

IN DEPTH

## **Don't forget my name. Disappearing at the border**

**Corina Tulbure and Wael Garnaoui**

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"I know he is alive, it's what my heart tells me", Fatima repeated, walking towards the house of another mother whose son had disappeared while heading for Lampedusa. In 2017, when we did the first interviews, Fatima's son, Ramzi Walhezi, had been missing without a trace for five years. He had left for Europe with other young people from the same neighbourhood in the Tunisian capital. Today Fatima is still waiting for him to call. His absence is a constant presence in her house. The walls bear the face of her son, with his photos accompanying her 24 hours a day. Her eldest son went to Germany earlier, but in 2017 he still had no residence permit.

Every photo in these mothers' houses asks to be listened to, demands its right to speak. These are photos that put a name and a face on Europe. Our present is called Ramzi Walhezi, Amine, Zied, Aymen... Young people who left Kabaria, Hlel, Ennour... Tunisian neighbourhoods marked by the geography of the "enforced disappearance" (Emilio Distretti, 2020<sup>1</sup>) caused by the European borders.

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## **border of Europe ”**

In Spain we wake up every day to the news of a boat that is in danger of sinking or has already disappeared into the Mediterranean. We live with this image on a daily basis, the story of the “boat of death” as a Tunisian activist calls it, is part of our present history; we cannot claim that we didn’t know. Thousands of people have died in the Mediterranean in the last twenty years as a result of the deadly policies executed on the southern border of Europe.

Fatima’s missing son is one of the young *harragas*, a word that literally means “those who burn” the borders. It refers to the act of crossing frontiers, transgressing them when movement is prohibited.

Through the system of frontiers, the movement of people has been exceptionalised and commodified. While thousands of people are forced to move due to different forms of violence –wars, economic crises or the consequences of climate change– restrictions have been placed on the movement of those who come from the South. This is the result of a global border regime that designs and imposes a hierarchical map of the world based on prohibitions, where the right to mobility is granted or denied based on the worth and the power of the passport. At the same time, an act such as moving, which is so common from a historical point of view, is subjected to laws and regulations; it is permitted or banned on the basis of whether you belong or are linked to a place, thus establishing that people are limited to one space, all of this in the epoch of globalisation and, in theory, of free movement.

**“ The border is a practice that confines the young  
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Faced with this policy of frontiers, of the securitisation of territories and prohibitions on the mobility of people from the global South, a policy promoted and managed by the European Union, the philosopher Achille Mbembe<sup>2</sup> defends “the right to hospitality” and a system of open borders between the countries of Africa. This is a response to the tendency towards forced immobility that is extending to several countries of the Maghreb, as a result of the policy of externalisation of the European borders. Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, through agreements with the European Union and in collaboration with European states, carry out the repression of people who come from other countries in Africa and who demand their right to move. Immobility, the geographies of confinement –from the denial of travel permits to the technological systems of persecution on the borders and the deprivation of liberty in migrant detention centres– have become violent methods of governing populations, reinforcing a racial and economic hierarchy rooted in Europe’s colonial past. “Zoning practices” are installed, giving rise to a “new collusion between the economic and the biological”<sup>3</sup>, which imposes a regime of security, division, and the creation of spaces without rights such as borders or border practices.

The border is not a line on a map that expresses collective fantasies concerning the nation-state at a social level, but has rather become an instrument of governance within a globalised world. It is no longer a space, but a practice that confines the young *harragas* inside Tunisia and leads to the deaths and disappearances in the Mediterranean.

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In 2011, the Arab Spring produced political and social changes in Tunisian society and intensified young people's demand for the right to travel. It was then when thousands of people, the *harragas*, headed for Europe, confronting the European border regimes. According to data from the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, more than a thousand people died or disappeared at sea in 2011-2012 because of Europe's frontiers<sup>4</sup>. The closure of the land borders and the denial of visas to travel to Europe drove young Tunisians towards the only route that remained open, the sea, despite the dangers that this entails. Without a safe travel route having been opened, it is incongruous to complain about the existence of networks of traffickers, given that it is the European policies themselves that push people into these networks. For many young people it was just a question of guides, people who helped them on the journey to Italy. Small boats with less than 10 people leave the ports of Sfax and Kerkennah, heading for Europe. They themselves raise the money to buy the boat, a fishing boat that will be piloted by one of the young people or by a guide.

