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How to Be a Border and How to Cross It: What Art and Literature Know about Democracy



https://icorn.org/sites/default/files/field/image/the_loneliness_of_the_migrant_1979_guillermo_gomez-pena.jpg

The Loneliness of the Migrant 1979. Guillermo Gomez Pena

Rarely tolerating political and geographical borders, literature and the arts pushes against borders and boundaries and discloses a secret about democracy. During the

ICORN Network Meeting in Brussels in March 2023, Stefan Jonsson, professor at Linköping University, spoke about how the aesthetic imagination is a force indispensable to democratic societies and how borders can be crossed through it. Read his speech here.

If people were free, art would be the form of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; and by opposing this unfreedom, art achieves its autonomy

Herbert Marcuse

Long ago, in 1979, a young man called Guillermo Gomez-Peña walked on foot from Tijuana in northern Mexico to Los Angeles in the USA. He had his head covered in gauze and carried with him a briefcase containing his passport, talismans, and a diary. At the time, Gomez-Peña was an art student at CalArts – the California Institute of the Arts. Today he is a performance-art legend. The 1979 border walk took him two and a half days.

Soon he followed up with another work, ‘The Loneliness of the Migrant’. He wrapped himself in fabric, transforming himself into a mysterious package that his friends placed on the floor in a public elevator in downtown Los Angeles. The artist lay on the floor for 24 hours. Many passersby interacted with the cocooned person or object: talking, kicking, poking, confessing, and verbally threatening. A dog peed on him. The bundle was eventually taken away by security guards and thrown into an industrial disposal bin.

A text on the elevator wall read:

"Moving to another country hurts more than moving to another house,

another face, another lover...

In one way or another we all are or will be immigrants.

Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open,

this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity."

Gomez-Peña's early actions marked the beginning of what has become known as border art. In 1984, he was co-founder of the Border Arts Workshop / El Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), whose members were Mexican, Chicano, Caribbean and white Americans from the area around San Diego and Tijuana. They turned the border into an aesthetic laboratory. They made homelessness a harbinger of universal belonging. Blending circus and politics, they showed that what on one side of the wall is a fellow human being and citizen is on the other side a disposable

bundle.

At around the same time, in 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa published her work *Borderlands – La Frontera*. This book is a also border laboratory in its own right, mixing autobiography and anthropology with poetry and cultural theory. Anzaldúa's people had lived in the land today known as Texas long before the present border was established. "We did not cross the border, the border crossed us", she wrote. Her description of the inhabitant of the Borderlands, *The New Mestiza*, is canonical:

The *new mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode.

With foresight, Anzaldúa transformed the border into a porous and connective cultural tissue joining different worlds. Her artwork and borderwork illustrates the power of imagination to assist democracy. The border connects two real countries to create a possible third one, where a person is always superior to her national and cultural identity.

Literature and the arts are the oxygen of democracy. It dies without them.

I recently published a book in Swedish with the title 'Untamed Beauty: 5 Things Art Knows About Democracy' (*Den otyglade skönheten. 5 saker konsten vet om demokratin*, Norstedts, 2022). My publishing house and I decided to have it released in early September 2022 right before the elections in Sweden, as a protest against the authoritarian and nationalist turn of Swedish politics, and international politics more generally. It is a handbook for cultural workers and the general audience, a suite of examples that argues for placing aesthetic and cultural work where they belong, at the heart of democratic politics. Literature and the arts are the oxygen of democracy. It dies without them. To make my argument clear, simple and compelling, I establish 5 things art knows about democracy. I argue that we must continue to *learn* these 5 things not from – but *through* – artistic practices. What, then, is it that art knows about democracy? Essentially this:

1. Why the imagination is a democratic force
2. How a democratic *thing* functions
3. Why democracy is without borders and boundaries

4. Why every mode of representation betrays democracy

5. How to resist fascism

How come art knows these things? Briefly put, it is because aesthetic figurations, unlike other knowledge tools, are not primarily representational, but performative. They do not only represent reality, but present possibilities. Hence the ability of literature and the arts to introduce new questions and points of reference to which the public relates: a voice not previously heard, a figure not seen, a connection not noticed. Aesthetic creation is the only form of human activity that is congenial to democracy in the deep sense: it is multiform (like democracy), it sees the world from many perspectives at once (like democracy), it is inherently dialogical and polyvocal (as democracy also is) it is by definition social and collective (like democracy), and it is unbridled and limitless (like democracy). Therefore, literature and the arts do not recognize borders. And they point out the inevitable shortcomings of representative democracy. Indeed, literature and the arts are also superior indicators that sound the alarm whenever democracy is under pressure or threat. We know this. The first sign of the weakening, disappearance, or absence of democracy is censorship targeting the arts.

