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**Publication date**

2015

**Document Version**

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

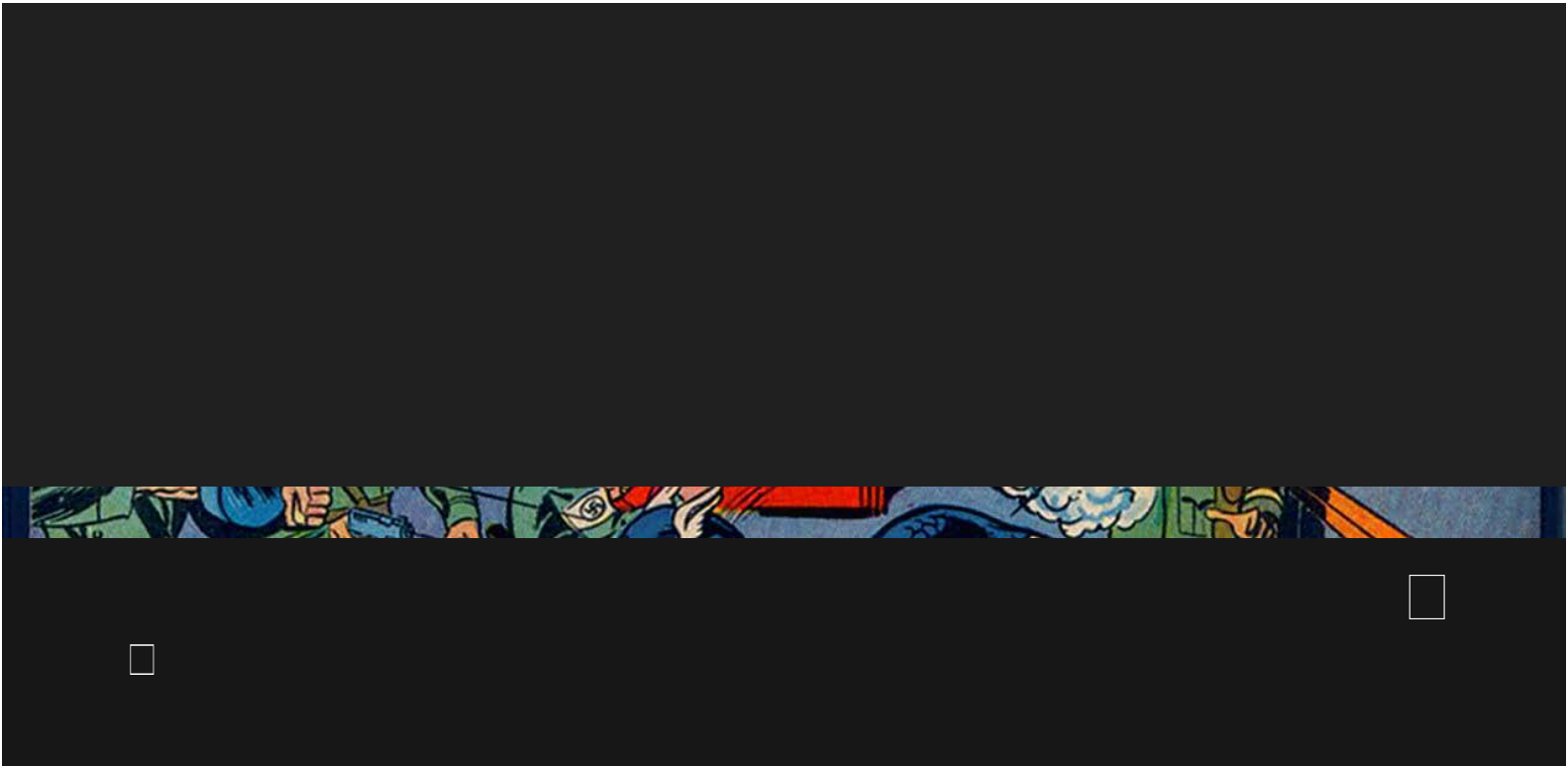
Pallister-Wilkins, P. (Author). (2015). There's A Focus On The Boats Because The Sea Is Sexier Than The Land: A Reflection on the Centrality of the Boats in the Recent 'Migration Crisis'. Web publication/site, The Disorder of Things.  
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## There's A Focus On The Boats Because The Sea Is Sexier Than The Land: A Reflection on the Centrality of the Boats in the Recent 'Migration Crisis'

