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# **SURVIVORS OF THE WAR AT THE NEO-COLONIAL BORDERS**

**Moroccan accounts on the roads of demise**



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# INTRODUCTION

This article draws on the accounts of three Moroccan migrant survivors to explore some of the contemporary mechanisms that cause death at Europe's borders. The survivors' experiences serve as crucial empirical data for gaining insight into the impact and modes of operation associated with border violence. The aim, however, is not merely to document, through the survivors' accounts, the ways in which people are intentionally abandoned to perish or exposed to injury and demise, but also to explore the psychological impact of such experiences on survivors. The article makes the case for moving beyond a long-standing analytical divide in some African and Afrocriticism (*Afrocritique*) literature. Specifically, it calls for a shift in the study of deadly border mechanisms, where the distinction between "Black Africans" and "North Africans" has been a sticking point. Such a distinction is implicitly perpetuated by the racial division established and sustained by the discourse and practices of the dominant governments of the Global North. This is occurring at a time when migration policies affecting non-European postcolonial populations are being implemented continuously, indiscriminately, and cumulatively across the African continent, irrespective of the ethnic, linguistic, or national affiliation of migrants who are denied visas, and thus the right to freedom of movement.

The three cited accounts specifically serve to reaffirm the material unity of African experiences in the face of border regimes. Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerians, Syrians, Sudanese, and Senegalese people face the same limitations on movement, deadly risks, dangerous and grueling journeys,<sup>1</sup> and the same forms of postcolonial sorting and categorization that shape the Schengen Area. We aim to reconstruct the unity of this exhibition by tracing the stories of migrant survivors from Morocco and the Mediterranean, challenging the interpretative frameworks which have fragmented it. Survivors of these treacherous routes, particularly those who have survived accidents or shipwrecks and witnessed the deaths of other migrants during their journeys, carry with them unvarnished memories of border wars. Their profound physical experiences reveal the continuity of a policy that destroys, sifts through, and selects African bodies from the Maghreb to the Sahel and throughout areas where the Schengen Agreement and visa systems impede freedom of movement.

The presentation of these accounts in their unedited form, sometimes through excerpts from interviews rendered in their entirety, has the aim of reconstructing, fragment by fragment, a geographical map of death, injury, and disappearance, linking the shores of the Maghreb, the Sahel, other regions of Africa, and Europe. These experiences align with a spectrum of neocolonial violence that affects all African migrants in distinct yet interconnected ways, as they find themselves ensnared in a border-based coloniality undergoing a process of reconfiguration.

Our analysis will unfold in three stages.

**Firstly**, the study of communities affected by deaths at the border is contextualized by an ethnographic vignette based on observations conducted in Beni Mellal. These observations focused

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Sahara Desert serves as a death trap that primarily targets black migrants, a phenomenon that is exacerbated by the externalization of borders and the ban on direct travel from the capitals of sub-Saharan African countries.

on families in the Middle Atlas region in Morocco dealing with the loss of loved ones. The observation of these families resulted in an encounter with a survivor, **Ghali**, an eyewitness to a shipwreck that resulted in the disappearance of forty-one migrants. His account of the tragedy provides insight into the devastation wrought by the border on Moroccan youth, among other age groups.

**Secondly**, Ghali's experience will be enriched by **Salah's**. Salah is a Moroccan migrant whose visa applications were denied. He is a survivor of a shipwreck off the coast of Tan-Tan and a firsthand witness to the deaths of several migrants on another route to Europe; the Atlantic route. His account allows for a more thorough examination of the ways in which migrants encounter death and the subsequent impact on their migration projects.

**Thirdly**, we will undertake a meticulous examination of **Fayez's** testimony, whom we encountered in Tunisia among a cohort of Moroccan harraga (irregular migrants). His account of the perilous journey along the Balkan routes is replete with detail, offering perspicacity into the epistemology of migration as shaped by migrants themselves. This includes aspects such as route planning, diversifying routes to evade murderous police, circulating stories of survival, and accumulating knowledge necessary to navigate emigration and survive a border war.

Through these accounts, it is demonstrated in our article that European necropolitics does not merely kill, injure, or deport. Rather, migratory knowledge and practices that resist necropolitics and "counterattack" it are fostered by these policies, particularly within an Africa unified by the shared experience of exposure to Europe's border violence.



# 1 BURNT “BURNERS” (HARRAGA)

TRAVEL DIARIES,  
BENI MELLAL, FEBRUARY 2025

It’s a little past two in the afternoon, and I have just finished a meeting with about a dozen families gathered in a café in downtown Beni Mellal, at the foot of the Middle Atlas Mountains.<sup>2</sup> Each of the mothers present has spoken about her child’s departure for Europe. Their stories share a common thread: Since setting sail in three boats a few months apart in 2023, there has been no sign of life from any of the twelve young men. Each mother has brought a file, which she entrusts

<sup>2</sup> These observations were provided by Montassir Sakhi.

to me in the hope that I will forward it to Spanish organizations involved in searching for individuals who have disappeared off the coast of the Spanish Canary Islands.<sup>3</sup> I promised to forward the files, which I did a few days later. I copied a few of the young men's sisters, who are university graduates, on the email. There were responses, though none of them provided positive news.

A young woman remained aloof as families huddled around the tape recorder to recount their journeys and the remnants of their shattered lives inside the café. Once the meeting was concluded, she approached me and requested a private conversation. When the crowd eventually scattered, she moved closer: "My situation is quite distinct. Mine concerns my sister, who disappeared. I wish to remain anonymous, particularly to the families. She set off on a boat with only men on board." Her voice quivered as she continued, "The incident occurred on September 16, 2023, off the coast of Laâyoune. Of the 48 people on board, only 7 were found. The remaining 41 are still disappeared.

However, **Sana**, my interviewee, asserts that her sister's WhatsApp account was still active just a few weeks ago. "I sent messages and could see that someone was reading them without replying," Sana tells me. She hands me her phone and gives me permission to read the messages and listen to the voice notes. I come across a few carefully saved voice notes, dating from a few days prior to her sister's disappearance in September 2023: details about the itinerary, the final hours before departure, Sana's invocations for smooth sailing, and her sister's sorrowful voice, as if influenced by a group dynamic over which she no longer has control. In response to Sana's persistent inquiries regarding the trip, her sister reiterates her ignorance of her exact whereabouts with her male companion (the fact that she is traveling with a male companion further exacerbates the ethical burden on her family vis-à-vis other families, rendering her sister's testimony virtually unfeasible unless supported by the researcher or an official representative). **Nawal**, the missing young woman, also appears to be unaware of the exact date of departure and the type of boat being sailed in the voice notes.

Following September 16, 2023, all exchanges were halted. From that point on, communications were exclusively unilateral. The interface resembled a wall adorned with crying face emojis that Sana had sent. There were additional voice notes that I had not heard, although Sana revealed their content to me: "There are times when I find myself speaking with her, mourning her, and reaching out to her, though there is no response." In recent weeks, the application has displayed messages marked as "read," as indicated by the two blue check marks on the application. "Upon contacting Maroc Telecom, they corroborated that the phone number remains registered to my sister," Sana added.

Hailing from the Middle Atlas region, this young woman pursued her studies at the university level, attaining the Diplôme d'études universitaires générales DEUG (General Academic Studies Degree) in Arabic literature. However, financial constraints compelled her to discontinue her education. Unemployed, she eventually entered into an arranged marriage with a man "who was never educated but could earn a living," she explained during our interview. She added that her husband forbids her from actively searching for her disappeared sister because this would require her to visit organizations, leave the house unaccompanied, meet with other families, and deal with "the administrative authorities and the Makhzen." *[Translator's note: the Makhzen is the traditional*

<sup>3</sup> Contact was mainly established with the non-governmental organization Caminando Fronteras.

***governing institution in Morocco, centered on the monarch. It refers to the elite network of royal advisors, military officials, bureaucrats, and landowners that form the core of the state's power structure and administration***]. However, when she manages to allocate time to this endeavor, she is compelled to do so surreptitiously, concealing her actions as well as her travels. Despite having been in communication with me prior to my arrival in Beni Mellal, she had not specified the type of assistance she was hoping to receive. However, she has now made her request abundantly clear: "I would like you to speak with one of the seven survivors. I want him to tell me the truth about my sister." When I inquire as to the reason why he would recall her sister specifically, she responds without demur: "He will surely remember her because she was the only woman on board."

