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Becoming Fugitive Migration in the American and EurAfrican Borderlands

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Article abstract

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Becoming Fugitive: Migration in the American and EurAfrican Borderlands

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Abstract

This article tells the stories of illegalized migrant people moving through two violent, transcontinental borderscapes: the EurAfrican border that spans Western Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, and pushes further south each year across Africa; and the American border that stretches from the interior of the United States, through Mexico and Central America, and into South America and the Caribbean. Comparative analysis of these borderscapes reveals similar logics, practices, and policies of border enforcement, as well as strategies that migrant people use to subvert them. We argue that fugitivity provides a critical lens for understanding the co-constitution of borders and border transgression, and reveals how the border manufactures its objects—producing fugitive subjects, spaces, and relations across expanding spatial and temporal distances. As a lens rooted in histories of racialized control over human mobility, fugitivity allows us to chart contemporary territorializations of racial domination through bordering alongside constant challenges to these territorializations through movement. Ultimately, fugitivity provides a method that not

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Keywords

Borders, Black geographies, Latin America, Africa, autonomy of migration, resistance

I ran from it, but I was still in it.

-Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*

Introduction

This article tells stories of illegalized migrant people moving through two violent, transcontinental borderscapes: the EurAfrican border that spans Western Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, and pushes further south each year across Africa; and the American border that stretches from the interior of the United States (and Canada), through Mexico and Central America, and into South America and the Caribbean. Though much has been written about one or the other borderscapes, they are rarely discussed in relationship to each other despite similar logics, policy and policing tactics, and the lived experiences of people on the move (cf., Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Sanchez et al. 2021). This is a significant gap, especially considering the ways that both sites are increasingly entangled. In the early 2000s, growing numbers of people from Latin America traveled to Spain via North Africa (Alscher 2005); today, hundreds of Cameroonians, Somalians, and other Africans are being detained at crossing points in Mexico and the United States (Yates & Bolter 2021). Other mobile people, including humanitarian workers and security and policing ‘experts,’ circulate between these borderscapes, as do practices, goods, and technologies bound up in the control and care of migrant people (see, for example, Meché [2021] on drug enforcement experts’ mobilities).

The heterogeneity of actors, practices, and sites points to a key insight of critical border studies over recent decades: borders are not lines on maps or barriers between two territories but processes of facilitating or containing movement of people, capital, ideas, goods and so on (Paasi 2009). “Borderscapes” emphasize the three-dimensional, textured, and expansive spaces that are produced and constitutive of bordering processes (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2007). The border-as-landscape invokes the uneven terrains through which people move or do not move, belong or do not belong, and how struggles over mobility and belonging—past and present—give these terrains their shape. As Brambilla and Jones (2020) point out, borderscapes are made through violence and domination, but also through struggle, transgression, and counter-spatial practices that disrupt the border’s smooth operations and condition possibilities for political imaginaries beyond the nation-state.

While the borderscape concept casts a wider net to capture the heterogeneity of bordering, analyses often reproduce a binary that pits the actions of the state and/or capital to control mobility against migrants' resistance through ongoing movement. Radical scholars have rejected the domination-resistance model, arguing that mobility is *prior* to borders and that states react to this mobility through the multiplication of tactics of control (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Rodriguez 1996). The denaturalization of bordering is evident in the well-known slogan of migrant justice and indigenous sovereignty movements in North America, "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us" (De Genova 2016; Luna-Firebaugh 2002; Walia 2014). Emphasizing unauthorized migration's autonomy from state power forwards the political subjectivity of migrant people through their "stubborn mobility" despite harder and more deadly borders and counters theorizations of migrants as abject (Johnson, 2014: 180; Rodriguez 1996).

Rejecting econometric analyses of push/pull factors, scholars theorizing the autonomy of migration (AoM) use words like "escape" and "freedom" to emphasize the political nature of migrant performances on the move and upon arrival (Mezzadra 2004). The right to escape applies to all people, regardless of legal status or the imposed and racialized categories of "economic migrant," "illegal alien," or "refugee." Freedom is embodied in the migrant person (as part of a multitude of autonomous mobile subjects) who refuses the limitations of the border and depoliticization as victim, alien, and non-citizen (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). AoM intervenes to recuperate migrants' full political being despite their exclusion (or differential inclusion) from citizenship and nation-state territory (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Mezzadra 2020).

Despite this, AoM has been criticized for "granting epistemic privilege to the struggles of people called migrants," obscuring the political struggles of poor or racialized people who seek to remain in place (such as indigenous nations refusing settler sovereignty) as well as the solidarities and connections between migrants and non-migrant groups (McNevin 2022, 1001; Ticktin and Youatt 2022; Walia 2021). Migration ethnographies unpack autonomy's ambivalence as migrant people seek recognition and inclusion in the very structures that migration disrupts (Bachelet 2018). For example, migrants may seek legal avenues for migration, or convince others not to migrate, strategies that "diverge from the dramatic depictions of young men scrambling from pirogues on the shores of the Canary Islands or scaling the fences of Ceuta and Melilla. Such images are common currently within the aesthetic circuit of the border regime, but they also resonate with AoM's valorization of migrant acts of contestation, defiance, and resistance" (Ould Moctar 2022, 8). Finally, while now-mature AoM literature stresses the heterogeneity of migration projects and the racialized, gendered subject positions of migrant people, merely marking these identities does not address how migration, like bordering, is enacted across axes of difference, nor how it is understood by specific populations and in relation to specific histories. Asserting that difference structures unauthorized migration without exploring the way this happens can inadvertently "homogeniz[e] AoM depictions of migrant experience (Ould Moctar 2022, 2).

