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HAUNTING THE BORDER:
Passages, Horizons and Memories of Disappearance in Morocco

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Tutti dovrebbero avere una storia
Anche piccola, anche breve,
ma da loro pensata e vissuta, anche se non fisicamente.
Perché le storie fanno sempre stare bene,
anche se parlano di cose brutte.
L'importante è raccontare.
Lorenzo Vecchio

لو كنت نغمّض عينيّا
و تاخذني الأحلام من يديّا
و نعلّي و نحلق في سماء جديدة
، و ننسى الوجايع
لو كنت نسافر في خيالي
نزرع و نبني قصور ليالي
.. يكبر فيها الحب و آمالي و نمحي الآلام

دنيا ترى فيها ملامح ناس
قوسها الضلم و البؤس و القهر
، من واقع عاسر يعبث بكلّ ما نبنيه
دنيا علت فيها أسوار طغيان
سحق فينا أحلاما أحلام
و عمّ الظلام و الأنانيّة في كل القلوب
Holm, Emel Mathblouthi

إلى غزة

Index

PROLOGUE.....	6
Introduction.....	9
Why a Border Hauntology	13
Building the Theoretical Framework: Toward a Border Hauntology.....	15
Inhabiting the Field: Methods, Movement, and Reflexivity	37
Contexts: Migration, Civil Society, and Disappearance in Morocco.....	59
Disappearing While Black: An Ethnography of Border Disappearances and Memory Practices among Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco	81
Intimacies and Contestation at the Moroccan Border: Families of Missing Migrants Between Intimate and Political Haunting.....	112
Returning Bodies: On Restitution and Contested Truth for Border Disappearances	147
Conclusions.....	165
References	166; 185
APPENDIX I. Organizations Involved in the Research.....	186

Notes

For security reasons, most individuals, organisations, and associations mentioned in this research have been anonymised or omitted. Only some of the names used for family members and missing persons correspond to real names, in accordance with the indications provided by the interlocutors themselves.

PROLOGUE

In September 2025 I leave for Zagreb. I organise this trip after a fieldwork conducted in Morocco on the issue of deaths and disappearances at the border. It is Yasser who brings me here: following his route, I arrive in the country where his body was found and buried before being repatriated. I am here at invitation of Yasser's father, Nouredine, who, five years after his son's death, has set out to travel through the places that took him away and from which his own life has been upended. He told me that the trip was born from a need to know the places inhabited by his son's death. He wanted to meet the solidarity actors who over the years had supported him in the repatriation of the body and in his mobilisations. That journey was affective and political at once: visiting the place where his son's body was found – wedged against the bank of a river – would have been the starting point of a walking path through the Balkans, to retrace Yasser's route, to recover his footprints and "find out what really happened." How Yasser died – his family insists – has never been clarified, nor has any accountability been established. He told me he intended the journey to be shared with others – artists, researchers, journalists – to make Yasser's story, and his own, public. I recognised the significance of this request: it was not only a demand for visibility, but an insistence that responsibility for this struggle is shared – that his son's death is a matter that concerns everyone, not a private one.

I arrive in Zagreb, but Nouredine is not there: his visa has been denied. Yet the documentation was complete, all the required criteria met: he had two invitation letters from formally registered organisations; a letter of hospitality for accommodation; a guarantee signed by a Croatian citizen; the required financial means. "If he had been any other Moroccan," Marijana, who had supported him through the application, tells me, "they would have given him the visa. But not him, because he is Yasser's father." Nouredine cannot enter Croatia because he is the father of a Moroccan who died at the border.

Yasser's story is an ongoing story, traversed by successive degrees of absence – now that of the father from the places that were his – and of persistence. In these pages I follow his journey through to autumn 2025, without the possibility of bringing it to a close, waiting to watch it persevere. The visa denial is an attempt at interruption – one more border – imposed on a story of death that has a public life and that refuses to die; a story whose persistence endures as a demand for truth and justice in the face of border violence. A story that begins where borders begin, in the body of a young Moroccan who wanted to move but could not, and whose repression at the frontier set in motion a series of movements – intimate, social, political – that insistently claim his presence. A story that speaks not only of absence and presence but reveals that what lies in between is capable of unsettling the ontology that produces violence and calling it into question.

This thesis makes space for stories of disappearance and death at the border. It seeks to open onto the dynamics of absence and presence, of interruption and reconfiguration, of collectivisation and questioning that run through the experience of border violence, and ground for its contestation. It seeks to trace the threads traversing stories of violent absence, focusing on the absence itself and in what it builds, relating with the deep bond between the living who bear it and the disappeared who remain. The story of Yasser and his family is one of these, entangled with others – the people who, for decades, have continued to die and disappear at the borders of the world.

Here, some of these stories are brought into relation with one another. Among them, the story of Ahmed, also found dead in Croatia; that of Daniel, who disappeared in Ceuta; the deaths and

disappearances of the Melilla massacre. These are interwoven with the story of Abdelkarim, presumed to have drowned off Sfax, and with the disappearances of Said in Serbia and Hamed along the Balkan route. Then there are Hadi and Yousef, who disappeared on the sea route toward Cádiz; the group of the disappeared from Attaouia; the disappearance of Rachid; and that of Ousama and his companions disappeared from Sfax.

Each of them carries different experiences that begin at the border and have not yet ended, with their afterlives continuing to work through the lives of the living. Following them, family members, travelling companions, and solidarity actors have mobilised through re-tracing practices, alternative forms of memory and kinship, and protests. Their struggles cross Morocco, Sudan, Guinea-Conakry, multiple European and African borders, expanding to involve people, places, and actors now called to account for these absences.

Between presence and absence, relational spaces are opened where bonds, practices and imaginaries are reinvented, building frames that name the experience of violence and oppression. They contest the social orders and structural relations that organise the world, challenging the violent and racialised logics through which borders are enacted and bodies subjected to repression. In this experience, the discourse on death and disappearance at the border is re-policed, traversed by constant tensions between the forces of neutralisation and the agency to claim recognition. As in Nouredine experience: there is the denial of a visa on one side, on the other his insistence on bearing witness.

Persisting in different registers, stories of disappearance articulate an uncertain wandering at and beyond the border, which does not resolve the absence but inhabits living bodies – bodies that drift, that cannot find their footing, demanding justice for their loved ones. These stories ask us to sit with interruption and suspension, to dwell in the space of removal. They compel us to relate to what is missing, leaving us with an absence that is disturbing precisely because it is produced by a denial, and therefore necessarily violent. These stories speak of border violence, but not only. Through the disappearance of bodies, they compel us to interrogate the broader structures of the world we inhabit: unsettling epistemic frameworks and categories, they expose the fractures in the system we live within, speaking of oppression, injustice, truth, and justice.

Here, the intention is to read together heterogeneous stories that, departing from particular trajectories, find common ground in a shared condition of injustice and oppression and in the articulation of a common need for truth and justice. The intention is to see how they converge, in different ways, in a posture of contestation toward the border and advance, from singular positions, a collective movement of demands for accountability. In this framework, disappearance – and its forms of persistence and re-appearance – becomes the point of departure for tracing a process that crosses the border and exceeds it, contesting its logic, and opening toward new forms of relation, solidarity, and collective imagination. To speak of disappearance, in this frame, is ultimately to speak of the presence – the life – that is produced around it.

If this thesis attends, on one hand, to how disappearance is prepared and produced at the border – as a mechanism of bodily governance and a dynamic of oppression – the heart of the work is elsewhere: in what disappearance generates in terms of resistant practices, alternative ways of knowing, interpreting, and re-imagining the world, and, finally, acting on it.

This work is born from the desire to return a research journey that began in Morocco with the intention of studying borders and solidarity, and that came to traverse places, relationships, and

processes shaped by absence and violence, as well as by aspirations. To *let the stories of disappearance speak* – through their traces, what they have set in motion and those who carry them – is the ambition that underlies this text.

The research sought to put ethnographic stories, academic literature, and broader epistemic and political frameworks into dialogue. The movement it follows – across Morocco, Italy, and Croatia – is guided by stories of death and disappearance, and shaped by encounters and relationships that demanded a constant unsettling of languages, interpretive frameworks, and assumptions; they set its rhythms and repeatedly imposed the necessity of shifting posture, position, and register. The epistemic process was continuously pushed by the need to deconstruct, construct, and deconstruct again – by the difficulty of tracing any analytical contours around absence, and indeterminacy, while the voices of the disappeared, and of the living, near and far from the border, accumulated and overlapped. This is what stories of violent absence do: they haunt.

This work is, ultimately, an effort to give back something of my doctoral research experience, at the end deeply laden with questions and frustration. It is the product of a struggle with the impulse to impose order, to locate a thread, to connect, to render the argument coherent – with the attempt to make this fieldwork, and the stories that run through it, narratable. Sociology does not offer much help here, nor does the academy more broadly, with its structuring tendency to explain things in the ways they are generally held to be explicable. As I reassemble the architecture of this thesis, I fear I have at times succumbed to the need to render heterogeneous stories coherent – writing as though they speak to one another, rather than alongside one another. What remains, in the end, is the violence of suspension, in a context where injustice itself is played out in the very impossibility of closure and definition, and in its relentless ongoingness.

To move within this field meant inhabiting the violence of absence, haunted intimacies, the urgent need for recognition. It has been a non-linear, at times painful relational process, marked by a recurring need to withdraw and re-engage, in order to make the relationships with loss and injustice less unbearable, and to remain inside what has been, before anything else, a profound human experience. In this experience, it is this relational space – built with the living and, through them, with the disappeared – the instrument for inhabiting the violence of disappearance and death, for dwelling within its ambiguity and uncertainty, and for sustaining the possibility of its undoing. This thesis, ultimately, takes its bearing from the resistant, imaginative, and transformative force of those who remain. It is from this relational and profoundly unsettled position that any act of restitution must depart.

Introduction

This work situates itself within disappearance studies (Baser et al., 2025; Edkins, 2011; Zia, 2019; Gatti, 2011; Huttunen and Perl, 2023) and brings a hauntological approach (Gordon, 1997; Auchter, 2014) to bear on border and migration studies (Corrubias et al., 2023; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2013). While looking at how violent absence is produced and inhabited at the border and beyond, the central concern is to attend to what it generates, in terms of political discourses, practices, relations, and imaginaries. It draws on fieldwork research conducted within the ERC Solroutes project in Morocco, as a borderland site from which to observe the dynamics between borders, movements, and the social worlds shaped by disappearance and death.

The intention is to approach the border as a space shaped by the violence it enacts, within which it becomes sedimented across everyday life, bodies, and the relations binding them, and in which the very experience of inhabiting this violence simultaneously opens onto other ways of relating, knowing, and acting. The hauntological lens allows diverse forms of absence and dispossession at the border to be brought into relation with one another, thereby accounting for its depth and density, as well as for the practices through which it is inhabited, contested, and transformed.

In this work, absence surfaces through stories of missing but also of recovered bodies: death and disappearance overlap, blur, and mutually unsettle one another¹, giving shape to conditions bound together by the injustice of absence and by an unresolved need of truth. Rather than attempting to demarcate the boundaries between them, death and disappearance are narrated here alongside one another not to equate them, but to account for what they produce: unresolved losses, absences that cannot take their leave, demands for truth and justice haunting the present, reverberating through the past, and casting their shadow over the future. The ethnographic narratives gathered in this work recount diverse experiences of disappearance and varying degrees of absence: the absence of the person, of the body, of truth, of justice.

Attending to absence as a space of experience of violence but also of possibility, the six chapters of the thesis seek to accompany the reader through the ethnographic experience and to draw out the theoretical reflections traversing it. While proposing to *inhabit absence* as an epistemic posture from which to engage with stories of death and disappearance, the first chapter elaborates a *border hauntology* as its theoretical framework. Through the lens of *haunting*, the aim is to approach the absence produced at the border as a field of political inquiry, attending, on one hand, to the social and political processes producing it, and on the other, to the practices and relations through which contestation is grounded. The second chapter presents the methodological design of the research, introducing the ethnographic field in Morocco, the interlocutors, the methods employed, and the epistemological reflections informing them. The third provides the contextual foundations of the analysis, situating the study within Morocco as a space of borders and mobility, examining the relationship between central power and practices of contestation, and tracing the genealogy of disappearance within a broader national historical, political, and social trajectory.

Having situated the ethnographic field, the subsequent chapters move toward the stories and reflections that inhabit and shape it. Each ethnographic chapter takes the experience of disappearance

¹ The boundary between death and disappearance is not stable in the field: a missing person may be presumed dead, a recovered body may remain unidentified for years, and the classification of a case may shift depending on contexts. Throughout this work, the two experiences are at times distinguished – where their specific contours matter analytically – and at times allowed to overlap, following the indistinction characterising them. This tension is not resolved but inhabited, as a productive site from which to observe what violent absence generates in the lives of those who bear it.

and death at the border as its central analytical concern, centring the testimony and everyday practice of actors differentially positioned in relation to it: people on the move, family members, solidarity actors, the bodies themselves. The intention is to trace a trajectory that moves from the intimate register of lived experience toward its socialised and collective dimensions, attending to how absence itself becomes generative, producing new political relations, practices of memory, and claims to justice articulated from below. In this passage, such practices of visibility and memory-work come to question border governance, within the construction of a politicised discourse around borders, violence, and justice.

The fourth chapter examines disappearances and memory practices among sub-Saharan people on the move in Morocco, taking as its starting point disappearance as a dynamic of control and repression of racialised bodies at the border. The chapter draws on research conducted with sub-Saharan people in transit through Morocco under conditions of *unauthorised mobility*², and takes Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2004; Freire, 1970) as both a methodological and analytical lens. Through it, the chapter explores how people on the move inhabit, resist and negotiate the condition of *disappeability* (Laakkonen, 2022) as both an individual and shared experience, inscribed and signified also through the memory of travel companions lost at the border. The memory of those no longer present is understood as a practice through which the community confronts its own exposure to disappearance and transforms it into an act of epistemic resistance.

Within an experience in which the possibility of disappearing shapes the movement as such, this possibility is confronted, individually and collectively, through an active aspiration to resist it and to come to terms with it. If disappearance is configured, within this framework, as a practice of oppression, the oppressed body responds by engaging with its own in/visibility, enacting practices of negotiation and subversion aimed at reclaiming recognition, both for itself and for the movement as a whole.

The fifth chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Morocco with families of Moroccan people who disappeared or died at the border, analysing how the experience of border disappearance restructures the intimate, epistemic, and political lives of those who remain. The chapter traces the movement through which the private need to know is transformed into a public demand for truth, unfolding across three intertwined registers. The first examines how unresolved absence reshapes family members' relationship with the self and the world, producing disturbed intimacies insistently demanding resolution. The second explores the epistemic dimensions of disappearance, observing how families navigate regimes of forced unknowability, epistemic violence and injustice, developing practices of alternative knowledge and epistemic resistance. The third traces how this haunting experience crosses domestic thresholds, becoming legible as a political demand through practices of visibility-making within the Moroccan public sphere. In this passage, haunted intimacies are mobilised

² The term *unauthorised migration* is adopted here in preference to alternatives such as *irregular* or *undocumented*, which remain anchored to a governmental register framing mobility primarily through the lens of administrative compliance. The very notion of authorisation presupposes a state apparatus empowered to grant or deny the right to move; the choice of this term is therefore intended to foreground the agency of people on the move: to look at unauthorised migration as a phenomenon that emerges through the relation between migratory forces and the forces that render these 'illegal' or irregular (Squire, 2017), and to attend to the "agency used to negotiate mobility" as the intersection between "migrant agency and sovereign power" (Mainwaring, 2016: 5-6, in Squire, 2017: 1). In this framework, crossing without authorisation is understood as a deliberate act of refusal of the borders that racialised regimes of mobility impose on certain bodies (Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). This dimension of unauthorised movement as a form of political and existential agency will be developed further in the course of the work.

toward forms of public haunting, through which families restore their loved ones to the space of visibility in pursuit of an obstinate demand for truth and justice.

Finally, the sixth chapter turns to the demand for truth and justice in the face of border violence, and to what it would take, concretely, to answer it. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Morocco and Croatia, it takes as its analytical entry point two ethnographic cases of short-term disappearance subsequently resolved through the recovery of the body, to trace how the returning corpses impact on and shape the demand for truth, opening new claims, activating new actors, and unsettling – rather than resolving – the fractures produced by disappearance. Within this framework, restitution emerges as a complex, relational, and political demand, one that deeply confronts the very system of power that produced the disappearance.

In this trajectory, which runs from the lived experience of the possibility of disappearing at the border, and of those who remain, to the political demand for justice and restitution, the intention is to bring together diverse ethnographic instances of haunting, testifying to how border violence is carried, inherited, and passed on across bodies, kinship ties, and social worlds. In this propagation, we observe how relations of solidarity, practices of mourning and memory, and forms of political imagination take shape from below, as a collective practice of world-making that directly confronts the political systems producing disappearance.

A Note on Numbers

My research does not deal in large numbers. It is built on individual stories – some tens of them – that render at once a singular and collective experience: that of those who die and disappear at European borders, and of those who, on the other side, are left to reckon with that violence. Yet it seems important, in situating this research, to provide some quantitative coordinates for the phenomenon I aim to deal with.

Establishing the numerical scale of this experience matters in constructing a discourse of denunciation, since every name – Abdelkarim, Said, Yousef – carries with it the implicit question of how many disappear without leaving us any trace. To count the dead is a political act insofar as it restores recognition to lives lost at the border and establishes the scope of the violence enacted by and within international regimes of movement. At the same time, any attempt to quantify border deaths and disappearances is not without tension. This concerns, in the first instance, what renders a death or disappearance countable (Tazzioli, 2015) – on what basis, that is, an event is classified as a border death or disappearance – and, in the second, the methodological challenges involved in how counting should be conducted. Available estimates diverge for both technical and political reasons: every counting practice performs a specific version of reality, determining who is to be considered a victim (Stierl, 2025; Heller and Pécoud, 2018).

One institutional attempt to quantify border deaths globally is the IOM's Missing Migrants Project, which records – from 2014 to April 2026 – 82,942 people dead or disappeared at borders, of whom 34,766 were never recovered. The MMP, however, excludes from its count the deaths of people on the move under direct state control, for instance in detention facilities, during deportations or forced returns. The question of whether these should or not constitute border deaths speaks to the political work performed by the categories through which border violence is made legible, and to what such categories render invisible (Heller and Pécoud, 2018).

With specific regard to European borders, several civil society initiatives adopt a broader definition, encompassing all deaths and disappearances directly or indirectly attributable to migration policies, and

drawing on press monitoring and networks of ground-level organisations. UNITED Against Refugee Deaths counts at least 66,519 such deaths between 1993 and June 2025; the Fortress Europe project recorded at least 27,382 between 1988 and 2016, when monitoring ceased. These figures include deaths in detention, during expulsions, from police violence, and from lack of medical assistance (Heller and Pécoud, 2018). The Deaths at the Borders Database of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam represents a different approach, seeking to produce verifiable data from official sources: drawing exclusively on death certificates extracted from 563 civil registry offices in Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, and Gibraltar, it certifies 3,188 deaths between 1990 and 2013. The significantly lower figure reflects the method's intrinsic limitation, counting only those deaths for which an institutional trace exists (Last et al., 2017), while speaking of the broader invisibility of border deaths within institutional recording systems, where the absence of documentation is itself a measure of structural unaccountability.

With respect to the Western Euro-African border specifically, the NGO Caminando Fronteras – which collects data through direct testimonies, contacts with vessels in distress, and networks of family members – reports at least 33,466 victims between 2015 and 2025, with a strongly increasing trend: in 2024 alone, the deadliest year the organisation has ever recorded, more than 10,400 deaths and disappearances were documented, at an average of 30 per day. Along the Balkan route, the grassroots initiative 4D Database documents at least 857 people deceased or disappeared between 1973 and 5 June 2026, representing a ground-level attempts to systematically track border deaths along this corridor.

The methodological and structural gaps in these counts speak to the difficulty of tracing the contours – or even the rough scale – of the effects of border militarisation and securitisation, and suggest that what escapes enumeration is exponentially greater than what is captured within it.

In the course of my fieldwork in Morocco, I repeatedly confronted the absence of data, in a context of authoritarian control over the production of knowledge on sensitive issues such as migration. To date, on the part of civil society there are efforts to document the deaths and disappearances produced by the border system in Morocco, which are nonetheless neither public nor externally accessible, despite being shared with the authorities. That the data exist but do not circulate freely is itself a datum: it testifies to how the production of knowledge about border violence constitutes a contested terrain, in which the visibility – or invisibility – of that violence and of what it produces is the outcome of dynamics of control and power.

Why a Border Hauntology

In January 2026, Cyclone Harry strikes the southern Mediterranean, moving through Tunisia, Algeria, and Malta before reaching Sicily, Calabria, Sardinia, and the south of Spain. In southern Italy, the violence of its impact leaves seafronts and infrastructure devastated, met with collective praise for the security measures that are credited with preventing casualties. In those same days, NGOs report shipwrecks amid the swelling waves of the Mediterranean, and in the weeks that follow, the sea begins to return bodies along the coastlines. One by one: the migrant bodies swallowed by Harry's fury.

Cyclone Harry arrives while I am in Palermo – among the less severely affected parts of the island – writing about deaths and disappearances at the border. It arrives while I am asking myself what it means to speak of disappearance and haunting, of justice for border violence, and it confronts me with the brazen violence of the contemporary regime we inhabit: a nation that celebrates the absence of casualties in an environmental catastrophe, while hundreds of bodies remain dispersed at sea and dozens continue to wash ashore – weeks later – along its coastlines.

As I reflect on this, I find myself thinking that the point of proposing a border hauntology is precisely to dwell on the bodies that return, and to let us to be disturbed by them. From the white side of the sea, it means placing the removed body at the centre – in this case, the migrant body – and asking what that removal tells us about the order of the world we inhabit. It means inhabiting the tension that arises between a communal feeling, in its own way cohesive, and something beating against it from the outside, pressing it to see how profoundly unjust it is at its very foundations. The ghost is a symptom of something missing, Gordon (1997) writes, and it compels us to face the present we are moving through, to ask what it is made of, and to bring into relation the bodies that, from different positions, inhabit it. In my case, I am on the other side of the coast: the side relieved that its own family was safe, that receives bodies not its own on its beaches and must reckon with what to do with them.

These bodies are carried by the sea to the shores of a nation that does not recognise them as part of its community, nor, more fundamentally, as subjects deserving of protection. In washing ashore, they become visible within a system that finds its structural coherence in the hierarchical division of the world and in its organisation according to dynamics of oppression, and in doing so they unsettle its stability. It is in the resurfacing of these bodies – silent, yet persistent – that the force of disturbance resides.

The bodies of Cyclone Harry disturb because they unsettle our gaze and our assumptions about space, about who is entitled to be present within it – removed bodies that return and, in returning, compel us to collect them, bury them, make room for them. It falls to municipalities to retrieve them, to make burial arrangements and carry them through. It falls to local communities to reckon with the corpses on the shoreline, with the remains surfacing in fishermen's nets, with nameless graves – to ask whether there is a name or a story, and, where there is not, to imagine one. The sea itself becomes a site of burial and disappearance, reshaping the horizon of what can be thought and mourned. It will be civil society that follows the practices of identification, denounces the violence, supports the family members and friends searching for those who are missing, and attempts to bridge the distance between unidentified bodies and stories without a body.

Dragged in by the waves, becoming dead weight in the hands that collect them, they tell us that it is now we, on this side of the Mediterranean, who must reckon with the dead, who must concern ourselves with laying them to rest. In doing so, they lay bare the contradictions we inhabit – whispering that it is not true that Cyclone Harry left us all unharmed, that, like them, we too are not at peace. They

compel us to look across the sea and behind our own shoulders, to listen to the appeals of families searching for their missing loved ones, to count the dead, and to ask how border management policy functions and at what cost. They speak, too, for those who landed and survived, yet remain invisible to our restricted gaze: those excluded from our idea of population, rendered invisible by the violence of migration routes, lost in the labyrinths of European migration governance, absorbed into circuits of irregularisation and exploitation, confined in detention facilities awaiting deportation. Removed from our space, yet never entirely.

To propose a hauntology of the border is to begin from the removed bodies, tracing how they move and live through the spaces we inhabit. It means following their trajectories of resurfacing, persistence, and return in order to observe the dynamics of violence and their contradictions, and the shadows they cast on the present and the future. Haunting is approached, in this sense, as an obstinate movement of unveiling: is the unresolved injustice refusing to be contained within a single place or a single temporality, extending into territories and moments that are not properly its own. In its return, the removed demands to be confronted, to speak to us, to be reckoned with: in this sense, it is an occasion for unsettling.

Border violence is, in the research that follows, traced and listened to in the voices of those who live it most intimately: the disappeared, their travel companions, their families, and those in solidarity with them. These interlocutors stand at the heart of this research, which departs from them in order to observe how the injustice they experience spreads, carrying with it a demand for justice.

On the other side of this movement stand I: arrived in Morocco on an Italian passport, listening to stories of border violence with the constant possibility of withdrawing. This asymmetry redefines the terms of my implication within it: not directly touched by the violence I study, yet bound to an experience that thins the boundary between the two shores of the sea, and that calls me to account for the position I occupy. From a position of privilege, I gather the fragments of a violence that exceeds the bodies and spaces in which it takes shape, in the belief that this violence does not concern only those who bear its most direct weight, but implicates, differentially, all who inhabit the world within which it is produced. If confronting the injustice of border violence is a responsibility concerning everyone, the collective horizon is the possibility of its undoing.

I. Building the Theoretical Framework: Toward a Border Hauntology

I.I. Navigating Absence, Death and Disappearance

One of the primary undertakings of this work is to understand what the ethnographic stories that compose it are about. All of them begin with a disappearance: some remain defined by the absence of the person and the body, with the fate still not clarified, while others continue with a returning body. Yet, even when death has been established, disappearance keeps on shaping the experience, layered beneath and alongside it, continuing to organise the life of those who remain. It is from this shared starting point that the ethnographic narratives and analytical reflection of this work depart.

Disappearance constitutes an ontological rupture, shattering the ordinary categories of life and death, presence and absence. It destabilises space and suspends time (Edkins, 2011:1), opening a void in which the boundaries between things collapse. Speaking of disappearance is, in this sense, *slippery* (Huttunen and Perl, 2023:1). It requires us to engage with a lack – of knowledge, of recognition, of material evidence. It asks us to question the conceptual structures through which we attempt to order the world, and to dwell in a space where things are not as they should be: where a person can be neither alive nor dead. Ambiguity is, indeed, an intrinsic feature of disappearance: it is the impossibility of declaring an absent person dead, or of affirming them alive, that makes disappearance such a complex and consuming experience. This ambiguity renders disappearance an ontological condition (Gatti, 2020), carrying different legal, psychosocial, and political repercussions (Citroni, 2025) demanding us to continually examine the delicate relationship between disappearance, life, and death, and problematise their boundaries and overlaps.

Under ordinary circumstances, the death of a person is commemorated according to the practices and traditions of the community to which they belonged, socially certifying the end of a life. Relatives and loved ones have a body, a place to remember the deceased, and the possibility of mourning the loss and attempting to move forward. Death is certainly not a linear event with a clear boundary between absence and presence, but rather a gradual process of withdrawal (van Gennep, 1960; Boss, 1999), through which the dead person enters the family and community as deceased, and this relationship is mediated by a set of collective rituals. In disappearance, this process remains suspended in the uncertainty of the person's status. The disappeared person is left in a condition of epistemic and social liminality, caught between uncertain states: not entirely dead, not fully alive. The confusion between life and death calls into question the social foundations for remembering and mourning, impacting time, space, language (Crenzel, 2024). The linear progression of time and the finality of death are placed on hold, blurring the distinction between past and present and generating recurring cycles of anguish and hope (Kordon and Edelman, 1987; Edkins, 2011).

In the cases primarily considered here – where disappearance is the product of repression acts or policies – uncertainty, ambiguity, and the risk of impunity are structural to the violence itself. One of the defining characteristics of disappearance is that it constitutes an ongoing violence (IACtHR, 1988³): it extends temporally through the prolonged absence of truth and the uncertainty that surrounds it. This leads us to ask: when can a disappearance end?

Disappearance demands us to remain in continuous relation with death: in the absence of information, death persists as one of the possibilities – it hovers, haunts, torments. Disappearance, on the other hand, compels a continuous relation with life: an endless life continues to live indefinitely, in the

³ See IACtHR, Velásquez Rodríguez v. Honduras, Judgment, Series C, No. 4, 29 July 1988, para. 150.

waiting for the disappeared person's return, in the exhausting practices of searching, in the unmet need to know. What disappearance negates, however, is not life or death as such, but the very possibility of their recognition. It strips the individual of the possibility of holding a status in the world they used to inhabit.

The eventual recovery of the body, as we will see, does not necessarily interrupt the cycle of violence set in motion by disappearance; rather, it opens new intimate and political trajectories. The corpse may not suffice to fill the void created by absence, and the process of mourning may remain caught in ambiguity, where the lack of answers – and therefore of truth – does not allow the page to be turned.

Disappearance asks us to problematise the relationship between life and death, and to move beyond these categories in order to dwell in the space of exclusion and the negation of presence. To speak of disappearance is to inhabit a space in which both life and death appear to be absent, in a profound negation of the presence of the person who has been made to disappear. Within this condition of absence – transcending the absence of the body and encompassing the absence of truth, of recognition, of the very possibility of mourning – we talk about disappearance as an analytical category distinct from death, yet unstable and impossible to fix.

In Arabic, the term used to designate absence is *al-ghayb* (Pandolfo, 1997; Mittermaier, 2012; Bubandt et al., 2019). More broadly, the concept refers to that which is hidden, invisible, and imperceptible, and it unfolds across a range of meanings within both the Islamic tradition and everyday Arabic usage. It encompasses things that cannot be seen in the world because they are concealed behind other visible objects, as well as things that, by their very nature, cannot be empirically apprehended. Within this framework, the concept holds a central place in Islamic tradition, evoking the religious sense of faith in something that, within the human world, cannot be materially reached or verified: the presence of God in things, the significance of prophetic visions and dreams, the power of jinn, angels, and so forth (Bubandt et al., 2019:2). *Al-ghayb* is powerful and essentially unknowable, an irreducible elsewhere. Invisibility – as this concept underscores – is not synonymous with non-existence; rather, it is the defining quality of something that exists precisely in its not appearing, or in appearing only partially.

Within the Islamic tradition, two principal terms designate someone who is no longer present. On one hand, there is *mafqud* – derived from the verb "to lose" – which refers to a person who has gone missing and whose condition remains uncertain; on the other hand, there is *ghaib*, which denotes an absent person whose existence, however, is not in doubt (Heller-Roazen, 2021). The distinction hinges on the degree of certainty regarding the person's continued presence and existence, somewhere in the world.

This conceptual framework – that we can connect to disappearance – calls for moving beyond the ontological dimension of presence and absence, treating absence instead as a site of epistemological reflection, taking seriously what exceeds or eludes the domain of the tangible and the knowable. As Mittermaier writes, "*al-ghayb* presupposes a particular attitude and relationship to the world, in which the very condition of not-knowing is the foundation not only of faith but also of any knowledge" (Mittermaier, 2019:4).

The concept thus invites us to remain in relation with what is invisible and unknowable, without necessarily seeking its material verification, and to dwell on the fact that the invisible "haunts, affects, and co-produces the visible world in multiple ways" (Bubandt et al., 2019:3), and that it can "have real effects; it can guide people" (Mittermaier, 2019:11).

Dwelling in this condition requires analytical tools capable of inhabiting its ambiguity without seeking to resolve it, and of reading its traces – affective, epistemic, political – as simultaneous products of violence and of what it generates. Following an initial positioning of this study within the field of disappearance studies and a genealogical reconstruction of the concept, the chapter proceeds to compose the theoretical framework along three lines. The first proposes the category of haunting as an epistemological lens for engaging with what has been removed yet remaining present. The second interrogates the politics of disappearance, examining the processes that produce vulnerability to disappearance and the power dynamics that regulate visibility and recognition. The third proposes to read the border as a space traversed simultaneously by politics of erasure and by attempts at reappearance, advancing the proposal of a border hauntology.

I.II. Framing Disappearance

On Disappearance Studies

This study is situated within disappearance studies, an emerging and interdisciplinary field that seeks to analyse the diverse processes associated with the experience of disappearance. It investigates the multiple forms of disappearing and their consequences – intrapersonal, political, socio-cultural, economic, epistemic – across social sciences, forensic studies, political studies, law, and memory studies (Baser et al., 2025). Within this framework, disappearance is not treated as a contingent event, but as a complex cultural, social, and political phenomenon.

The field developed initially from the study of enforced disappearances in Latin America (Edkins, 2011; Gatti, 2014), where disappearance has been analysed as a technique of governance and political repression: an instrument through which state – or parastatal – power operates on bodies, removing them from public space and denying their juridical and social existence, and on collectivities. From this nucleus, the field has progressively expanded to encompass other forms of disappearance: those linked to armed conflict (Zia, 2019; Kwon, 2008), organised violence (Gatti, 2017; Robledo Silvestre, 2016), unauthorised migration (Huttunen and Perl, 2023; Laakkonen, 2022; Kobelinsky, 2017), gender-based violence (Hernández Castillo, 2016; Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010), and environmental disasters (Araos and Wolfe, 2024). Disappearance is, in this sense, seen as an elastic concept, cutting across geographical areas, historical contexts, and diverse political and social realities.

Dealing with the multiple dimensions of disappearance, several social-sciences scholarly perspectives have consolidated: the forensic, focused on practices of bodies identification and restitution (Rosenblatt, 2019; Weizman, 2017; Wagner, 2008); that concerned with memory and representation, which examines how societies process or suppress the experience of disappearance (Schindel; Taylor, 2003; Gatti, 2020); the social and psychological, which explores the effects on families and communities affected by ambiguous loss and suspended grief (Boss, 1999; Robben, 2018); and the political, which attends to the relatives and communities mobilisations (Edkins, 2011; Zia, 2019; Menin, 2019).

This study is positioned at the intersection of the intimate and the political dimensions of disappearance, investigating how the experience of those who remain – relatives, travel companions, communities – is articulated between the private sphere of loss and waiting, and the public sphere of claim-making. Within this framework, disappearance is not approached as an isolated event whose violence is exhausted in the act of removal, but as an open-ended process that continues to produce effects – affective, epistemic, political – and that is traversed by dynamics of oppression and resistance.

Before proceeding to compose the theoretical framework necessary to sustain this inquiry, I propose a genealogical reconstruction of the concept. Tracing the roots of disappearance as an analytical and juridical category makes it possible to observe how the meaning of the term has shifted over time in response to different historical and political contexts, and how this transformation has progressively expanded the scope of what we recognise as disappearance. This in turn allows us to situate the phenomenon of border disappearances within a broader conceptual horizon, grasping both their continuities with the tradition of enforced disappearance and their specificities.

At the Roots of a Concept

A person is considered disappeared when no information is available regarding their fate or whereabouts, and when they are no longer present in a social or symbolic context of which they are recognised as part (Edkins, 2011). They are not present, and therefore absent: from the Latin *ab-esse*, the term means "to be away," evoking a condition of physical distance.

In English, different terms exist to define the condition of a person who is not there, each tied to distinct historical and political contexts. In the humanitarian field, the terms *missing persons* and *persons unaccounted for*, developed through the work of the ICRC, designate under international humanitarian law

"persons whose families are without news of them or who are reported missing, on the basis of reliable information, as a result of an international or non-international armed conflict, a situation of internal violence or disturbances and victims of natural disasters or catastrophes" (ICRC, 2009).

What defines a person as *missing* is therefore the impossibility, on the part of the family, of tracing them, in relation to a particular contextual situation. This definition helps us to recognise a central element of disappearance, namely its relational character: a person disappears when someone else registers their absence (Edkins, 2016). The use of this term provides no information regarding responsibility for that absence: a missing person may be so by their own choice.

The term *disappeared*, on the other side, emerges through a process of politicisation of the concept, placing emphasis on what produced the disappearance (Huttunen and Perl, 2023). In particular, the 2006 United Nations International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance defines enforced disappearance as

"the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."

Historically, it is the category of enforced disappearance that grants political recognition to the experiences of the *desaparecidos* of 1970s and 1980s Latin America, referring to the deprivations of liberty and concealment suffered by political opponents at the hands of military governments. Within this historical context, the term *disappeared* consolidates the understanding that the untraceability of a person is someone's responsibility. As Amnesty International writes:

"Many prisoners who have 'disappeared' may well, at worst, have ceased to be. None, however, is lost or vanished. Living or dead, each is in a very real place as a result of a real series of

decisions taken and implemented by real people. Someone does know and, more importantly, is responsible." (AI, 1981:1)

While the use of the term *missing* operates within a framework that centres the experience of relatives in relation to a person's absence, *disappeared* foregrounds the crime that produced that absence.

From Enforced Disappearances to Border Disappearances

Historically, disappearance has been employed as a strategy of repression by both state and non-state actors, within the broader spectrum of political violence (Baser et al., 2025). Examples include disappearances carried out in the context of colonial policies (Millar, 2023), those perpetrated by authoritarian regimes (Schindel, 2021), and those committed by armed groups (Hernández Castillo, 2016). On one side there is an agent of disappearance (Gatti, 2020); on the other, a person or group denied recognition, presence, freedom, or – in the most extreme cases – life.

The juridical recognition of enforced disappearance was constructed progressively within international law, from the response of the Nuremberg Tribunals to the Night and Fog programme, through the provisions of humanitarian law on the protection of detainees and the right of families to information, to the jurisprudence of the Inter-American human rights system (see ASGI, 2025). It is in this latter context, with the case of *Velásquez Rodríguez v. Honduras* (1988), that the Inter-American Court defined disappearance as an autonomous and continuing violation, establishing state responsibility and laying the groundwork for subsequent instruments of protection. This trajectory culminated in the 2006 International Convention, through which enforced disappearance was recognised as a category of crime against humanity, characterised by the systematic concealment of the whereabouts of disappeared persons and the denial of access to any information regarding their fate, committed by state officials or third parties acting on behalf of or with the complicit silence of the state. The evolution of the concept subsequently led to a further distinction: according to the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, *disappeared* persons are defined as "persons who have been the victim of an act committed by human beings," while *enforced disappearance* refers specifically to "a disappearance committed by agents of the state or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of the state" (Baser et al., 2025:3).

Within the legal and political tradition surrounding enforced disappearances, there developed – alongside the recognition of the violation of the disappeared person's rights – an acknowledgment of the extension of violence to those close to the disappeared, particularly family members, who are recognised by the 2006 Convention as victims of enforced disappearance (art. 24). Within this framework, the international obligations associated with enforced disappearances aim to protect both the disappeared and their relatives, providing for "the search for the disappeared, including through interState cooperation; the exhumation, identification, respect for and return of the mortal remains of the disappeared, where appropriate; investigation aimed at identifying those responsible for the crime, followed by prosecution and sanction; and the provision of psychosocial support and reparations for the harm suffered" (Citroni, 2025:488).

It is in this context that the concept of the right to truth consolidated, initially developed within Inter-American jurisprudence in response to cases of enforced disappearance in Latin America, and progressively recognised as a principle of international law. This principle was forged through the claims of the relatives of the disappeared, who rendered the demand for truth a political act before it became a juridical one. The right to truth enshrines the obligation of states to provide information regarding the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared person, and recognises the right of relatives –

and, more broadly, of society – to know the circumstances of the disappearance, the progress and results of investigations, and the identification of causes (art. 24, par. 2). The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, in its General Comment on the right to truth⁴, qualifies it as an absolute right, subject to no limitation or derogation, and distinguishes it from the more general right to information. While the latter concerns access to news regarding the condition of a disappeared person, the right to truth has a broader scope, encompassing the circumstances of the disappearance in their entirety: the fate of the person, the reasons, and those responsible. In this sense, truth is not reducible to information; it requires, rather, a clarification of responsibility. This right makes explicit the recognition that, in the absence of truth, there can be neither closure nor justice. The right to truth is inscribed, in turn, within a broader framework of obligations concerning justice and reparation. The Convention provides that states shall guarantee victims the right to an effective remedy and adequate reparation (art. 24, par. 4-5), encompassing restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. Truth, justice, and reparation thus constitute interdependent dimensions: the establishment of truth is a necessary precondition for the attribution of responsibility, and the latter is itself a condition for reparation that is more than merely symbolic. In the absence of any one of these elements, the cycle of violence remains open – the disappearance continues to produce its effects, and the victims remain without recognition.

Disappearance is understood, in this sense, as a continuing crime, persisting until the body is found or information regarding the fate of the person is shared, and the circumstances of death are clarified (Citroni, 2025; Schindel and Figari Layús, 2013). It is in the impossibility of closing that story, in the fact that it is left in suspension, that the perpetuation of the violence resides.

What unites diverse forms of disappearance – from detention, to forced displacement, to concealed death – and renders them practices of violence is the fact that they entail the removal of certain bodies and persons from the sphere of visibility, confining the disappeared to a liminal state between life and death, between presence and absence, and forcing the community of belonging to confront a climate of anguish and fear.

From the 1990s onward, disappearances linked to unauthorised migration consolidated as a distinct category of disappearance. While not a novel phenomenon, it underwent a marked intensification in both scale and visibility with the restructuring of regional and global border regimes – most notably the reconfiguration of European borders following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the consolidation of the Schengen area, and the progressive militarisation of external frontiers. Under these conditions, a growing number of people on the move began to disappear at borders or along global migratory paths, as a direct effect to the consolidation of international movement governances (Last and Cuttitta, 2020; for the US-Mexico border see De León, 2015).

In academic and political spheres, a debate has emerged seeking to read border disappearances in continuity with the tradition of enforced disappearance. From the 2010s onward, international bodies – including the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (OHCHR, 2017) and subsequently the Committee on Enforced Disappearances – began to address disappearance in the migratory context specifically, identifying three principal forms: abduction for political or other reasons, disappearance in the context of detention or deportation proceedings, and disappearance linked to smuggling and trafficking networks (see ASGI, 2025). In parallel, the academic literature began to

⁴ Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *General Comment on the Right to the Truth in Relation to Enforced Disappearances*. A/HRC/16/48. United Nations Human Rights Council.
Cfr. https://www.concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/to/288.pdf.

explore the potential and limitations of applying this category to the context of border violence (Azarova et al., 2022; Distretti, 2019; Gatti, 2023), interrogating the utility of such a conceptual translation. The central idea is to question whether the three elements defining enforced disappearance are considered applicable in cases of border disappearance: 1) deprivation of liberty against the will of the person concerned; 2) involvement of governmental officials, at least indirectly by acquiescence; 3) refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or concealment of the fate and whereabouts of the person concerned (Citroni, 2017; Martínez-Castillo, 2020).

The move is first and foremost political: it seeks to demonstrate that border enforcement has become increasingly lethal, and to underscore the responsibility of the border regime and the states involved in migrants' deaths and disappearances. As the Committee on Enforced Disappearances emphasises in its General Comment No. 1, "the main element that distinguishes a migrant who disappears from a migrant who becomes a victim of disappearance is the commission of a crime against a migrant". At the heart of the conceptual juxtaposition between enforced disappearances and border disappearances lies the idea that the political structure producing the latter is as criminal as that producing the former.

I wish to dwell briefly on this debate, not in order to intervene on the juridical question of the category's translatability – which would require a separate treatment – but because the analytical gesture that the juxtaposition makes possible is relevant to the purposes of this study: reading border disappearances as the product of a politics of bodies governance, deterrence, and repression. This operation, however, is not without tensions, and deserves to be examined in its principal arguments.

From a structural standpoint, border disappearances recall enforced disappearances in significant ways. Distretti (2019) observes that the juxtaposition responds to an analytical necessity: both forms of disappearance operate as strategies of control and deterrence over specific populations, and in both cases political responsibility tends to be obscured or denied. Azarova et al. (2022) demonstrate how the category of enforced disappearance offers juridical and conceptual tools useful for unmasking this opacity, placing at their centre the right of families to information and truth. On an ideological level, the categories of persons subjected to these disappearances are represented as threats to national security – the political dissident alongside the unauthorised migrant – and the repressive policies that follow are rooted in colonial and racist ideologies (Laakkonen, 2022; Huttunen and Perl, 2023).

On the other hand, there is a substantial critique of the juxtaposition between the two categories. Gatti (2023) argues that invoking enforced disappearance in the definition of such violence risks dissolving the central elements of the traditional political definition. The condition of the *desaparecidos* constituted a specific "state of being", that of those who were the deliberate targets of military violence: it had given rise to a specific repertoire of instruments of political violence, as well as to imaginaries, collective sentiments, and modes of claim-making deeply tied to the historical and social context in which they developed.