DECEMBER 9, 2015 / GUEST AUTHORS



A guest post from Polly Pallister-Wilkins, [Assistant Professor in Political Science at the University of Amsterdam](#). Polly's work broadly sits in the borderlands between International Relations, Critical Security Studies and Political Geography. More specifically she specialises in the intersection of humanitarian intervention and border control. Her current research is concerned with what she terms 'humanitarian borderwork' building on previous research into

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humanitarianism, border policing and the political sociologies of walls, fences and security barriers. Her regional areas of focus are the Mediterranean, specifically Greece, and the Middle East. She has been an assistant professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Amsterdam since 2012 after undertaking her doctoral research at SOAS, University of London. Recent work has appeared in *International Political Sociology* and *Geopolitics*. She is also the editor of a forthcoming forum in *Mediterranean Politics* on the 'Migration Crisis'.



I grew up watching *Baywatch*. Saturday evenings were the highlight of my week. All that sun, sea, sand and heroics. This may account for my poor bastardisation—and for this I apologise—of [Warsan Shire's evocative verse](#). In addition I am not suggesting that all focus is on the boats that transport people and the sea they cross even as journeys and modes of travel become a central theme in border and mobility policing and the study thereof. I am labouring under artistic license here.

The appearance of search and rescue operations (SAR) in the Mediterranean and Aegean—beyond those undertaken continuously by commercial vessels and the daily routines of state coastguards—is, [Cap Anamur](#) aside, a relatively new phenomenon. The [Migrant Offshore Aid Station \(MOAS\)](#) was the first non-state actor to engage in humanitarian driven SAR in 2014, joined in 2015 by [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#) and later [Seawatch](#) in the southern Mediterranean. These actors are also present in the Aegean, a wholly different operating environment, with smaller SAR vessels, where they operate amongst a plethora of other groups and individuals focused on responding to the danger of the boat journeys of people on the move.

I have the utmost respect for those engaged in a range of practices that I call humanitarian borderwork. These humanitarian borderworkers, mostly volunteers, work tirelessly to alleviate the violence of a European border regime that makes safe and legal travel an impossibility for those seeking life. These people step in and step up to provide assistance for people on the move where Europe, its member states and its large-scale humanitarian organisations, so used to acting the sovereign and intervening elsewhere beyond the borders of Europe, have failed.

However, unreflective do-gooding can be a dangerous thing as countless examples from history show us. To what extent do these folk step in and step up in recognition that it is Europe's own border regime that causes so much suffering and death? To what extent does this humanitarian borderwork translate into political action beyond the spatio-temporally limited moment of emergency immanent in the boat migration in the Aegean and southern Mediterranean? In thinking about these questions what is clear from my recent research experiences in the 'field' is that such humanitarian action does not always translate into political action that can begin to challenge the structural causes of boat migration, which is entirely avoidable.

This, then, is an attempt at reflection. An attempt to shift the gaze beyond the sun, sea, sand and heroics and question why these practices dominate both on the ground in terms of humanitarian practices and much of the debate about 'what needs to and can be done'. This reflection is part of my [on-going research into humanitarian borderwork](#) and draws on recent observations of a range of practices from the beaches of Greece to the offices and [conference tables of humanitarian organisations](#) and political ministries. In this research and through my own experiences in the field I have grown increasingly frustrated with the focus on the 'sea' as 'the' time and space of intervention and assistance.