Reflecting on narratives of people's clandestine journeys, we argue that the emphasis on autonomy only partially matches what is occurring on the ground, where movement across dangerous borders is often experienced as the proliferation of constraint, especially as journeys become longer, fragmented, and exploitative (Bachelet 2018). We propose fugitivity as a lens by which to read these borderscapes and the experiences and relations of people moving through them. Fugitivity connotes flight from oppressive conditions and the racialized, criminalized subjectivities produced on the run. As a lens, fugitivity brings critical border studies into conversation with Black Geographies, which attends to the spatiality of racialized control. In Black geographic thought, flight is not the opposite of place-making, but a counter-spatial practice deployed by B/black¹ and racialized people within the dominant geographies of white, liberal, patriarchal modernity (McKittrick 2006). Fugitivity expresses the history of mobility by African, African-descended, I/indigenous, and poor people against racial world-making projects such as chattel slavery and settler/colonialism (Walia 2014). For centuries in the Americas and Africa, people have challenged racial regimes of domination through flight, a practice of being, in Toni Cade Bambara's words, "unavailable for servitude" (Gordon 2011, 8). They do this by producing alternative geographies, some of which achieve autonomy (such as Maroon towns and *quilombos*), while others are necessarily provisional or imaginative (such as rooftops and Brazilian *cortiços*) (Bledsoe 2017; Kelley, this issue; Leu 2020). As a lens rooted in "secretive histories" of mobility and place-making (McKittrick 2013), fugitivity allows us to chart contemporary territorializations of racial domination through bordering alongside constant challenges to these territorializations through unauthorized movement. In both the EurAfrican and American borderscapes, fugitivity positions unauthorized migration as a form of subversive mobility against attempts to control and profit from the movements of racialized, gendered people in landscapes shaped by earlier struggles over space, mobility and belonging.

Finally, fugitivity allows us to capture the messier, contradictory, and embodied nature of bordering. As an ensemble, fugitivity points to entanglements between actors, logics, and spaces and highlights the instabilities of mainstream categories like "transit" and "arrival" (Gross-Wyrtzen & El Yacoubi 2023). In particular, fugitivity expands our understanding of illegalization: it is not only mobile people who become fugitive, but their spaces and relations (Winston 2020). Black geographies, as landscapes characterized by racial domination, always contain within them undergrounds of survival, place-making, and movement by B/black and other "racialized, sexualized" people (McKittrick 2006; Noxolo 2022). Fugitivity, then, underscores the fundamentally racialized nature of both bordering and unauthorized migration that is concealed in mainstream discourses about "illegal immigration" and radical ones like "autonomy of migration."

¹ B/black is used to represent the various groups racialized as black that embark on migration, some of whom do not claim blackness as an identity. I/indigenous follows this same logic.

This article comes out of Author 1's ethnographic research among West and Central African migrants in Morocco between 2016 and 2022,² and Author 2's qualitative research carried out in Mexico with Latin American migrants in 2021 and 2022.³ In conversations, we were struck by the similarities between contexts, especially the transnational scope of border enforcement, smuggling, and migrants' life-worlds in ever-expanding borderlands. While sacrificing specificity, we hoped that comparing these borders would enable us to theorize the global logics of bordering and the scope of its violence, as well as the scope of the border's inability to contain human mobility.

Another resonance was how migrants' individual and collective struggles are embedded within longer histories of struggle over movement, labor, and race-making. As a white US citizen, Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen moved with relative ease between Africa and Europe while her West African interlocutors were continually subject to prohibitive visa requirements, surveillance, and illegalization. For Alondra Vázquez López, fugitivity not only characterizes the experiences of her interlocutors, but those of her parents, who migrated clandestinely to California from Mexico and Guatemala. Stories of migration and the threat of deportation were part of the everyday experiences of her childhood in the US borderscape. Fugitivity forwards the uneven, colonial and racist logics of regimes of im/mobility (Bestemen 2020; Hernandez 2018), as well as migrant people's persistent refusals to acquiesce to them.

The remainder of the article maps the fugitive geographies of the American and EurAfrican borderscapes. In part one, we start with the story of Chepe, who migrated from Guatemala to California when he was 19.⁴ Chepe's journey from Central America to the US was shaped by decades of efforts on the part of the US, Mexico, and other countries to limit the migration of poor, I/indigenous and racialized people (Blackwell et al. 2017). These efforts heightened migrants' vulnerability by funneling them into more dangerous landscapes and gave rise to human smuggling as a lucrative economic activity. In part two, we turn to the story of Ismail, who, like Chepe, migrated as a youth from his home country of Cameroon to Morocco, where he was stymied in his efforts to reach Spain. All along the route Ismail had fugitive encounters—with police accepting bribes to allow him to pass, smugglers passing him along an underground network, and militias kidnapping him for

² Author 1's research received IRB approval from Clark University. An IRB addendum was obtained to interview minor migrants, based on the reasoning that these minors had traveled independently across multiple countries and lived and worked independently. Assent was obtained from Ismail, and consent was given by his social worker in Morocco. Data was not published until he became a legal adult, and his consent was obtained in 2022.