If enforced disappearance – as it is defined – presupposes a deliberate act of removal of the individual from the political sphere, we observe different mechanisms producing disappearance at the border: it is not the result of a targeted action directed at identified subjects, but the structural outcome of a system that, through the criminalisation of mobility, the militarisation of controls, and the precarisation of specific bodies, produces a selective exposure to the risk of death and disappearance. This selectivity is differential and structurally constructed, operating along lines of race, class and economic precarity, targeting those whose very exposure to risk is conditioned by their exclusion from legal channels of movement. Although it operates through diffuse and mediated mechanisms rather than direct

persecution, this form of violence remains a product of deliberate state policy, that, in liberal border control contexts, entrusts lethal outcomes to the border regime itself rather than to the direct action of state agents (Laakkonen, 2022; Huttunen and Perl, 2023).

In this sense, Gatti (2023) proposes a reflection on disappearance as a form of social and political abandonment and a practice of governance: through the deliberate withdrawal of protection and recognition, the conditions in which disappearance becomes possible are produced. It is in the tension between the diffuse intentionality of the border regime and the absence of a single identifiable agent of disappearance that the specificity of border disappearance is located, and with it the need for analytical tools capable of accounting for it. At the basis of these reflections, in any case, lies the idea that border disappearances are the result – direct or structural – of a politics of exclusion and removal of unwanted bodies.

I.III. On Haunting

Hauntology: An Introduction

One evening in June 2025, while working through the early chapters of this thesis, I attend a screening of the short film *Upshot*, directed by Palestinian filmmaker Maha Haj. The narrative centres on the everyday life of two elderly Gazans, Lubna and Souleiman: their dialogues unfold around meals, agricultural work, and domestic tasks, and revolve around the lives of their five children. The couple share the phone calls they have received from them, negotiating between quarrels and quiet reflections the children's academic and professional achievements, their romantic failures, the aspirations held for them, alongside the concrete planning of a reunion the following weekend.

It is midway through the film that a third figure enters: a journalist – himself Gazan – who presents himself as a former schoolmate of Khalid, the eldest son, and insists on requesting an interview with the couple to tell "one of the most dramatic stories from Gaza," since "everyone in war has lost someone, but losing all five children" when they were still young, struck by a missile in their home, is surely among the most violent. The couple's refusal to open themselves to the telling is nonetheless followed by an invitation to dinner, during which the parents resume their account of a phone call received from Khalid, who – as it happens – sends his warmest regards to the bewildered journalist.

Upshot, in Arabic *maa'bad*: aftermath, consequences. The film tells an imaginary story set in an imaginary future, inhabiting the aftermath of the contemporary massacre in Gaza – the tomorrow of a today so violent exceeding comprehension. It is a family living with a past that continues to haunt them, weighted by a violence that surpasses both the narrable and the grievable.

The screening is brief and moves at a slow rhythm, measured by the unfolding time of an elderly couple. The slowness of the narrative – which proceeds through pauses, routine exchanges, ordinary gestures – amplifies a background disturbance that quietly unsettles the performance of everyday normality. It shows us how profoundly those empty times and spaces are inhabited by people who are no longer there. Or who, at least from the position of the viewer, are neither visible nor perceptible.

Watching, I find myself returning to the ghosts I encountered in Morocco, inhabiting and haunting the spaces navigated by the disappearance and death at the border.

In the present work, proposing an engagement with the ghostly and with what is haunting does not mean to place ghosts themselves at the centre of inquiry: the aim is neither to question belief nor to confirm or deny their metaphysical existence. The objective is, rather, to take stories of ghosts and haunting as a point of departure for observing the socio-political contexts in which they are produced and the relationship that the living establish with them. I intend to dwell within this relationship, taking as real what ghosts and the relation to them produce, and accepting the challenge of remaining in the unnarratable to examine its epistemic possibilities. Within this framework, to speak of haunting does not imply "the (im)possibility of the supernatural," but rather an attempt to inhabit "the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity and indeterminacy that characterise language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with difference and alterity" (Pilar Blanco and Pereen, 2013:9).

Ghosts do not arise from all violent deaths, but when they appear they bring unresolved questions to the surface. They speak of something that once was and is no longer, yet somehow continues to inhabit the present. They are the trace of something unknowable, escaping the domains of rationality and knowability and that, exceeding ontology itself, cannot be apprehended within classical epistemic frameworks or the boundaries of ordinary order. In Auchter's (2014) words, they are the residue of something that cannot be seen, that was once there and has been removed, that is repressed yet not entirely gone.

By virtue of the liminal space they inhabit and represent – between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, the present and what is not – the figure of ghosts and the concept of haunting are employed to theorise a range of political, social, and ethical questions concerning aspects that challenge traditional epistemological frameworks of presence, visibility, and knowledge, and that elude full comprehension. Haunting operates traditionally as a metaphor for the encounter with the disturbing forms of otherness (Pilar Blanco and Pereen, 2013), capable of revealing the disjunction of being, of the material, of history. Haunting proposes to interrogate rationality on behalf of that which "has been silenced, consigned to history, relegated to the liminal spaces of sociality, deprived of the conditions of possibility" (Saltmarsh, 2009:540), and necessarily demands a surpassing of this condition.

The concept of hauntology was coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993) to describe an attention to the apparitions, visions, and representations that inhabit the present, which "bring into contact the sensible and the insensible, the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, reality and the not-yet-real, being and non-being" (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015:192). The concept itself arises from a questioning of the traditional notion of ontology, understood as being characterised by a presence identical to itself and coherently representable: being, Derrida tells us, is inhabited by the spectral – by what once was and is no longer, and by what is not yet. The past and the future haunt the present, in the form of unresolved legacies and unrealised historical possibilities.

In his economic-political reading, Derrida observes how Marxism continues to haunt the present through the contradictions of post-Fordist capitalism, through inequalities that re-emerge as powerful social forces, demanding justice for "those who are not there, [...] those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living (Derrida, 1994:xix)." The ghostly, then, brings contradictions and incoherences to the surface, making space for the repressed to challenge the coherence and functionality of the economic-political system. In this sense, haunting demands an acknowledgment of what has been and what may yet be, insofar as these are part of the present. In this way, it invokes a responsibility of the living toward the dead, of the present toward the non-present, toward "those who appear as ghosts demanding justice and those future generations who will be affected by our responses

to these ghosts.” (Good, 2019:419) The apparition is recognised as carrying “a potential to lead to resolution and justice, a kind of cathartic movement toward healing” (Good, 2019:423)

The ghostly is thus credited with an ethical and political potential and a pedagogical function (Tanner, 2022): hauntology presupposes "an ongoing conversation with the ghost" in order to "challenge the hegemonic status of representational modes of knowledge" (Zembylas, 2013:69) and the practices associated with them. Across different theoretical interpretations, haunting is not necessarily a threatening experience but may constitute a presence that is *welcome, if unsettling*, as it stimulates consciousness and invites action, proposing new modes of interpretation and communication.

This cathartic potential is inscribed, in the literature, in a constitutively collective dimension. Haunting interpellate a community, called to publicly negotiate memory and to distribute responsibility toward what has been removed: it is through the shared elaboration of absence and repression that the ghost opens the possibility for social and political imagination (Gordon, 1997; Tanner, 2022; Saleh-Hanna, 2015; Hollan, 2019).

With the "spectral turn" (Weinstock, 2004) in academia, the category of haunting came to be employed across diverse disciplines⁵: the ghost and haunting became a way of analysing reality by connecting it to its non-material and non-visible dimensions. It has been progressively adopted in a wide range of political, social, and cultural studies to describe the persistence of traces, memories, and past or unrealised possibilities that continue to shape the present. In cultural criticism, the concept allows for the analysis of the collision between past, present, and future, revealing the non-linearity of historical time and the extent to which it is constantly traversed by returns, resonances, and absences (Derrida, 1993; Powell, 2010), marked by a structural nostalgia and the crisis of political imagination (Fisher, 2014).

Hauntology is employed in the study of subjectivity, in the analysis of how identities and relationships are traversed by memories, traumas, and unintegrated possibilities (Hollan, 2019), and it intersects with theories of trauma and the unconscious, foregrounding the persistence of what has not been symbolised or processed (Leys, 2000), as well as with reflections on the uncanny as the return of the repressed (Royle, 2003).

In studies of violence – interpersonal, collective, or political – the category operationalises the reading of the forms through which unresolved issues and a sense of injustice continue to manifest as a disturbing presence. The concept is also central to studies of historical memory and critical pedagogy (Varga, 2025; Saleh-Hannah, 2015), prompting analysis of how the politics of narration is traversed by dynamics of erasure and marginalisation.

Across its various deployments, hauntology makes it possible to observe how, in specific geographical, political, and social contexts, certain subjects are rendered vulnerable to processes of marginalisation, social erasure, and precarity. Pilar Blanco and Pereen (2013) interprets these phenomena in terms of *ghosting*, highlighting how systemic invisibilisation operates through forms of presence-absence that structure everyday life and the possibilities of agency. In this sense, hauntology becomes a critical tool for attending to what has been excluded from social structures, removed or rendered spectral, and yet continues to exert material and symbolic effects.

Haunting penetrates deeply into relational and interpersonal experience, prompting reflection on the self and on the social and political dimensions of the subject: ghosts and apparitions always concern

⁵ For an overview, see Gunn, 2006.

someone, directly or indirectly, implicating one's own emotional experience and the ways in which, from within it, one relates to others. In this perspective, haunting constitutes an epistemological tool for interrogating the modalities through which subjects construct meaning in their social, cultural, and political interactions and experiences, across dynamics of erasure, contested memories, and repression.

Given the breadth of the concept of haunting and its capacity to encompass diverse theoretical and empirical experiences, Lincoln and Lincoln (2015) have elaborated a classification to order its various epistemological and methodological possibilities. The scholars distinguish two types of hauntings: primary and secondary. Primary haunting consists of the concrete experience of individuals who perceive ghostly apparitions as real, and who act directly to restore justice or complete a missing ritual. Secondary haunting, by contrast, refers to experience mediated by collective memories and experiences, in which the persistence of violence, repression, or grief generates an enduring social sentiment of guilt or injustice. While the ghosts of primary haunting are the result of an impeded passage to the afterlife for which they seek resolution, secondary apparitions aim at broader forms of reparation, seeking social engagement with the issues they represent. Unlike primary haunting, which tends toward the closure of specific episodes, secondary haunting deliberately keeps memory alive as an instrument of social transformation.

Haunting as a Political Category: Violence, Removal, and Resistance

One of the fields in which hauntology has been applied is the analysis of mass violence and political repression. To advance the reflection on the use of haunting as a political and analytical category in this regard, I draw on three authors central to this field: Jessica Aughter, Heonik Kwon, and Avery Gordon. Each of these authors articulates haunting through distinct approaches and along specific lines of development, yet their analyses converge in observing that haunting emerges where systemic violence has produced an exclusion, a removal, a denial of recognition. Reading them together makes it possible to observe how the category of the ghost, even when deployed across ontologically and culturally diverse contexts, configures itself each time as a critical response to politics of repression, and how repressed bodies return to contest the official narratives that excluded them.

In *The Politics of Haunting* (2014), Aughter proposes a development of the concept by applying it to statecraft and to the ways in which governance intervenes in the construction of the categories of life and death. Analysing the life/death dichotomy as a political technology through which the state classifies and administers bodies, Aughter highlights how allowing certain deaths to escape this binary categorisation is itself an effect of the practice of governance: "The state both produces and presupposes certain operations of power that work by establishing a set of ontological givens, which remain uncontested and incontestable within the particular modes of intelligibility that the state asserts" (*Ibid*:101). Everything that does not fit – or rather, is not made to fit – within this construction is the spectral. Aughter observes that what is excluded from the state's ontology is not entirely removed but remains haunting, somehow present even while denied recognition by power. "Haunting is already contained in the ontology of the state, which decides on being" (*Ibid*).

Haunting in Aughter is at once a product of statecraft and its critique. If, on one hand, the deprivation of presence is recognisable as an effect of biopolitical dynamics on living and dead bodies, on the other, this very deprivation can be transformed into a strategy of subversion: ghosts operate as a destabilising presence that challenges the established order, carrying with them what the state seeks to forget (Nienass, 2015). The three case studies Aughter presents – the memorials for the genocide in Rwanda, the bodies of migrants at the US border, and the 9/11 memorials – illustrate this dialectic: they are

material sites in which removed violence continues to make itself felt, contesting from within the very practices of governance enforcing its erasure.

In *Ghosts of War* (2008), Kwon studies the experience of war and post-war memory in Vietnam, analysing the subculture of war ghosts generated by the American war. Kwon's ghosts are autonomous and real entities that relate directly to the community emerging from the conflict. They are the wandering souls of those who died violent deaths – death "on the road" (*chết đường*) – as distinct from a good death, – death "near home" (*chết nhà*): in the absence of the body the funerary rite had not taken place, escaping the process that ordinarily transforms the dead into an ancestor and, in this status, a member of the familial network. The practices of social, intimate, and public relation that Vietnamese society maintained with war ghosts served to remedy this rupture: commemorations and interactions constituted a way of confronting an ambiguous grief, bodyless, evading both the rights of the dead and the normality of the living. These interactions took place during the period of American military operations to recover the bodies of the MIAs (Missing in Action), in which the recovered bodies, amid a climate of public mourning for the soldiers of the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese army, and their allies, turned out to belong to the opposing side.

Transcending the boundaries between life and death, between ally and enemy, between opposing factions, the ghosts of Vietnam appeared to families other than their own and did not remember which side they had belonged to. The post-war community received these apparitions – in the form of visions, dreams, spirit possessions, or illness – according to a principle of reciprocity: hospitality was offered to the ghosts of others in the hope that the same would be extended to those of one's own wandering relatives. On one hand, this relationship accompanied a process of suspended grief; on the other, it sustained a process of social reconstruction in the fragile post-war context: through the ghost, the personal experience of war was reworked, particularly those private experiences that did not fit within the official narrative. It helped to give meaning to one's own precarious condition, and to re-establish the social and intimate relationships that violence had broken, claiming adequate recognition and memory for those who had suffered.

In *Ghostly Matters* ([1997], 2008, 2022), Gordon employs the concept of haunting to speak of the violences of modernity and what it produces. For Gordon, haunting is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (Gordon, 2008:xvi), one of the ways in which abusive systems of power make themselves felt, and their impact is experienced in everyday life, especially when they are thought to be over or when their oppressive nature is denied.

With a strongly political connotation, the ghost in Gordon's analysis is a *social figure* that represents past tragedies and injustices. In the three ethnographic cases that structure Gordon's book, ghosts tell of repressed subjectivities, of slavery in the United States, and of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina. To listen to the ghosts of modernity, Gordon tells us, is to observe the violences of modern social experience by attending to the stories of those who have been excluded and to their repressed subjectivities:

“We have seen that the ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge. I have also emphasized that the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. [...] We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother.” (Gordon, 2008:63-64)

Gordon's ghosts indicate the traces of historical violence and signal the power relations and dynamics of oppression in the world. They are unprocessed emotions, the dead still here, the invisible things: on the other side, there are those who relate to them, human subjects compelled to recognise them, to mourn, and *perhaps to take action*. It is in this sense that the Gordonian ghosts are an exhortation to justice: they invite us to struggle for the dead against those who sought to erase them, and tell us that – about that – *something has to be done* (Gordon, 2011). Gordon's ghosts carry political significance insofar as they invite liberation and impel contestation, making claim on the historical *imagination* to compel a reckoning with violence, suffering, and injustice.

Auchter's, Kwon's, and Gordon's ghosts are ontologically and culturally different from one another, and bear different relationships to power dynamics and to their communities of reference, yet in all three cases they arise from politics of removal. A body that has not returned home to be buried, a memory denied justice, a violence that remains buried, a life unjustly repressed.

They underscore how the dialectic of presence and absence, visible and invisible, is to be read as the product of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The repressed, haunting, lays claim to its own presence-absence: "The excluded return, as bodies, as bones, or as rubble" (Nienass, 2015:129), "and when they return, they refuse to replicate the standards of presence and visibility established by statecraft" (Nienass, 2015:130).

In these experiences, haunting reveals itself as an impulse toward liberation, that can be realised in collective or individual form. Across their differences, what Kwon, Gordon, and Auchter share is the recognition that the ghost is not only a figure of contestation but a vector of possible transformation: its apparition opens a process through which what has been violently suppressed can be acknowledged, mourned, and, in some measure, healed. If for Kwon this possibility is most tangible – where the practices of relation with war ghosts enable a communal working-through of grief that violence had rendered impossible, reweaving the social and affective bonds it had torn – in Gordon's and Auchter's work, the transformative potential of haunting starts in the act of recognition itself. To attend to the ghost is already to initiate a reckoning, a collective restitution that does not restore what was lost but creates the conditions for imagining something otherwise.

Haunting as an Epistemological Lens on Disappearances

Researching disappearances requires engaging with things that are not visible, not materially verifiable, nor easily definable: dead who are not dead or who have not entirely departed, inexplicable absences, and yet living beings and things maintaining a relationship with them, finding expression on non-material planes. On one side, there are persons who once were and are no longer, who inexplicably no longer appear anywhere, who died in unclear circumstances or who may not have died at all while not resulting living. On the other, there are present persons who suffer, who are witnesses to a violence – direct or indirect – and whose lives remain profoundly shaped by, and oriented toward, those who have disappeared.

The relationship between the living and the disappeared – in its intimate-affective, epistemic, and political dimensions – is the central object of this study. I propose to dwell within it, accepting the epistemic incapacity for definition and explanation as a constitutive condition of the phenomenon. The central concern of this work is, rather, to employ this relationship as a vantage point from which to observe the power dynamics that traverse the experience of disappearance, both in terms of oppression and of resistance. Through listening to the narratives of experience, the processes of searching, and the epistemic and political practices that those who relate to absence enact, I seek to observe how the

experience of disappearance reaches and transforms living subjects, “who are moved to acknowledge, mourn, regret, and possibly take action.” (Lincoln e Lincoln, 2015:194)

Adopting hauntology as an analytical and political category makes it possible, within this framework, to pursue a threefold objective. First, it allows for engagement with those phenomena escaping ordinary conceptions of intelligibility and visibility – such as death, disappearance, absence – which require the surpassing of classical epistemological frameworks. In this way, it opens the possibility of remaining within the unknowable without the need to deconstruct it, creating instead a space for analysing what it produces. The methodological challenges that this epistemic positioning entails will be discussed in the methodology section.

From an analytical standpoint, hauntology further allows us to attend to stories of disappearance as the sedimented products of dynamics of removal and politics of exclusion: through the analysis of the traces – symbolic, affective, and political – that disappearances leave behind, it becomes possible to trace back to the violence generating them. At the same time, by dwelling within the relationship that the living establish with disappearance and with the disappeared, this study seeks to trace what that experience, in turn, produces in the intimate textures of everyday life, in the fabric of social relations, and in the political field – attending to disappearance as a generative force.

In the literature on enforced disappearances, the ghostly manifests as a persistent presence in the social and cultural history of societies that have experienced them (Gordon, 2008; Crenzel, 2024), reflecting itself in social relations, in popular and mass culture, and in other experiences of loss. The ghost activates processes of historical and memorial elaboration among the living (Bond, 2018), demanding testimony and placing communities in relation with deaths and disappearances across different times and spaces.

Ghosts, Gordon reminds us, are real in the sense that they produce material effects in the world: attending to what they leave behind opens a space for reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, and social processes that surround disappearance, that participate in its production, and that in turn set new processes in motion. Haunting, in this sense, is an affective and political phenomenon that can be ethnographically inhabited, a lens through which to trace how those who remain are haunted by the experience of disappearance and how, in living with that, they themselves produce haunting.

Finally, with the intention of remaining within the specificity of the bond that the living maintain with the disappearance, this study attends to how that relational space becomes a site in which alternative modes of interpreting, narrating, and inhabiting the world are produced and negotiated. Foregrounding the transformative dimension of haunting outlined above, this analytical lens allows us to trace how the experience of disappearance at the border is world-making: how it opens a space of political and social imagination through which the intimate, communal, and structural relations that traverse the border condition – and extending beyond it – come to be contested and reimagined.

I.IV. Politics of Disappearance

If the category of haunting allows us to engage with what has been removed and yet continues to make itself present, it remains necessary to interrogate the political conditions that produce such removal: the processes through which certain bodies are subtracted from the sphere of visibility and recognition, and rendered vulnerable to disappearance.

In this section, I intend to engage with the theoretical efforts reflecting on the relationship between bodies and power, in order to observe how the forms of presence and appearance in public space are determined by practices of recognition that establish their value and the conditions of their intelligibility. The appearance and disappearance of bodies, within this framework, are political constructions – produced by the gaze that holds the power to decide who is worthy of being seen, protected, and eventually mourned, and who may be removed without their absence being registered. The aim is to observe how the possibility of appearing and the risk of disappearing are part of broader dynamics of power, and how the border, in particular, configures itself as a space in which vulnerability to disappearance is structurally constructed.

Dis-Appearing and the Public Sphere

For Arendt (1958), the appearance of subjects in public space lies at the heart of the political dimension of human action. This dimension is founded on the possibility of individuals to manifest themselves through actions and speech and, through these, being seen and recognised. It is within this space of appearance that political subjectivity is formed, moving from the individual and inserting itself within a collectivity. A subject who appears appropriates space to develop and present their social and political presence, and is thereby inscribed within the dynamics of public life. A body that does not appear, by contrast, remains excluded from them.

Exclusion from the sphere of appearance, for Arendt, means being denied access to plurality, which is the very condition of the political: it means being removed from the possibility of acting, of being seen and recognised as part of the common world. As Butler writes:

“In Arendtian terms, we can say that to be precluded from the space of appearance,[...] is to be deprived of the right to have rights.” (2015:59)

What Butler defines as “the exercise of the right to place and belonging” (*Ibid*:60) is founded upon a recognition that precedes the presence of bodies in the space of appearance. In this sense, public space is shaped as a biopolitical space: it moulds individualities, relationships, and socio-political dynamics. Within it, there are “conditions of appearance” (Arendt, 1958; Butler, 2015): criteria, established within epistemic frameworks, determining who may access the sphere of visibility and on what terms. Butler writes:

“But what happens when the highly regulated field of appearance does not admit everyone, requiring zones in which many cannot appear or are legally prohibited from doing so? Why is this field regulated in such a way that only certain kinds of beings can appear as recognisable subjects and others cannot? Indeed, the requirement to appear in one way rather than another functions as a precondition for appearing at all.” (Butler, 2015:60)

If being a political actor is understood as a function of acting under conditions of equality with other human beings, the field of the recognisable is limited and is both subject to and produced by broader operations of power. Within the sphere of appearance, specific norms tied to elements such as gender, race, and class determine the degree of recognisability of subjects, tracing a distinction between apprehended and unapprehended lives. This distinction, inscribed within established frameworks, generates specific ontologies of the subject.

This is what Butler (2009) calls *framing*: a political and epistemic operation through which normative schemas produce, alongside political and rights-bearing subjectivities, subjects that are barely recognisable as such and lives that are barely recognised as lives. The socio-political value of certain

subjects is thereby diminished on a double plane: as political agents, they are excluded from the possibility of acting and being recognised in public space; as objects of knowledge, they are removed from the practices of knowing through which a life becomes intelligible and socially significant. Bodies that do not fit within the frames of recognition are, in effect, "stripped of their presence, agency, belongings, and rights" (Rygiel, 2016:549): devoid of political value (Edkins, 2015), reduced to bare life (Agamben, 1995). Such an apparatus is necessarily discriminatory: the protection of certain lives corresponds to the structural precarisation of others, maintained in conditions of exposure to loss.

From this apparatus, concrete consequences follow: it is through these hierarchies that it is determined who has access to protection and care, and who is excluded from them. Within this relation, there are losses that are not regarded as such, normalised by a politics that renders acceptable, within a given system, the removal and absence of some. Certain lives, Butler explains, are rendered expendable.

Within the framework of this study, this operation is central: a body that in life is not recognised as existing within the socio-political system of which it is part will not be recognisable in its absence either. The failure of recognition in life precludes the recognition of disappearance and, with it, the possibility that the loss will be deemed worthy of account. It is here that what Gatti (2023) defines as disappearance as a product of abandonment takes hold: a structural condition of invisibility in an ontological sense (Gündoğdu, 2022), which precedes and makes possible the disappearance itself. Abandonment, in this perspective, is not the absence of governance but a specific form of it: certain subjects are removed from the structures of protection and recognition, placed in a space in which their presence is not registered and, consequently, neither is their absence.

Beyond Necropolitics: Making – or Letting – People Disappear as Repression

Exclusion from the sphere of appearance is thus produced through operations of power and sustained by dynamics of oppression, operating according to complementary logics: the abandonment of the bodies deemed expendable, and the active repression of those whose presence is experienced as a threat to the established order. Such exclusion, as Sánchez argues, constitutes the "operation that deprives of rights those who do not matter, but also that deprives of a voice those who challenge the order of the perceivable and the sayable" (Sánchez, 2019:6). These operations are structurally interrelated: in the first, visibility is withheld from subjects who fail to meet the normative conditions of appearance; in the second, the bodies contesting the existing order are targeted for removal.

Pursuing the analysis of disappearance as a dynamic of bodily exclusion and control requires moving to the level of life and death as politically mediated forms of presence and absence. Drawing on Foucault's theorisation of biopolitics (1997), Agamben's elaboration of sovereign power and the concept of bare life (1998, 2005), and Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics (2006), we reflect on how sovereign power extends its reach into the direct administration of life and death, and interrogate the political and social meanings that such control produces. Necropolitics concerns "the production and regulation of death through the production of 'death-worlds' (Mbembe 2003:39), where the sovereign right to kill takes on a normative ground and an entire population is positioned as akin to death" (İşlekel 2017:339). Within this framework, the authority to determine who may live and who may die emerges as a foundational prerogative of sovereign power, that, for the purpose of this analysis, can be understood as the capacity to grant or withhold from bodies the very right to presence.

We situate the practice of making or letting disappear within this theoretical constellation, understood here as a practice of political violence that exceeds and complicates the categories of life/death and

presence/absence. Disappearance, in fact, shows us a violence that is not exhausted in the act of killing, and it requires us to go beyond necropolitics itself.

İşlekel (2017), in her ethnographic engagement with forced disappearances in Turkey, attends to how the practice of making political opponents disappear lays bare the articulation between death and sovereign power while deliberately evading spectacular representation. In these experiences, which nonetheless speak of violence and death, the very moment of death seems absent. As Gordon (2008:109) observes, death belongs to the past, disappearance to the present: this distinction foregrounds how the violence of disappearance resides in the structured impossibility of closure it produces as an enduring feature of the oppressive experience and in the denial of both presence and absence. "For its secrecy and uncertainty, enforced disappearance works as a violation that has no temporal end" (Bargu, 2014:41).

If life and death are understood as effects of power, produced and assigned within relations of domination, then being recognised as alive or as dead carries a profound political significance. As a practice of governing bodies and their meanings, disappearance "thus opens another type of death, a space in which both life and death are unrecognized and unrecognizable" (İşlekel, 2017:341). If the production and distribution of death constitute a central technology of governance, so too does the capacity to suspend bodies in a condition that eludes dichotomous categorisation altogether, stripping them of any legible political value. As İşlekel writes:

"It is rather about erasing and making absent both life and death. Spaces open up where there is no life and no death: neither a life that can be surveilled and regulated, nor a death that can spectacularize the power of the sovereign; neither a life that can be witnessed, nor a death that can be mourned" (*Ibid*:351).

These practices fall within what Bargu (2014) terms the "politics of erasure": a politics in which sovereign power asserts itself through the capacity to render bodies, violence, and history invisible. Erasure, Bargu writes, is a practice of performative invisibilization: through removal, it extends the violence of repression by erasing the traces of absence and presence. In its most radical form, it affects the very possibility of remembrance: in the absence of traces, of those holding memory, of body or person, nothing remains to be preserved. The experience of disappearance, in this framework, is "a complicated web, consisting of unforgotten knowledges, unsaid statements, inaccessible mass graves, unreturned bones, and undead deaths" (İşlekel, 2017:344). This is what Gordon describes:

"Disappearance is a complex system of repression, a thing in itself. With less noise than expected, it removes people – including and significantly those it never tortures or kills – from their familiar world, with all its small joys and pains, and transports them to an unfamiliar place where certain principles of social reality are absent. The disappeared, then, are not dead terrorists or dead children. They are people who have disappeared through enforced absence and fearful silence." (Gordon, 2008:112)

This experience concerns both the bodies of the disappeared – whose status remains uncertain – and the bodies of the dead not duly recognized as such: both share the condition of being removed from the register of what is politically recognizable. The violence of repression is structured in the suspension of bodies' status between life and death, extending the denial of recognition to the bodies themselves. Bargu introduces the concept of "necropolitical violence" to describe acts that target corpses:

“by way of their mutilation, dismemberment, denuding, desecration, dragging, and public display, the destruction of local cemeteries and other sacred spaces that are designated for communication with and commemoration of the dead, the delay, interruption, or suspension of the conduct of funerary rituals, the imposition of mass or anonymous internment, the pressure for clandestine internment, and the repression and dispersion of funeral processions for the newly dead” (Bargu 2016, 3, 9; in İşlekel, 2017:342).

Under these conditions, the “veil of disappearance,” as İşlekel (*Ibid*:341) defines it, does not always lift when the body is recovered: uncertainty remains about the circumstances of death and about responsibility; the depth of the violence inherent in accepting that loss as expendable persists, and this prevents death from being fully acknowledged and closure from being achieved.

Disappearability and the Border Regime

Following the theoretical framework outlined above, we examine the international mobility system as traversed by power dynamics that regulate the visibility and presence of bodies, and borders as concrete instruments of exclusion (Verdolini, 2025). Within the border regime, the positioning of bodies is politically constructed as inherently unequal: control targets movement and rests on the production of ontological hierarchies that establish differential levels of possibility. The right to move is distributed according to scales of value that divide bodies into subjects to be protected and subjects to be excluded – whereby the exclusion of the latter is functional to the inclusion of the former, operating according to a logic that proceeds by defining varying degrees of legality. Borders – understood as heterogeneous and mobile assemblages of state and non-state actors, institutions, rules, discourses, and practices (Walters, 2002; Cuttitta, 2015; Hess and Kasperek, 2017) – enact this sorting, dividing people into inside and outside according to deeply racial and classist dynamics.

Illegalised subjects are stripped of agency, presence, and rights (Gündoğdu, 2022:14), reduced to what Fanon describes as “a zone of nonbeing” (Fanon [1952] 2008: xii), which serves to “deprive them of their living presence as embodied subjects navigating and inhabiting the world with other living beings, and lock them into dehumanizing representations that undermine their efforts to individuate themselves and pursue their distinct life trajectories” (Gündoğdu, 2022:32). A substantial body of scholarship examines how border control practices – grounded in mechanisms of differential inclusion and exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) – produce juridical and social hierarchies that render illegalised persons vulnerable to precarisation and institutional violence (De Genova, 2013; Gazzotti, 2021). Illegalisation, in this sense, constitutes a form of ontological production that redefines the subject in terms of their very capacity for movement and, more profoundly, for existence.

Within regimes of movement control, repressed bodies are exposed to diverse and progressive forms of exclusion: from the denial of legal access to detention, from forced immobility to expulsion, from pushbacks to death and disappearance. These are distinct forms of absence that share the common logic of the withdrawal of the subject from the sphere of recognition. Through the case of Morocco, the subsequent chapters will offer an opportunity to examine how this process of subjection is constructed within border politics. Here, however, the focus is on how, within the politics of domination, exclusion, and bodily control, certain bodies are structurally exposed to the risk of disappearing at the border.

Within this progression, the concept of *disappearability*, introduced by Laakkonen (2022), finds its place. Studying deaths and disappearances during migration, Laakkonen observes that disappearability is not the event of disappearance itself, but the condition that precedes and enables it: “a pressure towards

certain types of precarity and threat, which limits the horizon of possibilities available to racialised migrants" (2022:1). Disappearability thus designates structural vulnerability to vanishing: the process through which a person is reduced, on the basis of their socio-political position, race, gender, class, and related factors, to the condition of being able to disappear without that disappearance being deemed worthy of consideration.

So formulated, disappearability inscribes itself within a broader conceptual constellation developed in critical border and migration studies, which interrogates the processes through which the structural vulnerability of migrant bodies is politically and socially constructed. The concepts of deportability (De Genova, 2002) and detainability (García Hernández, 2015; De Genova, 2019) refer to the constructed conditions of exposure to forced transfer and detention as diffuse disciplinary forces that shape the behaviours and movements of migrant bodies, in turn producing their governability, their exploitability, and ultimately their political subordination. Within this framework, disappearability adds a dimension of permanent existential precarity, designating vulnerability to the definitive removal of bodies, the condition in which a subject may not only be removed or confined, but may cease to be present without that absence generating any recognisable trace.

The forms of exclusion operating concretely and structurally through the border actively construct this condition. The precarious positioning of migrant life is produced through multiple forms of violence (see Galtung, 1969) intertwining and mutually reinforcing one another: the direct violence of the border (Cuttitta and Last, 2020), the structural violence inscribed in legal and socio-economic systems (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012), and the epistemic and symbolic violence that normalises and legitimises the oppressive systems (Aradau and Canzutti, 2025).

I.V. For an Hauntology of Borders

The logical progression of this chapter brings us to a point where we have the elements needed to propose the epistemic framework through which I intend to approach stories of disappearance at the border. I have privileged an approach that understands disappearances as the product of policies of exclusion and erasure of undesired bodies. In this framework, disappearance cannot be reduced to a private event, nor understood as concerning only the physical – and eventually social – absence of the disappeared person. It is rather necessary to foreground the political character of the phenomenon, which, in the case of the border regime, is grounded in racist and violent systems of power and operates as a practice of bodily governance and domination.

Disappearances and deaths are read here as direct products of the border regime, operating through both material violence (Cuttitta and Last, 2019) and what has been theorised as slow violence (Nixon, 2011; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020): the political and socio-economic processes of precarisation (Butler, 2004), disappearability (Laakkonen, 2022), and political abandonment (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020) through which certain lives are devalued and rendered disposable at the border. Within this framework, border deaths and disappearances are understood as coherent and predictable outcomes of the policies governing international mobility and their systematic enforcement (Last et al., 2017; Weber and Pickering, 2011; De León, 2015). The border, within this analytical framework, is attended to as a space of violence production, generating the conditions for haunting itself: the ghosts of the border are the effects of the structures of power shaping and traversing it.

At the foundation of [border] hauntology lies the recognition that the violence structuring it exceeds both the attempts to hide it and the singular episodes in which it is enacted. It persists in places,

inscribes itself in violated bodies, structures relations, and extends across social, cultural, and political formations far removed from the border itself. It sediments, quietly yet consequentially, across spaces and times, accruing in the residues of unresolved histories and unanswered demands. It is in the possibility of entering into relation with these residues – with their attempts at reappearance and their claims for resolution – that the generative potential of a hauntological approach resides. Morrison (1987) names *rememory* the persistence of things in the places where they occurred, their attachment to locations, objects, and atmospheres which, when traversed, retell and re-manifest themselves to those who pass through – as though *nothing ever truly dies*. To engage with the returning repressed is to undertake the critical work of reassembling a fractured, suppressed, and dispersed history, and to read it together as a collective matter that traverse past, present, and future configurations of power and recognition.

The border – the articulated assemblage of relations, places, bodies, and temporal interactions – constitutes the space in which this study positions itself to apprehend the sedimentation of the violence that shapes and traverses it. The intention is to trace the contours of a history that speaks not only of oppression but also of its contestation; a history whose traces are inscribed in bodies – present or absent – and in which the conditions of alternative possibilities can be discerned. It is from the fissures that this violence exposes that the imagination of relational, social, and political alternatives becomes thinkable.

If the function of ghosts is to demand justice, the intention of this study is to listen to the ghosts produced by the border and to dwell within their manifestations, attending to what they communicate regarding the political regime they inhabit and contest. The analytical gaze aims to turn toward what remains in the wake of disappearance, engaging with the attempts at apparition mediated by the accounts of relatives and those close to the disappeared, and by the people that experience disappearability themselves. The living become agents of reappearance, constructing relational dynamics, practices, and imaginaries through which they work to restore visibility to – or, as some scholars put it, to make *reappear* (Huttunen and Perl, 2023; Butler, 2015) – what the border's politics work to erase. Through memory practices, intimate bonds of kinship, and public practices of protest, the disappeared are kept present: refusing the closure that disappearance imposes, those who remain insist on their loved ones' inscription within the public and political domain, generating forms of claim-making that reverberate across civil societies and national and transnational political structures (Butler and Spivak, 2007). It is in the tension between visibility and invisibility that the re-politicisation of the experience of disappearance and death at the border is played out, when, as Rancière writes (1999: 28–30),

[it] breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined. [...] Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.

Haunting allows us to inhabit the dynamics of repression and resistance at the border from within the interstice between what is visible and what is not, because the ghost is "one of the ways in which we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us." (Gordon, 2008: xvi) Attending to this tension – hence, "bringing ghosts into critical border studies" (Ferdoussi, 2022: 33) – gives us the possibility of "unpacking ontological borders" (Ibid.: 35), dwelling within the space between visibility and invisibility as a generative site in which both the exercise of violence and

the conditions of its contestation take shape and find expression. The ethnographic itinerary proposed here seeks to inhabit this tension, traversing heterogeneous stories and accompanying a movement articulated across three analytical passages.

The first concerns the border as a space of incomplete removal, examined in its spectral dimension: a space lived and inhabited by absence, death, and disappearance, producing trajectories, dynamics, subjectivities, and generative relational configurations. The second attends to the experiences and practices through which visibility and presence are reclaimed for stories of disappearance and death at the border, through material, affective, and political practices, that themselves come to haunt the oppressive regime from which border violence originates. The third, finally, interrogates how these spectral relations open onto political testimony and the possibility of contesting and transforming regimes of violence – how the returning repressed opens *the scene to the possible* (Verdolini, 2025).

How the Border is Haunting

Inhabiting the hauntological dimension of the border allows us to observe how border violence extends beyond the border itself and how, through the residues of death and disappearance, it produces an experience of haunting for those who enter into relation with it.

Within the materiality of the border regime, the disappearance of a body in movement generates residues – both material and immaterial – that preserve traces of those who attempted to cross and are no longer present. Communities without bodies to mourn on one side; the tangible marks of crossings and of violence along migratory routes; the presence of unidentified bodies on the other side of the border: together, these constitute a geography of absence in which, across distant shores, the absence of a person who once existed and has now seemingly vanished is inscribed. Along the scattered, incoherent coordinates of this geography, diverse persons, places, and objects find themselves in relation with the absence and the residues of the presence of the disappeared – with their history, or with the absence of one. In this experience we encounter family members and friends engaged in search, fishermen retrieving human remains from the sea, border authorities concealing them, solidarity actors looking for them, migrants relating to objects left behind by crossing attempts and with the possibility to disappear themselves: this geography speaks of heterogeneous actors touched by the experience of disappearance which, transcending the limits of physicality, moves to implicate disconnected points within a single experience. Hauntology allows us to observe how border violence propagates along the social and affective trajectories that migration produces, reaching relational contexts and spaces geographically distant from the border itself. Each of these contexts carries its traces in distinct forms, yet all are bound together by their relation to this unjust absence – a disappeared person who continues to act upon the world they once inhabited, remains that demand recognition, stories that have found no closure. It is in this capacity to propagate – to haunt people, relations, and places – that the specifically spectral nature of border violence resides, continuing to shape subjectivities, practices, and imaginaries across the entire geography of absence it produces.

How the Border is Haunted

I then turn to examine how diverse actors – among them family members, travel companions, and solidarity workers – engage actively with disappearance and with the disappeared. Attending to the processes through which the presence of the disappeared is kept alive and claimed – through ritual, material, affective, and political practices – allows us to observe how this relational engagement produces an articulated set of political needs, interrogations, and demands. In response to the politics of removal inherent in the border regime, different actors develop practices that claim visibility and

knowledge of the disappeared: from an intimate dimension of relation with absence, epistemic and political practices of memory-keeping, denunciation, and contestation unfold. In this sense, haunting takes shape as a relational and contestatory practice through which people on the move, family members, and other implicated subjects keep insistently open the demand for justice and truth, refuse to acquiesce in the erasure of recognition owed to their loved ones, and insist upon their inscription within the public and political domain, challenging, in so doing, the state power that produced their disappearance. This study seeks to show how the haunted come, in turn, to haunt the border regime itself.

This process – which acquires political character insofar as it contests invisibility while intervening in the sphere of the visible – reveals the formation of political subjectivities forged through the experience of disappearance. At the same time, it restores agency to the disappeared themselves, who, through the claims advanced in their name, continue to act upon the world. What emerges is a process of profound negotiation between the subjectivity of those who mourn and those who are mourned, between the agency of the living and the one of the disappeared, and between an ethics of care for the absent and the political commitments it generates and transforms.

Haunting as Testimony and – *Maybe* – Possibility

In this sense, haunting constitutes a form of political testimony: it renders visible the contradictions of the border regime and the persistence of its violence, and in rendering them visible, demands that they be confronted. To attend to the spectral apparitions of the border is to recognise the violence that produced them and, simultaneously, to demand its end. It sustains those who engage with its apparitions in a state of agitation and vigilance, while "deferring resolution of the immediate or general crisis to a utopian horizon" (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 211). The utopian horizon toward which it draws us is grounded in the necessity of interrogating the border regime and the political, social, and symbolic processes that traverse it – offering the occasion to conceive of them otherwise, and to rethink the very concepts of truth and justice in the time of border disappearances. It is in this sense that border hauntology offers itself not only as an analytical instrument, but as an ethical and political posture: a mode of remaining with stories of disappearance that does not seek to foreclose them, but to be traversed by what they demand – holding open the possibility of re-imagining and transforming the world we inhabit.

II. Inhabiting the Field: Methods, Movement, and Reflexivity

Introduction

This chapter develops the methodological framework of the research through three interconnected dimensions. It first reflects on what it means to conduct an ethnography of absence, and presents the tools mobilised: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and participatory art-based methods, including four Theatre of the Oppressed workshops. It then traces the trajectories of a multi-sited field, introducing the actors involved and the geographies of absence that connect them. Finally, it situates the researcher within the field through sustained reflection on positionality, contexts, and relationships involved.

II.I. Ethnography of Absence: Reflections and Tools

Observing Absence

Researching disappearances and deaths requires to engage – both ethnographically and analytically – with the inherent unboundedness and undetectability of what is being studied. Methodologically, this translates into relinquishing the presence of evidence and concrete coordinates, which have fallen into inaccessibility or unavailability: what remains at the centre of observation is absence itself.

Reflecting on what it means to conduct an ethnography of absence (Navaro, 2020), I am drawn back to an episode from my theatrical workshop experience in Morocco – specifically, to the configuration of bodies and representation that characterised the second workshop in Rabat: the absence of actors on stage. This workshop had not initially figured in my research trajectory, emerging later at the request of participants from the previous one. The concrete possibility of continuing the collective theatrical work had been then negotiated with external actors – in the search for funding to cover costs – and discussed collectively with the group, eventually bringing us back to the stage three months after the first experience. The first workshop day had been marked by intense expressive activity, inhabited by active, moving bodies that charged the space with the performance of border violence and life in transit. Yet only one of the eleven participants showed up on the second day. After another day of absence, the workshop was suspended. Despite various suppositions, Dawd – the theatre facilitator – and I could not understand why, after a long period of negotiation and a collective will to begin, the stage had remained empty. In those days, we experienced a profound failure of communication with the participants. I remember the feeling of waiting, sitting on a bench, without the tools to comprehend that withdrawal from representation, to define it, to draw perspectives or conclusions. And yet that empty stage appeared to me charged with meaning. What was it telling us?

Researching disappearances means relating to something that exists in its apparent negation: the presence of absence is part of, and shapes, the ethnographic experience. It means being in constant relation with absence – with something that was, and should be, there, but is not, or at least is not visible. It means engaging with people and places permeated by this non-appearance, in constant contact with it – with the edges of that stage, with a door left open, with someone sitting not knowing how long they will have to wait.

I recognise a similar feeling – more acute – in some ethnographic encounters. In my field diary, for instance, I recount my visit to the home of Noura, sister of the missing Mohamed:

One thing strikes me about this visit: Mohamed's non-presence. When I think about it, what comes to mind is Noura's living room, where I sat talking with her and her grandmother. Next to the room where we later lay down with little A. to watch the evening television series. These walls soaked in Mohamed's history, who is no longer here. He too used to sit on those sofas. There is a photo of Noura's father, who died last year from an illness: he is still there, in this way – his body is buried, Noura speaks of him and becomes emotional, blows a kiss to the photo and another to the sky. Where is Mohamed? His photo is not on the wall. He is nowhere.

