

Part I
***Bordering Imaginaries I: Migration, Populism and
the Crises of the Neoliberal Nation State***



(B)Orders of Immobility
Politics of Movement and Poetics of the Frontier

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Abstract

Against the promise of free movement and mobility celebrated by the narrative of capitalism and globalization, the border stands as a stark reminder of the terrorizing history of death, destruction, and humiliation at the frontier. Like the Atlantic Ocean, home of the invisible and brutalizing memory of the slave trade, the Mediterranean and the Sonoran Desert today have become a dead zone, a dark trail of loss and suffering amidst faint dreams of open lands and seas and freedom to roam. The growing militarization and securitization of the border unleashed by sophisticated technologies and algorithms of surveillance reflect a disturbing precariousness of empathy which seeks to conceal and banalize the trauma of crossing frontiers. By framing the debate of borders around security, threat and territory, the narrow calculus of border thinking multiplies and mutates beyond the physical spaces of the frontier, animating in the process a narrative of invasion, cultural purity, and territorial privilege. This article offers a critical reading of the politics, performance, and poetics of the border, border practices and border thinking in our current fractious conjuncture. Using the works of Caribbean poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant, I argue for a different interpretation

and poetics of the border, one which does not nullify rootedness but refutes the tyranny of the “totalitarian root”. Under this alternative imaginary, the degeneration of borders into zones of non-being and the converse image of mobility as a human right force us to re-visit old fundamental questions about the distribution of the earth.

Keywords

migration – social imaginary – borders – movement – decoloniality – labor of forgetting

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*This is my testimony
 We could no longer stay in Nigeria
 Many were dying, most were bombed ...
 We ran to the desert
 We went to the Sahara Desert
 Many died ...
 Raping and killing of many people
 And we could not stay
 We flee to Libya and Libya was a city of ISIS
 And Libya was a place not to stay
 We cried on our knees, “What shall we do?”
 The Mountains could not hide us
 The people could not hide us
 And we ran to the sea
 Too many passengers died
 They got lost in the sea
 A boat was carrying 90 passengers
 Only 30 were rescued and the rest died
 Today we are alive
 The Sea is not a place to pass by
 The sea is not a road
 It is risky in life not to take a risk because life itself is a risk
 We stayed too many weeks in the Sahara desert
 Many were dying with hunger
 Many were drinking their piss to survive
 We drank our piss to survive
 Because that was the journey of life.*

Nigerian refugee rescued in the Mediterranean (*Fire At Sea*, 2016)



We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

EDOUARD GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation*



1 Introduction

What happens when border crossings turn into nightmares of horrid torment, when the right to movement and mobility is condemned, and when the innocent hope of hospitality morphs into a vulgar flog of inhumanity? Where are we today in the growing dissonance between the promises of motion, circulation, and flows and the realities of killing borders, ruthless incarcerations, and mass expulsions? The penetrating words of the Nigerian refugee in the opening passage, uttered in a series of religious chants a few hours after being rescued from a sinking boat off the Italian island of Lampedusa where dozens perished, remind us of what has become a specter of migration today and the precarity of the border as a regulating artifact of movement in modern society.¹ Some cross borders for leisure, profit, and business, yet others take the risk of crossing, displaced by unfavorable environmental, economic, or political conditions. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 71 million people were forced out of their home in 2018. An unprecedented 26 millions of them are refugees and half of those refugees are children (UNHCR, 2018). Although 80% of refugees move to or settle in neighboring countries, a small number make the treacherous journey to Europe, the United States, or Australia. Since 2014, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has recorded the death and disappearance of 22,500 migrants in the Mediterranean, a figure that could be much higher as many deaths remain unreported. In the Sonoran desert, a deadly expanse of cactus-filled hills, canyons, and scorching heat between the United States and Mexico, hundreds die every year attempting this dangerous trek.

Like the Atlantic Ocean, home of the invisible and brutalizing memory of the slave trade, the Mediterranean and the Sonoran Desert have become a dead zone, a dark trail of loss and sufferance amidst faint dreams of open

¹ Braidotti 2017.

lands and seas and freedom to roam. The growing militarization and securitization of the border unleashed by sophisticated technologies and algorithms of surveillance reflect a disturbing precariousness of empathy which seeks to conceal and banalize the trauma of crossing frontiers. By framing the debate of borders around security, threat and territory, the narrow calculus of border thinking multiplies and mutates beyond the physical spaces of the frontier, animating in the process a narrative of invasion, cultural purity, and territorial privilege increasingly invoked by influential populist far-right parties and mainstream politicians.

The aim of this article is to expose the glaring excisions of border politics in a Western imaginary of boundaries, movement, and walls which breeds mostly a defensive rhetoric and practice of separation, enclosure, and division. Specifically, it will foreground the hideous violence that continues to mark the birth of the modern victim of border crossing, a disposable and suspect body destined to be merely detected, inspected, and classified. This obliteration of the 'other' human at the border becomes a necessary performance to produce the stability of territorial sovereignty and maintain the biopolitics of mobility of our time. More importantly, my argument assumes the failings of our dominant epistemological imagination of the border and calls for a necessary rethinking, a theoretical reframing of the very principles under assault today by the growing criminalization of the figure of the migrant and the deadly expediency of the border. For this end, I suggest an alternative imaginary and poetics of the frontier as invoked in the work of Caribbean poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant whose vision of mobility, errantry, and movement resist the temptations of conquest, control, and management of risk. The border today is a shameful emblem of our moral and epistemic handicap and the unrelenting tales of loss and suffering at its core compel us to go beyond our intellectual introversion and look elsewhere to think the world anew and respond to the growing clamors of freedom of movement for everyone.