³ Author 2 collected oral histories as part of her undergraduate thesis with close supervision from a faculty advisor. Participants were identified while working for a non-profit organization at the US-Mexico border between 2019-2020. Oral histories were collected only after work with the non-profit was terminated. Written consent was obtained from each interlocutor.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for all research interlocutors.

ransom. The clandestine physical and social landscapes he encountered did not oppose the EurAfrican borderscape but were constitutive elements of it. In parts three and four, we analyze the experiences of Chepe and Ismail to trace how migration through these borderscapes is a process of becoming fugitive (Coutin 2005). Becoming fugitive not only refers to the production of subjects like Chepe and Ismail but fugitive spaces and relations that persist even after migration is “over.” In the conclusion, we reflect on how bringing these stories into conversation underscores the truly global nature of contemporary bordering as well as the possibilities for more fugitive imaginaries of human geography.

Paso del Norte: Fugitive Movements through the American Borderlands

At 19, Chepe left Guatemala to reunite with his parents and meet his two, US-born siblings for the first time. When Chepe was two years old, his parents migrated irregularly to the US, leaving him in the care of his grandmother. In the years since his parents’ departure, hardened border policies and stepped-up enforcement in Mexico and the US had made it nearly impossible for his family to travel back to Guatemala for visits, and his parents were eager for him to join them in California. His father contracted a guide (coyote) from their village, paying \$13,000 for the journey from Chepe’s hometown to northern California, where the family now lived. The trip occurred in multiple stages, as Chepe and other migrants were handed off from smuggler to smuggler until they reached their destination. The guides helped Chepe and his companions evade not only border controls and police but navigate cartels and other dangers that make up the borderlands between Central America and the United States.

The coyote took me [from Guatemala] to Mexico...the trip took a day. I was traveling with five other men. There were two twenty-year olds, two of us were nineteen, and the other was thirty-five. The coyote was from [the same town] also...He took us by car in a seemingly normal trip but through valleys where there would be no police. The cartel’s cut was already included in our trip fee, so we were able to travel and pass with ease.⁵

Once they reached the Mexico-Guatemala border, Chepe was picked up by a charter bus, along with migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Cuba. The bus took them to an interior Mexican state, where they joined dozens of others already hiding in a warehouse. After several days, Chepe boarded the first of two other private buses, hiding again in warehouses, until they reached the Mexico-Texas border near McAllen. After waiting nearly a month for an opportune moment, another Mexican guide led Chepe to the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande.

They took us in a small group at five in the evening. We walked up until the edge of the river. Some managed to cross, but I had to wait all night because

⁵ Interview, March 20, 2021.

border patrol was reported to be close. At five in the morning, I crossed the river by raft. There were about fifteen people in the raft. After that, we ran until a car picked us up and took us to a house in Texas. We were there for nine days. Then, we had to walk through the desert for four days near ranches, until a car picked us up again.

Eventually Chepe was taken to Houston, where he was able to change clothes. In Texas, he was moved to a series of safe houses, rarely staying in one place for long. At the final warehouse, smugglers came to the house to pick up groups of people heading to the same final destination—New York, Florida, and elsewhere. A Guatemalan man arrived to take Chepe and several others to California. “There were seven of us. They dropped me off [downtown] where my father picked me up.” Reunited with his family but lacking legal status, Chepe lives and works in California.

Producing the American Borderscape

Chepe’s journey is characteristic of many Central Americans’ who embark on fugitive journeys from their hometowns, along perilous routes, to rejoin family or seek refuge and economic opportunity in North America. Mobility has a long history in the region, which is marked by colonial settlement and Indigenous dispossession, the trafficking of enslaved Africans, as well as circular labor migration, trade, and tourism. More subversive mobilities have also been practiced from centuries: marronage has a long history in the region, as does the flight of fugitives from colonial powers, political transitions, law enforcement, and debt peonage (Truett 2006; Nichols 2013). While people still migrate in all directions (e.g., US retirees settling in places like Antigua, Guatemala), since the late 1980s the US has expended considerable effort to prevent Latin American migrants and refugees from reaching its southern border, enlisting Mexico and Central and South American countries in these efforts.

In 1989, the US Immigration and Naturalization Services, with Mexican and Central American governmental cooperation, initiated Operation Hold-the-Line to stop Central American refugees from claiming asylum in the US in the wake of multiple wars, economic instability, and natural disasters (Vogt 2018, 58). Operation Hold-the-Line targeted Mexico’s southern border, providing training and equipment to Mexican personnel to police migratory routes in Mexico’s southern states. In its first year, Mexico deported 500% more Central Americans than it had in the previous year (Vogt 2018, 59). These policies emerged from a legacy of racial discrimination and labor exploitation in border and immigration policy that prohibited Chinese immigration in the late 19th century and imposed quotas favoring European migrants (Hernandez 2010; Ngai 2004). In the first half of the 20th century, Mexican labor migration was encouraged or repressed depending on economic conditions; in either case, programs to induce migration (such as the 1940s and 50s US “Braceros Program” that targeted young, male, able-bodied migrants) and prevent it (such as the US-Mexican joint “Operation Wetback” that deported one million Mexicans in 1954) were deeply racialized and gendered (Hernandez 2006).

As border enforcement intensified between Central America and the US, new sorts of traffic were being routed through these same landscapes. In the late 1990s, the United States targeted Colombian cartels and shut down Caribbean smuggling routes to the US. Rather than stopping the drug trade, drugs demanded by US consumers were redirected along land routes through Mexico (Vogt 2018, 60). The re-routing of drug trafficking to migration routes and the continued flight of Central Americans from political and economic violence at home in the late 1990s led Mexico, with the support of the US, to expand “its border enforcement infrastructure along interior or transit routes through various apprehension, deportation, and drug interdiction efforts” (Vogt 2018, 59).