For us ethnographers, accustomed to being in the field and engaging with what is present, restitution becomes difficult. Observation necessarily remains incomplete, as the ethnographic materials that would render the field "positively researchable through their visibility, tangibility, and existence" (Navaro, 2020:162) are missing. In this context, knowledge itself often remains inaccessible, elusive, contested: the very possibility of knowing is called into question, as a central dimension of the experience of disappearance. What remains are "absences, erasures, traces, fragments, ruins, remnants, silences, gaps, and voids" (Idem).

The ethnographic field I conducted in Morocco is traversed by a pervasive sense of uncertainty that shapes its dynamics throughout. Is he alive or dead? Was he killed by the police or did he fall into the river? Will we receive news or not? Is he in prison or has he been abducted? Uncertainty structures the narrative, which is dense with attempts at interpretation, suppositions, fears, and hopes. A disappearance produces not only the absence of a person, but also the absence of knowledge (Kivilahti and Huttunen, 2023; Navaro, 2020; Tecca, 2023), under the constant threat of irrecoverability of the story. This condition of structural uncertainty produces significant repercussions not only on the ethnographic relation in the strict sense, but more broadly on methodological choices and on the ways in which I, as a researcher, can – or cannot – situate myself in relation to the field. I write again after visiting Noura:

I enter Mohamed's home. I never knew him, but now I am with his family. My mind rationalises: I tell myself he disappeared in a shipwreck almost a year ago, on one of the most dangerous routes from Morocco, and that it is very unlikely he is still alive. [...] And yet there is the tension of hope that he might still be alive – a hope his family keeps alive by speaking of him in the present tense, considering the possibilities of where he might be: in prison, somewhere in Spain. I feel their desperation so acutely that I want to leave. And now the expectation that Mohamed will walk back through that door and start playing with the canaries again.

In attempting to analyse the stories gathered during fieldwork, I find myself immersed in the uncertainty that constitutes them: a proliferation of questions in the face of a structural difficulty in obtaining answers. I cycle through anguish, scepticism, hope. This uncertainty inhabits the analytical process from within: the stories insist, return, imposing a continuous reorientation of my ethnographic gaze. I position myself before my interlocutors – relatives, travel companions, friends of the missing person – seeking to observe the forms through which the disappearance is narrated and lived, assuming the other's experience as an interpretive prism. I then attempt to reconstruct the tracing efforts, the reports, the claims – but I am confronted with the multiplication of doubts, questions, with the continuous oscillation between the need for intelligibility and the possibility that such intelligibility may be unattainable.

I shift, then; I change posture. I begin from the names of the missing, attempting to reconstruct their stories, the details that would allow me to figure the person who has disappeared, the journey – in all its possible meanings – they undertook, followed by the most detailed reconstruction possible of the last contact, the last news. But I encounter the unknowability of the story, the infinity of possible continuations, the multiplication of partial suppositions and reconstructions, the impossibility of reaching narrative closure. What remains is an indefiniteness that repeats and extends – something that persists, stubbornly unfinished.

To practise an anthropology of absence (Navaro, 2020; Bille et al., 2010; Mittermaier, 2019) means, in this sense, pushing the discipline towards its own limits (Mittermaier, 2019:3): it asks us to inhabit the unknowability of the story as a structuring element of the research process itself, to remain in the observation of what cannot be known (Navaro, 2020). This implies the effort to resist the positivist impulse to translate the unknowable into something knowable, to resolve absence by reconciling it with more familiar categories. Rather, it asks us to give voice to its uncertain wandering – to what it produces, to the effects it generates in the world of those who relate to it from a position of presence. It invites us to dwell in the threshold zone structured between the world of the present and the world of the absent, in the relation that holds them in tension without resolving it. From this perspective, the incompleteness of data, the contradictoriness of stories, the inaccessibility of places and people represent the very form the field assumes when its object is a disappearance. Taking unknowability as a starting point, the impossibility of research opens up different ways of researching, of unravelling phenomena through what they produce.

In the study of mass violence, Navaro proposes what she terms counter methodologies, defined as "practices against the odds of the researchable vis-à-vis lives that have been exterminated and lifeworlds that have been extinguished" (Navaro, 2020:162). The absence of evidence, she reflects, does not paralyse research but impels it to experiment with alternative methods, practices, and imaginaries to render visible what eludes direct observation. In the field of border disappearances and deaths, this orientation has translated into the study of the presence of absence through traces, memories, and political and social practices (Soto, 2018; Hamilakis, 2018; Perl, 2017; Schindel and Colombo, 2014; De León, 2015): methodologies that, proceeding from material and immaterial remains, attempt to reconstruct the experience of border violence and to render visible the dynamics through which it reproduces itself and generates effects.

Research Tools

This work engages with stories of disappearance and death at the border, with the intention of tracing the political, intimate, and social processes that surround them. On one hand, it follows how violence is produced within the experience of disappearance and extends across bodies, relationships, imaginaries, and spaces; on the other, how this violence is navigated, elaborated, and contested. If absence constitutes the centre of this inquiry, the ethnographic gaze orients itself towards what constructs it and what it produces: the trajectories through which it continues to inhabit and generate effects in the world of the living.

Methodologically, classical ethnographic tools have been combined with participatory and art-based methods. Participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) constituted the primary means of access to the field: extended across time and through diverse contexts, it allowed me to follow the dynamics of life in relation to the border – the practices of waiting and searching, the forms of sociality, political engagement, and intimacy that are built around absence. Semi-structured and in-depth

interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) offered a space for narration and the restitution of experience with disappearance, involving people on the move, relatives of the missing, and civil society actors. Family members and travel companions proved to be the principal custodians of their missing loved ones' stories: bearers of memory, protagonists of the efforts to search and claim, and interlocutors through whom disappearance becomes both narrative and political practice.

These tools are complemented by participatory and art-based methods (Leavy, 2015; Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2018), chosen in response to the difficulty of accessing experiences that resist the linearity of narrative and direct representation. In particular, four workshops inspired by the practices of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) were conducted with people on the move and solidarity actors, allowing for the collective exploration of dimensions of border experience that are otherwise less accessible through conventional discursive tools. Theatre of the Oppressed, with its vocation to make the stage a space of elaboration and transformation (Boal, 1979; Rohd, 1998), offered in this context a form of relation and restitution consistent with an ethical orientation towards collaborative research (Lassiter, 2005): within this space, it became possible to analyse imaginaries, perspectives, and lived experiences in their embodied and relational dimensions (Sjöberg and D'Onofrio, 2020).

The Theatre of the Oppressed Workshops

Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979, 2004) is a set of interactive dramaturgical practices aimed at critical reflection on situations of oppression. It seeks to construct a performative space in which the perceptions, knowledges, beliefs, practices, and behaviours of a group of people – sharing a common lived experience – are brought to light. Starting from the recognition of power dynamics operating at different levels, Theatre of the Oppressed proposes the active elaboration of practices of denunciation and resistance to oppression, oriented towards emancipatory possibilities: the scenic figuration of situations of social injustice invites subjects not to adapt to them, but to *transform* them (Ibid.). A workshop conducted at the border thus takes shape as a device for observing the different systems of oppression produced or reinforced by the border apparatus – a chain involving migrants, solidarity actors, and institutional agents. Starting from the recognition of such dynamics, the group elaborates practices of resistance and response, opening spaces of imagination and possible transformation.

Within the framework of this research project, Theatre of the Oppressed was mobilised as a methodological tool through the organisation and co-facilitation – together with Davide Dawd Parisi, theatre practitioner – of four theatrical workshops: two in Rabat and one in Oujda (with people on the move), and one in Tangier (with solidarity actors), conducted between March 2023 and February 2025.

The workshops served multiple purposes. On one hand, they enabled the creation of spaces of sharing, in which the workshop frame constituted a protected context for the externalisation of experiences of lived violence (Maggie et al., 2018), difficult to access through conventional interviews. The collective dimension of the group, built through shared tools aimed at making it progressively safer, facilitated the emergence of sensitive content that tends to find little room in more conventional forms of research. On the other hand, the workshops made it possible to respond to difficulties of field access linked both to contextual factors and to structural limitations connected to the research object. On a practical level, the constraints on ethnographic observation rendered inaccessible a series of places and situations in public space – the border above all – which the theatrical device instead rendered representable and narratable.

Theatrical expression created a space for sharing imaginaries, narratives, and aspirations, moving beyond the limits of verbal communication through the language of the body. Central to this

experience is the imaginative capacity of the participants (Wrentschur, 2021), which the collective dimension welcomes into a space for the development of symbols, narratives, and new imaginaries. In this sense, Social Theatre can be understood as a participatory research approach, in which dialogue, sharing, negotiation, and association give rise to co-constructed narratives. Methodologically, the conduct of research is decentralised, proposing a deconstruction of the classical relationship between researcher and researched (Liamputtong, 2007). It makes it possible to construct a process that becomes a space of collective critical reflection, in a transformative trajectory that restores agency to the subjects involved. By translating individual experiences into theatre and reflecting on them through artistic practices, both performers and audience can creatively intervene in the unfolding of the scene in multiple ways. The emancipatory process takes shape in the attempt to transform representations; in these encounters between identities, it becomes possible to observe how they are interwoven with forms of social action (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008).

II.II. Trajectories and Actors of a Mobile Fieldwork

Ethnography of Routes and Disappearances

This research engaged with a field of mobile geographies, porous borders, and shifting, non-linear trajectories. Within this framework, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) proved a necessary mode of inquiry for navigating a dispersed and delocalised field. Migratory routes traverse multiple spaces in non-linear ways, extending beyond the crossing points themselves – taking shape in movement and transforming constantly (Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Lipphardt and Schwarz, 2018), dispersing and redefining themselves in interruptions, sedimenting in the bodies and memories of those who travel them or relate to them from a distance. To study the disappearances produced along these routes means, in a certain sense, to pursue what is no longer there – to reconstruct paths from their interruptions, to give form to stories that resist narrative linearity, and to observe what is generated within such ruptures (Lovato, 2025). Engaging with the research field of movement and disappearances thus requires encountering spaces, actors, and experiences that relate to migratory routes from different positions and vantage points – distant yet deeply interconnected – within a geography that, shaped by absence, is composed of uncertain points, attempts at reconstruction, and delocalised relations.

Within this framework, the movements that dictated the trajectories of this research were essentially two. The first was geographical, driven by the intention to encounter and follow specific nodes of the migratory routes through an ethnography of border, transit, and departure spaces. This included, on one hand, engagement with the spaces of movement – traversed by sub-Saharan and Moroccan people on the move – that is, the sites of transit and settlement interactions, border spaces and sites of encounter with the frontier, places of waiting and departure. On the other hand, in the work with families of Moroccan nationals who disappeared at the border, the geographical dimension encompassed visits to the places of origin and residence of family members, outlined more broadly in the section dedicated to the actors involved.

The starting point of the ethnographic experience (see Figure 1) was Rabat, a structural node of migratory movements: a place of departure, settlement, and transit, where mobility sediments itself in the biographies of those who inhabit it temporarily, waiting to leave or unable to do so. From Rabat, the field progressively expanded following the trajectories of the research interlocutors' movements. To the north, Tangier represents one of the points of greatest density within the border system: a port city where the aspirations of many to cross converge, and where the maritime border towards Spain

becomes an embodied experience of waiting, attempt, and risk. A few kilometres away, Ceuta – a Spanish enclave on African soil – materialises in extreme form the exclusionary logic of the European border and constitutes one of the symbolic sites where the possibility of disappearance is constructed and produced. Moving inland, Beni Mellal and Casablanca are cities not sitting on the border but traversing it in diffuse ways: crossroads of departures, returns, and transits, places where migratory biographies intertwine with those who have stayed behind, where families wait and mobility projects are built and dismantled. To the south, Agadir and Laayoune – in the occupied territories of Western Sahara – occupy a crucial position on the Atlantic route towards the Canary Islands, the most heavily used at the time of the research: sites of departure and transit, but also of forced settlement for those unable to continue. To the east, Oujda sits on the formally closed border with Algeria: a crossing point between movements of entry and exit, departure, settlement, and return. Across the different cities, the research was not confined to urban centres: in several contexts, the field extended to peripheral areas and surrounding villages – spaces where the dynamics of mobility and the border take on often distinct forms, in dialogue with those of the frontier spaces and cities.

In each of these locations, the violence of the border regime assumes specific forms and intensities, distributed unequally between Moroccan and sub-Saharan citizens according to racist and class-based logics, producing configurations of blocked, diverted, or accelerated mobility that constitute the structural backdrop within which disappearances occur. Fieldwork was structured around relations with actors among people on the move, family members, and solidarity actors, as well as the interactions between them – in an attempt to retrace the nodes of a geography of absence, where disappearances are produced, diffuse, searched for, and contested, and to understand what this absence generates in the bodies, relationships, and spaces of those who confront it from a position of presence.



Fig. 1 Fieldwork Map

To these movements a geographical extension towards the Balkan route is added, which brought the field as far as Croatia. This extension arose from a necessity that emerged from the field itself: two of the families encountered in Morocco had lost their sons along this route, whose bodies had been found on Croatian territory and repatriated from there. Following the trajectories of the disappeared – and the mobilisation of their families – required extending the ethnographic gaze towards the places where those stories had been interrupted and where part of their traces remained deposited. In this sense, Croatia does not figure as a second autonomous field, but as a node of the same route, accessible

through a mode of inquiry consistent with the multi-sited ethnographic logic orienting the entire project. Between September and October 2024, a visiting period at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb provided a base from which to deepen encounters and relations within the Croatian context. This enabled access to local solidarity networks engaged with migration along the Balkan route, as well as visits to the border spaces connected to the stories of the two missing individuals. The institutional dimension of the visiting period facilitated entry into a field that would otherwise have been difficult to access within a short timeframe. The Institute represented, in this sense, far more than a logistical base: as an actor with both an academic and a solidarity presence in the field of migration along the Balkan route, it offered mediation, accompaniment, and legitimation that made a brief but dense fieldwork period possible. Particularly central was its role in my relationship with the families of the disappeared, built upon pre-existing relations of trust with local networks and with the families themselves. Despite the limited duration of this immersion, this segment of the research made it possible to follow the trajectories of disappearances beyond the borders of Morocco, to encounter the transnational dimension of the search for bodies and truth, and to situate the stories collected within the broader geography of routes and solidarity.

The second movement traversed, in a combined and transversal manner, two spatial registers: the intimate and the public spheres. On one hand, observation developed within domestic and private spaces – homes, neighbourhoods, reception settings, informal spaces of sociality – inhabited by the experience of the border and of absence. On the other, the field included public spaces traversed by people on the move, solidarity actors, and family members themselves engaged in processes of information-seeking and practices of claim-making. This movement was structured around the necessity of entering into the dynamics that shape the relation between the visible and the invisible, between the private and the political – dynamics that run constitutively through the field of migration and border disappearances. Observing these spaces meant attending to how bodies move within them and become visible – or are rendered invisible –, to how access to public space is negotiated, granted, or denied, and to how this negotiation of presence is differentially structured according to one's position in the field and to factors such as legal status, origin, racial identity, and gender. To this register are added mobilisations, conferences, associative meetings, and demonstrations, moments in which public presence assumes an explicitly political and assertive dimension. The movement between these two planes constituted one of the methodologically most productive tensions of the research, making it possible to grasp how private experiences articulate with practices of claim-making and the negotiation of visibility as political dynamics.

Field Subjects and Relations

a) Sub-Saharan People on the Move

The ethnographic work with sub-Saharan communities developed primarily in Taqadoun, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Rabat. Initial access was mediated by an actor belonging to an international ecclesiastical organisation, but quickly gave way to an autonomous relationship with Tely, a young man from Guinea Conakry who proved to be a key contact and an invaluable research companion, introducing me to the field, facilitating encounters with many of its inhabitants, and accompanying me through significant portions of the research. From this first encounter, a network of relations with the Guinean community of the neighbourhood gradually took shape – composed predominantly of young men between the ages of sixteen and forty, largely from Guinea Conakry and Pular-speaking – which consolidated over the years of fieldwork and served as a constant point of reference throughout the research.

Observation of these spaces made it possible to grasp not only the internal dynamics of the sub-Saharan community, but also its relationship with the wider neighbourhood and with the Moroccan community that inhabits it. Taqadoum is a space of cohabitation and tension: a place where the boundaries of presence, access, and visibility are negotiated on a daily basis. Relations between sub-Saharan and Moroccan communities are structured along multiple axes – economic, social, spatial – producing configurations in which solidarity and exploitation, coexistence and oppression, coexist and overlap. To this is added the dimension of surveillance, which characterises Taqadoum as a site where the dynamics of control over black migrant bodies in Morocco condense, shaping the boundaries of accessibility and safety for those who inhabit it in an irregular condition.

The interviews involved people occupying different roles within the community and the economic and social life of the neighbourhood – from recently arrived young men to more locally rooted figures, from those managing small commercial activities to those living in conditions of greater precarity and dependency – allowing for a rendering of the internal stratification and an understanding of the interactions that sustain, traverse, and shape the transit migratory experience. Observation also included collective moments connected to the preparation and the imaginary of the journey, which conveyed the profoundly social and shared dimension of the migratory experience: here it takes shape as a collectively lived project, discussed, imagined, and partly constructed within the community. The relationship with this community also made possible the organisation of participatory research moments, including two Theatre of the Oppressed workshop. It is within this context that some of the stories of disappearance at the centre of this research emerged. For ethical reasons, it had not been my intention to directly involve people on the move in research on disappearances, by avoiding soliciting personal narratives on the subject. Yet the theme surfaced organically, within the free narration of migratory experience – as part of a shared experience, known and feared by those living in transit in Taqadoum.

The ethnographic experience with sub-Saharan communities progressively extended to other contexts and cities, following the central nodes in the dynamics between movement, border oppression, and solidarity. An ethnographic trajectory unfolded over time across Oujda and Casablanca, enabling encounters with highly differentiated situations: migrants in transit and people more stably settled in Morocco, individuals engaged in socio-professional integration pathways and people in irregular conditions, men and women at different moments of their migratory journey. Central to this trajectory were two migrant assistance organisations offering spaces of reception and support: inhabiting their daily life for limited periods made it possible to observe solidarity practices from within, to follow the movements that traverse them, and to build relations of exchange with some of the people on the move who passed through or found in them a stable point of reference. In a more punctual and less in-depth manner, the research also touched on the Agadir area, where observation included villages in which sub-Saharan migrants are employed in seasonal agricultural work: this dimension of sub-Saharan presence in Morocco is less visible in narratives on mobility, but significant for understanding the forms of precarious settlement and labour exploitation that the border regime produces.

Interlocutors came from very diverse geographical and biographical backgrounds – Sudan, South Sudan, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea Conakry – with a predominantly male composition: the women encountered in the course of work with sub-Saharan communities were a minority, out of a total of several dozen encounters. Ages ranged from approximately fifteen to forty years old.

b) Families of Moroccan Missing Migrants

A central group of interlocutors was constituted by the families of missing migrants. The research developed an in-depth and temporally extended relationship with the relatives of ten Moroccan nationals who disappeared in the course of migration. The missing individuals at the centre of this research are young men – aged between nineteen and thirty-two at the time of their disappearance – who went missing along different routes: mainly, the Atlantic route, the Mediterranean route, and the Balkan route, individually or within groups migrating together.

Twelve family members were involved in interviews and in a continuous relationship, carefully cultivated over the entire fieldwork period: nine women and three men, connected to the missing person primarily through sibling or parental ties. In terms of age, the youngest interlocutor was nineteen at the time of the first meeting, while the others ranged between thirty and sixty years old. In terms of geographical (see Figure 2) and social background, the group is heterogeneous: the origins of the interlocutors – indicated in the table and on the map – span the north-eastern region, the inland areas of the country, the main urban centres, and the border zones, reflecting the territorial distribution of irregular Moroccan migration. From the standpoint of social position, the large majority come from subaltern and marginalised contexts; exceptions are two interlocutors belonging to the middle-upper class, both coming from one of the country's central cities. For many, contact with associative networks and practices of claim-making had come about precisely as a consequence of their relative's disappearance, taking shape as a form of politicisation induced by grief. Finally, one relative of a young missing person is part of the Moroccan diaspora in Europe.



Fig. 2 Origin of the families participating in the study.

The following table summarises the profiles of the twelve family members primarily involved.

Table 1 Actors involved in research overview.

Case	No. of family members	Relationship	Age range	Region of origin
1	2	parents	50–60	Casablanca-Settat / Fès-Meknès
2	2	cousins	40–50	Casablanca-Settat
3	1	sister	30–40	Béni Mellal-Khénifra
4	1	sister	~20	Guelmim-Oued Noun
5	1	sister	40	Rabat-Salé-Kénitra
6	1	brother	30–40	diaspora (Europe)
7	1	mother	40	Rabat-Salé-Kénitra
8	1	mother	50	Oriental
9	1	mother	40	Casablanca-Settat
10	1	sister	30	Oriental

Access to these interlocutors was gained through various channels: the mediation of civil society actors, contacts established through social media, and the progressive expansion of the network through the relations that families themselves maintain with one another. It is worth noting that the majority of those engaged in sustained dialogue had already rendered themselves publicly visible in the search for their loved ones – through social media campaigns, associative networks, and public mobilisations: this prior exposure facilitated initial contact while simultaneously orienting the relational and political character of the research encounter. Alongside this core of in-depth relations, the research included more punctual encounters – in associative spaces, during conferences, and at collective events – with a further ten or so families of missing migrants, who enriched the overall picture without giving rise to a continuous relationship.

c) Civil Society Actors

The third group of interlocutors traverses the civil and institutional space of migration governance and solidarity. This is a composite and internally differentiated field, which the research sought to read not as a homogeneous whole but as a spectrum of positionings in relation to the border regime, distributed along an axis ranging from the most informal and radical forms of presence and organisation to the most institutionalised ones. For security reasons, the organisations and activists involved in the research are not named here: only some will appear in the text. These are realities heterogeneous in composition and rootedness (Gazzotti, 2019, 2021): within this space, very different orientations towards the migration question coexist, ranging from welfare-oriented management to political denunciation, from integration into the institutional apparatus of control to what Bachelet and Hagan (2023) define as subversive solidarity – actively challenging the structural conditions producing vulnerability and death at the borders. The research sought to move across this variety, privileging contact with those actors who occupy a critical position in relation to the border regime, while not ignoring the complexity of intermediate positions.

On one end, self-organised collectives and networks operating autonomously and without formal registration appear alongside independent activists, journalists, researchers, and lawyers working at the margins of, or independently from, formal structures. At an intermediate level, there are local organisations – registered and relatively structured associations – with orientations ranging from

welfare management to political advocacy. At the other end appear internationally funded organisations, characterised by more consolidated structures, defined roles, and more formalised organisational dynamics. Their relationship with the mobility governance apparatus is often more integrated, or in any case more constrained by institutional mandate logics and by the funding they receive, which conditions their margins of action while not excluding internal tensions and differentiated positionings with respect to control policies.

These actors are distinguished not only by their degree of formalisation, but also by the nature of their intervention – political, humanitarian, social, or welfare-oriented – and by the type of relationship they maintain with central power. For associations physically present in Morocco, this relationship is often ambivalent and negotiated, within a civil society space that is heavily restricted and surveilled. In Morocco, the space of action available to organisations working with migrants is subject to direct and pervasive mechanisms of control, which condition not only practices but also the discourses publicly available, producing configurations in which critical autonomy and institutional dependency frequently coexist within the same organisations. This aspect will be examined more closely in a later section.

Relations with these actors were built over time, facilitated by Rabat's position as the gravitational centre of associative and institutional life on migration issues in Morocco: a city where many organisations are headquartered and where national and international meetings, conferences, and coordination moments between transnational networks converge. This made it possible, from a single urban context, to access a variety of actors operating at very different points along the migratory routes – on the borders, in transit locations, in cities of settlement – and who bring with them perspectives and practices forged in specific and often very distant contexts. Overall, the field included encounters with at least fifty people among volunteers, activists, and practitioners engaged on migration issues and, in particular, on the question of border disappearances: a heterogeneous composition in terms of background and positioning, including Moroccan, sub-Saharan, and European actors operating on Moroccan territory or in direct relation with its border apparatus.

Furthermore, the relationship with Moroccan civil society and activism extended more broadly to the field of human rights in Morocco. A specific and particularly significant dimension concerned activism and mobilisation around the issue of disappearances: on one hand, the work of movements, associations, collectives, and researchers engaged with the question of enforced disappearances in the Moroccan context – an issue with a dense political history, tied to mechanisms of state repression; on the other, the advocacy networks that have formed around other forms of disappearance, distinct in context and dynamics.

The work with the various actors took different forms: individual meetings, participant observation in associative spaces, but also participation in public and private gatherings, conferences, and demonstrations organised by Moroccan and European civil society, in which the question of migratory disappearances was discussed, named, and situated within broader political frameworks. These contexts also enabled encounters with transnational networks active on these issues, connecting actors based in Morocco, in Europe, and in migrants' countries of origin, operating across different geographical scales and weaving together the local and international dimensions of claim-making. In this domain, the research developed relations with five political organisations – of which only one was international, against four Moroccan ones – based both in Morocco and in Europe, whose perspectives offered a broader analytical and political framework within which to situate the stories encountered in the field, making it possible to place migratory disappearances within a wider Moroccan genealogy of disappearance as a form of rights violation.

Making sense of the field

The extended duration of fieldwork made possible a process of reflection and analysis distributed across different phases. I arrived in Morocco with the intention of studying border disappearances, but the research trajectory that followed did not lead immediately to this theme. The initial period was dedicated to understanding the broader context: migratory routes, the diverse positionings within civil society, and the meanings that movement, solidarity, and the border assumed in the lived experiences of those I was encountering. Encounters in Taqadoum and in the other cities of the geography of movement, in everyday interactions across Morocco, and with civil society actors allowed for a gradual immersion in the context of movement and borders; it was only once my presence in the country was already established that the theme of disappearance emerged with full force. In this trajectory, engaging with solidarity actors working against border violence, the theatrical workshops, and subsequently sustained encounters with the families and travelling companions of the missing were the spaces in which this experience surfaced organically.

This gradual approach shaped the analytical process itself. Each encounter, observation, and exchange pushed me to engage with a set of recurring questions: what does it mean for a person to disappear? How does disappearance insert itself into the broader machinery of the border? How do those who remain make sense of this experience? How do those who inhabit its violence respond to and contest it? Encounters distributed across time with my interlocutors allowed me to grasp different dimensions of the experience of disappearance, and opened possibilities for exchange and reflection across different registers. Over time, the accumulation of encounters distributed across contexts, actors, and registers made it possible to read individual efforts collectively, to recognise that, even where stories did not intersect, certain words, concepts, and imaginaries recurred with striking consistency, pointing toward shared structures of experience and meaning.

The analytical trajectory was profoundly shaped by the tools of reflection that accompanied this research. The Theatre of the Oppressed workshops contributed to framing the experience of the border as an experience of oppression, within the framework of the systems of power and bodily control that compose it – attending to disappearance as part of a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003), capable of penetrating the most intimate dimensions of life, and lived both individually and collectively. In engaging, through observation, with the diverse singular and collective narratives and experiences of lived and embodied oppression, I found myself also attending to what emerged from the other side: the necessity of reckoning with it, of naming and contesting it. It was within this accumulation that hauntological theory offered itself as a productive analytical lens – one that attends to how violence returns, insistently, carrying with it not only the weight and anguish of the experience itself, but also a demand for justice, rendering legible the practices through which this demand takes shape. In this, hauntology resonated with the emancipatory vocation already present in Boal's pedagogy, both frameworks attentive to the possibility of liberation that inheres in the confrontation with oppression.

This trajectory, shaped by ethnographic stories and accompanied by theoretical interpretations, was also profoundly personal. Alongside the weight of the violence encountered in the field, the research brought into view something else: the aspiration to justice and to a world that might be otherwise. The stories gathered here are traversed not only by loss and injustice, but by the insistence – expressed in practices, relations, and imaginaries – that things could be different. In this sense, the research intersects with the concerns of a sociology of the future (Jedlowski and Pellegrino, 2020) and with the frameworks of transformative justice and abolitionism (Verdolini, 2025), attentive to the possibilities

that open within and beyond conditions of oppression, and to the political and imaginative labour through which other worlds are prefigured and demanded. This theoretical trajectory made it possible to read singular stories of disappearance together, as a collective experience that, from different positions, contests the structures of power that organise the border and the world beyond it.

The knowledge produced in this research is the result of a set of co-constructed encounters, shaped by the languages through which they were mediated, the relations that made them possible, and the positionality I brought to their interpretation. Exchanges with fellow researchers and sustained engagement with academic literature constituted a further layer of this process, providing analytical frameworks through which to situate and make sense of what the field was sharing. Interactions were conducted in Levantine Arabic, French, Italian, and English, languages in which I could work autonomously, while the support of Davide Dawd Parisi and Abdilah Ouariz proved indispensable for translation and for navigating the nuances of Darija.

The research trajectory was marked by slowdowns, obstacles, and exhaustion: moments of withdrawal and reorientation that were frustrating yet constitutive parts of the process itself. These difficulties shaped the pace at which understanding accumulated, the questions that were asked and continuously revised, and the posture from which interpretation was approached.

II.III. Positionality, Access, and Field Relations

The conduct of research and presence in the field require methodological reflection articulated across three deeply interconnected levels, which intersect and condition one another. The first concerns the structure of field access: how the context configures itself in relation to my presence and the research topic, which spaces are rendered accessible and which remain foreclosed, and through what mechanisms of opening, negotiation, or closure this access is continually redefined. The second concerns the relational dimension of research: the relations built with the interlocutors mentioned above prove central to the ethnographic work, actively shaping its contents, limits, and possibilities. The third concerns my positionality – the social, cultural, and political positioning in the field, the way in which the body moves, is perceived, and perceives, and how all this conditions access, relations, and interpretation. What follows does not aim to be exhaustive but offers a series of reflections that traverse these three levels in a situated and partial way.

I began fieldwork in Morocco in October 2023, following several years of prior engagement at the borders. In the years preceding the doctorate, I had accumulated fieldwork experience across several geographical areas marked by contemporary migratory movements, spanning the Middle East, the Balkans, and Italy. Alongside this, a prior research trajectory conducted in Kosovo – as part of my master's thesis – on questions of transitional justice had brought me into contact for the first time with issues of disappearance in contexts of violence, memory, and methods of collective knowledge construction. These themes, encountered in a post-conflict setting, would continue to sediment in my analytical gaze, resurfacing – in different forms and within a structurally distinct framework – in the context of the research in Morocco.

Morocco represented for me one of my first encounters, at least physical and geographical, with the African continent. I arrived equipped with conceptual tools and a degree of experience with border contexts, but without direct knowledge of the specific setting I was about to explore. The asymmetry between thematic familiarity and contextual novelty constituted one of the defining features of my initial positioning in the field, orienting both the modes of entry into the context and the necessity of a

situated learning that could not be substituted by prior experience, though it could draw from it in terms of method and analytical frameworks.

The overall duration of the research – approximately fifteen months – offered me the possibility of progressively bridging this distance through daily, prolonged, and sustained immersion in the field. I lived in Morocco continuously until June 2024; subsequently, between September 2024 and June 2025, I conducted a more mobile phase of research, moving across different locations in the country. The articulation into an initial phase of rootedness and a second of movement reflected the evolving needs of the research itself, making it possible to combine the relational depth built during the initial phase with a broader perspective on the geographical contexts relevant to the topic under investigation.

The reflections that follow proceed from the awareness that the relationship between the research field, the actors encountered, and the researcher's bodily presence is never linear or neutral, but is traversed by continuous negotiations and by contextual dynamics of opening and closure that are not always consistent with one another. Beginning from my positionality: I am a white woman, holding a European passport, under thirty years of age at the time of the research. I arrived in Morocco with working knowledge of English and Levantine Arabic, and acquired conversational French and *Darija* over the course of the research years. I was preparing to inhabit a deeply gendered context, marked by racialised, class-based, and social power dynamics, and to work on a politically contested and sensitive topic. These conditions required a constant negotiation of my presence and a sustained awareness of how my body was being read and positioned across the different spaces of the field.

Field Access

Between Two Moroccos

The initial research design envisaged a period of settlement in Rabat – dedicated to learning *Darija* and building first contacts with local universities and civil society – followed by a progressive shift towards areas more directly exposed to migratory routes. This plan, revisited and redefined several times over the course of fieldwork, did not however materialise in the form originally intended: a combination of factors – as the difficulty of identifying local actors able to support and mediate such a move, security considerations, and the objective difficulties of accessing certain contexts – ultimately kept me based in Rabat during the first phase of the research, from which I conducted periodic field visits to sites of interest. Living in Rabat meant inhabiting a dense context, in which many of the dynamics relevant to the research were not immediately visible but manifested obliquely, in the folds of everyday life. The Moroccan capital is traversed by deep contradictions – economic, political, social – that coexist with a systematic restriction of the public spaces in which these can be discussed and named. Daily life unfolded against an apparently calm backdrop, oriented towards tourist hospitality, within which, however, an ordinary and pervasive presence of the authoritarian apparatus was consistently visible and oppressive.

Over time, my movements led me to frequent more popular and peripheral areas of Morocco, where I encountered social, economic, and cultural experiences markedly different from those of the capital, and where the depth of the divide separating centre from periphery became evident – in terms of the economic, cultural, and resource-access fractures that run through Moroccan society as a whole. An interlocutor who accompanied the entire research trajectory had captured this with a distinction: "there are two Moroccos: there is *l-Maghreb*, which is popular Morocco, and *le Maroc*, which is what Europeans typically see, the Morocco of the wealthy." The movement between these contexts – the clay houses of families encountered in peripheral and rural areas, and the international neighbourhood of Rabat where

I was based – made concrete a dissonance that continuously interrogated my position as a foreign researcher, the privilege that position entailed, and the structural asymmetries that research work inevitably traverses.

On one hand there were the spaces I inhabited – those of the Moroccan upper classes and the international community –, on the other, those the research led me to traverse – the spaces of the experience of marginalised classes and groups. Though distant, these two dimensions intersected in daily life in ways that were often not mediated by the research itself. On trains, in taxis, in cafés, I found myself casually exposed to stories of Moroccan migration: widespread economic frustration, a sense of social oppression, the perceived closure of cultural and political spaces, and an everyday familiarity with the forms of repression that characterise the Moroccan context. Migration emerged in this framework as one of the imaginable responses to a structurally repressive context and to a sense of blocked horizon that cut across classes and generations. These narratives encountered in passing constituted a layer of contextual understanding that sedimentated over time, informing the gaze with which I approached the research themes and allowing me to situate the stories of disappearance to which the work was dedicated within a framework of profound social, political, and economic dualism – one that deeply shapes people's lives in Morocco, marking deep internal and external boundaries. At the same time, they provided points of access to the *Maghreb*, central to my work but more difficult to access. If my positioning was marked by a constant tension between the desire to step outside the international and class bubble in which my presence naturally tended to place me, there were structural limits that this very positioning imposed: for instance, being a foreign woman who could not enter gendered spaces alone, or who could not move without being immediately visible in areas not used to international presence. Navigating this tension required sustained negotiation, and a series of mediations that continually pushed me from one context to another, in search of points of access that my positioning never rendered entirely predictable or stable.

Observing While Being Observed

Morocco is characterised by a high level of political and social repression, operating through a capillary and diffuse structure of control: a system that is not limited to military apparatuses or formal authorities, but extends structurally to a broader network of social actors, involving to varying degrees community and private spaces and informal dynamics (Hibou and Tozy, 2020; Perrier, 2024). This system is particularly intense with respect to sensitive issues such as migration and, even more so, the question of disappearances, which occupies a politically delicate terrain. The associative and research field is subject to pressures that constrain its margins of action and public expression, and the presence of international actors working on these issues is subject to constant attention from the authorities. Within this context, my figure as a foreign researcher was perceived in a non-neutral way: a white female body moving autonomously through spaces that were often gendered, peripheral, or border-adjacent was visible and incongruous with the context. Whiteness (Gazzotti, 2023) and gender attenuated, in different ways, some of the modes of oppression and restriction of movement to which other bodies were subject; at the same time, these two elements played a central role in my exposure (Zadrožna, 2016), determining how I was perceived, which spaces were accessible to me, and in what terms my presence was read and negotiated.

From the very beginning of fieldwork – and increasingly so as my stay extended – I found myself relating to the apparatus of control, which manifested itself on one hand explicitly through law enforcement and institutional representatives, and on the other through indirect and less attributable signals: notifications on social media profiles and digital devices, behaviours of interlocutors that

seemed to reflect external pressures, forms of alert coming from civilians at varying degrees of proximity. I render this experience in an extract from the ethnographic diary written during a research mission at the border:

I stop by the hotel reception to pay for my stay; the lady speaks only French and we exchange a few words. She asks if I'm leaving tomorrow, I confirm – "and you'll return to Rabat?" I reply no, I'm heading to Fes – from where I arrived a week ago. To respond calmly, I have to control myself: I had never mentioned Rabat to her; in fact, my communications with any employee of this hotel have never included information about myself. How does this lady know that I live in Rabat? Or that my final destination will be there?

I feel a bit anxious and decide to postpone my visit [...]. I go back to my room and start thinking. The control here is diffuse and fragmented; many are involved in an innocuous exchange of information that ultimately creates a complete picture. H. asking me which hotel I'm staying at to "show me the way without needing to activate Google Maps," the hotel asking me which city I'm coming from and which city I'll go to, M. asking me what plans I have for the afternoon – and so on, a bit from here and a bit from there, various pieces of information about who I am and my movements are collected. I'm aware of this; it's not the first time I've felt under surveillance, and by now I behave as if it's always the case, as if eyes are constantly fixed on me.

This episode is emblematic in conveying the diffuse nature of the Moroccan apparatus of control. Even among actors positioned in a solidarity or humanitarian capacity within the migration field, the perception of a relationship – direct or mediated – with the authorities was recurrent. In the course of several encounters with such actors, for instance, I was asked to show my passport or was photographed without prior notice. Explicitly, one humanitarian worker shared with me that such information was used to inform and request authorisation from the Moroccan police to receive me on their premises. Particularly emblematic was the case of a central actor in the field of solidarity around border disappearances in Morocco, who was simultaneously engaged in a collaborative relationship with local power institutions, and who on several occasions demonstrated awareness of my movements over the preceding months – including in distant regions of the country – without that information having been shared by me. Control manifested at times as direct threat, at times through a language of care: given that these forms of control came primarily from men older than me, this language assumed a deeply paternalistic connotation, in which concern for my safety functioned as a legitimising frame for orienting and constraining my movements and research choices.

The intensity of control varied according to context: more or less explicit depending on the city and proximity to the border, particularly direct in majority sub-Saharan areas and in encounters with family members and politically exposed associations. The cumulative effect of these practices – direct and indirect – was the sedimentation of a constant sense of being observed which, over time, had become ordinary, generating a process of internalisation of surveillance that made it progressively difficult to distinguish actual control from its subjective projection. The sense of being watched produced concrete methodological effects: on one hand, it generated forms of self-censorship that constrained movement and possibilities for encounter, producing the contraction of agency that characterises research conducted in contexts of surveillance (Zadrozna, 2016; Bachelet and Hagan, 2023). On the other, inhabiting the dynamics of control in the first person – however incomparably different the level of repression to which I was subject – made it possible to understand more concretely how solidarity

actors and people on the move inhabit them in turn, continuously negotiating with the apparatus of control in order to secure spaces of movement and action (Lovato and Stimmattini, 2025).

Expectations and Mistrust

A third element that characterised field access concerns the structural expectations I encountered as a European researcher working on migration in Morocco. This cut across the field of Moroccan civil society, the local academic environment – involving both Moroccan and international researchers – and the institutional context.

I could note a mistrust that in many cases preceded any direct encounter with me, and that required continuous negotiation with sedimented expectations regarding the figure of the European researcher in Morocco. Despite the extended duration of fieldwork and my efforts to learn *Darija* – while already able to communicate in Arabic, the language I used in everyday interactions – I frequently found myself called into question as an Italian, and, as such, a colonial positioning was attributed to me with a certain ease even if never directly. The episodes that illustrate this dynamic are numerous. At one of the first academic exchanges, a researcher asked me why I did not work on Lampedusa, given that I was Italian; on a similar occasion, the director of a migration solidarity association asked me why I was not instead working on Italy's responsibility for funding to Libya and the border violence for which "Italians" were held accountable, rather than "worrying about Morocco." Less directly, a doctoral student working on migration suggested I redirect my research towards Europeans living in Morocco, since "it's no longer like before, when Moroccans went to France – migration has reversed."

To these episodes were added others that in various ways underscored my Italianness as a factor that did not legitimise my engagement with Morocco and migration. A professor at a Moroccan university noted how risky it was for their context "to have all these white people coming with their backpacks to do research" who "don't understand how this country works", while explicating critiques of neocolonial dynamics in academia. A journalist with whom I was discussing my work – without my having asked her for contacts with families – told me that "when doctoral students ask me for contacts with the families of the missing, I don't give them: the pain of families is too heavy and not everyone knows how to handle it." The president of an association central in the field remarked, speaking with me, that "there are many researchers who come here from Europe only for their research but do nothing for the missing." And finally, another activist-practitioner told me that: "obviously, with all the problems you have in Italy, with Meloni, it would be better if you dealt with those."

These remarks were not addressed directly to me, but functioned to create a climate of closure and suspicion that affected me as part of the – in the eyes of my interlocutors, homogeneous – category of European researcher, and served to underscore a relationship that was not one of equals. These limitations expressed themselves in varied and not always explicit forms: advice about what to do and what to avoid, warnings framed within the narrative of ethics, suggestions not to meet certain actors. Adding complexity to the dynamics of racial identity was the fact that this closure came from people older than me, often men, occupying positions of power in the migration and solidarity field, whose choice to include or exclude me from the field weighed heavily not only on the conduct of the fieldwork itself, but also on my own safety.

I felt that this sentiment of hostility was widespread, and however much I tried to adjust my approach – exposing myself less, foregrounding European responsibility for border violence in my positionings, emphasising my ethical lines of conduct and research – the question of my Italianness was not

negotiable, and in certain contexts it precluded any positive consideration. I felt seen as white and could not find a way to work through the problematic weight of that factor.

To these dynamics was added a more specific suspiciousness, often motivated by the fear that the purpose of my work was not what I declared – that there might be unstated motivations, especially in interactions with Moroccan interlocutors. I always sought to clarify from the outset who I was and what my intentions were, explicitly asking that people feel free to choose whether or not to speak with me. The process of negotiation was nonetheless complex: I was frequently asked to re-explain and justify my role, sometimes providing information that exceeded the boundaries of my role as a researcher or expressing positions on broader issues, and sharing information that did not always keep me in a safe position or protect other research interlocutors. I noticed that North African colleagues often found these kinds of relations – in institutional, academic, and civil society settings – more readily accessible, not experiencing the level of mistrust I observed directed towards me and other European colleagues.

Reflecting on these dynamics, it seems possible to distinguish at least two levels of analysis. The first concerns a real structural responsibility: the relationship between European researchers and practitioners and the Global South contexts in which they intervene – in the field of research, but also in humanitarian and political work – is historically marked by deep asymmetries and extractivist practices that have produced a legitimate sedimentation of mistrust. This applies to researchers who conduct brief fieldwork periods without attention to ethical access, as well as to those managing externally funded projects without genuine local rootedness. The critique directed at such practices is analytically grounded, and forms part of a well-established debate within postcolonial studies and methodological reflexivity in anthropology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

The second level is more complex and requires a critical reading of the anti-colonial sentiment itself. In several cases, critical positions towards European presence were expressed by actors who, at the same time, received European funding, operated within institutional frameworks that reproduced the very asymmetries they denounced, or maintained structural collaborations with actors from the Global North. The professor who questioned the legitimacy of European researchers in Morocco, for instance, was themselves embedded in transnational academic networks involving numerous European colleagues and institutions working on MENA region and receiving funding to host them. This contradiction does not invalidate the critique itself – which retains its political grounding – but complicates its interpretation, suggesting that anti-colonial discourse can be mobilised selectively and not always consistently with the practices that accompany it.

This level concerns as well my perception that anti-colonial discourses were being mobilised to render sensitive relations, spaces, and topics difficult to reach, protected by gatekeeping mechanisms that regulated entry into certain environments and the circulation of certain information. In some cases, the – indirect – charge of extractivism seemed to operate not so much as political critique but as a device for regulating access, a means of keeping at a distance presences perceived as inconvenient or competitive.

The Fieldwork Relational Dimension

Building Relations as a Research Practice

At the relational level, the research privileged an ethnographic approach based on the construction of relations extended across time and cultivated with continuity, focused on the networks and everyday practices surrounding people on the move and the families of the missing (Sanson and Le Breton, 2020;

Desmond, 2014). A prolonged relational investment made possible a series of accesses – to spaces, to lived experiences, and to dynamics – that a shorter or more formalised presence would not have permitted, or would have kept superficial.

