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Naturalising 'Black Spaces' in the Mediterranean: Towards a Political Ecology of Bordering Infrastructures

Timothy Raeymaekers

Department of Histories and Cultures, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the terminology of border infrastructures as a way to enrich a multi-perspectival approach to territorial bordering processes that takes seriously their stratifying and racialising dynamics. Building on the analysis of migrant informal dwellings, or ghettos, which are increasingly constructed as naturalised 'black spaces' in the Mediterranean, the paper's contribution is twofold. First, it calls for more situated research into the multiple networks, connections and agencies involved in bordering processes, which often comprise complex interactions across 'formal' and 'informal', 'human' and 'more-than-human' boundaries. Second, it proposes to foreground the socio-materiality of borders-as-infrastructures by analysing how these actively reproduce a logic of separation in both a political and an ecological sense. The article pushes forward a more immersive understanding and methodology that is able to unearth the stratifying, racialising dimensions of contemporary borderwork across and within the confines of nation-state territoriality.

Introduction: Border Infrastructures as Stratigraphic Operational Landscapes

This article foregrounds the term bordering infrastructures as a way to come to grips with the multiple networks, connections and agencies involved in bordering processes across the globe. Focusing on the social and material construction of such infrastructures in the Mediterranean borderland and -sea, I regard these as the sites where the assemblages involved in planning and implementing territorial borders become operational. Put shortly, bordering infrastructures represent the conduits that allow sovereign pretences over mobile bodies to take hold as not just states, but all sorts of political agencies get involved in the channelling, filtering, and controlling of mobility across borders. I write 'not just states' because as of lately, it has become clear that a whole range of agencies are involved in bordering processes, which often comprise complex interactions across 'formal' and 'informal', 'human' and 'more-than-human' boundaries. The terminology of border infrastructures

will not only allow geographers to place these expressions into a wider political ecological perspective, I hope. But it also possibly untangles the ecological and relational dimensions of contemporary borderwork that take place not just *across* but also increasingly *within* the confines of nation-state territoriality.

The theoretical agenda that binds my question is to think about territory and geopolitics in terms of complex and multidimensional assemblages of power, rather than along predefined Cartesian axes of surfaces and scales. By introducing new concepts such as stratification and pre-emption, height, and reach, stretching and tightening power relations, I follow a group of scholars who are interested in a more topological understanding of geopolitics, and refuse to start from the idea that power may simply be distributed through either hierarchically or horizontally extensive spaces. Such scholars draw attention instead to the ways in which a more transverse set of political interactions holds institutional hierarchies in place. Put simply, a topological understanding tries to show what an altered geopolitical understanding looks like when it works through an analysis of the geographic intensity and transversality of political power in place.¹ Loosely inspired by what Elizabeth Grosz and Bruce Braun call the new forms of geopower that have emerged in the era of modernity,² my theoretical aim in this paper is to disentangle what Gupta and Ferguson, in a much-quoted essay, refer to as the proposition of the state's territorial space as 'a kind of neutral grid on which cultural differences, historical memory, and societal organisation is inscribed'. (2002: 34) Characteristic of this grid, on the one hand, is the idea that the state stands somehow 'above society' – state planning is thus understood as a 'top-down' process, and civil society as a 'grassroots' and 'bottom-up' phenomenon – as well as the idea the state somehow 'encompasses' its localities. To be sure, state verticality and horizontality shall not be taken literally in this sense, as these are rather the effect, the result of the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations 'whereby state space achieves a distinctive identity as a place'. (Idem; see also Mitchell 1991). In this realm, I stick to Deleuze and Guattari, who propose the term striated space, which derives this from *stringere*: in Italian, to draw tight. Striated space allows for a system of regulated connections to be established between determined points on dedicated lines – such as a topographical map of the Ocean, or a territorial grid of a city. Striation allows for state functioning by creating what Michael calls a 'gravitational space', which sets up the state as 'the central organisational organism' or regulatory body. The politics of striated space produces a hierarchy of social control, it is a fractal space that organises functionalities into productive modes; and it does so in ways which, as I will hope to explain, combines both encompassing and vertical dynamics, human and more-than-human dimensions (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

In this article, I build further on the notion of striated space in the realm of what others have called the 'ordinary topologies', or the lived practices of

bordered lives in the context of planetary urbanisation (taken from Brenner 2013; Brenner and Katsikis 2013; Elden 2013; Harker 2014; see also Merrifield 2013; Yiftachel 2009).³ One key contributor to this discussion is Eyal Weizman, who, in his work, describes the ebbing and flowing deployment of the Israeli state and military power in territories that are co-constituted by various types of agencies where the distinctions between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ cannot be clearly marked. His investigation tends to reach beyond a simple mapping of walls, barriers, and checkpoints to zoom more broadly into the ‘logic of separation’ – or, ‘apartheid’, as he calls it – which reproduces ‘a complex compartmentalised system of spatial exclusion’ that lodges the power of the state geographically at every scale (Braverman 2011; Weizman 2002, 2007, 24; see also Weizman and Sheikh 2015).

The invocation of Israel-Palestine and South Africa in this context is not coincidental, as I will explain further, because the operational landscape of EU-African bordering infrastructures has come to reflect a wider differentiation of humanity that is increasingly militarised and weaponised (see also Heller and Pezzani 2016; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018; Pezzani 2020). I argue that bordering infrastructures play a central role in this differentiation by producing a form of ‘anti-urbanity’: a logic of separation that reproduces the hierarchical segregation of segments of humanity deemed either ‘not quite’, ‘not yet’ or totally ‘unfit’ for government into a space that is categorised as ‘natural, so unmodern, uncivilised, and threatening. In this sense, I regard border infrastructures as oscillating socio-material entanglements which, while situated on the edges of state territoriality, are also constitutive of power relations because of their central role in channelling living labour and inscribing social difference in space. I choose the term anti-urban, or *eschatopolis* – from *polis* (city, state, city-state), and *eschatia* (confines, border, edge) – to indicate their central marginality in terms of defining the boundary between what counts and does not count as ‘civil’, so ‘human’ (see also Raeymaekers 2014; Yiftachel 2009).⁴