She elucidates that this is a young man whose father was sentenced to 12 years in prison for orchestrating the crossing of the 48 migrants. The boat was also boarded by his son, who was attempting to make the journey to Spain himself. The young man had uploaded multiple videos chronicling the shipwreck and their seven days spent adrift at sea; however, these videos were later removed upon demand by police authorities. She was adamant, stating, "If you reach out to him, I believe he will be open to a conversation, provided I'm not included."

She provided me with his phone number. I called him right away. His name is Ghali. He works at an auto repair shop. I informed him that I was only in town for a few hours, and he agreed to meet me at 17h that same day. When he arrived, he recognized Sana and greeted her discreetly. Then she quietly left. The two of us found a table at the same café from earlier that afternoon.

Not yet having taken a seat, Ghali divulged to me: "I understand the reasons for her relentlessness. But I have already told her the truth about her sister's fate. Regrettably, some of the survivors are stirring up doubts amongst the families. I am being candid because I have ascertained that you are not a police officer and that you genuinely wish to help the families. I was also eager to provide support to the families, although they are gratified by the fact that my father is incarcerated. But now she understands the unfairness of the situation. If my father were responsible for the defective engine on that boat, would he have put me, his own son, on board? I evaded death by a hair, and my father remained entirely oblivious to the entire engine malfunction. [...] Absolutely nothing has been done for these families. They are being fed falsehoods to stifle their voices. These families have been left to fend for themselves. I already explained what I'm about to reveal to you in a video that the police forced me to remove".

Our encounter with Ghali has had a profound and enduring impact on us. The sheer brutality of his experience bearing witness to death and mass disappearances is a poignant testament to the collective silence and official disregard for the loss of life wrought by borders. The following is an excerpt from Ghali's account, in which he describes surviving a tragedy that claimed the lives of several migrants:

**Montassir: *What transpired upon your departure on your crossing journey?***

**Ghali: *On September 16, 2023, we set sail from the south of Agadir, bound for Las Palmas. Only seven of us survived.***

**Montassir:** *Are you certain that the rest are dead?*

**Ghali:** *Yes, I am. I witnessed it myself. When one finds oneself adrift at sea, the experiences of each individual are observed by the others. Think about how I'm speaking to you right now; would I have any reason to doubt that? What else could have happened out on the open sea? Envision a span of seven days and seven nights spent adrift in the vast expanse of the open sea. On the first day, the boat's engine caught fire and then the hull ruptured in the middle. Our journey ended abruptly with that incident. Those in the middle of the boat were the first to fall overboard. A few of us managed to swim to the surface and cling to the inflatable life rings. With each passing hour and day, our numbers dwindled. By the seventh day, only seven of us were left when we were finally rescued by some Moroccan fishers. There were numerous ships traversing the sea, transporting Moroccans and foreigners, who passed by us without even a hint of acknowledgement. Despite observing our desperate pleas for help, their sole reaction was to remain passive and bear witness to our inevitable demise.*

**Montassir:** *What, then, of Sana's sister?*

**Ghali:** *She was the only woman on board. She persevered until the fifth day, perhaps even the sixth. We used the last rope we had to secure her, stopping her from drowning. I kept an eye on her as she was close to me while clinging to the inflatable rings. All were vigilant in their care for her. We all spoke to her, offering encouragement and support to help her persevere and maintain her sanity, despite the intense heat during the day and the extreme cold at night. Nevertheless, she had to battle with every fiber of her being just to remain above water. Some of the people who had managed to secure her had perished before she did. We did everything in our power. May Allah have mercy on her soul.*

**Montassir:** *The families are still searching for the bodies...*

**Ghali:** *Bodies?! [Staring at me] There are no bodies! This is the open sea! How could there be any bodies left after seven or eight days? Those who drowned never resurfaced. Do you think the Moroccan or Spanish police scoured the area in search of the bodies? Certainly not! May Allah have mercy on their souls. While we struggled to stay afloat for seven or eight days, we hoped our families would alert the authorities and that a plane or ship would come to our rescue. However, despite our families alerting the police and reporting our disappearance, no action was taken.*

**Montassir:** *Do you recall what occurred at sea?*

**Ghali:** *I remember everything clearly except for the last few hours. There was “al-qard” (Translator’s note: Hallucinations are referred to by the local Moroccan colloquial term “al-qard”). Sunburned throughout the day, the nighttime brought bitter cold. We all attempted to soothe one another, reciting the Quran and sharing tales to take our minds off our ordeal or to console those on the brink of a nervous breakdown... but then the hallucinations began. As time passed, we grew weary, each of us concerned with our own survival. When the hallucinations took over, you would hear someone saying, “I’m going to run an errand and will return shortly.” And they would drown, disappearing forever. Another person might claim to have heard their mother calling them, to only then dive into the water. We were all falling apart and losing our minds. Those images will forever be etched in our memories. How many lives could have been saved? It was utterly unfeasible. Allah blessed us with a chance at a new life. May Allah have mercy on the souls of the “Chouhadae” (martyrs).*

**Montassir:** *I noticed in a video shared by the families that parts of yours and the survivors’ bodies were burned.*

**Ghali:** *Yes, the boat burst into flames, and the passengers were left to scramble for safety. Even before coming into contact with the water, we were already engulfed in flames. Within the first few minutes of the accident, I watched people burn alive before jumping into the water. Then, in the days that followed, the sun and the salinity of the seawater continued to burn our already badly scorched skin.*

**Montassir:** *Your account of events is crucial for the families...*

**Ghali:** *Indeed, I had intended to speak up. However, I faced repercussions. Despite my burn injuries, I reached out to the families when I was discharged from the hospital. My phone was inundated with messages, and I responded to each family. I was labeled a liar by a few of them because they refuse to believe their children are dead. Consequently, I recorded a video and posted it online, only to have it subsequently removed due to mounting pressure and threats from the Makhzen. My father had been arrested for “facilitating the Harga” (irregular migration) and was sentenced to 12 years in prison. I currently live with my mother. I cover all expenses, including water, electricity, and rent. I was perpetually requested to appear in Agadir by the gendarmerie and the judiciary. I do not wish to have any further dealings with the Makhzen.*

Without mincing words, an essential truth is laid bare in the vignette above: the war at Eu-

Europe's borders does not discriminate based on region, race, or gender. Individuals deprived of visas and hailing from former African colonies are all specifically targeted and massacred. However, our approach to decoloniality is not merely theoretical; it clarifies a border regime conceived in the neocolonial centers of northern metropolises and imposed indiscriminately on Africans deemed unworthy of freedom of movement. A vicious cycle of violence ensnares these migrants. Colonial authorities punish them, rendering their lives disposable in the eyes of Fortress Europe. They all share a similar destiny, one that is characterized by exposure to destruction, whether it be through shipwrecks, acts of violence perpetrated by border police, deportations, or a general disregard for their rescue. The immediate consequence of this system is their demise, as it was intended to cause mass casualties at the gates of Europe and the Western way of life. From the Maghreb to sub-Saharan Africa, borders are equally imposed on the populations of the former colonies. Those who dare to confront them are sorted, maimed, repelled, and murdered by the thousands. The essence of the underlying politics is encapsulated by the vignette; an essence that unfolds in the shadows of control mechanisms, leaving behind only fragmented accounts, which are often relayed by survivors of a perilous crossing intended for the visa-less.

The testimony encapsulates the fragmented, harrowing experiences of mothers, families, and entire communities affected by the disappearances. In their quest for the truth and for explanations regarding the fate of their loved ones, these families are initially and most directly confronted with such accounts. The testimony elucidates how the postcolonial state, confronted with Europe's border externalization policies, has implemented a strategy to stifle collective awareness and any endeavors to challenge the official account concerning the truth behind



the disappearances. It reveals the strategy behind the lack of legal response: downplaying the tragedy, using euphemisms for death, and denying responsibility to the bereaved families. It

acts as if death does not affect families or loved ones, as if there is no shared history or lasting scars of trauma that will forever mark the collective identity and future of these communities.