In the work with people on the move and with the families of the missing, this approach translated into a progressive entry into the everyday lives of interlocutors: being welcomed into domestic spaces, participating in community relations, being drawn into personal dynamics that exceeded the formal moments of the research, opening onto convivial and intimate exchanges. This kind of proximity created the conditions of trust necessary for violent and delicate lived experiences to be shared. Following the construction of a relation of intimacy as method (Cîrstea and Pescinski, 2024; Sanson and Le Breton, 2020), the negotiation of the relationship of confidence, the limits of participation, and the forms of restitution were discussed with participants, in some cases leading to more direct involvement in forms of imagining and constructing research outputs. The relational approach and the adoption of participatory tools conferred on the research an additional ethical and political significance: the data collected are the product of bonds maintained over time and of reflections that were not unidirectional.

The relational dynamics with different actors required different temporalities and modes of presence, taking shape through non-linear processes of progressive approach. In the context of Taqadom, entry into the community occurred gradually, from the first encounters in public spaces to progressive access to domestic spaces and the daily life of the group. The theatre workshop played a significant methodological and relational role in this trajectory. Over the course of fieldwork, the trajectories of group members diverged: with some, the relationship thinned as they moved on; with others, it was maintained and deepened over time.

The work with families of young Moroccan men who had disappeared followed a slower temporality, beginning several months after the start of the ethnographic fieldwork. In almost all cases, the relationship was built by degrees: initial introductory encounters, without any immediate expectation of data production, followed by a more structured interview phase. This approach was deliberately chosen to create conditions of genuine rather than performative consent, to build a sufficient foundation of trust to sustain the sharing of difficult lived experiences, and to preserve over time the possibility of withdrawal – which some people did in fact exercise in the course of fieldwork. In this process, a significant role was played by the mediation of certain family members who, through their solidarity-oriented posture towards others' experiences, facilitated the progressive expansion of the network of relations. Throughout this work, my position as a woman – and my age, close to that of the missing individuals – constituted a relational facilitating factor, favouring my reception into domestic spaces and my involvement in more intimate dynamics, particularly in relations with the female relatives of the missing.

In the field of organised civil society, relations assumed very different forms and intensities. With some associations, encounters remained formal and punctual: structured appointments following the classic modalities of the research interview, without any more continuous relationship developing. With other actors, the relationship built over time through recurring meetings, taking shape as a deeper and more reciprocal exchange, in which support for the research became interwoven with forms of dialogue and sharing that exceeded the formal moment of the interview. This heterogeneity reflected the availability, positionings, and circumstances of the different interlocutors, as well as, inevitably, the affinities and distances that the field produces and that it is difficult to control entirely.

Power Dynamics and Relational Asymmetries

While I consider it important to emphasise that the relational dimension was central to this research – for reasons both practical and personal – I do not intend to render these relations in romantic terms or to neutralise their asymmetries. The relations built in the field were traversed by multiple and overlapping power dynamics, concerning gender, social position, geographical origin, legal status, and mobility. On one side stood I – holder of a European passport and of guaranteed mobility; on the other, Black migrant men and women, undocumented and subject to the violence of mobility policies, or Moroccan individuals with direct or indirect experience of border control regimes – regimes of which I am, structurally, a privileged beneficiary. These asymmetries were neither static nor uniform, redefining themselves according to context, interlocutor, and moment, producing differentiated relational configurations in which positions of power were distributed in ways that were not always predictable. Navigating these dynamics required constant attentiveness to gender roles, age differences, and social positions as framed within the cultural references of my interlocutors – a practical awareness of how these structures shaped the spaces of encounter and the possibilities of relation (Berlant, 2000; Fassin, 2011).

One of the most recurrent difficulties was that of maintaining a distinction – often subtle and hard to manage – between the plane of research and the relational plane that necessarily emerged in the process of building trust. In a context where positions were not equal, there was a significant risk that relational proximity would generate implicit expectations or feelings of debt and mutual obligation that were difficult to name and to manage. Some family members, for instance, tended to invest my role with hopes that I might offer concrete support in their search for the missing. With some people on the move, there were instances in which I was asked for economic or material support that went beyond the research relationship. Engaging with these situations required a negotiation that was not always resolved, aimed at reducing the conflation of the two planes without thereby denying the human dimension of the relations built. At the same time, in order to keep consent to participation genuinely free and to reduce the ambiguity of the relationship, it was considered necessary to ensure that the willingness to meet and to be interviewed did not correspond, on the other side, to an undeclared expectation of reciprocation. The economic recognition of certain presences in the research process – and the agreement of terms prior to the interview but following the confirmation of consent – was one of the instruments through which I sought to formalise and close the exchange connected to research participation, avoiding the persistence of conditions of implicit reciprocity that might have translated into forms of unethical exchange.

A reflection that accompanies this tension concerns my own posture in the field. Throughout the entire duration of fieldwork, I found myself engaging in concrete practices of support, in the search for the missing or in the daily lives of people on the move. However, I noticed how the sense of greater freedom to participate actively in these support practices emerged more readily once the formally academic relationship had concluded or loosened. This suggests that the research framework, while necessary, imposed a form of distance that did not always correspond to my ethical and political position towards my interlocutors, and that the separation between research and solidarity engagement is, in many cases, more a methodological construction than an effective condition of the field.

Research Ethics in Sensitive Contexts

In addressing these ethical and methodological questions, I sought to adopt a reflexive approach to the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. The asymmetrical relation also involved the condition

of emotional and existential vulnerability that many interlocutors inhabited at the time of the research – a condition in which being asked to recount experiences of loss and violence risked prompting a re-living of pain (Liamputtong, 2007). In awareness of this risk, I sought to maintain a posture of active and non-invasive listening, structuring interviews in a non-directive way: the aim was to create the conditions for a self-managed narration, granting the interlocutor decisional autonomy over both content and mode of communication (Atkinson, 1998). When I perceived that the emotional weight was becoming excessively burdensome, I would interrupt the conversation or suggest a pause, in an attempt to exercise the ethical responsibility that research on traumatic themes imposes towards those who participate in it (Benson and O'Neill, 2007; Liamputtong, 2007).

To this is added the question of the exposure of the interlocutors themselves. In a heavily surveilled and politically sensitive context, participation in the research entailed for many a concrete risk of unwanted visibility: being seen in the street in Taqadom in the company of undocumented migrants, or in a public café with recognisable figures in the activist field, could translate into real consequences for those involved. In cases where interlocutors were aware of this risk and had developed their own strategies of caution, I relied on their guidance – as was the case with several activists, who directed choices about where and when to meet and through which channels to communicate. More generally, I favoured neutral and relatively inconspicuous spaces, in which the presence of a foreign woman alongside other subjectivities would be unremarkable and unlikely to attract attention. In the presence of risks perceived as elevated, I suspended or postponed meetings, or opted for remote modalities. To these precautions was added the systematic anonymisation of names, places, and organisations in the treatment of data.

On Being in Research

I spent my first days in Morocco in Tangier, as a guest of a volunteer movement connected to an international religious organisation operating a day centre for Moroccan street children. My first encounter with the border in Morocco was mediated by a small group of kids between eleven and fifteen years old – that day I had been accidentally locked outside the day centre alongside those who could not be admitted, the number of children exceeding the room's capacity. I tried to memorise each of their names, especially that of the little girl who stood apart – Nadia. They were barefoot, covered in dirt, with various wounds. Two of them were showing me videos on TikTok of their attempts to jump into lorries at the port of Tangier, with the song *Italia mi amore* playing underneath. I spent less than thirty minutes with the children knocking at the door and shouting to be let in, and the rest of the morning playing cards with the others. That same afternoon, I went with some volunteers to one of the cemeteries where the kids shelter to sleep – among the abandoned burial niches and the cats. From there – the image is fixed in my mind – I could see Spain.

In the ethnographic diary entry from that day, I found myself questioning what it meant to speak of solidarity in front of an abandoned niche where a child sleeps, dreaming Europe and rejected by it. I asked myself what I could give back from that encounter, and what tools I would need over time to do so honestly – to deconstruct my gaze as a person who relates to borders from a position of guaranteed mobility, and to place myself in a condition capable of rendering the experiences of violence and injustice I was encountering. The distance between my condition and that of those children was – and remains – a structural distance, inscribed in bodies and movements, while the border rendering visible a radically asymmetrical experience.

Working on the themes of border disappearances sharpened the weight of this distance: for the journey from Europe to Morocco that I paid tens of euros for on Ryanair, there were relatives and friends of people I encountered who had disappeared or died along that same crossing. The same risk was inscribed in the bodies of the people I met in the course of my research, whose tension towards crossing the border was charged with the possibility of disappearing.

The need to recognise and work through – at least humanly and politically – this distance continued to traverse the entire research trajectory, demanding me to constantly reckon with the partiality and situatedness of my gaze (Palmary, 2006). This constituted an ethical tension never fully resolved, but productive in its own way – it persistently called me to question the deeper meaning of the work I was doing, and to interrogate the effects of the research on myself.

On one side, there was the profound impact that researching that deep violence was having on me. In this regard, the literature on haunting resonated deeply with the experience I was living: my daily life became populated with the names of the missing, the accounts of those searching for them, the sense of void they left in their wake. The violence of the border seeped into my everyday interactions, my intimate spaces, the contours of my imaginaries. At Yasser's home, surrounded by photographs of him as a child, I dreamed of being in a forest searching for him. On another occasion I dreamed of being in the open sea, unable to move, and then of seeing my father weeping in a police office. Another time, my brother trying to pass through a gap in the Ceuta fence, unable to get through. In another dream, my sister and I were on a platform in darkness in the middle of the sea. In these dreams, the violence I was indirectly experiencing found form, gradually seeping into my everyday life, haunting the places, relationships, and ways of knowing I was previously used to. I could no longer look at the sea without figuring bodies beneath the surface. I found myself memorising the faces of the people on the move I encountered, afraid of recognising them one day in a missing persons notice.

On the other side, my research experience was shaped and interrogated by the wider academic structure within which it was embedded. The work unfolded within a doctoral trajectory marked by profound solitude, that was only partially, and gradually, mitigated by an informal network of researchers, comrades, and friends who became central interlocutors for this project, and without whom this work would not exist.

Yet the starting condition is the academic space of which we are part: a context marked by the structural precarisation of research, which produces vulnerable academic subjectivities (Gill, 2010; Murgia and Poggio, 2019) and confronts us with a deeply productivist structure that rewards performativity over critical and honest thinking, and the frequent absence of genuine spaces for support and exchange. These are the material premises from which any serious problematisation of the role of research in the world we inhabit must begin. This tension dwells within the research process and the writing itself, demanding a form of accountability that asks, repeatedly, what the knowledge produced under these conditions is for, and for whom.

Within a PhD project concerned with violence and injustice, these questions become impossible to bracket: what does it mean to speak of death and disappearance at the border? *For whom* is it important to do so? *How* is it important to do it? These questions are the starting point from which to interrogate the meaning of our presence in the world, and the stakes of our commitment to producing knowledge about it.

III. Contexts: Migration, Civil Society, and Disappearance in Morocco

Introduction

This chapter aims to construct the contextual framework within which the ethnographic cases that follow are situated, following three interconnected thematic axes. The first reconstructs the geographies and politics of mobility in Morocco, tracing the process of European border externalisation and its consequences for the migratory movements crossing its borders. The second analyses the field of civil society: while Moroccan civil society actors are not central to this research, examining this field is necessary to understand the relations between the *Makhzen*⁶ and social space within which practices of mobilisation and claims to visibility in the migratory domain are embedded. The third introduces the theme of disappearances in its historical depth: starting from the practice of enforced disappearance during the Years of Lead, it traces the genealogy connecting that history to the contemporary discourse on border disappearances. Through these three axes, the chapter examines how in Morocco disappearance is constituted as a political phenomenon, and how in the cases of border disappearances it is shaped by and embedded within the migratory geography of which it forms an integral part. In this framework, the border is observed as a space in which heterogeneous power relations intersect – political, racial, class-based, gendered – reflecting the contradictions of a regime that continuously negotiates its position between internal pressures and external constraints, and disappearance as the product of oppression dynamics.

To provide a brief and general overview of Morocco's political structure, I draw on Natter's (2021) definition of "liberal monarchy", a concept that captures the coexistence of formally liberal features with an essentially authoritarian management of power. We see in fact how in Morocco the political transition initiated under Mohamed VI – framed within a rhetoric of democratisation and neoliberalism – pointed toward an apparent direction of political liberalisation, without however producing structural reforms to the power centralisation. Morocco remains a hybrid regime (Morlino, 2008) in which space for mobilisation and public denunciation is systematically constrained by the control exercised by the authorities, in a weak rule of law (Jiménez-Alvarez et al., 2021; Natter, 2021; Gazzotti, 2020). At the domestic level, the democratic demands that have historically traversed the country – as seen, for instance, in the February 20th Movement of 2011 (Tourabi and Zaki, 2011; Desrues, 2013) or the Hirak Al-Rif of 2017 (Wolf, 2019; Masbah, 2017) – have repeatedly sought to challenge the authority of the *Makhzen*, without ultimately affecting the concentration of central power. At the international level, strained relations with Algeria, the conflict in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, and negotiations with EU member states have fuelled a progressive militarisation of border zones. In this sense, we look at migration-making practices as part of a deeper process of state-making (Natter, 2021). It is within a regime that manages internal dissent and external pressures through selective openings and systematic control that the question of migration and that of disappearances take shape as intrinsically political issues, and within which the dynamics of oppression, contestation, and subversion examined ethnographically in the following chapters unfold.

⁶ In the post-colonial period, the term *makhzen* refers to the Moroccan state and administrative apparatus, with particular emphasis on the system of royal power which governs it.

III.I. Morocco: Geographies, Policies, and Routes of Mobility⁷

Geographies of Mobility in Morocco

Morocco's geographical and social configuration renders it a privileged site for observing the deep entanglement between African routes and societies (Alioua, 2005). Its position – facing both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, traversed by mountain ranges and open toward the Sahara – places it at the convergence of spaces, cultures, and ways of life historically connected to the geographies that define them. Its deep ties to the Sahara make Morocco a crucial node of connectivity with both West Africa and the Sahelian countries (Peraldi, 2011). To the north, its proximity to the European continent – from which it is separated by just fourteen kilometres at the Strait of Gibraltar – has historically shaped relations of closeness and asymmetry: flows of people, goods, and capital have intersected with colonial and postcolonial dynamics that continue to leave their imprint on contemporary mobility policies.

The routes linking Morocco to sub-Saharan Africa carry a history sediment over centuries of commercial, religious, and cultural connections along the trans-Saharan corridors (El Hamel, 2013). The pre-colonial empire itself was intimately bound up with regional mobility, including trans-Saharan trade: movements that were historically circular, structured according to logics that predate the emergence of modern border regimes and for which Europe was not the horizon (Alioua, 2005; Marei et al., 2019).

The advent of French and Spanish colonialism, culminating in the establishment of the protectorates in 1912, durably restructured these movements. It triggered migrations from European metropolises toward Moroccan urban centres while simultaneously facilitating the movement of Moroccan workers across the colonial empire (Gazzotti and Gross-Wyrtzen; De Haas, 2005). Following independence in 1956, a prolonged cycle of economic growth in Europe reversed the direction of transnational mobility, orienting it steadily from south to north. During the same period, Morocco sought to expand its territory by occupying Western Sahara in 1975, thereby setting in motion a further series of internal displacements and border-related conflicts (Zoubir and Benabdallah-Gambier, 2004).

It is within this layered context that Morocco emerges as a crossroads (Alioua, 2013) of migratory routes connecting it to sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. The Moroccan space has historically been traversed by populations of diverse kinds – workers, students, asylum seekers and refugees, environmental migrants, religious travellers – whose presence weaves together individual trajectories and structural dynamics in ongoing transformation. The mobilities that pass-through Morocco follow different logics, respond to heterogeneous contexts of departure, and produce forms of settlement, transit, and rootedness that coexist within the same space. From the 1990s onward, however, as European pressure for the externalisation of migration control intensified, Morocco was progressively framed – in the perspective of European institutions and in diplomatic negotiations – as a transit country: a space functional to the management of movements directed northward, whose territorial sovereignty is mobilised in a security-oriented register to protect the external border of the European Union. To reduce this complexity to the category of transit country, however, is to subordinate the multiplicity of African mobilities to the singular perspective of the northern border, ignoring the fact that for the majority of African migrants Europe has not historically been the desired destination (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti, 2020). This work proposes instead to approach Morocco as a space of entanglements (El Qadim and İşleyen, 2023), where exchanges and interactions of a historical, spatial,

⁷ Parts of this section are adapted from Lovato and Cassarini, 2023.

political, and social nature intersect in a process of continuous negotiation among the various actors involved. Drawing on this perspective, the following sections analyse mobility and border policies in Morocco, with particular attention to the process of border externalisation and the consequent development of mobility practices that challenge the emergence of a regime of movement and migration control.

The Externalisation Process in Morocco

Until the 1990s, domestic migration regulations in Morocco were limited and generally unenforced (Perrin, 2016). This situation changed radically with the process of Schengenisation of the European Union, which, by introducing a differentiated freedom-of-movement regime based on nationality, led to the exclusion of citizens from non-Schengen countries from the legal system of mobility (El Qadim, 2018). The Tampere Council of 1999 formally enshrined this direction, acknowledging the need to involve non-Schengen countries – in particular those bordering the EU – in the task of keeping non-Schengen nationals outside European space (Gazzotti, 2022), inaugurating a logic of delegated border control that would profoundly reshape the migration policies of the region. In this sense, countries like Morocco and others across North Africa were strategically positioned as "transit countries" and called upon to assume a central role in the "fight against illegal immigration." This process – known as border externalisation (Cobarrubias et al., 2023; Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2016) – translated into the construction of militarised borders, the adoption of domestic migration policies structured along Eurocentric logics, and the progressive transfer of portions of control to European and international agencies in exchange for funding and other favourable conditions. The consequences of this process were not confined to the sphere of individual states' national policies: it more deeply reconfigured the geopolitical balance between North African countries, the European Union and its member states, and within the African region itself, redrawing historically complex border relations that had long been subject to negotiation.

At the legal level, the categories of regular and irregular migration were incorporated into the domestic legal orders of other countries in the region as well – from Law 88-11 in Algeria to the 2008 Immigration Law in Mauritania – while the establishment of detention mechanisms, waiting zones, and deportation practices gave rise to a system of border pushback founded on the criminalisation of unauthorised mobility (Cassarino, 2017). The border thus extended beyond the physical frontier to take shape as a diffuse apparatus, exercised at a distance through visa obligations, safe country lists, readmission agreements, and forms of cooperation with the police forces of third countries. This form of *remote policing* (Guild and Bigo, 2003) enables the EU and its member states to exercise control over migratory movements before they reach the European border, delegating this function to Morocco and other countries in the region and effectively excluding from the legal system of mobility a substantial portion of African populations who lack access to visas.

The Borderization Process in Morocco

The process of border construction found its legal foundation in the adoption, in 2003, of Law 02-03 on the entry and residence of foreigners in Morocco and on irregular emigration and immigration (BO 5162, 2003). This law introduced for the first time into Moroccan law the administrative and juridical categories of regular and irregular migration, restricting access to employment, healthcare, education, and social services, and providing for criminal and administrative sanctions against those who entered or resided in the territory without authorisation, as well as those who facilitated irregular entry or exit (Labayen and Gutiérrez, 2022; Bartels, 2018). This security-oriented approach produced profound

effects not only on movements directed toward Europe, but also on the historically circular flows between sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco that did not have Europe as their destination (Berriane, 2015; Cassarino, 2017). The policies that will be here described affect both unauthorised outward movements from Morocco and unauthorised entry and transit through its territory: in this work, the focus is constituted by two categories of movement, involving people on the move from Morocco and from sub-Saharan African countries respectively. While prospective Moroccan migrants tend to remain less visible within their own country, transit migrants – particularly those from West and Central Africa – are visibly foreign and therefore disproportionately exposed to racialized border policies and violence. The border governance practices intersect with and are articulated through racial dynamics that are themselves rooted in Morocco's own history and cultural formations around race (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi, 2024; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2022). It is through this racialised logic that, over time, the figure of the irregular migrant has become structurally associated with the "sub-Saharan" African, and Blackness has effectively been transformed into a visible marker of illegality (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi, 2024; Berriane, 2015; Gazzotti, 2021).

The restriction of access to regular status exponentially increased the presence of undocumented individuals on the territory, exposed to conditions of extreme vulnerability and confined to precarious housing arrangements on the urban periphery or in informal settlements in border areas.

At the material level, the borderisation process has unfolded through a deep criminalisation of unauthorised movement and the simultaneous "spectacularisation" of the border (Cuttitta, 2014). This is expressed in the militarisation of border spaces, the development of technological surveillance systems – including the kilometres-long fences and control technologies deployed at Melilla and Ceuta, as well as the armed vessels patrolling maritime borders – and the introduction of administrative detention mechanisms. Border management practices entail the systematic use of force: expulsions, pushbacks, raids on informal encampments, and forced deportations to peripheral Moroccan cities or to Algeria, where individuals risk being in turn pushed back toward other countries, following the logic of chain deportations (GADEM, 2018, 2023; Migreurop et al., 2015). In urban areas, violence manifests through continuous police roundups and racialised hostility from local populations, targeting also minors and people who have long resided in the territory on a regular basis.

In this process, the border acts not only through direct violence, but through the precarisation and control of migrant bodies. This is what Ilcan (2022) terms the "borderization of waiting" – the deceleration of movement that creates the conditions for selectively identifying, detaining, and expelling people in transit. To this dimension is added the absence of a structured asylum and reception system, alongside the denial of access to social services for undocumented migrants. The spectacular violence of the border is thus accompanied by the less visible "violence of abandonment" (see for example, about the Moroccan case, Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020), which produces the presence of people trapped in informal camps or deported to the urban and industrial margins of the country: what Stock (2020) calls liminal spaces – spaces from which it becomes impossible to exit without documents and in which the migratory project toward Europe takes shape, in practice, as the only escape route from marginalisation. In these contexts, abandonment does not constitute an absence of power, but rather one of its strategic forms of exercise, through which the racialised bodies of people on the move are systematically rendered invisible and reduced to a condition of prolonged liminality – made vulnerable to deportation, exploitation, and a slow, diffuse, and cumulative violence that gradually erodes subjectivity and dematerialises presence over time (Nixon, 2011; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020).

In response to pressure from civil society, in 2013 King Mohammed VI announced a "radically new" approach to migration, grounded in international human rights frameworks (Gross-Wyrzten and Gazzotti, 2020). In 2014, the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) was established, coordinated by UNHCR and IOM under the leadership of the Moroccan government, with the mandate of overseeing the integration of regular migrants and their access to social services. The system provided regularisation pathways for foreign nationals in irregular status on the basis of specific eligibility criteria – marriage, employment, illness, or five years of continuous residence. Two extraordinary regularisation campaigns were launched, in 2014 and 2017, enabling approximately 50,000 irregular foreign nationals to obtain an annually renewable legal status, with an application acceptance rate of 83.5%. Of these, 55% were citizens of sub-Saharan African countries – 21% of whom were Senegalese (Ghazouani, 2019; Gross-Wyrzten, 2020). This process gave rise to a collaboration between the government and civil society, in line with the Kingdom's clear objective of repositioning Morocco on the global stage by projecting a more democratic and rights-respecting image (Natter, 2014, 2021). However, despite initial encouraging signs, it soon became apparent that the announcement of the strategy had neither brought an end to human rights violations at the border nor produced substantive changes in migration governance in Morocco. The New Migration Policy has never been translated into law, and the two asylum bills drafted since 2013 remain to this day in draft form, while Law 02-03 continues to serve as the principal legislative reference on migration matters.

Despite the developments since 2013, administrative reforms capable of ensuring long-term solutions have not been implemented, and structural violence and discrimination persist. Sub-Saharan people in particular continue to face barriers to accessing integration and social services, despite being officially entitled to them, and remain highly susceptible to involvement in exploitative networks and informal labour. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened social vulnerability, isolating many people from assistance and intensifying their marginalisation: many, owing to movement restrictions and job loss, were unable to renew their regularisation. As the Global Detention Project (2021) report highlights, Morocco's migration management policies continue to be characterised by the use of force, expulsions, border violence, and a de facto absence of access to regular status.

Various associations have denounced in particular the policy of arbitrary detention and deportation of sub-Saharan migrants from border areas and major cities to marginal zones (GADEM, 2023; El Arabi, 2020) – a policy that employs the dispersal and containment of bodies as a geopolitical instrument for governing sub-Saharan migration. These practices fall outside the scope of Law 02-03 and also affect minors and migrants holding UNHCR documentation, who are left without any legal or formal protection. Border violence has over time displayed varying degrees of intensity, with episodes of particular severity. Among the most violent was the Melilla massacre of 24 June 2022, when Moroccan and Spanish authorities brutally suppressed a group of migrants attempting to reach European soil, resulting in numerous deaths, disappearances, and injuries (AMDH, 2022).

Practices and Categories of Unauthorised Mobility

The effects of this system of control play out differently depending on the subjective positions and migratory trajectories involved. In Morocco, the externalisation process has had a differential impact on the migratory movements that have historically passed through the country. This section focuses in particular on how it has affected the movements connecting Morocco to sub-Saharan countries, as well as those of Moroccan citizens themselves.

With regard to sub-Saharan mobilities – encompassing both circular movements and those directed toward European entry points – the construction of the border has profoundly disrupted historical patterns of movement and the presence of various communities already established on the territory, producing a structural condition of illegality that has deeply affected original migratory projects. The absence of regular channels for entry and residence has exposed these populations to systematic experiences of marginalisation and racial violence, radically reshaping their trajectories in ways that are often irreversible: on the one hand, compelling them toward a forced and indefinite stay in Morocco; on the other, pushing them to consider onward movement to Europe as an alternative to a life lived in irregularity.

Data on legal presence in Morocco (Table I) offer, albeit partially, a reflection of this transformation. Between 1990 and 2020, the number of regularly registered foreign nationals almost doubled, rising from 54,895 to 102,358. This growth was not linear: following a slight contraction between 1990 and 1995, figures remained broadly stable until 2005, before accelerating significantly from 2010 onward – a period that coincides with the first regularisation measures introduced by the New Migration Policy of 2013–2014.

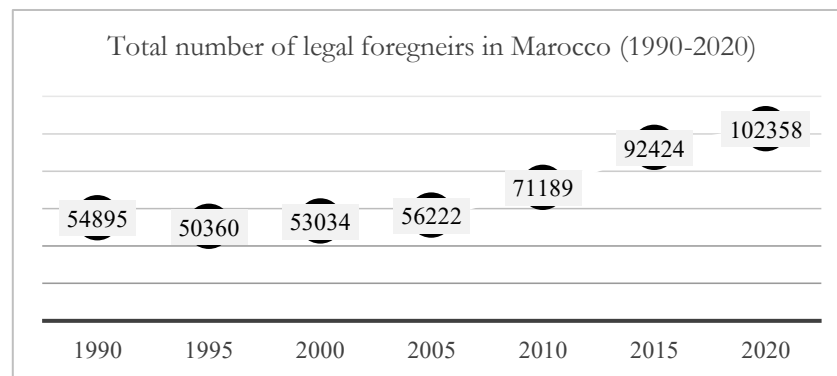


Table 2. Source United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). *International Migrant Stock 2020*. In Cassarini and Lovato, 2023.

It should be noted, however, that these figures capture only a partial picture of the phenomenon: irregular presences are not recorded in official statistics, and comprehensive data are not publicly accessible in their entirety. With regard to populations present in Morocco from West and Central Africa, according to available data for 2020, Côte d'Ivoire represented the principal country of origin of foreign nationals, at 16.7%, followed by Senegal (15.9%), Guinea (13.2%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (10.1%), Cameroon (8.7%), Mali (4.9%), and the Central African Republic (2.3%) (Cassarini and Lovato, 2023). This opacity, on the one hand, prevents any reliable assessment of the actual scale of these presences; on the other, it creates space for narratives of emergency and invasion which, in the absence of verifiable data, tend to overestimate numbers and to lend legitimacy to increasingly restrictive migration policies.

The composition of sub-Saharan populations in Morocco is furthermore in continuous transformation, being closely tied to regional dynamics: the intensification of conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan, for instance, has in recent years led to a significant increase in Sudanese and South Sudanese presence in the country, just as instabilities in the Sahel, in Guinea-Conakry, and in the Lake Chad region have over time reshaped the trajectories and nationalities of flows in transit.

Dynamics of exclusion produced by the bordering process have also affected Moroccan citizens, albeit in distinct forms and with varying degrees of intensity. The history of Moroccan migration to Europe is

rooted in the period of the French and Spanish protectorates, when Moroccan workers began to move in response to labour demand in the mining, construction, and military sectors. Following independence, these movements intensified and were characterised by predominantly linear ones: labour migration was followed by family reunification (Drihneur, 2020), eventually giving rise to a diaspora that today numbers approximately four million people registered with diplomatic or consular missions.

Over time, however, European migration policies have become progressively more selective, favouring the entry of skilled workers and students while narrowing the possibilities for legal mobility for other profiles (Alioua and Arab, 2023; Infantino, 2016). In parallel, a circular flow of seasonal workers has been maintained, employed primarily in agricultural contracts – as documented by Alioua and Arab (2023) in the case of the *dames de fraises*, workers involved in strawberry harvesting who numbered approximately 15,000 in 2022 – while restrictions on legal entry push those who lack other means of movement to attempt unauthorised crossing, with increasingly younger profiles and a significant presence of unaccompanied minors. According to UNHCR data, since 2018 approximately 10,000 people from Morocco have sought asylum in other countries, with numbers rising in more recent years; the principal destination countries – France, Italy, Austria, and Spain – nonetheless apply restrictive policies toward this nationality, deemed to originate from a safe country, as evidenced by high rejection rates: in Italy in 2022, 81% of asylum applications by Moroccan nationals were refused.

The border reveals itself as a mechanism of differential selection that stratifies access to legal mobility along lines of class, nationality, and race, producing exclusion at multiple levels while simultaneously generating the structural conditions for its own transgression. In response to the devices of border closure, new practices of unauthorised mobility have emerged as a systematic response to the inaccessibility of regular channels. Within the communities that inhabit these practices, they have acquired their own nominal and symbolic categories, which reflect their cultural and political dimensions. In North African vernacular, those who move without authorisation are called *barrag*: the root is *brg*, meaning to burn, evoking the image of those who destroy their documents before crossing into European territory, erasing all identifying traces in order to evade mechanisms of control and pushback (Arab and Souvannavong, 2009). Among francophone sub-Saharan migrant populations, the act of crossing is referred to as *boza* – a word meaning "victory" in Bambara – used to celebrate the moment the border has been successfully crossed (Mouna and Kchikach, 2020). The coexistence of these categories points to two interconnected dimensions: on the one hand, the operation of a border regime that, according to a precise geometry of power, differentially defines the conditions of access and the subjectivities deemed legitimate to mobility; on the other, the practices of resistance and negotiation through which migrant subjects contest this regime, reclaiming the act of crossing as an agentive act and as an experience valued collectively or individually.

The Geopolitics of the Border

Morocco's migration and border policy is deeply intertwined with the geopolitical relations the Kingdom maintains with the European Union, its member states, and the countries of the African region. Within this framework, Morocco does not figure as a passive or subordinate actor, but as a subject that actively pursues its own strategic objectives, selectively negotiating its position through the migration question.

Bilateral relations between Morocco and European countries on migration matters have developed in a differentiated manner (see Lahlou, 2018; Carrera et al., 2016; Andersson, 2015; De Haas, 2007).

Geographical proximity – and in particular the presence of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla – has made Spain the principal European country involved in managing movements from Morocco, giving rise to a series of agreements from the 1990s onward that have progressively formalised cooperation on border control. The second major European interlocutor is France, historically the European country with the largest Moroccan community, whose relationship with Morocco is structured around the issue of diaspora and visas and characterised by deep-seated negotiations.

At the European level, the relationship with Morocco on migration has taken shape over the years on both the material and political planes. According to Statewatch data⁸, since 2001 the EU has allocated approximately 215 million euros to border security projects in Morocco – 68.6 million between 2001 and 2010 and 140 million from 2018 onward – while between 2014 and 2022 it directed 2.1 billion euros to the country through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and other financial instruments (European Union, 2023). European presence extends beyond the economic dimension. Morocco was among the first countries in the southern neighbourhood to conclude an Action Plan under the European Neighbourhood Policy (2005) and to negotiate an Advanced Status with the EU (2008) – instruments that institutionalised migration cooperation within a broader framework of political and economic relations, strengthening the country's negotiating position vis-à-vis its European partners.

European presence is further structured through international organisations and agencies: in Morocco, IOM has been operational since 2001 and UNHCR since 2007, and international organisations – funded by the EU particularly from 2011 onward – put forward initiatives to support the government in governing migration, including information campaigns to discourage departure and voluntary return programmes which, according to several scholars, de facto replicate the logic of externalised migration management (Maâ, 2022; Bartels, 2018). This is accompanied by the operational presence of Frontex and Europol at Moroccan borders – through Operation Hera (2006), aimed at patrolling and intercepting vessels along the Saharan coast toward the Canary Islands, and Operation Minerva (June 2022), in support of border guards at the ports of Algeciras, Tarifa, and Ceuta – and the ongoing negotiation of cooperation agreements between European agencies and the Moroccan government (European Union, 2022; ASGI, 2022).

Morocco's cooperation with the EU is driven by a set of overlapping strategic interests: projecting humanitarian credibility internationally while maintaining authoritarian control domestically, expanding its influence across the African continent, and negotiating more favourable mobility and labour conditions for its citizens (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi, 2024; Jiménez-Alvarez et al., 2021; Natter, 2021). In this sense, the relationship between Morocco and EU is "marked by dependence as often as it is by dominance" (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi, 2024:3). Several scholars have nonetheless highlighted, in fact, how Morocco behaves strategically within the geopolitical relations surrounding migration (Ahouga and Kunz, 2017; El Qadim, 2018). The label of "Europe's gendarme" – which emphasises the country's subordination to EU policies – is called into question when we consider how the Kingdom acts with its own autonomy and as a protagonist in its own right: from the early 1990s, the country's relationship with the EU has been marked by alternating phases of cooperation and tension. The adoption of Law 02-03, for instance, is regarded as "a deliberate move, consistent with the country's national priority of recovering its role as a regional actor" (Natter, 2021: 18), justified domestically by framing irregular migration as a public security issue linked primarily to sub-Saharan

⁸ Data available online, on <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2019/aid-border-security-and-eu-morocco-cooperation-on-migration-control/>, report 2019.

movements. This narrative choice is also strategic in deflecting attention from the more sensitive – and rarely discussed publicly – question of irregular Moroccan migration.

In this relationship, irregular migration becomes a commodity of political exchange (Lahlou, 2018; El Arabi, 2020), through which Morocco negotiates greater rights for its diaspora – whose remittances represent a fundamental contribution to the country's economy – along with agreements in the agricultural and fisheries sectors, and political leverage regarding Western Sahara. In moments of diplomatic tension⁹, the country has deployed migration as an instrument of political pressure, demonstrating its capacity to modulate border control in accordance with national interests.

In the face of European demands, Morocco elaborates its own "counter-strategies" (El Qadim, 2018), invoking the concept of dignity as a foundational value of anti-colonial struggles: its reluctance to accept readmission agreements in exchange for visa facilitation is interpreted as an expression of national pride and as a moral foundation in support of a broader right to mobility for its citizens.

Morocco's cooperation with the EU is therefore "strategically intermittent" (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti, 2020): by advancing humanitarian narratives in the vocabulary of European discourse, Morocco constructs an internationally palatable image that does not, however, find correspondence in border practices, which remain security-oriented and continuously redirected in accordance with national interests. The New Migration Policy represents the most emblematic expression of this intermittent cooperation, and it needs to be read also as a strategic response to the expectations of European partners. By adopting the vocabulary of human rights and international protection frameworks, Morocco has cultivated an image of itself as a reliable and progressive interlocutor, functional to the maintenance of privileged relations with the EU (Natter, 2021; Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti, 2020). Yet, as already noted, the strategy has produced no structural transformation: the humanitarian rhetoric provides a symbolic cover that enables Morocco to negotiate funding and favourable conditions with the EU without ceding sovereignty over domestic migration policies (Norman, 2020).

Morocco's strategic positioning within migration policy is not exhausted in its bilateral relationship with Europe, but extends across the entire African regional space, assuming growing significance from 2011 onward (Cherti and Collyer, 2015; Natter, 2014, 2021). The upheavals of the Arab Spring and the consequent decline of Libya's role in regional migration management created a geopolitical vacuum that Morocco was able to occupy, consolidating its position as a privileged interlocutor both for African countries of origin and transit and for European partners. This process has translated into active engagement in numerous multilateral agreements and forums: from the Global Forum on Migration and Development to the African Alliance – the latter promoted by Morocco itself as a continental governance platform – to the chairmanship of the Rabat Process, launched in 2006 as a regional dialogue on migration between African and European countries. Through these instruments, the migration question functions for Morocco as a vector of influence and negotiation with other African states, serving the reinforcement of its own role as a regional power.

This role produces asymmetric effects. On the one hand, it generates differentially privileged relations with certain countries: Senegal, for instance, figures among the nationalities traditionally favoured by Moroccan migration policies, by virtue of longstanding historical, cultural, and diplomatic ties. On the

⁹ For example in 2021, when, following Spain's decision to admit Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali for medical treatment, Morocco responded by suspending border controls at Ceuta, thereby allowing thousands of people to cross into Spanish territory without authorisation

other, it fuels significant tensions with other regional actors. The militarisation of the border with Algeria (Vermeren, 2022) constitutes one of the most contentious nodes, interweaving with unresolved territorial and historical disputes that render Morocco's eastern frontier a terrain of ongoing negotiation and conflict. To this are added the diplomatic disputes triggered when Moroccan citizens fall victim to the migration policies of neighbouring countries: emblematic in this regard is the controversy between Morocco and Libya in 2006–2007, when numerous Moroccan nationals were detained in Libyan prisons for attempted irregular migration, generating a diplomatic crisis that laid bare the internal contradictions of the regional migration governance system (Cassarino, 2017).

A View of Migration Routes in Morocco Today

The migratory routes that pass-through Morocco constitute a set of pathways in continuous redefinition, shaped by local, regional, and international geopolitical balances that shift rapidly. Border policies do not halt migratory movements, rather, they redraw them (Tazzioli, 2020): they displace departures toward new crossing points, lengthen journeys, multiply intermediaries, raise costs and, with them, the risks to the lives of people on the move. In this sense, routes must be understood in relation to a system of control that is itself in transformation – just as the geographies of mobility and the modalities of crossing transform in parallel.

The trajectories of migratory routes in Morocco have historically involved both land and maritime borders (see Figure 3). On the land side, one of the principal nodes is the eastern border with Algeria, particularly in the area of the city of Oujda. Located a few kilometres from the frontier in the north-eastern part of the country, Oujda represents the main point of entry into unauthorised mobility in Morocco, serving as a gateway for migrant movements, primarily involving citizens from sub-Saharan and North African countries. Oujda is a junction where various migratory movements intersect, both inward and outward: it is also a point of departure for those who intend, for example, to continue eastward through Tunisia and Libya.

A second land axis concerns the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, the only portions of European territory located on the African continent. Since the introduction of migration regulation policies, both have constituted destinations for unauthorised migration – by Moroccan nationals, in particular minors who reach the Spanish shores by swimming, as well as by sub-Saharan citizens who attempt to cross by scaling the perimeter fences. The bordering process, whose fences were erected in 1993, has entailed a profound militarisation, with border authorities present on both sides. In 2015, the Spanish government effectively legalised collective pushbacks as a means of protecting these borders.

A further route directed toward Europe, circumventing the Mediterranean, is the Balkan route. This route is accessible to Moroccan citizens given that they are exempt from the visa requirement for entry into Turkey, which allows them to reach Istanbul by air and from there to undertake an overland journey through the Balkan region. Until a recent revision of bilateral agreements, the same exemption was in force for Serbia as well, which represented an additional node of facilitated access along the route. According to Frontex data, between 2020 and 2021 Moroccan nationals figured among the top nationalities recorded along this route, after Syrians and Afghans, accounting for 26,969 unauthorised crossings in 2020 and 61,735 in 2021.

On the maritime side, departures from northern Morocco connect the country to the Iberian Peninsula via the Strait of Gibraltar. This is one of the oldest migration corridors in the western Mediterranean: the short distance separating the Moroccan coastline from the Spanish shores has historically made it accessible even to those with limited resources. According to Frontex data, this route was the most

heavily used for entries into Europe from 2018 onward, the year in which a record of 56,245 detected unauthorised crossings was registered. Morocco is the principal country of departure, and Moroccan nationals represent a significant share of those who use it. Crossings included both self-organised passages on small makeshift vessels and journeys managed by intermediaries. Between 2019 and 2021, arrivals along this route decreased to between 17,000 and 20,000 per year, with a predominantly North African composition: approximately half were Algerian and Moroccan nationals.

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, this route has been progressively compressed by the intensification of Spanish and Moroccan maritime surveillance, which has rendered the Strait considerably less navigable than it once was. Furthermore, the increased militarisation of the enclave borders and the escalation of border violence – most notably with the Melilla massacre of 24 June 2022 – drastically reduced crossings from the northern part of the country, redirecting flows southward along the Atlantic route. Data from Alarm Phone confirm this dynamic: already following the summer of 2019, as arrivals along the Strait route declined, a parallel intensification of movements toward the Canary Islands was observed.

The Atlantic route toward the Canary Islands departs from the southern coast of Morocco and, with growing frequency, from the coasts of Mauritania and Senegal. Unlike the Strait route, it is entirely managed by networks of intermediaries: the distances involved – ranging from 100 to 1,400 kilometres depending on the point of departure – make self-organisation impossible and require larger vessels, fuel, and experienced crews. The necessary recourse to intermediaries translates into high costs, making this crossing accessible only to those with significant resources or willing to incur debt.

It is considered one of the most lethal routes in the world: Atlantic currents, the length of the crossing, and the difficulty of maritime rescue combine with devastating effect. In 2024 alone, according to data collected by Caminando Fronteras, at least 9,757 people lost their lives along this route. This figure is, however, an underestimate: the remote nature of the route makes monitoring extremely difficult for both authorities and civil society organisations. Unlike the central Mediterranean, where networks such as Alarm Phone and various NGOs operate on a continuous basis, the Atlantic offers very limited possibilities for intervention and documentation. The true death toll therefore remains largely unknown.

The recent expansion of this route is a direct reflection of the progressive closure of other crossing axes and is part of a broader redistribution of movements affecting Morocco as a whole. Within this context, the eastern border with Algeria continues to represent a structural point of entry, with entrances that have remained uninterrupted in recent years and recorded a significant increase in the summer of 2024. This growth reflects a series of interconnected regional transformations: the closure of the Tunisian route, the systematic deportation of sub-Saharan individuals into the Algerian and Libyan desert¹⁰, and the persistent violence in the Libyan context have progressively reduced the viability of other pathways, orienting movements toward Morocco as an alternative. Considering the various routes together thus enables the identification of a recurring pattern: control policies do not eliminate mobility, but rather redraw it, displacing it toward less monitored, longer, and more dangerous passages.

¹⁰ These policies have been documented by various research efforts: Desert Dumps, Lighthouse Report, May 2024, see <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/desert-dumps/>; State Trafficking, Report, RR[X], January 2025, see <https://statetrafficking.net/>.



Figure 3 - Sub-Saharan migratory routes through Morocco. Gianmaria Dall'Asta. Web Source.

III.II. Civil Society and Migration

Against the backdrop of the migration policies and border practices described above, civil society plays a significant role. Its analysis provides a necessary context for understanding the memory practices and mobilisations around border deaths and disappearances that will be examined in subsequent chapters. The field of Moroccan civil society underwent a progressive liberalisation from the late 1990s onward, coinciding with the accession to the throne of Mohammed VI and the declared intention to inaugurate a new political and social era. As already noted, however, this opening did not translate into any genuine broadening of the space for dialogue between civil society and central power: the possibilities for political competition and opposition remained structurally limited, and the margin of action available to civil organisations continued to be defined and conditioned by their relationship with the authorities. Within this framework, advocacy for the rights of people on the move developed in a non-linear manner, navigating conflictual internal political dynamics, government instrumentalisation, and – not always successful – attempts to carve out autonomous spaces of mobilisation and visibility.

