Madison Murphy

Professor Naous

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# Crossing Borders By Land and Seas:

## How Strict Border Policies Create Danger & Migrant Vulnerability

*The Guardians* by Ana Castillo and *What Strange Paradise* by Omar El Akkad reflect the tragic reality of our society, where immigration and migration have become criminalized, and governments are attempting to push people away from crossing borders. In *The Guardians*, we see the issues that occur along the United States-Mexico border as we learn the story of undocumented teen, Gabo, his aunt Regina, and the rest of his family who were killed while migrating for work. In *What Strange Paradise*, we experience the journey of a young boy, Amir, after he follows his uncle onto a boat of refugees seeking safety by fleeing to a Greek island. Though these novels take place in different parts of the world and explore different methods of and reasons for migration, both reflect the extreme measures migrants must go to to have a chance at a new life, and how they are more subject to extreme conditions, violence, and overall vulnerability as they are forced to take riskier routes to avoid the ones that have become heavily militarized. Criminalizing migration not only fails to stop people from crossing borders, but it actively increases their risk of harm, as shown in both Castillo and El Akkad's novels, proving that severe immigration policies are more about controlling, othering, and dehumanizing migrants than safety or order.

As migration is criminalized and borders are becoming more difficult to pass through, people are forced to travel by way of hazardous routes where the natural environment, like

deserts and oceans, becomes deadly. One scholar points out how, through her story writing, Castillo "spotlights how US efforts to treat its border with Mexico as a dividing line between discrete nations, when people have always migrated across and the two economies are mutually dependent, creates conditions for criminal activity along the border that yields violence and death" (Szeghi 405). When official roads and paths are guarded in attempts to stop people from passing over the border, it only reroutes them. They are given no choice but to face the secluded, high-risk environment with no true path marking their way. In *The Guardians*, Regina mentions many times the dangers of the desert, everything from animal bites to freezing, as well as a personal experience from a time she and her family were crossing the desert and became so dehydrated they "had no choice but to drink [their] own urine. It is disgusting to admit, but it saved [them]" (Castillo 87). The fact that they had to do something they found repulsive shows how severe the situation was, and the dehydration directly reflects how harsh the environment is and how long they were out there. This desperate act shows that Regina and her family had no other options. No one would choose such a horrible journey unless forced to.

This issue of being forced into dangerous environments is not only seen on land, but also in the sea, like in *What Strange Paradise*. At some point in their trip, Amir noticed the boat engine had stopped (El Akkad 191), and when the storm hit, the boat could not withstand it and "A deep cracking sound emerged from somewhere below, the hull giving way" (El Akkad 214). The boat that Amir and the others were placed on to cross the Mediterranean was not fit to make that journey, which resulted in many casualties. Though it is a fictional story, this problem is a very real one. Smugglers purposefully choose ill-equipped boats because "the EU-led anti-smuggling Operation Sophia began destroying vessels in 2015, [so] the incentive to purchase cheaper disposable rafts has increased" (Hoffmann Pham and Komiyama 7). This

operation, meant to prevent smugglers from bringing migrants to shore, has failed to do that and has simultaneously created a new problem. Not only is the destruction of vessels directly putting the migrants aboard them in harm's way, but it is also enticing smugglers to choose a much riskier means of travel. Smugglers know the military personnel are patrolling close to the shore and what they will do to their boats. Since they do not want to repeatedly spend money on replacing larger, safer boats, they are willing to risk lives. It has been noted that "Over 30,000 migrants have died in the Mediterranean Sea since the early 1990s…IOM data indicate that the deadliest year was 2016, with over 5,000 deaths" (Pécoud 380). This migrant route across the Mediterranean has always been deadly, but the increase in casualties the year after Operation Sophia was put in place reflects how much of an impact the attempts to stop migration can have on the level of risk migrants face.

The physical passage of migrants is just the beginning of the problem considering migrants that are pushed into informal and hidden paths become far more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and violence from smugglers and traffickers. In *The Guardian,* Regina shares how Gabo's mother was found in the desert among three other women and "All four had been mutilated for their organs" (Castillo 4). She also explains that when migrants are in the desert, they're "at the mercy of not just [their] coyote but all coyotes, all traffickers prowling out there for the victims of poverty and laws against nature" (Castillo 118). There are people involved in organized crime who are aware of the migrants' vulnerability in the middle of the desert and are able to take advantage of their discreet travels. In *What Strange Paradise,* a human smuggler tells Amir's uncle "We're happy to pay his fare if you can't, but then he's not yours anymore. He's ours, and we have a right to recoup our costs" (El Akkad 58). No matter the location, the smugglers take advantage of migrants' desperation and see it as a business opportunity. If

migrants try to travel on their own terms, whether it be by land or sea, they are risking repercussions from coyotes or smugglers. Scholars explain that when rejecting access for migrants, "governments of receiving states create the conditions for a parallel and illegal market to develop…The outcome of migration control is not the decline of migration flows, but the transformation of these flows from a formal state-monitored process to an informal and illegalized process—with all the dangers that this entails" (Pécoud 38). There is no way for a government to stop people from migrating to their country. Whether it is legal or not, people are still going to do it, and by refusing to allow people to do it the legal way, it just becomes far more dangerous and gives space for organized crime groups to step in and take advantage of the already vulnerable.