My reflection in this article rests on an urgent interrogation of the social imaginaries that govern our understanding and management of borders and bordering practices precisely at our current conjuncture marked by deep tensions between an expedient market ideology of global mobility and a dangerous resurgence of ethnic and cultural nationalism. Under a neoliberal regime that celebrates open borders and global belonging in the name of a homogenized and undifferentiated universal culture, borders have become prime sites to defend and perform the territorial sanctity of nations and the inviolability of national cultures. Analyzing the border as a social imaginary allows us to see the material manifestation of its practices and the ways in which they are embedded within a larger system of cultural significations. While

documenting and analyzing this ‘imaginary institution’ of the border, to borrow from Cornelius Castoriadis,² my purpose in this article is to reveal how borders relentlessly carry out basic principles to legitimate the universality of Western modernity through its conception of space, mobility, and geography. Conversely, I ask how this imaginary can be contested now that we can see its incongruence in a world of forced movement and its victims. How can we indeed rethink the border beyond the calculus of this ruthless imaginary?

2 The Border Line and Absented Legacies

The question of the ‘color line’ was for W.E.B. du Bois the defining concept of the twentieth century, a relentless problem which explains the centrality of race, racial domination and exploitation in modern society and their intersection with power and the needs and desires of empire. Color, according to du Bois, had to be invented as a socio-biological category to establish the supremacy of white Europe and extend its reach and domination in the world.³ Today, the color line has not abetted, but it would be safe to argue that the ‘border line’ has joined it to become another defining concept of the twenty-first century. Analyzing border politics and aesthetics of our time is necessary to reveal not only the unbending racial hierarchies that inform its practices but also the philosophical logics that determine its existence and assign meaning to those vulnerable bodies that cross it. As philosopher Thomas Nail asserts in his recent book, *Theory of the Border*, borders of all sorts have multiplied in the past two decades as a primordial feature of social life:

We live in a world of borders. Territorial, political, juridical, and economic borders of all kinds quite literally define every aspect of social life in the twenty-first century. Despite the celebration of globalization and the increasing necessity of global mobility, there are more types of borders today than ever before in history. In the last twenty years, but particularly since 9/11, hundreds of new borders have emerged around the world: miles of new razor-wire fences, tons of new concrete security walls, numerous offshore detention centers, biometric passport databases, and security checkpoints of all kinds in schools, airports, and along various roadways across the world.⁴

2 Castoriadis 1997.

3 Du Bois 1903.

4 Nail 2016, p. 2.

This bordering frenzy is largely informed by anxieties of difference and the threat of terrorism which are primarily invoked in a rhetoric of crisis and imminent invasion by others who will most certainly disrupt an otherwise stable order. Major European democracies have seen a dramatic ideological shift in their politics as xenophobic far-right obsessions about immigration and refugees are mainstreamed. In the United States, President Trump has not only successfully campaigned on the fears of immigration and dangerous internal others, but his administration has created a despicable dehumanizing spectacle at the border with Mexico with poorly sanitized detention centers where children are separated from their families and apprehended without due legal course. Refugee camps and tent cities are erected in the margins of major European centers with precarious living conditions and elevated risks of disease, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.⁵ These new marginal urban spaces, often described as the 'Jungle' or 'camps of the living dead', have become damning signs of the dehumanizing politics of the border and its grievous practices of delegitimizing dignified life and prolonging the suffering of vulnerable migrants and refugees.

The 'border crisis' narrative is also used on the other end of the political spectrum as a humanitarian ordeal that necessitates immediate relief and political action. Naturally, this emergency situation warrants a humane intervention to attend to the urgent needs of refugees, but framing the disaster at the border in terms of invasion or humanitarian crisis elides an important function of the border as a triage center for who can move and who is denied the right to movement. But before I address this function, I need to raise another elision of the border, another instance of its ruinous effects on the memory of domination and exploitation which continue to force displacements and crossings through treacherous journeys along deserts and seas. The border, I argue, and despite the graphic nature of its scenes of death and loss, contains within it grave invisibilities that escape visual documentation and immediate comprehension. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler around the concept of 'imperial debris', I look at the absented significance of the border and the occluded traces of its imperial complicity which still inform today the logics that allow and exalt the passage of certain bodies and demonize or deny that of others.

In the lead essay of her book, *Imperial Debris*⁶ entitled "The Rot Remains: From Ruins to Ruination," Stoler draws our attention to the resiliency of imperial formations and the ways in which colonial legacies of dispossession and

⁵ Koegler 2017.

⁶ Stoler 2013.

plunder continue to regulate and overwhelm people's lives today. Things fall out of focus and lose their priority in historical accounts, she says, yet they persist in shaping the world in which we live today. Her theoretical and empirical intervention is to find new ways to re-visibility what should be defined as the "tangibilities of colonial pasts and imperial presents"⁷. To explain further the significance of connecting colonial past to imperial presents, a longer quotation on the distinction between imperial formation and empire from Stoler's essay is in order:

To look at "imperial formations" rather than at empire per se is to register the ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation. Imperial formations are relations of force. They harbor those mutant, rather than simply hybrid, political forms that endure beyond the formal exclusions that legislate against equal opportunity, commensurate dignities, and equal rights. Working with the concept of imperial formation rather than empire per se shifts emphasis from fixed forms of sovereignty and its denials to *gradated forms* of sovereignty and what has long marked the technologies of imperial rule – sliding and contested scales of differential access and rights. Imperial formations are defined by racialized relations of allocations and appropriations. Unlike empires, they are processes of becoming, not fixed things. Not least, they are states of deferral that mete out promissory notes that are not exceptions to their operation, but constitutive of them: imperial guardianship, trusteeships, delayed autonomy, temporary intervention, conditional tutelage, military takeover in the name of humanitarian works, violent intervention in the name of human rights, and security measures in the name of peace.⁸

The border is the "technology of imperial rule" in the sense that it does not simply function as a neutral regulating mechanism of entry and non-entry. By augmenting its security measures and ramping up its obsession with safety and peace, borders, in this imperial formation, act as a trail that conceals a relation to a history of domination and corrosion of which the humanitarian crisis today is only the tip of the iceberg. The scenes of drowning in the Mediterranean and dead bodies decomposing in the Sonoran Desert concern mostly people of color who come from countries whose history and development have been truncated by colonial designs and persisting policies and practices of imperial control. What has remained in these ruined societies in

⁷ Stoler 2013, p. 5.