In the early years following the onset of the bordering process, various civil society actors expressed their dissent from border policies, mobilising in response to the systematic abuse of the rights of people on the move. Among the most active Moroccan organisations in this regard, a prominent role is played by GADEM (Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'Accompagnement des Étrangers et Migrants), founded in 2006 in Rabat, which has progressively established itself as one of the principal bodies documenting violations against migrants and publicly denouncing border practices. At a broader level, AMDH (Association Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme), founded in 1979 and historically committed to the defence of human rights in the Moroccan context, has over time extended its mandate to denouncing violations against people on the move, helping to keep the migration question within a wider discourse on civil and political rights. At the same time, movements led by migrants themselves emerged, engaged in defending their own rights against the repressive practices of border control

(Alioua, 2009; Magallanes-Gonzalez, 2020). Among these, CCSM (Conseil des Communautés Subsahariennes du Maroc), which emerged in the early 2010s as a federation of sub-Saharan communities present in the country, represented one of the most structured attempts at autonomous migrant organisation, with the objective of engaging with Moroccan and international institutions from a perspective of self-organisation and collective advocacy.

In 2013, the announcement of the "radically new" approach to migration – grounded in collaboration with civil society – redefined the terms of the relationship between civil actors and central power. Institutions responsible for migration management were strengthened, several previously unauthorised associations were regularised, and many began collaborating with Moroccan and international institutions to deliver social protection services. In parallel, the presence of international organisations in the country intensified, accompanied by flows of external funding originating primarily from the EU (Stock, 2022; Maâ, 2022). Among these, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Caritas, and Médecins du Monde (MDM) played a significant role in providing healthcare and social assistance to people in transit and in border areas.

This injection of external resources, while expanding the operational capacity of many organisations, simultaneously shaped their agendas, orienting them toward a predominantly humanitarian register. Médecins Sans Frontières, which had been present in the border areas of north-eastern Morocco since 2004, chose to leave the country in 2013, revealing the impossibility of maintaining an independent humanitarian space without remaining silent about the structural violence that made such a space necessary (Gazzotti, 2020). The progressive involvement of civil actors took place in managerial roles – such as in the administration of the SNIA – but not in matters of political direction, effectively rendering them an integral part of the authoritarian structure and the border apparatus (Natter, 2021; Gazzotti, 2020). The fragmentation of the civil society agenda and the presence of numerous actors working on the issue facilitated selective co-optation (Gazzotti, 2021), while investments and initiatives centred on human rights multiplied, producing the *illusion* of a democratic social landscape (Bachelet and Hagan, 2023).

At the political level, this process proved functional to the consolidation of the regime: the involvement of civil organisations in migration management became a means of enhancing the internal legitimacy of the monarchy, enabling it to control the human rights discourse and reduce space for criticism, without any genuine commitment to the protection of people on the move (Natter, 2021; Jiménez-Alvarez et al., 2021; Benjelloun, 2020). Within this framework, a fully-fledged "migration industry" (Gazzotti, 2021; Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013) became institutionalised – a product of neoliberal governance that has led to the externalisation and privatisation of an ever-expanding range of functions: from the management of worker programmes to the delivery of social services and collaboration in returns or so-called voluntary repatriations. Within this industry operate actors who, while presenting themselves as apolitical and oriented toward supporting people on the move, participate directly or indirectly in policies of migration containment (Maâ, 2022; Cuttitta, 2020).

It is the activism of "subversive solidarity" (Bachelet and Hagan, 2023a) that keeps the question of rights for people on the move politically alive: actors who engage with the border apparatus by refusing humanitarian neutrality in favour of explicit critique – and sometimes active attempts to subvert – state policies. Such actors have over the years been subjected to increasing criminalisation, exposing them to surveillance and movement control, institutional violence, political and social isolation, and concrete risks to their activism, differentiated along lines of gender, race, and nationality (Bachelet and Hagan, 2023a; Lovato and Stimmattini, 2025). In the Moroccan context, however, the distinction between

subversive activism and the migration industry is never clear-cut: migration governance entails practices that oscillate between coercion and care (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti, 2020), in which humanitarian and security-oriented narratives continuously intertwine, rendering the boundaries between cooperation, adaptation and contestation fluid and subject to ongoing renegotiation.

Civil Society in the Field of Border Disappearances

Although the civil society field concerned with border deaths and disappearances constituted one of the central elements of observation and interaction throughout my fieldwork, a systematic analysis of its dynamics and composition falls outside the scope of this thesis, as it would require an analytical depth that cannot be adequately developed here. The following section therefore offers an introductory overview of the context, presenting those elements that seem necessary to situate the analysis of the ethnographic cases that follow.

The civil society field specifically engaged with border disappearances and deaths is traversed by the same dynamics described above, which in this particular domain manifest in more acute form owing to the political sensitivity of the subject. Engaging with the deaths and disappearances produced by border violence is a delicate matter in Morocco: it intersects with the complicated dynamics between civil society and central power, concerns a historically surveilled topic, and is situated within a broader discourse on responsibility that implicates both the Moroccan state and its partners in border management. In this context, the field is heavily exposed to dynamics of control, co-optation, and repression, and involves heterogeneous actors in complex relationships with one another, with central power, and with those directly affected by disappearance.

The first associations formally established to address this issue emerged during the period of liberalisation initiated under Hassan II and subsequently continued under Mohammed VI. In 1999, the *Association des Familles des Victimes de l'Immigration Irrégulière* (AFVIC) was founded in Khouribga – a city historically marked by high rates of emigration – with the aim of providing support to the families of Moroccan nationals who had disappeared in the course of migration, combining this activity with media mobilisation and demands for political intervention on the issue. An activist from the association recounts that the movement was militant in its early period, having to contend constantly with attempts at control and opposition from central power. Subsequently, with the arrival of external funding in the migration field in Morocco, the acceptance of financing initiated a process of growing institutionalisation that gradually transformed the association's modes of operation, until it effectively ceased its activities around 2010. In the early 2000s, in Larache, a group of young residents founded *Pateras de la Vida*, a locally rooted association committed to direct support for the families of victims, monitoring, and public awareness-raising around unauthorised migration. This association has also experienced significant surveillance in its attempts to carry out its activities. Both organisations have since formally ceased to operate; they are rarely mentioned in the public spaces where border disappearances are discussed, and tracing any institutional memory of their work proves difficult. The trajectory of these early actors is not coincidental: the AFVIC activist denounces how the process of institutionalisation progressively altered the association's political orientation, ultimately leading to its closure, describing this dynamic as "a way of controlling from the outside, in accordance with the wishes of central power, the discourse on borders and frontiers."

A number of associations working on human rights and migration have nonetheless begun to incorporate the issue of border disappearances, in a transversal manner, within a broader scope of work. AMDH, across its various local branches, has progressively extended its mandate to include the

documentation and denunciation of border violence and disappearances, combining direct support to families with research and public advocacy, and situating the border question within a wider framework of civil and political rights.

For years, however, engaging with this issue in any direct form proved extremely difficult: as will be seen, family collectives that attempted to register as formal associations were denied authorisation by the authorities, while several activists report that addressing the topic publicly on political grounds has consistently been met with obstacles. What proves acceptable in this context is a humanitarian register that does not call into question either Morocco's domestic policies or its border practices. There exist, accordingly, organisations and initiatives that offer support within the framework of general humanitarian assistance, without this translating into any critical stance on the structural responsibilities that produce disappearances. Those who do take such a stance are subject to repression and criminalisation. More broadly, the field is subject to powerful dynamics of control and co-optation on the part of the authorities. A question that effectively illustrates this dynamic is that of access to detention facilities: associations seeking to enter prisons – for instance, to search for missing migrants or provide them with support – are required to accept a relationship of systematic data exchange and sharing with the authorities. Many organisations, in order to protect the people with whom they work, choose not to accept such conditions, thereby forgoing the possibility of operating within those spaces. This example illustrates clearly how the boundary between assistance and control translates into concrete operational choices that ultimately define the margins within which action is possible.

At the international level, the International Committee of the Red Cross was active in Morocco through the *Rétablissement des Liens Familiaux programme*, which addressed, among other situations of disappearance, the migratory dimension as well. In 2024, however, officially due to lack of funding, the programme passed under the coordination of the Moroccan Red Crescent, which operates on a voluntary basis across various cities in the country and is considerably less independent than the ICRC. Transnational actors of a more explicitly political character are represented by Alarm Phone and Caminando Fronteras, both of which play a central role in real-time monitoring and the denunciation of violence and emergencies at the border. The activists of these organisations are subject to intense processes of criminalisation, as illustrated emblematically by the case of Spanish activist Helena Maleno Garzón, who after decades of sustained activity in Morocco left the country following prolonged experiences of both physical and legal persecution, and whose political work on Morocco now continues from Spain.

Today, the only formally authorised association in Morocco working specifically on missing and dead migrants is the *Association Marocaine d'Aide aux Migrants en Situations Vulnérables* (AMSV), founded in 2017 in the north-eastern part of the country. Operating at the national scale, the organisation coordinates search activities, collects disappearance reports, and maintains direct relationships with groups of families. Significantly, its work is concentrated primarily on Moroccan nationals who have disappeared in Algeria: this focus reflects a narrative frame coherent with and functional to official Moroccan border policy, and it effectively shapes a substantial portion of the public associative discourse on border disappearances.

Over recent years, a shift has been registered in this field, shaped by two concurrent developments: on the one hand, a relative liberalisation of public discourse on the topic; on the other, the arrival of external resources and funding directed at the issue. The result has been a gradual increase in public initiatives and a progressive, if fragile, structuring of advocacy spaces between 2021 and 2025. During this period, various bodies and organisations founded and/or based in European countries have begun

investing resources to create collective spaces and operational networks between North Africa and Europe, involving local organisations, international bodies, migrant-led organisations, and local and international activists and researchers, while supporting a range of projects on border disappearances. These spaces are traversed by heterogeneous languages and perspectives, and seek to articulate a discourse that mediates with the Moroccan context, moderating the terms of public exposure in light of local political constraints. This specific field is not analysed in depth here; however, it is important to note that the presence of external funding does not render this field neutral (Gazzotti, 2021b), nor does it exempt it from the dynamics of control and tension that traverse it more broadly. At the same time, resources from European or international bodies inevitably shape agendas, select interlocutors, and participate in defining the public discourse on the issue. That this nonetheless constitutes a field in expansion is a significant development, signalling that the question of border disappearances is acquiring growing visibility and is progressively consolidating as a terrain of mobilisation.

III.III. Disappearances in Morocco: Genealogy and Context

Addressing the theme of disappearances at Morocco's borders requires looking at the broader context in which this experience is embedded. Engaging with disappearance in Morocco means confronting a climate of general reluctance to address the issue publicly, ineffective institutional search procedures, and a legal framework that remains incomplete and poorly defined. Understanding this present requires tracing the historical, political, and cultural roots that shape disappearance as a political and social phenomenon in Morocco.

Speaking of disappearances in Morocco compels us to step back in time, to the period when, under Hassan II's regime between 1956 and 1999, Moroccan activists and political opponents would disappear – typically following direct contact with the regime's authorities (Marzouki, 2000; Loudily, 2019; Menin, 2019). Rachid El Manousi of the Association des Parents et Amis des Disparus au Maroc recounts that when the first disappearances occurred during that period, there was no term to describe them, and the word used was *ghubār* – dust. Dust symbolically evoked the fate awaiting political detainees who entered Moroccan detention centres: to be reduced to dust, and therefore untraceable. It was only later that the term *mukhtaḥif* came into use, derived from the verb *akhḥā*, meaning to hide. *Mukhtaḥifin* referred to those who had been made to disappear, rendered invisible: their disappearance, their untraceability, was thus directly linked to being made invisible – in this case, by the Moroccan repressive system.

In the mobilisations of movements and families, this experience produced a series of cultural, political, and social repertoires of claim-making (Biondi, 2025; Menin, 2017, 2019), structuring a demand for truth that, within a repressive monarchical context, called for the recognition of political responsibility and the illegitimacy of the system that had produced the disappearances. It is this legacy that makes the issue politically sensitive to this day – debated between institutional silences and pressure from below – and that lends historical depth to the concept of truth in the Moroccan context within which contemporary mobilisations around border disappearances are situated. Before proceeding with the historical reconstruction of the *mukhtaḥifin* experience, two clarifications are necessary which, while not constituting the direct object of this work, are important for conveying the complexity of the phenomenon and for adequately contextualising the analysis that follows.

The first concerns the layering, within the Moroccan context, of different forms of disappearance united by their intrinsically political nature, and the consequent absence of any public space for debate

and denunciation. Over the years, for instance, enforced disappearance has been documented in the territories of Western Sahara, as a practice that began with the occupation of those territories and continued through arbitrary detention¹¹. Here too, the issue remains subject to tight control: in the Moroccan context, those who engage with it face a concrete risk of repression, and space for public denunciation remains effectively non-existent.

A similar dynamic of politicisation and closure is found in the case of young Moroccans who left as foreign fighters to the Middle East and subsequently became unreachable within detention systems. In 2019, the Coordination of Families of Moroccans Stranded or Detained in Iraq and Syria¹² was established, bringing together around 300 families by 2024. These families report intense pressure from Moroccan military forces, deep social and political isolation, and a lack of support or guidance in their attempts to obtain information about their relatives. Here too, the issue remains highly sensitive and devoid of public space. It is worth noting that the association does not publicly claim the term "disappeared," even though families have had no news of the fate or conditions of their loved ones for years – since they were informed of their arrest. The choice of terminology reflects a politics of control over experiences and their meanings, shaping the degree of visibility and recognition accorded to them, and, with it, the possibilities for mobilisation and access to institutional channels. In the context of migration – a category that will be explored further below – the term used for disappearance is *mafqud*, equivalent to the English *missing*, carrying no explicit political connotations. Language, in this framework, produces the conditions under which certain absences become publicly recognisable and politically actionable.

The second element concerns the structural deficiencies of Morocco's system for searching for missing persons. During the period of enforced disappearances, the denial of information to families was in some sense infrastructural: when relatives turned to the police, officers were often unable to provide any useful indication of whether the person had fled the country or was in the hands of the state. This opacity has extended over time beyond politically motivated disappearances to ordinary cases as well. An emblematic example is the disappearance of a child in Tangier in 2020, which drew widespread public attention in Morocco: the child was found four days later – dead – just metres from home, having apparently remained alive in the same neighbourhood throughout. The general outrage that followed brought into sharp relief the fragility and ineffectiveness of Morocco's institutional system for searching for missing persons.

The Years of Lead and Enforced Disappearances in Morocco

When the commissioner told me he would erase me from the face of the earth, I said to myself: "Already done. I have been erased from the map of Morocco. Nobody knows where I am. I no longer exist except in the memory of my loved ones – and perhaps even they, exhausted by the search, believe I am among the disappeared or the dead."

Fatna El Bouih, in *Sole Nero. Gli Anni di Piombo in Marocco*, pp. 37-38.

The practice of enforced disappearances is part of a broader set of repressive mechanisms inherited from the French colonial tradition in Morocco and consolidated during the post-independence period (Slyomovics, 2005; Menin, 2016; Marzouki, 2000). In the years following the end of the French

¹¹ See for example <https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2025/12/25/13601.html>, <https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2026/03/13/14623.html>.

¹² At-Tansiqiyya al-Wataniyya li-'A'ilat al-'Alaqin wa al-Mu'taqalin fi Suriya wa al-'Iraq.

Protectorate (1912–1956), Morocco saw the rise of an authoritarian regime under Mohamed V, which moved to counter the left-wing forces that had fought for national liberation – principally the Istiqlal and the Armée de la Libération Nationale – in favour of the centralisation of monarchical power. This authoritarian turn deepened further under Hassan II (1961–1999), who made the co-optation and repression of opponents a central instrument of power consolidation.

The regime's repressive policies targeted heterogeneous social and political categories across the decades. Between 1956 and 1959, in the early years following independence, the Moroccan army conducted military operations in the Rif mountains against Berber tribes who had risen against the Alawi monarchy, establishing a repressive pattern that would mark the decades to come. As Hassan II's grip on power intensified – particularly from 1965 onwards – repression became systematic and widened to encompass an ever-broader range of opponents: left-wing party militants, student activists, and trade unionists were among the primary targets of extrajudicial detention, torture, and enforced disappearances, carried out in secret detention centres, police stations, isolated villas, and old fortresses scattered across the country (Hegasy, 2014; Menin, 2017). In the early 1970s, following the attempted military coups of 1971 and 1972, the regime carried out a drastic internal purge of the armed forces; officers and other suspects were arrested and transferred to secret detention camps (see El Guabli, 2020). With the occupation of Western Sahara from 1975, enforced disappearances reached particularly grave proportions in the occupied territories: between 1975 and 1993 alone, over four hundred documented cases involved members of Sahrawi communities. Repression extended to Islamist movements and to the relatives of those deemed opponents, regardless of any direct political involvement, making state violence a capillary and systematic instrument of social control.

During these years, the *Makhzen* demonstrated with brutality both the force and violence it was willing to deploy in defence of centralised power, and its capacity to extend that reach beyond national borders – enabled in part by strong external support. This is illustrated by the cases of Ben Barka and El-Manouzi¹³, prominent activists and leading figures of the National Union of Popular Forces, who disappeared in Paris and Tunis respectively. The circumstances of their disappearances – never fully clarified – reveal elements of collaboration between Moroccan intelligence services and Western and North African forces. Under Hassan II, enforced disappearance functioned as an instrument of transnational repression, designed to operate as a tool of systemic social disciplining – acting through the bodies of dissidents upon society as a whole.

The Moroccan regime denied state violence for decades. Amid the imposed silence, however, various efforts emerged to denounce the regime's repressive policies and, in particular, its practice of enforced disappearances. In the face of uncertainty about the fate of the disappeared and the absence of any protection against state violence, activists, family members, and movements continued – in various ways – to seek information and to denounce the disappearance of their loved ones and comrades.

¹³ Mehdi Ben Barka, a prominent figure of the Moroccan independence left, founder of the National Union of Popular Forces and activist in the Third World movement, had been sentenced to death in absentia for high treason in 1963. Forced into exile in France, he was disappeared on 29 October 1965 while in Paris: his body was never found, the circumstances of his disappearance were never fully clarified, though evidence emerged pointing to collaboration between Moroccan intelligence services and their French counterparts, as well as the involvement of Israeli and American agencies in his abduction.

Houcine El Manouzi, a young trade unionist and militant of the National Union of Popular Forces, disappeared on 29 October 1972 at Tunis airport, where he was living as a political refugee from Belgium. News of him emerged when he managed to escape, along with a group of detained activists, from the secret detention centre of Poste Fixe III (PF3) in Rabat, only to be recaptured less than a week later. To this day, the circumstances of his disappearance have not been clarified, nor have his remains been found.

Mothers and wives in particular began gathering outside prisons, demanding news of their detained relatives (see Menin, 2017; Biondi, 2025). Alongside these early spontaneous gatherings, more organised forms of protest developed: sit-ins, hunger strikes, university demonstrations, and symbolic occupations, such as that of the mosque in Rabat in 1991. The movement of denunciation and resistance also took cultural form: Moroccan writers, poets, and intellectuals – many of whom had direct experience of detention or exile – worked through literature, theatre, and poetry to give shape to the memories of enforced disappearance. Clandestine texts and publications produced abroad circulated through diaspora networks and international solidarity movements. In this context, the 1990 publication of Gilles Perrault's investigative book *Notre ami le Roi* marked a decisive turning point, bringing the scale of the *Makhzen's* violations to the attention of international public opinion.

In response to the regime's repression, a movement emerged – not necessarily coordinated – that included family collectives, local and international associations. Among the most important were the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), founded in 1979, and subsequently the Moroccan Organisation for Human Rights (OMDH). Family movements organised around collective cases of disappearance or around specific secret prisons – such as the collective of families of forcibly detained persons from Agdez – in an effort to build national coordination. Among these was the *Comité de coordination des familles des disparus dont le sort est encore inconnu et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc*, established in 1992. In the diaspora, the *Association des Parents et Amis des Disparus au Maroc* (APADM), founded in France in 1984, built bridges between exile communities and the homeland, while the *Asociación de Familiares de Presos y Desaparecidos Saharavis*, established in 1989 in Tindouf, pursued the specific cause of Sahrawi victims. Following the end of Hassan II's reign in 1999, a number of former political prisoners founded the *Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et l'Équité*.

Pressure from the international press and human rights movements pushed Hassan II to release political prisoners and to initiate a process of political transition (1991–1999). As part of this political opening, in 1990 Hassan II established the Advisory Council for Human Rights, which subsequently became the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), while in 1993 a Ministry of Human Rights was created.

In 1998, the Advisory Council – under the presidency of former political prisoner Driss Dahak – published a press release listing 112 individuals: 56 had been declared dead without further detail, while the remainder were described as having disappeared in unknown circumstances (Amnesty International, 2010). Without revealing the full extent of enforced disappearances, the communiqué nonetheless represented a step toward their official acknowledgement in Morocco. With the accession to the throne of Mohammed VI in 1999, a genuine break with the past appeared possible, opening what seemed to be a new phase of transition. In 2004, the Advisory Council for Human Rights established the Instance Équité et Réconciliation (IER), with the specific mandate to investigate human rights violations perpetrated between 1956 and 1999, to provide reparations to victims and their families, and more broadly to preserve the historical memory of the Years of Lead. Its mandate, however, did not extend to identifying or prosecuting those responsible for these crimes.

An Incomplete Transitional Justice

The period that appeared to inaugurate a transitional justice process in Morocco saw the kingdom confront, for the first time at least partially in public, its own past of violence. The opening of several secret detention centres, the recovery of some remains, and the apparent willingness to acknowledge

the violations committed during the Years of Lead opened the way to a possible reckoning with the political violence of the preceding regime.

In a climate of far from consolidated trust in the monarchy, and in a context in which many families continued to encounter serious difficulties in reporting the disappearances of their loved ones, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER) received over twenty thousand applications for review. In the course of its work, it examined 803¹⁴ cases of enforced disappearance, confirmed 385 burial locations, and collected and analysed 44 bone samples from victims; between 2005 and 2012, it also carried out DNA analysis on 9 samples for identification purposes. Nevertheless, many of the names of those recognised as victims of enforced disappearance were never made public, and in a great number of cases families received no information whatsoever about the fate of their relatives or the location of their burial. In 2005, the IER submitted its closing report to the King, which included a series of recommendations aimed at providing reparation for victims and at reforming the legal and institutional framework so as to ensure the non-recurrence of such gross human rights violations. The conclusion of the Commission's work was not, however, followed by any judicial proceedings against those responsible, nor were there ever any indications of a political intention to pursue such accountability.

At the international level, Morocco had in the meantime acceded to the principal instruments of protection: in 1979 it ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in 1993 the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and in 2013 the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. To date, however, the country has not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, significantly limiting the possibility of prosecuting those responsible for violations before an international tribunal, and revealing the structural limits of a commitment that remains, at least in part, formal in nature.

These limits are even more apparent at the level of domestic law. Among the IER's final recommendations was an explicit call for the Moroccan state to criminalise enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention. A reference in this direction can today be found in Article 23 of the Moroccan Constitution, which qualifies arbitrary detention, secret detention, and enforced disappearance as "crimes of the utmost gravity" subject to "severe sanctions," specifying that:

"Any detained person must be informed immediately, in a manner they can understand, of the reasons for their arrest and of their rights, including the right to remain silent. They must benefit, as quickly as possible, from legal assistance and the possibility of communicating with their family, in accordance with the law."

This provision is, however, missing a fundamental step. Article 436 provides for sanctions against anyone who illegally arrests, detains, or abducts a person, but stipulates that such penalties apply exclusively when the act is carried out for personal ends. It follows that a public official who demonstrates having acted in execution of a hierarchical order, falling within the competence of the superior who issued it, cannot be held liable for the actions committed. Similarly, Article 228 sanctions arbitrary detention, but where the offence is committed by a public official, the penalty is reduced to mere deprivation of civil rights. This provision was denounced by the IER in its Final Report, which noted that the 1962 Penal Code had already provided for severe penalties without distinction for

14

See

<https://cndh.ma/fr/instance-equite-et-reconciliation#:~:text=Instaur%C3%A9%20par%20Sa%20Majest%C3%A9%20le,du%20Conseil%20national%20des%20droits>.

anyone committing such an offence, a fact which "allows us to deduce that the authors (...) consciously included this clause granting a privilege in favour of public agents" (IER, 2005: vol. II p. 103). To this structurally entrenched criminal impunity is added the fact that no provision currently exists recognising truth as an enforceable right at the national level. The resulting legal framework is thus structurally inadequate to guarantee the prosecutability of enforced disappearances committed in the exercise of state power, perpetuating a form of institutionalised impunity that the reconciliation process has, in practice, left untouched.

The Heritage of Truth Mobilizations in Morocco

It soon became clear that the Moroccan kingdom had no intention of going so far as to establish political and individual responsibility for the violations committed, nor of opening a genuine public reckoning with the systemic nature of the repression. The measures taken proved sufficient to construct an appearance of reconciliation at the international level, but not to meet the demands for truth and justice of victims' families. To this day, mobilisations for truth and justice for the forcibly disappeared in Morocco struggle to find any real interlocution with the central power.

Over the years, Morocco was repeatedly called upon to criminalise enforced disappearance as a specific criminal offence. This figure, for instance, in the report of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances of 2020 and in the report of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances concerning Morocco of 2024.

The demand for more concrete action on truth and justice continued to be advanced by Moroccan collectives and movements against enforced disappearances. In 2019, for instance, several human rights organisations active in Morocco gathered in Casablanca – with the participation of victims' family members and former political prisoners – to develop a proposal aimed at establishing a new transitional justice mechanism. Those present emphasised that tools and technologies now existed that would allow for more accurate examination and identification practices, thereby facilitating the process of truth-seeking and memory-building around enforced disappearances. The Moroccan government responded by declaring that it had already addressed the question of disappearances – a position it reiterated before international bodies in subsequent years – and following this declaration, many associations withdrew from the network working on the topic.

Several activists who continue to work on the issue today denounce the progressive restriction of public space afforded to it in Morocco and the growing condition of political and social isolation in which they operate. This experience is reported, for instance, by activists who have collaborated with international bodies in the drafting of public reports on enforced disappearances in Morocco.

Movements denounce the lack of spaces for discussion and information about enforced disappearances in Morocco – in schools and universities, for example – underlining the risk that debate on the issue remains confined to specialist associations or affected families, and that the memory of the Years of Lead and its resistance may be lost over time. They insist on the necessity of a truth process for Morocco that can serve as the foundation for a real political, social, and cultural transition.

Within the demand for truth that has been built over time among certain families and associations for the *mukhtafin*, two strongly political claims can be identified. The first concerns the search, identification, and restitution of remains and bodies as a condition of recognition. Several family members have refused the financial compensation and death certificates offered by the State as a form of administrative closure, not recognising in these measures an adequate response to their demands.

What is claimed is the *Makbzen*'s real commitment to recovering the remains of those it disappeared. As Rachid Manousi of the *Association des Parents et Amis des Disparus au Maroc* states:

"We consider all these people to be no longer alive, but until we have the body, until we have the remains, until we have carried out DNA analysis to be certain that they are our loved ones, we still consider them disappeared."

For those who take this path, the demand for exhumation and identification of remains forms part of a broader process of justice and truth, in which the material recognition of death – of the fact that they were made to die – is a necessary and foundational condition for being able to engage with the past. Connected to this demand is a collective dimension of truth. As various movements continue to maintain, the demand for truth was – and remains – part of a political transition process aimed at closing an era of repression, in which truth serves the promise of non-recurrence. A truth that, in the words of Houcine of the Forum Vérité et Justice, must be "consensual":

"A truth that Morocco must proclaim as such and on this basis build a different Morocco. [...] one that concerns not only the victims, but all of Morocco and society in general. [...] one that affirms that Morocco has suffered grave human rights violations, even crimes against humanity, and that this truth is incompatible with a modern society. And that we must live, politically speaking, differently. [...] If we manage to know all the cases without being able to move forward, it serves no purpose. Truth is not an end in itself [...] it is a push to move on to something else."

The demand for truth thus reveals itself as an intrinsically political question, structured around the relationship between State and citizens: a relationship in which recognition – or its denial – is itself an act of power.

IV. Disappearing While Black: An Ethnography of Border Disappearances and Memory Practices among Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco

Introduction: Narrating Disappearance Through Bodies

"Who wants to talk about the Guineans who didn't arrive and didn't come back?"

Tely is on stage. It's March 2024 and we're on the third day of the workshop, the first organized within my project, in Rabat. We're doing a theater exercise aimed at collectively sharing and choosing the themes to stage through theater of the oppressed: whoever has a topic to propose goes up on stage and makes it explicit, and based on interest in addressing it, the rest of the participants move to one side or the other of the room. There's a moment of silence; the atmosphere is serious and I stay watching. Tely struggles to explain himself and tries again: "Yes, I mean, the dead of Ceuta, I mean they're not dead... but they haven't come back either," he tries to clarify, "ah, *les disparus*!" After a few seconds, the participants all move toward the back of the room, expressing with their bodies their agreement to work on it.

The theater workshop in Rabat was linked to an ethnographic research experience in Taqadoum, a peripheral neighborhood of the city. Most of the participants were sharing a house there, a precarious dwelling with several rooms, each inhabited by four or five people. They thus were sharing daily life, resources, survival strategies, and future projects. All of them were men aged 18 to 33 from Guinea-Conakry. They experienced the same migratory route – through Mali, Algeria, and finally Morocco – though traveling it at different times: some had arrived in Morocco a few months earlier, others had been living there for several years, in a condition of transit that had become a temporary yet structured permanence. This suspended temporality characterised their lives in the country: without documents, between one attempt and another to cross European borders, they were occupying a liminal space between departure and arrival, caught between being here and imagining themselves elsewhere, making do with what was available to survive the wait.

The workshop was presented to participants as a space dedicated to autobiographical and collective narration. The performance topic was left open, to be established collectively – at that stage, I had not yet disclosed my research interest in border disappearances to any of the participants. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, my intention was to keep the ethnographic work with people on the move focused on experiences of borders and mobility in transit, without directing attention explicitly toward border violence. Nevertheless, the theme of disappearance emerged from within the group itself, giving rise to the recounting of the story of their close friend and travel companion, Daniel, who had departed for Ceuta a year earlier and had never arrived on the other side, nor returned. I was struck by the way that story emerged: the theatrical space had been framed as a place in which to narrate their experience, and Daniel's account was now offered as part of the shared narrative – of their daily life in Morocco – as an integral element of the journey of a community that inhabits the present together, that holds a common past and projects a collective imaginary future.

Silence accompanies the group as it shifts across the room to declare the need to bring that story out, a mission as intense as it is real, and this becomes the space to talk about it. What are the words to narrate disappearance, in a situation where it becomes difficult even just to define Daniel now? What does it mean for someone to disappear? What does it mean materially, socially, politically? In the room, bodies move without speaking, because words struggle to be found.

Working with theater in narrating the migratory experience and borders means foregrounding the body. On stage, bodies are at the centre of narration: mobile or immobile, silent or speaking, their materiality and gestures determine the language and unfolding of the story. "The performing arts are arts of presence," writes Sánchez (2020:8). Theatrical representation takes shape through the physicality of bodies, through movements, words, gestures, costumes, particular signs – carrying embodied experience and staging it. It is on what is visible and perceivable that meaning is built: bodies are given enunciative power, capable of representing places, objects, people, concepts. The appearance of the body lies at the foundation of this language, as does its negation: scenic presence can be constructed through an empty stage which, in its non-appearance, narrates absence, removal, disappearance.

On stage, it becomes possible to speak of those who are neither here nor there – like Daniel and the other *frères disparus* – and to interweave those stories with others: those of people still on the move, of those who have arrived, of those who have remained in the country of origin. Stories that cross different temporalities and spaces, gathered into a single narrative corpus: theater allows for narrating duplication, Sánchez writes, "being here and now and at the same time being there and in another time" (Ibid.). The stage gives space to Daniel's absence, traversed by his companions who use their own bodies to evoke the absent beloved, his exclusion from the world of the present, the furrow left by a body that was there and is no longer, and which for this reason cannot otherwise be represented.

Theater, in this framework, helps us to see that power is played out in the dialectic between visibility and invisibility. The presence of a body on stage holds control of the narration; a body that does not appear is removed – or withdraws – from the role of enunciating subject, leaving to its absence – and to silence – the power to tell. In this space, non-appearance gives room to something that has been removed, that withdraws from the visible, that cannot be seen or has been made invisible. What remains is an empty stage and, on the other side, those who relate to that void.

At the Rabat workshop, the narration mixed present, past, and future, bringing back experiences of movement and borders. The themes identified by the exercise described at the beginning were then grouped into three macro-themes: 1) the life system of migrants in Morocco, 2) the beginning of the adventure, 3) those who neither arrived nor came back. Throughout the narration, disappearance seemed to inhabit all dimensions. The staging, in fact, narrated the companions fallen in clashes in Guinea and the bodies lying in the Mali desert, dwelt on making space for Daniel's present absence, and sharply depicted the horizon of existential precarity that concerned all of them, inscribed in the attempts of border crossing and palpable in the relationship of oppression between black migrants and border authorities in Morocco. Disappearance thus emerged as a constitutive part of the migratory experience, shaping the routes and the relationship with the border apparatus, structuring daily life and moulding imaginaries and prospects for tomorrow.

The theatrical work then continued in Oujda, a border city in northeastern Morocco, a point of entry and exit on migratory routes connecting countries between sub-Saharan and North Africa. Oujda appeared in the Rabat theater workshop, in the account of the route that entered Morocco from Guinea-Conakry: a violent place, of pushback, of beginning. In November 2024, within my project, I organized a theater workshop in Oujda, organized in two daily sessions with different groups of people on the move, hosted at a local charitable structure. The participants reflected the transitory and confusing nature of that place: they came from Sudan and South Sudan, some from Egypt and Niger, from Guinea and Cameroon, and so on.

Compared to the fixed and relatively coherent structure of the Rabat experience, here the theater was shaped by the constant coming and going of Oujda, where every day the workshop participants were changing, between those who had just arrived and those who had left, leaving the narration each time to a different group of actors. The workshop involved people who were at different stages of their migratory journey: people just entered from Algeria, or who had been transiting through Oujda for months, those who had returned after being pushed back from Melilla or Ceuta, or trying to settle in the city itself. Different temporalities overlapped, enriching it with heterogeneous perspectives and experiences of the border, making the narration necessarily fragmented, tense, confused. On stage, experiences mixed: the war in Sudan was followed by the account of the Guinean school system, then the experience of migration in Libya, and then an attempt to cross to Ceuta and an imagined future beyond the border.

The narration constantly jumped geographies and temporalities, finding coherence in the common denominator of border violence, which provided a constant backdrop to the representation. The border materialized in the actors' bodies themselves, which here moved limping, with arms in casts, with crutches, with shoes full of sand. The wounds were legible signs of something that could not be seen from here and resisted verbalization: it is the body that speaks the border, inscribed with violence in the flesh. What came on stage was the wounded body, which hides, flees, camouflages itself, moves in the dark, collides with the fences and jumps over them, is pushed back, lies motionless on the ground: a corporeal testimony to movement and crossing, to precarity and the tension toward the future.

On the Oujda stage, Frej mimes the crossing of the border between Morocco and Algeria: there's a policeman with a flashlight and a dog following him, while he crawls trying not to be seen. In the performance, Frej will be stopped, beaten, and just before being dragged backstage, he will stop in front of the audience to recite – while touching his face: "The problem starts when they see us black."

These bodies on stage narrate that disappearance is a structural condition, inherent in the very concept of the border. It is in the daily coming and going of participants who are here today and tomorrow who knows, in the wounded bodies that narrate that it could have gone worse, in the precarity of an existence in which being seen as black is synonymous with unworthiness and this produce vulnerability. Presence and absence are constructed here between oppression and resistance, in a negotiated and tense equilibrium, in which disappearance is a constant possibility, inscribed on the skin of those who cross.

At the centre of this chapter lies the moving body and the relationship it holds with the possibility of disappearing, attending to how this possibility is lived, negotiated, and inhabited within the experience of movement. The chapter unfolds across three passages. The first examines the structural construction of disappearability within the border regime, tracing how certain bodies are rendered vulnerable to disappearance and how they navigate this condition in their everyday lives. The second turns to the ways in which the moving body negotiates the persistent possibility of disappearing across the migratory journey: within an experience that is intimately haunting, practices of signification render intelligible the very choice to move, that appears continuously shaped by the need to come to terms with this possibility. The third attends to the collective dimension of movement, examining the memory practices directed toward disappeared travelling companions and the forms of relation they sustain.

Listening to how racialised people on the move give account of the experience of being seen differently – *when they see us black* – the aim is to observe how bodies traverse and negotiate regimes of in/visibility within movement: bodies that concretely inhabit spaces of suspension, whose negotiation of their own political and social visibility this chapter seeks to analyse, as they inhabit and simultaneously resist the horizon of disappearability. By attending to practices of meaning-making, counter-practices, memory and storytelling, attention is thus given to how bodies on the move – both individual and collective – seek to grant visibility and testimony to what border violence conceals and to sustain its testimony over time. In this space, the experience of the border's politics of removal is narrated alongside the practices of resistance through which it is contested: the body rendered removable is at times hidden, at times violently exposed, yet finds in the collective experience of movement a way to return, to regain visibility, and to build memory.

IV.I. Infra-structures of Disappearability

Constructing Disappearability

The theatrical workshop becomes a space for reflecting on the relationship between bodies and disappearance at the border. On stage, we encounter black bodies, subject to varying degrees of visibility and invisibility according to racializing epistemic frameworks. I observe them performing different moments along the migratory route, from the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea to the search for day labour in a peripheral neighbourhood of a Moroccan city. Apprehended from these varied postures, the border assumes multiple dimensions, intimately shaping the value ascribed to a given body within the spaces it traverses. The relationship between body and border governs corporal movement, simultaneously shaping its social meanings, its possibilities of engagement with the surrounding world, and the degree of recognition and visibility accorded to it within given spatial and political configurations.

At the centre of this section lies the racialised body and its relationship with the border, with particular attention to the dynamics interacting in the construction of disappearance. To interrogate this construction, I draw upon the previously introduced concept of disappearability, understood as the sedimented accumulation of precarious conditions to which unauthorised people on the move are exposed over the course of the migratory trajectory (Laakkonen, 2022). The analysis moves between two complementary dimensions: the structural construction of disappearability at the border, and the ways in which racialized bodies on the move inhabit and navigate it. The first dimension attends to the interaction between the elements, dynamics, and power structures that make disappearance possible for certain bodies, conditioning its forms and social distribution. In this framework, it proves productive to mobilise the concept of *infrastructure*¹⁵ developed in migration and border studies (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Andersson, 2014), which allows us to interrogate how the production of disappearability operates at a structural level. The concept of *infrastructure of disappearability* looks at how technologies, processes, practices, and discourses converge systematically to make certain bodies structurally vulnerable to disappearance at the border or along migratory routes. This infrastructure is not limited to the material apparatuses of the border, but extends into the spaces where its logic operates through spatial configurations (Mountz, 2010; Agier, 2011), juridical (Menjívar and Abrego,

¹⁵ The authors use the concept of infrastructure to observe the complex assemblage of actors, technologies, and practices that condition and shape mobility (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) and border practices (Casas-Cortes et al. 2013; Andersson, 2014).

2012) and material devices (Walters, 2011; Amoore, 2006), and mechanisms of structural and symbolic violence that, cumulatively and over time, render the disappearance of certain bodies normalised, predictable, and traceless.

Distributed geographically and temporally, it operates through gradual processes of precarisation that culminate in exposure to death, through a network of state, economic, and social actors with varying degrees of responsibility that generate an opacity obscuring direct causal chains. This diffusion sustains a dominant narrative that neutralises systematic violence by framing deaths as accidental, concealing the political forces that produce them and, in particular, the direct responsibility of European border control policies.

Mapping the material, political, and spatial processes that render certain bodies disappearable allows us to observe the entanglement of border violence with broader systems of exploitation – both local and global – and of political and socioeconomic dispossession, attending to the historical, political, social, and economic processes that sustain and traverse them. These systems are traversed by the long lines of coloniality, through which racialised hierarchies of mobility, life, and death have been historically produced and continue to be reproduced at the border (Quijano, 2000; Mbembe, 2003). Within this racialised architecture of power, the possibility of disappearance takes shape, constructed as part of a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003), composed of a *multitude of small wars and invisible genocides* that accumulate across time and space, routinizing violence (Scheper-Hughes, 2003). The border thus emerges as a condensation point in which violence, articulated across overlapping systems of oppression and power relations operating at multiple scales, assumes a particular intensity.

As the ethnographic accounts will show, I understand disappearability as operating through alternating regimes of forced visibility and invisibility: in a constant movement between marginalisation and surveillance, the racialised body reveals that the risk of disappearing resides at times in being hidden, and at times in being hypervisible. On the other hand, this section attends to how the racialised body inhabits and navigates the infrastructural construction of disappearability. It draws on accounts gathered through performative cues emerging from the theatrical workshop, ethnographic observation, and interviews conducted with racialised people on the move. These accounts narrate the experience of bodies *seen differentially*, whose possibility of disappearing is constructed through regimes of both visibility and invisibility. They allow us to observe how the work of removal is constructed and how racialised bodies inhabit this condition, navigating, negotiating, and resisting it throughout the migratory experience.

Through an ethnography of urban transit spaces, the first two parts show how disappearability is constructed far from the border itself, through daily processes of racialisation and precarisation that render black bodies systematically removable; the third examines how this structural vulnerability materialises at the border in relation to the physical apparatus of the frontier.

From Taqadoum: Biopolitical Border Space between Exception and Disappearability

Rabat, second day of the workshop. The exercise involves walking in the space following the instructions of the facilitator's voice, which, from time to time, gives indications about where we are and what we are doing. "You are in Taqadoum and you are walking." I start walking briskly toward a point in the room, perceiving how visible and out of place my whiteness is in the imagined context. Toto pulls up his hood and starts walking more decisively; Tely frantically searches his pockets until he pulls out his UNHCR document and clutches it in his hands; Djallu and Masq do the same, simultaneously quickening their pace. The facilitator – Dado – stops the scene. Toronto is holding a broom: "I need it to smash the clochard's head; they are Moroccan men who want my

money." Djallu is still, with one hand raised and his eyes narrowed: "I'm throwing a stone at a clochard. He has a knife in his hand and wants to hit me." Then, we resume walking normally.

The first time I set foot in Taqadoum I am struck by its restlessness. I walk through the market, trying to capture its chaotic variety: along the long central street, vegetable stalls, clothes, and various objects alternate, along with kitchen utensils and tajines, on improvised tables or sheets spread on the ground. Sub-Saharan food stalls slip in among the stalls with *hammam* products and carts selling Moroccan sweets – *sfenj* and gazelle horns – testifying to the mixing of this space. Going deeper into the neighborhood, the internal streets seem to conform along color lines: black on one side, not-black on the other. In the bustle, everything seems to have an order. 'The ultras' graffiti on the peeling walls becomes the reference points to orient myself in the streets, which at first glance all look the same to me.

One of my first times in Taqadoum I meet Tely, in October 2023. We meet at the *Château*, a building located at the entrance to the neighborhood. He introduces himself saying he comes from Guinea-Conakry and is 20 years old, and has been living in Taqadoum for about a year. "Welcome to the favelas of Rabat," he tells me, proposing a tour of the neighborhood. With him, I enter an interior area of Taqadoum, which progressively becomes blacker. He explains that many undocumented migrants live in this area, in houses rented from Moroccan landlords – the streets become increasingly narrow and unpaved, we descend a bumpy slope that leads us to his house. "Do you know why we accept all this suffering? Because our goal is Europe." As we walk, he tells me to watch my pockets and stay close to him – he alerts me, in fact, that in Taqadoum there are many *clochards* who rob and use violence, especially with non-local people. I look at the makeshift dwellings and the ruined streets: some houses have plastic sheets for roofs. It is interesting to note that the root of Taqadoum in Arabic means "progress."

Taqadoum is a neighborhood on the outskirts of Rabat, originally conceived during the French protectorate (1912-1956) as a housing solution intended to replace pre-existing slums (Zerrouk, 1986). Over the decades, it has continued to function as a site of marginalization for the most disadvantaged classes. Since the 2000s, it has seen a growing number of arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa, to the point that it is popularly called "Le Quartier Africain" or "Le Petit Senegal" (Ntang and Peraldi, 2011). The urban geography that separates central Rabat from Taqadoum embodies Moroccan social dualism: the distance between privilege and marginality is contained in just fifteen minutes by taxi. While the center hosts the institutions and activities that organize the country's social, political, and economic life, those unable to participate in this project are relegated to the urban periphery. This spatial configuration operates through overlapping dynamics of exclusion and control: on the one hand, urban segregation confines those marginalized along class lines from the national economic-political project; on the other, racialized surveillance targets black bodies denied access to the citizenship regime.