This is not to say that those life-seekers getting into overloaded rubber dinghies in Turkey or knackered old fishing vessels in Libya are not at risk. They are. But this is not the only time or space of risk or suffering on the journey. Why then this focus on the 'sea' and the 'boats'? It is not by some magical happenstance that people choose to seek life in Europe in this way. The boat becomes a means of transportation through a combination of European border policies that deny people the possibility to fly, the physical closure of land borders through the increasingly prolific use of fencing, and geographical realities forged long ago in the geological mists of time. This is to say that the 'sea' is not a certainty. It doesn't have to be the main route of travel. In fact only three years ago most entries into Greece occurred at the land border in Evros causing Frontex to add the clause 'Land' to Joint-Operation Poseidon, forming Joint-Operation Poseidon Land.

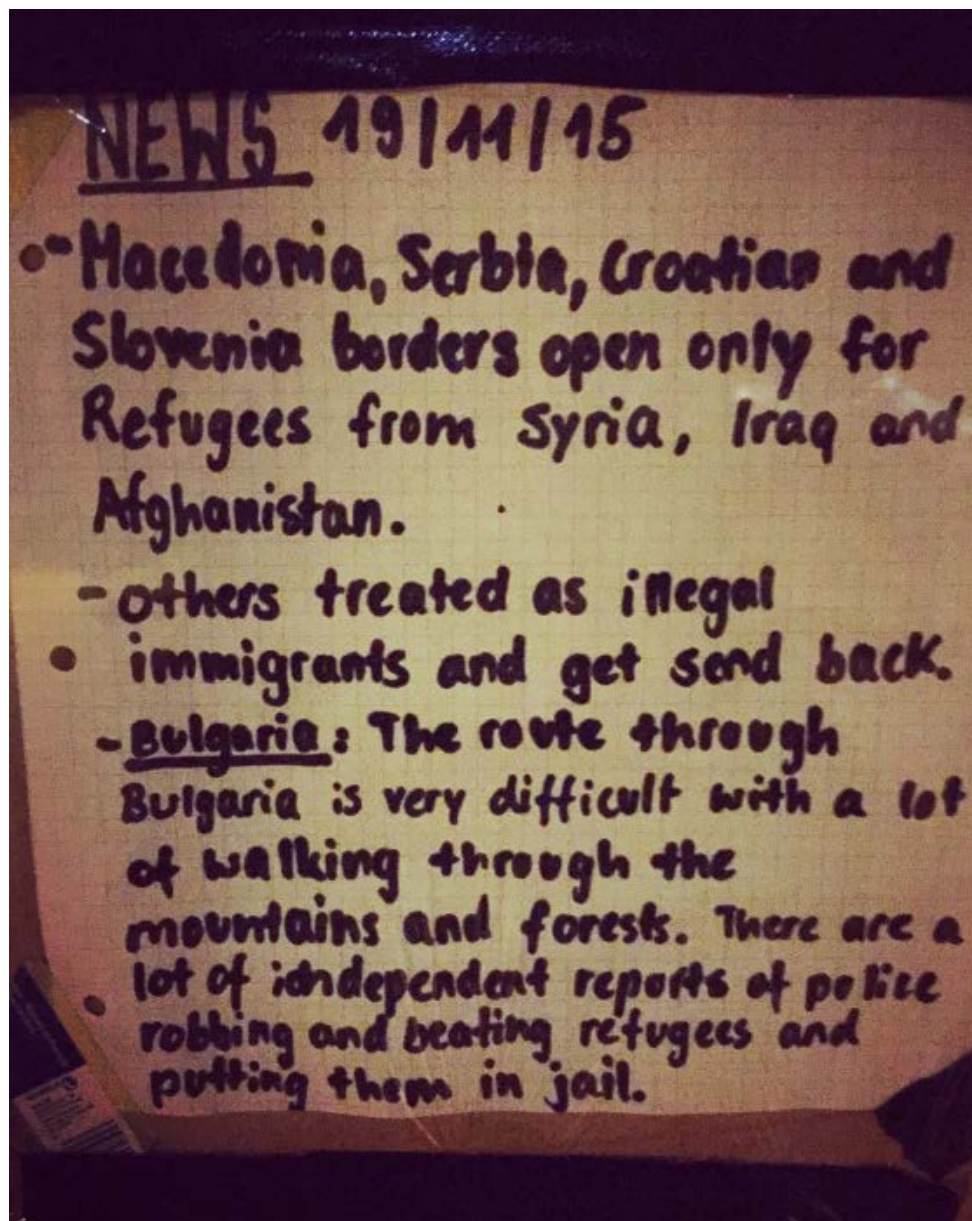
So why the focus on the boats and the sea as the necessary point of intervention?