This strategy acknowledges one major fact; forensic means of confirming death allow for a debate. This debate is about the reality of the violent deaths brought about by the border regime. Forensic means of confirming death include DNA identification of bodies unceremoniously buried in anonymity. It also includes judicial investigations verifying the cause of death. In Ghali's portrayals, we witness the harsh reality of lives that count for little, lives that must be honored through collective action and mobilization: These are the lives of Moroccans -part of the rest of Africa- who were burned alive. Their bodies were left unburied, and their subjectivities were de-subjectivized and rendered superfluous, vulnerable and expendable by what Achille Mbembe terms "Necropolitics".<sup>4</sup>

Ghali's account reveals the fate that befell many of the disappeared prior to their demise, which included their bodies being burned at sea and their repeated pleas for help over the course of seven days, all of which were unanswered. These experiences are a microcosm of the harrowing reality endured by racialized and disenfranchised bodies upon perishing at the border. However, despite its brutality and violence, this reality is often euphemized in studies that continue to portray migration through an aestheticized or orientalized lens. These studies embellish the subject with extraneous details that confuse the reality of death. Meanwhile, the scenes depicted by Ghali are reenacted daily in settings lacking critical space for their existence. Migrant boats are abandoned to their fate in the middle of a sea traversed without impediment by tourist boats or cargo ships engaged in free trade. Bodies are disfigured by the elements as boat captains are forbidden from rescuing the victims of shipwrecks. Death is drawn out and cruelly prolonged to act as a deterrent to other would-be migrants who hear the accounts of survivors, as well as to mark bodies with the power of neocolonialism, thereby discouraging and sanctioning acts of migration that flout visa requirements. Downstream, local police have systematically suppressed any effort by survivors to expose the truth. This is compounded further by the sowing of doubt amongst families. There is a society-wide system of agnotology<sup>5</sup> propagated by a pseudo-science that ascribes irregular emigration and subsequent death solely to social factors. By doing so, it absolves neocolonial borders of their culpability. An active campaign to perpetuate ignorance is underway, which engenders uncertainty regarding the circumstances of the disappearance and effectively nullifies the violence perpetrated by the border regime. The aforementioned elements are especially apparent in the protracted procedure by which the deceased are re-categorized as disappeared; that is, ghosts haunting the living, impeding the grieving process, and shielding migration policies from accountability.

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<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics"(Néropolitique), the *Raisons politiques* review, 2006/1 no 21, 2006. p.29-60.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding agnotology, the study of ignorance induced by the dissemination of misleading scientific data; see: Robert N. Proctor, *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition* (French version: *Golden Holocaust - La conspiration des industriels du tabac*, Paris, Éditions des Équateurs, 2014.

## GHALI AND SALAH: TESTIMONIES ON BEHALF OF THE DECEASED AND SURVIVORS' COMMITMENT TO THE DISAPPEARANCE

In describing the disappearance/death of 41 Moroccan migrants off the coast of Agadir, Ghali reveals a profound understanding of death. This awareness is reflected in the consternation that pervades his account and in his repeated invocation of Allah's mercy upon those who disappeared. He asserts with certainty that they are all deceased in light of their collective experience crossing the sea and the tragedy that ensued. He refers to them directly as "*Chouhadae*" (martyrs). He is now haunted by their death and is taken aback by our questioning of the possibility of losing memory of them. Despite the repression he suffered after his rescue, which in no way altered his relationship with the deceased or his support for their families, he remembers them. He is determined to tell the bereaved families "the whole unvarnished truth," even when they refuse to accept it, reflecting a moral imperative shaped by his experience of the tragedy. This imperative is contrary to the state's efforts to perpetuate uncertainty. His decision to confide in a researcher stems from his need for a space where his personal experience can be reinterpreted. Upon learning that the researcher was not a police officer and that the purpose of the interview was to assist the families, he agreed to the interview. First and foremost, he is dedicated to a specific political cause, one that is profoundly personal, with the objective of alleviating the collective suffering of families through the pursuit of truth. Admittedly, his quest for the truth clashes with the official narrative; that is, the state's stance of downplaying the disappearance in favor of maintaining official doubt.

Ghali has forged a connection to reality and to the act of speaking out that extends beyond mere fear of police repression. This is because he has survived a brush with death and witnessed the agony of many of his fellow migrants. Having endured an experience of such intensity - comparable to the horrors of brutal warfare - has enabled him to share his story regardless of the risks, whenever a relatively safe space is provided. Later in the interview, the young survivor bursts into tears when he mentions two friends and neighbors who disappeared when the boat burst into flames and the hull ruptured. "They never resurfaced," says the young man in a muffled sob.

Ghali's initial reluctance changed, and he consented to a meeting and accepted the request from the sister of the disappeared/deceased woman. As the interview draws to a close, an inexplicable sentiment remains, one that I encounter whenever I speak with survivors of a fatal crossing journey. Their readiness to recount the intricacies of their journey leaves us with the impression that we are not merely engaging in an interview, but rather partaking in a moment of contemplation. It is a poignant remembrance of the disappeared, shared by survivors. From the researcher's perspective, there is an opportunity to re-inscribe the deceased into a renewed narrative that counters the frigidity of the term "disappeared" used in the debates between families and the state when discussing the "disappearance." The true significance of such an opportunity becomes apparent only after the moment of remembrance has passed. After the deceased are remembered, named, and mourned, the survivors must denounce the circumstances that led to these deaths: the prohibition of crossing the borders, the misery in the country of origin, and the atrocity through which death is inflicted. All this is while the captains of ships hauling the world's "globalized" goods stand by and observe with indifference.

It is evident that survivors are keenly aware that the families of the disappeared are the subject of a taboo that must be avoided if they wish to shield themselves from police and judicial pressures. They

are participating in a movement for the right to life, truth, and justice by supporting these families. This movement calls into question the state's responsibility for deaths and disappearances at the borders. Having cheated death, those who have survived find themselves in a quandary: on the one hand, their survival exposes them. On the other hand, their safe return could lead to confrontation with the justice systems of their countries of origin, such as Morocco and Algeria, which have criminalized irregular emigration due to Europe's border externalization policy. Consequently, the burden of proof falls on each survivor to demonstrate their innocence in relation to the various legal categories of smuggler, fugitive boat captain, or coordinator of the *Harga* (irregular migration) and human trafficking. Their position grows even more untenable in cases where the crossing journey results in casualties or disappearances. In such cases, authorities in the country of departure (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in our case) intercept the migrants. Survivors face trials. They also face extensive police investigations. There are restrictions on meeting bereaved families. In some instances, judicial monitoring is yet another outcome. This repression further intensifies the traumatic impact of nearly drowning, the loss of friends or loved ones, and the challenge of dealing with the memories of an event reduced to silence and consigned to oblivion through the actions of local authorities and Europe, making the deaths of migrants an unremarkable event. While some of the survivors are imprisoned, others are confronted with the suspicious or pleading gaze of families who have lost their loved ones.

The emotional and social toll on survivors was recounted by Salah, a Moroccan who survived a shipwreck off the coast of Tan-Tan.

*“In the years following the disappearance of my friends on the boat in 2016, I would pay visits to their families during religious celebrations. My intentions were well-meaning. But then I understood that I was just adding fuel to the fire of their suffering. Perhaps it is better for them if they are considered to have disappeared, while hope is retained, rather than for me to remind them that they drowned and that I was one of the few survivors. Once I realized that, I started crossing to the other side of the street whenever I passed a bereaved family. Seeing me reminded them of their children. That was too painful for them. It was distressing for me as well, as I had not forgotten them either.”<sup>6</sup>*

Although years have passed since 2016, Salah persists in nurturing a desire to emigrate to Europe. He applied for a visa twice, but both applications were denied by the French and Spanish consulates in Morocco, respectively. As the interview reached its conclusion, he divulged the underlying rationale for his desire to make it to Europe, which was once again connected to the trauma of the rescue.