In this stratified context, the presence of sub-Saharan communities has been structured over time, accommodating the plans of those who move to Morocco with the intention of staying and those who are instead directed toward Europe. In the second case, temporalities are determined by inconsistent migratory policies, now restrictive, now more permeable, depending on geopolitical relations between Morocco, other North African countries, and European ones. Taqadoum is a space where people live what Collyer (2007) defines as the condition of "extended transit," a forced immobility in which daily life is structured in the wait to resume movement, a condition of *waiting while living* (Stock, 2019). Over time, sub-Saharan communities have structured informal infrastructures of support and self-

organization, becoming a reference point and support for those who face the various attempts to cross the border (Bachelet, 2019; El Arraf, 2018; Alioua, 2013; Pian, 2005).

Tely's house is a three-story building, a skeletal structure, without plaster or windows; the front door is unhinged and opens with a push. Inside, his companions are still sleeping. It's about noon: "They don't have UNHCR papers," Tely explains to me, "so until the afternoon they can't leave the house, because of the police presence." He explains that, during daytime hours, the Moroccan police – supported by civilian men without uniforms – stop and check the documents of black people, according to a deeply racial logic. This practice refers to an opaque and lacunary legal system on the matter, which is based on the aforementioned law 02/03, used to normalize extremely arbitrary practices (ASGI, 2025). The stops are followed by arrests and deportations to peripheral cities of the country, up to distances of hundreds of kilometers, in what El Arabi (2021) calls "the politics of dispersion." Left in the dead of night on the outskirts of cities – deprived of money and often shoes – the deported people are abandoned to themselves and must find a way to get back home. Tely tells me that the stops are violent and frequent. During checks, the right to show the document issued by UNHCR is often violated by the authorities, as also denounced by civil society (GADEM 2023; ASGI 2025), with informal detentions and collective deportations even of people possessing it.

These dynamics of repression are enacted in the theatrical performance of the Rabat workshop. One of the staged scenes, titled "The life system of migrants in Morocco" (Fig. 4), condenses the daily machinery of the urban border as lived through arbitrary arrests and collective deportations. In the scene, a policeman accuses an underage migrant of not being the holder of the document he is showing. The policeman, with the authority to demand an account of the migrant's presence in public space, embodies the border; the UNHCR document becomes the instrument that the migrant mobilizes to legitimize his presence. Tely describes it to me as "the piece of paper that can save the lives of migrants in Morocco": an A4 sheet with the stamp of the United Nations agency, his photo and his data – a fragile attestation of existence in a context of structural precarity, constantly under threat of invalidation. Faced with the policeman's accusations, the boy insists: "*C'est moi! C'est moi!*" The insistent repetition becomes the performance of one's own existence in the face of the power that denies it. During the scene, the document will be torn from the migrant's hands, and he will be violently deported to Khouribga. Deprived of proof of his presence, he is physically expelled from a space where no traces of his existence remain. The theatrical scene condenses a dynamic that permeates and shapes black lives in Taqadoud: the constant vulnerability to being removed.



Figure 4. *The life system of migrants in Morocco, Rabat Workshop, Michela Lovato.*

Following Tely in his daily life allows me to observe the material conditions of his transit migratory experience: precarious and overcrowded housing, labor exploitation, and permanent vulnerability to racialized violence. Although far from the spectacular borders of Ceuta and Melilla, here the border takes shape in the condition of irregularity to which sub-Saharan migrants are forced in Morocco. At the base of this is a profound process of racialization, operating according to degrees of blackness (Gazzotti, 2021b) and determining differential exposures to violence. Black bodies are rendered intrinsically illegal, naturalizing, on the one hand, the deprivation of rights and, on the other, legitimizing containment practices. This concretely translates into the denial of access to social services, hospitals, schools and the formal labor market, as well as constant exposure to institutional and social violence, manifested in the criminalization of black presence in different spaces.

These processes construct, from a political point of view, a permanent condition of deportability (De Genova, 2017), defined as the condition of those who are constantly and structurally vulnerable to expulsion, a "disciplinary mechanism of social control and domination" that "imposes a prolonged condition of vulnerability to legal recriminations and, consequently, engenders a complex and multifaceted spectrum of circumstances in which daily existence becomes characterized by precariousness, conditional constraints, inequality, and uncertainty" (De Genova, 2017:160). The unpredictable and constant possibility of being arrested, detained or deported governs the daily life of migrants in Morocco, configuring itself as a practice of disciplining bodies and their mobility (Sheller, 2020).

In the daily life of Taqadoun, the border extends into urban space and penetrates intimacy, inscribing itself into the migrant's body. The black body becomes border territory (De Genova, 2013), defined by the racializing gaze that precedes it, establishing its parameters of recognizability according to prevailing epistemic frameworks (Butler, 2009). On the other side is the body that experiences being seen as black: being deprived of recognition becomes a bodily dimension, a lived experience that shapes the perception of self and space (Khosravi, 2019), leading to the internalization of border control. Tely shows me this when he tells me *he deserved* an expulsion to Ouarzazate: he had forgotten his documents at home before being stopped by the Moroccan police. "It's my fault, I should have gone out with my documents", he tells me. "I'm in another country and I respect its rules." In his words, Tely attributes to himself the responsibility for the expulsion, naturalizing a system in which his existence is criminalized. During my time there, I observe him covering his dreads in public, wearing the *jellaba*¹⁶, offering seemingly casual greetings to the policemen when he passes by the police auxiliary van, uttering bits of *darija*. He explains to me: "I'm not *too dark*, so if I dress like them, I can *pretend to be one of them*".

When I walk with Tely in the central area of the market, the pace is fast and furtive, determined by the feeling of being watched. He relaxes when we reach the area inhabited by sub-Saharan. Tely tells me that in some streets of the neighborhood the police presence is extremely reduced and that these are rather governed by the sub-Saharan communities living there. In these areas, he tells me, we can be relatively calm: I observe Tely crossing them with greater security, as he explains that there is a tacit agreement between the authorities and the black community that divides the spaces, legitimizing or not their presence in portions of them, according to policies of strategic visibility and invisibility. Here, the border infrastructure is immaterial but shapes public and private spaces. For example, space is negotiated in the outer streets of the neighborhood, where in the morning lines of sub-Saharan wait to be hired for day labor, such as at the *Château*. Despite being a visible area and in the presence of

¹⁶ Traditional Moroccan dress.

authorities, their black presence is tolerated insofar as it is functional to the local demand for informal and underpaid work.

Subaltern Geographies and Spaces of Disappearability

Observing the daily life of Tely and his companions in Taqadom reveals how the regulation of the urban fabric is inscribed within the broader architecture of Moroccan borderwork, constituting a space that actively participates in the processes through which black migrant lives are rendered vulnerable and precarious. This spatial configuration is both functional to and constitutive of the infrastructure of disappearability: the normalisation in absence of racialised migrant bodies in Morocco works through the slow and cumulative process of precarization – from the denial of legal registration in the territory, through the systematic withholding of social, political, and economic recognition, to their active oppression.

Taqadom operates, in this framework, as what Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi (2022) define as a racialised space of exception: a site where legal protections are suspended, institutional violence functions as a governmental mechanism, and racialised bodies are held in a condition of permanent exposure to repression. As the following analysis will show, this logic is articulated, with varying configurations, across the broader geography of Moroccan transit spaces. What remains structurally consistent across these sites is the constitutive logic of the infrastructure of disappearability: a process of progressive precarization that operates simultaneously across multiple registers – intimate, social, and political – and through the intersection of overlapping systems of oppression – racial, class-based, political, and socio-economic – whose entanglement renders certain bodies cumulatively and structurally vulnerable to disappearance.

To trace how this infrastructure operates across the Moroccan geography of transit, the following analysis turns to two further sites where the politics of migrant governability assumes distinct yet structurally related forms: the Ouled Ziane camp in Casablanca and the agricultural villages of the Agadir-Souss region. Each of these spaces occupies a subaltern position within the broader political economy of migration, articulating, in ways conditioned by its local context and functional role, the underlying logic of containment, exploitation, and visibility control. Attending to their specificities allows us to map how disappearability is produced through a dispersed and differentiated architecture whose effects converge on the racialised and precarious bodies.

I encountered Ouled Ziane¹⁷ from the outside, in October 2023, during an ethnographic mission in Casablanca. Originating from informal encampments of migrants en route to Ceuta and Melilla, the settlement had grown progressively over the years into one of the most significant of its kind in Morocco (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020). Known among its inhabitants as *the ghetto*, it had been constructed from plastic sheeting, railway sleeper wood, and corrugated metal, occupying a parking lot adjacent to the city's main bus station. From my visit, I remember a black man assembling a shack with pallets and a nail gun, and, beyond him, the texture of an informal community life organised around makeshift bars and a football pitch where children played. Most striking, however, was the palpable sense of an invisible threshold dividing the camp from the surrounding city: Ouled Ziane was legible as part of the landscape, materially exposed to the daily flow of urban life, yet spatially cordoned off from it.

In its precarious dwellings, its acute sanitary conditions, and its pervasive violence, Ouled Ziane embodied what Gross-Wyrtzen (2020) theorises as the politics of abandonment. Thousands of people

¹⁷ See also <https://www.reset.it/voci-dal-mondo/la-realta-urbana-dei-migranti-di-ouled-ziane-dove-la-parola-europa-diventa-una-mantra>.

– many of them minors and undocumented – subsisted here in the complete absence of services or security, structurally exposed to exploitation and harm. Those pushed back from Ceuta arrived here directly, after journeys of over five hours, with wounded and exhausted bodies, finding in the camp a temporary space of relative shelter from the threat of deportation. The settlement was tolerated by the authorities until 2024, when it was cleared following a fire. Until then, as a local solidarity worker described it to me, its existence functioned as a governmental *concession*, a calculated allowance that permitted racialised bodies to be spatially contained and maintained in conditions of structural precarity.

A distinct logic emerges in the agricultural villages of the Agadir region, where, in November 2023, I conducted a research mission in collaboration with AMSA – *Association des Migrants Solidaires d'Afrique* – an organisation whose solidarity projects extend across the villages surrounding the city. In this area, sub-Saharan migrants are employed on a large scale in the agricultural sector, engaged in the harvesting of citrus fruits and vegetables and in the farms of the Souss plains, under conditions of systematic underpayment and complete absence of labour protections. Accompanied by Tamto, a fieldworker of the association, I visited the villages of Inezgane and Taddert, where I encountered a clear spatial organisation of black presence: in the peripheral areas, migrants used to sleep on the streets, in open fields, or in abandoned structures, employed during the day as casual labour for wages ranging between 70 and 90 dirhams¹⁸. In the interior of the villages, by contrast, black presence had assumed a more structured form, organised around informal networks of community self-governance¹⁹. Tamto explained that many sub-Saharan migrants arrive in this area following deportations from the border or from major urban centres, while others relocate here to access the Atlantic route toward the Canary Islands, alongside a sub-Saharan presence that has stabilised over time. Black presence in this context is governed in order to be instrumental to the local agricultural economy: the risk of arrest and expulsion is considerably lower here than in urban contexts, though this provisional tolerance coexists with a constant and normalised exposure to everyday racist violence.

Taqadoum, Ouled Ziane, and Agadir articulate three variants of the same biopolitical border dispositif, which – through modalities of confinement, abandonment, direct control, and exploitation – renders bodies of people on the move governable and expendable. The structural precarity that organises life in these spaces of exception is constitutive to their function, and it is this same precarity that determines the terms under which death, when it occurs, is or is not recognised. In a Butlerian sense (Butler, 2004; 2009), these lives recognition is structurally withheld, their disappearance unfolding in the absence of public acknowledgement and under a condition of generalised impunity. This condition is constructed incrementally, in the ordinary spaces of transit, through the daily processes of precarization that progressively strip racialised bodies of recognition, protection, and social and political value.

Said used to live in Taqadoum, he was from Guinea-Conakry. In organising his life in transit, he worked as a day labourer at a construction site near Rabat – it was there that he died, falling from a building under construction. The only trace of him that remained were the WhatsApp statuses shared by his friends following the day of his death; beyond that, life in Taqadoum continued without visible interruption. Said was black and undocumented: his death, like his existence, passed as though it had not quite occurred.

¹⁸ Approximately seven to nine euros.

¹⁹ While we were walking down the street, for example, we met a woman who introduced herself as the President of the Ivory Coast, reference point for the Ivorian community in the area.

Cameron's body was found in Khamira, a village on the outskirts of Agadir. He was thirty years old, Guinean, employed in the agricultural fields – the rest, by now, can be anticipated. He was killed by a fellow person on the move during a violent altercation; his skull was shattered. His photograph circulated across social media and WhatsApp groups within sub-Saharan communities in Morocco, registering the profound insecurity pervading even in spaces that are, in some sense, home. The police intervened, closed the case, and effectively silenced those in the village who had been demanding justice.

In February 2024, following the forced eviction of Ouled Ziane, a charred body was discovered on the site – reported by the press as "probably belonging to a migrant."²⁰ The authorities promptly attributed responsibility for the fire to the migrants themselves, simultaneously legitimising the violence of the evacuation and sanctioning the normality of that death. To this day, the body bears no name and no accountability.

Cameron, Said, and the nameless body bear witness to a fundamental dynamic: the border kills far from itself. The conditions of irregularity and constrained mobility in which they lived slowly and inexorably sedimented into the fabric of their everyday existence, normalising a precarity that ultimately dissolved into impunity. The continuum of violence, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2003) argue, refers to the ease with which a socially vulnerable human being slides toward the condition of a sacrificeable non-person, through expressions of radical social exclusion, depersonalisation, dehumanisation, and reification, legitimising and routinising the dynamics that produce their violability. In this progression, the process of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1996) operates as a structural prerequisite, alongside the normative everyday forms of violence hidden in the minutiae of ordinary social practices and the implicit, legitimate, and routinised forms of violence inherent in particular social, economic, and political formations (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003: 21). Their death, in this framework, is configured as a coherent and predictable product of the border system, exemplifying how the infrastructure of disappearability operates through a dispersed structure of responsibility and accountability.

At the Border

On the other side, the border – in its material apparatus – represents the site at which bodies on the move are brought into direct confrontation with the concrete conditions of their own disappearability. Here, dynamics of visibility and invisibility condense the power practices through which the border regime operates, determining differential levels of exposure to erasure. To examine how disappearability is materially instantiated at the frontier, I turn to two accounts of encounter with the border: Tely's trajectory along the Atlantic route, and Salih's testimony as a survivor of the Melilla massacre.

At the end of October 2024, Tely embarked from Tan Tan for the Atlantic route, toward the Canary Islands. His journey reached its destination after five to six days of navigation: Tenerife. In the following words, Tely reports some moments of the crossing:

"Finally, they sent us to the edge of the ocean. I heard the noise of the water. I was afraid. I had never heard such a noise. I told myself not to be afraid. People always pass by here. Then we continued our journey. We crossed the international zone. The fuel ran out. The fuel ran out

²⁰ See <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/55326/maroc--un-corps-retrouve-apres-le-demantelement-dun-camp-a-casablanca>.

completely. We were desperate. We called Helena²¹. The phone we used also fell into the water. Helena was looking for us. She couldn't find us. The water brought us back to Morocco. The zodiac was pierced. It was bringing us back to Morocco. There was no fuel. Everyone was discouraged. Women were crying. Men were crying too. I was concentrated. I risked my life until then. I looked at God. I calmed down. We saw a small plane, like a drone. Everyone was happy. We asked everyone to be calm. Not to make any movements, so that the zodiac wouldn't be reversed."

During the interview, Tely dwells on the conditions of the journey: the frightening ocean, the isolation during the crossing, the general fear. He lingers on the moment when the boat's passengers feared they would die, then on the arrival of rescue: it is an intense moment, full of pauses and silences. The sentences are short and concise, repetitive. He recounts trying to convince himself that many people have crossed and arrived safe and sound, but he is aware that many others have died there. "You know how many bodies remain there (in the middle of the Ocean)?" he tells me. In these years of mobility, Tely has lost several friends and travel companions along the migratory routes, and now the awareness that he too might not have made it is profound. "Now I tell my brothers in Morocco not to take the sea: it's too dangerous".

Tely reports the conditions that made him vulnerable to disappearance and death at the moment of crossing. He describes the technical unpreparedness, the lack of fuel, being alone in the middle of the sea, the unpredictability of the ocean. His account offers an illustration of one mechanism through which the contemporary border regime produces disappearability – the "threat of dying without anyone knowing about it" (Laakkonen, 2022:5), that the boat might sink without witnesses or the possibility of rescue. The bodies undertaking such crossings traverse a vast border defined by the depth of the ocean: they sail unseen, embarking under cover of darkness to evade surveillance and control systems. While invisibility constitutes a necessary condition for unauthorised mobility, it simultaneously forecloses the possibility of monitoring or intervening upon the conditions of passage within a profoundly hostile environment. In this configuration, the work of deterrence is delegated to environmental hostility itself (De León, 2015; Heller and Pezzani, 2013).

In Tely's relation to the border-as-sea, vulnerability is produced through the convergence of precarious means of movement with a condition of radical isolation and inaccessibility to visibility. A report to the NGO *Caminando Fronteras* opens onto a space of acute tension in which the prospect of the zodiac being swallowed without trace coexists with a profound and persistent hope of becoming visible once more – of re-entering the field of legibility that would render rescue, or at least traceability, possible.

The account offered by Salih of a crossing attempt illuminates a distinct mechanism of the border apparatus. Salih is a thirty-four-year-old Sudanese man, I meet him in Casablanca for the first time in November 2023. He is a survivor of the tragically famous Melilla massacre when, on June 24, 2022, about 1500 aspiring border crossers were violently pushed back and attacked by the Moroccan police in front of the Barrio Chino barrier. When we meet in September 2024 to talk about this event, Salih invites me to keep myself free for the whole morning: "So many things happened, and you need to know everything, because it's important to write everything." Instead, our chats, punctuated by many pauses, end after over an hour: the account is fatigued by the memory of so much violence. "Here being migrant and black makes your life hard."

²¹ Ref. to Caminando Fronteras NGO.

June 24, 2022. A group of people on the move – mainly from Sudan, South Sudan and Chad – marched toward the Spanish enclave with the intention of attempting a collective crossing. "It was supposed to be an attack, that's why there were so many of us," explains Salih. The NGOs that investigated the case (see AMDH, 2023; Border Forensic, 2024) have observed that this event was preceded by an intensification of police raids in the Nador area and in the informal camps bordering Melilla, with arrests and deportations of sub-Saharan migrants, in addition to the imposition of a food blockade that prohibited shopkeepers in the area from selling food to migrants. The Melilla massacre, therefore, was preceded by a profound and systematic action of repression and attrition: a daily and systematic "persecution" (AMDH, 2023:5) against people on the move. Salih recounts that they managed to walk the kilometres to the border undisturbed – a mass of thousands of (*visible*) black bodies. It was at the Barrio Chino crossing that they encountered the Moroccan police, deployed in force and heavily armed. "The police attacked us, and we fought. Some ran away, I stayed to fight, because I went there and I thought, either I pass or I die." Salih recounts being surrounded and attacked "with anything, gas, stones, electricity": the tear gas produced a blanket and increased the level of violence, between the crowd pressing together and the police attacking indiscriminately, blocking any possibility of escape. The Spanish police, on the other side, assisted in the pushback and worked to bring back the people who were managing to cross the border.

In the description of Salih, the border materialises as a scene of bodies collapsed upon one another at the foot of the Melilla barrier – barely alive, or dead from asphyxiation and the effects of violence. "The police of this country *dead* many people," he recounts: according to the data, 23 people died and at least 64 remain missing, alongside hundreds of injured and detained on immigration offences.

The NGOs denounce the cover-up policies of the massacre by the Moroccan authorities, who concealed the bodies and prevented civil society and the press from accessing the places and people involved. If on the one hand the authorities were quick to remove the bodies and make them invisible, on the other hand, identification procedures were not initiated. Still today, family members and travel companions do not know the fate of their loved ones. The survivors that day were arrested or deported to various cities in Morocco, in precarious and medically critical conditions: some have not been traced since. With the anger of what happened to the "Sudanese brothers in Morocco", Salih recounts that disappearability is the threat of dying in conditions of impunity and concealment, by direct hand of political power.

Listening to the accounts of Tely and Salih allows us to grasp the dialectic between visibility and invisibility that structures the border, shaping the dynamics of control and repression to which bodies are subjected and rendered vulnerable to disappearance. Tely's body is subject to the forced invisibility of maritime crossing, where both the possibility of completing the journey and the risk of dying depend on remaining undetectable by control systems. In the space Tely crosses, the work of the border is delegated to the environment: the possibility of shipwreck, of drifting, of being untraceable is instrumentalized in pushback policies that operate without immediate direct responsibility. Salih's account, conversely, illuminates the consequences of bodily exposure in contexts governed by racialised violence. We imagine his body exhausted in informal camps, deprived of food, shoved in police raids, observed while walking down the street, denied access to places, and finally beaten at the border – piled on other bodies without air, then deported hundreds of kilometers away. Here, the border operates through direct violence followed by systematic erasure: informal burial of corpses, absence of identification, detention and expulsion of survivors, institutional cover-up, and the exclusion of civil society.

What these two accounts make legible is that visibility and invisibility function as differentiated modalities through which disappearability is produced and governed. The border regime operates through the calibration of exposure, a dynamic that is not confined to the frontier itself, but extends across the entirety of the migratory trajectory. The chain of progressive invisibilization shaping existence as undocumented black migrants in Morocco constitutes a continuum of differential erasure, which finds an acute expression at the border. Disappearability, in both cases, is the product of this differential and pervasive regulation of legibility.

IV.II. Inhabiting Disappearance

This section intends to dwell on the embodied and lived dimensions of the experience of mobility and borders, attending to how the conditions of disappearability are navigated, inhabited, and negotiated by people on the move. There is a video recorded during the Oujda workshop that is symbolic for beginning the reflection on this. The recorded exercise is called "complete the image" and involves one participant striking a motionless pose and then being followed by another who positions himself in relation to the first, then in the same way by a third person. When the fourth participant arrives, the first actor withdraws from the scene and so on. In the video, I begin the exercise by positioning myself in the middle of the space standing, with arms spread and legs pressed together, with my gaze fixed forward. Isa arrives, who positions himself balancing on one foot, with one arm directed toward my head. Then Diakitè arrives, lies down on the ground with one arm open and the other covering his face. Then Moho, who positions himself at my feet, sitting on the ground, with legs crossed and face resting on his palms.

In the moment, I had not grasped the meaning of the sculpture we were composing as the participants moved, which was then followed by a succession of statues. I understood it months later, watching the videos on my phone. I – white, with a divisive manner – was the border; at my feet Isa tried to climb over, Diakitè was a motionless outstretched body, Moho was waiting. In a few seconds and with mechanical gestures, the three statues embodied what is inscribed in the horizon of these lives in movement – the tension between the aspiration to movement and its repression – central characteristics of the existential experience of unauthorized movement, which many of my interlocutors call the *aventure*.

The sections that follow develop these themes in sequence. The first examines the *aventure* as an existential condition, attending to how the awareness of death structures the migrant subject's positioning in relation to the border regime. The second explores how the negotiation between movement and mortality shapes the very posture assumed toward the decision to move. The third turns to the material and affective geographies of death at the border, and to the intimate relationship with disappearance that those in movement are compelled to inhabit.

In the *Aventure*: Living and Dying at the Border

The "adventure" is what the migratory journey from some francophone populations of sub-Saharan Africa toward Europe is commonly called (Bradeloup, 2008, 2013; Bachelet, 2019). The term itself conveys the immersion of the self in movement toward an *elsewhere*, which promises emancipation, a breakthrough, victory (the *boẓa*)²². Although not necessarily determined by "hunger or misery"

²² The shared experience of unauthorised migration is designated by distinct terms across different African contexts. Sudanese migrants, for instance, refer to the crossing attempt as *chanchi* and to its successful outcome as *al-najah* (literally, "success"), thereby reproducing a dialectic analogous to that operative in the pairing of *aventure* and *boẓa*. Beyond their

(Bradeloup, 2013) or by wars, the experience of the *aventure* assumes a political character when relating to the dynamics of exclusion and oppression of contemporary mobility regimes, emerging as an act of defiance in the tension between movement and prohibition. It is structured around the impulse of unauthorized movement that opposes sovereign border power: in this sense, the *aventure* exists because borders do, and these borders shape its meanings, practices, and imaginaries. On the other side stand the fighters – *the soldiers of bozra* – who relate to the border apparatus with the determination to win and the awareness that they may fall. During the theater circles, military gestures and postures recurred in the participants' greetings and introductions.

I meet Tely in December 2024 in Madrid, outside the reception camp for asylum seekers where he has been staying for about a month. As we comment on the biting cold – to which neither of us, especially him, is accustomed – I listen to him retracing with fragmented thoughts his experience of unauthorized migration. "We had to become soldiers, whether we liked it or not," he comments. "You crawl on the ground, you run from dogs, you cut yourself on barbed wire, you hide in the woods, you camp: like soldiers." Faced with the border regime that governs bodies, the fight is to reclaim one's own (un)governability. "Do you think we do it for pleasure? Do you think we like it?" He pauses briefly, while I remain silent. "We do it because we have nothing," he gestures with empty hands. "We flee from a meaningless death toward a probable one."

Tely conveys that, alongside the need to flee political violence, the choice to leave is inscribed in the desire for "alternative ways of inhabiting the world" (Anderlini and Pellegrino, 2025:2; Jedlowski and Pellegrino, 2020), in which mobility is configured as a way to resist a sociopolitical order structured through oppression. In a world where power dynamics work also through the paradigm of mobility, "disobeying immobility" means possessing the "capacity to aspire to a different future" (Ibid.), a practice through which resistant imaginaries (Medina, 2013) are constructed against a present of structural oppression. The *aventure* follows an obstinate trajectory toward elsewhere, an alternative temporal horizon. Tely tells me that, for him, being on the move has meant undertaking "a path toward freedom," which is "gradual: each time you take a step to become more autonomous." "Once I can leave this camp, I'll be a little freer, and even more so when I have documents."

At the time of this conversation, I had known Tely for over a year. Through my relationship with him I had the opportunity to witness different moments of his life and to observe him in various situations. I knew him and spent time with him in Taqadoum, encountering his daily spaces; I met him again after numerous deportations and pushbacks at the border; we stayed in contact when he moved to Agadir for agricultural work. From Agadir he departed for the Canary route: during those days I experienced the anguish of his unreachability, and rejoiced with him when he announced he had arrived. Now we are in Spain, and our conversations have a different tone: I observe him lowering his shoulders as he retraces his migratory experience, sharing the frustration and exhaustion of what he has lived through. After years of movement – following incoherent geographies and continuously redefining his projects – Tely finds himself on the other side of the border, the point where the *aventure* can come to an end. Now that his body is on the other side, Tely allows himself to surrender to fatigue, drawing out moments that are part of his story, mixing times and phases, allowing them to interact with each other. He permits himself temporal and narrative incoherence in order to touch upon a point that gives coherence to the entire journey: the *aventure* is a way to affirm existential autonomy, even if the path is

linguistic differences, these terms converge in the construction of an imaginary of the journey organised around the twin poles of emancipation and repression at the border.

precarious and requires a continuous wager with death, traversing spaces where violence is an integral part of the governmental apparatus that is challenged.

In this jagged, exhausting soldier's journey, I observe Tely assuming and recounting different postures: university student, protester, negotiating with traffickers, dressed in poverty to beg for charity, positioned as a leader in his community, camouflaging himself and engaging with law enforcement, exploited in agricultural greenhouses, aboard a boat in the middle of the ocean. The scenario changes while the underlying dynamic remains constant: on one side stands Tely's desire for an alternative future, on the other the horizon of his own existential precarity.

The Beginning of the Aventure: Death, Agency, and the Border Regime

Tely's account offers a privileged vantage point from which to examine how death – and the awareness of death – structures the migrant soldier's positioning in front of the border regime, and how the active confrontation with this mortal horizon constitutes a form of existential autonomy and subjectivity. This dynamic is central on the experience of the people on the move I have met, and emerges with particular force during the Rabat workshop, in the process of staging the theme of the beginning of the adventure. Below, I report some images from the workshop that are significant in this sense:

Rabat, third day of theater workshop, morning. We are discussing the themes that emerged from the previous exercise to identify the macro-themes to work on through theater. Djallu insists that he wants to tell about life in Algeria, Toto retorts that talking about Algeria and the adventure is in fact the same thing. Djallu responds that it's not the same thing, that telling about Algeria means "being ready to throw yourself from the window on the top floor out of fear that they'll come get you and take you to the Country." Djallu remains the only participant who wants to work on Algeria, so the theme is merged with the title "Le début de l'aventure." We therefore begin with improvisations on this. Four scenes emerge.

First scene: Tely is alone and throws objects, while hiding crouched behind a chair.

Second scene: Nayly is hidden; Mandy and Djallu run and mime climbing; Toto stops the scene: "We're talking about the beginning of the adventure, not the end"; Djallu says that in fact they are representing the crossing between Algeria and Morocco. Policeman Toronto takes Djallu, beats him while taking his shoes and money and loads him onto a van.

Third scene: all participants arrange themselves in two lines: on one side they crumple sheets and set them on fire, on the other they shoot. Protesters and police. Confusion and loud noise until someone from the protesters' side falls to the ground. Tely takes the backpack and runs away. The protesters capture a policeman, the policemen capture a protester and start beating him in the station - Nayly goes there and pays the ransom to free him.

Fourth scene: Masqpro imitates a dialogue between him and a crying woman who tells him not to go, that there is danger of death (he does it by miming a finger cutting the throat), and he: "I have to go."

I remember this moment of the workshop with confusion, hyperstimulated by the different things that were happening in the room. I was sitting on the side bench and felt overwhelmed by the dynamics of the moment, which with great rapidity and in a fragmented way attempted to give body to the theme of the beginning of the adventure. The narration was based on improvisation: the scenes followed one another without interruptions and, in the succession of movements, the possibility of pre-coordination was practically non-existent. The movement on stage was chaotic, yet a collective and coordinated narrating body emerged, an ensemble in which individual bodies found reciprocal coherence.

What the actors were staging at that moment was part of their experience, fragmented and intense, as soldiers toward the European borders. A journey starting from Guinea, where the death of a protester

during clashes with the police pushes Tely to pack his bag and leave and Masqpro to say goodbye to his mother in tears.

Reading the improvisation according to a temporal order in the reconstruction of the migratory journey, the scene then moves to Algeria – where the border is materially encountered. Here bodies lower themselves, crouch, crawl in front of an invisible line, the net-border separating Algeria from Morocco, one of the critical junctions of the journey toward Europe. The body jumps toward the fence to cross it, but is stopped, pulled away, loaded onto the van and pushed back – where it ends up it is not possible to know, it is backstage, therefore beyond the narrative's capacities. The themes of absence and death, in these performances, are constantly present in the background of the representation, as is the need to confront them.

During the fourth day of the workshop, the improvisation material was then reworked and condensed into a theatrical image, titled, precisely, "The beginning of the adventure" (Fig. 5). In the scene, Tely, Mandy and Masqpro are standing in walking position. Tely is in the middle, one step ahead of the others, and has a map in his hand. Masqpro, to his right, has a backpack; Mandy has his head covered by the hood of his sweatshirt and his gaze lowered.



Figure 5. *The Start of the Adventure*, Rabat Workshop, Michela Lovato.

The rest of the workshop participants had then the space to interview the characters, and it is in this moment that the tension of death assumes verbal form. I report some of the dialogues from the forum moment:

Audience to Tely: but what guarantees that you will arrive in Europe and have freedom? Because then you arrive in Europe and you are sans-papiers. Is this freedom?

Tely: the destination is not Europe, it is freedom of expression. I want to find a better life, more specifically freedom, where I can speak, I can share my thoughts. At home there isn't.

Audience: Do you know that the journey is difficult, that there are people who die?

Tely: I know there is a lot of suffering, but you don't know how many people have died in my neighborhood because of the military, the Guinean military who beat us young people...

Audience: Isn't it that you were influenced by friends of your friends who live in Europe and who maybe posted photos of the Eiffel Tower on social media?

Tely: No, I'm not interested. I made the decision to come when my friend died.

In the framework of the *aventure*, as Tely emphasizes, death is the alternative that manifests itself alongside victory in a dialectic in which, faced with the border apparatus, the tension toward elsewhere must coexist with its mortal negation.

Salih also recounts this, sharing his experience of the Melilla massacre, when he describes his choice not to desist from the attempt to cross the barrier despite the massive presence of police: "At that moment, I thought, either I pass or I die." Placed in front of the border, Salih stops finding alternatives faced with the possibility of dying or arriving on the other side: for him, returning to the precarious life as a black migrant in Morocco or as oppressed in Sudan is no longer an option.

These accounts emphasize how the adventure is structurally shaped by the awareness of being able to die in it and, on the other side, by the necessity of coming to terms with this. This tension reveals itself as central in the experience of unauthorized migration. Djallu emphasizes it speaking about Algeria, describing it as the condition for which, rather than return to the country, *you throw yourself out the window from the top floor*. When the alternatives oscillate between different forms of oppression – sociopolitical violence in the country of origin and the denial of movement outside of it – confronting the threat of repression at the borders becomes a space of agency.

Here Is the Fence and Here We Are, at the Cemetery

Confronting death on the move also means inhabiting spaces where it is actively produced. Migratory routes and borders are saturated with the material and immaterial traces of those who did not survive: corpses, abandoned objects, and human remains testify to the violence inscribed in these landscapes, marking the interruption of movement and transforming them into open-air museums of border violence (De León, 2015). Alongside this physical dimension, narratives about those who have died or disappeared during the crossing (Kobelinsky, 2020; Kivilahti and Huttunen, 2023) populate these spaces with the ghosts of unrecovered bodies and untraceable people, investing the liminal space with a simultaneously sacred and uncanny quality. Inhabiting these routes means sustaining a constant and embodied relationship with the materiality of death that haunts the horizon of possibilities of those who continue to cross. Dealing with death at borders means having to relate to the death of others – travel companions, brothers, peers who have fallen in the attempt to subvert border regimes – and having to concretely confront mortality, constantly inscribed in the horizon of aspiration. The reflection that follows intends to dwell on these dimensions, drawing on a scene from the Rabat theater workshop that condenses this experience.

As it has already been mentioned, among the themes proposed by the workshop participants was the disappearance, particularly the story of Daniel, a friend disappeared in Ceuta. Given the ethical sensitivities involved, Dado and I decided to frame Daniel's disappearance as a commemorative dedication rather than material for direct performative elaboration. We will return to the dynamics of this moment later. What is of interest to observe here is how, during the commemoration, the participants' choice to represent Ceuta conveyed the daily relationship with the traces of disappearance at the border (Fig. 6): a way of inhabiting the border space that recognizes and constantly relates to its dead, inscribing them in the material and affective geography of crossing. In the following notes I recount the dynamics of the representation of the moment:

They actually begin to represent the Ceuta border, in a very lively way. Totorina goes out, Toronto stands aside playing with the balloon, then enters the construction of the border and doesn't stop anymore. There's confusion, Dado doesn't really know how to handle the situation.

M. and I – the two white people among the participants – are asked to hold a panel indicating the Spanish side of the barrier. With the chairs the border is built on the Moroccan side: the legs of the chairs are turned upward, to indicate the spikes. There's a void in the center. Djallu throws himself on the ground: "I'm playing the dead one." Dado tells him that in the scene there should only be objects. Then Trendyboy positions a mattress in the same spot to indicate the cemetery. A cardboard box on the side indicates the police base instead.

Beside me, Toronto adds a pole: "It's the radar that signals to the police if there are people, in all you have a minute and a half before the radar emits an acoustic signal," then a door: "This is where the Spanish police come out to pick up people and hand them over to the Moroccan police. This door opens for the Spanish, not for us and not even for the Moroccans." The construction of the border indicates the entire room.

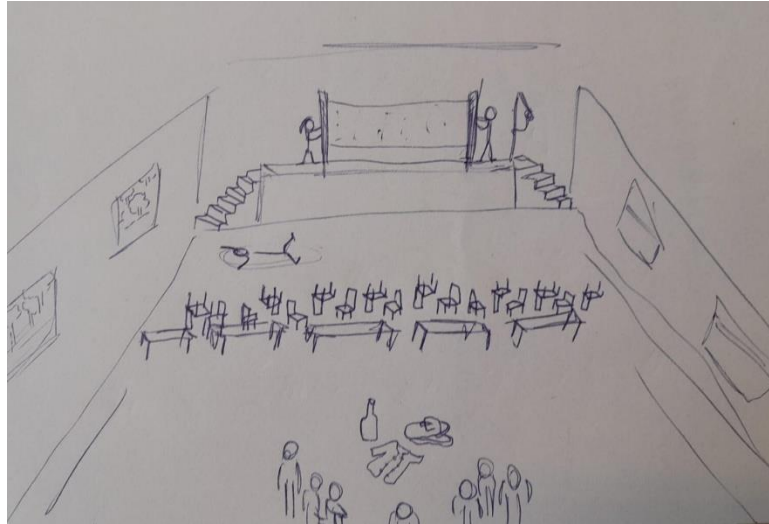


Figure 6. Staging of the Daniel Memorial, Fieldwork Notes, Rabat Workshop, Michela Lovato.

The facilitator's instructions were to create a commemorative moment in memory of Daniel. This instruction had set off a frantic and intense movement that had led to the physical construction of the Ceuta border, complete with its material elements – such as the radar, the barrier, the barbed wire – and its profound meaning – being a selective space of death.

The choice to position me to represent the Ceuta border was dictated by the bustle of the moment. While I was sitting on a side bench, in the frenzy of completing the image one participant handed me the panel: *You are the Spanish border*. Whether conscious or not, the white body came to hold the border line the black body cannot approach. Starting from my feet, the gradual process of border exclusion was erected, which, after the Spanish barrier, included a second barrier and, finally, a third, that of the Moroccan side – where the memorial for Daniel was then actually positioned. Between the second and third fence, Djallu threw himself to the ground, arms spread, to be the dead one, then replaced by the mattress.

During the break that followed the commemoration for Daniel, I stopped a few minutes with Toronto who, through a photo of the Ceuta border, wanted to show me the fidelity of their representation. What the mattress was representing – he showed me from the map – was "the cemetery," that is, he said moving his finger from the phone to indicate himself, "where we are." *We*, he specified, "both Moroccans and sub-Saharan, Christians and Muslims." The cemetery was located between the two barriers, therefore being inaccessible to the living except at the moment of crossing, and was an integral part of the border.

In the geography of the border depicted here, the cemetery is not just the place of the dead. It is the space where those who cross encounter disappearance, where those who are in movement encounter those who no longer move. Here, in fact, remain the dead bodies, fallen or disappeared during the attempt. It is an indistinct space, in which bodies lie anonymous, united and made identifiable solely by the degree of illegality attributed to their racialized bodies – far from the possibility of being recovered, identified, returned. The cemetery between the barriers of Ceuta testifies the risk of being able to remain stuck in unauthorized movement, to be swallowed by its dynamics of invisibilization and never be able to get out of it. Moving his finger from the phone screen to his own chest, Toronto emphasizes that the border is inhabited by the living and the disappeared, in a distance – physical and existential – that thins until becoming tremendously overlapping.

This intimate relationship with death emerges forcefully in migrants' accounts of crossing. Tely describes the desert between Mali and Algeria as "inhabited by skeletons," showing photos of corpses and human remains encountered along the route: death becomes a physical presence, an element of the landscape accompanying movement. The same awareness structures his account of the Atlantic crossing, where the fragility of the zodiac rendered the possibility of capsizing a constant and material horizon. In the space of the sea, Tely's body enters into relation with the bodies of fallen companions – dispersed in the abyss in indeterminate quantities, invisible yet persistently present. The ocean presents itself as a space populated by those who did not complete the journey, their corpses suspended in the depths, unmarked and unrecovered. It is against this backdrop that the material possibility of his own disappearance is reflected: dying unwitnessed, his body absorbed into the same currents as countless others. The distance between Tely's living body on the boat and the corpses at the bottom of the sea is measured in the depth of the abyss and the durability of an inflatable vessel. "I myself," Tely recounts, "at that moment no longer knew if I was alive or dead."

Tely conveys the existential liminality of the migrant body's relationship with disappearance at the border: mirroring himself in the waves of the ocean, he can no longer locate himself – among the corpses at the bottom or among the survivors who will reach the shore. His account speaks to how the border renders the black body a *neither-alive-nor-dead* existence (Gazzotti, 2019), a *living dead* (Kobelinsky, 2020), suspended between presence and absence, between visibility and invisibility. In this configuration, the border shapes a common condition of disappearability that binds the living and the disappeared: the crossing body enters into a specular relationship with its own not-yet disappearance, reflecting and amplifying the awareness of its structural precarity and vulnerability. To cross the border is to cross death itself, in close proximity to all those who did not arrive on the other side, and in direct confrontation with the concrete possibility of not arriving there either.

The constant awareness of disappearability permeates the entirety of life at the border. It shapes the way people inhabit their present as much as the way they project themselves into a future that cannot easily free itself from the border's hold. The border experience produces haunting conditions for the lives that confront and are subjected to it: a precarity that cuts deep into intimacies, relationships, and the perception of self and world.

At the Oujda workshop, shortly before the session begins, Randal speaks of "wounds on the legs that you know are there, but you don't know when they will come out and if they will ever heal." Surrounded by crutches, wounded and limping bodies, he articulates something that cannot be seen: the deepest wound of the border remains inscribed in the body and the soul – the constant memory of precarity, the confrontation with human smallness, with the ease with which people die, or rather with

which a world accepts the disappearance of certain bodies. This wound projects into the future, inhabiting the imaginaries of what is yet to come.

During a circle of free improvisations at the same workshop, Ahmed acts out being at a party in New York: he dances with his hands above his head, until he receives a phone call. After listening, he bursts into tears – he has just learned of a friend lost at sea during a crossing. Ahmed stages how the border penetrates the migrant body haunting the very idea of the future, even in the imagined moment of success, the projected life beyond the barrier. It persists in the background as an aggressive reminder of disposability within a system of racialised violence.

IV.III. For Those Who Neither Arrived Nor Came Back

The failure to recollect is the failure to resist. Memory is the key to self-retrieval, self-restoration, and therefore liberation.

Wole Soyinka, 1998

Within the framework through which disappearability is inhabited along the migratory journey, the relationship with the stories of those who have disappeared or died on the move occupies a constitutive place. This final section of the chapter turns to this relationship, examining how the collective existential trajectory of unauthorised mobility inscribes within itself the bond between the living and the disappeared at the border. The aim is to look at the spaces carved out for the stories and memories of fallen companions, and at the meaning that such practices of memory-making assume within the communal trajectory of unauthorised migration in terms of knowledge construction, epistemic agency, and collective memory.

Grounding this analysis in the framework of Theatre of the Oppressed, the question of knowledge – of being aware – emerges as central to the relationship between the oppressed and the structures of oppression they inhabit. Conscientisation, as Freire (1970) theorised, is an essential element in the mobilisation of the oppressed against the oppression they endure. Part of the violence of oppressive systems lies precisely in its epistemic dimension: if invisibility is an epistemic wrong (Lackey, 2022), then reclaiming consciousness of that condition is itself an act of resistance. Within social epistemology, it is recognised that when facing structural injustice, the oppressed bear a responsibility to confront it in accordance with their level of awareness (Jugov and Ypi, 2019): this responsibility corresponds to the capacity to make sense of one's experience and to mobilise, accordingly, the resources available to oppose and resist. In this framework, the act of preserving knowledge constitutes a form of epistemic resistance (Medina, 2013), rooted in the situated knowledge of oppressed subjects (Collins, 2000). As Tobi (2025:8) writes:

"The act of remembering [...] is a tool of liberation in the present and the future. By documenting and sharing their experiences, victims of oppression disrupt the epistemic opacity that sustains structural injustice, exposing the systemic nature of their suffering and encouraging others to recognise and resist it."

Remembering and narrating stories of oppression is understood as part of a broader commitment to epistemic repair (Lackey, 2022) and to moral resistance against structural injustice: the oppressed bear a duty to share their stories, grounded in wider epistemic obligations, "such as the duty to resist injustice, preserve collective memory, and foster solidarity" (Tobi, 2025:8). This framework proves central to the analysis that follows, inviting us to read the practices of truth-seeking and commemoration for the

disappeared as spaces in which survivors construct epistemic agency, "reclaim historical authorship and enact decolonial futures" (Ibid.:12).

