

Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival



Edited by Lynda Mannik
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“**W**hat are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish?” quipped Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*. *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival* elaborates this query. This impressive collection of essays, centred on migration, borders, identities, and humanitarian ideals is both theoretically astute and ethnographically rich. Each contribution is solid and together they challenge readers to rethink the politics of migration.

Human rights became a global force with the founding of the United Nations after the Second World War, and yet this volume documents the countless ways that our humanity remains a slippery commodity, our rights a “Loose-Fish” that is fair game to take or squander. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights addresses freedom of movement and asserts in Articles 13 and 14 respectively that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own” and that “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” Refugees have been accorded a distinct legal status under international law since 1951. The principle of *non-refoulement* is an essential component of this status, articulated in the statement in Article 33(1) of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees that “no Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened.” Member states are obligated to aid asylum-seekers at their borders. The UN International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Families (adopted in 1990 and entered into force in 2003) also emphasizes that human rights apply to all migrants and their families. Despite this rhetoric of rights, sovereign nations increasingly imperil migrants and avoid humanitarian action through devious tactics that include depoliticizing migration, deflecting would-be migrants and asylum-seekers through policies of deterrence and enforcement, exorbitant visa costs, complex bureaucracies, and tightened security measures. Asylum-seekers and “irregular migrants” have been routinely returned to the desperate situations they have fled. Others are held in offshore detention camps. A rhetoric of fear, voiced by political actors and echoed in the media, presents migrants as threats to state borders and national security. The rights of refugees and migrants are further negated through strategies that result in statelessness and invisibility. Categories, such as “offshore entry persons,” “excludable aliens,” and “irregular”

or “illegal migrants” strip individuals of rights and trap migrants and asylum-seekers in a perilous limbo. Perhaps even more alarming, many of those lost at sea remain nameless and uncounted, disappeared between shores that offer only policies of violence, hopelessness, rejection, and neglect.

The chapters in *Migration by Boat* employ interdisciplinary perspectives in order to cast a wide net and bring to light the human drama of migration across bodies of water. Particular attention is focused on the perils of those who have come to be known as “boat people.” An overarching concern of contributing authors for human life and dignity and a challenge to indifference lend both urgency and timeliness to the text. Despite the right to safe passage for “ships of all States” specified by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (Article 17) and the obligation of “masters of ships” to “proceed with all possible speed to the rescue of persons in distress” (Article 98), Europe has fortified itself against migrants, militarizing its southern seaboard in an effort to deter migrant travel. Chapters in this volume estimate that some 30,000 individuals have perished trying to reach its borders by sea since 2000. This number has risen significantly since the volume went to press. Similarly, an estimated 2,000 migrants are thought to have drowned en route to Australia between 2000 and 2013. Australia has responded to asylum-seeker boats with policies of interception and detention.

Migration by Boat documents flows of migrants traveling across water and approaches this topic through creative and varied themes. Articles include a review of children’s literature on the “home children” in Canada that offers a reinvigorated appreciation for the role that children’s books play in forming a nation’s collective memory. A chapter by Kim Tao discusses efforts by the Australian National Maritime Museum to restore and display the Vietnamese fishing boat *Tu Do*—a boat that brought 31 refugees to Australia in 1977 after the fall of Saigon. Tao offers a riveting account of the boat-builder’s daring flight and 3,700-mile journey from Vietnam to Australia and demonstrates the power that material artifacts hold in communicating ideals of freedom and courage. Tao also notes that such stories of heroic perseverance can help shape public opinion regarding contemporary border policies. A chapter by volume editor Lynda Mannik details events surrounding the arrival of the *Amelie*, a freighter crowded with Sikh refugees, that

dropped anchor in the tiny fishing hamlet of Charlesville, Nova Scotia, in 1987. Some village residents greeted the refugees with sandwiches and tea before they were “whisked away and relocated” by government agents. Mannik revisits the “social drama” that ensued, contrasting an overwhelmingly negative discourse of breached borders and national threat with the simple hospitality offered by Charlesville residents. In a similar juxtaposition, Linda Briskman and Michelle Dimasi detail efforts by residents of the Australian Territory of Christmas Island to rescue men, women, and children from the wreck of the *Janga*, an asylum-seeker boat that was dashed to pieces in stormy weather. While dominant Australian narratives cast shipwrecked migrants as unwelcome invaders, residents of Christmas Island reacted with compassion and sought to aid and comfort survivors. Articles on art installations and performances, museum exhibits, the protests of mothers of migrant children “disappeared” in transit, as well as discussions of works of fiction help to clarify the often nightmarish labyrinth of hostility and fleeting moments of hospitality encountered by asylum-seekers. The volume is organized in four sections: “Embedded Memories for Public Consumption,” “The Artist and the Illegal Migrant,” “Media, Politics and Representation” and “Stories of Smuggling, Trauma and Rescue.”

The breadth of topics in this volume holds the reader’s attention while maintaining an unwavering focus on the most basic rights of life and liberty. The slipperiness of human rights, however, lies in the fact that sovereign states are responsible for creating the infrastructure through which these rights are made possible. Readers may desire more emphasis on the structural violence that propels desperate citizens to risk all on the open seas or the smug complicity of those who fortify their borders and darken the lighthouses, orchestrating crimes against humanity as

“accidents.” To the editor’s credit, no single, simple cause or solution is presented. Readers will do well to consider the entire volume and to reflect on the powerful image of boats made of rotted planks, weighted beyond capacity with the fragile aspirations of our children. Who has the courage to offer safe harbour? The authors assembled here are not counting on sovereign states to take the lead.

This is a collection that is both useful (for classroom or curatorial purposes) as well as transformative. Authors draw on nearly a century of social science theory, including Hannah Arendt, Victor Turner, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Derrida, without contrivance or pretense. But perhaps the most satisfying quality in this collection results from the ways that each author engages a community beyond academia. There is a prevailing concern for actions, metaphors, or images that transform. Too often, when grave violations of human rights are acknowledged at all, readers are left with a sense of helpless despair. How can safe migration be facilitated? How can new arrivals be incorporated into the social body and national identity? These chapters detail specific effects that individual acts, narratives, protests, exhibits, or performances can have, shifting public perception and, perhaps, changing public policy. The volume seeks to make visible those who have been lost at sea or swallowed in the gaps and holes of global discourses of population management, national identity, and state security. It also charts immediate and strategic ways in which individuals and their communities might hold fast the Rights of Man after all, even in these turbulent and cynical times.

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Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto



Eric Tang

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Eric Tang’s *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* is an important contribution to the literature on Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. As the title conveys, the book challenges the image of Cambodian refugees in the Bronx section of New York City as “saved,” or resettlement as a “solution,” either to the war in Indochina or to what Tang characterizes as a “veritable war” against the poorest residents of America’s

cities. The term *hyperghetto*, which Tang takes from sociologist Loïc Wacquant, refers to the idea that the poorest urban residents are no longer seen as useful by the state or corporate America. Instead of being recruited into the lowest levels of the workforce, they can only be held captive, imprisoned by harsh regulation in the welfare system and physically disciplined and controlled by an increasingly militarized police.¹