

The salience of borders in the experience of refugees

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In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate that borders have a special significance in the experience of refugees, which is, in a broad sense, characterized by their violation, at different levels, psychological, social, and political. In particular, I would like to explore the meaning, the function, and the effects of such violations, and their implications, keeping in mind the narratives of refugees who arrived from Africa and the Middle East to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, and my clinical experience as a Jungian analyst with them. Although I do not intend to approach clinical material here, this text is informed with ideas and narratives and information collected during sessions with refugee patients.

7.1 The violation of bodies and minds

In our work with refugees, the first aspect we are faced with is the sometimes shocking impact of various forms of collective violence on refugees' individual (~~physical and intrapsychic~~), interpersonal, and social life (Alberto & Chilton, 2019; Napolitano et al., 2018). The reasons to leave their country are often some form of social, political, and familial violence. Sometimes people are persecuted for their political or religious convictions or for ethnicity or family circumstances. At times, refugees are targeted because of their gender or sexual orientation. Occasionally, the violence is private, but even in such cases, it often reverberates widespread social, political, or more systemic violence.

Although the circumstances that lead to displacement vary, all of them end with an expulsion of the person from their life environment. The previous ties with family, work or school, relationships, social milieu, the natural and built environment are severed. In this banishment, there is a dimension of violence, defined or ambiguous. The etymology of violation and violence refers to *vis* = force. A force is imprinted on people's lives. This *prime mover* applies to people producing the movement that leads them to displacement, that is, to cross national borders, fleeing to migrate, seeking *asylum* or another type of *international protection*, and a new place in which to live.

7.1.1 The relationship between state violence and the body

The relation between the state and the body is complex and ambiguous. It consists of control, protection, discipline, persecution, compassion, repression, and regulation (Cameron et al., 2013; Foucault, 1975, 1976).

According to some philosophers and sociologists, the state has a foundational relation with violence. For example, Weber (1918 [1946]) maintains that in the ideal-typical social contract that links individuals, the state is supposed to protect society from violence through law and law enforcement, and in exchange, is granted a monopoly on legitimate violence. When this contract is not respected, either because security is denied or because abuse is gross, individuals may feel entitled to resist the state or even revolt against it. Such is often the case of [asylum seekers](#).

Asylum seekers' ~~bodies are often the place where the mark of power of a state is imprinted and can be retraced.~~ [All of them](#) must prove their eligibility for human and social rights and the body is often the place that displays the evidence of truth in the face of asylum determining authorities (Fassin & d'Halluin, 2005, pp. 597–598).

Thus, the body is the place of an inscription of the relationship between a group and an individual. From a developmental perspective, the body is always the place of an intersubjective meeting. Since birth, it is the crossroads of relationships; the territory of the other (recognized or rejected, imposed, idealized, or denied); and the platform of our identity (cohesive or perforated). Even the most benevolent meeting of the beginnings is a meeting with another, 'M-other' and 'Fa(o)ther', someone with whom to negotiate a differentiation that helps us draw our own boundaries and make coexisting feelings of dependence, interdependence, independence, and separation. 'Facing the reality of the body thus involves a paradox: it means simultaneously taking ownership of the body, its desires and limitations, and integrating the fact that the body is the site where we meet the other, where we negotiate the meaning of sameness and difference' (Lemma, 2010, p. 175). For this reason, the body is the place where we start drawing our own self-defining borders with respect to the other, the place of identity, of how we define ourselves.

In the beginning, the infant body is an object-subject – more an object than a subject because it is exposed to the other's will and projections – with the potential to be transformed into a subject-object – a subject with residual characteristics of an object – through the development of a mind that is [integrated with its body](#), ~~or not,~~ thanks to [thoughtful interaction with benevolent caregivers, ~~or failure of that thoughtful interaction.~~ However, this process is never completed, and the body continues to work as an object to the subject itself and others: a disputed territory between conscious and unconscious, and between me and others in relationships.](#)

