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► **To cite this version:**

Nishat Awan. Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime. *Media Theory*, 2020, *Mediating Presents*, 4 (2), pp.139-158. <hal-03266395>

**HAL Id: hal-03266395**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03266395v1>**

Submitted on 21 Jun 2021

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**Horizonless Worlds:  
Navigating the Persistent  
Present of the Border Regime**

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*Media Theory*  
Vol. 4 | No. 2 | 139-158  
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**Abstract**

Through discussing the persistent present of displacement the essay argues that a politics of time is being mobilised as a biopolitical means of control in migrant lives. This can be seen in the circularity of displacement, deportation and return, where waiting and disorientation become forms of control. The discussion emerges from field research and interviews I carried out in the villages of north Punjab, Pakistan, where many people are caught in this chronopolitics of migration. The migrant experience of borders is read alongside a critical interrogation of the computational technologies deployed in border management, including EuroDAC and iMap. They produce a form of imperial temporality for which the horizon acts as a constitutive trope of progress, while simultaneously producing a sense of a horizonless world through the networked logic and ubiquity of datafication. I end with a discussion of how it may be possible to find other orientations within these normative spatiotemporalities of a bordered world.

**Keywords**

chronopolitics, migration, navigation, algorithmic control, borders

The lives of undocumented migrants are spent attempting to be somewhere else, so it is ironic that in such lives the question of temporality emerges more urgently than that of space. This is because the price exacted for moving across borders without papers is time. People wait to earn enough money, they await decisions on their asylum applications, or simply wait for an opportune moment to go further. The

question of the future becomes fraught as planning is not only difficult but often impossible due to the increasing uncertainty that is the result of migration policies and border securitisation. People are kept in constant circulation, so that they are always on the move, meaning that the kind of generational thinking usually attributed to migrants is not possible. Not being in a place long enough with enough stability to begin to make a life and a home means that many never settle down enough to have the children for whose welfare they were supposed to be acting. Here I discuss this condition of undocumented migration as a state of living in a persistent present,<sup>1</sup> in order to explore what political possibilities remain for those trapped within the border regime. What types of spatial imaginaries can account for this circulatory movement of people that is also an inhabitation of different temporalities? In my conversations with those caught between borders, their descriptions of their journeys often transform from quantifying them in monetary terms to accounting for their experiences temporally. This is partly because people find themselves in places they do not know, or are unable to locate themselves on a map, but I would argue that this is also an expression of a different kind of subjectivity, one that has lost its ability to fully situate itself in a world that has unfolded both too fast and too slow. But through this process they may have gained a different kind of ability, one that allows them to partially orientate themselves through temporal and embodied means. In the stories that I have had the privilege to hear, however curtailed these movements and alignments dependent on orientation might be, they do offer a challenge to the perceived absoluteness of state space and provide a template for a political refusal of globalised border regimes at the so-called planetary scale.

### **The persistent present of displacement**

It is now commonly understood that in many journeys of displacement, and especially those made by forced migrants, there is no direct route that can be traced from A to B (Ahsan Ullah, 2013; Hassan and Biörklund, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2018). Instead, the journey is emphasised as a social process that is an ongoing event in people's lives, as well as shaping the places through which they travel. There may be periods where people remain static, but that does not necessarily signal the end of a journey, which can also encompass settling in, finding a home, deciding to move on or being deported. At the same time, deportation regimes and militarised borders

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keep people moving; what Shahram Khosravi (2018) terms circulation: ‘a controlled movement of people sent back and forth between undocumentedness and deportability: between countries, between laws, between institutions.’ Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) made a similar argument in their analysis of the functioning of geopolitical borders as filtration devices that allow some to pass through and not others. Those who do manage to make it to the global North can only find precarious employment due to their lack of legal status and are easily exploited, meaning that securitisation regimes derive surplus value from the very conditions of precarity that people are forced into. As the Windrush scandal in the UK and the changing fate of the dreamers in the US has shown, the confluence of securitised borders and legal regimes produces illegality within racialised subjects.<sup>2</sup> In these situations, changes in legal and bureaucratic procedures can transform a legal citizen into an ‘illegal migrant’, when often it is the very processes themselves that are illegal. The production of illegality can therefore be thought of as an ongoing process or an emergent property that is produced as certain subjects encounter border regimes.