In the wake of 9/11, Mexican President Vicente Fox initiated Plan Sur, a comprehensive immigration plan that led to the doubling of the number of detention centers by 2008 and record numbers of deportations of Central Americans (Vogt 2018, 60; Ogren 2008). In the US and Mexico, migration and border enforcement became matters of national security. At the same time, entanglements between border and drug enforcement deepened when Mexico declared its own War on Drugs in 2006 and, in 2008, the US Merida Initiative committed \$2.5 billion to Mexico in its efforts to combat drug trafficking. Despite the emphasis on drugs, the Merida Initiative helped fund Mexico’s Southern Border Program, which cracked down on migrant trains and pushed people into less visible, more remote places where they had to rely on guides (Vogt 2013). The diversion of migrants’ routes to more fugitive landscapes also made them vulnerable to kidnappings and extortion from illicit organizations and local gangs. The overlap of border enforcement and the policing of drug smuggling also created on-the-ground entanglements, as in Chepe’s case, when the cartel charged for passage through their territory. The racialized discourses that posited Central Americans as undesirable and “illegal” immigrants increasingly constructed these groups as “criminal” drug traffickers or gangsters (Sanchez 2017). The criminalization of migration and the securitization of borders forced migrant people, their facilitators, and others underground, creating new sociospatial arrangements predicated on fugitivity from local, state and transnational law enforcement.

As Mexico consolidated its role as a major actor in border enforcement in the American borderscape, other countries’ participation grew. In an unprecedented action, US President Trump suspended aid to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador until they “agreed to take actions to reduce the number of migrants coming to the US border” (GAO 2021, n.p.). Funding was reinstated in 2020 after those countries signed new agreements with the US Department of Homeland Security to cooperate on asylum, border security, biometric information sharing, and procedures for granting short-term agricultural visas to migrant workers on US farms (DHS Fact Sheet 2019). Nonetheless, tens of thousands of people embark on fugitive journeys from South and Central America toward the US and Canada each year.

Chepe’s story illustrates the heterogeneous, fragmented, and contested nature of the American borderscape. His trip would not have been possible without relying on smuggling

networks that helped him navigate around police roadblocks and border checkpoints and negotiate passage through territories under the control of non-state agents, such as cartels. While the characteristics and dynamics of the American borderscape are partly determined by geopolitical, geographic, and economic factors specific to the region, the logic and trajectory of the expanding border, and migrant people's encounters with it, are not so unique. As we will see below, the EurAfrican borderscape also began with anti-immigrant anxieties in the Global North, and many of the same practices, policies, and discourses contributed to its expansion. Ismail's story demonstrates how the expansion and intensification of bordering did not stop migration, but rather created the conditions for fugitive movements of thousands of people through the region.

Overland and Underground: Adventures in the EurAfrican Borderscape

Like Chepe, Ismail's motivation for embarking on a dangerous journey was family. At 15, he was working for a butcher in Cameroon when he decided to leave for Europe, hoping to "realize [his] dreams" to get an education and a job that would enable him to support his father and two sisters back home.⁶ Through a friend in Morocco, he contacted a smuggler who would arrange his transport from Douala, Cameroon, to Oujda, Morocco. After that, it was up to him to arrange the last step of his journey, either by climbing the border fences at Melilla and Ceuta (two Spanish enclaves on Morocco's northern Mediterranean coastline), or by paying for a seat on an inflatable boat (a Zodiac) crossing the Straits of Gibraltar to the Spanish mainland. Ismail's trip was also broken into stages, as he was passed from one local guide to the next. He paid his "connection" a set fee, leaving the rest of his money with his big sister to be sent along as needed. Carrying money was impossible—migrants were constantly being robbed by police, by locals or rival smugglers, and by armed groups who patrolled remote sections of migration routes.

The bus trip from Cameroon to Nigeria took a week and some bribes to local police, but Ismail arrived in northern Nigeria with little difficulty. From there, he called a prearranged number, and a smuggler took him across the border into Niger, where he waited a week for a "chauffeur" to drive him and his companions north, across the Sahelian plains of southern Niger into the Sahara Desert. Like Chepe's transport, the 4x4 truck took back roads to avoid police roadblocks, driving on rough tracks through the flat, rocky plains and climbing up arid plateaus. In the desert, the migrants (including "women, children—even babies") were kidnapped and held until their families could pay ransom. Upon his release, another smuggler took him and his companions to Algeria. In the Algerian desert town of Tamanrasset, he camped in an abandoned building until the money came through to pay for the next stage of his trip. This time, however, a smuggler did not appear, so Ismail and his friends walked for two weeks, arriving at Ain Salah, one of the hottest places on Earth. Migrant accounts of this journey almost universally recount the death of companions along

⁶ Interview, June 7, 2018.

the way, but the remoteness of the landscape means that official numbers vastly underestimate the number of deaths, which some researchers presume to be higher than the number of those perishing in the Mediterranean Sea (Sengupta 2016).

Upon reaching Ain Salah, Ismail caught a bus to Algiers, where a friend met him and took him to the local “ghetto,” a migrant encampment administered by “chairmen” who charged a daily fee in exchange for protection. After a week, Ismail and his friend went to Maghania, a town near the border with Morocco. From there, they tried to cross the barrier between Algeria and Morocco but were sent back by Algerian border guards.