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What does it mean that art knows why democracy is without borders and boundaries? My introductory snapshots of Gomez-Pena and Anzaldua perhaps give you an idea. They tried to teach us how a border multiplies one's identity. I would like to stress how different this is, and how superior it is, compared to today's border ideologies and border controls, which construes borders as something that reduce peoples' identity to one homogenous block. You are either like us or you are *other*.

During the long summer of migration of 2015 when more than a million refugees arrived by foot in Europe, many of us turned to an old tragedy by Aeschylus, *The Suppliants* (in Greek *Hiketides*) written 2 500 years ago. The plot is driven by the mechanisms of belonging and exclusion. Who is included in the community? Who can be excluded? Refugee boats arrive on the coast outside the Greek city of Argos. The fifty daughters of Danaos have fled Egypt to escape forced marriage with the fifty sons of Aigyptus. Like today's refugees, they take refuge in the temples. Danaos gives his daughters some fatherly advice:

Hurry up and solemnly carry on your left arm

the wool-wrapped sprig of olive,

(...) and answer the strangers piously and sadly,

A too bold language does not suit the weak.

The wool-wrapped olive branch was called “hiketéria” in ancient Greek. It was the word for an appeal or prayer, a sign of the refugee's vulnerability, and, in brief, an asylum application. The words I quoted are the first surviving description of the asylum process.

The play revolves around the king Pelasgos's dilemma. If he accepts the refugees, he fears people may complain that he places an unreasonable burden up the city. He also puts Argos at risk of war, as the Egyptians are on their way, arms in hand, to reclaim their fiancées. The king fears the judgment of posterity: “For love of strangers you destroyed your city.”

On the other hand, if he does not accept the refugees, he violates a higher law. Whoever saw the wool-wrapped olive branch was obliged to grant the appeal. Otherwise, the divine punishment would be severe: “Grave is the wrath of Zeus, lord of refugees.”

Whatever the king chooses, doom threatens. “I may be the ruler of this country, but a decision like this must be made by the whole people,” he says. In the square of Argos, he gives a passionate speech in favor of receiving the boat people. The citizens then hold a referendum. When the refugees find out the results, they are relieved:

With unanimous voice Argos has spoken,

(...) With raised right hands, the people stirred the air

when they confirmed their decision:

We are granted residence in this country,

inviolable freedom under the protection of the law.

Neither native nor stranger may lay a hand on us.

In *The Suppliants*, democracy determines the outcome. Apparently, the Argos citizens knew that the right to asylum – or the law of hospitality, as it was called back then – was a norm more fundamental than any other.

Aeschylus wrote in a time and world of small and large wars, in which democracy and asylum emerged to prevent that everything collapsed into blood, slavery, and rape. When the modern-day right of asylum was re-established after the Second World War, the situation was comparable: the right of asylum was necessary to prevent a repeat of such massive suffering as the Holocaust.

Today, however, few politicians make passionate speeches in favor of asylum rights. The law of hospitality is replaced by laws of hostility. Insofar as there is hope in our age of extreme nationalism and racism, it is to no small degree kept by literature, culture and the arts, which holds up the conflicts and violence of European history as a mirror to the present. Without this self-reflection, Europe is dangerous for all who are not white and Christian.

Through its aesthetic form, it [art] establishes its independence from reality, helps us see reality as for the first time, and allows us to briefly occupy a place where order is suspended, and the world is changed.

If literature and the arts are a defense against such dangers it is not only because they continuously render cross-border movements and encounters between strangers. It is also because they are boundless and infinite *by definition*. True, every artwork and literary work is deeply marked by reality. It is a creation made by a human being at a particular time, shaped by existing boundaries between classes, nations, languages, audiences, generations, genres, and media. But above and beyond such determinants, the work owns an aesthetic thrust, what we often experience as beauty. Through its aesthetic form, it establishes its independence from reality, helps us see reality as for the first time, and allows us to briefly occupy a place where order is suspended, and the world is changed. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse put it well: “If people were free, art would be the form of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; and by opposing this unfreedom, art achieves its autonomy.”