*“Here in Morocco, everything brings back memories of the departed. Six Moroccans drowned before sailors could rescue the rest of us. The*

<sup>6</sup> This is an interview conducted in Salé in May 2024 with Salah, a 35-year-old survivor of a crossing journey across the Atlantic to the Spanish Canary Islands. A childhood friend of mine who is aware of my research on these journeys introduced Salah and me in my hometown. He lives near my family's home. Montassir Sakhi conducted this interview.

*only way I can escape these memories and move on is to leave.”<sup>7</sup>*

## **FILTERING THROUGH DEATH IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH, AND GOVERNING THROUGH INJURY, DETENTION AND DEPORTATION IN THE GLOBAL NORTH**

Chloé Allen’s investigative research on the Alpine route and the Calais Jungle is critical to understanding this border regime, in which violence is institutionalized through a macabre visa system. She elucidates how European borders, integrating legal, police, and infrastructural mechanisms, create spaces wherein exposure to injury and death is an inextricable element of the governance of migration.<sup>8</sup> Her ethnographic observations unveil a border policy that masked its brutality with legal complexity, surveillance technologies, and the indistinct boundaries of police authority. Insight into the various forms of resistance taking shape, such as local alliances and practical solidarity among migrants, supporters, activists, and the local population, is also provided by these observations. Understanding this analysis is crucial to grasping the interplay of repressive logics. It enables us to view border violence as a form of governance; a bureaucratic rationality that dispenses death in a differentiated manner, rather than as an isolated policy championed solely by far-right political parties in Europe. Chloé Allen’s investigative research reveals that this procedure is an extension of other layers of a broader system originating in the south and at the peripheries of Europe. The farther we are from the capital cities where these murderous policies are conceived, the more death is shrouded in the legal architecture of “maintaining order,” appearing instead in its raw form: mass casualties and disappearances amid widespread indifference.

For migrants heading for a particular European country, the Alps are just **the last hurdle to cross**. They are a filter that sifts through the survivors who have made it across the routes of the South. These meticulously engineered borders extend into the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Sahara Desert, the roads of Turkey, and the glacial forests of the Balkans. In externalizing its borders, Europe outsources death, resulting in reduced visibility, diminished rights, and increased disappearances that leave no trace and no avenues to pursue the truth.

The experiences of the Moroccan and Tunisian migrants we encounter unfold in these settings. Their stories are brimming with details that might be dismissed as picturesque, anecdotal, or narratively appealing by an overly disciplined sociological perspective. However, this approach fails to grasp the essence **of these stories, which are imbued with themes of demise**, disappearance, and the decomposition of bodies on the sand or washed away by the waves. These stories also touch on post-traumatic stress and humiliation. Ethnographic research must strive to maintain a neutral perspective and document these experiences without allowing the narrative form to overshadow the suffering itself.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Salah, Salé, May 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, Chloé, “Abolishing Borders.” An ethnography of the necropolitics of asylum, daily acts of resistance, and neoliberal racial violence in the mountains along the French-Italian border in the Hautes-Alpes (« Abolir les frontières ». Une ethnographie de la néropolitique de l’asile, des résistances quotidiennes et de la violence raciale néolibérale dans les montagnes à la frontière franco-italienne des Hautes Alpes), Doctoral dissertation in Political and Social Sciences (Anthropology) at the Catholic University of Louvain, defended on October 16, 2025.



The migrants naturally recount their former lives and their hopes; dreams of becoming soccer players in Europe, rare moments of celebration along the way, friendships formed, and previous menial jobs, as well as the reasons for leaving: poverty, debt, hopeless social situations, unemployment, and meager wages. Nevertheless, their narratives swiftly revert to the crux of the predicament: **Europe's policy of militarized borders that subjects them to the peril of a calamitous demise.** Narratives of this ilk are especially pervasive in the testimonies of survivors of perilous crossing journeys<sup>9</sup>. These witnesses have personally observed the methods employed by agents in the enforcement of this policy, including the use of uniforms, armored vehicles, police vans, ships, barbed wire, tactics, weapons, police dogs, and searchlights. They recognize which trucks herald mass deportations, which police formations in the Balkans portend beatings, and which Zodiac boat engines spell a death sentence. Academic knowledge is not theirs, yet hours are spent on YouTube channels following in the footsteps of other survivors to prepare for the crossing journey. The acquisition of this knowledge has come with a significant personal cost, stemming from repeated experiences with repression, mounting difficulties in accessing food and employment, exploitation in transit countries, failed attempts at crossing, life in detention camps, short-lived relationships, and ruptured bonds of solidarity.

The following story is set within this geography of arranged death; the story of Fayeze, whose experience embodies a poignant form of situated knowledge. This is the kind of knowledge that does not discourage leaving but redirects it. It is the kind of knowledge that does not sup-

<sup>9</sup> For more insight into this topic, please refer to the documentary "Sans que les larmes tombent" (Without shedding a tear) by Moroccan artist Mahdi Lyoubi, also known as Mahdi Black Wind, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_2jGx9oEVY&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_2jGx9oEVY&t=4s)

press the desire to emigrate, but instead rationalizes it according to the conditions of survival.

The rest of this article will present the journey of a twenty-year-old Moroccan man, a case in point of this knowledge of the forbidden routes. We shall call him Fayeze. Our encounter with him took place at Tunis-Carthage International Airport<sup>10</sup> one evening in February 2024, a few months before Algeria's introduction of a visa requirement for Moroccan citizens in September 2024. He was traveling with three other young men, all of whom were from Fez. They are part of a wave of Moroccan migrants who must now circumvent the militarized border checkpoints between northern Morocco and Spain's Andalusia region to reach southern Spain. This involves flying from Casablanca to Tunis, then from Tunis to Algiers. Next, they take a bus to Oran before embarking on the forbidden route to Spain. They must now cross an area of almost 120 kilometers at sea between Algeria and the Spanish coast. In the past, the crossing was only 14 kilometers between Tangier and Tarifa. The militarization has not led to the closure of that route; rather, it has merely elongated it, relocated it, and rendered it all the more perilous.

The four men had spent two nights on the benches in the check-in area at the airport. Despite the amiable atmosphere between them and the Tunisian police, there was a sense of precarious light-heartedness, tinged with constant mistrust. The police were well aware of precisely who they were. Week after week, other young Moroccans passed through the same corridor before disappearing into the network of clandestine Algerian routes. The four men would recharge their phones at the police bureau at the airport. As a reward, they would share their food and Moroccan pastries, which they had packed meticulously for the journey. "The Tunisian police are as unpredictable as the police in Morocco," said Reda, a friend of Fayeze's. "It's crucial to stay vigilant and generous. Some have been assisting us over the past two days, expecting nothing in return. Others have threatened us with arrest or eviction out into the cold." This constant pendulum swing between helpfulness and hostility is one of the defining features of the forbidden borders in the Maghreb countries.

Reda, the brother of a Moroccan man who disappeared off the coast of Sfax in 2021, introduced me to the group. His brother was never found, nor were many of the other thirty-two young people who left Casablanca that year. After weeks of searching morgues and dealing with the authorities, only two mothers were able to identify their children's remains and bring them back home for a dignified burial. Being cognizant of my presence in Tunisia and my collaboration with the medical examiners - a collaboration facilitated by Wael Garnaoui - Reda informed me: "They are at the airport tonight. You should meet them. They will speak to you." I had to spend a few minutes persuading the police officers to allow me to enter the check-in area, as I did not have a plane ticket. The four of them, all from the same neighborhood, were about to board a flight to Algiers, and later another one to Oran. They were following in the footsteps of those who had perished in Sfax, but this time they were taking a different route. Instead of crossing to Lampedusa from Tunisia, the four had opted for a longer journey through Algeria. Their hope was to reach the Spanish coast (Almería).