In thinking with the persistent present of migration, the way in which time is embodied within a particular life is important, especially because in many cases of deportation time is used as a mechanism of control. In some instances time can slow down completely while people wait months and years for a decision on their asylum application (Griffiths, 2014). For many, time becomes a bodily experience that weighs heavy in waiting. In other cases, it is accelerated with deportation decisions being made in days, or even hours, making the threat of having to leave always imminent. The time of deportation is therefore contradictory, both fast and slow, disrupting attempts at constructing an everyday life with plans for the immediate future or for the longer term.<sup>3</sup> Many live with the constant threat of being ‘sent back’, sometimes to a place they do not even know. Within the UK context, perhaps the best known example is of Afghan refugees who came to the country as minors but only have leave to remain as children, meaning that as soon as they turn eighteen they are to be sent back. Such a policy demands that both the person and their place of origin remain in stasis so that a decade or more later, they can simply go back. In the case of Afghan refugees this would require on the one hand that the place change completely in the sense that the war and violence they have fled ends, but on the other for it to remain recognisable. As Rob Nixon has argued in the context of

places transformed through environmental degradation, temporal dislocation should also be considered a form of displacement that might encompass ‘the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’ (2013: 19). In a similar vein, Georgina Ramsay has argued that the disruption of temporal rhythms are not only limited to the refugee experience but are also present in many lives where precarity causes displacement (2019).

Recently I visited one of the villages of north Punjab in Gujranwala division, Pakistan, where I have been researching and conducting interviews over the past two years. The agricultural area is well known for two reasons: as the place in the country where some of the best quality and highly priced basmati rice is produced, and being home to the majority of men who are attempting to make their way to Europe. The incongruous nature of these two facts is explained somewhat when driving to the area from the city of Lahore. It is being engulfed by the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation that has been creeping northwards from the city over the last decade. As villages lose their land to industrial workshops and small-scale highly polluting factories, and as climate change makes crop yields unpredictable, young men are being lured to make difficult journeys, to go *bahar*, a word that means ‘outside’ and usually denotes for them somewhere, anywhere, in what they consider to be the prosperous West.<sup>4</sup> The villages are nestled between small towns, half-built motorways and the debris of a fast and unregulated industrial expansion. Yet, despite this rapid urbanisation there is severe unemployment and what work there may be is highly precarious. Working conditions are cited as the main reason for migration by everyone I spoke to:

I decided to go because here we suffer so much, all of our labour is for others’ benefit. I thought if I went I could at least work for myself and sort my life out. That’s why I wanted to go... I wanted to go to Greece as I have some friends there.<sup>5</sup>

There are many stories of the violence that has engulfed the area in the recent past, stories of land disputes and conflict between villages around questions of *izzat* – a gender-based idea of family honour residing in a woman’s body and her social status. As the majority of the male population has either left, are planning to leave or have just returned, that is, they are caught in the circulation described earlier; women’s role

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and their position in society is transforming albeit slowly. Sarah Ahmed discusses this in the context of rural-urban migration in south Punjab, Pakistan, particularly to understand what she calls the ‘aftermath of male migration’ (Ahmed, 2020: 601). She writes of how despite the absence of their husbands, women are still subject to patriarchy, their movements controlled and surveilled by the wider family including older women. Yet, that does not mean that they are unable to find their own ways of negotiating and bargaining a better situation for themselves. The circulatory movements of migration in the villages of Gujranwala division mean that there is no ‘after’ as such, and that there is always a patriarchal presence within the wider familial context, but the loosening of what were strict gender roles due to migration has created some space. In the context of gender relations, such transformations are a double-edged sword, allowing women more freedom but at the same time contributing to an increase in honour-based violence. This erosion of a traditional way of life leads to a sense of what Hedda Askland calls ‘broken time’ (2018: 233). Askland is describing the situation in New South Wales, Australia, where displacements caused by mining have produced a temporality completely entwined with the before and after of the extractive and destructive processes of mining, where the landscape itself serves as a constant reminder of dispossession. There is something of this sense in these villages where industrialisation has indelibly marked the landscape through constructions, pollution and ever increasing mounds of litter abandoned by the roadsides.

