THE BOY ON THE BEACH: THE FRAGILITY OF CANADA'S DISCOURSES ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE 'CRISIS'

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Abstract

The contours of Canadian refugee policies have in recent years fluctuated from a narrative of 'bogus' refugees requiring a tough approach of interdiction to one of urgent humanitarian assistance. These rapid discursive shifts highlight the fragility of how Canada's humanitarian responses, and its place in the world, are conceptualized. Using the case study of Canada's responses to the Syrian conflict, this short paper argues that state responses must be critically interrogated in order to move away from homogenizing narratives grounded in tropes such as *'fear'*, *'floods'* and *'crisis'*, which continue to impact how state, media, and public discourse handle the influx of refugees. Examining how the Canadian state performs its sovereignty in response to the Syrian conflict is instructive to reveal its broader nation-building projects, ones which utilize particular tropes of fear to justify suspicion and exclusion of bodies that have been cast as dangerous and uncontrollable. While Canada is once again presenting itself as a global leader in refugee and human rights issues, it remains to be seen whether these more humane policies can withstand the continuing millennial border anxieties of the West when facing the prospect of resettling increasingly large numbers of refugees.

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You broke the ocean in
half to be here.
only to meet nothing that wants you.
- Immigrant
"Poem" by Nayyirah Waheed (2013)

The image of 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi's tiny lifeless body lying on a Turkish beach sears into the memory, impossible to forget (Moyer 2015). However, the striking image also highlights the fragility of discourses around refugees and migrants and the media's power to quickly galvanize a progressive and timely response to an ongoing conflict that had previously attracted minimal attention in countries like Canada. Refugee movements provide unique opportunities to examine both the policies on migration, and the often-unspoken assumptions that motivate them. The Canadian state performs its sovereignty by utilizing particular tropes of fear to justify suspicion and exclusion of bodies that have been cast as dangerous and uncontrollable, when facing the prospects of resettling increasingly large numbers of refugees.

The contours of Canada's refugee policy are shaped not only by government goals and international obligations but also by media discourses and public opinion. Policy directions wax and wane in line with the discourses that are most prevalent, and policy itself influences public, private, and popular conversations (see Molnar Diop 2014; Ahmed 2004). Particularly in recent years, we have seen a fluctuating discussion, from a narrative of 'bogus' refugees requiring a tough approach of interdiction to one of urgent humanitarian assistance, welcomed by refugee advocates and the general public. Unfortunately, the conversation seems to have now circled back to fear and insecurity in the wake of recent terrorist attacks abroad and the complex realities of Syrian refugee resettlement (see also Showler 2015, Ball 2015).

The production and dissemination of information, knowledge, and policy is a political exercise. Complex situations such as protracted refugee crises are often compressed into palatable sound bites. These simplifications can results in starkly different responses: sympathetic outpourings of grief or blanket suspicion against migrants (particularly Muslim migrants), leading to violence. Importantly, the rapid discursive shifts in Canada's refugee policies highlight the fragility of how Canada's humanitarian responses and its place in the world are conceptualized. Examining how the Canadian state performs its sovereignty in response to the Syrian conflict reveals its broader nation-building projects. These projects mute the rich diversity of human migration by drawing on fears associated with uncontrollable and dangerous bodies and selectively welcome those that serve the state's political objectives. For Canada, it remains to be seen whether the Syrian conflict will be more than a hot-button political issue or whether it can become an opportunity to critically interrogate broader state policies towards refugees and shed light on current nation building policies that continue to perpetuate selective exclusion.

"Not in our backyard:" History of Canada's Immigration System

Canada historically positions itself as a leader in refugee protection and resettlement. To uphold its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 *Refugee Convention,* Canada has indeed resettled significant numbers of refugees over the past few decades. However, Canada also has a long and troubled history of excluding those migrants it deems unwelcome.

Canada has welcomed large groups of refugees in the latter half of the twentieth century: 37,000 Hungarians fleeing the Soviet invasion in 1956; 11,000 Czechoslovakians following

Prague Spring in 1968 (Aiken 2001); 7,000 South Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972; and 7,000 dissidents escaping the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile after 1973 (Macklin 2015). The nation also resettled about 60,000 Vietnamese between 1978 and 1980 (Macklin 2015, see also Fisk 2015). These significant efforts resulted in the Canadian people being awarded the *Nansen Medal* in 1986 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the only nation-state to-date to have received the accolade (Canadian Council for Refugees 2009).