⁸ Stoler 2013, p. 8.

terms of possibilities of livelihood after war, environmental degradation, and economic decay is scant enough that risking one's life becomes the only viable solution in the face of utter ruin.

The disastrous conditions of borders are indeed an extension of an enduring process of social and economic ruination that continues to produce sequestered lives and interrupted histories. The connections between the colonial past and the postcolonial present along this arc of human ruination are not only real but also striking in what they afford us to see. In the same way that the outsourcing of Western toxic waste in Africa, for instance, is a sign of a brutal politics of structural and slow violence against disposable countries of the South, borders also perpetuate the same racial calculus that makes certain bodies and sites perpetual objects of neglect, abandonment, and expendability. The restrictions on mobility enforced by the border are tinged with the residues of these historical durabilities and the inscriptions of race that have marked colonial rule and continue to inform today the politics of mobility and movement. Borders are in fact the imperial debris that Stoler describes as "the rot that remains"⁹, the trace that lingers in disguise as a modern and sophisticated artifact of exercising sovereignty and managing control over one's own territory.

Invoking a wider lexicon of imperial ruins and ruination to describe borders and their politics is not meant to trivialize the heightened urgency of the humanitarian disaster facing those who cross borders with no basic guarantees. A larger lens along a historical arc of degradation allows us to re-insert borders in a wider system of exploitation that is not only about the spectacle of death we witness today, but also the cumulative and slow violence that escapes our collective memory and prevents us from doing the necessary work of interrogating the principles upon which borders justify their existence. It is precisely this fallibility of memory and our lexical opacity about the border that I wish to turn to now.

In her book, *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman begins with the 'Terrible Spectacle', that horrid tale of violence told by Frederick Douglass of the beating of his aunt Hester, a now famous scene of torture he believed inaugurated the birth of the slave. This primal episode of violence, Hartman argues, both reveals and obscures at the same time. It reveals how the black body was initiated and subjected to power, how it was born as a subject of dominance and dehumanization, but it also obscures by its familiarity, its casualness through repetition. She asks,

⁹ Stoler 2013, p. 2.

are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the “peculiar institution”? Or does the pain of the other merely present us with the opportunity for “self-reflection?”¹⁰.

Hartman raises fundamental questions about the merits of parading the ‘ravaged body’ and the risk of what she calls, ‘a precariousness of empathy’ by virtue of a surplus of citation of torture and suffering.

In order to avoid this spectacle of empathy, Hartman resists simply conjuring up violent scenes of subjection like Douglass’ ‘The Terrible Spectacle’ and decides to focus on other scenes which may not appear as terror like slaves dancing in the quarters, the Minstrel stage, the internalization of the whip and discipline, or the invocations of rights to slaves. Her conclusion is that in order to remember the pained body, you must first recognize the absented performances of racialization and social relations which produced the brutalizing human breach that was slavery and its aftereffects. At the heart of this valuable rethinking of the injuries of bondage is a temporal redress which seeks to affirm that the present of blackness finds eerie resonances in the racial prohibitions and sanctions of the past. This ability to re-open the archive of the past to better articulate and widen the optics of the present is what I call up in my comparison with the performative politics of the border today. The scenes of suffering and loss at the border, like those of the tortured slaved body, may haunt our conscience, but their repetition can also neutralize our empathy and render our gaze politically and historically vacuous. Instead, our analysis of the border needs a similar temporal corrective to retrieve the abuses of history and foreground their complicity in the atrocities of the border today. This temporal lapse, however, is far from being coincidental or benign. As I will argue in the next section, this distancing of memory and the border is the result of a deliberate and vigorous act of forgetting which has deepened the incoherence of any historical associations and muted the murky entanglements of power, race, and the impossibility of movement.

10 Hartman 1997, pp. 1 et seq.

3 Bordering as a Labor of Forgetting

The desperate lament of the nameless Nigerian refugee I started with can appear, even to the most empathetic, as a tragic consequence of a reckless act of crossing a knowingly treacherous border. The humanitarian needs of refugees like him are invoked to alleviate their distress, but very little is done to address the sources of the harshness of life which push people to the edges of their destiny. What conditions of precarity force refugees today to leave their homes and families behind and face tremendous risk in some of the most unforgiving places on earth? What possible realities of dispossession and misery impel refugees to subject themselves, children, and pregnant wives to the perilous tides of the ocean and the horrific hazards of the desert? What desperation brings some refugees to burn their fingertips, stop speaking, and efface themselves entirely?

I do not have the full answer to all these questions, but I can venture that our growing incapacity to make sense of these frequent scenes of abjection is largely due to the inaccessibility of a proper vocabulary and historical context engendered by a long process of forgetting and policing of memory. This absencing of the effects of colonial history and power machinations of geopolitics and capitalism is what I would call, relying heavily on the work of Ann Stoler, as “border aphasias”. In a seminal article on the distorted histories of race in France, Stoler¹¹ coined the phrase ‘colonial aphasia’ to describe an elusive process of radical disassociation that renders colonial history and its repercussions of ruination so unspeakable and simply too difficult to comprehend. This is not a passive form of amnesia, but a deliberate labor of forgetting and evading history not to be scarred and burdened by its monstrosities. By naming this process ‘aphasia’ Stoler seeks to:

emphasize both loss of access and active dissociation. In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken.¹²

¹¹ Stoler 2011.

¹² Stoler 2011, p. 125.

It is this suspension between knowledge and ignorance about coloniality and its aftermath as manifested in the border that should be of grave concern to all of us because incomprehensibility is manufactured and produced, not innocently experienced, particularly in a hypermediated world where information is accessible in unprecedented volumes. Yet we lose our semantic ability to understand, to speak of the morbidities of empire, of the incommensurability of the realities at the border and the natural rights of movement for everyone regardless of race or class. The footprints of predation and dispossession are there, yet we are not comfortable talking about them or we don't have the vocabulary to verbalize them and therefore to see them, to feel them, or to comprehend them.