Fayeze and I initially review the events that transpired prior to his planned emigration to Spain. It soon becomes apparent that the ease of access to Algeria - the starting point for the journey to Spain - was not the catalyst that set him on this path. Instead, it was the tribulations, brutality and violence,

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<sup>10</sup> The interview was conducted by Montassir Sakhi.

and mortification he had endured during his endeavor a year prior to cross the Balkans. At the onset of our interview, he articulated his sentiments with a serene, detached demeanor, stating, "I would prefer to perish in the jaws of a shark than to suffer injury in a detention camp in the middle of the Balkan forests." He is referring to the imposing mountains, the glacial rivers, the frigid nights in the forests of Croatia, Serbia, or Slovenia, the "racism in Turkey," the incessant deportations, the friends he lost along the way, the violence in detention camps, the hunger and thirst; all of this compelled him to seek an alternative route to Europe, a more costly but swifter path that was purportedly "safer." Fayez's journey stands as a testament to the intimate knowledge that migrants acquire of forbidden routes, a knowledge which does not dampen the desire to leave. On the contrary, it imbues him with a stubborn, rationalized clarity, as it does all those who have been spared death.

## 2 INTERVIEW WITH FAYEZ

### THE DEFIANCE AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE FORBIDDEN ROUTES

**Montassir:** *How was the idea of leaving formed? How was this decision viewed by your family?*

**Fayez:** *Brother, I had no intention of attempting “hrig” (irregular migration). A couple of friends from our neighborhood departed for Europe through Turkey earlier in 2023, traveling all the way to Italy. Allah blessed them on their journey. Four other friends and I contacted them to learn how they did it. They mapped out the route for us. Once I returned home, I told my mother that I wanted to leave.*

**Montassir:** *Have you inquired with them about whether they obtained legal residence permits?*

**Fayez:** *No, we have not. We were only aware that they were now enjoying a more fulfilling life and were employed. Their life is better than the one they had in Morocco. [...] That is when I approached my mother and asked her to help me travel to Turkey. We argued back and forth. She said she could not bear to see me suffer. Ultimately, she relented and gave me 4,000 Moroccan dirhams (€400) to buy a plane ticket. My flight was scheduled for May 2, 2023, shortly after Eid al-Fitr. I was accompanied by two friends. I tried to cross into Europe for the first time, and then again a second time. Unfortunately, both attempts were unsuccessful. One of my friends was arrested in Turkey and sentenced to one year in prison. May Allah bestow upon him his freedom. His sentence ends in a few months. He was arrested because he was not carrying a passport. I spent several months in Turkey working to earn enough money for my plane ticket home. I did not overstay (“burn”) my three-month visa. On both occasions, I “knocked” on Europe’s door five times (“drabt khams darbat”). Yet Allah’s will was otherwise. The first time, I hid under a semi-trailer truck, but unfortunately, the Bulgarian border police caught me. The second time, border guards apprehended me while I was crossing a river in Slovenia. They initially intended to deport me, but I pleaded with a soldier who ultimately released me at the final border crossing instead of detaining me for deportation. This was my first time in Europe. I witnessed truly horrific scenes in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. In the camps, we practiced defending ourselves against bear attacks using plastic bags. Two days later,*

three bears appeared right in front of me and my friends. The bears did not attack us, but they could have. We walked, carrying these plastic bags, which you must fill with air and burst in the event of a bear attack. I was frightened because I was unsure if this method would actually be effective. The temperatures were freezing, and before reaching Slovenia, I thought I might die of cold in the middle of the forest. I watched people fall behind and break away from the group. I have no idea if they are still alive. On the second occasion, border guards apprehended us, forced us to remove our clothes, seized and destroyed our phones, and used batons to compel us to swim across a river. This was a border crossing. It was a fast-flowing river. [Silence]. We lost a member of our group there. He was never found. We checked other camps in Bulgaria, but we could not find him. I have seen the face of death on that road. [...]

Thereafter, I returned to Morocco. Eight months later, I was still unable to find a job. I managed to scrape by with odd, unreported jobs, and I obtained my driver's license. Then, I headed back to Turkey and attempted to cross the border again, and again, I failed. I returned to Morocco and headed to the city of Nador, where I secured a menial job. I managed to save enough money to follow in my friends' footsteps. A cousin of mine also made the crossing from Algeria only two weeks ago. I heard he made it to Spain, may Allah grant him success. Once again, I have thought about migrating. My parents... [Silence]. My poor parents, even though I have not said anything to them, they could still sense it. One day, they approached me and said, "You seem overwhelmed with sorrow. It appears that you want to migrate. If you wish to leave, you may go; we are prepared to support you." In their hearts, my parents believe that I am a righteous and decent person. I have never been to prison. My only shortcoming is my academic failure. But now, here I am at this airport. I ask you to please invoke Allah for our safety and that the engine not fail us out at sea.

**Montassir:** Amen. May Allah grant you a safe crossing. Have you tried crossing over to Melilla from Nador?

**Fayez:** Yes, I was there to work, but also for "hrig" (irregular migration). However, it quickly became apparent that the border fences and barbed wire in Melilla were under stringent surveillance and had become the site of considerable violence. Crossing over with the others meant becoming like them: a Chamkar (*Translator's note: The term «Chamkar» is a prevalent local Moroccan term describing an individual with an addiction to volatile substances and inhalants*). You had to become part of their world. This was unacceptable to me. I worked on a construction site and later returned to Fez.

**Montassir:** Ceuta and Melilla have rather stringent border controls. Does that imply that you must travel to Oran via Tunis?



*Fayez: Yes, they are sealed off to Moroccans. Other sub-Saharan Africans, Tunisians, and Algerians might be able to try, but it is more challenging for us. [Pointing to a passenger in the waiting area] This one is Algerian. He will leave Tunis for Casablanca before heading to Ceuta. [Gesturing to me] Why? Because of “unf wal mu’amala» (violence and mistreatment). When police officers arrest Moroccans, the violence they inflict is unfathomable! “Hrig” is banned for Moroccans in Morocco, and we are hunted down and beaten should we be apprehended. We are therefore compelled to leave the country if we are to avoid police brutality. Other foreign nationals, however, are merely detained or deported, without being physically assaulted. The same applies in Algeria and in Tunisia. However, police violence is not as one might imagine; it is worse than being struck by police-issued batons and then being released. The police aim to incapacitate us by delivering a*

blow that will prevent us from ever moving again, perhaps by breaking one of our bones or shattering our ribs. Additionally, we are leaving Morocco to attempt “hrig” in order to avoid further police harassment of our families. Our parents worry about physical assault, and if we are apprehended by the Moroccan police, they would be compelled to navigate the labyrinth of police stations, courts, and prisons. These are the reasons for my journey to Algeria, whereas Algerians make their way to Morocco. I have tried crossing into Europe twice via Morocco. This has only made me realize how challenging it is. Please invoke Allah’s benevolence that our endeavor meets with success in Algeria.

**Montassir:** [...] How does it work in Algeria?

**Fayez:** The route runs from Oran to Almería. You can opt for the “Sari’a” (Translator’s note: Sari’a is a high-speed boat, as its local name in Algeria suggests. It is an expensive option favored by irregular migrants because of its high-speed engine and its ability to navigate rough seas), or a medium-speed motorboat, which is a cheaper option. One benefit of Algeria is the prevalent culture of trust. Although «nssib» (scams) can occur anywhere, more trustworthy people are known to be found in the country. For instance, payment for the trip will only be provided once I arrive in Spain. When I arrive in Algiers, I will take a taxi for the 400-kilometer trip to Oran. The cost of the trip is estimated to be around 20 euros.

**Montassir:** How much does the crossing journey from Oran to Spain cost? How much is the fare?

**Fayez:** Eight and a half million centimes (equivalent to 8,500 euros). However, I will not be carrying the money on my person while traveling. The individual overseeing the operation in Oran employs an additional operative as a liaison in Oujda. As soon as I arrive in Spain, I will ask my mother to hand the sum over to the aforementioned liaison. Once we disembark, the boat captain will hand me their phone so I can call my family. Otherwise, I will not be allowed to set foot on land. Along with the 8,500 euros, I had to cover the cost of plane tickets to Tunis and then to Algiers. I spent 3,500 euros in Turkey.