The deaths at sea of course play a huge part in shifting our attention and our actions towards the boats and the sea. But what else is at play? Here we get to the issue of the spectacular versus the mundane, crosscut with a gendered and possibly colonial politics concerned with the heroics of rescue that is contrasted with a quieter care-giving occurring away from the immediate moment of imminent crisis. We also need to consider the visual politics of humanitarian action where the need to be seen to be doing something in the constructed focal point of crisis plays a role in decisions about intervention. Essentially we get to some of the key tensions that have plagued much humanitarian action over the years.

### ***Proximity and distance on the beaches***

Thinking about the role of proximity and distance in accounting for the motivations of the actors I have encountered in Europe's borderlands provides a useful analytic framework for making sense of my experiences. But it also enables me to differentiate between motivations of actors and to effectively say #notallvolunteers.

The reasons behind people's desire to be present on the beaches of northern Lesvos to assist those making the journey from Turkey are manifold. There are those, such as the Kempson family, who are present on the beaches day in and day out bringing boats in and providing what basic assistance they can because of proximity. When boatloads of refugees arrive on the beaches in front of your house, on the coastline on which you have made your home, your motivation is driven by this proximity, to suffering. For those driven by proximity the focus on the boats and the beaches as the time and space of assistance can be understood as a performance of the idea that charity starts at home.



Meanwhile there are those who are driven to be present, to attend to and to witness the suffering of others because of the disempowering affects of distance. It is in this relationship to suffering and the move to action that things become more complicated. Here any analysis also has to consider how suffering is mediated and it is this mediation that plays a large part in inflating and conflating the boat crossing and the beach landings with the journey as a whole. Time and again the experiences of people on the move across the borders of Europe, the experiences of displacement and life-seeking, are reduced to the dramatic image of the rubber dinghy approaching the shore with its human cargo of 'suffering Syrians,' 'desolate Afghans,' or 'helpless women and children,' even if such a description fails to capture the full subjecthood, variegated vulnerabilities and complex needs of people on the move.

I have lost count of the number of times in recent months discussions on the European border regime or the 'refugee crisis,' all with their complex politics and

long-running structural causes, have been visually rendered and reduced to those dramatic images of boat arrivals in Lesvos that conceal more than they illuminate. Often stories about somewhere else along the route are visually accompanied by photographs of dramatic peril-ridden boat arrivals even when the story has nothing to do with this particular time and this particular space. All of this highlights and reproduces the danger in the popular imagination while obscuring the politics and structural violence of the European border regime and borders more generally.

This mediation and the spectacular picture it presents has an affect on those who feel disempowered by distance. By focusing on this one moment of crisis on the journey of people on the move it promotes the time and space of the boats, sea and beaches as the time and space where help is needed, where presence is necessary, while erasing other possibilities for struggle (or even the necessity of struggle itself) and other moments of suffering. In addition, it promotes the idea of a particular heroic type of help concerned with dangerous and dramatic rescue enabling those who are pre-disposed to act out their inner David Hasselhoff.

As the principal time and space for emergency and assistance, the beaches become sites of disaster tourism with groups of people arriving on the beaches in order to be able to say they have been there. They take photos documenting their presence and their humanitarian sensibility regardless of whether or not their presence has any material effect in assisting those in need. In addition, the focus on the boats, sea and beaches sees some larger-scale humanitarian organisations, such as the UNHCR, promote the idea of their presence in this spectacle of rescue through the construction of careful photographic and social media narratives, even if in reality their actual presence and work remains something of a mystery to those on the ground.