However, not all migrants were viewed as equally deserving of refuge and Canada's immigration and refugee policies have also expressed racially and ethnically exclusionary practices. There was the imposition of the Chinese 'head-tax' and the internment of Japanese migrants during World War II (Aiken 2001). Canada also turned away ships bearing refugees, such as the Sikhs on the *Komagata Maru* in 1914 (Khazimi 2012) and Jewish refugees on the *St. Louis* in 1939 (Macklin 2015). The potential for hysteria that surrounds the docking of unwelcome human cargo at Canada's sea ports can also be seen in the treatments of Sri Lankan Tamil refugee claimants, on the *MV Sun Sea* and *MV Ocean Lady* in 2008 and 2009 (see for example Fong 2010; Jiwani 2010). Some Tamil families, including women and children, were detained for years, far away from access to community supports, lawyers, and psycho-social services. The Tamil refugees were publically linked with terrorism threats and human smuggling by the Conservative government of the time. They were presented as not 'legitimate' refugees, despite a large number of them having received official refugee status through Canada's own refugee determination processes (Fong 2010; Mann 2009).

In the aftermath of 9/11, the increased focus on national security and prevention of terrorism as legitimate state goals, resources have been diverted to strengthen border enforcement and to decrease the number of refugees and asylum seekers, rather than aid in resettlement and integration (see also Hyndman 2009). As the state became preoccupied with rooting out terrorists, the 'refugee' became coterminous with the figure of the 'migrant'; one who comes undeservingly to fleece Canada's state and take advantage of its purported benevolence (Aiken 2001, 14). Now again, in response to the Syrian conflict, Canada's stance is shifting and the emergent tropes of 'fear' and 'crisis' illustrate how the state performs its sovereignty in strategic ways, to further its particular changing ideological agenda.

Canada's Response to the Syrian Conflict

The recent change in federal leadership in Canada highlights the divergent responses of the former Conservative government and the new Liberal government, which clearly illustrate how powerful images and narratives are exploited by particular governments to support particular ideologies. However, even the more 'sympathetic' response of the new Canadian government reveal how millennial anxieties about uncontrollable flows of migrants, impacts on the performance of the state as it seeks to redefine itself once again as a humanitarian leader on the world stage. As we shall see, Canada's refugee responses are not static but highly contingent. State responses to the Syrian conflict have shifted from suspicion to sympathy and then back again, highlighting the fragility of policy direction which is shaped by powerful discourses about nation building, securitization, and the ever-present threat of the Other – the unmitigated and uncontrollable influxes of migrants.

From "Bogus" to "Terrorist:" Conservative Responses to Refugees

Under Stephen Harper's Conservative government, the policy towards refugees and immigrants was largely exclusionary and unwelcoming. The government tapped into discourses of 'bogus' and 'fraud' (Kenney 2012), to garner support for its hard-line approach. It cast particular groups of refugees, such as the Roma, as unfounded refugees out to abuse the Canadian system and used this justification to bring in sweeping legislative reforms (see also Molnar Diop 2014). Some of these legislative and policy changes were subsequently challenged and struck down as unconstitutional, including the denial of health care to asylum seekers (Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care 2015). The Harper government also actively withheld information on its response to the Syrian conflict. Until the Fall of 2015, it was unclear how many Syrian refugees had been brought to Canada, and journalists reported many roadblocks to obtaining such statistics which should have been available in the public realm (Petreau 2015).

However, in September 2015, an image enflamed the dormant debate in Canada and the conversation shifted. The image of drowned toddler Alan galvanized the public. The media and the public started pressing for information on the Harper government's response to the Syrian crisis. Numerous investigations brought serious problems to light, such as the Harper government actively limiting the number of Syrian refugees who could come to Canada to a few thousand; intervening in UNHCR resettlement processing; and creating internal prioritization systems based on problematic grounds such as business background (Friesen 2015a) and religion (Lynch 2014).

At the same time, the links being formed between Syrian refugees and terrorists were becoming apparent. *The Globe and Mail* reported that intake of Syrian refugees was halted while the Conservative government audited claims of 1,300 refugees already vetted by the UNHCR on the grounds of suspicions of terrorism (Friesen 2015b). A Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) official told *The Toronto Star* that the audit was sparked by unsubstantiated reports that Islamic State fighters were 'actively' trying to infiltrate the flood of migrants and make their way to western countries (Campion-Smith and Keung 2015).

