

Migrant destinies

Sylvaine Bulle and Laetitia Tura



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Although borders are often invisible, they govern people's right to move freely, as well as clandestine migration strategies. Here, Sylvaine Bulle comments on photographs by Laetitia Tura and, in doing so, examines the complex interactions – between law, economics and violence – that sharing territories implies.

Photography and the social sciences: borders and migration

In partnership with the Paris-based photographers' collective Le Bar Floréal, *Metropolitics* is pleased to present a new series of articles that explores themes from a dual perspective: through the photographer's lens and from the standpoint of a researcher. In this paper, Sylvaine Bulle's text and Laetitia Tura's images examine migrant trajectories from a different angle.

Laetitia Tura's work focuses on the measures used to close borders and the migrants who try to cross them. The two series of photographs presented here show the borders between Mexico and the United States (*Linewatch*, 2004–2006) and between Morocco and the Spanish exclave of Melilla (*Je suis pas mort, je suis là*, 2007–2012).

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The United States, Mexico, Latin America, Africa... are they any spaces, territories or citizens capable of resisting the action of governments who organise “the distribution of space” (Rancière 1998)? Responsibility for the division of individuals, between those who are free to travel and trade and those who are not, must lie with the role of national governments in the globalised economy. We know, indeed, that current Western democracies are characterised by a highly security-conscious mode of government that focuses on the need to control and select people's movements inside and outside borders, all in the name of global security, so as to protect nation states threatened by flows across national boundaries. This type of sovereignty is visible in countries at peace and at war alike, in the US, in Israel, in North Africa and in Iraq.

In many cases, migration policies are governed by the economy (Brown 2007, 2009; Gros 2012; Sassen 2011), with the privatisation of border surveillance, containment or quota systems, and even policies that select individuals deemed suitable to move around the global market of people and capital. Consequently, the very term “border” now extends beyond the mere exercise of national sovereignty or the “physical and moral boundaries” of states (Searle 1992)¹ to cover complex arrangements between law, economics and violence, which give rise to new restrictions on mobility, and also create new territories.

Clandestinity: a product of security-minded governments

In his two latest works, the sociologist Luc Boltanski (2009, 2012) describes these new ways of qualifying reality through measurability, selection, and standards that disorient individuals as a “complex system of domination” (or “managerial government”). In the case of migration, with regard to global security, law is a central element as it helps stabilise a certain world order or an order of things. After all, it is the law that governs reality, assigns legal and civic qualities and has the power to differentiate between human beings. It therefore defines the human *nomos* and the

¹ For Searle, a border represented by a line of stones relates to a physical ontology, but these stones have a separating function. In this case, a status function (national boundary) is added to the physical function (to separate).

boundaries between people, as it enables institutional players and security forces to follow the trajectories of individuals who are authorised (or not) to cross from one territory to another. It is therefore impossible to have illegal migrants without fences and camps, to have camps without a security regime to safeguard sovereignty, and to have sovereignty without the concealment of migrants.

One thing is clear: the fragmentation, separation and quotas so characteristic of liberal societies today cause infinitely ambivalent events. Under the guise of technocratic processes (such as the allocation of rights, visas and work permits), managerial and security-minded governments effectively manufacture human tragedies. They condemn a portion of humans to not be free, or to be reclusive, hidden, invisible. We are talking here about human beings as illegal migrants, who are not incorporated into any legal or numerary measure. For if attributive and constitutive rules – such as those concerning civil status, residence permits and the right to move freely – qualify individuals, there is also no doubt that they make illegal migrants doubly or triply foreign. For them, migration involves existential hardships linked to their insecure status. In this sense, the law is not only a legal operator that defines types of citizenship or membership, but is also an ontological operator.

Who has the right? Concealment and disappearance into sovereignty

As noted by Judith Butler, any critical theory (such as that on the generalised or globalised exception) is insufficient if it does not differentiate between the various figures of the “bare life”, such as deportees or illegal workers, of whose lives an understanding is sought (Butler 2010; see also Agamben 2002). Across the globe, the case of illegal workers moving between two countries (Mexico and the United States, Morocco and Spain, France and the UK, Palestine and Israel, etc.) evokes one of the forms of painful experience inherent to migration in conditions of invisibility (Bauman 2006). Working illegally requires mental preparation by the clandestine migrant for an exploration of a generally hostile world. A specific geography relating to illegal migration is therefore characteristic of liberal societies.