**Montassir:** Which kind of boat will you board in Oran? Will it be a wooden boat?

**Fayez:** Fayez: No, I will be taking the “Sari’a” (the high-speed boat). It is equipped with a 300-horsepower engine. Rates differ. Those who travel by inflatable zodiac boats pay less, but it is a riskier option. The expense varies, with some paying 4,000 euros, others 3,000, and some as little as 2,000 euros. Assessing the situation on the spot and being familiar with the engines is also important. I would not board a boat with a 15- or 100-hor-

*sepower engine. This means I would call the liaison handling the money they received from my mother on behalf of the Algerian intermediary and inform them that the engine is low-powered and does not warrant such a high fare. After all, the original agreement with the “harrag” (the smuggler) was for a 300-horsepower engine, so there should be no other engine. One of these 300-horsepower speedboats was boarded by my cousin, and since he’s a minor, he’s currently being held at the Centro (immigration detention center) in Barcelona, having arrived in Spain. May Allah bestow His benevolence upon us all.*

**Montassir:** *Are you familiar with the boat? Have you researched the route you intend to travel?*

**Fayez:** *It is a 120-kilometer trip. The 300-horsepower engine should cover the distance in approximately 2 hours and 12 to 20 minutes. I will verify this before boarding.*

**Montassir:** *How many people will be on the boat?*

**Fayez:** *Twenty people. It is a large boat. It can carry between 18 and 20 migrants. However, it may take up to a full day for certain boats to reach their destination. A large number of crossings are occurring due to the ongoing diplomatic tensions between Algeria and Spain. My cousin said the Algerian navy was present and watched them sail away but did not intervene. Beyond that, I am not particularly well-informed. This is my first time in Algeria, and I sincerely hope that we will be allowed to proceed tomorrow.*

**Montassir:** *Is the amount paid the same for Moroccans, Algerians, and people of other nationalities?*

**Fayez:** *No, Moroccans pay more. Absent of this, there are no other sub-Saharan African nationals. Mostly, it is Syrians and Moroccans. Algeria is closed to Black Africans. I’m not sure of the reason why. Algerians pay much less for the journey across. Moroccans are charged an additional 15,000 dirhams (1,500 euros). My cousin attempted to pass as an Algerian. Nonetheless, the individual in charge interrogated him on the subjects of Algeria, the government, and the regions of the country. He was unable to answer. He was then asked to pay an additional 15,000 dirhams to proceed. My cousin pleaded with him, but to no avail. This inequality baffles me. In principle, everyone should pay the same amount. Why raise the cost for us when we already have other expenses? Algeria is not a popular tourist destination. Most visitors to the country are craftspeople who have practical skills, and therefore have money.*

**Montassir:** *How is your family faring at the moment? Is your mother*

*keeping up with the developments?*

**Fayez:** *My mother is unable to sleep. “Qabda ‘ala ‘albha” (she has her heart in her mouth). I make sure to tell her the truth; that entering Algeria is becoming increasingly difficult, and that I risk being arrested. As you can see, there is nowhere for us to sleep. This is our second night at Tunis–Carthage International Airport, even though we have already reserved and paid for a hotel in Tunis. However, the hotel reservation ensures that we are legally compliant with the local police.*

**Montassir:** *Then why haven’t you stayed at the hotel?*

**Fayez:** *Because none of us are familiar with Tunis. We are worried that the police might arrest us. We would rather stay at the airport.*

**Montassir:** *How much did the plane tickets cost?*

**Fayez:** *They cost 5,500 dirhams (550 euros). That was for tickets from Casablanca to Tunis, and then on to Algiers. We also had to pay for two nights in hotels here and in Algeria, as well as transportation costs from Fez to Casablanca and from Algiers to Oran. We purchased return tickets that we will only be using as proof of onward travel.*

**Montassir:** *Why did you choose Algiers instead of the route through Turkey?*

**Fayez:** *The route through Turkey and other Eastern European countries is extremely difficult and violent. I would urge Moroccans and all migrants to avoid this route, on which my friends and I endured terrible hardships. It is littered with death. People died from starvation, freezing, or disease after drinking contaminated water from rivers. There’s also “onsouria” (racism) in Turkey. This is in contrast to Algeria, where people “yat’amlou ma’ak” (treat you decently). They spat on me countless times in Turkey. May Allah torment them. There are a lot of racists in Turkey. They scammed me by overcharging me. On one occasion, they sold me a bottle of water for 50 Turkish liras when it cost only 20. They could tell I was a migrant. I worked at the “mawqif” (a gathering place for day laborers). I used to work twelve hours straight in cardboard sheds for the equivalent of 30 euros, all the while being verbally abused. They insulted me whenever I stopped working, spitting on me and shouting slurs like “dirty Moroccan.”*

*I would much rather cross by sea, having experienced firsthand the situation in Turkey. Each migrant’s experience with violence is unique, but crossing through Turkey by land often leaves parents in a state of prolonged fear and uncertainty. However, when crossing by sea, parents receive news about their children within two or three days. Receiving such*

news can take months, sometimes even more than a year, when crossing through Turkey or Eastern Europe. I lost track of a friend for four months. His family and I searched for him. It was only after four months that we learned he was, and still is, at the Edirne Removal Center.

**Montassir:** Yes, you mentioned preferring to cross by sea. But boats do capsize. May Allah preserve you of such gruesome fate.

**Fayez:** Yes, I prefer crossing by sea because death at sea is quick. It is much less violent than the treacherous routes through forests and mountains. I have done a lot of research on the topic, and I have watched some disturbing videos taken in Eastern Europe, like that of a migrant burying their friend. While there, I met an Algerian migrant in a camp in Serbia whose leg had to be amputated due to walking long distances in freezing temperatures. In another camp, I watched a migrant have his toes amputated. What purpose does life have once my foot has been amputated and I'm dumped in a detention camp awaiting deportation? I would prefer to perish than to endure such a life.

**Montassir:** Were you acquiring knowledge about this situation from videos you viewed before departing?

**Fayez:** Yes, I watched videos on YouTube and other websites. Friends who had returned from Turkey and others who had arrived in Europe warned me that the route was dangerous and should be avoided. But I never believed them. I did not trust the videos either. I assumed my friends were simply jealous and that they did not wish me well. I did not realize it at the time, but I came to understand it later when I witnessed the reality of that journey firsthand. I realized they had been right. While it is an adventure, the risk is grave and fatal, leaving an indelible scar on the heart and soul.

**Montassir:** Do you have any relatives in Europe who could provide an invitation letter for a visa application process, instead of you having to cross the sea?

**Fayez:** I do have relatives residing in Europe. In fact, my sister lives in Spain. However, she recently got married and is currently in the process of regularization. She is not yet proficient in Spanish. She wants to help me,



*but what can she do? She does not even have an employment contract yet. Even if she was regularized and provided me with an invitation letter, do you think I will be granted a visa? It is not that simple.*

**Montassir:** *Have you ever applied for a visa?*

**Fayez:** *Certainly. I have applied twice. I paid an intermediary 3,000 dirhams (300 euros) to facilitate my visa application with the Italian consulate in Morocco. 300 euros were paid simply for the intermediary to submit the application on my behalf. I never received a reply. I have also managed to apply for a visa with the French Consulate in Morocco. I also paid the required fees. However, they requested further documents that were not included in the initial checklist, so I submitted my anthropometric certificate and criminal record extract, among various other documents. My application was denied. Certain intermediaries requested a fee of 2,000 euros to facilitate the process, yet they offered no guarantees. At that point, I realized that “hrig” (irregular migration) was my only remaining option. May Allah grant me a safe journey.*

*At the same time, I sought employment. In the city of Nador, the daily wage amounted to 130 dirhams (equivalent to 13 euros). Does that sound fair? I consider that to be labor exploitation. I worked on a construction site where I risked my life and was completely unprotected. Eventually, I chose to leave the job.*

**Montassir:** *Were there other reasons that led your decision to emigrate to Europe? Or was it mainly the working conditions and other money-related considerations?*