In the context of the 2015 federal election, Conservative politicians also publically linked Syrians fleeing persecution with terrorism. Joe Daniel, Conservative candidate for Don Valley North, claimed that there is a 'Muslim agenda' in the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe that he does not want to see replicated in Canada (Harper 2015). Also, former cabinet minister Peter Kent tweeted a photograph alleging two Syrian asylum-seekers were actually Islamic terrorists in disguise, which has since been debunked by the BBC as a forgery (Omar 2015). In response, Amnesty International Canada condemned the association of Syrian refugees with Islamic terrorism as 'yet one more chapter…of hearing from our government this kind of ugly, poisonous terminology when talking about refugees as "bogus", as "cheats", as "threats" and spreading this sense that we need to be suspicious and restrictive' (Ball 2015). The UNHCR also cautioned that the biggest global challenge has become 'populist politics and toxic public debates, and the climate of fear they engender' (UNHCR 2015). Throughout the 2015 Canadian election campaign, events in Syria inspired polarized debates and Canada's response to the Syrian conflict became a determinative issue in the federal election.

From Sympathy Back to Suspicion: Liberal Responses to Syrian Refugees

Since coming to power in October 2015, the Liberal government has made a number of positive policy changes to cement its position as a leader on the refugee front, and to show

a more welcoming side of Canada after years of hard-line policies. The Liberal government committed to resettling 25,000 refugees by early 2016 (Government of Canada 2015). It also rectified the Harper government's policy of denying healthcare to refugees by immediately reinstating universal access (CBC News 2015). Ultimately, the Liberal government positioned the Canadian response to the Syrian conflict as a hallmark of Canadian hospitality, the perfect issue to reintroduce traditional Canadian diplomacy on the world stage, after years of conservative policies that distanced Canada from its human rights defending image.

However, the current policies are also bound up with Canada's nation building projects and further perpetuate the discourse of fear around Syrian and other refugee groups. Coinciding with the Paris attacks, the Liberal government made a number of statements that suggested that it would prioritize women and complete families to the exclusion of single men (Kinsley 2015). The assumption and implication was that that single Middle Eastern men are a greater security risks and should be feared because they fit the stereotype of likely terrorist (Kinsley 2015). The government has since back-pedaled and stated that it will consider all cases of protection risks, including for example single men from sexual minority groups. However, it continues to be unclear what happens in cases that are complex. For example, what happens if the single refugee man is a widower, like Abdullah Kurdi, the father of the drowned boy? What about a youth separated from his family? What about a war-wounded amputee without family supports? These resettlement policies obliterate the nuances and heterogeneity of experience when dealing with the resettlement of Syrians to Canada.

Ultimately, this second shift in conversation also aligns with the conflicted understanding of refugees both as victims of conflict and terror, but also linked to it. By virtue of their origins, faiths, ethnicities, and associations with danger, refugees are cast as the ultimate Other. These associations cause physical as well as conceptual harm: in November 2015, following the events in Beirut and Paris, Toronto saw a random attack on a Muslim mother who was simply picking up her children from a Toronto primary school. She was told to 'go back to your country' (Nielsen, Shum, and Miller 2015). Likewise, a mosque was torched in Peterborough, Ontario, an event later classified by police as a hate crime (Perkel 2015). Another mosque was defaced twice in Alberta (Rieger 2015). Clearly, there was a 'shift from sympathy to suspicion' (Showler 2015) in the span of the weeks between Alan's death and the bombings in Paris and Beirut.

More recently, to counteract these hateful narratives, Syrian refugees who have been successfully resettled to Canada, have had to repeatedly publically reiterate how 'grateful' they are to be here, even as they were pepper sprayed at a welcoming ceremony (Omand 2016) or while they continue to wait in cramped Toronto hotels until more permanent housing options are found (Martin 2016). Migration is construed as a privilege and not a universal human right (see also Carens 2014) and those selected for resettlement are positioned as the lucky ones who have passed the test of being 'vulnerable enough' of deserving Canada's protection. The dominant discourse is that these refugees *should* be grateful because they are here at the benevolent behest of Canada, once more upholding the trope of Canada's generosity without interrogating the complexity of resettling a large number of refugees after years of inaction during Conservative governance.

Migration Management Regimes in Times of 'Crisis'

The ongoing shifts in Canada's policies regarding the Syrian conflict show how state performativity and its responses to the refugee 'crisis' are inherently tied to nation building projects (Ahmed 2004; Appadurai 2006). By employing a particular discourse that casts the refugee as the

ultimate Other, state, media and the public continually gravitate towards contentions headlines firmly rooted in a binary: we are either sympathetic to the plight of the Syrian refugees or else we are suspicious of the ongoing influx. Ultimately, Canadian migration policies function as a way to discipline the wider populace (see also Zambelli 2012), in line with the global regimes of migration management predicated on this binary. These regimes make migrants controllable and place migrants' rights at the bottom of the hierarchy. By selecting which refugees 'deserve' to be resettled over others, the state is performing its ultimate sovereign power over the control, management and exclusion of migrants on its soil (Ahmed 2004), choosing populations that advance its political goals while excluding others that are construed dangerous, uncontrollable or only temporarily useful, such as migrant workers.