In thinking with the temporalities of undocumented migration as they reveal themselves in the lives of migrants and in the landscape around Gujranwala, I am interested in how time is being mobilised as a biopolitical means of control. Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of ‘chrononormativity’ developed in conversation with queer lives shows how the privileged rhythms and temporal experiences of heterosexual, bourgeois life become for others a ‘mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts’ (Freeman, 2010: 3). The seasonal rhythm and slower pace of village life being replaced by another time tied to the demands of capitalist production, as well as to the circulatory rhythms of migration, are one such example of chrononormativity. The operations of the normative also emerge in language as the Punjabi lunar calendar and its associations to particular seasons and to farming loses out to the Gregorian calendar. At the same

time, the journeys of undocumented migration follow their own temporal and seasonal logic that emerges in relation to the restrictions and filtrations of borders, resulting in the smallest of distances sometimes taking days or weeks to cross, while at other times large distances can be travelled easily and quickly. In such moments of speed, those without documents are able to inhabit the contiguity of normative time and space that those of us with documents take for granted. Time is also encoded in the very systems of documentation that keep people moving; for example, the databases and their functions that are used to police borders through biometrics, passport controls and visa checks.<sup>6</sup> What does it mean to be entered into EuroDAC (European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database) as a category 2 person; that is, as someone who has been tagged as having entered the EU ‘in an irregular manner’? The records in the database include age, sex and the place where the biographical data was taken. As Tsianos and Kuster have pointed out, this is sparse and very basic information that is mobilised to categorise individuals as asylum seekers or as illegally entered foreigners and then is used to not only decide their future but also wider European migration and asylum policy. There is a fixity to the categorisations in such databases, so that it is almost impossible to move from the ‘illegal’ category to that of asylum seeker, although moving the other way is of course easier. The modes of identification, such as iris scans and fingerprints, are attached not to a living and embodied person but to their representation understood as biographical data; what Tsianos and Kuster describe as ‘the digital representation of a living and volatile body’s singularity via its fingerprints’ (2016b: 51). That is to say that the relation fixing the contents of the database to a now ‘identified’ person is extremely strong and endures over time, but we know that the individual bits of data are fluid. They inhabit a different bureaucratic temporality and operate within the spatiality of a network that allows data to be transferred across jurisdictions (legally as well as illegally, as we have seen from the revelations of Edward Snowden) and mobilised within different algorithmic processes.

How then can we move from the lived experiences of people making their way across inhospitable and securitised landscapes to the globalised scale of information exchange through databases that are used to police borders? What spatial and temporal imaginaries are required for such moves that also keep open the political possibility of resisting the border regime? Freeman’s reading of Derrida in *Spectres of*

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*Marx* (1994) gives a clue to how we can mobilise temporality as a form of ethics or a responsibility towards the other across historical time and across a present that is always already split ‘but split by prior violence and future possibility rather than simply by the nature of signification’ (Freeman, 2010: 9–10). What new modalities of living and being are produced through this splitting temporality and in relation to the violence of borders, and how do ordinary people affect the border regimes that they pass through and are not *only* subject to? What may be required is a mode of thinking resistance beyond opposition towards something that is much more mundane and non-spectacular (Povinelli, 2011; Weheliye, 2014).