**Fayez:** *It is not entirely about the money, although it is certainly an important factor. Another reason is that I have seen how people left for Europe and have later witnessed how they appeared after their return home. They seemed transfigured upon their return; they have become “zwine” (attractive) and “biyad” (fair-skinned). One of my cousins had a less than flattering appearance before he migrated. Now, he is an entirely different person. He has a lighter complexion. After a few days, or perhaps a few weeks, everything changes [laughs]. Do you find that hard to believe? [He unlocks his smartphone, opens Facebook, searches for his cousin’s account, and shows me two photos side by side: the first taken before his cousin’s journey and the second taken afterward. The second photo features a young man with a beaming smile standing in the middle of a brightly lit avenue in Barcelona. He shows me other social media “stories” of his cousin in nightclubs with Rai and Maghreb pop music playing in the background]. That is what I meant. What’s more, the parents are pleased. Once Allah has granted you a chance to make it to Europe, parents will*

*assure you that they have no need for anything and that, above all else, they care about your safety and well-being. They perceive it as a deliverance. [... redirecting the question back to me: But tell me, honestly, when you arrived in Europe, did you not feel a sense of relief, seeing as you live in Belgium as my friend has informed me? Has your life not been changed?]*

**Montassir:** *Yes, certainly, my life has changed.*

**Fayez:** *Some friends have told me that they become bored after about two weeks of vacationing in Morocco. The same sentiment is shared by them all: “Our country is beautiful, but living here requires substantial financial resources.” Life is quite challenging in our countries. Just a few hours ago, [lowering his voice] a police officer approached my friend and me here at the airport and asked us for money. Imagine that! It is nothing short of a disgrace. [...] Times are tough back home. Commerce is the sole means of earning a livelihood, and even that is stymied. Conversely, individuals who leave for Europe would return home within a span of five years, often with a car and a purchased apartment. How much can you expect to earn in Morocco, assuming of course one even has a job? 100 dirhams a day (10 euros)? This amount is negligible. With such wages, savings are impossible. If you fall ill, you will be left penniless. As for hospitals, well, I’m sure you are aware of the situation there. On the other hand, in Europe, your rights are protected and care is provided. In Morocco, one can only hope that their earnings will not be seized!*

**Montassir:** *What are your plans for Europe? Would you prefer to work? Or would you like to receive vocational training?*

**Fayez:** *I wish to work. I would like any job that isn’t haram (illegal). There are some who wish to engage in illicit activities, such as drug dealing. I cannot fathom why they would choose to be involved in such activities. If they want to deal drugs, why not just stay in their home country? Pursuing such a path is not worth risking one’s life. Personally, I seek to “natgharrab” (immigrate, settle abroad) so that I can earn an honest living while retaining my dignity. I have a diploma in men’s hairdressing. Allah willing, it will be useful to me in Europe. I had lost interest in working in a barbershop back in Morocco, and that feeling only grew stronger after Turkey and once I had the desire to leave. Although I lost motivation, I still have the necessary technical skills; I was taught well at the vocational school where I trained.*

**Montassir:** *What are your accommodation plans in Oran? Will you be staying at a hotel?*

**Fayez:** *No, we have only booked a hotel in Oran for four days for the*

same reason as in Tunisia; the hotel reservation, along with travel insurance and a return ticket, serves as proof of our purpose for entering the country, which we will present to the Algerian border police. We will spend the majority of our stay at the home of the person in charge of transporting us to Spain. That means we'll have to wait because they are arranging all aspects of the crossing journey. This includes coordinating with the "samsara" (intermediaries), each of whom is responsible for gathering a few people (perhaps 3 or 4, or even 6 people). The crossing is scheduled to occur once a group of 15 to 20 migrants has been gathered.

**Montassir:** *Have you explored other routes?*

**Fayez:** *One route involves crossing to Italy through Tunisia. Nevertheless, that is a crossing journey of around 20 hours, and is rather arduous. When embarking on an adventure, I adhere to the principle of not being overly adventurous. I believe in minimizing the risk of death. This is precisely why the route through Algeria, albeit more costly, is significantly less perilous. Furthermore, patience is essential. It is crucial to approach it in a manly fashion. Despite the hardships, women join us on these journeys. They endure with great fortitude. I remind myself that two hours is not that long. We must pray, entrust ourselves to Allah, and summon our courage. Young people will not progress if they lack courage.*

**Montassir:** *Do you know of any young Moroccans who were hesitant? Have you been hesitant yourself?*

**Fayez:** *Certainly. I know several people who were hesitant. Many of them had the financial means needed. Yet they stated that they would rather remain beside their mothers and loved ones. After my time in Turkey, I was hesitant as well. Leaving parents, siblings, and an entire life behind is never easy. Only those who have experienced it are capable of appreciating how hard the decision is. After all, you could die at any moment. It is even harder for my parents since I am their youngest child, and all of my siblings are married.*

**Montassir:** *How many siblings do you have?*

**Fayez:** *There are four of us. My three sisters and me. They are married and want the best for me. Unfortunately, their marriages haven't been very fulfilling as they deal with life's hardships. However much they insist I should, I cannot rely on them for help: they are barely managing themselves with their own children.*

**Montassir:** *Are there people in your neighborhood who "hargou" (migrated irregularly) and have managed to thrive since arriving in Europe? Are there also families searching for their children who have*

*disappeared?*

**Fayez:** *Yes, I know young people who have left and become legal residents. In particular, I know families who relocated to more desirable areas a few years after their children arrived in Europe. I knew people who had secured jobs that would have provided a better life for them in Morocco if they had stayed. Yet, they chose “hrig” (irregular migration) instead. A friend joined me on my last journey to Turkey. He was an only child who had recently lost his father. Having inherited a substantial amount of money, he could have “started a business”. Yet he chose to migrate. He was detained for a year in the Edirne Removal Center in Turkey for not carrying a passport. Regardless of the dangers, he is determined to continue the cross-border journey should the Turkish authorities release him. I know someone else who left in 2018 and never returned to Morocco. He remains undocumented in Belgium.*

**Montassir:** *How old are you?*

**Fayez:** *I am nineteen and a half years old. I was born in 2004.*

**Montassir:** *Once you are out at sea, what is your plan for your passport?*

**Fayez:** *I will hold onto it until the day we leave. After that, I plan to find a way to send it home to my family in Morocco, maybe by asking someone to forward it to my mother. When I reach Spain, Allah willing, my passport will be necessary, albeit from afar.*

**Montassir:** *Wouldn't you prefer to carry your passport with you?*

**Fayez:** *No, because if it is found in my possession, the police will have all my personal information, thus allowing for quick deportation. Besides, I need to buy time and pose as a minor, even though they will eventually discover the truth. An individual lacking a passport cannot be legally deported by the authorities; therefore, one's identity must only be stated without presenting any identification documents.*

**Montassir:** *Is it now harder to cross into Europe from Morocco?*

**Fayez:** *Yes, the borders are becoming more tightly sealed. I knew people who crossed from Belyounech on jet skis in 2022. Spain is a mere 15 minutes away. However, even these nearby areas are now impassable. Although the route is only 14 km, it is swarming with police and is heavily patrolled. The only other options are to head out to the Atlantic or to cross hundreds of kilometers toward Portugal. Occasionally, the restrictions are relaxed, prompting some to attempt a swim across. Yet, such an endeavor is a death sentence. One of our neighbors' nephews lost his life this way. He*

*was from Ketama, in the Rif region of northern Morocco, and he was introduced to the idea of the “hrig” (irregular migration). He made the worst possible choice. He traveled from Ketama to Nador, aiming to reach Melilla. He followed the city’s sewers out to sea and began swimming toward Melilla. I had met him before. He passed away eight months ago. May Allah have mercy on his soul. However, I cannot fathom the logic of venturing into the sea without proper swimming skills. Swimming skills are a must for anyone who decides to cross the sea, even though death can befall anyone at sea. Having learned to swim at a young age in pools, rivers, and the sea, I can attest that, while it offers no guarantees, this skill is invaluable.*

*May Allah preserve us! One must pray before stepping aboard. People recite the Shahada (the declaration of faith, as if preparing for death). Allah is the ultimate Protector.*