Alongside the running joke of the mystical presence of the UNHCR on the northern shores of Lesvos, there are other humanitarian organisations that have been castigated for not being present. Chief amongst these is MSF, who by dint of their SAR operations in the southern Mediterranean have made something of a rod for their own back. Even while MSF was planning how to best be present in the Aegean and then preparations were underway into having SAR boats, MSF's lack of presence at sea and on the beaches over the summer and early autumn saw people questioning where they were. These criticisms are not limited to MSF but MSF offers an illustrative example where the sea and the beaches and action there come to equate to action everywhere. Organisations might be present in the 'Hotspots' 70 km away, or elsewhere on the Balkan route. However, lack of visibility in the small stretch of water between the Aegean islands or on the beaches where the boats land comes to stand in for presence as a whole.

These criticisms grow exactly from the focus on the boats and the sea. This focus on the boats and the sea works to conflate and collapse all operational environments

where those two elements are present. Such conflation and collapsing does not take account of the Aegean being a different operating environment, geopolitically and practically. Or as some of those working in the relative calm of the MSF transit point at Mantamados, 20km inland from the frenetic activity of the coastline, said to me “there are so many volunteers down there including many doctors, what is there for MSF to do?”

### ***White saviours, gendered heroics and passive victims***

In these moments of rescue, often made all the more dramatic by the presence of a large number of would-be rescuers, I witnessed what can only be described as the ‘male white saviour’ complex, or to be more accurate, ‘the male European saviour’ complex in action. The gendered nature of this work and its reproduction of traditional humanitarian tropes of the powerful assisting those considered unable to assist themselves was arresting at times. As these saviours engaged in often unnecessarily dramatic interventions they would often insist on removing children from the boats against the wishes of their parents and handing them to the female volunteers assembled on the beach where it was assumed these women—by dint of being women—would perform some form of care-based triage. Meanwhile the wishes and agency of the children themselves, their parents or guardians were overlooked as it was, and is, assumed by many assembled on the beaches and keen to rescue that they know best. But why should they know best?

Such actions often lead to tensions between the volunteers themselves, between those professionally trained in sea rescues such as the Spanish lifeguard team, [Proactiva Open Arms](#), and those with considerable experience of bringing in boats such as the Kempson family and the more recent volunteers from elsewhere in Europe looking for action, and believing, that without their presence disaster would strike. The resulting heroic action only serves to increase the spectacle. As people dash from beach to beach along the dirt road that lines the northern shore rushing to meet the boats, and the photographers lean in to get what they deem the necessary action shots of drama, suffering children and the helpless ‘Oriental’ looking refugee, the cycle continues as it feeds on its fuel of the spectacle.

But can the refugee speak? Yes they can and often it is to mumble an embarrassed and confused thank you. To say they are fine and they require no assistance. There is a delicate balance but an all-important difference between the need to be present ‘just-in-case’ and ‘being present requires doing something’. The need to do something generated by the spectacle of suffering and danger that has become the dominant mediated narrative concerning the boat arrivals fails to take account of the idea that sometimes not acting is itself acting. Here the presence of volunteers, while a pre-emptive and precautionary measure against possible imminent emergencies, often falls into the trap of intervention for intervention’s sake.





When the refugee is allowed to speak, often away from the frenetic activity of the beaches and in the contrasting relative calm of the transit points, they talk about being categorised as deserving or undeserving. Here there is an enactment of dominant tropes around hierarchies of victimhood intermingling with popular depictions of fit and healthy young male refugees and resulting, which results in young men reporting assistance being refused. In addition, when the refugee is allowed to speak they often report being scared and confused by people rushing at them on the beaches, as they are unaware of whom these would-be rescuers are. “We thought they were police” people say. “We didn’t know who they were.”

Sometimes this white saviour logic takes on overt overtones of the civilising mission as refugees report attempts from Christian groups to convert them. In these encounters traditional orientalist tropes of a mono-cultural Arab world are articulated when Christian missionaries claim Muslim Arabs [come into contact with Christian Europeans for the first time on the beaches of Greece](#). However, this traditional orientalism of a Christian West and Muslim Orient is disrupted by the presence of many Islamic groups also proselytising.