### **Mapping geospatial totalities**

As the example of EuroDAC reveals, the use of digital technologies in border management relies on a bureaucratic and archival tendency that takes individual bits of data and assembles them anew to make arguments for the securitisation of borders. The temporal logic of data collection works in an historical timeline – who you are (included in the database as a reference number and algorithmically verified fingerprint data), where and when you were located. Once these discrete bits of information enter the database they become spatialised into the form of a network and subject to its calculative processes. Network science as a form of data management and economic model produces an accelerated time through promising to reveal hidden links and by claiming to produce real-time connections. To be able to map evolving relationships over time is the conceit of dynamism that underpins computational network analysis (Chun, 2019). Yet, the very nature of the connections that are made leads to fixed categories and subjectivities mapped as static identities. In this the categorisation processes of databases such as EuroDAC are no different from the imperial archival techniques of the past, and the use of computational technologies to continue the work of racialised categorisation is well documented (Azoulay, 2019; Eubanks, 2019; Noble, 2018). As a digital archive, albeit one that can be assembled and reassembled through an algorithmic logic, it contains within it the progressive temporality of coloniality even if it can be understood as accelerated through the logic of the network society and its variants (Castells, 1996). As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay reminds us in her reflection on institutional and state archives: ‘To engage with the histories and modalities of the archive from outside the

position it shapes for us as citizens or as scholars requires unlearning its latent progressive temporality' (Azoulay, 2019: 143). I would suggest that this unlearning is even more important in the context of digital archives whose techno-politics and reach often leave no outside as such. The stated function of EuroDAC to store information on potential asylum seekers might mean that most of us will never be entered into it, but the information from this database is used for visa decisions, at ports of entry into Europe and those states it shares data with. When we consider this extended network that EuroDAC participates in we can all potentially be included within its functions. This is what Azoulay identifies as 'one of the major rights violated by imperial sovereignties [...] the right not to become a perpetrator, that is, the right not to act as a privileged citizen who complies with or acquiesces to the differential sovereignty from which she or he benefits' (2019: 36).

Being included in citizenship registers means that we participate in the violation of others' rights but it also produces a sense that we now inhabit a world of totalities where the horizon beyond which things might remain uncertain or incalculable seems to have disappeared. How does this production of a horizonless world intersect with the spatiality of migration journeys and particularly in the way that they are controlled through geospatial techniques? A good example of this spatial control from the world of migration policy is the i-Map produced by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), which claims to map irregular migration not only through focusing on the start and end of journeys, as we often see in the arrows in journalistic maps of migration that are all inevitably pointing towards Europe. Instead, the focus shifts to the routes that people take, pin-pointing important nodes and places of passage that should be targeted in the quest to reduce migration towards Europe and North America. The i-Map is interactive and regularly updated to reflect the changing nature of the routes and, in its claim to provide real-time data to border control, the i-Map's expanding database produces a geospatial territory. Techniques of crowd-sourcing are used to collect and collate information from different sources in order to capture the shifting routes that people take to evade border control. The aesthetic of the map is relational, rather than using arrows to map flows in one direction only, the map has a networked logic that encompasses some of the circulations of the undocumented. As Casas-Cortés et al. have noted, the map attempts to capture a shifting subject in order to 'facilitate control and not

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movement' (2017: 13). The different thicknesses of lines used denote major and minor routes, as well as distinguishing between what they call 'migration hubs' and 'migration route cities'.<sup>7</sup> Thus the i-Map is mapping what it considers to be a fixed subject, the illegal migrant, but of course as people cross borders they are categorised differently – transit migrant, economic migrant, refugee, asylum seeker – where you are denotes who you are within the complex and highly troubling politics of international migration policy. At the same time, how a person embodies laws and illegality changes as they cross borders; for example, it is often experienced migrants that become agents, facilitating others' journeys. Thus, there is a slippage between the categories that people inhabit and the way in which they slip between legality and illegality through, for example, bureaucratic manipulations, as can be seen in the Windrush case. One of the reasons the i-Map is so successful is because its logic and its politics are aligned to those of network science. It is designed to provide states with a risk calculus, to predict where the next 'migrant flow' will occur, where to plug the leak in the system, where to fortify the walls. It demonstrates clearly why the underlying assumption of the fluidity of network behaviour is so problematic; fixed attributes are encoded within the network that are then used to calculate and feed into and reinforce those very same categories.