We tried three times. There were 14 of us waiting [to cross]. The first time, we couldn't get in. The second time, we reduced [our numbers]--we were seven or maybe eight. We didn't get in. [The third time] we found a guide...a migrant. He was staying there because he had tried many times to cross and he knew the way, so now he guides others for money. We returned [to the barrier] on a Sunday. Once we [made it across], everyone went in different directions, fleeing in different directions...so the guards couldn't catch [all of] us.

Once Ismail stopped running, he headed northwest, eventually making his way to the clandestine forest encampment where migrants hid out in preparation to scale the six-meter tall fences that surrounded Ceuta, the Spanish enclave located on Morocco's northwestern shoreline.

After a month of sleeping rough in the forest and escaping several nighttime raids on the encampment by Moroccan auxiliary forces, Ismail managed to climb two of the razor-wire topped fences at Ceuta, only to fall in the moat on the other side. Moroccan border guards apprehended him, beat him, and then put him on a bus headed south into the Moroccan interior. The bus dropped him and other migrants off on a street corner in suburban Meknes. His money gone, he was unable to pay for a spot on a Zodiac and was biding his time before traveling north and trying his luck at the fences once more.

Producing the EurAfrican Borderscape

Ismail's passage from Cameroon toward Spain traversed a landscape characterized by mobility as much as settlement. For centuries, trans-Saharan networks routed enslaved captives, salt, gold, and textiles from West and Central Africa, north through the Sahara Desert to North African and European markets (Gross-Wyrtzen 2022). Likewise, trade and conquest across the Mediterranean linked North Africa to Europe and Southwest Asia, especially with the expansion of Islam after the 7th century, and, much later, the colonization of Africa by European powers. As in the American context, these lands have harbored fugitive slaves, tax evaders, /indigenous peoples resisting colonial or post-colonial state “pacification” and, in the present, migrants and refugees, people- and commodity smugglers, militias, and “terrorist” groups (Montalbano 2022; Rashid 2000; Scheele 2012).

Over the past four decades, border enforcement between Europe and Africa has gone from lax to heavily securitized. The 1985 Schengen Agreement in Europe, which allowed for visa-free travel between signatory countries, made border enforcement along Europe's exterior a significant regional priority (Walters 2002). In 1999, the European Commission's Tampere Agreement outlined the EU's plans for the "external dimensions" of its migration and asylum policy, calling for economic and political incentives to enlist Europe's "neighbors" in stopping undesirable migration from Africa and Southwest Asia (Menz 2002). The racialized dimensions of EU priorities were made explicit in the EU's release of "black" and "white" Schengen lists, the former designating countries whose citizens needed a visa to enter the EU (mostly Muslim and "developing" countries) and the latter, countries for whom their citizens needed no visa (in North America, South America, and Australia) (van Houtum 2010).

In the mid 1990s, Spain built the first fences around Melilla and Ceuta, Spanish enclaves located on Morocco's Mediterranean coastline, and a crossing point for people like Ismail who cannot afford the more expensive boat trip to the European mainland (Piños 2009; Saddiki 2017). To align with Schengen provisions, which Spain and Italy signed in 1990, both countries reformed their immigration laws, restricting visa access, and tightening controls on North Africans crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and, in the case of Spain, via its enclaves (Paoli 2015; Piños 2009). Bilateral and multilateral agreements between EU member states and "neighbors" like Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya sought to unify efforts to prevent "African" migrants from reaching EU territory through cooperative policing, information sharing, and readmission provisions that would allow European countries to deport migrants to cooperating states, even if those migrants were citizens of another country (Carrera et al. 2016, Wolff 2014).

Under pressure from the European Union to strengthen its response to unauthorized migration, in 2003 Morocco passed law 02-03, which criminalized unauthorized entry and exit (Lahlou 2007). Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Mauritania soon followed suit (Gazzotti 2021a, 38). They also cooperated on joint military and policing exercises: in 2002, Spain and the EU, with Moroccan cooperation, initiated the Integrated System of External Vigilance (SIVE) to patrol the Straits of Gibraltar and later, the Atlantic passage from northwest Africa to the Spanish Canary Islands (Ferrer-Gallardo & Van Houtum 2014). Joint Libyan-Italian patrols were carried out in the Central Mediterranean during the same period. After the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) in 2004, interceptions of boats increased across the Mediterranean, and migrants were pushed back to North African countries where they were intercepted by local border agents to be detained, deported, or dispersed through the countryside (Gazzotti & Hagan 2021).

Another turning point for the securitization of the EurAfrican border came in the wake of uprisings across North Africa and Southwest Asia in 2011, and especially after the "refugee crisis" in 2015, in which nearly 5 million Syrians were displaced across the eastern Mediterranean. In response, the EU and partner countries stepped up border enforcement

throughout the region. In Algeria, officials began to link unauthorized migration to terrorism and drug- and weapons-smuggling, causing the government to secure its formerly lax borders with Niger and Mali (Zardo & Loschi 2022, 157). The Algeria-Morocco border, which has officially been closed for decades but has always seen a robust cross-border exchange of cigarettes, petrol, and other goods, also hardened in recent years. In the last decade, Morocco and Algeria erected new barriers, including trenches, berms, and fences (Saddiki 2017). At the same time, the need for cheap labor led to tacit acceptance of migrant workers (especially in construction) in northern cities like Algiers and Oran even as border enforcement consolidated along Algeria's southern and western boundaries (Zardo & Loschi 2022). In Algeria, disabled, elderly, and women migrants' labor was less valued, making them more vulnerable to enforcement throughout the country and indebted to smugglers and other migrants.