Through the stories of Daniel, who disappeared at Ceuta, Abdelkarim, presumed drowned off Sfax, and Salih, survivor at Melilla massacre, I observe how the communities respond to the epistemic violence of absence through practices of memory and mourning. The analysis dwells on the significance that the act of remembering takes on in this context, on the understanding that memory, within a context of oppression, cannot but be a political act. It unfolds in two parts. The first presents the three commemorative cases in turn, reconstructing the circumstances of each disappearance and the practices through which those who remained responded to it. The second develops a comparative reading of these cases, examining how space for memory is negotiated under surveillance and constrained mobility, how ritual gives form to absence, and how the relationship between the living and the disappeared is constituted through a communal experience.

From a methodological standpoint, the three commemorative practices were documented through different approaches. The first was observed through direct participation; the second was reconstructed through interviews with those who organised and participated in the commemorative ritual; the third draws primarily on the account of Salih, complemented by participant observation in civil society advocacy settings, including solidarity network meetings and a public commemorative demonstration.

Commemorating in Transit

In Memory of Daniel Oury

Dado proposes devoting a moment to the issue of the disappeared. He suggests addressing it first, before turning to the other themes that have emerged. He asks whether anyone specific comes to mind; Trendyboy says that four of his friends disappeared at Ceuta border. Tely explains that they are speaking of a friend who had been living in Taqadoum and whose whereabouts were lost at Ceuta the previous year. His name was Daniel Oury.

Among the themes proposed at the Rabat workshop, that of disappearance was the one that received unanimous consent for treatment – with every other theme, there was always someone who disagreed or remained unconvinced. It was decided that the entire group would work on it collectively, while the remaining themes would be addressed through subgroups.

What followed was a moment of considerable emotional intensity, culminating in the frantic, painstaking construction of the Ceuta border already described above. Participants were then invited to step outside the scene and observe it from a distance, and asked to add elements to the Ceuta backdrop to give presence to Daniel and the other lost companions. To make room for what would become the memorial, the chairs forming the barrier were moved: the border opened, yielding space to the memory of the fallen. Three objects were placed before it – a backpack, a jacket, and a water bottle (Fig. 7). "These are the objects you have to leave behind to climb the *valla*²³, to make yourself lighter," they explained. "You keep only one layer on, so that nothing obstructs your movements."

²³ The Ceuta fence, in Spanish.

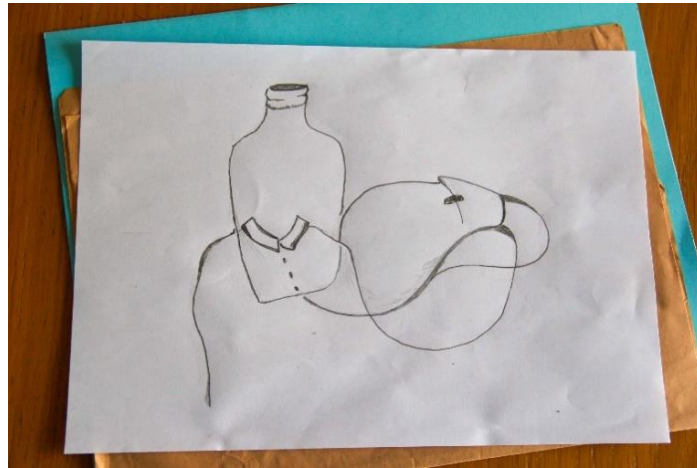


Figure 7. Memorial for Daniel, Fieldwork notes, Michela Lovato, Davide David Parisi.

Before the objects, the atmosphere assumed a sacred quality. The group arranged itself in silence in a semicircle – some seated, others kneeling or standing – and the space opened for those who wished to express something. Mandy bowed before the memorial, opened the backpack, extracted a necklace, and kissed it; Trendyboy bowed and kissed the jacket. Dedications were offered in Pular, prayers in Arabic. Masqpro led a collective chant. Tely addressed a thought to Daniel's family; Totorina recalled moments shared together in the neighbourhood.

Daniel Oury came from Guinea-Conakry. His migratory trajectory, personal history, and circumstances closely mirror those of the workshop participants: he had fled during a period of political unrest, crossed Mali and Algeria, and – entering through Oujda – had lived for a time in Taqadoum, while repeating attempting to cross the Ceuta border. In September 2021, together with a companion, he organised an attempt involving consecutive assaults on the fence, with intervals spent in the forest of the mountains surrounding the enclave. On the third attempt, the two managed to cross. Once on Spanish territory, they became separated upon the arrival of a Guardia Civil vehicle: while one reached the migrant reception centre on foot, it was at this point that Daniel's trail vanished. He was never found on either side of the border. His brother travelled from France to search for him in the areas surrounding Ceuta; a Spanish association conducted searches within the enclave; from Taqadoum, an online campaign was launched through alerts and calls for assistance. To this day, no material trace of his presence has been found anywhere.

It is this absence that the workshop now holds. The border appears here, in the theatre space, in its full materiality – complete with its most disturbing details. Of Daniel, only the objects through which his presence can be imagined remain: the jacket, the backpack, the water bottle. They bear witness to his passage, to the relationship he had with that place and its materiality, and constitute the only tangible trace of an existence that the border has consumed – vanished into nothing, perhaps absorbed by the earth, swallowed by the machinery of border policing, or simply evaporated. What remain are three objects and an open border, figured in the displaced chairs: to make room for Daniel's absence? To indicate a devouring mouth? To represent the void into which there is a risk of falling?

The Funeral Without a Body: Abdelkarim

Abdelkarim as well used to live in Taqadoum, participating actively in the daily life of the neighbourhood's Guinean community and sharing his living space with Tely and the other workshop participants. Following numerous unsuccessful attempts to cross the Moroccan border, in autumn 2022

he opted for an alternative migratory route through Tunisia, influenced by the recent experience of a fellow migrant who had successfully reached Lampedusa from that country.

Upon arriving in Sfax – where he spent a period before embarking towards Europe – he maintained sporadic contact with his social network in Taqadoum, whose members received news from him only during the days immediately preceding and following his departure across the Mediterranean. According to the account of the friend who was awaiting him in Sicily, despite Abdelkarim having communicated the vessel's departure several days in advance, he was not among those who disembarked upon arrival. From Taqadoum, the group sustained an active communication network with the contact in Italy and with other acquaintances still in Tunisia, in an effort to continue the search for him. This network eventually received reports of a shipwreck whose timing corresponded to the dates of Abdelkarim's crossing. Although his body was never recovered, he is presumed dead by those who knew him.

Tely recounts that, in the following days of Abdelkarim's presumed death, he felt driven by the need to do something to honour the memory of his companion and friend. "We thought of making a sacrifice for him," he says, "as is customary in our country; to replicate something traditionally done there for the dead, and to do it here." A number of sub-Saharan residents of the neighbourhood were brought together to organise a funeral rite for Abdelkarim: even in the absence of a body, a collective moment to mourn him and pray for his soul was felt to be necessary. A group took charge of preparing the ritual food, through a collection that enabled the purchase of the required items. "We all had little, but everyone contributed something, until we had covered everything we needed," Tely recalls. The rite took place in a house in the neighbourhood, typically rented by Moroccan owners to sub-Saharan migrants. The owners granted permission for the ceremony to be held there and provided, for a fee, equipment such as chairs and tables.

According to Tely's account and the photographs he shared from that day, hundreds of sub-Saharan people attended the funeral rite, coming from Taqadoum and other neighbourhoods. The photographs were also shared with Abdelkarim's family in Guinea, so as to involve them symbolically in the moment of commemoration. The central invocation of the day was addressed "to Abdelkarim and all those who have died at sea, and to our *bozza*."

The Melilla Massacred Day

"This is day 24 June, is like Independence Day for immigrants, especially for Sudanese. We recall 24 June all years, we emigrants we have something like to recall who is passed, who is died. [...] If you ask any people for around this day, he knows this day, he knows this story. Because we lost many friends, many people, many Sudanese, many Africans also in this day."²⁴

Having survived the Melilla massacre, Salih was deported to Fqih Ben Saleh, more than 600 kilometres from the enclave. From there, he managed to gather sufficient funds to make his way to Casablanca: one of his companions had sustained a severe arm fracture because of police violence and required hospitalisation, while Salih himself was suffering from intense headaches following the beatings he had endured. Having already been turned away from one hospital, they made for Casablanca, where they knew of a support organisation providing assistance to migrants. In the days following the massacre, Salih found himself simultaneously navigating the search for medical care for his own injuries, and confronting the magnitude of the losses he had witnessed. Some of his friends and companions had been imprisoned but could not be located; others had died – he had glimpsed their bodies amid the

²⁴ Interview with Salih, Casablanca, Sept. 2024.

chaos; of others still, no certain news ever emerged. The task of notifying families fell, in part, to those who had survived. "Families were calling and we had to tell them they were dead. They weren't in prison, they weren't in hospital – so they were dead, weren't they?"

Salih further recounts that, in the period following the massacre, survivors were subjected to an intense campaign of criminalisation, being publicly accused of involvement in trafficking networks or membership of criminal organisations. This systematic delegitimisation had a pronounced silencing effect: fearing reprisals, many survivors were deterred from speaking openly about what they had witnessed and endured. In the days that followed, no spaces for public discussion or commemoration of the massacre were permitted in Morocco – the authoritarian effort to suppress any public reckoning with the events has been documented above. The only commemorative gatherings took place in private settings: in a church in Rabat and in certain mosques, where sub-Saharan community members and a number of international church volunteers assembled to mourn collectively.

For Salih, every 24th of June carries him back to 2022, accompanied by the still-vivid embodied memory of the violence endured and the absence of any prospect of justice. He recounts how, in the days preceding the anniversary, the full intensity of the event resurfaces – a sense of "reliving it as it had happened yesterday." In Salih's account, the anniversary has acquired a symbolic weight so profound that it has come to occupy a central place in the collective experience of black migrants in Morocco more broadly. Every anniversary, Facebook pages fill with personal testimonies, photographs, and commemorative posts about the massacre, emerging as the primary site through which memory is preserved, circulated, and kept alive.

Building Memory at the Border: Practices and Meanings

Commemorating Under Surveillance and Constrained Mobility

For the second anniversary of the Melilla massacre, I was in Morocco. For months, I had been following the planning of a conference in the enclave, organised by associations investigating the crime, with the intention of attending. After the official dates were postponed, some activists told me informally that the conditions for holding it did not exist: it was clear that no city in Morocco would be authorised to a public event on the subject. In the end, an improvised demonstration was held in front of the parliament in Rabat, among a small group of international activists – European and a few African – and Moroccan activists who happened to be in the city for a conference. There were around twenty of us, carrying signs in Arabic and French: "Stop the criminalisation of migrants", "Stop crimes at the border". We arranged ourselves in a semicircle in the small square in front of Parliament, flanked on all sides by the usual military presence. Police officers began walking alongside us – making their presence felt – and turning away passers-by who stopped to listen. The chants were faint and made no direct reference to the events at Melilla: we shouted instead "solidarity with migrants everywhere" and "defend migrants' rights". The demonstration lasted less than twenty minutes.

Without wishing to analyse in detail the dynamics of mobilisations for truth and justice – a theme that will be examined later – I intend here to draw out some elements that highlight how access to public commemorative practices is shaped by deep authoritarian control. The demonstration itself, in its very composition and form, reveals the constraints imposed: it was attended only by subjects deemed acceptable, conducted in moderate and indirect language, limited in time, and denied any real engagement with the public sphere. The police officers walking alongside us made visible the boundaries within which we were permitted to move.

I was in the square that day, slightly to one side, watching the movements of the police. Where was Salih, on that 24th of June? Probably at home, or at the charitable association where he volunteers for migrants, or perhaps walking around Casablanca, as he usually does after work. He was not in the square, and this is significant: my white body was there, his was not, yet it was his story and those of his companions that our words were meant to carry. His body was denied presence even now, deprived of the very possibility of publicly commemorating his own dead.

I take this ethnographic experience as a starting point to reflect on how the practices of searching for and remembering disappeared companions necessarily collide with a context of controlled mobility and pervasive surveillance, and to examine how space for commemoration is negotiated within it. In doing so, I seek to trace the tensions that run through Moroccan public space when black bodies attempt to claim visibility and the right to memory, and to reflect on the limits and possibilities that such space affords. As will become apparent, the same context in which disappearability is structural – dynamics already described in the preceding chapters – shapes not only the movements of living bodies, but also the possibilities of giving space and voice to the dead.

The ethnographic cases presented here differ from one another in important ways. On one side are Daniel and Abdelkarim, who have disappeared into the everyday opacity of the border regime, their stories reconstructed through the accounts of companions and friends. On the other is the direct testimony of Salih, speaking in the first person in an attempt to render his experience. Here, a brief note on Salih's account is necessary: the Melilla massacre is an extraordinarily sensitive and politically contested issue, both within Morocco and beyond, and one that would merit dedicated analysis²⁵ which cannot be provided here. In this space, I limit myself to reflecting through Salih's lived experience – which offers a personal account of events necessarily shaped by his positionality as a black migrant and survivor – and through my own direct participation in a commemorative demonstration.

Indirect witnesses on one side, a survivor and direct witness on the other: faced with the disappearance of those close to them, both figures attempt to reconstruct events, trace the disappeared, and restore their presence and recognition where the border regime has systematically denied it. This section analyses how the practices of the search for the disappeared and the act of commemoration attempt to carve out space within a context defined by constrained mobility and diffuse surveillance.

When Daniel disappears at Ceuta and Abdelkarim at Sfax, their friends, families and companions confront, in different ways, the impossibility of locating them and reporting their disappearance. Swallowed by the machinery of the border, both young men experience the epistemic violence of non-recognition: border zones are not accessible for monitoring except by the authorities themselves; family and friends are physically distant from the sites where searches might be conducted; there is no access to the retrieval of traces or evidence. The sea on one side, the fence at Ceuta on the other.

The companions living in Taqadom find themselves unable to move through public space to conduct searches in person: their status as undocumented migrants precludes access to institutional spaces and Moroccan socio-political life, foreclosing any possibility of formally reporting or collectively commemorating the loss. They must move – as far as they can – within the frame of everyday repression. To negotiate with the surveillance apparatus within which they experience constrained mobility, sub-Saharan migrants develop transnational and digital networks of inquiry. The search for disappeared companions unfolds across fragmented geographies connecting distant places and multiple actors – among them family members, solidarity networks, and migrant communities in transit –

²⁵ See instead Border Forensics, Iridia & AMDH (2024), Human Rights Watch (2023), Caminando Fronteras (2022).

producing transnational and deterritorialised practices of searching²⁶. It is through this method that they will eventually learn of the shipwreck that presumably brought Abdelkarim's journey to an end.

Salih's account discloses a different scale of experience, where the friction between any attempt at denunciation and the politics of repression becomes far more explicit. He describes how the violence of the pushback was followed by a systematic policy of dispersal and concealment. This politics of repression extended to the dead: the fallen were not identified and were rendered inaccessible to their families; and for survivors – as Salih recounts – and civil society it proved extraordinarily difficult to establish how many people had simply not come back. Attempts by families and civil society organisations to restore identifiability to the bodies and a material reality to the disappearances were structurally obstructed.

While in the first two cases the repression surrounding the fate of Daniel and Abdelkarim operates as a direct consequence of the border infrastructure's ordinary functioning, the Melilla case reveals an explicit and pre-emptive politics of surveillance, calibrated to the degree of international politicisation the event had generated. At varying levels of intensity and intentionality, all three cases converge in painting the same landscape of epistemic repression with regard to border violence against black bodies in Morocco.

These politics result in the denial of truth to the stories of the disappeared, obstructing any clear reconstruction of events and any possible identification of the cause of death. At the same time, the denial of bodies and the epistemic uncertainty surrounding the fate of these young men obstructs the rituals necessary to the mourning process and to the fulfilment of spiritual obligations toward the dead. For sub-Saharan migrants attempting to seek truth and preserve memory for their fallen companions, this becomes an act of continuous negotiation with a space of variable surveillance, in which the very experience of remembering must adapt to the margins of the permissible.

The three commemorative experiences described here present different degrees of negotiation with the surrounding context. The act of remembering fragments across private and communal spaces, oscillating between visibility and invisibility, and confronting the precarious openings that an authoritarian context occasionally concedes. Against this backdrop, we observe distinct modalities through which space for memory is created.

The commemoration of Daniel takes place within the theatre workshop: a private, sheltered space, protected from external surveillance, where an intimate atmosphere is created in honour of a disappeared friend. This space of memory exists precisely because it is closed, removed from the public sphere. The workshop functions as a temporary sanctuary where grief can be expressed collectively, outside the daily risk of repression.

The funeral for Abdelkarim represents a different form of negotiated memory, managing to open a communal space within the everyday life of Taqadom through explicit strategies of mediation with the context. His companions organise a ritual moment by negotiating their presence with local authorities: the concession of space is secured through an economic transaction, in which the rental of equipment becomes the condition for obtaining permission. The commemoration is thus able to take a collective form, but only on the condition that it remains circumscribed and controlled.

²⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of this, see Lovato, M. (forthcoming). Dealing with the present of border disappearances: Collective practices of memory-keeping in Morocco. In M. Hameršak et al. (Eds.), *Tracemaking Border Deaths*. Zagreb: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research.

The Melilla case represents the most extreme degree of public memory repression among those examined. The systematic, nationwide denial of any space – social or institutional – for commemorating the victims of the massacre confines commemorative practices to the interstices of private space – as churches and mosques – where state surveillance exercises less direct control, stripping the act of remembering of its public and political force. A limited exception was the improvised demonstration of June 2024.

Salih gives voice to the profound tension between his need to bear witness and the political denial of any space in which to do so. The massacre is, for him, a powerful event – a memory of such intensity that it marks a day of reference for *the entire migrant community in Morocco*, shaping the experience of everyone who has been through that border, whether or not they were in Barrio Chino that day. At the same time, he describes the exhaustion of finding space to speak, to denounce, to share: to escape the violence to which his black skin and his status expose him in Morocco, his need to remember is confined to social media – the only space in which he can feel *safer*.

In this tension, he explains that in the face of the structural denial of public spaces for speaking about the dead and disappeared of Melilla, it is the migrant community itself that becomes the space of memory. The 24th of June – Salih tells us – is inscribed in the collective memory of migrants in transit in Morocco: a refuge for the names and stories of those who have fallen and those who have survived.

Giving Body to Absence: Ritual and Community

Within the context of erasure and epistemic violence discussed above, these practices constitute attempts to ritualise absence. In doing so, they seek to address two interrelated needs: on one side, the need of the living to process and give form to disappearance; on the other, the need to restore sacrality to the no-longer-presence of the disappeared. The three cases recounted here reveal distinct ways in which ritual takes shape in the absence of conventional conditions: deprived of the spaces and institutional means through which loss is ordinarily commemorated, those who remain generate alternative practices of mourning and memory.

Within the theatre space, the ritual for Daniel unfolds against the backdrop of the three-dimensional representation of the Ceuta border. Before it, Daniel's non-presence is rendered through displaced chairs and the material traces that bear witness to his attempt to cross. Just as his body is nowhere to be found, Daniel cannot be seen within the memorial space: it is absence itself that speaks of him, a gap left in the mesh of the border fence. In the ritual process, objects carry the burden of Daniel's presence, the only remaining link between his earthly life and his immaterial state. These are ordinary objects, worn by the daily use of the route, which through the collective gesture of sacralisation are transformed into relics. They are the remains of a young man who challenged the border regime and fell in the attempt – defeated in the undertaking shared by all of them. Before the altar for Daniel, the group arranges itself in a semicircle; the sacrality of this moment is composed of bows, kisses to his belongings, prayers, songs and tears, restoring ritual dignity to the act itself.

For Abdelkarim, the commemorative moment assumes a more structured form, oriented toward a broader collectivity and organised around the intention of restoring, within the limits of what the context permits, the traditional funerary celebration owed to a departed soul. In adhering to Guinean funerary tradition, the occasion acquires solemnity. The rite unfolds through sacrifice and the collective sharing of food: in the absence of a body, dignity is restored to the deceased through communal practices of recognising and consecrating death. In Abdelkarim's name, a prayer is offered that extends beyond him to encompass all those who have perished at sea and all those gathered in his memory. The

living pray for the dead, and in doing so affirm the bonds that continue to hold between those who are no longer present and those who still endure.

Salih conveys the same sacred intensity in relation to the anniversary of Melilla. It matters little that in Morocco there is enforced silence on the subject: 24 June, Melilla, is a date etched into the collective lived experience of migrants in Morocco, indelible from their minds and souls. Even those who were not there – or did not personally know anyone who participated – carry the memory of that day with them in their everyday experience at the border, a memory so symbolically powerful that it has become the day on which the independence of oppressed bodies at the border – and their sacrality – is commemorated.

If the ritual practices just described restore the sacred dimension of remembrance, what runs through all of them is a profoundly collective dimension. In the face of the politics of concealing border deaths, it is the community that emerges from below to honour its dead, taking charge of these memories, creating space, organising ritual, and keeping alive the bond with those who are no longer here. On one side there is a community, on the other a fallen comrade who is mourned – a friend, a brother. All three stories reveal a profound interaction between the community and the disappeared who become part of it as such, is an indissoluble bond forged against the backdrop of Ceuta, or Melilla, or the sea, and which shapes the interconnection between the living and the dead. Here, the remembrance of those who are no longer present and the future of those who have survived are indissolubly linked in narrating the present of a community that builds its history in response to the need to resist borders.

*The Drowned and the Saved*²⁷

I sense the intensity of this bond during a visit to Taqadoum, a few weeks after the news that Tely had managed to reach Spain. That time it was Mandy who welcomed me; I sat with him in one of the house's bedrooms. On the wall I noticed a new inscription: BOZA TELY. I looked at the writing with a smile, thinking that the celebration of Tely had arrived even here, praising the fact that he, faced with the border, had been saved. That room had been home to many people I met during fieldwork, a constant turnover dictated by the temporalities of the border regime: Daniel had lived in this house, as had Abdelkarim. Here I met Omar, Daniel's close friend, through whom I reconstructed the story of his disappeared companion. In this space, the stories of those who have been defeated and those who survive intersect in a coherent narrative that unites individual experiences into a collective history. The inscription on the wall memorialises this – in a house inhabited by many, which now, between Mandy waiting and Daniel disappeared, inscribes Tely's story into the collective memory of transit. This house – with its inscriptions, its changing inhabitants, its accumulating stories – is the image of a community that carries the living and the dead together. Individual experience matters insofar as it tells the story of all, conveying the exhausting, violent, yet hopeful battle at the border.

In this section, I wish to examine more closely the nature of the relationship that forms between the disappeared and those among the living who must reckon with their absence. In the section "Inhabiting Disappearance", I observed how the border produces a communal experience of disappearability, in which the living and the disappeared share a precarious existential condition, both confronting a vulnerability that is at once radically individual and structurally collective. In the commemorative practices recounted here, it becomes apparent that those who sustain the memory of the disappeared

²⁷ The title draws on Primo Levi's work, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), in which the author reflects on the memory of the Shoah and on the relationship between survivors and victims of it. The reference does not intend to establish an equivalence between distinct historical contexts, rather to recognise in that analytical category a tool for thinking through the relationship – described in this section – between those who have fallen at the border and those who are still on the move.

are travel companions still in transit – individuals who have not yet crossed the final border and thus remain exposed to the same possibility of disappearing. The relationship between those who commemorate and those who have disappeared therefore inhabits a suspended temporality, one in which the distinction between the fallen and the surviving remains irreducibly provisional: the mourner and the mourned are held together within a shared condition of precariousness that death has interrupted for some and deferred for others.

This translates into the fact that those who hold the memory of disappearance do not relate only to the absence – violent and profoundly unjust – of a loved one, but to the possibility of becoming victim to the same fate. I seek to render this through the concept of *sameness*: the unsettling recognition of oneself in another's violent condition. Before the memorial to Daniel is even assembled, Ceuta is already present – rendered in detail through the various devices that consume migrants' bodies. In remembering their friend, the participants are simultaneously confronted with the fact that Ceuta remains there, its mouth open. It was symbolically significant, in this respect, that the objects composing the memorial were the participants' own belongings: Djallu placed his backpack on the ground, Tely removed his jacket and laid it beside it, and the water bottle was the one from which the entire group had been drinking that day. Daniel's objects – in the lived experience of Tely, Djallu, and the others – could have been, and in a meaningful sense are, their own. Just as the absent body of their friend could have been theirs.

When I meet Omar, Daniel's roommate and close friend, I find this condition powerfully present in his account. Omar tells me that he had shared several stages of the migratory route with Daniel: they had met in Oujda and decided to travel together to Rabat, from where they had made repeated attempts to cross into Ceuta. Among the first things Omar discloses during the interview is that he had originally been meant to accompany Daniel on the night of the crossing, but had withdrawn at the last moment for lack of money for transport. Omar, beyond the grief for a friend who is no longer here, lives with the anguish of knowing he should have been with him, could have been like him. I wonder how frightening this relationship must be: having to reckon with a violent story that could – and quite plausibly still can – be one's own.

Sameness names the condition by which the living recognise themselves in the fate of the drowned, in a situation that has not yet delivered its final verdict. There are no saved, only survivors inhabiting a temporality that remains uncertain and precarious. What the commemorative practices recounted here ultimately reveal is that at their foundation lies a profound and constitutive relationship between those who have drowned and those who have survived: they are bound together by participation in the same struggle, and the fallen have succumbed within the very condition that the living continue to inhabit. It is the border that shapes this relationship, and memory becomes the means of confronting it. This existential proximity – and not only affection for the lost person – makes memory a necessary act: honouring the story of the disappeared is, in this sense, a way of rendering epistemic justice to it, restoring the recognition that the border has denied.

It is the community that mobilises to search for the disappeared, sustains ties with families in the country of origin, and circulates news of those who have managed to arrive. Tely speaks to this directly when he recounts feeling compelled to act upon learning that Abdelkarim had in all likelihood drowned. The impulse was not individual but collective: many people committed themselves, contributing what little they had so that a funeral could take place. Tely and the other workshop participants enacted the same logic in a different register, offering their own belongings so that a memorial – however temporary and materially modest – could exist for Daniel. In both cases, the

community assumes the function of witness, custodian of memory, and guarantor of the symbolic recognition that no institution has been willing to provide.

At the root of this impulse lies the profound idea that, since the drowned and the survivors belong to the same battle, the living bear a testimonial debt toward the disappeared, for which they feel responsible for the recovery and preservation of their memory. It is striking that Salih emphasises that the Melilla massacre is constituted as a day that the entire migrant community in Morocco commemorates. For even when there are no particularly intimate relationships or affective obligations toward those who disappear, the living are recognised as bearing what social epistemology calls the "imperfect duty to remember and tell their stories" (Tobi, 2025). It is an imperfect duty because it is flexible, based on the victims' capacity to fulfil it according to their well-being, their capacity to act, and the context, and one that "stands on its own as a moral and epistemic response to structural injustice, rooted in the epistemic agency and solidarity of the oppressed" (Ibid.:13).

Within this framework, memory is not just a practice of processing grief, but an act of resistance. Preserving the names and stories of the drowned – keeping them present in the collective narrative of transit – is a form of solidarity that opposes the double disappearance that the border regime produces: the physical disappearance of bodies and the epistemic one.

V. Intimacies and Contestation at the Moroccan Border: Families of Missing Migrants Between Intimate and Political Haunting

Introduction: Border Violence and Its Afterlives

During one of my visits to the family, Hamed's mother shared with me a poem she had written for her son. It was kept in a folder alongside photographs, drawings, and written pieces that remind her of Hamed. The poem reads:

*To my beloved Hamed,
lover of dignity,
protector of the weak,
fighter for justice and rights,
pure heart.*

Her son had disappeared in 2021 while migrating without authorisation; his body was later found at the foot of Fortress Europe. In the years that followed, Hamed's absence came to saturate her daily life, shaping its practices, understanding frameworks, and imaginaries, and drawing her toward a new way of seeing the world. She recounts this while we are drinking mint tea in her living room: Hamed is with her constantly, and she has made her life a way of remaining in contact with him and demanding truth about his death. Her everyday existence is structured around the contours of his absence – a void that bears witness to what should be present and has been unjustly removed. The poem expresses what Hamed represents to her today: a good person whom the unjust order of the world has taken from her, who in his death continues to speak of dignity, justice, and rights in a world marked by borders and violence. His story transcends that crossing and that loss, narrating something far greater, untethered from the body that once harboured his life and his death.

Hamed's mother conveys how her life has been transformed by the experience of her son's disappearance – a transformation that is intimate, social, and political. In the ethnographic work I have conducted in Morocco with families of disappeared and dead migrants, I observe how the experience of border loss has given shape to new ways of living, relating, and making sense of the world, each inflected by the particular circumstances and subjectivities of those involved. Across this diversity, a set of recurring elements emerges: lives marked by presence-absences, oriented around a profound and unresolved need to know, and traversed by restless and obsessive temporalities that resist linearity. Their accounts testify to a violence of the border that does not exhaust itself in the moment of disappearance, but spreads and sediments into the intimate and social lives of those who inhabit absence, persisting, transforming, and continuously reproducing itself.

What these accounts reveal is a relationship with absence that is at once intimate and social, private and political. In this relationship, the presence-absences of their loved ones *do not rest quiet* (Gordon, 2008): carrying an inescapable demand for resolution and insistently calling for *something to be done* (Ibid.) – bearing, within them, the conditions for the transformation of private loss into a political demand for justice and truth. In tracing this movement, I attend to how in this experience the boundaries between intimate and public, private and social, become permeable and porous. It is within this space of intersection that the need for resolution activates search practices, political processes of contestation, and public practices of memory: the private need to know is translated, through this movement, into a demand for truth.

Taking disappearance as a site through which border violence propagates into the social and affective fabric of people's lives, this chapter traces how what is intimately lived as an unresolvable need to know is transformed into a political question. Haunting emerges in this framework as the affective texture of disappearance, but also as the way through which private loss crosses into political claim-making. Following this logic, the analysis moves across three registers that interweave and blur into one another: the private and intimate experience of disappearance; the production of (un)knowledge and counter-knowledge practices; and the public practices through which contestation takes shape. Throughout, absence emerges as a productive site of political subjectivity: generating political imaginaries, practices and discourses and shaping public demands for truth, dignity, and accountability.

The families who took part in this research reflect the diversity of pathways through which this political subjectivity takes shape. As outlined in the methodological section, they come from heterogeneous social backgrounds: the majority belong to subaltern classes, while a smaller number come from relatively more privileged households. Almost none report having been involved in organised political activism prior to the disappearance of their loved one. Among the cases considered, only two²⁸ have a prior history of oppositional political activity in Morocco.

The terrain in which they move is structurally hostile. Families find themselves operating under conditions of structural unknowability and – compelled to navigate the untraceability of their loved ones – in the absence of adequate tools, resources, or shared frameworks of recognition, enduring, alongside the violence of suspended loss, a profound and unresolved sense of a removal that is, in its very nature, unjust. Left largely alone and rendered solely responsible for the search and for whatever fate may await their loved ones, they must contend with a national and international system for tracing disappeared persons that is fragmented or altogether absent, with a climate of intense criminalisation of migration, and with institutional apparatuses that not only fail to offer support but actively function as obstacles. As the following sections will show, it is within this terrain that the practices of search, contestation, and claim-making this chapter sets out to follow take shape.

V.I. Inhabiting Absence

In their relationship with their disappeared and dead loved ones, the families involved in the research convey a powerful sense of cohabiting with a presence-absence that continues to inscribe itself into the fabric of everyday life. In North African Arabic dialect, there exists an expression that captures this condition: *kbayalu mā kayfāreqnīsh*. The term *kbayal* designates image, thought, imagination; *yfarraq* means to separate. In its negative construction, the phrase translates as "that image does not leave me" or "I cannot free myself from this memory" – evoking a condition of profound longing, of persistent loss, of an obsession that resists dissolution. In my ethnographic work with families of persons disappeared at

²⁸ Noureddine – Yasser's father – recounts his militancy in an opposition party in the early 2000s, his participation in a strike in 2005 for which he lost his job and was compelled to migrate abroad for several years. Hafida – Hadi's sister –, in turn, was actively involved in the student protests of 2013, during which she was arrested and detained for two days. Both situate the injustices suffered by their loved ones – and their own exclusion from truth as family members – within a longer historical horizon of oppression, political violence, and humiliation reproduced along class and racial lines in Morocco, connecting their demand for truth and justice to the broader struggle against the monarchy and the neocolonial relations binding Morocco to Europe. Other families, by contrast, emphasise that their entry into the space of claim-making was propelled by the disappearance itself: this experience brought them into contact with political apparatuses previously foreign to them – among them, the international border regime – and led them to renegotiate their relationship with both local and international political powers in ways they had not previously anticipated.

the border in Morocco, I have engaged with memories, non-material images, and blurred presences that gather around absence, lending it structure and endurance. *Khyal*, in Arabic, also means shadow.

This experience is pervaded by an exhausting sense of waiting for someone who is no longer there, by the frustrating struggle to comprehend what it means that they – and truth about them – are nowhere to be found. The domestic and intimate experience of disappearance and death takes shape around the shadow of those no longer present, marking the time of a mourning that cannot reach completion and *disturbing* the very fabric of intimacy (Huttunen and Perl, 2023). Entering carefully into these intimate spaces, this section attends to how absence reshapes one's relationship with time, space, and the texture of daily life. The intimate is not understood here as a predetermined space – as for example the domestic – but as a zone of contact and passage (Berlant, 1998) in which bodies, desires and different structures of power intertwine and co-produce one another (Gross-Wyrtzen and El Yacoubi, 2024).

Ethnographically rendering the intimate experience of disappearance entails a series of methodological and epistemic challenges. Engaging with disappearance shatters the categories of meaning through which we habitually understand reality, problematising the very possibility of giving coherent narrative structure to experiences that are deeply personal and profoundly fragmented. Each person I have encountered in the course of this research conveys an experience powerfully shaped by their own social and political context of origin, as are their expectations and imaginaries regarding the disappeared person and the prospect of their return. This inquiry constantly grapples with the risk of adopting deterministic tones when addressing a subject that is inherently multifaceted and irreducible to operational frameworks, or of gravitating toward generalisation in order to simplify its comprehension and representation. Mindful of this risk, I draw on observations from my fieldwork with families of disappeared and dead migrants, in an attempt to glimpse the social and political life generated by the experience of disappearance – attending to how people navigate this terrain, what they endeavour to accomplish, and how they relate to it.

Those who find themselves engaging with this absence – in its multiple manifestations – seek to make sense of what they are enduring, yet encounter the lack of adequate terminology, of shared frameworks of recognition, of rituals and modes of restitution. How do we survive in a world where people vanish into nothingness? How to come to terms with the absurdity that a person can suddenly cease to exist, or can return only as an emptied corpse? How do people reconcile themselves with a void whose depths remain undefined, and for which the languages and practices of elaboration are absent?

The experience of disappearance compels families – as well as those of us observing it – to reconceptualise notions of presence, absence, visibility, and reality (Edkins, 2011). What emerges is the collapse of ontological boundaries and the consequent dissolution of the temporal, spatial, and presence-based frameworks that once sustained the understanding of reality and its significance. Disappearance pushes us into inhabiting a liminal space – at times abstract, and not always representable within classical epistemological frameworks. It demands that we engage with a form of being that defies the categories of life and death, of here and elsewhere, of presence and absence. What remains is a void produced by removal, laden with the presence of what is missing: uncanny, it inhabits spaces, relationships, and the daily existence of those who remain. Disappearance unsettles the stability of the present (Gordon, 2008), disrupts the linearity of time and space, and reappears in forms that are intangible yet unmistakably perceptible.

The Geography of Ghost Boats

On September 5, 2021, sixteen young people from the same neighborhood are reported missing by their families in the region of Rabat-Salé. It is the day after Eid al-Adha. Families reconstruct that their children departed during the night for the *barqa*, the unauthorized crossing toward Europe: *they have burned*, self-organizing to depart toward Cádiz in a zodiac. For days, their families await news of their arrival somewhere: days that became months, and months that have since become years.

The simultaneous disappearance of sixteen people from the same street, on the same night, produced a rupture that reverberated across multiple families. Hafida's brother, Hadi, was among them. She recounts the frantic exchange of information in the days that followed: the calls, the attempts to reconstruct a route, a timeline, a destination. Like the other families, she inhabited the visceral need to locate her brother, to place him somewhere in space, to anchor his existence to a point on a map.

Into this disorientation, rumour rushed to fill the void left by the absence of information. Family members found themselves navigating a proliferation of hypotheses about the fate of their loved ones: a neighbour immediately spread word that they were all dead, without offering any evidence; a fellow townsman claimed to have heard that the group was safe, sheltering in a forest somewhere, without being able to specify where; others suggested they had drowned, or that they had been seized by traffickers at sea. In the absence of answers, questions multiplied, rendering disappearance a haunting experience. Hafida recounts:

“Only God knows the truth. Are they alive? Are they dead? Will they arrive one day and contact us? Will they remain missing forever, for our entire lives? Will we die without having found them? I don’t know. Will our children ever be found? I don’t know... we have met people who have been searching in vain for eight years for their missing loved ones. Their children are still missing, without a trace.”

At the time of this research, four years have passed since the disappearance of Hadi and the others. Four years constituted of suppositions, false alarms, prolonged hopes. The families of the disappeared have gathered, turned to authorities, approached local and international associations, organised sit-ins. Four years on, the questions remain unchanged.

I meet Hafida in Rabat during Spring 2024. In recounting her brother's story, she shares how the experience of disappearance has unsettled her understanding of the world, calling into question her capacity to grasp the very concepts of presence and absence, of real and unreal. Since Hadi disappeared, a boundless and undefined dimension has opened before her – where a person can simultaneously be not alive and not dead, in which questions multiply under the menace of time passing without yielding answers. Her brother is not here, and yet he could be anywhere, suspended within a geography that extends far beyond the spaces Hafida knows, rendering him at once everywhere and unreachable.

Momo shares a similar experience. His brother Hamza disappeared along with fifty other people in the Attaouia group case in June 2023. At the time, Momo was in Italy, unable to travel due to lack of documentation. In attempting to recount Hamza's disappearance, he navigates the map of Morocco on Google Maps – tracing the point from which the boat should have departed, then following, one by one, the numerous directions it might have taken – trying to explain:

“Perhaps it reached Spain, but we haven’t found it yet, or perhaps it caught a wrong current and ended up in Ghana. Or perhaps the boat never even departed – it was kidnapped by the

‘Sahrawi terrorists’, making it unfindable. Or perhaps it was intercepted by the Stockholm prison ship – maybe they’re detained there.”

As Momo moves between suppositions – contacting associations, institutions and solidarity organisations across different countries – he cannot stop questioning himself, navigating an infinite range of spatial and temporal possibilities. The boat appears to have departed from Agadir and then to have vanished. The sea has yielded no traces, nor have the monitoring radars of search organisations: the boat has neither arrived nor returned, carrying with it bodies that could now be everywhere or nowhere at once. The cases of Hamza and Hadi belong to what have come to be known as "ghost boats" – vessels that depart and are lost at sea without leaving material traces, as if they had never truly existed. According to the NGO Caminando Fronteras, in 2024 alone, at least 131 boats disappeared with all persons on board along the Atlantic route.

Hafida and Momo share a profound sense of disorientation that I find recurring across the testimonies of many families of people dead and disappeared in migration. They share the experience of destabilisation of spaces and geographies, manifesting in the disintegration of spatial boundaries and the dissolution of the frameworks through which space is ordinarily made legible. While navigating it, they attempt to reconstruct the moment and place at which their loved ones ceased to respond to the principles of visibility and presence, by advancing hypotheses, following indications, tracing connections between points that refuse to cohere into a map. In the absence of traces, every time and every place becomes part of a potential scenario, folded into a geography of anguish that expands with each new supposition. A proliferation of imagined destinies accumulates, coexisting in the minds of those who wait, none of them verifiable or dismissible. "They could have been taken by the military base in Aruba," Hafida continues, "or by the sea mafia."

During fieldwork, I find myself drawn into the attempts of families to trace the movements of disappearance, shifting from one point to another in search of material confirmation of a void. I receive requests for support in locating disappeared loved ones across different countries: a mother asks me to contact a prison in Verona, where her son – disappeared along the Atlantic route – might be held; a sister asks me to verify the existence of undisclosed detention facilities in Spain, where her brother and a dozen companions who vanished with him might be confined. If her brother does not appear in official records, she reasons, he must be somewhere unrecognised: held arbitrarily, unable to communicate, unknown to the authorities his family has already contacted – as the history has made real, in Morocco as well.

The different attempts – material or imaginative – try to ground absence: the geography of the search expands into territories that are at once real and imagined, mappable in principle yet irretrievably beyond reach. It is a geography that exceeds transnational boundaries, weaving together routes, traversing distant regions, extending across spaces that most families have never themselves crossed, whose passages, reference points, and actual distances remain largely unknown to them. The Atlantic Ocean, the Balkan route, the Mediterranean are not usually legible geographies for those who wait from home, but abstract expanses assembled from unfamiliar names and spaces that resist visualisation.

Fatima, for example, is a woman from the Rabat-Salé region whose son disappeared in Serbia. Before he passed through there, she had no knowledge of Eastern European geography, and she now finds herself compelled to imagine a space for which she possesses neither coordinates, nor reference points, nor imaginaries. She recounts never having travelled, not even within Morocco except for a few nearby cities connected to her family. The very thought of boarding an aeroplane, she says, terrifies her.

Hafida, in turn, finds herself calculating the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean in order to delineate the boundaries within which her brother might have passed, forced to learn to think in terms of marine currents, navigation routes, and aquatic territories entirely foreign to her experiential world. Amina, in her search for her brother, describes a similar sense of disorientation: she has never left her village in the Sidi Ifni area, she is twenty years old, and has not been in education since the age of thirteen: now she finds herself discovering the geographies of countries her brother may have passed through.

In the face of a geography that becomes overwhelmingly and uncannily immaterial, I observe practices of countermovement, driven by the need to restore spatiality to the movements of their loved ones. Several family members express the desire to traverse themselves the border spaces and routes to which the disappearance is bound, planning journeys, encounters, searches. Faraah's son departed in February 2023 from Saidia on a motorboat and disappeared from there; she insists on travelling to Algeria to look for him – her son must be somewhere, and Algeria is no larger than the need to find him. Hafida, similarly, speaks of wanting to go to France and Spain. Khawla, whose son disappeared near the Kerkennah Islands, recounts having already travelled to Tunisia without finding him, and now wishes to go to Libya and Malta – perhaps her son arrived and left some trace of himself on one of those shores. A father whose son disappeared along the Balkan route expresses his intention to "walk backwards" along his son's path in order to "discover the traces of truth." The need to materially reappropriate space aims to dimensionalise absence. It aspires to assign it limits, to give a disappearance a contour, to provide a scattered story with a background, a body yet to be found with a place in which to be sought.

Hamed's mother recounts how important it was for her, years after her son's death, to visit the places where his body had been found. Her son's story, she explains, had remained suspended in spaces she did not know and could not reduce to anything imaginable – hovering, unanchored, across territories that existed for her only as abstraction. Several years after his death, she organised a journey to reach those places: the site where the body had been discovered, the cemetery where it had lain buried before repatriation. She recounts: "It was difficult [being there], but at least now I can picture where my son was. I took many photographs of the place where he was found. I have them now. When I speak of him, I can show them – and I know where to imagine him."

Having a place in which to imagine him territorialises her son's death. What had previously hovered everywhere – dispersed across spaces she did not know and could only picture abstractly – is now anchored and grounded. The photographs ground him in a context with precise coordinates, rendering him less elusive, less unbounded. Against the haunting openness of not-knowing and not having coordinates, where absence expands to fill every conceivable space, they offer something the search had so far withheld: a limit, a boundary, a place where the imagination can finally come to rest. The imaginaries surrounding his disappearance contract; the space of death acquires concrete dimensions, becomes a place she can visualise, a place where she herself has stood. The physical visit produces a partial sharing of her son's experience, forging a material connection between her presence and his absence, between the here of life and the elsewhere of death.

Suspended Time

If the space of disappearance expands toward the indefinite, its temporal dimension proves suspension. Disappearance imposes upon those who remain a specific and unrelenting temporality, structured around absence, the unresolved demand for answers, resisting both closure and forward movement.

In the course of fieldwork, I encounter this temporal condition surfacing repeatedly: in the practices through which family members seek to return presence to the disappeared, and in the ways they narrate and share their experience. In one exchange, for example, I ask Momo how old his brother *was*, and he immediately correct me: his brother *is* twenty-five years old. The interaction navigates delicate conversational terrain: Momo corrects my use of the past tense when speaking of Hamza, while simultaneously conveying his own uncertainty about how to narrate the experience at all. He recounts that his family has been broken since his brother – and here he pauses, searching for the word – *died?*, he wonders aloud, before correcting himself: "Let's say since my brother is no longer here." The tension between the insistence on the present and the difficulty of defining Hamza's story reveals how disappearance remains anchored to an unresolved here and now, where Hamza's story cannot pass, permitting neither elaboration nor projection toward the future. Hamza is held in a liminality that does not flow, and the narration of his disappearance is held there with him. To speak of the disappeared in the present is an act of restitution, a refusal to assign to the past someone whose absence has never been explained, whose story has never been authorised to end.