*[...] As I mentioned earlier, most of those who arrive in Algeria are skilled craftspeople. Should their journey to Spain come to a halt, at least they have the option of remaining in Algeria to work. I am in a similar position. If my journey to Spain fails, I will seek work as a day laborer, hairdresser, skilled construction worker, or painter. The important thing is being able to earn a living and support my parents, however modestly. I intend to stay as long as possible, whether in Europe or Algeria. I did not come for just a few weeks. I embarked on this journey to transform my life. What would I return to in Morocco? There is nothing there for me. At the very least, I can gain new experiences abroad. In the worst-case scenario, I will remain in Algeria and pursue a new trade. My friend intends to do the same. He closed his parents’ barbershop and left in pursuit of a better life. He has been so nervous that he even brought the key to the said barbershop with him! [...] Pardon me; I must go collect my phone and charger from the police officer.*

# C CONCLUSION

In *Afrocritique: Essai sur l'infrapolitique des luttes noires* (Afrocriticism: An Essay on the Infrapolitics of Black Struggles), Aymar N. Bisoka delves further into his examination of the necropolitics targeting black bodies, building on the contributions of Mbembe<sup>11</sup>, F. Sarr<sup>12</sup>, and N. Ajari<sup>13</sup>. Advancing beyond the critique of a violent, white epistemology, which this line of thought endeavors to dismantle<sup>14</sup>, Bisoka unflinchingly exposes the impact of the European border and the legal regime that underpins it in the decimation of black lives:

*“Notwithstanding its humanistic rhetoric, Europe persists in its treatment of Black people as subhuman [...] In recent years, the Mediterranean Sea has become a vast cemetery, with Europe’s complicity allowing tens of thousands of Black people to perish by drowning. Black people who have managed to evade slavery in North Africa have been consigned to a fate that is the result of Europe’s successful expansion of its borders to that region. Those who succeed in crossing the sea are frequently held in inhumane conditions at the various camps spread across Europe. Some prisoners are bound and forcibly deported to the Sahara Desert as Europe outsources the removal of these second-class humans to various states and hired mercenaries. A few manage to escape, only to perish from starvation or extreme cold in major European capitals. In certain instances, a few would cling desperately to cargo trucks bound for England, eventually having their skulls crushed on the endless, scorching asphalt roads leading there.”<sup>15</sup>*

An excerpt of such nature, meticulously chronicled by an African jurist, underscores the necropolitical approach espoused by Europe that is a quintessence of colonial whiteness; a violent and theatrical abandonment to death. Bisoka methodically delineates the legal and discursive framework:

*“In a manner akin to the captains of ships traversing the Mediterranean, it is imperative that truck drivers refrain from providing assistance to those black migrants. Europe has prohibited it, firstly because it considers these lives worthless, but mainly to ensure that their atrocious, publicized deaths serve as a cautionary tale for any survivors.”<sup>16</sup>*

An examination of this analysis within the framework of North African countries, which have now become integrated into the systems of border externalization and the outsourcing of deportation, gives rise to a pivotal question. While certain aspects of such delegation may be debated, notably the fact that North African governments have never excluded Maghrebi populations when

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics (Néropolitique)*, the *Raisons Politiques* review, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*, Philippe Rey, Paris, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Ajari, *Le manifeste afro-décolonial. Le rêve oublié de la politique radicale noire* (English version: *Afro-Decolonial Manifesto*), Seuil, Paris, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Aymar N. Bisoka, *Afrocritique : Essai sur l'infrapolitique des luttes noires* (Afrocriticism: An Essay on the Infrapolitics of Black Struggles), Eterotopia, Paris, 2025, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

implementing the European mandate for repressing mobility and necropolitically managing migration, a risk nonetheless exists: the risk of perpetuating an analytical dichotomy between Black Africans and North Africans within the body of work produced by African researchers and intellectuals. Nevertheless, the mechanisms of destruction function incessantly and indiscriminately against migrants who are deprived of visas and “papers” (legal residence permits) as a consequence of the racial hierarchy instituted by Europe. These mechanisms are applied to all African bodies, irrespective of their national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic affiliations and backgrounds.

It is surely not a question of dismissing the distinctiveness of Negritude or the unique experience of anti-Black racism. This racism is systemic in the West, persistent, and is reinvigorated by incitement or manipulation by governments, as well as by minority nationalist groups that have been co-opted by regimes and governing bodies in North Africa. Instead, it is a matter of underscoring the inextricability of the migratory experiences shared by all Africans and the populations of erstwhile colonized territories, presently the target of the Schengen Agreement and European migration policies. Expanding upon Fanon’s foundational analyses- ranging from the “North African Syndrome<sup>17</sup>” to “The Wretched of the Earth<sup>18</sup>”- the denunciation of the arbitrary segregation of Africans warrants re-examination in the postcolonial era. Under novel guises, the border persists as a means of colonial violence. Racism perpetrated by North African governments whilst pressured by border externalization mechanisms and outbursts of hatred in nationalist-shaped societies (from Tunisia to Egypt and from Morocco to Algeria) or societies ravaged by civil wars (from Libya to Sudan and from Syria to Lebanon) should not overshadow the fundamental structure driving the war waged by colonial borders: the equal treatment of individuals solely in terms of their exposure to death, injury, and disappearance.

If statistics on the ethnicities of those affected were available, they would undoubtedly reflect the scale of the devastation: Moroccans, Tunisians, Sudanese, Syrians, and Algerians perish, disappear, and sustain injuries in the same border regions as their Senegalese, Cameroonian, and other West, East, and Central African sisters and brothers. Surveys in North Africa, interviews with the families of the disappeared, observations in villages consumed by the sadness caused by this absence and the seemingly endless waiting for the return of the disappeared, as well as the accounts of survivors such as Fayeze, Salah, or Ghali, show that the apparatus of the European Union and its member states’ border controls is pulverizing African bodies.

However, crossing the forbidden border remains a brazen act of defiance, a brave and resolute stance against hostility and neocolonialism. The experiences of Fayeze, Salah, and Ghali, as illustrated by the interviews quoted in this article, underscore a critical aspect of the contemporary anthropology of forbidden migration. Their accounts suggest that the decision to migrate was not driven by a capricious impulse or a fleeting romantic notion, influenced by the myth of a European “Eldorado.” Instead, it is firmly embedded in a moral, relational, and pragmatic framework, guided by meticulous knowledge of the intricacies involved in the journey. The impetus to migrate is initially imitative in nature, driven by tales of success recounted by friends from the neighborhood who had migrated to Europe, coupled with a desire to “improve one’s

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<sup>17</sup> Le Syndrome nord-africain (The North African Syndrome), 1952, in Frantz Fanon, *Pour la révolution africaine. Écrits politiques* (English version: *Toward the African Revolution*), La Découverte, Paris, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (English version: *The Wretched of the Earth*), Maspero, Paris, 1961.

lot.” Fayeze underscores the collective nature of departure, accentuating the paramountcy of maternal consent and blessing. While information about the journey comes from individuals who have already arrived in Europe, the hardships encountered in the Balkans reconfigure this knowledge into a process of constant recalculation. Desire is not extinguished by violence; instead, it is rationalized by it. Violence nurtures a migration-specific aptitude, an ethics of departure.

Fayeze, Salah, and Ghali have shown that being conscious of one’s own mortality, of the proximity and likelihood of death, and of its materiality, does not impede the migration project. In fact, it provides it with a structure, rendering it more clear, collective, and strategically sound. The key to comprehending contemporary “hrig” (irregular migration) lies in the interplay of awareness of mortality, the economics of migration, and the pursuit of dignity.

European necropolitics do not merely subject migrants to death; they also produce the conditions for migratory know-how that resists these policies. This know-how is reconstructed and transmitted despite the continuous pulverization of the bodies of the migrants. Necropolitics create the very migrants they claim to deter while obliterating their physical and social lives. Acknowledging this murderous new colonialism, denouncing necropolitics, and assessing the subjectivities of migrants and the traumatized societies from which they come are fundamental tasks for African governments and social movements. These tasks will enable negotiations on the fundamental right to freedom of movement and restore a more equitable balance of power with regard to imposed, externalized, and imported migration policies.