In 2015, Niger, a country dependent on regional migration and a participant in the Economic Organization of West African States' (ECOWAS) free travel zone, criminalized the "transport and accommodation of third country nationals, including from the ECOWAS region" (Van Dessel 2021, 6). As in the American border context, the criminalization of smuggling, and the securitization of migration routes with European funding and "technical assistance" pushed migrants off well-traveled routes toward more remote and dangerous landscapes (Van Dessel 2021). Smuggling also became riskier and more expensive, and many migrants became indebted to smugglers and pushed into forced labor (including, especially for women, sex work) to pay off their debts (Brachet & Scheele 2022; Sanchez et al. 2021). The diversion of migratory routes to less policed regions, coupled with crackdowns on cross-border movement of licit and illicit goods, also led to an uptick in kidnappings for ransom by smugglers, locals, and various armed militias searching for new economic opportunities (Brachet 2018).

Ismail's experiences—paying police bribes, contracting smugglers, walking in the desert, being kidnapped, climbing physical barriers, going broke—show how "borderwork creep" (Frowd 2021) materialized in and across vast spaces and through various actors and institutions. While different in key ways, including the fact that Chepe made it all the way to his destination while Ismail, five years on, is still stuck "in transit," both men's journeys demonstrate how borders have become embedded in sites far from political boundaries between states and shaped economic, political, and social relations beyond the field of border enforcement. In the next section, we discuss both men's journeys and arrivals not as accounts of the border's excesses or migrants "autonomous mobilities," but as narratives of fugitivity. Fugitivity offers insights into how borders condition the possibilities for clandestine mobility, relations, and geographies, and disrupt linear trajectories of movement and arrival.

Becoming Fugitive: Subjects, Spaces, Relations

In Chepe and Ismail's narratives the American and EurAfrican borderlands are not just landscapes of state power or economic exploitation, but sites of multiple struggles over movement, place-making, and value. Chepe and Ismail's fugitive mobilities are not

dialectically opposed to bordering, but in tension with and productive of bordering. This has spatial, temporal, and subjective implications for people en route and at their destination. While many people in both Central America and West and Central Africa are fleeing various forms of violence at home, even “voluntary” migrants like Chepe and Ismail become fugitive through the act of migration. Migration in these borderscapes is not the movement from violence and unfreedom to safety and freedom; instead, migration compounds people’s experiences of constraint and often, violence. Becoming fugitive emphasizes borders as productive, rather than repressive, technologies that (re)shape spaces, identities, and relations at multiple scales (Andersson 2014b).

Criminalization is one tactic for producing fugitive people, landscapes, and relations. In the EurAfrican borderscape, criminalization of people’s transnational movements is relatively recent, as circular labor migration, regional trade, and other mobilities have been fundamental to the political, cultural, and economic life of the region. In the American borderscape, racialized migrants have been criminalized for longer, though enforcement has been uneven for much of this history. Criminalization is not a universal process, but one that is heavily racialized through design and application of law (Abrego et al. 2017). For example, Arizona’s 2010 law SB 1070 directs local law enforcement to conduct immigration status checks based on “reasonable suspicion” and made unlawful presence in the state a criminal offense. SB 1070 and other laws racialize Latine people as illegalized outsiders and expands the border inward through domestic police (Williams & Boyce 2013). In the EurAfrican borderscape, the visibility of “black” migrants has made them more vulnerable than non-black migrants in the same spaces, making them susceptible immigration round-ups and criminal violence (Andersson 2014a, Gross-Wyrtzen 2020, GADEM 2013, Menin 2016). Migrants’ legal status has different meanings and consequences depending on race, gender, class or nationality (Vives 2011). As Lorena Gazzotti (2021) has shown in Morocco, white European migrants with lapsed paperwork expect to talk their way out of trouble, while even some B/black legal residents are targets of surveillance and detention. In other words, legal status alone does not protect an individual from becoming fugitive from law enforcement, as race, ethnicity, and other markers become metonymic with criminality and out-of-placeness.

For migrants like Chepe and Ismail, travel through the borderscape entails dodging police and other state agents all along the way. This is not just an inevitable outcome of border enforcement, but a strategic tactic to deploy landscapes as deadly border technologies (De Leon 2015; Schindel 2022). In Niger, border security operations target wells located along Saharan highways, causing Ismail and other migrants to bypass them, increasing risk of dehydration and loss of life (Van Dessel 2021, 6). Both Algeria and Morocco have carried out illegal deportations (*refoulements*) to the Sahara Desert. In Morocco, the difficulty of climbing the multiple fences around the Spanish enclaves has led migrants, especially women and children, to attempt crossing the Mediterranean Sea on overcrowded, inflatable boats that frequently capsize on the rough waters of the Straits of Gibraltar (Tyszler

2017). The higher cost of the boat means that many women remain stuck *en route* longer or take on significant debts to smugglers and “madams” in order to finance their crossing.