On top of the endangerment of migrants, criminalizing migration also dehumanizes them, framing them as numbers in statistics rather than individual people with unique identities. All too frequently, migrant travels are invisible due to their need to remain undetected by the government. This endangers them because, like Regina says in *The Guardians*, "When you try to come over with no papers and vanish, there won't be any dogs or search parties called out…" (Castillo 117). This passage emphasizes the likelihood of undocumented people going missing. Unfortunately, because they are forced into remote locations and the government is unaware of them, it can go unnoticed that they are missing. And when, or even if, they are found, there may be no way of identifying them; they just become another number to the government. This concept is echoed in the opening of *What Strange Paradise* when El Akkad writes "The child lies on the shore. All around him the beach is littered with the wreckage of the boat and the wreckage of its passengers…Dispossessed of nightfall's temporary burial, the dead ferment indecency" (El Akkad 3). The imagery and use of the terms "litter" and "indecency" create a

disturbing scene where the victims lack identity and dignity and are nothing more than debris on the beach. One analysis of El Akkad's novel says "the characters in the novel are precarious, fickle, self-reflexive, and primarily uneasy about framing their identities…for the characters are burdened by unresolved questions about their unreconciled past and unrelieved present and future" (Askar 42). Migrants are unable to define their own identities because they are stuck somewhere between their pasts that they had to escape from and a new, unwelcoming destination that either wants to define them as criminals or never learns of their identity and treats them as statistical data. This reading reinforces the idea that with the criminalization of migration, migrants are stripped of their identities and perceived as just numbers.

Overall, both authors, Castillo and El Akkad, challenge anti-immigrant rhetoric and are not afraid to question the consequences of strict immigration policies. Castillo does this outright when she has Regina question "What if this country accepted outright that it needs the cheap labor from the south and opened up the border?" (Castillo 29). This one question says so much. Migrants have always, and will continue to, cross borders to do the jobs nobody else wants to do. She is expressing that trying to stop migration is only causing people to risk their lives for work, but if governments allowed a little more openness along the border, it would benefit both the state's economy and the migrants. Castillo also writes Miguel's perspective as "The Border Patrol not only has million-dollar stadium lighting; they have motion sensors, helicopter sweeps and night-vision goggles. They are better equipped for combat than the boys at war" (Castillo 124). One understanding of this passage is that Miguel is "exposing the national narrative of border security as a lie, a cover-up of the actual war against subalternized 'others'" (Poks 136). Castillo's choice to make the comparison between war and the border reflects the extremities of the border patrol, and the fact that they are equipped for war deeply emphasizes how far they will

go to keep migrants out. El Akka does not critique the system as outright, but it has been noted that his "novel is a fictionalised rendition of the occurrence of the Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on the Greek seashore after a journey on one of the death boats in 2015" (Askar 41). By creating a fictional piece so closely related to a real event, especially one that gained so much attention in the public eye, he is pointing out the tragedies caused by restrictions on migration. He is prompting readers to remember this tragedy and consider why it happened, why there was not an easier way for a young child fleeing war and violence to be given refuge. Through fictional stories, these novelists can represent and analyze the problems our world has dealt with for so long.

Both *The Guardians* by Ana Castillo and *What Strange Paradise* by Omar El Akkad offer powerful narratives that explore the troubling realities of migration in our often unsympathetic world. These novels and supporting articles reveal how criminalizing migration does not prevent it from happening, but only creates a greater chance of risk for migrants through their dangerous journeys, exploitation, and dehumanization. By enforcing harsher immigration policies, migrants are forced to move under the radar, and this will continue to happen because migration will always happen, whether documented or not. As we see in themes throughout both Castillo and El Akkad's works, these policies reflect a larger idea: control is prioritized over human lives, and the strict policies and their consequences only reinforce the notion that migrants are expendable. The stories of Gabo's family and Amir reflect the real-world facts, and together, they call attention to the need to reevaluate immigration policies and consider ones that will recognize that immigrants and migrants are valued humans seeking a better life.

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