

Studying the Absurdity of EU Border Controls

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Abstract: *Migration scholars deal with absurd policies and practices in their everyday research. Yet there is little research on the absurd as such or the use of absurdity as an analytical lens to understand those policies and practices. Drawing on my PhD research on the European Border and Coast Guard agency's (Frontex) securitization of migration, this commentary makes a case for the need to study the absurd and illustrates how this can be done. It argues that focusing on the absurd helps us question the taken for granted and imagine alternatives to the status quo, which is emancipatory for a discipline that is rooted in state-centric perspectives on mobility and has positive effects for refugees and migrants.*

WHY WE SHOULD STUDY THE ABSURD

Migration scholars deal with absurdity in their daily research. This ranges from studying policies and practices that are indirectly discriminatory or straightforwardly racist,¹ have unintended side effects or flat-out counterproductive effects,² are short-term oriented and not evidence based,³ or even harmful.⁴ Yet, little research has been devoted to the absurdity of these policies and practices or absurdity itself as a useful *conceptual lens* in which to examine them. Conceptualizing something as absurd is in some cases the only way to explain seemingly illogical things, such as border control being ostensibly humanitarian and 'migration crises' normal.⁵ Treating something as absurd can be both humoristic and subversive,⁶ contributing to destabilizing commonly held beliefs and assumptions and illuminating their arbitrariness.⁷ This, in turn, can change both how we perceive certain phenomena as well as how we respond to them, which has positive effects for refugees and migrants who are caught up in these absurd policies and practices.

This commentary calls for more research on the absurd and illustrates how this can be done by drawing on the literary nonsense genre. The following will show how, in my PhD, I used the

analogy to *Alice in Wonderland* to highlight what I found to be the absurdities of EU border control.⁸

HOW TO STUDY THE ABSURD

My PhD research focused on how the European Border and Coast Guard agency (Frontex) securitizes migration through its risk analyses. I analyzed Frontex's annual risk analysis reports from 2010-21, focusing on the specific type of knowledge about migration that they produced. I departed from the assumption that knowledge is neither objective nor universal but rather situated and performative⁹ and that the process of knowledge production can be studied discursively since it is discursively constructed.¹⁰ By absurd I understood what in a given context would seem contrary to 'common sense', which of course is contingent.¹¹ The focus on the absurd helped me draw attention to the similar inverted logics that characterize both *Wonderland* and Frontex's risk analysis reports, such as how refugees are seen as a risk rather than at risk,¹² how border control is supposed to be in their best interest,¹³ and how crises at the borders are now 'normal'.¹⁴

The similarities between what I termed 'the field of EUropean external(ized) border control' and Lewis Carroll's fictional worlds turned out to be more than I anticipated, with discourse playing an important role in both contexts, with Carroll's creatures constantly debating the 'interpretation of words, names, rules and logic'.¹⁵ I pointed out that this is not too different from the discursive struggles in this field about what constitutes push and pullbacks at the borders, where the different actors imbue these terms with meanings that serve their own agendas.¹⁶ Thus, whereas 'common sense' is inverted in the world beyond the looking-glass,

crises and humanitarianism are inverted in Frontex's risk analyses, with the notion of perpetual crisis being just as paradoxical as the Mock Turtle's misery because it has no sorrows.¹⁷

Alice's dream worlds illustrate how 'common sense' is situational, with 'digging for apples' making just as much sense in Wonderland¹⁸ as non-rescue does in the field of EUropean external(ized) border control.¹⁹ Much like Alice's encounter with Wonderland, my encounter with this field was perplexing, as I struggled to understand the de-humanizing responses towards people fleeing war and poverty. And just like things are done the other way around in Carroll's worlds (such as the Queen of Hearts' insistence on 'sentence first, verdict later') and the explanations that are given do not always make sense, I found the same to be the case in this field and in the knowledge produced by Frontex. Whereas Alice tries to find meaning in Wonderland, I tried to understand how border security can be seen as more meaningful than human lives in EUropean external(ized) border control. Perhaps it would have been easier to follow the King's advice, that 'if there is no meaning in it... that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any'.²⁰ But to resort to nihilism is not very useful either, especially not if we want to live up to the emancipatory promises of critical approaches.