In 2012, the Tunisian and Italian authorities established a joint commission to search for the disappeared, but this cooperation ended in January 2016. The *Terre Pour Tous* association maintains that young people disappear each year while going to Europe. However, in recent years, given the lack of support, many families have stopped denouncing the disappearance of their children.

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From Tunisia, they don't see the borders in the same way as from inside Europe: “Borders separate two nation-states, but also two different ways of experiencing the world”<sup>5</sup>. Borders do not have the same consequences on social consciousness, they do not impose the same social relations in Tunisia as in Europe. The current frontier fetish establishes relationships within European societies based on the separation between the national and the foreigner. From the other side, the border is more related to a

location than to a social practice and is something that can be broken, hence the young people who “burn” and transgress borders, who claim their right to be part of the same world that has the right to mobility. In the face of a system based on security, a racial and economic hierarchy, the transgressors of borders demand to be recognised as equals.

One of the mothers interviewed explains that her son has gone to “burn” the sea route and that she supported his decision: “He told me that he needed 1,000 dinars; I gave him more money, God helped him, I helped him, he went”<sup>6</sup>. Mothers are the ones who support their children on their way to “burn” the border regimes.

**“ The border has become a place where the power  
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”**

Being made to “disappear” is a consequence of the existence of the border. Within Europe, the illegalisation of people through specific laws made only for foreigners, such as the “foreigners’ law” (*ley de extranjería*) in Spain; detention centres for foreigners; police stop and search actions based on racial profiling on the streets of our cities... all these form part of a system of control and repression that establishes within Europe a regime of *departheid*<sup>7</sup>, people without “the right to have rights” (H. Arendt) and who live under the permanent threat of deportation. In Europe, border practices impose social disappearance, through the processes of illegalisation. The young *harragas*, by transgressing the borders, transgress this system of restrictions and spatial and racial hierarchies. The word *harraga* has broadened its meaning to include the “burning” of other symbolic borders: passports, the documents that shut in a person and reduce their humanity to a piece of paper; the practices that they suffer when they reach Europe.

**Mothers and their battle against indifference**

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Right now, Fatima does not only have to cross local bureaucratic walls in her battle to find out where her missing son is and who is responsible for his disappearance. She also has to face up to the European bureaucratic jungle and, above all, to the social indifference of Europe before a border policy that provokes people's deaths.

**“ Reducing a person's life to humanitarian intervention becomes the expression of a politics in which the life of the other ceases to have the same value as your own ”**

For years, the mothers of the *harragas* have been meeting up in the neighbourhoods, in associations such as *Terre Pour Tous*, to demand justice for their disappeared children. They have occupied places such as Avenue Habib Bourguiba –the centre of the 2011 protests and a very symbolic space for Tunisians– to force the search for their children and the reality of their disappearances onto the political agendas of Tunisia and Europe. They want to clarify the truth and the accountability in the disappearance of their children. “If they are dead, we want their bodies”, say the mothers. Disappearance can be much more painful than death, a grieving that never ends<sup>8</sup>. The disappearances have led to a continuous mourning for the families that do not have the bodies of their children, for the parents of those who constitute “a lost generation” in Tunisia. Mothers demand an answer from both the Tunisian and the Italian governments to the question: where is my child? One of the mothers interviewed refers to the route her son undertook as a journey in which “he burned (the border) but has not arrived”. This is the anguished wait of the mothers of the disappeared young people, unable to recover their bodies. These mothers said goodbye to them and now their children have ended up in the middle of nowhere. The mothers' previous lives have disappeared and now all they do is search for their children. It is not just that the whole family becomes submerged in the trauma of the disappearance at the border, but that the trauma becomes collective. Mothers cannot recover the bodies of their children, even when their remains are recovered at sea, because they cannot travel to Italy to identify them. The very same

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borders impede them from travelling to say the last goodbye to their children. Other families receive information about belongings of their children that have been found at sea. They also are unable to collect them, for the same reason, because they are denied a visa, and the belongings are not even sent to them.