A key aspect of this dynamic, I argue, concerns the instrumentalization of race as a central determinant of this logic – and which, in my view, has not sufficiently been highlighted in this scholarship so far (see also Pallister-Wilkins 2021). Three elements emerge as particularly striking in this context. One regards the stratification of humanity on the boundary between ‘informal’ and ‘official’ places of refuge. A central instrument that is used to distinguish between different strata of humanity is that of the territorial residence, which agro-capitalists use as a technology to exploit the difference between ‘not yet’, ‘not quite’ and dehumanised subjects who cannot claim full rights of residence. The second element regards the ‘naturalisation’ of African migrants’ living space as a ‘black space’ that is both uncivilised and threatening. Rather than a fixed borderline, state interventions tend to reproduce ‘a complex compartmentalised system of spatial exclusion’ (Weizman 2007, 24) that

lodges the separation between deserving and undeserving subjects geographically at every scale. A third element involves the strong connectivity between human and non-human forms of agency. Bordering infrastructures form the backbone of a materialdiscursive agency that both enacts and reproduces the boundary between the human and the non-human into the geographic landscape. And in so doing, they distinguish and reconnect human lives in terms that feed capital. A final element regards the role of marginalised ‘black spaces’ in reproducing the boundary between who belongs and who does not belong to the citizen-human space of the European nation-state. It is this process of racialisation, and in particular of African migrant ghettos, that will be the centre of my argument.

I will use the remainder of this article to do two things. First, I will define more concretely what I mean with border infrastructures in the domain of what others refer to as ‘borderwork’. Second, I will explore how this new terminology can help us analyse the different manifestations of borderwork and their underlying logics of pre-emption and stratification of segments of humanity constructed as ‘not quite’, ‘not yet’ or totally ‘unfit’ for the ‘normal’ practices of government. I will place my theoretical argument in a short case study based on participatory research in the region of Basilicata, Southern Italy, in 2014–2019.

Borderwork

To some extent, the discussion on border infrastructures refers back to Michael Mann (1984) and his attempt to set apart the state as an arena that reflects ‘the condensation, the crystallisation, the summation of social relations within its territories’. (63) Mann contrasts what he calls the *despotic power* of the state – defined as the routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups – and the state’s *infrastructural power*: the capacity of the state to penetrate civil society, and to implement ‘logistically political’ (54) decisions. In a contextual observation, he invokes the ‘massive infrastructural powers’ of the state, which include its ability to raise taxes, administer our lives through bureaucracy, the flow of information, and to regulate the economy – Mann was writing in 1984. Yet while Mann does analyse the multifunctionality of state infrastructures – the development of bureaucratic, military, communications and economic infrastructures necessarily brings ‘the state into functional relations with diverse, sometimes cross-cutting groups between whom there is room to manoeuvre’, he writes (59) – he still remains trapped in a state-centric perspective on infrastructure, which, in his view, permits the state to ‘radiate authoritatively outwards from a centre’ as well as to ‘regulate, normatively and by force, a *given* set of social and territorial relations, and to erect boundaries against the outside’. (author’s emphasis: 60)

Since at least one and a half decade, this state-centric notion on borders as state infrastructures has been challenged on two grounds.

A first challenge involves the *relational dimension* of infrastructural power at the state's territorial boundaries (Brighenti 2006; Del Biaggio 2016; Star 1999; see also). One important dimension of infrastructural power Mann did not consider sufficiently concerns the increasingly transnational connectivity of the state's infrastructures in the financial and economic domains – a connectivity that notably destabilises the state's central powers in significant ways (see Ong 2000; Sassen 2006; Schindler, DiCarlo, and Paudel 2022). But also, in the domain of border studies, a 'multi-perspectival' approach to territorial bordering has been gathering strength (Scott 2015: xv). This perspective encourages border scholars to consider borders simultaneously as spaces of contestation, struggle, and negotiation (Brambilla 2015; Casaglia 2020). Border infrastructures are not merely erecting boundaries against the outside, but they involve a complex set of relations between human and more-than-human agencies involved in the reproduction of these boundaries at multiple scales – including the operation of algorithms, visual and surveillance architectures (Glouftsiou 2018, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Tazzioli and Walters 2016). This multiplicity has led to the acknowledgement that borders do not just embody territorial differentiations, but "they create those differences" (Jones 2016, 166), because they act as filters and membranes that separate 'the desirable from the undesirable, the genuine from the bogus, the deserving from the undeserving' (Gargiulo 2020, 15). In line with pioneering research in the domain of (post-)colonial and migration studies,⁵ geographers seem more inclined nowadays to study border infrastructures as specific 'geographical formations' involved in controlling, channelling, and filtering mobile flows through the interactive borderwork of converging agencies and institutions (Rijke and Minca 2019: 972, Martèn and Boano 2022).

In a recent contribution on the EU-African borderlands, Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht (2021) theorise borderwork as a concept that allows us to track the specific systemic practices, not just of states but also of other 'organisational actors' (Bialasiewicz 2012; Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter 2014; Frowd 2018, 2021; Laine, Moyo, and Changwe Nshimbi 2021; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Rumford 2008, 2; quoted in Rumford 2012; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2021; see also Vukov and Sheller 2013). Put differently, these scholars invite us to pay more attention towards the 'complex, laborious' process of translating bordering technologies into concrete arrangements that affect the shape and scope of political power across multiple geographic scales. This necessarily requires a more engaged analysis, not just of the multiple events and places, but also of the multiple actors that take part in the everyday (re)production of borders, i.e., how citizens and migrants, state, and non-state actors construct, navigate and facilitate border control under constrained circumstances at various levels of intervention (Vammen et

al., 2022: 4, see also Mengiste 2021; Reeves 2014). In the following section, I will build further on this conceptual framing to think more in depth through what Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht (2021) call the pre-emption and stratification of human flows in the EU-Africa borderland. Whereas *pre-emption* ‘normalises the idea that there are people that can be justifiably expelled from the civic/civil, and increasingly also the human sphere’ (Niang 2020, 333), *stratification* refers to the hierarchical, uneven incorporation of (non-)citizens with different statuses and positions within the confines of national state territoriality (see also e.g., De Genova and Peutz 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Before discussing these two dynamics more at length in the context of the EU-Africa borderland, I want to highlight a second dynamic that I deem important in this regard, which concerns the stratigraphic territorial order bordering infrastructures embody and reproduce.