Since 1994, US border control has deliberately blocked off crossing points between the US-Mexico border at highways or in urban areas where migrants could travel via automobiles or disappear into dense neighborhoods, instead directing them into the Sonoran desert where rough terrain, long distances, and high summer temperatures have led to thousands of deaths (Andreas 2003). Between Colombia and Panama, the Darien Gap, a 100-kilometer break in the 48,000 kilometer Pan American Highway, has sheltered groups like the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (the FARC) and drug smugglers, and more recently, has become a route for South Americans, Cubans, and even Africans heading north. In 2016, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela announced that the northern “exits” from the Darien Gap would be sealed to prevent further migration, leaving many migrants and refugees stranded in the jungle (Miraglia 2016). Despite this, tens of thousands of people pass through the Gap each year, including 12,000 minors in 2021 alone (Grattan 2021). The mobilization of difficult or remote landscapes for bordering is also the means by which migrants are able to continue on their journeys. The inaccessibility of deserts, jungles, and other spaces make the borderscape ripe for fugitive movements and alternative spatial practices.

In addition, the expanding borderscape proliferates fugitive relations. Difficult, fragmented journeys have made smugglers indispensable. As scholars of migration have argued, the relationship between migrant and smuggler evades simplistic binaries (Sanchez et al. 2021). In Algeria, it was a migrant who acted as paid guide to the best place to cross into Morocco. Ismail and others often call the “connection” who arranges the whole journey “Papa,” using the language of kinship to express the authority, moral obligations, and intimacy bound up in the migrant/smuggler relationship (Achilli 2018; Vogt 2016). Arnaud, another Cameroonian migrant, expressed deep gratitude to his smuggler, saying “It was not easy in Morocco, but with the aid of [the smuggler] and his wife, I faced difficulties and made it to Europe. Really, I will be infinitely grateful to them for my whole life. Long life to [smuggler] and his wife!”⁷

In the past decade or so, humanitarian discourses linking the facilitation of migration with human trafficking have justified the securitization of border enforcement, making smuggling a riskier and thus more expensive endeavor (Pallister-Wilkins 2018). The criminalization of facilitation—which includes the criminalization of rescue operations—has made migrants more dependent on guides, without whom they would not be able to travel. These dependencies can lead to abuse or abandonment, as Ana, a Salvadoran woman who traveled with her child recounts:

⁷ Conversation on Whatsapp, May 18, 2018

I alone would not have come, to be honest, I did not have any experience traveling outside my country—anyhow, you have to do as they tell you. Whether I wanted to or not, we were with a guide, so we felt somewhat more protected because they know the way and everything and we did not know anything. With [the] Salvadoran [guide] we suffered; she would scream at us, take our money, and then here we [were left] in the hands of God...⁸

Migrants enter into other fugitive relationships as a result of the hardened border and criminalization of facilitation. In both the American and EurAfrican contexts, crackdowns on migration “facilitation” have directed smugglers into the same operational spaces as militias, cartels, and other illicit actors, creating opportunities for capital accumulation via kidnapping and extortion (Vogt 2013, 773-4; Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou 2020). Local police often get in on the act, levying “fees” for passage or turning migrants over to gangs. Migrants lacking money must find work but have less ability to negotiate the terms. Women are especially vulnerable to exploitative conditions that range from being underpaid in textile factories to indentureship and coerced labor in the sex industry (Wright 2006). The “undergrounds” produced through bordering are capacious spaces that enable myriad clandestine projects beyond unauthorized migration, including drug, weapons and people trafficking, government corruption and extra-legal violence, coerced or exploitative labor, material dispossession, informal or illicit trade, and revolutionary or guerilla mobilizations (Coutin 2005; Stierl 2020). These undergrounds, and the relations they enable, expose the ways in which border regimes succeed in distributing vulnerability while failing to contain unauthorized human mobility.

Are We There Yet? ‘Arrival’ in the Borderscape

Where fugitivity provides a lens for analyzing the multiple subjects, spaces, and relations that constitute migration journeys, it also expresses the incompleteness of “arrival” within ever-expanding borderscapes. Ismail first set out on the journey toward Europe in late 2017 and, in 2022, is still biding his time in Morocco. The intensification of border enforcement, while not stopping migration, has prolonged the journey, sometimes indefinitely (Collyer 2014). In 2013, Moroccan King Mohammed VI announced immigration policy reforms that would regularize the status of undocumented people in the country and extend social services to all, regardless of legal status. The policy changes, which sought to integrate migrant people in the country, led to a more visible presence of West and Central Africans in Moroccan cities, and granted more than 40,000 people one-year residency papers in two campaigns. As a minor, Ismail received special provisional status and found housing in an NGO shelter before eventually being sent to the street due to “lack of deference” to NGO staff.⁹ Since leaving the shelter, his provisional status is expired, and he

⁸ Oral history interview, March 5, 2021.

⁹ Fieldnotes, July 14, 2019.

is without papers. Hearing there were lucrative construction jobs in Laayoune, he spent the last of his money on a 1,400 kilometer bus trip south. Upon his arrival, he learned that all jobs were full. Stranded without money, he moved to a migrant encampment and was subsisting on money earned from begging or seasonal work in a sardine factory. Each summer he returns to Ceuta to attempt another crossing.