Studying EU border control and Frontex's risk analyses through the lens of absurdity helped me see both the inhumane and inverted logics underpinning them. While this is not sufficient on its own to change them, it is still a necessary step towards critiquing them and imagining alternative responses to irregularized migration. Similar as in Wonderland, the reality constructed by Frontex becomes 'curiouser and curiouser' the further one reads. Just as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, so do established facts alter in the risk analysis reports as one goes along, with non-rescue becoming humanitarian since it deters people from getting on the boats in the first place.²¹ Although logics in Wonderland and the looking-glass world are different from the real world, they are still

recognizable to us in their inverse form. Likewise, the logics in Frontex's risk analyses constitute very particular ones derived from a securitized ontology and epistemology. While 'four times five is twelve' in the world underground²² facts are obscured in Frontex's reports, which *uninform* rather than inform about the fundamental rights situation at the borders by focusing on the alleged risks posed by refugees and migrants rather than the risks that they are exposed to at the borders.²³ This is clear from the sub-sections of the different chapters in the reports, none of which relate to fundamental rights concerns but rather 'illegal border crossing', 'illegal stay', and 'document fraud', among others.

While all the ways belong to the Red Queen in the looking-glass world.²⁴ Frontex's risk analyses provide the evidence base for the strategic, operational, and budgetary decisions in EUropean external(ized) border control, despite their quasi-scientific nature, being produced by Frontex officials with a vested interest in exaggerating the 'threats' at the border to increase the agency's powers.²⁵ As I demonstrated in my dissertation, whereas the signs in Tulgey Woods are unable to give Alice a clear sense of direction, Frontex's risk analyses contribute to short-sighted and counterproductive responses in this field by producing more irregularized migration and deaths at the border rather than less.²⁶ Where readers search in vain for meaning in Carroll's works, Frontex's securitized vantage point render some practices meaningful (e.g., border control) while others not (such as fundamental rights). Further, like the anthropomorphic creatures that Alice encounters on her adventures, borders become *sentient* in Frontex's risk analyses, being described as feeling 'vulnerable' to the alleged threat posed by refugees and migrants, who are conversely de-humanized.²⁷

The unlikely comparison of Frontex's risk analyses to the literary nonsense genre disrupts the reports' claimed objectivity²⁸ and exposes their equally odd neologisms, such as the 'irregular migrant', which is a concept that is just as constructed as 'unbirthday'

is (although by migration laws²⁹ rather than a Mad Hatter and a March Hare). The analogy draws attention to the absurdity of treating all refugees and migrants as risky, with Frontex's reports being no less bizarre than Wonderland, despite being wrapped as scientific-looking publications.³⁰ Frontex's risk analyses also share the incoherence of Wonderland, being steeped in a securitized crisis discourse that is combined with a technocratic one, (re)constructing 'common sense' in this field through its discursive inversions that are presented as natural.³¹

The question then becomes: How can we expose the politicized and securitized nature of Frontex's risk analyses? This is where an emphasis on the absurd comes in. Throughout her journeys, Alice critically reflects upon the worlds that she is in, questioning what is portrayed as 'normal' there.³² In the same way, Frontex's claim that its risk analyses are objective should be problematized, since they contain entrenched securitized assumptions regarding such an everyday and historical phenomenon like human mobility, for which we might be in too deep of a slumber to realize the unnaturalness of.³³ As the absurdist realities of Wonderland and the looking-glass world teach us, things could always be different, since 'common sense' is fluid rather than fixed. Fairclough emphasizes that 'discourses include representations of... imaginaries... of how things might... or should be', drawing attention to different kinds of knowledges and states of affairs than the current ones.³⁴ Exposing the absurd assumptions underpinning Frontex's risk analyses and EU border control is hence one step on the way to dismantling the securitization of migration in this field and its increased normalization.

TOWARDS A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA?

As this commentary has demonstrated, there is an urgent need for more migration research on the absurd and engaging with absurdity as an analytical strategy. Paying attention to the absurd enables researchers to shed light on problematic aspects of the status quo that go largely unnoticed, as well as

debunk conventional wisdom that has no empirical basis. This has been an overarching aim of critical approaches for a long time and is becoming more pressing for mainstream approaches as well with increased far-right populism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and skepticism towards critical migration and ethnic studies.³⁵ A focus on the absurd has emancipatory effects for migration studies as a discipline, disconnecting it from the sedentary assumptions and state-centric categorizations of state actors,³⁶ which in turn can have positive effects for refugees and migrants, who will not be treated as a problem or security threat anymore.

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