Stratified Borders

The terminology of border stratification brings me to the second challenge to Michael Mann’s treatise of infrastructural power, which concerns their socio-materiality. In the wider context of scholarship that frames human and more-than-human interactions as mutually constitutive (see e.g., Braun and Whatmore 2010; Castree and Nash, 2006; Cabot 2012; Lemke 2015; Sundberg 2008, 2011), border archaeologists have studied, for instance, how man-made border infrastructures, but also apparently ‘natural’ terrains such as oceans, deserts, and mountain ranges may become part of militarised landscapes that have the objective of making cross-border environment unliveable, hazardous, and inaccessible for those trying to cross them (see e.g., Moffette and Walters 2018; Pezzani 2020). In their research in la Lande, in Calais (France), Hicks and Mallet, analyse the recurrent eviction and destruction of this camp settlement as an emblematic example of the British ‘environmental hostility’: the official UK policy to deter migration across its territorial borders.⁶ Through their archaeology methods, they see how the relationship between displaced and settled populations is articulated in and around the landscape, how identities are mapped into a landscape, and how the limits and the protection of one are dependent on the limits and the protection of the other (Hicks and Mallet 2019, 19). Such research privileges a participatory ethnographic research method that uses archaeology as one of many tools we can use to study and document extensive border processes.

Adding another layer to this stratified understanding of bordering processes, Anita Sundberg foregrounds the material encounters with the intimate objects of migrant travellers across the US–Mexico borderlands as everyday framings of belonging. Investigating the social meaning that is ascribed to these materials (as either ‘trash’, ‘filth’ or ‘personal belongings’), Sundberg proposes a post-humanist political ecology that refuses to treat non-human

nature as ‘the thing over which humans struggle’ but instead builds on (and enacts) a relational approach in which ‘all bodies are participants in constituting the world’. (2008: 876). ‘To synthesise’, she writes, ‘a posthumanist political ecology refuses to treat nonhuman nature as the thing over which humans struggle and instead builds on and enacts a relational approach in which all bodies are participants in constituting the world. A relational perspective accounts for the materiality and physicality of bodies while emphasising that their properties and capacities are historically contingent and geographically situated outcomes of association, relations between things. . . Such an approach promises to animate and enliven the study of boundary making by attending to (1) the properties and capacities of the many embodied beings that bring the world into being, (2) everyday practices and doings-in-relation, and (3) specific sites of politics-in-action’. (Sundberg 2011, 322)

I agree with Vicky Squire, however, that a post-humanist scholarship on borders risks to become a ‘naïve humanism’ if we do not consider the active processes of de-humanisation and re-humanisation in which contemporary boundary work is implied (Squire 2014; see also Pallister-Wilkins 2021: 4). Contrarily to Sundberg, Squire invites us to investigate these processes of separation – or the materialdiscursive ‘cuts’ (Barad 2003, 816) – that co-constitute bordered landscapes as intra-acting physical and social forces. This is important, she writes, because it forces us to consider the meaning of migrant materialities and bordering infrastructures not as deriving from any pure or pre-existing conception of ‘the human’ but as an outcome of socio-material entanglements.⁷ In a recent contribution, Polly Pallister Wilkins makes exactly this point by highlighting the explicitly racist dynamics of the nature/culture divide reproduced in contemporary bordering infrastructures. Though using a different terminology, she highlights the racialising work of such infrastructures ‘through perpetuating dualist ontologies of nature/culture or nature/human from which illegalised migrants are linked to the natural, read pre-modern, world; and through producing illegalised migrants as “bodies-out-of-place” in a political ecology that is concomitantly (re)produced as a whitescape’ (2021: 1).

With Squire and Pallister Wilkins, I am concerned here with a greater consideration of the dynamic relation between what is constituted as the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ world in critical border studies. I agree it is vital to think not only about how im-/mobile bodies encounter different geographic spatialities that are co-constituted by human and more-than-human elements, but also about the role of the latter in reproducing the very ‘logic of separation’ that bounds these bodies to concrete geographic sites or places. Of particular interest to me is the connection between bordering infrastructures and what Weheliye (2014: 79, 202) calls ‘racialising juridical assemblages’: the construction of race not as a biological or cultural classification but as ‘a set of socio-political processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-