One question for a more emancipatory practice could be to ask how we encode databases without the risk calculus? What would a mapping that refused fixed categories look like? Here the question of data aggregation becomes important. Algorithmic functions are performed across different data sets and through a series of repeatable moves that organise, sort and process data. Whatever information about a person or a thing is stored in a database will not only be partial but also particular. This process of taking parts and not the whole and then aggregating is of course reductive; that is, many elements across different databases can be included within algorithmic functions, but none of these parts necessarily adds up to a whole that we might recognise as ourselves or as a thing imbued with meaning in the world. As Adrian Mackenzie states: 'No one belongs to a database as an element, but many aspects of contemporary lives are included as parts of databases' (2012: 343). All the idiosyncrasies and details of a particular life are not in the database as such, but the fact that you are Black, or you are brown, the fact that once you were caught shoplifting as a teenager, are there. It is this openness of databases to continue

aggregating, to continue to derive new relations from such simplified and decontextualized aggregations that is so dangerous. And it is found in the way that certain people get on ‘no fly’ lists, it is in the kill lists of the US, in the unlawful detention of people, and it does of course underlie the technology that is used at the border which makes judgements about who can or cannot enter and who can remain. As Louise Amoore states, these sifting functions are the ontology of algorithms: ‘In a real sense, an algorithm must necessarily discriminate to have any traction in the world. The very essence of algorithms is that they afford greater degrees of recognition and value to some features of a scene than they do to others’ (Amoore, 2020: 8).

### **The horizon as form of colonial navigation**

New spatial and visual regimes are being produced as algorithmic functions become embedded within geospatial technologies, such as the manipulation of data in satellite remote sensing or the increased use of drone and radar surveillance technologies. Platform visibility seems to have exploded notions of perspective and embodied forms of knowing that might be the usual mode of navigating the visual and the spatial as lived and perceived. Instead, the challenge posed is similar to what Harun Farocki identified as that which computer animation presented to film. As Doreen Mende (2017) explains, Farocki thought that the relationships between space and time usually made by the filmmaker through techniques of montage were increasingly being produced by the viewer (or the user) themselves as they navigated through and across platforms. Yet, this navigation occurs in a totalising world that resists any outside meaning beyond the closed and often obscure circuits produced through the exchange and analysis of data across platforms. Recent debates have discussed what a machine or a platform sees (as opposed to what it makes visible) from Trevor Paglen’s (2014) exploration of machine vision that does not produce images that can be seen by what he refers to as ‘meat-eyes’ to the question of how visibility transforms in relation to algorithmic production. Here the notion of ‘image ensembles’ emerging across hardware, software and various external inputs produces a form of seeing that according to Adrian Mackenzie and Anna Munster ‘create[s] new opacities that even the most advanced seeing-devices – the machine learning-based predictive models used to organize and order image flows – cannot dispel’

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(MacKenzie and Munster, 2019: 6). This opacity sits uncomfortably next to the claim that geospatial technologies make visible the spatiality of migration journeys, as we have seen in the discussion of the i-Map.<sup>8</sup> It points to the fact that the pertinent political question may not be what we see but how we see and what this does to our ability to act. If we take Farocki's insight that navigation is a key mode through which we can critically engage with new forms of the visual, which seems to still hold true for the image ensembles described above, then the question of what forms of navigation through opacity are being deployed in border control seems to be crucial, knowing also that opacity as described by Édouard Glissant (1997) is in certain contexts for certain people a mode of survival.