If we observe illegal crossings, as Laetitia Tura has done so delicately in her photographic work, we see that the initial motivation for workers is to get in touch with networks of smugglers and employers. They then have to make the dangerous border crossing, climbing walls and fences at their peril, build a place to sleep, or even domesticate the environment in the “host” country. The journey “up” or “down” to the host country often amounts to humiliation. Ghost-like clandestine immigrants are forced to make tumultuous journeys through towns and villages, through mountain areas, in order to access the only public places that are not threatening: public or community lands, schools and public parks, and mosques (as in the case of Palestinian migrants in Israel, or Iraqi and Syrian migrants in Lebanon). Sometimes they are chased out of the spaces in which they rest. Here, the label of undesirable alien – of an illegal immigrant forced into invisibility – inevitably makes a reappearance. For what can be said about the hostility faced by migrants, who supposedly threaten public order? They are perceived as a danger to host countries’ rules and peaceful community life. Their isolation is often the result of mutual suspicion: a fear of informers for migrants, and fear and mistrust of migrants for citizens and legal residents. The struggle for resources (such as employment and food) and the economic predation exhibited by some smugglers or employers further reinforce the feeling of humiliation. Migrants, as illegal and foreign individuals who are vulnerable in terms of citizenship and basic rights, are therefore considered exploitable. The conditions of their existence thus add a secret and painful character to the ordeal of their movements that often forces them into silence.

This brief reminder of the broad lines of the debate allows us to highlight a first point: as strange as it may seem, the phenomenology of the foreigner (Le Blanc 2010) is not enough alone to account for this human condition. The problem is not so much the invisibility or stigmatisation of migrants, or the various ways in which this persists in the public space with a wide variety of codes, equipment and tricks, as “the appearance of politics through the disappearance of these citizens”

(Tassin 2012) – i.e. political gestures that lead to the appearance of certain individuals and the disappearance of others. Citing Arendt (1965), Étienne Tassin emphasises the fact that “in politics, more than anywhere else, we do not have the ability to distinguish between a being and an appearance, which are really one and the same thing”. He then points out the following paradox: although it is justified to talk about invisible illegal immigrants or foreigners, this is due not so much due to a phenomenality and a set of experiments by these people, as to the deprivation of a political existence for these individuals. In other words, there is concern that the various skills deployed by illegal migrants to sustain themselves in the public space, using skills that have been described many times before in the social sciences, are not enough alone to account for the separation of migrants from other people or for their appearance and disappearance. The invisibility or concealment of migrants is – as Étienne Tassin, following Arendt, reminds us – a test of the state of politics and societies, or of politics itself.

In her photographs, Laetitia Tura has chosen to show only the backdrops to borders: barbed wire, electrified boundaries, crossing points, and the silhouettes or physical forms of those camping nearby. It is this delicate capturing of reality by the photographer that attracts the attention of the sociologist. She shows us that images or visual documents can easily be used to both record and analyse a phenomenon. It is precisely this kind of dialogue, and this distribution of the sensible, that enables us to combine disjointed viewpoints and see things more clearly as a result.

These images are of great value in terms of the context they help to reconstitute; however, they, and the aptness of the photographer’s viewpoint, cannot be considered without also questioning the politics and policies in place. The challenge here is very much to determine what has led to this blight of migration, as Tassin once again explains: “Disappearance means the process by which liberal society deprives immigrants already stripped of their rights or illegal migrants of any visibility, erasing their appearance in the public space and forcing them to lead an underground, dark and cavernous existence”. Let us not forget that the anonymity of these existential ordeals is brought to the fore as the result of nominative and attributive categories – the (national or international) laws that allow certain individuals to have an existence and condemn others. In this way, immigration and exile resulting from a legal, economic and political operation, including in the case of wars, constantly confirm the structuring of reality around rules and institutional statements. In this way, the relationship between political institutions (and their processes) and the human beings who must comply with Western, and perhaps global, sovereignty is clearly indicated. The idea that an image, a story or a testimony alone might explain the political meaning of the acts of visibility of these “precarious lives”, to use Butler’s expression, remains unlikely. But there is no doubt that these photographs urge us to reconsider politics from the perspective of the plight of the illegal alien.