It is now a stable acquisition of psychoanalytic thought that the mind needs other minds to process the parts of itself that are not integrated since its origin and those parts that possibly dissociate later in life. In other words, the psyche is not integrated at its origin and inherently dissociable, as Jung correctly comprehended (1920, 1928, 1948). However, such unintegrated and dissociated parts of the psyche cannot stand being left apart and spontaneously look for containers, as M. Klein (1946) and Bion (1962, 1967) and other authors emphasized, in order to work through undigested and non-transformed emotional contents. At the beginning, the body is the place of encounter and confrontation with an other, and through these initial interactions, if the caregiver's handling and holding (Winnicott, 1960) is appropriate, and the infant feels contained and thought about through maternal rêverie (Bion, 1963), its mind acquires the ability of thinking and creatively playing with reality and meanings. When unbearable affects cannot be digested by the caregiver's mind, they remain unintegrated and inscribed in the body as alien parts.

As infants, as much as adults, we need *containers* in which to deposit what our mind cannot integrate. These deposits are also functional to a possible working through of their contents, by means of others who, hopefully, can do something to facilitate our integration of those contents. These fundamental dynamics continue to function in adult life within the more complex and manifold matrix of social relationships. If dissociated parts of a psyche find similar dissociated parts in other people's psyches, they can become the basis for social bonds, and they can start looking for containers, often finding them in the body of socially weak subjects. This is particularly akin for the emotions triggered by trauma that seek the other's body, the body of a potential victim, to find containment, the ultimate repository of their emotional deposits. This search is what creates torture victims (Luci, 2017a, pp. 156–157) and victims of other kinds of social violence (Hollander, 2010).

7.1.2 Somatic and psychic envelopes and trauma

The 'somatic envelope' of the self, the skin, emerges almost always as violated by situations at the limit of survival: laceration scars, burn scars, dermatological diseases, and infections resulting from the violence endured before fleeing, from poor hygienic conditions or accidents or intentional violence during travel and detention in overcrowded places, and more.

After arriving at Italian shores, a refugee patient of mine used to dream he was skinless. Heartbreakingly, he recounted a dream in which his skin had been removed by a group of people who skinned him alive, and for this reason, he could neither touch nor be touched.

I would like to give theoretical substance to the idea that transformations of self, psychic and somatic, go through the skin because the skin

is the root of self. The skin and the self have a mutual relationship, and this intuition can be retraced in many theories of psychic development (Anzieu, 1989; Bick, 1987; Freud, 1923; Meltzer, 1975; Ogden, 1989; Tustin, 1991, 1992)

Sigmund Freud (1923) sees the skin as a fundamental enabler of the mind's processes and a crucial constituent of the early ego. He remarks: 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity but is itself the projection of a surface' (1923, p. 26). And in a footnote, he adds: 'The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body' (1923, p. 26). Similarly, Donald Winnicott (1960, 1975) understands the skin as an indispensable means to the infant's mind/body integration. Wilfred Bion, in his works on the 'container' and the 'contained' (1962, 1967), views the skin as the sensory-perceptual foundation of the infant's capacity for thought and thinking.

However, it was Bick's ground-breaking work on early infancy (1987) that demonstrated the importance of the surface of the body as a substratum for the genesis and structure of the self. Observing infants' behaviour and interactions, Bick came to the conclusion that they fluctuate between two primary states of mind: a state of coherence which is associated with feelings of aliveness and existence, when the caregiver is meaningfully present, and the infant will experience itself as integrated and bound and held together; and a state of in-coherence which is associated with feelings of anxiety and annihilation, when the caregiver is absent, and the infant's mind will likely be experienced as unintegrated, unbounded, and falling to pieces. Because mind and body are not felt to be in any way separate in these early months, the experience of a contained body can and will serve as the foundation for the experience of a contained mind.

If this cannot happen, then the infant fears that its self will dissolve and, ultimately, leak into a limitless space living in extreme anxiety, which results in a range of disturbed personality structures that have in common the lack of or a perforated mental skin, one experienced as precarious and full of holes.