humans, and non-humans'. As a counterpoint to Wilkins- analysis (with which I am much in agreement), I am interested here in the 'black spaces' that characterise migrant preclusion and stratification in the EU-Africa borderland. In Italy, Heather Merrill (2018) has noted how Blackness works as a figure of non-belonging that both threatens the moral purity of the nation-state and excludes black subjects from participating in the rights of the national citizenry. For her, the diasporic space occupied by people of African descent not only challenges the monolithic, Eurocentric definitions of belonging, racialised logics, and exclusionary practices, but also, for that reason, such 'black space' remains always enmeshed in racial antagonisms that affirm ambivalences and equivocations in the conditions for settling, of 'being black in relation to the white man' in Europe (Merrill 2018: 2). Yet, as Camilla Hawthorne points out, this tension makes it equally important to find out how Blackness is actively constructed as an anti-thesis to civility in this context. In a context where the term citizen effectively functions as a racial proxy for the category of the 'human', the struggles that ensue over the externalisation of Black communities as being inherently foreign to European nation-states betray a much deeper antagonism over the complex geographies of collective identification and in which a larger set of political negotiations over belonging, solidarity, and citizenship take root and are reproduced. Reframed like this, 'black spaces' thus acquire a wider significance as those spaces in which these struggles literally come to matter. In this paper, therefore, I build further on Camilla Hawthorne's work, particularly on her use of Devon Carbado's notion 'racial naturalisation', which refers to the ways in which the experience of racism effectively naturalises a racialised humanity into a stratigraphic order of 'not yet', 'not quite' and 'non-belonging' to the nation-state – with all the violent struggles and negotiations this dynamic entail (Carbado 2005, 638; Hawthorne 2021). Though I have no space to develop this broader argument here, the notion of 'racial naturalisation' is also directly tied to a much wider debate I am involved in on the Black Mediterranean as the geographic space in which these struggles and negotiations unfold in our contemporary era (for further reference, see Black Mediterranean Collective 2021). In this article, I will keep the discussion about 'black spaces' restricted to the mobile infrastructures of African migrant ghettos as informal diasporic dwellings in the increasingly repressive and bordered Mediterranean space.

The Anti-Urban

For the last 7 years, I have been studying the bordering of migration across the EU-Africa borderlands from the perspective of sub-Saharan seasonal labourers in the region of Basilicata, South Italy. Coming from 'African' border research, I am used to consider the fragmented, at times patchy patterns of territorial sovereignty that characterise contemporary border politics. In my subsequent

research on the EU-Africa border, however, I have found it much more difficult to place such observations within current ‘critical border studies’ debates. Though many now admit that the ‘moral technology’ of humanitarian security that underpins the EU’s contemporary border regime has involved an intentional subcontracting of sovereign control to nonstate agencies that are often neither directly controlled nor held accountable by the state (Heller and Pezzani 2016, 11), very few seem willing to also discuss what this means for the multiplication of borders. In this section, I will discuss the consequences of this ‘informalization’ of border infrastructures in the context of EU-African border policies in the Mediterranean.

The commonly used terminology for ‘informal’ migration infrastructures in the Mediterranean context is *ghetto*.⁸ In the Italian context, it is usually invoked in close connection with the phenomenon of *caporalato*: the form of illegal labour mediation labelled as being responsible for the notoriously detrimental circumstances to which migrant employed as contemporary agri-food commodity labour are increasingly subjected. The *caporalato-ghetto* nexus figures prominently in a narrative frame called *neo-abolitionism*: the struggle against extreme labour exploitation that is perceived as affecting the individual in a way that is comparable to slavery, and, as such, forms an embarrassment for public authorities deemed incapable (or unwilling) to protect enslaved workers captured in a system of systematic exploitation (Howard and Forin 2019). Other scholars insist on the sociality of the ghetto as a place that proves a sense of community in a context of widespread institutionalised racism, as Perrotta and Sacchetto (2014, 87) write: One of the most important pillars of the system of illegal hiring is the construction of a sense of ‘community’ that binds the [African gangmaster, also called *capo nero*, or black boss] with ‘his’ workers. It is a ‘community’ made up by bonds of kinship, friendship, respect, and trust. The workers closer to the black boss . . . do not question his role and profits, or the organisation of his home and daily life. Farmworkers are bound to him by ties that go beyond mere economic considerations”. In these narratives, ghettos appear as central nodes in a system of weak social ties: a kind of marginal urbanity that offers a practical response to the spatial and social marginalisation of people of African descent in an era of extractive capitalism and proliferating borders.

Both narratives tend to overshadow the important transformations such transient forms of migrant settlement have experienced during the past decade, however. In Libya, for instance, the term *ghetto* (the French term is *foyer*) has been commonly associated with a form of mobile dwelling organised along kinship and ethnic lines of descent. In the fluctuating space of Sahelian-Saharan migration, African ghettos (also called *foyer* by francophone West Africans) function basically as a gathering space – an apartment, room, or improvised shelter – where migrants share information, as well as a ‘sensation of being part of the same common destiny of African Black people in the Arab

world' (Bredeloup, Pliez, et al. 2004: 17: my translation). As Julien Barchet (2018) and other scholars have convincingly argued (see also Bensaâd 2012; Bredeloup, Zongo, et al. 2004; Cepero 2018), the transformation of these African ghettos into hotbeds of criminality has been a consequence, and not a driver, of the rapidly changing EU-Africa border regime. A significant moment in this respect can be associated with the signing of a 'Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation' between Libya and Italy in 2008.⁹ Since that date, the Libyan government – then still under the leadership of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi – has systematically curtailed migrants' rights to travel legally, claim a legal residence and official employment contract in the country. As a result of these changes, the living space of hundreds of thousands sub-Saharan migrant workers living in the country was progressively impinged by criminal elements involved in human trafficking, armed violence, and state corruption (see also Kohl 2016), while African ghettos gradually became a central kingpin in the clandestine economies of unfree labour and forced migration that directly capitalise on the latter's mobility aspirations. As a result, a significant portion of migrant's work experiences in Libya has been defined as some form of unfree labour (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018): whereas Africans used to be racially associated with temporary and domestic work, their current experience is characterised by systematic abuse and human rights violations. From the ghetto, these abuses gradually shifted to the many privately run prison complexes that perform a key function in the Libyan war and human trafficking economy. African migrants' living space thus became progressively captured in a racialised hierarchy that not only spatialises but also temporalises their mobility in the EU-African borderscape, as Marthe Achtnich (2021b) writes. It is exactly this politics of otherness that exposes migrants on the move to the most extreme forms of exploitation and abuse. To quote Weheliye (2014), the informalization of bordering practices across the Mediterranean tends to produce a racialising assemblage that stratifies migrants into a hierarchy of 'not yet', 'not-quite', and 'non-humans' that is deliberately promoted and bolstered by official border security and surveillance throughout the EU-Africa borderscape. Mirroring the institutionalised spaces of migration containment on the European continent, where incoming migrants are increasingly locked away in formal camp infrastructures that have the deliberate aim to usurp time for the purpose of migration control,¹⁰ the Libyan space of migration gradually transformed migrants' time-space into a source for capital accumulation for agencies that systematically encroach upon their spaces of intimacy and on the 'frail, often temporary, measures [that] reproduce the conditions for their own mobilities' (Achtnich 2021a; Vogt 2018).