The border has become a place for the practice of *necropolitics*, governance through death, through deciding “to kill or to allow to live” (Achille Mbembe, 2011<sup>9</sup>), a place where the power of the State is exercised to decide on human life. At the same time, in the daily news we receive, the border has assumed a narrative that hides the responsibilities, in the form of humanitarian rescue. Frontier policies deny the right to life of these people, they are forced to cross the sea due to the closure of any other form of travel (banned from taking a plane, banned from obtaining a visa, banned from entering by land), they are abandoned to their fate and the possibility of a rescue or humanitarian intervention.

**“ The person who manages to enter Europe by transgressing this system of borders is present as a racialised body. They have no name, no past, they are not seen, nor heard ”**

Reducing a person’s life to humanitarian intervention becomes the expression of a politics in which the life of the other ceases to have the same value as your own. And through a permanent “state of exception” (Giorgio Agamben), decisions are made at the borders about who has the right to life.

At the same time, in the media, the person who manages to enter Europe by transgressing this system of borders is present as a body, the racialised body. They have no name, no past, they are not seen, nor are their words heard, but they are rather presented as a survivor, a person restricted to the mercy of humanitarian intervention. In the border system there is a “relationship between politics and death”<sup>10</sup>, between the racialised body and rights. However, the deaths of people at sea are part of current

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European history. It is contradictory to think about the habitual coexistence of notions such as human rights or freedom of movement with the reports of people dying in the Mediterranean, without these policies having changed and without there being a massive protest by European citizens themselves against this situation. Social indifference is not a new phenomenon and indifference directed towards certain people can coexist with societies that claim to defend democratic ideals (Michael Herzfeld, 1993<sup>11</sup>; this is the expression of an attempt to “deny common humanity”<sup>12</sup>. Fatima struggles precisely against this social indifference, an indifference based in part on the trust in and lack of questioning of state institutions and policies by European citizens. And it is precisely the State that, through its border policies, carries out, justifies, and aims at “‘civilizing’ the ways of killing”<sup>13</sup>.

As we were writing this text, we continued to receive messages from some of the 800 Tunisians who have been locked up in Melilla, the Spanish enclave in North Africa, for more than six months, without knowing what will happen to them. They arrived by land; they did not want to take “the boat of death”. Now they await the response of the Spanish authorities: to let them continue on their way through the peninsula or to deport them to Tunisia.

1. In Paolo Cuttitta, Tamara Last (eds), *Border Deaths. Causes, Dynamics and Consequences of Migration-related Mortality*, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, Amsterdam.

2. Achille Mbembe, “Achille Mbembe: Peut-on être étranger chez soi?” in *Libération*, November 13th 2019.

3. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. Duke University Press, 2017, Durham, p. 5.

4. Wael Garnaoui. “«Mère ne vois-tu pas que je brûle?» Esquisse d’une compréhension de la dynamique familiale des migrants clandestins disparus”, en *Filigrane Écoutes psychanalytiques. Identités – Qui suis-je?* Deuxième partie. Volume 28, num. 2, 2020.

5. Shahram Khosravi, “What do we see if we look at the border from the other side?” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*(2019) 27, 3 409–424.

6. Idem, Wael Garnaoui.



7. Barak Kalir, "Departheid, The Draconian Governance of Illegalized Migrants in Western States", *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (2019): 19–40.

8. Idem, Wael Garnaoui.

9. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40, 2003, Duke University Press. p. 11.

10. Idem, Achille Mbembe, p. 16.

11. Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*, University Press Chicago, 1993, p. 5.

12. Idem, Michael Herzfeld, p. 173.

13. Achille Mbembe, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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