### ***Spectacle, affect and the erasure of politics***

The scenes on the beaches of Lesvos offer a microcosm for many of the criticisms levelled at humanitarian practice over the years, from the production of (often radicalised) hierarchies between powerful saviours and passive victims; the gendered politics of such categorisation; the demand for action generated by the construction of a crisis scenario; and importantly the ways such action based on the logic of emergency often works to erase the politics that underpins such

emergencies, allowing the status quo to continue while alleviating the worse of its effects. It is to this last criticism I now want to turn.

Crises, emergencies and the necessary responses they engender are often presented as apolitical or as occurrences, because they are seen as urgent, that shift crisis responses and emergency practices beyond the realm of the political. But crises are [failures of the political rather than apolitical](#). In addition, the 'refugee' or 'migration crisis' is the product of politics. The crisis of the boats, the crisis of deaths at sea and the immanent crisis that exists in the dangerous journeys that produce the very spectacles and affects discussed here are the product of the violence of territory and borders more generally and the very specific border politics and practices of the European Union. These border practices to keep certain people out of Europe, including restrictive visa policies, strict carrier's liability, a range of surveillance technologies, more traditionally violent methods and [the time honoured tradition of fencing](#), are the very things that create the spectacle and the dangerous affect of the boats and the sea.

It is this politics that often gets lost in the emotive and heroic actions focused on the boat journeys and the perils of the sea. The spectacular moment of crisis that shines an intense spotlight on specific aspects of the journey, reducing space and time, erases or conceals the structures and the politically made and thus, human-made nature of the spectacle. The focus of those moved to action becomes the alleviation of danger at sea evacuating the political field of struggle over a restrictive European border regime that denies safe passage. Consider that I have met hundreds of Dutch volunteers on the northern shore of Lesbos while a Refugees Welcome demonstration in central Amsterdam struggles to attract 100 people. The desire to help and the subsequent provision of assistance too often replaces and silences political struggle.

The 'problem' is not only at sea, and the 'problem' is not only the boats, but the 'problems' extend along the journey as whole—witness Idomeni and Preševo—and more importantly are to be found in the political decisions of our representatives. They are not only problems for which interventions and action of assistance are required. If people want to reform the terrain as opposed to maintain the status quo then they are problems that require political action, resistance and change. The 'problems' that people are responding to are the result of decisions made by political actors for which we, as European citizens must all take responsibility. The spectacle limiting the issue to particular times and spaces obscures this relationship erasing the politics and absolving political actors, institutions and structures of responsibility and accountability.

The need to highlight the politics behind the boats and thus to raise the issue of accountability is not always absent from action. MSF's recent announcement of [their new SAR operations in Lesbos in conjunction with Greenpeace](#) comes with the clear

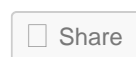
calls for an opening of the land border between Greece and Turkey to allow for safe and legal passage. In addition, MSF's operations are framed as only a temporary measure in the absence of state actors and a condemnation of the dangers created by the European border regime. This intervention simultaneously challenges the political structures behind the spectacle of the boats and sea rescues, complicates the affective pull of the need to assist by suggesting such rescues are only temporary and the result of failure while at the level of practice contributes to the spectacle.

### ***Things lost***

The reflections here are not meant to detract from the importance of life-saving operations and interventions in the Mediterranean and Aegean. Nor are they meant to belittle the dangers traversed by people on the move as they encounter and are made acutely vulnerable by the violence of Europe's borders. Instead, these reflections are aimed at addressing the things that often get lost in the representation of the 'migration/refugee crisis' and some of the more breathless discussions about the response, which while necessary is not—and should not be—beyond criticism. These lost things are the politics that underpin the crisis itself, such as the borders and political decisions that determine who can move in safety and who cannot; as well as the types of 'heroic' actions on the beaches that whilst intended to prevent harm can have consequences beyond the immediacy of the crisis scenario.

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*danielwilkinsauthor*

DECEMBER 9, 2015 AT 7:53 PM

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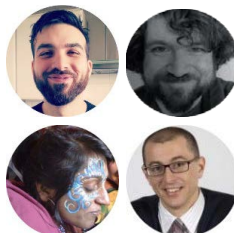
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