While the moral and political ramifications of this slow descent into 'hell' (Achtnich 2021b, 319) are now widely discussed among scholars and in the wider public sphere, however, a less known dimension of multiplying borders

concerns their role in consolidating and enhancing a racialised hierarchy among forms of life that are considered not quite, not yet or categorically unfit for the normal operations of government. This is the analysis I will turn to in the following section.

Naturalising' 'Black Spaces'

In 2014–15, while preparing the stage for a longer research stay in the area of Basilicata, Southern Italy, I was struck by the spatial coincidence between what MSF, in its 2016 study, had called the 'informalization of refugee settlements' in Italy, and the broader transformations of the country's rural landscape in this region. Assisted by MIC-C (which stands for the margin is the centre-of change), a small, anonymous collective, I started combing the countryside for remnants of what often appeared as a not-so-distant past. Many of today's ghettos in fact repurposed and adapted what had been the nodal infrastructures of the region's agricultural reform of the 1950s and 60s. Such was the case for many of the former *borghi*, or hamlets, in the vicinity of Venosa, Palazzo San Gervasio, and Lavello, in the Northern Bradano area.¹¹ During an artistic-political intervention in Matera, which heralded the title of European cultural capital in 2019, MIC-C used the city's main square to document what it called the 'impermanent space of life at the margins'. By counterposing a pile of rubble from one of the destroyed agricultural reform hamlets on one end with the construction of a temporary ghetto shack on the other end of the square, we wanted to highlight the tension between the active ruination and exploitation of these marginalised bodies, and of the logic of separation that continues to transform these into productive commodities.¹² In the context of my research, these interventions could be interpreted as an initial, playful, incursion into the terrain of study – a kind of futuristic elegy with similar aesthetic dimensions as the jinx groups' interventions in New York's underground and the Stalker project in Rome (see Deyo and Leibowitz 2003; Elden 2013; Wiley 2010). What appeared as playful and innocent at first, however, revealed a rather more serious questioning of the way the contested aesthetics of ruined infrastructures in the Basilicata context coincided with a layered process of separation and segregation. Building on Hicks and Mallet's (2019), one could say MIC-C highlighted the articulation of the boundary between the displaced and the settled, the discarded and the preserved as it detailed the impermanence of migrant ghettos in the landscape. Layer upon layer, the maps and objects displayed on the website revealed how this stratified boundary was actively mapped into the landscape.

Three elements emerge as particularly striking in this context. One regards the stratification of humanity on the boundary between 'informal' and 'official' places of refuge. The dynamic map on MIC-C's website shows how, over the past 8 years, the fluctuation of official temporary labour camps is paired with

an equally important ramification of migrant workers' ghettos that continue to fulfil a central role in the commodification of migrant labour. Since the formal reception centres for migrant workers invariably open late in the region, most workers prefer to squat out in the ghettos or on the countryside to be able to socialise among co-workers and get access to labour opportunities.¹³ But since 2014, squatting has been declared a criminal offence. The result is that many workers, a growing section of whom are refugees and asylum seekers, are caught between the hammer and the anvil.¹⁴ Given the detrimental assistance offered by the predominantly privatised system of migrant reception in Italy,¹⁵ and given the increasing denial rate of asylum seekers' residence renewal (which grew from 60 to 80% in 2015–2019),¹⁶ thousands of refugees and asylum seekers, predominantly from sub-Saharan African origin, are showing up in South Italy's agricultural fields in search for a means of subsistence during a period of acute indeterminacy and impossibility to cross European borders.¹⁷ A central instrument (or political technology) that is used to distinguish between different strata of humanity in this context is clearly that of the territorial residence. Though refugees and asylum seekers have a right to a territorial residence, they need an official address to be able to renew their papers. That is why in the context of multiplying borders, it is exactly around this right to territory that the struggle over migrant rights is being fought, because next to the popular consensus the exclusion of migrant workers is generating in Italian public opinion, this differentiated status of migrant workers also works to the benefit of agro-capitalists who subsequently exploit the difference between 'not yet' (in the case of asylum seekers), 'not quite' (in the case of refugees) and dehumanised subjects who cannot claim full rights of residence. The granting of a residence card, which is a prerequisite for a labour contract, thus emerges as the quintessential black-mail of contemporary migration and border management in this context.¹⁸

The second element regards the proceeding 'naturalisation' of African migrants' living space as a 'black space' that is both uncivilised and threatening. The result of the state's destructive intervention towards migrant ghettos since 2014 has been a gradual criminalisation of migrants' informal dwellings – again, in striking parallel to the encroachment of migrant ghettos on the other shore of the Mediterranean in Libya during the exact same period (see above). In 2014–2019, the regional government of Basilicata promoted the systematic eviction and demolition of migrant ghettos in the Upper Bradano area except for one site, which, ironically, has been preserved; coincidentally or not, this is also the site that continued to host the major *caporalato* stronghold in the area known as 'la casa gialla' – before the site was finally impounded in 2019.¹⁹ Despite the prevailing rhetoric against the *caporalato* mafia in Southern Italy, this politics of preserving zones of criminal labour intermediation has not been an exception: in northern Puglia, the Gran Ghetto ghetto of San Severo continued to be accessible even after its official eviction and judicial

confiscation (Raeymaekers 2021). In Calabria, Puglia, and Campania, and Piemonte informal dwellings of migrant workers emerge again each year in anticipation of the harvesting season (see Ippolito, Perrotta, and Raeymaekers 2021). Contrarily to dominant public opinion in Italy, therefore, the main objective of these seizures and evictions does not appear to be the eradication of migrant workers' informal settlements per se, but rather to render their living space increasingly unliveable, hazardous, and inaccessible. During consecutive evictions in Basilicata, security forces deliberately destroyed the roofs of evicted buildings while blocking the access to former *borghi* with stones and wires. In one case, the authorities blocked the access to a water pump that was also used by local farmers. What emerges as a result of these state interventions, therefore, is not a neat dividing line between the 'civilised' society of rural towns and agro-capitalist operations on the one hand, and the 'barbarious' hinterland of outcast migrants on the other, but rather a complex jigsaw of both formal and informal, human, and more-than-human elements. To quote Eyal Weizman, this jigsaw reproduces 'a complex compartmentalised system of spatial exclusion' (Weizman 2007, 24) that lodges this separation geographically at every scale in this bordered landscape.