Bick's work was further developed by her successor, the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, (1989) who built a model for what he called the *skin-ego* that emphasizes the surface of the body and its role in the creation, elaboration, and organization of the mind. The skin-ego is defined by the different senses of the body. The skin, as Anzieu pointed out, is a wrapper, a container of the child's body, but it is also a border, a security barrier between the inside and the outside; it is a place of contact and exchange with the outside world.

In his unique theoretical elaboration, Ogden reworks several of Melanie Klein's key concepts, giving a new account of the development and the working of the self. Understanding the immense importance of the skin, Ogden

extends Klein's developmental model by adding to her paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions a third one called the 'autistic-contiguous' position. By juxtaposing these two terms, Ogden intends to convey the fact that the infant's 'autistic' experience of the world – an exclusively sensorial experience of its surroundings, and no awareness of the distinction between its self and the world around it – is informed by a range of 'contiguous' sensory events – events that, over time, transform the infant from an insular being to an increasingly relational one.

The autistic-contiguous position is associated with a mode of generating an experience that is of a sensation-dominated sort, characterized by proto-symbolic impressions of sensory experience that together help constitute an experience of bounded surfaces (Ogden, 1989). In this position, the infant's relationship to its significant others is neither object-oriented (as it is in the paranoid-schizoid position) nor subject-oriented (as it is in the depressive position). Instead, the infant's relationship to its significant others in the autistic-contiguous position is 'sense-oriented' (1989, p. 32). Over time, the sensory impressions that are understood by the infant to begin and end at the body's surface give rise to the experience of a boundary between inside and outside, self and other. Indeed, even sensory impressions that are not straightforwardly tactile like, say, sights, sounds, and smells, tend to create for the infant a sense of boundary. In Ogden's understanding, this provides the infant with an incipient sense of groundedness, that is, with a sensory 'foundation' from which they can generate rudimentary forms of experience that will ultimately serve as the 'floor' of the infant's personality.

In adulthood, the self continues to use this mode of organizing the experience as a background of other psychic functions that are more in the foreground of mind.

7.2 The transgression of national borders

7.2.1 Migration routes, objectification, and confinement in closed spaces

In Africa and the Middle East and in other regions of the world, asylum seekers pass through national borders in various ways, by various means of transport, often walking, and/or putting themselves in the hands of traffickers, 'smugglers', and 'passeurs'. Initially, traffickers are often compatriots, who can communicate in local languages and recruit migrants who want to leave. At intermediate stages, they facilitate the next steps to other countries on the migration route. Sometimes, the contacts are established before the moment of departure; in other cases, they are made during the journey. The migrants must pay for many services: the transport, the advance payment that the trafficker lends them to rent a bed, the food, the bribe to the police at the various checkpoints, etc. This often results in building up a

debt towards the trafficker whose sum is not ever known. When it is not possible to continue the journey because of financial shortage, people will have to work. These moments are dramatic for exposure to a high level of violence by the employers, police, and, in unstable political contexts by different kinds of groups: a real business that exploits foreign labour or profits through extortion and kidnapping.

In recent years, more and more migrants have been imprisoned in detention centres in Libya. Libya did not sign the 1951 *Convention Related to the Status of Refugees* and does not recognize the existence of refugees. Here migrants undergo torture and truly inhuman and degrading treatment. Some detention centres are state-owned; others are run by rebels or traffickers. Here people are forced to live in overcrowded, dirty cells, without light, in unhygienic conditions, without proper food and subjected to daily beatings, torture and constant humiliation in order to extract money from their families. When this is not obtained, they are sold as slaves and employed in forced labour.

A question that arises is about the psychological meaning of this confinement and disproportionate violence perpetrated on migrants enclosed in these prisons where violence, murders, and extortions are on the daily agenda. If, as an adult, someone wants to 'skin us alive', the experience forces us to relate to a persecutory object that will result in our not being able to get rid of the grip of this persecutory bad object, and leaves us with the need to match with an ideal good object that will guarantee us the loving gaze of the other to shield ourselves. This splitting is the typical dynamic left as in-heritage of relational trauma in 'victims'. Or when the relationship is filled with interpersonal hostility and the body is the receptacle of the 'bad', 'appalling' and unacceptable parts of the other – a possible way to survive is 'to skin the other alive', that is to supplant it, 'becoming' Other. These are the kinds of dynamics we tend to find in 'perpetrators'.