Importantly, as Andreas reminds us, 'public perception is powerfully shaped by the images of the border which politicians, law enforcement agencies and the media project' (2009, p.9). In unstable times and ongoing instances of threat, the very powerful trope of Western 'innocence' positions the benevolent welcoming nations as constantly besieged by outside tides and waves of irregular migrants, terrorists and human smugglers (Buck-Morss 2002). The creation of a particular form of 'we' justifies attacks on refugees on the ground of needing to uphold our ideals of freedom, democracy and the Western way of life. Affective responses lie at the heart of the discourses that mobilize popular beliefs and bolster cultural constructions of perceived enemies (see Ahmed 2004; Buck-Morss 2002; Balibar 2009). In a performance of its sovereignty in response to dangerous times, the Canadian state continually justifies the control and management of certain bodies over others.

Border anxieties that designate which bodies matter and who the perceived enemies are, highlight the millennial hopes and fears of the West in an unstable world (see also Molnar Diop 2014; Stewart and Harding 1999). The bodies of migrants carry the burden of our fears and they have become useful in bolstering migration management regimes (Ahmed 2004). Importantly, through these regimes, migrants also lose their individuality and become interchangeable for one another. As Ahmed explores, 'the figure of the bogus asylum seeker is detached from particular bodies: *any* incoming bodies could be bogus, such that their "endless" arrival is anticipated as the scene of "our injury"' (2004, p.123). Since any migrant body can be a source of threats, they become a global object of fear. Tropes of 'flood', 'waves', and 'crisis' come to define the discourses of state responses to mass migration. Even the mainstream media has now picked up on this phenomenon, as highlighted by the Public Radio International piece on journalists and politicians across the globe, resorting to describing the arrival of refugees in these 'apocalyptic terms' (Goyette, 2016).

Apocalyptic terminology, is however, appealing because it inheres rather persuasively on the seemingly uncontrollable masses of migrants and plays up the anxiety of the sovereign state. Migrants are perceived as dangerous precisely because they are difficult to control and must therefore be appropriately managed. There is a profound fear of mobility and of the uncontrollable because 'the asylum seeker is "like" the terrorist, an agent of fear, who may destroy "our home"' (Ahmed, 2004, p.127) and our way of life. As state sovereignty becomes more contested, the maintenance of state power becomes predicated on having to guard against actual and perceived violence, which is often 'transmitted through rumours, tales and reputations' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, p.4). The border, both the physical space as well as the borders construed through policies of exclusion, is a particular locale where sovereignty intersects with notions of threat, security and power (De Genova 2002; Heyman 2004; Linde-Laursen 2010). As such, the authority of the state and its legitimacy must be constantly supported by controlling the unclean, uncontrollable, dangerous, and disruptive bodies threatening this performance of sovereignty,

even as Canada works to redefine its role on the world stage as a leader in refugee management.

Conclusion: The Danger of a Single Story

The politics that manage migration, re-circulate contentious discourses which oversimplify the narrative, muting important complexities in the rich diversity of human migration. In Alan Kurdi's case, the printing of this particular image of a dead baby became a macabre catalyst for progressive change. However, there is the danger that the re-circulation of emotionally charged stories without critical discussion can result in disastrous misapprehensions and dangerous conflations. New governments, powerful pictures and shifting popular opinions reveal the speed with which policy responses towards refugees change. Refugee advocates and the majority of the Canadian public have welcomed the Liberal government's abrupt turnaround. Yet, the speed of this monumental policy change highlights the incredible fragility of refugee resettlement policies. Bolstered by media responses that tug at the heartstrings but offer neither nuance nor substance, there is a danger that the public will become oversaturated and that the image of a dead baby on the shore will no longer register an impact. The worst case scenario is a collective retreat to linking *all* refugees with terrorism and security threats.

One way to guard against the dangers of a single story (Adichie 2009) is to critically interrogate state policies towards refugees. In real terms, this means that we must seek out individual experiences in the production and sharing of information and knowledge, rather than resorting to homogenizing very diverse experiences. Highlighting the complexity of refugee crises, personal stories put faces on the otherwise indiscernible mass of humanity waiting for resettlement. The motivation to personalize refugees is not only grounded in the need to heighten compassion and to change the 'single story,' but because not doing so can have life or death impacts on thousands of innocent people fleeing the very terror that we are told we must guard against.

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