requisitioned for another purpose. She observes these

'places of otherness, both imagined and real, that exist on the sidelines' (2019, p.322). Borden's hospital is such a site, whether in a field in Flanders, behind the lines on the Somme or at a typhoid hospital at a casino in Northern France. Borden and her nurses are the custodians of these spaces, but their presence is temporary, their roles undefined. As the boundaries of war move, so must they. This recurrent movement is inevitable, a reminder of the life cycle and of our symbiotic relationship with the environment. Traditionally, the earth is a place of sanctuary and growth. But in this space, humans and their mechanical creations churn up and destroy the natural order.

Throughout *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden's tone and dialogue are chatty, often bordering on the absurd, drawing us in with a friendly yet cautionary tone:

> On our right? That's the road to Ypres. The less said about that road the better: no one goes down it for choice — it's British now. Ahead of us, then? No, you can't get out that way. No, there's no frontier, just a bleeding edge, trenches. (1929a, p.7)

It is at this 'bleeding edge' — in the vulnerable tunnels within the earth where the army burrows — that Borden's world comes alive. In this subterranean domain, men are forced underground to survive, nestling like wild animals. Trenches, ditches and shell holes obliterate established boundaries, and the bodies of the living are usurped by the unsettling re-emergence of the dead. The land has become a graveyard, littered with the cauterised stumps of trees and decaying human remains, a ghostly fusion of humankind and the natural world, in which the border between life and death is blurred. The war's progress is denoted by constantly shifting frontlines and the names of battle sites; time is demarcated by victories and defeats.

At the centre of the vortex, the hospital is a sanctuary. Away from this, trenches provide temporary safety but are also a prison; the earth protects but is also a grave. The living and the dead coexist, and

mud slurps and smothers, an omnipresent and unavoidable organic antagonist. Potentially as dangerous as the manufactured war machines of land and sky, mud can both nurture and extinguish life.

Mud is everywhere, amalgamated with the excrement of battle. Broken machines, human waste and the mutilated bodies of men and horses are dragged under, the remnants of war becoming part of the quagmire, as fields, roads and villages are consumed into an unrelenting viscous mass. Mud silently covers not only inanimate objects but also the dead, who have become a part of the landscape, dehumanised, nameless and multiple. Fascinating yet repulsive, with the ability to both disguise and protect, mud eradicates the boundaries of rank, race and gender. It doesn't differentiate between men and women, soldiers and nurses. Instead, it is a leveller: coating, spreading, drowning and consuming: a 'vast liquid grave' that has 'drowned our men' (1929a, p.25).

Das suggests that mud on the Western Front represents the paradox of the war: a product of the amalgamation of industrialised technology and bad weather, 'it looked back to some primeval chaos' (206, p.45). Guns, bombs and mines violently strip away the landscape, revealing the disorder beneath: 'The experience of trench mud was one of the most powerful encounters of the human subject with the immensity and chaos of inert matter' (3). The landscape has become a graveyard, littered with the cauterised stumps of trees and decaying remains, a ghostly fusion of humankind and the natural world: 'The act of going down into the bowels of the earth was like going back in times as well' (44). Nature turns against itself, mud becoming a metaphor for the mechanics of war itself, with its unrelenting, annihilating advance.

Liquid mud becomes solid as it wraps around the body, a malign and unnatural substance divesting men of their individuality and humanity, while blood and mud congeal into the earth beneath. It strips men of their entitlement as all ranks learn to coexist in this predatory landscape, as insidious as the enemy army and potentially as deadly. Countless numbers of soldiers fall into it, rapidly sucked under and unable to escape**.** It remains a defining motif of the

battlefield: a force of both protection and destruction, and an omnipresent signifier of power. Noting this correlation, Barbara Shaff suggests that mud is a metonym for the landscape of war (2021).