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Linewatch
(2004–2006)



Cañón de Matadero, Tijuana, Mexico, May 2004.



Nido de las Aguilas, Tijuana, Mexico, February 2005.



Migrants – Cañón de las Cabras, Tijuana, Mexico, May 2004.



Opposite the Tijuana neighbourhood known as Colonia Libertad, California, United States, May 2004.



Cañón de Matadero, April 2004.



Signcutting, San Ysidro, California, United States, May 2004.



Probing lights – Cañón de Matadero, Tijuana, Mexico, May 2004.



Probing lights – Cañón de Matadero, Tijuana, Mexico, May 2004.



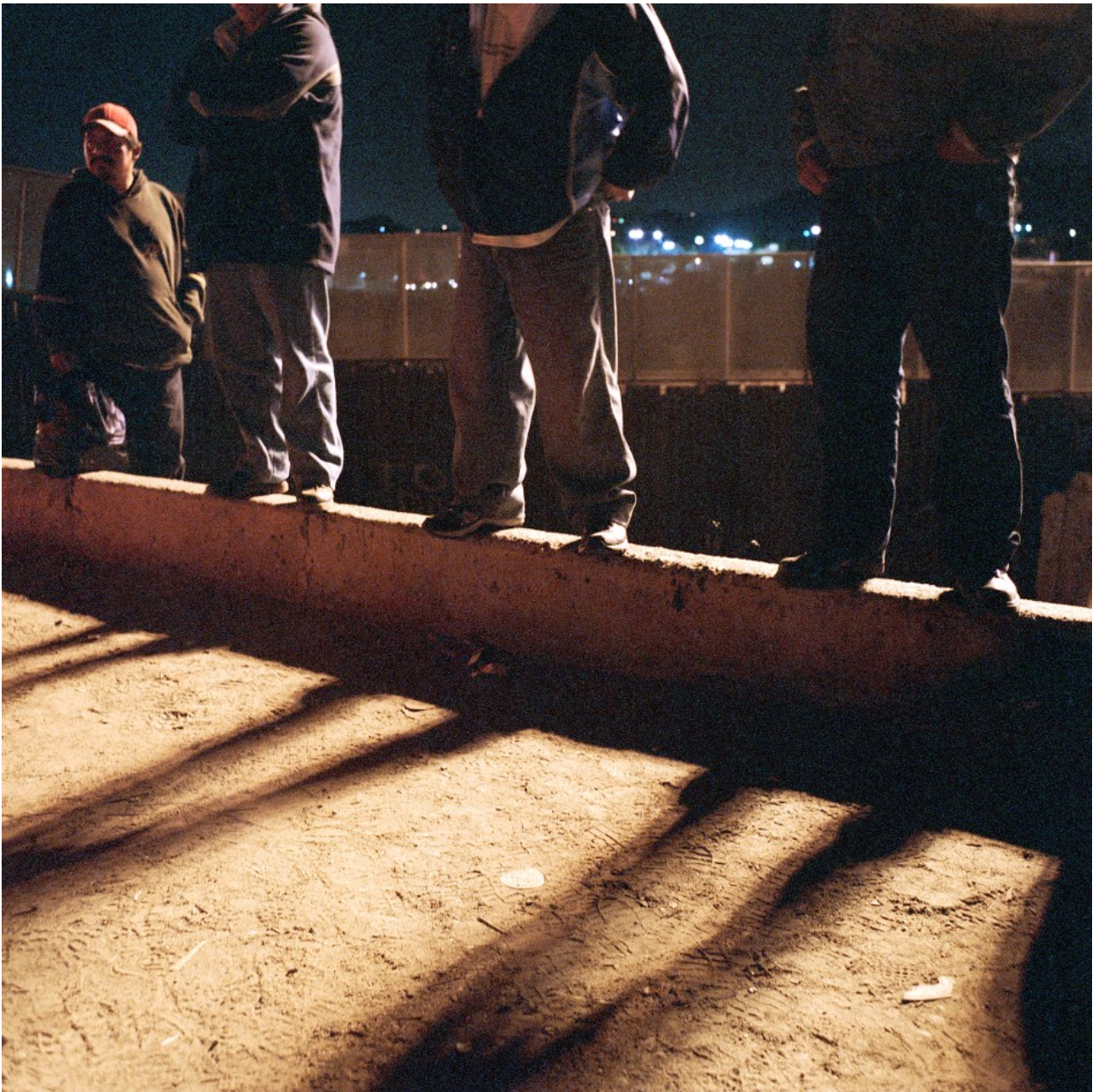
Probing lights – Cañón de Matadero, Tijuana, Mexico, May 2004.