The function of the aphasic border is to contribute to this deficit of remembering and erase the evidence so we can witness the ordeal of crossing either as a breach of sovereignty or a spectacle of ahistorical inhumanity. This disjuncture between words, things and context is the pathology that generates and perpetuates the namelessness of the Nigerian refugee and the repetition of those scenes of lament of a black pained body still shaming the world for failing to recognize his basic humanity and the dignity of his own existence. The foreclosure of the memory of the border has effectively trivialized the suffering of refugees by severing the ties between their predicament and the historical and geopolitical conditions that have precipitated their displacement. Beyond the durability of the colonial legacies of predation, 30 percent of the world's refugees today are forced to leave their homes because of climate change and more intense weather disasters. It is estimated that by 2050, 143 million people in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and southeast Asia will become climate refugees.¹³ The connection between intensified displacement and environmental degradation caused by wealthy nations is yet another one of the many excisions in the stories we tell about the border.

Aphasia at the border also assumes a privilege of not knowing or not needing to know the context of people's displacement. At the heart of this failure to read the border properly is not an absence of knowledge but a disturbing privilege of ignorance afforded to some people at the expense of others. The fact that some information about the border is readily available and another is made irrelevant or illegible is part of a complex political geography of ignorance, which, in the words of science historian Robert Proctor, generates not only privilege but also power. Not knowing is not necessarily malicious, but in the political and historical context of the border, it is manufactured and carefully orchestrated as a way to mask reality and seed doubt where there should

13 Podesta 2018.

be none. In fact, Proctor has spent his academic career focused on what he calls, 'Agnotology' or the study of ignorance calling on scientists and humanists "to question the naturalness of ignorance, its causes and its distribution"¹⁴. Who knows not and why not, he says, are important questions laced with a double project of undoing knowledge and effacing history.

Ignorance is engineered at every turn in our modern societies today even when our media and information networks have never been this accessible and open. Consider for a moment the media spectacle around the caravan of thousands of migrants from Central America walking for days to claim asylum in the United States. Much of the media coverage of this event, which coincided with the 2018 midterm elections, focused either on the security threat and the impending breach of the border or on the political ineptitude of President Trump and his callous tweets minimizing the plight of migrants. Very little mention was made of the imperial plunder of the countries of Central America through the reckless policies of the IMF and the World Bank or the violent drug trafficking which is primarily fueled by strong demand from the United States leaving a trail of crime, corruption, and insecurity.¹⁵ The irrelevance of this information and the failure of the mainstream public to access it is a prime example of the privilege of ignorance which is often defended as a simple gap of knowledge, but is actually a product of one's social and epistemic advantage. A privilege which allows certain people to turn a blind eye on historical and contemporary injustices while others live their brutalizing consequences handicapped by their subordination.

Speaking of a 'white epistemology of ignorance', Jamaican philosopher Charles Mills argues that a privileged racial contract has for centuries cast the world in a relentless repertoire of dysfunctional fantasies and omissions which ignores corrective information and absorbs contradictions as innocent missteps. His description of this dominant epistemology echoes Ann Stoler's analysis of the politics of forgetting:

If the racial subordination of people of color was matter-of-fact and taken for granted by racial liberalism in its original, overtly racist incarnation, it can no longer be admitted by racial liberalism in its present race-evading and calculatedly amnesiac incarnation. The atrocities of the past now being an embarrassment, they must be denied, minimized, or simply conceptually bypassed. A cultivated forgetfulness, a set of constructed

14 Proctor 2018, p. 3.

15 Kassab/Rosen 2018.

deafnesses and blindnesses, characterizes racial liberalism: subjects one cannot raise, issues one cannot broach, topics one cannot explore.¹⁶

Indeed, there is a high cost to ignorance when it parades as knowledge. What we don't know, or do not wish to know, about what actually transpires at the border everyday is a dangerous feature of this cultivated epistemology of not knowing. And ignorance and the failure to see only breed more tragedies and suffering. Such erasure goes even further when an alliance is created with nature to secure the effacement of evidence. In an anthropological tour de force using ethnography, forensics, linguistics, photography, and storytelling Jason de León argues in *The Land of Open Graves* that U.S. immigration and border policy deployed the desert as a form of violence that kills and erases migrant bodies, neutralizing any proof of the tragedies that occur daily in these treacherous lands: "Border Patrol draws on the agency of animals [...] while simultaneously absolving itself of any blame connected to loss of life," he writes.

The terrible things that this mass of migrating people experience en route are neither random nor senseless, but rather part of a strategic federal plan that has rarely been publicly illuminated and exposed for what it is: a killing machine that simultaneously uses and hides behind the viciousness of the Sonoran Desert. The Border Patrol disguises the impact of its current enforcement policy by mobilizing a combination of sterilized discourse, redirected blame, and "natural" environmental processes that erase evidence of what happens in the most remote parts of southern Arizona.¹⁷

Such dangerous complicity with the harshness of the desert and the Mediterranean sums up the callousness of authorities and politicians who can only think of further fortifying the border by introducing more sophisticated surveillance technologies like drones, biometric machines, and other digitized forms of capture. Detention centers in Spain, Italy, Morocco, Libya, the United States, and Australia have become infamous for their inhumane conditions and war-like securitization measures. In an iconic comment, a former mayor of Lampedusa warned that "We don't want to become the Alcatraz of the Mediterranean"¹⁸. The border has become a prominent political stage where a radical politics of national security is performed publicly without necessarily

16 Mills 2017, p. 43.

17 De León 2015, p. 43.

18 Pugliese 2010, p. 111.

seeking a solution to the humanitarian problems of crossing. Frontiers are increasingly predicated on a principle of separation and cultural binaries than a desire for encounter and easy passage. The migrant and refugee, under this alienating logic, are easily criminalized as the enemy and forced to cross a boundary that negates them the very right to life and to mobility.