In her poem 'The Song of the Mud', first published in the English Review in 1917, Borden combines unconventional absurdity and claustrophobic menace. Mud is a malevolent creature, insinuating its way into the armies of nations. 'The impertinent, the intrusive, the ubiquitous, the unwelcome, / The slimy inveterate nuisance' (Borden, 2016c, p.24). Existing at the borderland between life and death, it is a furtive and destructive predator, taking charge and inflicting damage on both armies in equal measure:

> Our men have gone into it, sinking slowly, and struggling and slowly disappearing.
>
> Our fine men, our brave, strong, young men;
>
> Our glowing red, shouting, brawny men.
>
> Slowly, inch by inch, they have gone down into it,
>
> Into its darkness, its thickness, its silence.
>
> Slowly, irresistibly, it drew them down, sucked them down,
>
> And they were drowned in thick, bitter, heaving mud. (25)

An element of the mud's personification is the sexualised tone of the imagery: 'The frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid [...] / That sucks the guns down and holds them fast in its slimy voluminous lips' (24-25). Borden pays homage to those whose voracious appetite it has consumed: 'There is not a trace of them. / There is no mark where they went down. / The mute enormous mouth of the mud has closed over them' (26), reminding us of our vulnerability in the face of more powerful and aggressive desires. Lines start repetitively with anaphoric words and phrases: 'This is the song'. 'This is the mud', 'This is the hymn', flowing rhythmically in time with the undulations of the sea.

Shifting boundaries are the focus of the City in the Desert', where the booming of guns is likened to the breaking of waves. This desert has been created after the waves have receded, leaving the detritus of war in their wake. But this is a dead sea: 'No sign of life, no fish fossils, or rotting seaweed, no plant of any kind, not a blade of green; a dead sea must have lain here' (Borden, 1929a, p.73). Borden's language is resonant with the moods of the ocean: ebb tides, low and high tides, the 'roaring surge' hastening a 'new flood', a world turned upside down and where nature is inverted:

> I'm lost. I've lost my way. The road was slippery. There were no landmarks. [...] Everything was sliding in the mud and all the villages that I knew here once upon a time had slipped clean out of sight, and now all the men and horses in the world with wagons and motor lorries seem to be pouring after them into a gulf. The earth is a greased slide, tilted up and shaking. (74)

Here, the landmarks of the civilised world are upended, the environment turns alien as it loses familiar markers**.** As a result, the road is a familiar trope in the poetry of the period. In 'Trenches: St. Éloi T.E. Hulme likens the meandering route of the trenches to his own psychological state: 'My mind is a corridor. The minds about me are corridors. Nothing suggests itself. There is nothing to do but keep on' (Silkin, 1996, p.159). Edward Thomas's 'Roads' offers a world where our freedom of choice, the roads we select, and those we avoid, are removed. Here 'all roads lead to France' (97). These thoroughfares create a partition which carves up the landscape, providing an area of both retreat and advance, where combatants pass one another like ghosts.

Borden's fragmented depictions of the landscape are comparable to the dislocated and surrealist compositions of Modernist artists. Contemporaries in life and art, the names Paul Nash and Christopher Nevinson have become synonymous with illustrations of the cauterised landscapes of the Western Front. In

Shell Holes (also called *After a Push*), a disconcerting canvas inspired by Nevinson's experiences around Passchendaele, we find ourselves standing among the rain-filled craters of No Man's Land, a scene as uncanny and unfamiliar to the observer as the craters of the moon. An eerie light hangs over the horizon, on which are a line of destroyed trees and the signs of continuing shell explosions. There are no indications of life: no bodies, equipment or military paraphernalia. The scene is imbued with an unnerving sense of stillness and silence, as though we are trapped in the aftermath of an event, on the edge of the world. Borden's realm reverberates here. A comparably ominous presentation of the aftermath of destruction is eerily illustrated in the uncanny landscape of her vignette 'The City in the Desert':

> There are no trees anywhere. There is no shelter, except under the iron roofs. The place is new and still and desolate. But the wind is howling over the west desert, and the old men who go carefully up and down with their heavy oblong bundles, stop and listen to the booming sound beyond the hills as if they heard the flood rising. (77)

A similar impression is presented in *Front Line near St Quentin*. Here, the line of vertical tree stumps is replaced by a correspondingly positioned row of wiring posts, the eye directed to distant explosions. Borden describes this world of twisted metal: 'they've tied the earth down with wire. You see those intersecting bands of wire, looking like a field of tangled iron weeds and iron thistles? That is evidently to keep the mud from slipping away' (75). Artificial boundaries hold back the chaos beyond.