If we consider the traditional practice of navigation in the context of seafaring it requires an external datum provided by the horizon or the stars, and in contemporary times is provided by the ping of our phones to the satellites orbiting overhead. These form a relation to a known object from which a position can be triangulated and then pinpointed on an already existing map. Hito Steyerl (2011) has written on how linear perspective depends on a stable horizon, producing a calculable and navigable space that has of course been central to colonial expansion. At the same time, it positions the viewer opposite the vanishing point and therefore in a commanding position, but one that is also subject to the scientific regime of vision encapsulated within linear perspective. Referring to Turner's 1840 painting, *The Slave Ship*, Steyerl describes how the scene shows the moment when the slaves were thrown overboard upon the captain's realisation that they were only insured as cargo lost at sea, and not as people who might fall ill and die. It is a painting where the horizon has not yet disappeared but has become less stable through being duplicated and scattered. Steyerl writes:

At the sight of the effects of colonialism and slavery, linear perspective – the central viewpoint, the position of mastery, control, and subjecthood – is abandoned and starts tumbling and tilting, taking with it the idea of space and time as systematic constructions (Steyerl, 2011: 6).

This description of the loss of horizon in many ways corresponds with the persistent present described by undocumented migrants, where normative ideas of linear time and space become untenable. Just as the sextant and the Mercator projection were

key instruments in the navigation of a world understood through the colonial logics of the horizon, we need an understanding of the instruments and maps being used to navigate and to continue the colonising logic within a horizonless world.<sup>9</sup>

The metaphor of the horizon is a constitutive trope in the production of the imperial or chrononormative temporalities described earlier. Underlined by notions of progress and modernity, they require the deviant to be brought into the fold of liberal spatio-temporalities. This imaginary of the horizon also appears in Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) definition of modernity as the gap between a 'horizon of expectation' and the 'space of experience'. It is that quintessential feeling of modernity described by many commentators of a radically different future that seems to have already arrived and so is not part of a society's experience, and, concurrently, having already arrived is no longer something to be anticipated. It is certainly a feeling alluded to by many inhabitants of the villages I visited in relation to the rapid transformations that have occurred within their lifetimes as traditional ways of life have been made untenable. And so people leave lives that are not always as abject as we might think they should be to countenance the types of migration journeys being made. This leads to a certain incredulity in the wealthy and bureaucratic classes in places like Pakistan who try to make sense of *why* people leave. As a high-level official in the FIA (Federal Investigation Agency) stated, 'Gujranwala division [in north Punjab] is an industrial zone [...] so why are these kids going? There isn't extreme poverty or unemployment there.'<sup>10</sup> Perhaps their motives can be explained through following Frantz Fanon, as Ian Baucom does in writing that 'a nascent intelligentsia trained by colonial ideology and the colonial educational system' will 'mistake the colour line for the border (the horizon) of modernity' (Baucom, 2006: 70; Fanon, 1963). The FIA official trained by IOM (International Organisation for Migration) and UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) failed to apprehend the temporal violence encapsulated in the logic of the horizon and the forms of displacement without moving that people from the area were already subject to. But my own location in the UK also makes it achingly obvious to me that the notion of the 'prosperous West' or 'the Europe of opportunities' that so many of the interviewees mentioned cannot exist for them. I could go as far as to say that the would-be migrants were mistaken, not understanding that our common neoliberal future is not their future, that the promise of shiny skyscrapers is also their world of

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precarious labour and the reality of racialised carceral capitalism (Wang, 2018). Yet, there is something more going on here. Fanon writing from the perspective of newly independent colonial states was surveying a very different world from the one we inhabit now. While it is true that still there are elites in the so-called postcolonial world who refuse to acknowledge that ‘we’ can never have ‘this’ for all the reasons of skewed economics, centuries-old debt and the fact of racialisation, the young men that I spoke to know all of this already. Whether here (Pakistan) or there (anywhere in the West), it is after all their experience. Baucom wrote: ‘Modernity is not the gleam. It is the view from the township’ (2006: 74). So, what is it that these young men see, what does the view look like from a small village somewhere in Punjab? And does it allow us to think navigation differently from the colonial logics of the horizon or the totalising worlds of the geospatial?