I am not the first one to point out that literature and art are in this sense analogous to a refuge, a place of asylum, completely conditioned by prevailing relations of power, and yet an assertion of human freedom and autonomy. Nor am I the first one to establish that this is also in analogy with democracy in the deep sense: it necessarily presumes that every member of humanity is equally free.

Interestingly, asylum, the arts, and democracy are also some of humanity’s oldest institutions, much older than monotheist religion or the nation-state system that governs the current world order. It is as if these three are constant antidotes to the abuse and corruption of political power.

Asylum, artistic creation, and democracy thus seem to articulate a shared idea of freedom and autonomy. All three defy borders. To be more precise: all three are essentially *open borders*.

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In the late 1990s philosopher Etienne Balibar asked a question: 'What is a Border?' This was in the wake of the East European *Mauerfall*. Balibar pointed out the border as the preeminent scene of violence. This is where politicians get their hands dirty. He also stated that borders give rise to contempt and cruelty. In this context, Balibar quoted the French psychoanalyst André Green: "You can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it's difficult to imagine how you can be a border." What would it mean to be a border, Balibar asks? You're not let in. You can't turn back. The border crosses you and it crosses you out.

Consider today's Europe. Consider a life where your "migration status" is an object of constant, daily surveillance and control – in schools, public institutions and libraries, at hospitals and clinics, by landlords, employers and even neighbours. People experiencing borders at their every turn soon themselves become borders, in Balibar's sense. Life becomes an endless encounter with border checks, structures of exclusion, systematized cruelty.

Let me now tie the threads together by concluding with a final example, to which a Norwegian colleague once brought my attention. In late July 2011 a statement by a 13-year old girl, Sophia Adampour, appeared on the chatline of Norway's public TV. It was a few days after the terrorist assault of Anders Behring Breivik, the neo-fascist militant who massacred 77 people, among them 69 young social democratic activists, at the idyllic site of their summer camp. This is what Sophia Adampour wrote:

"Hi. I am 13 years old and Norwegian Muslim. I feel that I am to be blamed. He says that he killed everyone because I am here. Should I move out to protect Norwegian children in the future? This is what I feel. Regards, Sophia."

The words caused confusion. On August 4, Sophia Adampour and her older sister were invited to the evening program *Sommaröppet*. Asked what she meant by the post, she replied: "I have learned, through my upbringing and being Norwegian and Muslim and Iranian, that we should care about each other and protect each other regardless of background or orientation ... um ... yes ... and appearance."

At stake in these statements by a 13-year-old girl is our past, present and future. Who can be here? Sophia took the blame, thereby absolving Norway of the fascist crimes committed by its native son. The murders were her fault. "That's what I feel." She also knew the solution: to move out. News media reported many similar cases. Kids from non-Norwegian backgrounds and especially from Muslim families felt guilty about Breivik's mass murder. We know this as internalized racism: the victim of racism internalizes others' hatred into her own psyche, so that

one part of her ego identifies herself as the root of the problem: I am a Muslim, therefore I am a problem. This inadvertently confirms the racists' worldview, which in turn triggers a guilt in the opposite direction: I feel guilty for being a Muslim, therefore I am a problem.

But Sophia's statements also sent an opposite message. She spoke from the perspective of a possible cosmopolitan community. She showed that this community already existed: "Norwegian and Muslim and Iranian". As a native of this community she affirmed the civic values of which the West likes to pride itself: "we should care for each other and protect each other regardless of background...".

This did not add up. As a Norwegian and a Muslim and an Iranian, she presented the ideal of a society where everyone fits in. As a Muslim and Iranian, she felt that she absolutely did not fit in. She embodied the highest values of the West at the same time as she had a nagging suspicion that her existence was a danger to Norwegian children. In a single statement, she marked her belonging and erased it.

What is it like to live as a border? Sophia's older sister told the viewers how the two of them used to witness strangers throwing eggs at their mother (who wore hijab). As long as society puts children in such situations, European openness and diversity is a lie. When Sophia disclosed the lie, the Norwegian and European public cringed with unease. If some of the country's children feel they have to disappear, is it possible to talk about Norway as a democracy?

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The first conclusion I am coming to is not original: without spaces of refuge, cities of refuge, where cosmopolitan and transcultural people thrive, democracy will die. To give up on the right of asylum is to give up democracy. My second conclusion is perhaps more unexpected: every time we engage seriously with art, literature, and other forms of aesthetic creativity, we may learn what a real refuge, a real free state, show what a real refuge, a real free state, a truly free city is like. Art is always hospitable. It welcomes everyone. This to you all, who struggle to keep borders open.