It bears repeating that the lessons to draw from this degeneration of the border are not only limited to the material consequences discussed so far, but should also address the philosophical bankruptcy of the concept of the border itself and the impoverishment of its imaginary in these fractious times. What is needed today is a radical interrogation of the epistemology of the border and the territorial doctrine upon which it rests. Such intellectual exercise must be expansive enough to transcend the limitations and biases of Western political theory and include other imaginaries of movement, space, and human encounter.

4 (B)Orders of Immobility

In an inspiring art project entitled “Freedom of Movement”, Ugandan researcher-artist Bathsheba Okwenje exposes the wide inequalities of movement in the world by focusing on the discriminating principles of the visa system. She built a comparative list of requirements to account for the stark difference between what a Ugandan citizen visiting the UK and a British citizen visiting Uganda have to provide to obtain entry into both countries. Commenting on the insurmountable restrictions placed even on those who can travel, Okwenje writes, “[...] some people carry a passport with privileges, and others don’t. To me, it’s a clear illustration of the many divergent ways in which the world rises to meet and support those with privilege and the way it doesn’t for those without.”¹⁹

UK Home Office visa requirements for Ugandan nationals

- Hotel reservation in UK
- Personal bank statement showing sufficient money to cover the visit to the UK

Uganda embassy visa requirements for UK nationals

- A passport valid for at least 6 months
- US \$50 paid at the port of entry

¹⁹ Okwenje 2019.

(cont.)

**UK Home Office visa requirements
for Ugandan nationals**
**Uganda embassy visa requirements
for UK nationals**

- Confirmation of employment
 - Evidence of permission to be in the country from which the application is made from (if outside of Uganda)
 - Round trip plane ticket reservation (Kigali – London)
 - Marriage certificate
 - Child's birth certificate
 - Spouse's employment contract
 - Husband's salary certificate
 - Husband's evidence of assets
 - Copy of husbands passport
 - Evidence of permission for husband to be in the country from which I applied for the visa
 - Programme agenda for the LSE Africa Summit
 - Concept note for the LSE Africa Summit
 - Invitation letter from the LSE to attend the LSE Africa Summit stating the LSE is providing financial support for travel and accomodation while in London
 - Invitation from the art exhibition's curator at the Africa Summit, stating ongoing, collaborative work with the LSE
 - Bio metric identifiers such as retina scan and finger prints;
 - US \$414 to expedite the visa process (only accepting online payments)
 - £55 to submit documents and bio-metric identifiers at the Kigali visa processing center (only accepting online payments)
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These constraints on the mobility of some follow a geopolitical order and a racial and cultural classification system which must be exposed indeed to reveal the politics of movement in our time. Israeli political theorist Hagar Kotef, who works on the functions of mobility and immobility in the history of political thought, wrote an instructive book in this regard with a highly suggestive title: *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*. The book starts with a sobering quote from Hannah Arendt who said that, “of all the specific liberties which may come into our minds when we hear the word “Freedom”, freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary”²⁰. Limitation of movement, Kotef argues, is the precondition to enslavement and a denial of the substance and meaning of what it means to be a political being. In a brilliant analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli border, Kotef concludes that our modern political systems have an obsessive interest in regulating and managing physical movement. These systems are organized around the ability and desire to decide who is allowed to cross what borders and enter what spaces, spaces that are increasingly foreclosed under the guise of preserving safety and autonomy. The border in this system of heightened securitization has become ground zero for both the display and enactment of these strict policies, ordering in the process the freedom of some and the immobility of others.

Kotef writes that in liberal political theory, movement and freedom are often identified with each other and celebrated as indissociable, but the growing securitization and militarization of the border through oppressive technologies, policies, and practices are undermining this association. Movement, then, had to be turned into the order of freedom rather than a “chaotic violation of order itself”²¹. The same liberal tradition which paradoxically valued the mobility of the liberal subject, however, constructed movement as a threat rather than an affirmation of liberty. Movement had to be conceived in terms of a set of racial, geographic and gendered condition in a way that produced certain “free” subjects and certain “hindered” others. The border’s function is to classify people while granting or denying them passage. Colonization was a prime example for how the movement of some undesirable subjects had to be regulated. Freedom and sovereignty here are intimately tied to closure, hindrance of motion, while at the same time celebrating values such as circulation, flow, and liberty. Freedom as such had to be managed and regulated, producing with it regimes of bordering and motion. Kotef’s aim is to reveal the complex ways in which movement can be celebrated and criminalized at the same time:

20 Kotef 2015, p. 1.

21 Kotef 2015, p. 3.

By providing a reading of several means through which movement is produced as freedom or as a threat, as an iconography of self-regulation or as a proof of the possibility to discipline this person or that group, this third layer also offers a critique of the modes of governance that crystallize around these two main configurations of movement: surveillance, enclosure, eviction, imprisonment, and siege.²²

So how do we visualize these regimes of regulation of movement, these tropes of closures at work, particularly when the violent implications of this ordering of freedom are obscured or rendered visible only to mark the violation of the ability to manage the border? My answer, following the initiative of Kotef, is to start with the premise that the modern nation-state has always been “an apparatus of closure” that demands strict regulation of movement and control of territory in the name of freedom. In order to understand this paradox, I turn to the Italian cultural geographer Franco Farinelli and his thesis of “the crisis of cartographic reason” in modernity.²³ Mapping, according to Farinelli, is not just about illustration of space but a way of thinking that shapes and regulates space as territory. As a social construction, maps served to create the geographies of power that informed the architects of exploration and coloniality and as such should be looked at as images of the world. Maps marked the transition from a fixed view of the world to a mobile vision which enabled the geographical explorations of the 15th century and the subsequent colonial enterprise. Farinelli is helpful in our analysis of movement and territory because he argues that at the heart of European modernity is an absolute belief in the power of mapping territory as a necessary technology to fit the world, tailor it to power configurations, and order it according to a particular usage.