A third element involves the strong connectivity between human and non-human forms of agency in this context. To understand this interconnectivity, it helps going back to the remark by Vicky Squire, who asks how the boundary between the human and the non-human is actively drawn into the landscape and on the bodies of mobile subjects. In my view, two types of events characterise the dynamic of bounding of 'natural' from 'human' life in this context: manhunts and [land] reclamations. Especially since the Italian friendship agreement with Libya, and again in striking parallel with what has been happening at the southern shores of the Mediterranean since then, African migrants in Southern Italy have been repeatedly subjected to veritable manhunts. The most (in)famous episode in this respect concerns the town of Rosarno in 2010. In a mass revolt that lasts for days, Ghanaian and Burkinabè workers demonstrated in the town after one of their companions had been shot, yelling: 'We are not animals'.²⁰ While this episode and the government reaction to it created a general outrage (for a discussion see Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2022), later lynchings and killings have received far fewer attention. In the Spring of 2021, for instance, three African workers were shot at for having denounced a theft in the Gran Ghetto close to Foggia. The last two years, similar manhunts continue to be reported in the Southern agricultural enclaves not just in Puglia, but also increasingly in Campania, Calabria, and the rest of Italy. As Irene Peano (2020, 226) suggests, these episodes are not an exception to the rule of 'normal' routine government, but they are rather to be interpreted as episodes of 'zoopolitical' violence, which flag the possibility of treating certain segments of humanity as animals. Building on Vaughn-Williams (2015), Peano identifies the operations of

a ‘zoopolitical’ border in this context as ‘the constitutive outside of humanitarian discourses, the application of human rights, and the citizen as the “proper” human subject in spaces of animalisation across Europe’.

Rather than the animalisation of migrant lives, I see in these events the gradual naturalisation of their living space, which makes racial violence both possible and justifiable in the current climate. The material discursive connection between the reclaiming of the ‘natural’ environment with the racialisation of those life worlds that keep being associated with such environment as non-human provides for the historical and geographic context in which such violence is being actively reproduced. The ontological counterpoint to this ‘animalisation’ of Black migrant workers’ lives in the agrarian frontier of the Mediterranean has been in fact that of *bonifica* (literally: sanitation, or land reclamation) – a widely used terminology in the context of deliberate migrant dispossession. In an interview in August 2016, the regional administrator for migration of Basilicata told me with respect to the eviction of one of the major ghettos in the area: ‘we are dealing with a lawless zone (*zona franca*) that needs to be eradicated (*bonificata*)’.²¹ Another local administrator told me: ‘we are dealing here with people who are a hundred years behind compared to us . . . concentrated in a place without rules . . . And so, we must impose the rules, there where there is no public force (*forza pubblica*)’.²² While the term *bonifica* recalls a much longer historical process of land reclamations in Southern Italy I have no space to develop here (for a discussion see Caprotti 2007; Tenzon 2018), the colonial undertones of this infrastructural undertaking come out clearly of one considers the shock and awe that infrastructure works such as these are meant to produce in the midst of often quite strong political contestations. Next to facilitating flows and circulations, in fact, another important feature of infrastructures is their embodiment of sovereign authority in places where it is highly questioned (see footnote 5; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). The term *bonifica* is particularly relevant in this context as it refers to the – largely unsuccessful – attempts of the Fascist and post-war Italian governments to repopulate and reclaim the pastoral lands in Puglia and Basilicata, following the completion of the *bonifica integrale* (total reclaim) of Latium’s Pontine Marshes planned by Benito Mussolini. Without entering into the details of this historical process, which I have no space to develop here, it strikes me as significant that the same logic of separation that has driven Italian rural development planning in the *Meridione* and the colonies during much of the 20th century occupies such a central place in current policy discourse with regard to migration. In an ironic twist, the very modernist farmhouses constructed for rural settlers are themselves now illegally occupied by those migrant farm workers, so that ‘the debris of those settlements that were once deemed as the solution to rid urban centres of the unruly, untowardly presence of day farm labourers has become yet another instantiation of the same “problem”.’ (Peano 2021: np).

As I hope to have made equally clear, though, it is exactly on the margins of these ‘reclaimed’ spaces that certain segments of humanity are geographically separated and made socially distinct, so that they may be ‘interconnected in terms that feed capital’. (Melamed 2015, 79) As places that are both materially and discursively singled out as standing somehow ‘outside’ the perimeters of civility, they tend to reproduce migrant workers as ‘bodies-out-of-place’ in a political ecology that is quite significantly charted along racial lines (see above: Pallister-Wilkins 2021). The ‘black spaces’ that emerge in this context thus need to be understood as a direct result and a desired outcome of the politics of separation carried forward by today’s bordering infrastructures. In my view, therefore, these marginalised, naturalised spaces reflect as kind of ‘slow’, incremental violence that gradually permeates the lives of the marginalised through dynamic spaces, of bodies, ecosystems, and natural resources. For Nixon, slow violence is a debilitating mechanism that eventually deforms the spatial characteristics that make a place liveable as it leaves people stranded in disposable ecosystems and deprived of the ability to subsist (Amira 2021; Nixon 2011; see also Schindel 2022).