### **Navigation versus orientation**

Thinking again with the view from Punjab, in certain villages nearly all the older men have attempted the journey to Europe at one time or another with varying degrees of success. Many of these same men do *aggenty* – that is they are agents who facilitate others’ journeys. I met a group who were all part of the same extended farming family in a village surrounded by a high mud wall, which I was told was due to the violence between villages. We spoke in a room full of smoke, in the *baithak* or sitting room that is always at the edge of a house, so that people can come and go without having the inner workings of the household revealed to them. About ten men sat around laughing and joking, falling silent and shy at the sight of a woman entering their world, but after a while everyone relaxed enough to discuss the topic at hand. I heard stories of the violence and exploitation that many of them had to endure, a violence that they often attributed to an agent who took their money, did not inform them properly of what was to befall them, and then was absent when they needed help. To me this seemed strange, that in the same extended family there were agents and there were migrants, families were sending their young children on these harrowing journeys and everyone was sitting there ignoring the fact that they were directly implicated in the violence that others have had to endure. There is an unwritten rule that you do not send anyone from your own village but there seemed to be a disavowal at the heart of these discussions that to me as an outsider was

striking. The systemic violence of militarised borders and their differential inclusions has created a global class of precarious migrants who are both traumatised by the violence and abjection that they have had to endure but have at the same time, paraphrasing Azoulay (2019), lost the right not to become perpetrators. Having spent months and years caught within the carceral regime of borders or in attempting to find a way into Europe, the majority are no longer capable of doing the work they might have done as farmers or labourers. Instead they mobilise their knowledge of the routes they have taken and the language skills they have picked up along the way to make ends meet through *agenty*. But they pay a high price for this work, which does not allow them to leave behind the violence of borders and ensures that they become complicit in circulating that violence within their own communities. It seems that the rivalries related to the '*agenty* business' have perpetuated and deepened the already existing animosities between villages, particularly related to the fraught question of *izzat*.

One man in particular who had recently returned from Greece possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the various bureaucratic, biometric and data collection processes implemented by the EU at its external borders. He had spent many months in Lesbos and then in Athens volunteering for an NGO. It was also how he had managed to come back, through IOM's so-called voluntary return scheme. While he might not have described the workings of these databases, such as EuroDAC that he is now a part of, in the terms that I have used – calculation and aggregation – he was very aware of their function in creating the complexity of the world that he would have to navigate should he decide to return – because the question of return is always open in the persistent present that he inhabits. But he was also confident in his own capacity to find a way through by mobilising the opacity that is the gift a racialised world offers to those who are seen as an undifferentiated mass (Glissant, 1997). As I have been told on a number of occasions, 'you must always try not to give your fingerprints or your eye prints'.<sup>11</sup> Combined with desperate tactics such as burning your own fingerprints, return is always possible so long as the network of relations built during these difficult journeys is kept alive. Azoulay on archives as institutions writes that they are 'a regime of coordinated thresholds—what I have called imperial shutters—that underwrite the shared world' (Azoulay, 2019: 91). She suggests that a strategy for working against the imperialism of archives is to keep the

shutters open. Those who have chosen *agency* as their line of work are contributing towards keeping the shutters open even as the only way they can do this is through remaining within the persistent temporality of borders and of perpetuating their violence.

Their work contributes to a network of practices that has the potential to become emancipatory through a collective project of unlearning the chrononormativity of borders and the spatialities embedded within computational navigation. It is a project that could be understood through notions of orientation over navigation, which, rather than requiring an external datum, is related to how the sharing of time and space affects bodies and objects. Here I am thinking with Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation, where she writes that bodies and objects are affected by the orientations they take towards each other through sharing space, and that these orientations depend on certain tendencies and social norms. Ahmed is writing about queer lives, but her insight into how orientations act, both as 'straightening devices' as well as providing 'fleeting moments' where something slips and other inhabitations are possible, is, I think, also applicable to the lives I am discussing (Ahmed, 2006: 563 & 565). This slippage, or a moment of orientation with potentiality in a life full of disorientation, is the small possibility that is left of finding new directions within a totalising horizonless world. The notion of orientation as a practice and methodology for working with the chronopolitics of migration has emerged from the experiences of undocumented migrants. Their inhabitation of a persistent present can also be considered a refusal of the normative concept of linear time embodied in notions of progress and modernity. In thinking with the migrant experience the question of temporality is always already entwined with the spatiality of border regimes that are increasingly operating within an algorithmic logic. Their chronopolitics offers a challenge to the perceived absoluteness of state space and provides a template for a political refusal of globalised border regimes.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the special issue editors as well as the two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on the draft. The essay has emerged out of a wider research project, Topological Atlas, which has received funding from the European Research