In this geometric order lies a stubborn ontology of cartographic reason, an order of mapping and drawing which hardens the meaning of boundaries and frontiers along logics of exclusionary belonging and pure lines. The border in this sense, and like the map, functions as an agent of power, a hegemonic proposition of territory, or an undisputed theory of existence. As Swedish geographer Gunnar Olsson argues,

from beginning to end cartographical reason serves as the handmaid of power, sometimes concealed with its face covered, sometimes naked with its genitals bared. Its overriding task will always be the same: to draw the line between insiders and outsiders, more precisely between the free

22 Kotef 2015, p. 5.

23 Farinelli 2009.

above, who can do whatever they like and the slaves below, who have no choice but to submit.²⁴

This narrow articulation of territory as a conquerable entity of land, ideas, cultures, etc. has been central in how Western philosophy has conceived of the limits and boundaries of what it means to be human. Whoever controls the ‘rules of geometry’, Olsson argues, can impose the ‘rules of thought’.

I use the important critique of Farinelli and Olsson precisely because it suggests that the mapping of territory is never about mere physical representations, but more about imaginary directions for thought and control. Under this cartographic reasoning, perfectly enmeshed in a Western will of order and conquest, knowledge and power intersect to impose a universalist and rational vision of space which structures and codes territory along assumptions and techniques of racialization and difference. This coupling of power and territory is what Edward Said aptly calls, ‘poetics of space’, a range of imagined attributes assigned to a space in order to demarcate it, act on it, and justify its appropriation. It’s worth recalling the metaphor of the inside of a house Said borrows from Gaston Bachelard in *Orientalism*:

The objective space of a house – its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms – is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel; thus a house may be haunted or homelike, or prisonlike or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here.²⁵

The fictions and fabricated meanings ascribed to space, and by extension people and cultures, project an imperial imaginary which conceives of everything in terms of the emptiness of an open canvas or the newness of an untouched realm waiting to be drawn and touched so meaning can be assigned again. Borders in this imaginary function as a powerful apparatus to mark this stark distinction and turn mobility into a privilege for the familiar cosmopolitan. So how can we destabilize this spatial reasoning which ensnares territory and borders in a logic of binaries and tamable difference? How can we resist this deployment of the border to legitimate an oppressive regime of movement based

24 Olsson 2007, p. 54.

25 Said 1978, p. 55.

on flagrant inequities and injustices? And how can we find an alternative to this geographic violence which continues to produce insiders and outsiders?

The precarity of borders today has prompted Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe to ask a series of provocative questions that force us to re-visit fundamental assumptions about the distribution of the earth: “How must the earth be distributed? To whom does the earth belong? Who can lay what type of claim to what part of it? To whom should be allotted what share? And who determines its distribution or partition?”²⁶ In commenting on what he calls a ‘new global mobility regime’, Mbembe takes us back to the 1884–85 Congo Conference in Berlin, a pivotal and fateful event, also known as the Scramble for Africa, where Western imperial powers gathered to divvy up large swaths of land and bodies of water in sub-Saharan Africa among themselves. The arbitrariness of this partition was indeed remarkable in its moral indifference, but what was even more striking about it was the fact that the existential reason for the border was “to attend to the problem of the distribution of the earth”²⁷. The primary function of drawing up the border was to legitimize control and restrict people’s mobility along imaginary lines. Today, images of Syrian and Afghan refugees locked in detention centers and caught up in the nativist fervor of countries like Hungary, Austria, Italy, and France reveal a disturbing similarity to the separatist ethos of the colonial border and its inhumane arbitrariness. “Wherever we look,” Mbembe writes, “the drive is towards enclosure, or in any case an intensification of the dialects of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, a dialectics of opening and closure.”²⁸

By drawing a historical line between the colonial and current models of the border, Mbembe exposes both the conceptual and empirical incoherence of the liberal idea of the border which sees in frontiers both an opportunity of freedom to roam and an order of security to control. Freedom of movement is possible only when it serves a desire for stability and settlement and as such we have inherited only two binary models: “Some movements were therefore configured as freedom, and others were deemed improper and were conceived as a threat”²⁹. We have never resolved this injustice in classical liberal thought, according to Mbembe, and that is why the mobility of some bodies today continues to frighten and feed anxieties of insecurity. The only way to ensure security again is to monitor closely or stop people who move excessively beyond the sanctioned schemas of mobility.

26 Mbembe 2018.

27 Mbembe 2018.

28 Mbembe 2018.

29 Mbembe 2018.

Classical liberal thought is not averse to the right of movement or freedom of mobility. We saw how Hannah Arendt emphasized the right of movement as the most elemental of freedoms and a necessary condition for any possible political subjectivity. In *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, John Locke advanced his ‘res nullius thesis’, that God has given the earth to all men to enjoy in common. We know now how such a stipulation was used as a pretext for a violent colonial enterprise by Europeans in the Americas and beyond.³⁰ Immanuel Kant wrote about the moral right of hospitality that states must honor when receiving a foreigner for a temporary stay in case turning them away can endanger their life. Kant’s cosmopolitan right to hospitality was a major philosophical attempt to grant visitors rights to visitation and protection from xenophobic restrictions, but as Derrida commented, Kant’s hospitality is impossible to achieve because it is ultimately contingent on the unconditional power of the sovereign state receiving the visitor.

We do not know what hospitality is [...] not because the idea is built around a difficult conceptual riddle, but because, in the end, hospitality is not a matter of objective knowledge, but belongs to another order altogether, beyond knowledge, an enigmatic “experience” in which I set out for the stranger, for the other, for the unknown, where I cannot go.³¹

But beyond these philosophical contradictions lies also a much graver inconsistency of Kantian thought that is difficult to reconcile with his universal calls of hospitality. It is difficult to read Kant without grappling with the fact that his work was central to the development of the racialized thought of the 18th century. This excision of racism from the genealogy of Kant’s work, and that of many other Enlightenment thinkers, is revealing because it hides a myth that their philosophy was a pure, universal, and race-blind intellectual affair. Kant’s theory of race, based on a hierarchy of skin color, geographic location, and rational capacity, had a teleological and ethical resonance that helped solidify “the superior/inferior classification” of race of his time and beyond³².