In a country in the grip of chaos, divided into two and more pieces, as a matter of fact with no state, in which the ferocious violence of armed gangs and corruption are spread everywhere, there is no shortage of unbearable and unthinkable bundles of anxiety. In this context, migrants lend themselves to be used as 'objects', as concrete containers in which to put and store the most disturbing and immediately, bodily felt clots of anguish (the Other). Unbearable dread is felt as 'other within' (Kristeva, 1982), which urges to be extruded in order to restore a sense of self. For this purpose, a minority group or a group with a minority status is exploited as the Other, someone in whom to evacuate formless dread via repetition of the initial trauma and intrusion into bodily boundaries, to give pre-symbolic form to the dread that is evacuated there. This guarantees some safety from unbearable otherness. These dynamics are what creates the *abject*. Julia Kristeva (1982) develops a notion of abjection that contains both corporal and pre-objectal aspects and provides an understanding of the dynamics of social oppression. She

conceptualizes abjection as an operation of the psyche through which subjective and group identity are constituted by excluding anything that threatens one's own (or one's group's) borders. In *Powers of Horror* (1982) the abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and Other. The fear is caused by the breakdown of any distinction between ourselves and the world of dead material objects (1982, p. 207). In Libya this degradation of migrants to objects is done at the hands of criminal groups with the complicity of the civilian population.

For Anzieu, 'There is no group without a common skin, a containing envelope, which make it possible for its members to experience the existence of a group self' (1990, p. 97). The group is seen metaphorically as a 'body' with an *esprit de corps*, providing a skin for individual members (1984). Anzieu proposes that the achievement of belonging in a group happens when it overcomes its anxieties about fragmentation, often by exporting those anxieties in the direction of others. This is what gives a group its sense of being a body that is not dismembered. The primal phantasy of a group as a mother's body, previously elaborated by Bion in his Kleinian review of *Experiences in Groups* (1961), is re-elaborated by Anzieu. On the one hand, there is nurture and a physical experience of bonding and safety; on the other hand, a terror of rejection and disapproval with frightening inner consequences of loss or fragmentation of what holds firm internally and in the group (Anzieu, 1984, pp. 118–119). The population in Libya is clearly in the grip of fragmentation and anxiety of final disintegration as a large group. Lack of political consensus among the various political actors, and their inability to resolve regional differences through peaceful national dialogue resulted in two parallel civil wars raging in the east and west of Libya and recently burst out in the most ferocious way. The Civil War has been fuelled by detrimental foreign intervention, while the local actors have been justifying their conflicts under banners of fighting 'terrorism' or standing up to a 'counterrevolutionary forces' (Martinez, 2014). In this framework, migrants, once made Other and objectified at the hands of their exploiters, are the perfect containers for all the abject that circulate in the country.

After detention in Libya, for those who survive, there is the Mediterranean Sea. Libya nowadays has many actors involved in trafficking human beings. This has led to a sharp drop in prices and quality of the means of transport to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Often, in order to be able to pay for travel or simply because they are forced to do it, migrants lead the boats without any experience, increasing the risk of drifting or wrecking, also due to the high number of people present and the conflicts between different players in sea. More and more often, now that atrocities have intensified in Libya and European countries are in the grip of their internal anti-immigrant nationalisms, it happens that these boats are detected by the Libyan coast guard who takes them back to its shores where the hell starts again,