A fourth and final element concerns the deep enmeshment of the spaces of informal African migrant settlement in an active politics of belonging and non-belonging. Here, I draw back to Camilla Hawthorne’s observation that the complex geography of bordering citizenship in the Mediterranean today betrays a much deeper antagonism over collective identification and over who does and does not belong to the citizen-human space called the European nation-state. Reframed like this, ‘black spaces’ in fact acquire a wider significance as those spaces in which these antagonisms literally come to matter. Once again, I like to think of this enmeshment in socio-material terms. As we hoped to highlight with MIC|C, Black migrant ghettos are also layered places where memories of belonging and non-belonging overlap, and where boundaries are constantly redrawn, re-narrated and re-envisioned. Next to their close – but often deliberately invisibilized and marginalised – connectivity with rural society, the infrastructures that are simultaneously repurposed as sites of active bordering and reconnection are also poetic places in a sense that they contain the traces of these narrated memories and narrations. Building on MIC|C’s work (but see also DeSilvey and Edensor 2012) I’d like to think, therefore, that infrastructures are also sites where the human and the more-than-human are embroiled in a mutually constitutive relationship, as authors like Juanita Sundberg, Vicky Squire and others have been trying to tell us. The broader impact of these convergences in today’s bordering infrastructures – which, I repeat, bring together state and non-state actors, human and more-than-human elements in specific times and locales – sustain a racialising hierarchy that singles out mobile bodies as ‘not yet’ (in the case of asylum seekers), ‘not quite’ (in the case of refugees) and ‘non-humans’ (in the case of ‘illegal migrants’ casted into the ‘natural sphere of

the ghetto) but also involve another kind of layerdness that is both material and social, palpable and graspable in a sense that is not accounted for enough in current scholarship on borders and migration. This layerdness is important to take into consideration, I feel, because it forces us to consider the meaning of contemporary and historical bordering infrastructures not as deriving from any pure or pre-existing conception of ‘the human’ but as an outcome of concrete socio-material entanglements. Let me try to draw some general conclusions from this specific observation.

Conclusions: Stealth Borders in an Era of Planetary Urbanisation

What would a ‘critical’ geography of borders look like if, apart from the horizontal terragraphy of walls, checkpoints, and border posts, it would also include a vertical stratigraphy of the bordering infrastructures that literally cut through the land and through our movements as they make the territorial claims of the nation-state penetrate ever-more insidiously into our lives? As I observed, such a research agenda would be critical only to the extent that it takes the multiplicity and pluriscalarity of bordering infrastructures, past and present, seriously. For sure, it would foreground a more topological perspective and methodology. Such a perspective refuses to accept that state power somehow ‘radiates outward’ from a putative political ‘centre’ or sits ‘above us’ to direct our lives from the top. Rather, it draws attention to the ways in which the close interaction of material and human processes that govern space holds certain institutional hierarchies in place. In this article, I have tried to exemplify how such a topology of borders-as-infrastructures can elucidate the kinds of stratified – or striated – interconnectivity bordering devices tend to generate in the wider geographic context of the Mediterranean. The principal function of territorial borders is not to block or stop the flows of goods, humans, and knowledge but to filter and channel these across such striated spaces. The terminology and method of bordering infrastructures can help us untangle such spaces by foregrounding the ‘relational networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space’ (Larkin 2013, 328–329). As I hope to have clarified, this approach potentially opens up a new direction in research that also takes seriously the apparently marginal, informalized spaces of migrant dwelling that increasingly tend to become central nodes in the stratification of human beings along racial lines. To paraphrase the Stalkers’ Manifesto, the aim is indeed to open up the interstitial and the marginal spaces that are both abandoned and in the process of transformation. These can be the removed *lieux de la memoire*, the unconscious becoming of urban systems, the spaces of confrontation and contamination between the organic and the inorganic, between nature and artifice (Wiley 2010, 14) and, I may add, between ‘human and ‘more-than human’ elements.

A second potential merit of infrastructure scholarship lays its insistence on the inherent social and ecological relationality of bordering technologies. This relationality requires us, on the one hand, to adopt a less state-centric perspective and consider more widely the power brokers that are able to open bargaining spaces far away from mainstream political sites – including non-state agents that are operating in the domain of humanitarian and development assistance. On the other hand, the quotidian negotiation, circumvention, and contestation of bordering infrastructures requires us to take more seriously the ‘soft-power’ bordering strategies that operate in intimate, non-conventional security spaces – often located off-grid and out-of-place with respect to the formal logistics of state infrastructure projects. These off-grid sites may include informal camps and migrant shelters, temporary hideouts as well as more stable ghettos, abandoned buildings, pathways and repurposed ruins that may be located not just along, but deeply inside the state’s territorial confines.

In the context I described – of EU-African bordering assemblages, finally, future work on border infrastructures may allow border studies to overcome what, in my view, has been a quite detrimental division of perspectives, between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ border studies, which still confines our scholarship in too significant ways. To address the daunting task of what many still perceive as comparing ‘the incomparable’ (Kirchker and Sarma 2021: 814) in cross-border studies, this would in fact require transgressing another boundary, which is not a territorial but a disciplinary one. Adopting a truly ‘multi-perspectival’ lens, as Rajaram and Grundy-Warr suggested 15 years ago, would mean at once to consider the patchy implementation of border infrastructures along a range of ungoverned frontiers and contested sovereignties, while taking seriously the power structures and surveillance assemblages involved in the stratification and pre-emption of life in the name of the ‘greater good’.