How is this critique of Kant’s philosophy related to our analysis of the border today? I would argue that it is extremely relevant because European thought has for long reserved for itself the capacity of logos while the rest remains in the waiting room of history.³³ The securitized border today and the

30 Benhabib 2012.

31 Derrida 1997, p. 112.

32 Eze 1997, p. 130.

33 Chakrabarty 2000.

penetration of its logic into all aspects of social life fulfill precisely the same classificatory role of who is deserving of movement and who is not, whose passage is safe and whose is threatening, and who can live in dignity and who can be left to die. Such calculus of the border must be denounced in the strongest terms possible because it is at the heart of a violent bio/necropolitical regime whereby cruel instruments of surveillance and enforcement are introduced to create new 'death-worlds' and enable hidden trails of slow destruction.³⁴

5 A New Poetics of the Frontier: Edouard Glissant's Theory of Relation

The question of the human continues to be central in an age of killing borders and perfect security. Being human has never been a neutral affair as racialized scripts and relations of power converge to confer the mantle of humanity on some and veto it for others. For the latter, border politics is nothing but a morbid replay of those long-standing scripts which have turned humanity into a hierarchy of races and cultures. The drowned corpses in the Mediterranean today should haunt us out of our silence to acknowledge the infernal implications of this narrow vision of humanity for what the border has become. In the wake of colonization, Frantz Fanon spoke forcefully about the psychological injuries of a deficient and ruthless humanism that saw in difference only fear to be contained and risk to be managed. His work described the trauma of what it was like to live as a black person under a regime of radical racism and corporeal demarcation:

[...] I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'." [...] On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.

34 Mbembe 2003.

[...] The crippled veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother, “Resign yourself to your color the way I got used to my stump; we’re both victims.”³⁵

Fanon, of course, refused to be assigned the ‘humility of the cripple’ and his work and militancy are clear markers of this rejection, but his distressing description of the trauma and amputation of living as black could apply to the hemorrhage of suffering of the life of a refugee today. The distress in the voice of the nameless Nigerian refugee at the beginning of this article is a similar indignation of a vicious humanism that is six decades apart. The tragedy at the border today is the culmination of this limitless force of fear, pain, and dehumanization that continues to define human relations and orders of power worldwide. The last words Fanon wrote, however, were an invocation of a new humanism devoid of racism and subjugation, which some have derided and others have simply not taken seriously.³⁶ His hope for ‘a new man’ came after a careful interrogation of the kind of humans we have become in the wake of colonization. The sting of that question still reverberates as we face similar forms of tyranny and repression today, whether it relates to the question of refugees, migration, climate change, or democratic governance.

Feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti³⁷ argues that the fatigue of imaginaries and melancholia of theory in the face of these pressing questions is related to a waning impact of deconstruction and a lack of diversity in the archives we consult. Our canons, I would argue, may not be canons after all since they may not contain answers on their own. Our fatigue is induced by our epistemic deafness and indifference. For so long now, we have looked in one theoretical and juridical register for answers of what constitutes the human, of what is a modern subject, of what is democracy, of what is citizenship, and of what are the terms of hospitality. It’s time we acknowledged our epistemic arrogance and listened to what other registers and archives of thinking have to say about the same questions, instead of assigning them dismissive ethnic and particularistic labels.³⁸ It is time we delinked theory from its European roots, as Argentinian historian Walter Mignolo³⁹ reminds us so vigorously. The point here is not to dismiss Western critical theory and philosophy but to center other sources of thought which still struggle for relevance and visibility.

35 Fanon 2008, p. 85.

36 Pithouse 2003.

37 Braidotti 2018.

38 Dabashi 2012.

39 Mignolo 2007.

We need multiple perspectives to avoid what feminist scholar Sandra Harding calls the “privilege of partial perspectives”.⁴⁰

This is why in the case of borders and imaginaries of mobility I rely on the theory of relationality of Edouard Glissant, a Martinican poet and philosopher who devoted his entire life to the ethics and poetics of movement for a world that defies fixity and sedentarity. Glissant’s poetry and philosophy are massive and a few paragraphs here will not do justice to the complexity of his work. I limit my analysis to some insights from his poetics of relation, a rich theory of errantry and nomadism that is at the heart of our ontological impasse around questions of mobility and movement. This is a different view from the vertical universality we inherited from classical liberal theory because its premise is on the force of multiplicity and existential creolity; not uniformity and homogeneity.

Let us start with Glissant’s fundamental view of borders and their function in the world to illustrate the relevance of his relational thinking to the idea of frontiers and boundaries:

We are drawn to borders, not because they are signs or elements of the impossible but because they are places of passage and transformation. Relationship depends on the mutual influence of identities, be they individual or collective, and requires each identity to be distinct and independent. Relationship does not mean confusion or dilution. I can change by exchanging with the Other and still not lose or distort myself. That is why we need borders, not as places to stop at, but as the point at which we may exercise that right of free passage from the same to the Other; *savour the wonder of here and there*.⁴¹

The border as a site of passage, encounter, and communication is a central principle in Glissant’s theory of relation. Identity is only livable through a relationship with the other, but for this relationship to be able to take its course, it has to be allowed to express itself, to carry itself on its own. It needs the freedom of mobility so that the instinct of relation can survive for all. Motion in Glissant’s perspective is not about calculable and economic rationality or about territorial discovery and conquest. It’s about a natural transition between various entities: smells, tastes, atmospheres, rhythms, and lived experiences. This projection of mobility and relationality as a necessary condition of being disrupts the homogenizing forces of a border mentality based on