Council (ERC) under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no: 758529).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed this term from Patricia Reed (2019) although I think she was using it a little differently. The feeling of being stuck in place has of course been described by many authors for different situations, including those of migration. Navaro-Yashin (2016) and Rabinowitz (2001) have described something similar but in the context of a mostly spatial enclosure caused by conflict, whereas Hage (2009) has described an existential feeling of being stuck, what he refers to as

- ‘stuckness’. My use of the phrase ‘persistent present’ attempts to emphasise the temporal over the spatial; even when there is mobility, the feeling of being stuck within a particular time remains.
- <sup>2</sup> The Windrush scandal concerned people from mostly Caribbean backgrounds who were wrongly detained and deported by the UK Home Office. Many of these were British subjects that arrived in the UK as citizens before the Immigration Act of 1971 that restricted the citizenship rights of those from the former colonies. For more information see El-Enany, 2019; *Wikipedia*, 2019b. The Dreamers refers to undocumented migrants within the US that arrived as children. They were provided temporary rights under the Obama administration but their fate has become a political bargaining tool under the Trump administration. For more information see Walters, 2017; *Wikipedia*, 2019a.
- <sup>3</sup> Griffiths identifies ‘four experiential temporalities’, including ‘sticky time’, ‘suspended time’, ‘frenzied time’ and ‘temporal ruptures’ that reveal the contradictions of the way time is experienced in detention and deportation (2014: 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> One man in his late-twenties described his reasons as: ‘I was interested in a better life and a better income in Europe. I thought there would be a hundred new opportunities there and I could make something of myself.’ From an interview conducted by the author in Punjab in 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> Extract from an interview conducted by the author in Punjab in 2020 with a man in his mid-twenties who had recently returned. He did not make it to Europe but was arrested in Turkey and taken to a camp to be deported. He was not given an opportunity to apply for asylum or a visa but was transported back to Iran by road and handed over to the Iranian authorities who then sent him back to Pakistan by road.
- <sup>6</sup> EuroDAC, the Schengen Information System (SIS II) and the Visa Information System (VIS) (Tsianos and Kuster, 2016a).
- <sup>7</sup> The map used to be available to view freely, but since the controversy surrounding it, the website now requires a password: <http://www.imap-migration.org/index.php?id=4>. For a detailed account of the i-Map and its complications, and a conceptual distinction between routes and trajectories, see Casas-Cortés et al., 2017. A graphic derived from the interactive i-Map can be viewed on the Reuters website (*Reuters*, 2016).
- <sup>8</sup> In the rapidly evolving world of border securitization, the i-Map is now an old technology. Instead, projects like the infamous i-BorderCTRL, an EU-funded project for automated border security, envisages the use of facial recognition technologies as a form of lie detection, through analysing micro facial movements (Crampton, 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> A similar point is made by Mende in her discussion of Farocki’s later films where she describes how, for Farocki, the world of computer animations posed a challenge to the usual technique of montage in filmmaking that produced a timeline and a filmic narrative. She writes: ‘If montage is the core formal device for concatenating space and time into a continuous causal sequence, then for Farocki, the computer-animated, navigable images that constitute the twenty-first century’s “ruling class of images” call for new tools of analysis’ (Mende, 2019: 1).
- <sup>10</sup> Quote from an interview conducted by the author in Lahore in 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> Quote from an interview conducted by the author in the Gujranwala area, Punjab in 2020.

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