Even for migrants who received Moroccan residency papers, “settlement” is provisional. West and Central Africans in North African countries have numerous stories of being racially profiled by police and being denied jobs or the ability to rent an apartment. In addition, while the steps the Moroccan government has taken to integrate migrants in the country are admirable, the state has long failed to provide the services it promises migrants to its own citizens. Public hospitals are overcrowded, unemployment among Moroccan youth is high, and food and housing costs are rising. Meanwhile, border enforcement continues to violently repel migrants from the barriers with Spain and Algeria, destroying encampments and pushing boats back from European waters (GADEM 2018). While Morocco and other countries in the EurAfrican borderscape have been recast as “countries of settlement,” the fugitive condition of many “settled” underscores their continued vulnerability to border agents, employers and locals who can detain or deport them, exploit their labor, insult or physically attack them. These vulnerabilities intersect with others across gendered lines: Sara, a Nigerian mother of two in Fes, remains with her abusive partner because there is no institution addressing intimate partner violence in the city, and she fears calling the police might result in deportation without her children. Reflecting on her situation, she sighed, “You know how Morocco is—there are no human rights here....Going home would be worse. I don’t have any hope [for myself]. The only hope I have is for my children, that they can have a better life than me.”¹⁰

Even for those who arrive at their final destination, the illegalization of migration makes people fugitives from law enforcement, even decades later. In Chepe’s case, despite arriving in California, reuniting with his family, and finding a job through his father’s connections, he and his parents face constant threat of deportation. The threat of deportation is not an empty one: between 2020 when Chepe arrived and the end of 2021, the US deported 244,000 people, many of whom are separated from their families and compelled to make the clandestine journey all over again (Miroff & Sacchetti 2022). Tomas and Susanna, two Guatemalans from Chepe’s hometown, lived in California for twenty years when Tomas was caught in an immigration raid on his way home from work in 2008.¹¹ After losing their deportation challenge in court, the couple, who have two US-born children, opted to return to Guatemala together. After six years in Guatemala, they decided to return

¹⁰ Fieldnotes, November 2, 2022.

¹¹ Interview, February 28, 2021.

to the US for the sake of their children, selling all their assets to pay for a coyote to guide them back to the US. While Chepe's parents hope that they can obtain legal status once their eldest US-born child turns twenty-one (the child is currently ten), the complications of having been deported make it unlikely that Susanna and Tomas will ever obtain residency. They aspire to remain in the US with their children and grandchildren as long as they can, aware that they could be summarily deported at any time.

The unsettled nature of arrival makes it difficult to discern where either the migration journey or the borderscape ends. Both Ismail, stuck *en route*, and Chepe, who reached his destination, remain in a condition of illegality and deportability, a condition produced through the criminalization of migration, border expansion, and the racialization of unauthorized migration (De Genova 2002). Ismail and Chepe remain fugitives, keeping to spaces where they are less likely to draw attention from border agents. Fugitivity informs people's decisions as they move through their daily lives and inflects their sense of place. It also impacts their families and communities as racialized markers of illegality attach to people even with legal status (Abrego et al. 2017).

Black Geographies in the Global Borderscape

In her discussion of Toni Morrison's essay on *Robinson Crusoe*, Katherine McKittrick notes how the "barbarous" Friday becomes an impossible geographic subject, his "savage body" subordinated to Crusoe in a colonial matrix (2006; 4). In his subaltern figuration, Friday is "positioned as a subject whose own geographies, whose own sense of place, are unrecognizable and valueless" (*ibid.*, italics in the original). "Friday's lack of sense of place is natural rather than enforced or socially produced," while Crusoe's spatial imaginary is comprised of "seemingly self-evident characteristics: particular local and global mappings, infrastructures, regional boundaries, and [authorized] transportation routes" (McKittrick 2006; 6). Analyzing how "mainstream" human geographies are naturalized enables us to apprehend space itself as a site of struggle, and as such, the terrain of Black geographies—not as peripheral or marginal places, but lived places "right in the middle of our historically present landscapes" (McKittrick 2006; 7). In other words, Black geographies are there all along, unintelligible to but entangled with colonial cartographies, i.e., "plots-and-plantations," the blues, homeplaces, and undergrounds (Dunnavant et al., this issue; Harney and Moten 2013; hooks 1990; McKittrick 2021; Moulton & Salo 2022; Woods 1998). They occur "when globally subordinated peoples mov[e] out of their Western assigned places and [call] into question the structures of the world system...a rebellious methodological moment that enunciates black [and nonwhite] life...[and] the unfinished possibilities of collective struggle" (McKittrick 2021, 41).

Borderscapes express how regimes of im/mobility produce mainstream geographies across nested spaces and animate racialized hierarchies of belonging and exclusion. Chepe and Ismail's narratives demonstrate bordering and migration as entangled political, economic and discursive struggles to naturalize certain bodies in place or everywhere out-of-place. Migrants' movements through, against, and with the border are not autonomous from

its geographies but in relation to them. The subjects, spaces, and relations produced through bordering are fugitive ones—always pursued by racial states and capital, and always seeking to elude them. Chepe and Ismail, Ana, Arnaud, Tomas and Susana en/counter the border *en route*, at fences, in legal proceedings, in the jungle and desert, on the job, at home.

Fugitivity provides a lens for understanding the border's inherent violences and its inevitable failures. As they move through borderscapes, racialized people become fugitive; likewise, fugitivity inflects the spaces they produce and relationships they enter. Thus, if borders are truly everywhere, so too are spatial and relational undergrounds that creatively imagine and enable survival, transgression, and alternative senses of place. Criminalization, surveillance, racialized state and economic violence are not limited to "the border," but are tactics mobilized for innumerable geographic projects. Fugitivity is a condition of/for our times and enables possibilities for collective action and affirmative visions of "more humanly workable geographies" by people written off the map (McKittrick 2006). As a method, it offers more than a framework of academic analysis; fugitivity is the means by which dominant geographies can be and are already disrupted, repurposed, and lived otherwise.

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