Notes

1. In this topological understanding ‘reach’ refers to the ability of the state to permeate everyday life and to make itself present in the regions ‘at-a-distance’, as Allen and Cochrane put it (2010: 1074): ‘reach, in this latter sense, is intensive; it is inseparable from the social relationships which comprise it’ – reflected in terms like ‘reaching into’, ‘reaching out’ and ‘drawing within reach’ (see also Allen 2011).
2. In their discussion of the political rationality of modern geological science, both authors try to initiate a discussion on the complex relationship between the social construction of ‘nature’ and forms of political rationality (Braun 2000; Grosz 2008; Yusoff et al. 2012). In human geography, their terminology has been applied in urban studies (Gandy 2002, 2004; Graham 2009, 2010; Graham and Marvin 2001; McFarlane and Rutherford 2008; Solis 2005) and, to a lesser extent, in the geography of warscapes (Graham 2004; Gregory 2011) and mining (for a discussion see Luning 2020).

3. In Brenner's words, planetary urbanisation advances a territorially differentiated, morphologically variable, multi-scalar and processual conceptualisation of urbanisation under capitalism, arguing that 'the development, intensification and worldwide expansion of capitalism produces a vast, variegated terrain of urban(ized) conditions that include yet progressively extend beyond the zones of agglomeration that have long monopolised the attention of urban researchers'. The research agenda involves casting light over the 'ever thickening commodity chains, infrastructural circuits, migration streams and circulatory-logistical networks that today crisscross the planet' that involve 'colloidal mixtures of rural and suburban landscapes' on national, international, continental, and even global scales (Brenner 2013, 15–16).
4. It is useful to note here that in the historical Greek city-state (*polis*), the *eschatia* was exactly that area along the city's confines that served as a buffer between the city and its territorial outside, a marginal and not fully incorporated land only partially integrated into the formal system of production and reproduction (Constantakopoulou 2018; Horden and Purcell 2000, 80;).
5. A key contribution in anthropology has been Brian Larkin's, who suggests redefining infrastructures as the 'material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space' comprising the 'relational networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space' (Larkin 2013, 328–329, see also e.g., Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Kornberger et al. 2019;). His definition builds both on the anthropology of colonial architecture and urban planning that considers the hybrid and fluid use of state infrastructures (see e.g., Mbembe 2001; Stoler 2008) as well as the burgeoning literature on so-called infrastructures of migration and their role in the reconfiguration of capitalist supply chains (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen 2013; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012; Tsing 2005, 2009; Xiang 2012, 2013).
6. 'The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment', Theresa May, then the UK Home Secretary, said in 2012, and the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 were designed to make it easier to deport people from the UK: Hicks and Mallet's (2019, 7).
7. A similar paradigm that emerges in this context is that of 'zoopolitics', or the simultaneous construction of the citizen as the 'proper' human subject in spaces of migrant animalisation across Europe. Taking the example of Libya, where migrants are detained in human 'zoos', Vaughn-Williams proposes to rethink the separation between citizen and non-citizen along human and non-human (animal) lines – founding his analysis on Derrida's critique of Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2004; Derrida 2008). Again, the question Vaughn-Williams leaves unanswered is how this boundary between the human and the non-human (or more- and less-than-human) is actively constructed through socio-material entanglements, or infrastructures, that also take active part in their definition (see also Kzaal and Almiron 2021).
8. Next to its Medieval European origins, where ghettos used to predominantly designate the circumscribed Jewish quarters of the city, the term has spread to the US and to West Africa, where, in the words of Loic Wacquant, it refers more specifically to the '(. . .) spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of ethnoracial closure and control' in the context of American racial segregation (Wacquant 1997, 342; Wacquant, Slater, and Borges Pereira 2014). In Africa the term ghetto refers more broadly to makeshift dwellings occupied by migrants from the same ethnic and occupational background (Agier and Lecadet 2014; Hoffman 2007).
9. With its \$5 billion reparations package (to be paid over 25 years, mainly by ENI), the Treaty favoured Italian infrastructural investment in Libya and increased cooperation on migration controls, leading to joint patrolling operations in Libyan waters and push-backs. In 2009, the Italian government passed a law that criminalised undocumented

immigrants as unlawful subjects (Law No 94/2009), and Italian border patrols systematically started illegally to drive migrants back to Libyan waters (for a discussion see Pradella and Cillo 2021).

10. On this issue, see Ruben Andersson (2014).
11. The results of this exploration are shared in the ‘Archaeology of a Frontier’ project on www.mic-c.org.
12. The displayed billboards and recordings of this public intervention are shared on the projects page of www.mic-c.org.
13. During a visit to the reception centre in the Summer of 2017, I counted 50 registered inhabitants on a total capacity of 300.
14. The legal reform (dubbed Piano Casa) proposed by the government of Matteo Renzi was commented by the director of the association Avvocati di Strada at the time: ‘Without residence, you cannot vote, you do not obtain health care, you cannot receive a pension nor benefit from local welfare, you cannot obtain formal employment, you are not entitled to legal assistance . . . [In short] taking away the residence permit from people who occupy a building literally means placing those people outside of society, making them invisible, erasing in one single shot the possibility to confront their difficulties’. (Godio 2021).
15. According to official numbers, the first level reception centres were already working at 24% over their capacity in 2014: Rapporto sulla protezione internazionale in Italia 2014. http://www.anci.it/Contenuti/Allegati/Rapporto_low.pdf (Last accessed: 23.10.2018; see also Novak 2019).
16. Minister of Interior, various reports, see www.interno.gov.it/it/stampa-e-comunicazione/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati.
17. Since 2001, the Dublin regulations stipulate that so-called first countries of arrival need to take responsibility over the migrants’ asylum claims. This principle was further rebolstered in the 2013 Dublin III agreement with the official intent to counter ‘asylum shopping’ by incoming migrants from Northern Africa.
18. Apart from the ‘state racism’ the residence permit exemplifies (Foucault 2004, 254–261), the sale of fake residences has also been the object of an expanding parallel market in Italy since 2014: for a discussion see Gargiulo (2020).
19. see <http://archaeology.mic-c.org/mulini-matinelle>.
20. Quoted in The Daily Telegraph, 9 January 2010.
21. For details see <http://archaeology.mic-c.org/borgo-boreano>.
22. Interview 9 February 2017.

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ORCID

Timothy Raeymaekers <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7205-6917>

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