for some people several times. At other times, these boats are intercepted by ships that come to rescue, before or after a shipwreck. Rescue or recapture depend on many variables, mainly the fate and the politics on immigration of European nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Mediterranean is a concave space, a space that allows reciprocal mirroring between cultures and countries, not shaped for rejection. In addition, the sea confronts us with our vulnerability and obliges to solidarity as the Law of Sea provides. However, from time to time, countries on the Mediterranean Sea close their ports, and stiffen their borders through national politics or outsource them: for example, in Greece with the EU-Turkey agreements; in Italy with the Italian-Libyan agreements; with United Kingdom leaving the EU; Hungary raising its barbed wire and carrying its anti-immigration reasons at the European Court of Justice (with Slovakia); with Spain, the only European country with a border in Africa, that surrounds its border by triple 10-metre fences and moats, protected by frontier guards. At the same time, the debate within Europe is always on the table, and many projects for vulnerable asylum seekers continue to be financed. Discourse about human rights, rescue operations, their failures and scandals, sea tragedies, reception policies, and political debates about migrants appear in the newspaper headlines, TV talk shows, social networks, national political meetings, etc. And the populist and extreme right parties raise their barricades and evoke their ghosts in many countries. The transgression of national and European borders is a concern for public opinion and politicians.

7.3 Threatened identities in the Mediterranean: lessons by refugees

Once a week, I facilitate an empowerment group for refugees who survived torture. During one of these sessions, a spontaneous discussion developed. The members coming from African countries, the majority in this group, commented how African group identities have been profoundly altered by the arbitrary divisions of borders of the colonial period and how their own education, now purely Western, ignore local traditions. To these participants, it was very clear that by dividing people and imposing its education, Europe is still controlling the social and political life of African countries and can still exercise its influence and concern for its economic interests in the area. A cogent political analysis that implied that personal and collective identities are intrinsically connected to a group's living space, and that dividing that space and the ethnic groups living in it, implies controlling that space and those groups.

People create an identity by positioning themselves relative to other people and by giving to these relations a meaning that tends to be stable in time. For Leon and Rebecca Grinberg, identity is 'born of the continuous interaction among spatial, temporal and social integration links' (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989, p. 132), where spatial links confer a sense of cohesion to

the self, temporal links establish continuity of a sense of self over time; and social or relational links between self and other establish a sense of belonging via processes of projection and introjection. An identity guarantees the being, a person or a group, in the flux of time by linking past social relations with those in the present and in the future. All these 'constructions' allow interrupting the permanent change of social relations thus creating a shared sense of sameness (an identity) in which persons, groups or societies can see their own image reflected, despite possible internal multiplicity. If others coercively introduce new social relations that disruptively change this sense of continuity of a group, its members' identity and sense of belonging will be affected, as will the group's ability to function as a whole, producing culture, rules, and organization.

The implication of group participants was that aggressive European politics had moved their boundaries, initiating violent processes in many countries. Kast (2002) writes that the first important function of aggression is that of moving boundaries. The line that we draw with respect to our neighbour is precisely the space we claim. Europe claimed a big space in the XIX and XX centuries in other continents, especially in Africa and Middle East. If the other completely (and traumatically) invades my space or if I pervade the other's space, the tension between me and the other is completely cleared, and then aggressor and victim are bound in an enduring bond. We were or still are their aggressors (and saviours) transgressing their group borders. Conversely, at individual level, for asylum seekers, the State from which they flee is to some extent an aggressor who transgresses their personal boundaries (inflicting wounds to their bodies and minds) and our State a potential saviour (when it recognizes the right to asylum). We have a bond to them which is not accidental, but historical. In this sense, what we have done politically and economically to them is coming back.

The Western concept of 'national community' was imposed on them, and new countries were created with territorial borders that were not perceived as such by many of the old identities that continued to persist, often across the borders. However, specific social groups (or tribes, as invented by the West) who obtained power in the new states used this in order to gain access to resources that traditionally belonged to other groups. In this perspective, the migrants' transgression of national borders, arriving in Europe and claiming asylum, appears as the return of a European ghost. The etymology of the term 'asylum' (*a-sylon*) refers to a space that is 'not violable', a space protected by boundaries.