40 Harding 1993.

41 Glissant 2006 [my emphasis].

enclosures and fortresses. Encounter and transit, in this imaginary, are the prime qualities that animate our inherent desire for multiplicity and diversity. Without the freedom to roam and meet, our own existence is threatened and our development is stunted.⁴²

Glissant's emphasis on multiplicity owes a great deal to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome and its prioritizing of a non-linear and non-teleological view of the world. Rhizomatic thinking is opposed to the totalizing root and the logic of oneness, beginnings, and ends. As such, the world is not made up of a series of determined realities and fixed principles, but is the outcome of a complex and fluid composition of various things. In an imaginary based on rhizomatic relations, Glissant writes, there is no 'intolerant root', no 'settled way of life', and therefore no preferred order of being.⁴³ Commenting on the limitations of a narrow model of identification left to the colonized after independence, Glissant cautions against mimicking the dualistic frames of reference of the colonizer:

For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an "opposite," [...] for colonized peoples identity will be primarily "opposed to" – that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.⁴⁴

This does not mean that roots are not important for Glissant. As he compares his idea of the rhizome to Deleuze and Guattari, he writes, "The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root"⁴⁵. At the opposite end of a narrow sense of sameness and fixed roots, Glissant proposes the figure of the nomad and the errant. Nomadism, that is not invested in a place of origin or consumed by national expansion, is for him a primordial way of being that defies the oppressive machinations of boundaries, borders, and territory. A nomad's journey never succumbs to the desire of conquest or re-settlement because it is invested in a desire to restart again. It is never preoccupied with the anxiety of contamination precisely because it both anticipates the gratifications of contact and surrenders itself to the vicissitudes of travel. This form of nomadism is reinforced in Glissant with

42 Glissant 1997.

43 Glissant 1997, p. 11.

44 Glissant 1997, p. 17.

45 Glissant 1997, p. 11.

a vocation of errantry that is just as fulfilling as it is unsettling. The errant, another important figure in his poetics of relation, “[is] no longer just the traveler, the discoverer, the conqueror, [who] strives to know the totality of the world, [but he] already knows that he will never accomplish this – and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides”⁴⁶. Unlike wandering aimlessly, errantry is still about an oblique sense of itinerary, of movement that is still informed by one’s past, yet it resists the univocal pull of fixed roots and closed belonging. The errant recognizes the uniqueness of their past and culture, but they also accept the fact that there are no absolute differences, no foundational myth of “single roots”, and certainly no universal conformity.

To grasp Glissant’s insights on this ethic of mobility, we must understand his vision of what he calls, *Tout-Monde* (Whole-World), a consciousness that is fully aware of how events and places in the world affect how we perceive and experience our surroundings. In other words, our knowledge of the world can only happen if we can evoke fragile memories, listen to all “the cries of the world” wherever they are, and respect the opacities of everyone without neutralizing them or integrating them into a vapid same. Glissant’s *Tout-Monde* celebrates an awareness of the world as a network of intimate interactions and ceaseless encounters enabled today by technology, media, and travel. Any inhibition of the latter constitutes for him a cruel breach of a vital right and an ethical imperative for humans to move and transform themselves through the unpredictable force of relation and exchange. In this vision of an open world, the border ceases to be an abyss of pain and loss, where barricades, fences, and walls have no place. The ordering of movement at the fortress border of today is replaced by a natural urge to cross, to walk, to leave behind, and start anew. That is the promise of the itinerant border which rejects the homogenizing myths of universalism and the essentializing fixation of cultural particularism. The border is an invitation to cross into the unknown, a provocation to errantry; not a command to stop or a decree to send away.

I realize the idealism of this perspective, but the deep abjection we face today at the border requires a radical shift in the philosophy and systems that underpin our ideas about mobility, movement, and migration. The viscerality of suffering at the frontier demands an intellectual and systemic rupture to avoid repeating the abuses of history and concealing the injustices of an incarcerating politics of race and power. Death and loss at the border should interpellate us all to listen to the cries of those who live in the seams of our civilization and resist the inhumane temptations of the fence. Walls are nothing but a pathological refutation of difference and exchange. They are the hideous

46 Glissant 1997, p. 20.

face of our enclosed identities and our compulsive fear of the other. To heal our borders we must first confront and change the governing logics that push us to erect walls so the pain of others on the other side falls out of view and we are not burdened by its distressing presence. Patrick Chamoiseau, another Caribbean writer and poet and a close companion and reader of Glissant said it best when he defended the need for a new poetics for the world to confront what he calls the “drying up” of our imaginaries:

Today, interpretation of the facts of the contemporary world is drying up, due to the pervasive idea that everything is economics. We're facing a rationality that has forgotten about the poetic. If you speak of conviviality, fraternity, love, touch, flavor, everything that adds spice to life and to creativity- in political discourse, it makes you seem frivolous. People prefer to stay with prosaic parameters. What Glissant and I have tried to do in our work is to reinstate the forgotten, poetic dimension of the political- that which organizes the city of men and allows people to come into their own.⁴⁷

I invoke the work of Glissant and Chamoiseau not as a magical solution to the tragedy of our borders or a definitive imaginary to follow. Nor do I intend to use it as merely a revivalist project where Eurocentric myths of universalism are met with a clamor for another form of triumphalist universalism: my culture is better than your culture. My knowledge is better than your knowledge. Or my imaginary is better than your imaginary. Such wasteful bickering or intellectual policing, misses the point of what I hope is a radical pedagogy of undoing the canon and of seeking pluriversal solutions to the most pressing issues facing us locally and globally. As queer poet, writer and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa said of living in the interstices of borders, “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions ...[but] There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being ‘worked’ on”⁴⁸. Instead of demonizing borders as a place of disorientation and separation, we need to inhabit the openness and opacity of borderlands (*La frontera*) because that is where anger, pain, and loss grind against hope, possibility, and living otherwise.

47 Cited in Simek 2016, p. 95.

48 Anzaldúa 1999, preface.

Biography

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