Two of Nevinson's slightly earlier pieces — *Flooded Trench on the Yser* and *The Road from Arras to Bapaume* — deploy a similar mise-en-scene to create a sense of vastness and desolation. In the former — a composition devoid of colour and signs of life — an abandoned trench snakes away from the foreground to the horizon, and water-logged fields merge with the grey tones of the sky. Sharp

needles of rain obscure the view. In the latter, Nevinson creates a similar landscape, but here his trench has become a road, on which the seemingly ordinary business of war is being carried out. The trucks, guns and men travel along a supply route; this is not an innocent pastoral tableau but one depicting the reality of mechanised warfare. Tree stumps and fallen branches to the sides of the road hint at an earlier existence, while the work's title implicitly queries what has become of the towns it references. Again, the boundaries between the living and the dead, order and chaos, are fragile.

Comparable impressions to those painted by Nevinson are found in Nash's work. Repeated depictions of environmental desolation and frontiers — solitary tree stumps, wire entanglements, water-logged craters and undulating mounds — denote the aftermath of shell explosions, and leave ghostly landscapes that stretch away to a flat horizon. *Mule Track* pulls us into the frame, helpless spectators of a bombardment that decimates the topography and causes pack animals to rear up in terror. Similarly, in *The Menin Road* — a vast canvas in which the thoroughfare of the title has been utterly obliterated by the apocalypse of war — the emblematic charred stumps of trees stand starkly. Concurrently pointing upwards to a darkly brooding sky and downwards to the still water, they are perfectly reflected. Shafts of light, suggestive of searchlights on the ground or the existence of planes above, break through the clouds, illuminating explosions in the distance. Soldiers, camouflaged against the muted shades of their environment, run haphazardly for cover.

Finally, Nash's vision of the aftermath of war is best demonstrated in the derisory *We are Making a New World*. This is not only a new day, but a new existence: one in which the sky has become blood red, and the landscape is an unfamiliar terrain of craters and blackened trees. The post-apocalyptic world is barren and still, shell-shocked into silence — a panorama in which physical and psychological devastation are conjoined. Here is a graveyard, strewn with the remnants of a previous existence. The skeletons of trees are associated with human remains, as though the demise of the natural world generates a fusion of mankind and the environment.

Again, the iconography of this piece is eerily reflected in the world of *The Forbidden Zone,* where the reader is bombarded with depictions of similar scenes:

> It seems a secret place, vast, spread out, bare but secret; and some strange industry, some dreadful trade is evidently being carried on here in the wet desert. (75)

Tension persists at the borderland between geographical precision and psychological emptiness: a nameless, alien and constantly moving liminal space, unfit for human habitation. We view the landscape through both a pyschogeographical and hauntological lens**.** The concept of Derrida's portmanteau creation, hauntology, suggests that we are troubled by futures that will never happen, and as such generates a sense of both nostalgia and dislocation. This element of haunting and temporality correlates with the study of trauma both in and after the war years. Empty spaces and annihilated landscapes represent a generation's lost future. The writer is a ghost, trapped in a purgatorial zone in which sensory experience can be more emotive and powerful than the reality of linear time.

The temporality of apocalyptic events — such as war — creates a liminal space: an uncomfortable and unknown in-between world. Reading war literature and artwork through the lens of spatial theory, I observe the tension that persists at the boundary between geographical precision and psychological emptiness. The borderlands of war provide a powerful chronotopic motif in which temporal and spatial order are suspended. Trenches and shell holes violate established boundaries, social conventions dissolve and disputed borders fade.

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Bordering Belonging brings together interdisciplinary perspectives on migration, memory, identity and place. Across Palestine, the Golan Heights, Poland, Morocco and the United Kingdom, the collection explores displacement and belonging, family and community, intercultural encounters, representation, and the experience of borders in everyday life.

The chapters examine how people maintain connections to places they have left, negotiate new forms of belonging, and encounter borders through relationships, institutions, cultural practices and public discourse. Together, they offer a timely and wide-ranging exploration of how movement, memory and social boundaries shape our understanding of home, identity and place.

The collection will appeal to readers interested in migration and diaspora studies, border studies, memory, identity, cultural studies and contemporary social life.

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London Centre
for Interdisciplinary Research
Unit 3A, Gateway Tower
32 Western Gateway
London, E16 1YL, UK
www.lcir.co.uk
info@lcir.co.uk