Madsen & van Naerssen (2003) notice that identities are not static but continuously (de- and re-) constructed; this implies a continuous process of bordering and 'othering' of us/them (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002). On both sides of a border, countries have identities that correspond to 'imagined communities' and nations or states are a significant cornerstone of these identities, that are made through different instruments, among which are rituals, symbols, the construction of a heroic past. This is not only the

result of top-down processes generated from formal institutions of the state, but a construction by people who are not merely passive receptors, but who play active roles in bordering and constructing identities. Social networks of parents and friends and colleagues with diverse structures and varying degrees of hierarchy and equality participate actively in this process and are important agencies for identity construction: families, local communities, religious institutions, etc. National identity is always significant, but its importance varies at different stages of a country's history, and territory may have different roles in it. During the colonial period, when nationalism was at its high point in Western Europe, national and territorial identities were of greater importance in the daily life of people than they are in today's era (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003).

Today, the EU is a supranational entity with a common past and a weak present based primarily on institutions and economics, with loose social bonds among its members. Its identity is multicentre, not based on territory but on functional and partially overlapping 'areas' and a few founding values (Luci, 2018). However, proponents of the EU have not succeeded in creating a strong sense of pan-European identity that supersedes the identities of its member states. Those national identities are tenacious and vary tremendously, ranging from relatively open ones that could accommodate diverse populations to others that create deliberate barriers to the assimilation of immigrants. The European identity needs something that goes beyond the sense of shared interests and abstract reciprocal solidarity (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 153). Collective identities are linked primarily to individuals in concrete interaction situations, emotional ties such as the sense of pride and shame become an important mechanism for reproducing such identities. Social psychology holds that the more loose and indirect social relations are, the more important become *social carriers* – objects that store the emotional and narrative meaning of collective identities (Eder, 2009, p. 5). In this sense, asylum seekers may have become our [European] *social carriers*, storage points of generalized emotions, positive and negative that are moving the boundary of our national identities (both through threat and empathy) enabling us to recombine them on the basis of a self-image as humans with respect for human rights, and also able to defend self-interest and possibly reject external threats, or contain disruptive internal pressures. If this is true, it also means that migrants, both those admitted into our protection and those painfully remaining outside it in a space of violability, are substantially contributing to building the European Union.

7.4 Conclusion

Borders have a special significance in the experience of refugees at different levels: individual (physical and intrapsychic), social, and political. The salience of borders emerges from this analysis of the self and its intimate

connection with the environment that sustains it and aims to inform it. The violation of bodies and minds and the rupture of the links with the living environment characterize the experience of asylum seekers and expose their bodies and minds to severe exploitations in exchange for a salvation hope. The search for migration routes by individuals breaches national borders through illegal crossings and implies for them new adversities, challenges, and social risks. For asylum seekers, their seeking protection also implies a painful reworking their own self and identity, which tends towards a future reconstruction of a new order of connections between the self and a new social/interpersonal and natural/built environment. However, during the journey, this search is profoundly marked by the suffering determined by violent encounters with others who bear their own wounds and psychic needs and are often inclined to search for concrete containers for their anxiety, finding them in asylum seekers' bodies. These bodies, often already degraded to being an object (of violence) by others, become the currency of exchange and compensation for perpetrators' own suffering, and containers of bundles of anxiety. They are transformed into social *abject* (Kristeva, 1982), imprisoned, isolated, and sealed off in horrible detention conditions in which even the last drop of energy is extracted from them through extortion of money, forced labour, rape, organ harvesting, etc., before ejecting them to the sea on precarious boats.

The painful events at sea, the shipwrecks, the rescues, deaths, and the related debates that take place in European politics among states and within institutions on the subject of migrant rescues at sea (and their distribution among European countries) belong to the confrontation of Europe with itself, with its past ghosts, and its own identity. If we consider this phenomenon not accidental for Europe, but as something endowed with historical meaning, we can read more clearly these debates and fears and the closure of nationalist policies that the phenomenon of refugees raises in Europe.

Borders are challenged to find a place and space in a new environment, a new self, new connections between self and the natural and social environment, and a new identity for both social actors implied in this play, a new fabric of social ties, customs, laws, belongings, and a new 'social skin'.

All these levels imply individual and social dimensions in which the self and identity are transformed through these crossings and shifts of borders.

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