Probing lights – Canal del Rio, Tijuana, Mexico, April 2005.



Probing lights – Colonia Libertad, Tijuana, Mexico, April 2005.



Probing lights – Canal del Rio, Tijuana, Mexico, April 2005.



Border Patrol officer, San Ysidro (San Diego suburbs), California, United States, April 2005.



Residential neighbourhood close to the Mexican border, built after the launch of Operation Gatekeeper, San Ysidro, California, United States, March 2005.



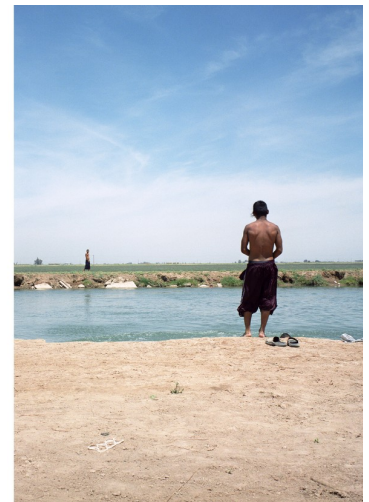
Residential neighbourhood close to the Mexican border, built after the launch of Operation Gatekeeper, San Ysidro, California, United States, February 2005.



In between, Jardines del Rincón, near Tecate, Mexico, May 2004.



In between, Jardines del Rincón, near Tecate, Mexico, May 2004.



In between, Canal Todo Americano, Mexicali, Mexico, May 2004.



In between, near Tecate, Mexico, March 2005.



In between, near Tecate, Mexico, March 2005.



In between, near Tecate, Mexico, March 2005.



In between, Cañón de la Marrana, Mexicali, Mexico, May 2004.

Je suis pas mort, je suis là
(“I’m not dead, I’m here”)
(2007–2012)



Landmarks – Railway tracks, near the Morocco–Algeria border, 2007.



Landmarks – Smelly water, near the Morocco–Algeria border, 2007.



Landmarks – Factory, Naima, Morocco, 2012.



Landmarks – Railway remains, Naima, Morocco, 2012.



Landmarks – Naima, Morocco, 2009.



Disappearances – Abandoned house, Douar el Fokra, Morocco, 2012.



Camouflage II – Takadoum, Rabat, Morocco, 2009.



Camouflage I – The bush, Malabata camp, Tangiers, Morocco, 2008.



Camouflage I – The bush, Malabata camp, Tangiers, Morocco, 2008.



Camouflage I – The bush, Malabata camp, Tangiers, Morocco, 2008.



La Valla I, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



La Valla II – Breaches, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



La Valla II – Breaches, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



La Valla I, Mawari, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



La Valla I, Mawari, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



La Valla I – Troughs, Agudú, Melilla, Spain, 2008.



Disappearances – Nets, Zarzis, Tunisia, 2012.



Disappearances – Stranded boat, Zarzis, Tunisia, 2012.



Disappearances – Mass grave, Zarzis, Tunisia, 2012.

Sylvaine Bulle is a sociologist, lecturer and researcher based in the LabTop (Laboratoire Théorie du Politique – “Theory of Politics Laboratory”) research unit within the Université de Paris-8. Her research interests include the political and pragmatic sociology of conflict (and, more specifically, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), critical and social theory, and the sociology of public problems (in particular with regard to protest movements).

Laetitia Tura has, since 2001, been conducting a photographic project on the themes of borders, invisibility and the memory of migrant trajectories. Following *Jnoub*, focused on the southern Lebanese border (2001), *Linewatch*, devoted to the US–Mexico border infrastructure (2004–2006), and *Je suis pas mort, je suis là*, on the detention of migrants in Morocco and the Spanish exclave of Melilla (2007–2012), she is currently working in the Pyrenees on the territories of the *Retirada* – the exodus of refugees of the Spanish Civil War – in 1939. In her work, she has developed an approach in which collecting people’s words is an integral part of the picture-making process.

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