The everyday experience of waiting is one of the central structures through which the intimacy of disappearance is organised. I explore this with Maryem, a member of the already mentioned Association of Families of Moroccans Detained in Syria and Iraq, whose son has been detained in northern Syria for three years. I meet her at a workshop held on the International Day of the Disappeared in a Moroccan city, which she attends alongside families of disappeared migrants. As our conversation deepens, I ask how she experiences being together with mothers whose loved ones disappeared through migration, a different form of disappearance from her own. She responds: "In the end it's the same: we are all here waiting for news."

Maryem gives powerful expression to the condition of prolonged waiting that structures her daily existence: each time we meet, she updates me on whether she has received letters from her son or any news of his condition. During the period of our acquaintance, a letter arrives, and I find her visibly relieved. Weeks later, the anguish returns: the interval between one contact and the next has grown too long, and news of a cholera outbreak in one of the prisons – and the report of unknown victims – has reached her. For Maryem, each day is punctuated by the anticipation of a letter, a phone call, any sign that her son still belongs to the present. Time dilates, marked by what does not arrive – an infinite and unsatisfying series of intervals in which absence makes itself felt as a form of duration. A similar dynamic recurs across my encounters with families of disappeared migrants. The temporality of waiting is punctuated by moments that interrupt the emptiness without resolving it: a meeting with a new association, the emergence of a new hypothesis, some new possible information. Each of these moments reactivates the present, briefly restoring the sense that something might still change, that the search is still open, that the disappeared person still belongs to a time that has not yet closed. Waiting configures itself as an imposed temporality (Menin, 2017): a forced suspension in which the future remains inaccessible so long as the present remains unresolved. Disappearance expropriates time: until there is a return, until there is an answer, everything is held in place. The sister of a disappeared migrant describes it to me as "a painful process continuously repeating":

"They [the associations, the authorities] told us: you'll receive a call from them, sooner or later. This gave the mothers a bit of hope, imagining their children still alive somewhere; perhaps detained, arrested, or something similar, but that one day, sooner or later, they would be able to see them again.

We're still waiting for that moment; we've suffered for three years; it's almost three years and the problem is still the same. Our holidays are no longer the same, we no longer experience moments of true joy, and some were supposed to get married, but gave it up, and no moment is truly happy like before. Someone is always missing; there's a void in the family that cannot be filled. So many things have changed, and you can't imagine how painful it is. Every time you think about it, all the pain comes back".

As with space, the experience of disappearance causes time to implode, collapsing into the chaos of absent references and dissolved meaning. It stretches and contracts, advances at irregular intervals, only to fold back upon itself and begin again, separated by long intervals of emptiness. *A painful process, continuously repeating.*

The intimate texture of daily life organizes itself around waiting: a suspension of time and materiality that resists mourning, sustaining itself through an alternation of hope and anguish. The absence of answers is endured by keeping the questions open, by preserving the possibility that one's loved one may still be alive and well, until proven otherwise, or that truth will be revealed. This resistance is nourished by narratives circulating among families: Noura, for instance, tells me of a mother from Beni Mellal whose son had left and disappeared, only to return to her ten years later after being detained in Europe. Such stories of long waits concluded by a long-awaited return traverse these communities, keeping the sense of suspension alive and fueling the hope that frozen time might finally resume its course. They are narrative resources through which the refusal to mourn is legitimized, and the open temporality of waiting is given a form.

The eventual recovery of the body does not always unlock this frozen temporality. Where truth and justice remain absent, the present is held in suspension regardless. For these families, time continues to be marked by unanswered questions about the circumstances of death and the attribution of responsibility: questions that return cyclically, pulling pain back into the present, which cannot be processed and transformed into the past without some form of resolution. The relationship with absence pauses the everyday: the need for truth is a present need, without which one cannot move forward, expropriating time and preventing it from flowing.

Materialising Absence

Over the course of the fieldwork year, I met Yasser's parents on several occasions across different cities. Following their son's death, they abandoned their home in Casablanca, unable to inhabit a space saturated with his presence. As the mother explains:

"When Yasser died, I couldn't bear to live in the city where he had lived, to see his friends, to pass through his places. I closed the house just as it was; I didn't want to change anything about those things. And we left."

Since Yasser's death, they have been in continuous movement, never remaining more than a few months in the same place. The provisional character of their dwelling is materially evident across every domestic space in which I encounter them: scattered suitcases, furniture draped in sheets, kitchens stripped of provisions. Each meeting takes place at a threshold – the family either just arrived or already on the verge of departure. Yet in every house, one element remains constant: an altar dedicated to Yasser, composed of photographs spanning his childhood and adolescence through to images from the migration route, surrounded by religious symbols, coloured fabrics sewn by his mother, fresh

flowers, and the inscription "*Yasser forever*". Each time she passes before it, Yasser's mother presses a kiss to his photographs.

As I can strongly observe in Yasser's family's spaces, the intimate experience of absence is organised around an *ecology of waiting*, a constellation of daily rituals and domestic practices through the relationship with the absent is sustained and negotiated, that endures – in different ways – whether the fate of the loved one remains unknown or whether death has been confirmed but its circumstances left unresolved, its weight unaccounted for. By following ethnographic accounts, I aim here to attend to the ways in which the infrastructure of everyday life is restructured around traces and residues, and to how objects, interactions, spaces, and narratives are re-signified in the process. The experience of absence and disappearance, as Edkins (2013) argues, is fundamentally relational: the person continues to exist within and through the relationship with the living, albeit in an incomplete, liminal form. Ethnographic engagement with family members thus constitutes an entry into the intimacy of this relational space.

During one of the visits, Yasser's mother shows me a novel set in the Balkans she is reading. The book has been transformed into a space of ongoing dialogue with her son: its margins are densely annotated in pencil, constituting a point of contact between the narrative space of the text and the biographical itinerary of Yasser's journey. Where a city along the route is described, she has written: "*my beloved son passed through here in May 2020*"; beside a passage in which a character asks "*have you ever lost someone you loved?*", an arrow directs the reader to a note recording the date and place of her son's death. The book functions, alongside the photographs, the altar, and the conversations that structure daily life, as a medium through which she sustains a continuous relational presence with her son. Through these objects and practices, Yasser continues to be actively part of the family life: they are material traces where his presence is inscribed, enabling the relationship to persist across the threshold of death and absence and to be relocated along family mobility, carrying him from house to house, embedding him in each new domestic space they come to inhabit.

The relational configuration that structures Noura's domestic space differs in significant ways from that which organises the household of Yasser's family. Where Yasser's death has been confirmed – however unaccounted for in its circumstances – Mohamed's fate remains entirely unresolved: he has been missing for a year and a half at the time of my first visit at his house, disappeared along the Atlantic route. The family home – a large, modest structure on the rural periphery of Beni Mellal, built by the grandfather and now inhabited by Noura, her son, her mother, and her brothers – constitutes the primary site through which this unresolved absence is negotiated. Since I enter the house I relate to Mohamed's presence not by material practices of inscription, but engaging with a domestic space organised around the suspended imprint of his present absence.

One of the first things I notice is the recently deceased grandfather's portrait hanging on the living room wall, while I do not trace any Mohamed's pictures around the house. Within this domestic practice of memory, the wall operates as the site reserved for the dead: to hang a photograph there is to assign the deceased a circumscribed and fixed location within the symbolic order of family life, to ratify their passage into a stable, if mourned, absence. Mohamed is not on the wall because Mohamed is not dead. His presence is instead diffused throughout the living space itself. While cooking together, Noura mentions that she is preparing *barira*, Mohamed's favourite dish. Her son shows me the canaries he and his uncle purchased together, expressing his eagerness to show Mohamed how much they have grown; Noura responds, "*Insh'Allah soon, habibi*." His absence permeates the domestic space through the texture of everyday interaction: in the telephone kept close for news that might arrive, in the words and

gestures through which his family continues to address him as someone who might, at any moment, come back through the door.

As the cases of Yasser and Mohamed illustrate in different ways, domestic spaces are configured as a sphere shaped by absence, constituting relational sites where the dead and the disappeared shape daily life. In this experience, I observe recurring practices across multiple accounts from the fieldwork: between them, the preservation of the dead or disappeared bedroom at its original state. This act simultaneously holds the space open to the possibility of return and constitutes a form of ongoing care toward someone who is felt as still inhabiting the intimate world. Momo, for example, recounts that his mother refused to unmake his brother's bed long after his disappearance, and that for months she used to wear her son's clothes. Fearing that this would "drive her mad", Momo persuaded her to leave, and that they would return together, *Insh'Allah*, when Hamza too had come back. When Momo himself returns to the family home a year after the disappearance, opening the door he is enveloped by his brother's smell, which "was still there." Unable to coexist with the saturating presence of that absence, he could not remain.

A structurally analogous experience is recounted by Ahmed's father, who, following the recovery of his son's body, finds himself unable to continue inhabiting their shared home. In the dark, he would see his son seated beside him on the sofa, in the place where he used to sit; when the light was turned on, the image would dissolve. The father came to fear the light, dispelling a shadow that was otherwise always with him. *Khayālu mā kayfāreqnīsh*.

The walls of those houses are impregnated with the absence of Yasser, Mohamed, Ahmed and Hamza, and it is impossible to free them from this. The smells, the places, the objects remind that the young men were there and should be there, but are not: they died violent deaths, are detained who knows where, swallowed by nothingness. Those who remain find the weight of this absence unbearable, which makes the spaces too large, too laden with suffering, and within which the violence of the disappearance itself continues. In their relationship with the house and everyday objects, the families of the disappeared find a relational continuity with their loved ones, where absence and presence are no longer distinguishable but overlap, in an unresolved tension. What remain are the traces that the disappeared left of themselves, which become charged with meaning: Hafida carries her brother's identity card in her phone cover, Fatima has as her phone background the photo of her missing son, as do many other relatives I meet. The photos, the personal objects, are a way to anchor the missing person to a reality to which they have not returned, to memorialize them, to declare them present in a context where it seems that they are nowhere, to resist consigning their loved one to the invisibility of disappearance and absence.

V.II. Intimate is Political: Knowledge, Epistemic Violence and Resistance

Introduction: Navigating Un-Knowledge

In September 2024, a collective attempt to cross the Ceuta frontier involved thousands of people. The appeal for mass migration, initiated on social media, engaged North African youth – primarily Moroccan, but also Algerian and Tunisian – and sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom were minors. Clear data regarding people's movements on that day is unavailable: some newspaper articles speak of several dozen successful crossings, of some bodies recovered at sea, and of numerous reports by Moroccan families searching for their loved ones who disappeared from the event. Arrests, according

to data shared by the media, exceeded 4,400. In subsequent weeks, various Moroccan families journeyed toward the country's north to search for their loved ones involved in the *barqa* attempt and who had become untraceable. Hoping they had been arrested and detained, they presented themselves at different detention facilities in the region to verify their presence and requested support from local associations to do so. In Morocco, when a person is arrested, the family receives neither formal notification nor information regarding their location – they find themselves compelled to initiate a private search process, navigating an opaque bureaucracy. The legal framework governing disappearances remains equally unclear. The state bears no specific legal obligation to conduct active investigations for missing persons, and the registration process for disappearance reports remains archaic: when relatives file reports at local police stations, these are circulated to other offices which wait for potential matches, but no systematic investigation is initiated.

The image of family members moving from one facility to another, carrying photographs and the names of their relatives in search of them among detention lists or morgues, narrates the condition of unknowability and forced ignorance to which they are exposed (Tecca, 2023; Huttunen and Perl, 2023; Riegler, 2023). This condition is constitutive of disappearance itself: a person ceases to be socially legible when those close to them can no longer account for their whereabouts or their condition. The unavailability of data, institutional control over information, the incompleteness of records and archives, and the systematic distortion of what is known or knowable actively produce and reproduce it: non-knowledge constitutes, within this framework, a structural component of the infrastructure of disappearability, shaped by a series of dynamics that – directly and indirectly – control knowledge and fragment it. In diverse disappearance situations, these mechanisms operate across multiple levels – institutional and administrative, both local and international – as well as through socio-political dynamics that constrain families' capacity to know, search, and speak.

These dynamics give shape to forms of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) that operate on two interconnected planes: they undermine families' capacity to know, understand, and make sense of their own experience, while simultaneously curtailing the right of disappeared persons to be known (Lackey, 2022; Mitova, 2026). Such violence is a constitutive element of the border apparatus, within which the control of bodies and movement extends into the control of what can be known and into the production and reproduction of knowledges and ignorances (Aradau and Canzutti, 2025; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008; Tazzioli, 2020). This is what Davies et al. (2023) term "epistemic borderwork": a regime in which "violence itself can result from epistemic and political dominance of particular narratives or understandings" (O'Lear, 2016:4, in Davies et al., 2023:173).

In the framework of border deaths and disappearances, we see how epistemic oppression is integral to necropolitics: through the control and distribution of knowledge, the normative frameworks that regulate its accessibility, the logics through which it is organised, and the truth-value attributed to it are all central to the functioning of necropolitical governance. İşlekel terms these practices "necro-epistemic technologies", operating "not only through the documentation or suppression of memory, but also in shaping, producing, and organising a collective memory of necropolitical death" (2017:258), targeting the temporal and logical coherence of recollection, eroding the credibility of those who bear witness, and obscuring the comprehension of events. In the Moroccan context and in cross-border regimes more broadly, such technologies operate simultaneously across administrative, political, social, linguistic, and legal domains. These practices actively participate in the production of hierarchies of recognition, that ultimately determine which experience or situation becomes institutionally legible or not. In this process, the normative constructions of subjectivity operate as mechanisms of inclusion

and exclusion, producing subjects whose claims to protection, visibility, and truth are structurally curtailed (Tuitt, 1996), and for whom disappearance becomes institutionally – and socially – tolerable.

These epistemic dynamics of oppression and control operate across multiple planes – intimate and social, private and public – shaping the conditions under which families in Morocco can search for their loved ones, access information about their fate, and produce knowledge about disappearance. Fatima's case helps us begin to reflect on how such mechanisms are embodied in individual experience. As a divorced Moroccan woman whose son disappeared in Serbia while migrating, she lives suspended between multiple fears that prevent her from publicly acknowledging the disappearance or seeking help. Her son had travelled through Turkey en route to Europe, a trajectory that, in the Moroccan context, immediately raises suspicion of links to foreign fighter networks. Fatima fears that reporting her son's disappearance would expose her to heightened political surveillance and interrogation by the authorities, as has happened to many families whose sons have disappeared in Middle East or along these migration corridors. Compounding this fear is a specific social pressure: as a divorced woman, she dreads the judgment and accusations of her ex-husband's family, whom she fears would hold her responsible for her son's disappearance. In her case, state surveillance, gendered social expectations, and the stigma attached to migration converge in defining the limits of her right to know, eroding her very capacity to position herself as a knowing subject (Fricker, 2007), while forcing her to navigate bureaucratic obstruction, administrative opacity, misinformation, and predatory dynamics.

Starting from the context of knowledge control and truth inaccessibility that families of missing migrants in Morocco are subjected to, this section explores the epistemic dimension of disappearance: the dynamics through which knowledge is produced, withheld, and contested. It examines how family members mobilise resources to navigate and counter the distortion or inaccessibility of knowledge, developing alternative ways of knowing and forging new interpretive frameworks while demanding truth about their loved ones. It then traces how this epistemic struggle opens onto a broader process of political subjectivation: as the private experience of absence is recognised within a shared condition, individual claiming practices articulate themselves through bonds of solidarity and collective action, giving shape to new forms of political agency rooted in the shared demand for dignity, truth, and accountability.

The Politics of Naming

This section examines the dynamics of oppression and resistance that shape the attempts of families to publicly name the experience of disappearance in Morocco. Drawing on testimonies of family members, it traces how the struggle over language becomes a site of both control and contestation. Attending to the linguistic dimension of oppression, it examines how identities and meanings are constructed or distorted through institutional practices (Tuitt, 1996), ultimately withdrawing or manipulating acknowledgment of the experience of border disappearance itself.

When families attempt to denounce publicly, they encounter the same logic of epistemic control operating at a broader scale: in Morocco, migration and disappearance – as already explained – remain politically sensitive terrain, and the authoritarian management of their narration constitutes, in itself, an instrument of necropolitical governance. The families involved in this research exhibit differential postures toward it, reflecting varying degrees of awareness, negotiation, and resistance.

The case of Attaouia – the 51 young people who disappeared at sea on the Atlantic route – represents a key example of this dynamic. This case provoked a strong reaction in Morocco from public opinion, soon becoming a media case, especially due to the organized and autonomous mobilization of the

families' network. A trial was initiated at the Marrakech Tribunal against men accused of being the traffickers, who faced a series of charges, including facilitation of irregular immigration and murder. The tribunal's position of "treating disappeared persons as dead" – as one of the family members denounces – immediately raised the families' opposition, that coordinated a shared stance publicly impacting the proceedings. Their contestation, significantly, played out on an epistemic plane: by insisting that their loved ones were not dead but disappeared, families were refusing the institutional distortion of knowledge about them. If on one hand Moroccan authorities were playing control on public discourse on the case, circumscribing responsibility to the traffickers, family members positioned themselves in opposition to such an attempt, collectively claiming their right to give a name to what concerned them and their loved ones.

This posture proves crucial to the broader experience of mobilisation around disappearance. For family members, the distinction between death and disappearance is deeply political: it constitutes a practice of symbolic control (Bourdieu, 1991) through which responsibility is assigned and visibility is shaped. Hafida articulates this with particular force when, at an international conference, a researcher on disappearances in Morocco assumes that a person who disappeared during migration is to be considered dead. "How can you tell a family member that their loved one is dead? On what basis do you say it?" she publicly challenges him. Death, Hafida – as the Attaouia families – insists, is not a presumption but a requiring-evidence determination: the traces she relentlessly pursues and is systematically denied access to. Disappearance, on the other side, is this condition of non-knowledge, in which even the possibility of knowing the death of the loved one is denied. By claiming disappearance as a specific experience irreducible to death, family members politicize the very categories through which loss is known and governed. In contesting its reduction to declared death, they insist that disappearance constitutes an "endless violation" (Bargu, 2014:41), precisely because the absence of evidence and certainty about the fate of their loved ones renders it an open and unresolved wound. To *treat disappearance as death*, they argue, is not only to misname it, but to conceal and perpetuate the violence it enacts.

In their search for truth, family members are confronted, at multiple levels, with a deep politics of language control. This dynamic also emerges in the individual experience of searching for one's missing loved one. A sister shares her process of reporting her brother's disappearance for migration: in filing the documents, authorities refuse to use the word *l-hijra* – the migration – and instead report *l-brub* – the escape – as the reason for the disappearance. In recounting this experience, she articulates a profound sense of distrust and non-recognition, that ultimately led her to withdraw from further engagement with authorities. This operation cannot be seen as neutral, as produces relevant political effects: while *hijra* inscribes the movement in a fabric of structural conditions, *brub* reinterprets that experience as an individual deviant gesture, transferring responsibility to the individual subject, functioning as a mechanism of political de-responsibilization and erasure. Beyond its structural implications, this linguistic imposition bears directly on the intimate experience of recognition itself: by controlling the terms through which the disappearance is officially interpreted, it shapes which modes of understanding are rendered legitimate, determining, at the most personal level, how loss should be named and acknowledged.

This dynamic finds a more explicit contrast when a family group decides to register its network as an association to support families of missing migrants. At the local authorities' office, they are told that the name "the families of disappeared migrants" must be modified: it cannot contain the words "migrants"

and "disappeared". The family members claim that this represents their experience: their loved ones – they emphasise – disappeared while migrating. Hafida shares her understanding of this move:

"The birth of this association was rejected because it intended to deal directly and explicitly with irregular migrants: the State does not want to acknowledge and officially recognise that many young Moroccans emigrate illegally; moreover, to aggravate everything, the creators of the association, its promoters, are the relatives of disappeared Moroccan young people. [...] Accepting the birth of this association, which highlights, in black and white, these phenomena, would entail – for the authorities – acknowledging and officially registering these facts."

In this case, epistemic control is configured as an instrument of governance: denying the possibility of naming Moroccan migration has the effect of denying the memory of disappeared migrants. As İşlekel (2017: 261) observes, "what is invisible is not memorable": not naming disappearance means denying that departures ever occurred, removing from the public sphere and from collective memory a phenomenon that questions Moroccan political and social order. In this semantic conflict, the very possibility of making visible what authorities want to keep in the shadows is at stake. The request to establish the association, Hafida continues:

"Is still open and constantly refused; they constantly ask us to change some aspects and information of the founding act that we present... but these are founding aspects, which we believe important for our group. We cannot change what they ask us; the reason and mission of the association would have to change."

Within this framework, the claiming posture of family members manifests precisely in their refusal to alter the association's presentation or to negotiate the terms through which their experience is defined, a choice they themselves invest with explicit political significance. In insisting on retaining their own language to name what concerns them, family members assert their authority as the legitimate interpreters of their own experience.

Taken together, these experiences illuminate how the politics of language harbours deeper power dynamics and relations: the naming practices surrounding disappearance emerge as a site of epistemic contestation, traversed by competing forces of control and resistance. Being direct actors in the experience of absence leads families daily to confront the systems that produced the disappearance, and whose violence now extends to their intimacy: this legitimizes them as interlocutors before institutionally and politically recognized actors, claiming the right to interpret and to speak, for themselves and for their loved ones. Momo emphasizes this during one of our conversations about his brother's disappearance: "If you really want to understand what disappearances are", he tells me, "you have to ask the family members. The others know nothing and will only tell you lies." Confronted with authoritarian attempts – whether public or otherwise – to control the narration of disappearance, family members produce forms of epistemic agency, asserting their authority as witnesses and legitimate knowledge producers. In doing so, they engage with structural epistemic disempowerment (Medina, 2022) in differential ways: openly negotiating, withdrawing from confrontation, or explicitly claiming the right to name.

Alternative Epistemologies

This paragraph examines how, against the fragmentation and withholding of official knowledge, family members confront the condition of forced ignorance by mobilising alternative ways of knowledge production. Within this framework, we look at how private experiences and pain function as epistemic tools that challenge the necropolitical rationalities and the regime of unknowability surrounding the

experience of disappearance. As Taussig (1992:27) observes, silence and removal "push memory deep into the individual", positioning intimate knowledge production as a device of resistance to epistemic violence and injustice. This is what İşlekel (2017) theorizes as "nightmare knowledge": dreams, visions, and private memories are mobilized as claims-making practices, politicizing knowledge about death and disappearance from within the most intimate registers of the experience. This insight finds resonance across a broader body of ethnographic scholarship, studying how in contexts of mass or collective violence the intimate sphere consistently emerges as a privileged site of epistemic resistance (see for example Kwon, 2008; Wagner, 2008; İşlekel, 2017).

Revisiting the phrase proposed at the beginning of this section – *kbayālu mā kayfāreqnīsh* – allows us to dwell on the translation of *kbayal*, which is both memory and imagination. Memory is real while imagination is supposed not to be: the overlapping of meanings delineates a condition in which what is knowable and what is unknowable, what is real and what is imaginary, in the experience of disappearance are irreducibly confused. Navigating this tension allows us to observe how these spaces produce forms of knowledge overcoming traditional notions of knowability and unknowability, constructing new forms of epistemic authority.

The oneiric and spiritual planes constitute a privileged terrain through which this intimate knowledge manifests and articulates itself, operating not just as spaces of loss elaboration, but also an epistemic claim. These experiences carry profound significance insofar as they open a relational space with the disappeared, capable of sustaining communicative channels and generating knowledge about their fate. In the interviews conducted for this research, some family members speak of recurring dreams and nocturnal apparitions bearing news of their loved ones; others turn to magical practices or seek out intermediary figures capable of maintaining open channels of communication with the disappeared. Confronted with the impossibility of accessing information through usual channels and compelled to navigate official accounts that deny them the truth about their loved ones, family members construct alternative knowledges that draw on supra-real dimensions.

One sister, for instance, recounted how the experience of her brother's disappearance had led her to seek knowledge beyond the boundaries of the empirically verifiable:

"Since [our loved ones] had left, we had sought answers, imagining things difficult to swallow. And since there were no answers from the Moroccan police and not even from the ministries, we also considered turning to magic, because there was something to know, something that went beyond our capacity for understanding."

In this case, as in others, families turn to the *shawafa*, a Moroccan popular magician. The magical consultation becomes an attempt to access a sphere that goes beyond the limits of the real, to surpass the restrictions of the possible to give meaning to a condition that seems to no longer touch the boundaries of the sensible. If in disappearance the ontological boundaries of existence fall, then traditional methods of knowledge – this woman suggests – might not be suitable for attempting an interpretation of this experience. Spiritual communication thus becomes a privileged channel, whether it be the *shawafa*'s magic and religious prayer, which allows opening communicative contacts with or regarding the missing loved one.

It is in this framework that the oneiric sphere assumes a central role. Hafida recounts that, while navigating the anguish generated by news of a possible shipwreck, families dreamed of their loved ones alive, thus opposing the version that wanted them presumably dead:

"One thing that the mothers started to do was to pray at night, asking God for news about their sons. A girl dreamed of her brother: he was a shepherd in Saudi Arabia. A woman saw her son in a place full of nature; smiling, he wore long hair and was walking.

My mother's cousin, she too gets up at night to pray, dreamed of him; she saw him in a prison, and then from this prison, illuminated, there was a light, he was coming out. Based on this, she said that he, even if now he is in prison, sooner or later he would come out."

A similar experience emerges from Fatima's account. She tells me that a few days after she reported her son's disappearance, the Moroccan police had told her that he was not found anywhere and that there was no way to know where he was. Yet, Fatima recounts being reassured – still today after three years – by the fact that he appears to her in dreams:

"I have the utmost faith in God and still harbour hopes for his return home; I often see him in my dreams: he tells me not to worry about him, because he is a man and knows how to manage."

The dreams of Fatima and Hafida, embedded within a spiritual framework, constitute relational spaces in which the presence of the disappeared is negotiated: they reveal a place where he continues to exist, in safety or on the verge of it. At the same time, they function as instruments of epistemic claim, constructing knowledges that challenge authoritative versions of events or fill the void left by the inaccessibility of official information. These episodes must be understood within the Islamic theory of dreams (Mittermaier, 2012), which in Moroccan religious and popular culture carries a distinctive significance (Crapanzano, 1975). In this tradition, dreams are, in specific cases, believed to result from the wandering of the soul during sleep, granting access to a reality which, however different it may appear from ordinary waking experience, is held to be real. In both ethnographic cases reported here, family members emphasize the connection between nocturnal prayer and the dreams received about their loved ones: this connection confers epistemic authority upon the dream itself. In Islamic tradition, dreams are configured as sites of divine intervention through which prophecies are communicated, attitudes rectified, and truthful apparitions received (Green, 2003; Edgar, 2004). A believer who dreams – in accordance with religious practices – is understood to be close to the Prophet, and what is dreamed is understood to come from God. The interpretation of dreams is thus a divine gift, part of what Quinn (1996) defines as the Islamic theory of "dream as political prophecy" (in Edgar, 2004).

These experiences allow family members to transcend the immaterial nature of disappearance – which, within the limits of the sensible, seems to leave no trace – and to contest the necropolitical productions of knowledge, by turning to and developing alternative epistemic practices that in turn confer upon them the authority to mobilise perplexity (İşlekel, 2017), advance claims, and maintain hope. Ultimately, a truth that consigns their loved ones to nothingness may prove less credible than one that reaches beyond the boundaries of the empirically verifiable.

Naming Oppression

This paragraph examines how family members navigate hermeneutical injustice and epistemic violence in their attempts to make sense of their own experience. The accounts analysed here are shaped by heterogeneous cultural and semiotic resources, themselves inflected by markedly different personal and biographical trajectories. Rather than treating these registers comparatively, the analysis attends to how each constitutes a distinct mode of interpreting the experience of border disappearance, through which fragmented private experience is articulated in relation to broader structures of power and claims of responsibility and justice are elaborated and advanced.

The first time I meet Hafida we do not speak directly about her brother's disappearance. We take a long walk through the old *medina*, and in our discourses her brother's story intersects with a broader picture of injustices that Hafida identifies: the occupation of Palestine, the repression of Berbers in North African history, class disparity and corruption in Morocco. What she sees, in the world as in Morocco, is a system of oppression in which some hold the power to oppress, and others are made to bear its consequences. Hafida recounts having studied at university but not having been able to access a specialization master's program because she lacked connections. "Here, if you don't know anyone²⁹, you're worth nothing", she says, "look at Morocco, it seems beautiful but it's not". Before attempting to migrate, her brother was around thirty years old and did odd jobs, unable to find stable and dignified employment that would make him economically autonomous. Hafida's account of her brother's disappearance begins from this: from how difficult it was for him to remain in Morocco, in a condition that offered him no pathway to social emancipation or economic dignity, and thus *barqa* manifested as a fixed thought, a way out of that sense of social humiliation.

A similar framework of understanding recurs across the accounts of the family members involved in this research. In Noura's account, too, the attempt to migrate is configured as the possibility of social and economic redemption. Her brother was over thirty and had "not enough money to get married". He had attempted unauthorised migration numerous times; one attempt had seen him pay 6 million dirhams (about 6 thousand euros) for a fake work contract for Italy, which then turned out to be a scam. For the Atlantic route on which he disappeared, he had paid another 4 and a half million (about four and a half thousand euros). His attempts were a way to escape the social powerlessness in the context in which he was born and raised: the lack of dignified work, the inability to emancipate himself from his family of origin, and the absence of a plan for his own life. A way to escape from a present of *bogra*, "to burn a present of subalternity and humiliation" (Vacchiano, 2022:162) – to flee from immobilism and confinement. The concept of *bogra*³⁰ recurs in my ethnographic work in Morocco as a condition of oppression and a sense of social and political injustice, and arbitrary abuse of power by authorities or dominant actors experienced by certain social groups. *Hogra* encompasses both an affective dimension – the embodied experience of frustration, anger, and humiliation – and a structural dimension – the systematic practices through which certain groups are denied dignity, opportunity, and social recognition. The mother of Hazem, lost at sea, recounts:

"The problem is that Morocco is not a country that allows you to live. It's hard to live if you're poor. There's no chance of getting ahead; it's difficult to find a job. What kind of future do you envision? So, of course, people try to leave for Europe because here everything is held back by the government (*rais hukuma*). If you are poor, there is nothing for you here."

While *bogra* operates primarily along class lines in the cases recounted by Hafida, Noura and Hazem's mother, it extends to political dimension in the case of Yasser and his family, coming from a relatively privileged economic background. The father recounts that Yasser was a "free spirit", who felt "suffocated by the Moroccan political system": he used to write songs about "freedom, human values, life", against the Moroccan political order, and had repeatedly clashed with its authoritarian and repressive context. For Yasser, *bogra* manifested through the systematic denial of freedom of expression, the inability to live according to his values, the confrontation with an authoritarian

²⁹ I.e., connections to influential people who can provide recommendations or support – the informal patronage system known as *wasta* in Arabic.

³⁰ See <https://www.daas.academy/research/al-hogra-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A9/>

apparatus that sought to silence dissent. For the father, it is this system of repression that had pushed him to leave and seek to emancipate himself elsewhere.

The emphasis on lived oppression recurs in family members' accounts of the disappearance of their loved ones, articulated through different cultural and experiential registers. It intertwines with the attempt to explain why their loved ones chose to leave, to undertake the precarized path of unauthorized migration in order to escape it: to follow what Vacchiano calls the "search for dignity", the *karama*. Where *hogra* denotes humiliation, invisibility, and the denial of one's social and moral worth, *karama* signifies its opposite: being treated with respect, recognized from a moral and legal point of view, and enjoying a protected social and political position (Ali, 2021). Whether fleeing economic marginalization or political repression, the young men who disappear share a common search: the pursuit of *karama*, of a life where their existence is recognized, valued, and protected.

On The Injustice of the Border Regime

If the relationship with absence prompts reflection on why their loved ones left, it equally generates a profound contestation of why they could not do so safely. Many family members emphasize that their loved ones had tried to follow legal entry procedures into European countries, receiving only denials. They denounce costly and demanding procedures, ended with a frustrating refusal, even in cases where conditions were fully met. The denial of legal pathways, family members contend, exposes the discriminatory nature of border regimes that differentiate between lives deemed worthy of mobility and those consigned to confinement. In the family members' accounts, the experience of migration is rendered intelligible through the language of injustice, insofar as it stands in contrast a structure of exclusion not deemed legitimate. A mother recounts:

"My son was not a criminal, he didn't do anything wrong, the Quran says that the earth belongs to everyone, but you know... It's the system. So he had to take that route."

Her invocation of the principle *that the earth belongs to all* directly challenges the legitimacy of borders. Yasser's father similarly frames his son's departure as a fundamental question of justice:

"He went to Europe not because he was poor. We are a modest family, but it's not about money. He went because he wanted to fulfill himself. He wanted to fulfill himself as a person. Isn't it unjust that he couldn't do it in his own country? Isn't it unjust that he couldn't do it freely in Europe?"

These questions of justice – about the right to move, to seek dignity, to realise oneself as a person – extend into the present, as family members confront what emerges as a second layer of violence: the systematic denial of their right to search for, to know about, and eventually to mourn their loved ones. The question of what is just thus deepens in the face of a violence recognised as continuous: the same structures of oppression that compelled their loved ones to migrate now manifest in the impossibility of finding them. In their attempts to seek institutional support, family members encounter indifference, dismissal, and the systematic minimisation of their experience. A sister recounts having received, only one week after reporting the disappearance to Moroccan police, notification of the case's closure for lack of evidence. A mother recounts being bounced from one office to another in filing reports for her son, and in the end having to initiate complicated procedures never actually pursued by authorities. Hafida comments:

"The problem of our missing children [...] Morocco doesn't care about them. It treats them as if it were... as if... have you decided to leave the country? then you are no longer my problem."

A profound sense of abandonment is shared and contested, experienced regarding their condition and their relatives' experience. Some family members recount having applied for visa application procedures for European countries after the disappearance and having received a denial.

On Local and International Structures of Discrimination

Amina powerfully conveys this sense of abandonment to me: when I meet her and she tells me about her brother, she emphasizes that she did not finish school and that she comes from a very marginal context in the country, sharing with frustration that she does not know how to proceed. When a local association tells her that she must reach Agadir – hours away from where she lives – to be able to file a disappearance report for her brother, Amina does not follow up on the request for support: she is a young woman who has never left her village, who now finds herself alone searching for her brother, without having the economic, relational, and cultural means to do so. Her case exemplifies how abandonment operates through multiple, intersecting barriers, combining to render the search for her brother practically impossible despite the relative existence of support mechanisms.

While particularly acute in Amina's case due to her marginal social position, this experience forms part of a broader pattern of structural discrimination that other family members explicitly name. A sister articulates this clearly, framing it as a politics of structural discrimination that operates along national and racial lines. She recounts having encountered an Italian association with a DNA database of some bodies found at sea and having requested clarification on identification possibilities. She explains:

"They said that, given the absence of the parents [in person], they were not authorized to provide any information; but at the same time parents cannot travel to those locations! On the contrary, if necessary, you [Italians] could easily come here to search for your children, and even just a lawyer would be enough to access all the data about your children. But this doesn't apply to us, for us, no! This is pure racism."

Her testimony, like others, repeatedly emphasizes the disparity of treatment: the impossibility of travel that confines Amina to her village operates at an international scale, preventing Moroccan families from accessing identification procedures in Europe. Family members point to the lack of appropriate search practices, the disregard for the management of any bodies found, and the general absence of tools, which they experience as a lack of interest but which, as these testimonies reveal, constitutes a systematic structure of exclusion that operates simultaneously through elements as class, origin, and racial identity. A family group recounts having reported to a local association the disappearance of a group of young people, but the association had responded that the number of missing persons was not high enough to activate a sea search operation. A family member recounts:

"There are 16 young men, and they need more to take charge of them! They want all of Morocco to emigrate illegally, and then go search for them! It's as if the value of human life counts for nothing. If it had been a European who disappeared, everyone in Morocco would mobilize to search for him. But what am I saying, a European? Even just for Abou Azaitar's³¹ dog they would have raised hell to find it! But for these 16 young men, no initiative, no search. It's here that you see that the life of a poor person has no value in their own country."

There is a profound critique of what has made the loved ones disappearable, a process that began with a deep devaluation of their life when they were still alive. Emptied of their recognizability, even as

³¹ He is a German martial arts champion of Moroccan origin, widely known in Morocco and personally connected to King Mohamed VI.

disappeared persons they are not considered worthy of recognition, of being searched for, or eventually mourned (Butler, 2009). There is a clear awareness of systemic discriminations, whereby a life can count for nothing, even less than that of an animal, if its owner is a politically recognized person.

This awareness deepens the conviction that, if there is an oppressed person – *al-maghor* – there is someone who produces the oppression – *al-bagar* – whether it be the discriminatory sociopolitical system of Morocco, or the border regime, or the disparity between the global North and South. It is within this frame that reflection occurs on what it means to speak of justice and responsibility regarding the loss of their loved ones.

On Accountability

The relatives of Yasser and Ahmed, found dead along the Balkan route, recount that their loved ones' bodies were found along a river. They reconstruct that the young men's fall into water occurred during pushbacks, and they ask what legitimized border police to inflict such a violence, to the point of finding them dead a few days later. One of them asks me:

"But can the police beat someone so much in Europe? At least there doesn't the police serve to protect you?"

On another occasion, one of the two young men's mother reflects:

"If he hadn't been afraid of the police, he wouldn't have thrown himself into the river; he could have walked calmly".

When the two young men's bodies are recovered, authorities release to the families certificates indicating drowning as the cause of death: both families reject those reports, as they want to know who caused it. In the interviews conducted in Morocco, the concept of responsibility emerges recurrently, expressed in Arabic with the word *maṣ'ūliyya* – derived from *maṣ'ūl*, the passive participle of the verb *ṣa'al* "to ask" – "the one who is asked", "the one who is held to account". For the families, accepting the autopsy that declares the two young men drowned would mean accepting that no one is held accountable for their deaths.

When Yasser's father insists at a Moroccan police office requesting pressure for international investigations to be opened, a functionary responds that he must find peace because "what happens is God's will". He responds that, if he decided to throw himself from the window, the will would not be God's but his own, and that his son's death has those *responsible* for it. And he declares:

"I accuse the Moroccan government, the European regime, and I take my responsibilities for what happened to my son."

When the police office functionary attempts to empty Yasser's death of responsibility, the father names what, according to him, is accountable for that disappearance. He recounts feeling responsible for his son's death, not having given him the opportunity for a different life outside Morocco – a safe one – when he had had the possibility. The father, in fact, had emigrated himself for some years, but had then chosen to return to Morocco, despite it being a repressive context for him and his family. The same system that he had chosen to continue confronting had now emptied his son of social and political valence even in death. Qamar too, relative of Ahmed, recounts that someone in her family had invoked "God's will" regarding his death. "I too believe in God's will", she emphasizes, "but when someone dies beyond God's will, we must speak of human rights, of law". Both find themselves having to resist a narrative that attempts to bury what they see as a profound violation of their rights and those of their

loved ones. In this sense, the act of questioning who is responsible for these deaths is not only an attempt to obtain an answer to the need to know, but a practice of resistance to the neutralization of these events, which points the finger at produced them.

Reflecting on the concept of responsibility in disappearances and deaths at the border is complex. As İşlekel (2019) observes, in the event of disappearance different systems of oppression intersect and various forms of violence interpenetrate. While, for example, in historical cases of enforced disappearances it is relatively easier to name actors involved and interlocutors, in migration-related disappearances responsibility risks being more diffuse, where the horizon of responsibility dilates and fragments among multiple intersecting – and transnational – systems. As we have seen, numerous, in fact, are the levels of oppression that have made that violence possible and determined the disappearance, and many are the interlocutors to whom one tries to address the question of truth and justice. In family members' accounts, responsibility is attributed to injustice in Morocco, to the internal political system, to the mobility control regime, to trafficking networks, to colonial relations between Europe and Africa, and to sociopolitical and economic disparity in the world.

The construction of frameworks of responsibility is itself a site of negotiation, traversed by tensions and encounters between different modes of interpreting and making sense of the experience, deeply shaped by contextual, biographical, and cultural specificities. Among the family members most radical postures I encounter, for example, is that of a woman who considers the disappearance of her loved one within a system in which the genocide in Gaza and border violence are part of the same transnational project of oppression:

"It's the *Makhzen*, you know... The King... He is with Israel and Europe... It is happening to our children and to people in Gaza; they want to erase them".

Across its different registers, underlying these frameworks is a shared awareness of dynamics of oppression and the assertion, against them, of a demand for accountability. At an international conference on missing persons, a Guinean man whose son disappeared in the attempt to cross Ceuta intervenes before representatives of international institutions. He recounts that he knows that his son in the days preceding his disappearance was in the *forest*³², in precarious and unprotected conditions. He asks how it is possible that in a country as militarized as Morocco these places exist that are "no man's lands, where the phone doesn't work, where no one knows what happens, and where a lot of migrants disappear". Hafida too emphasizes something similar during the interview, underlining that Morocco has such capillary control that "they know what happens (*including at the borders*), yet they do nothing to intervene". Their perplexity implies a dynamic of exclusion and abandonment that is active and that produces a structural violence underlying the disappearance of their loved ones.

Their position, in these cases, opposes a system that produces the conditions of disappearance and absolves itself of responsibility: the contestations of Hafida and the Guinean father – as well as those of Qamar and Yasser's father – advance, albeit in different ways, a critical reflection on the interactions between the different systems of oppression that intersect in disappearance. What they share is that people disappear because they are victims of dynamics of diminishment, of exclusion, of precarization and of abandonment, and they claim full recognition of this. In this sense, the fragmented experience of absence is configured as a space of contestation of the power relations that have produced the loss.

³² The forested mountains surrounding the Spanish enclave, where many migrants take refuge before or after an attempted crossing.

"We Are Few Today, but We Are the Voice of Everyone"³³: the Collective Dimension

While moving to the question of how the private experience of absence gives rise to practices of claim-making and mobilisation, in this paragraph the intention is to look at the inscription of individual experience into a collective dimension: plurality, as Arendt argues, constitutes both a political relation and a fundamental condition of political action (Borren, 2020). The process of recognition of one's individual experience within a broader shared condition does not necessarily translate into collective political action: claiming paths may remain deeply individual, and yet the experience they carry exceeds the strictly personal, becoming intelligible not solely through the lens of individual identity but in relation to structural dynamics exceeding it.

In the sharing of grief and the search for truth, spaces of mutual recognition emerge that render disappearance a collectively legible condition, transforming the need to know into a claim that resonates beyond the self. Faraah's experience illustrates this expansion from the individual to the collective. At a meeting between family members and civil society organisations, she intervenes holding a collage of the faces of the thirty-three young people who disappeared alongside her son, and presents herself as "the mother of 33 disappeared young people." The claim is symbolic and political: "Even if I am not the mother of all these young people, as a mother I represent the others." On another occasion, she reiterates the same gesture of identification: "When I see my son's face, I see thirty-three." Her son disappeared after embarking from Sfax toward Italy; of the thirty-five *barragas*, two bodies were recovered, while the others remain unaccounted for. The way Faraah inhabits her son's disappearance traces a path of recognition – of one's own experience in that of others – through which the bond with the other families becomes inseparable from the bond with the disappeared themselves. This bond is not just affective: taking charge of her son's fate becomes inseparable from taking charge of the entire group, confronting the situation in the name of a collectivity that moves together and claims truth for all.

The relations forged through practices of recognition give shape to bonds of solidarity, support networks, and collective structures. Across the fieldwork, I observe numerous families organising themselves informally on a collective basis, many coalescing, as in Faraah's case, around the disappearance of a group that had been travelling together. Relationships among family members are sustained through communication channels that facilitate mutual support and the collective navigation of information. Hafida, for instance, recounts that contacts with the other families in her brother's group began with the creation of a WhatsApp group, whose purpose was to share news and collectively assess its reliability. If on one hand this configuration is instrumental to the search for their missing loved ones, on the other it structures the passage from the private experience of absence to the collective one.

The bonds emerging from these networks frequently transcend national borders and local belonging. Several family members construct profound relationships with people who have lived analogous experiences across different contexts: I observe friendships between Moroccan and Tunisian women, or between Moroccan families from different cities, forged through social media or associations, and sustained by a shared condition of loss.

³³ The quote that titles this section is drawn from an ethnographic case not yet discussed. It refers to an intervention made by a family member during a public meeting held in Morocco in 2025 between international institutional and civil society actors and family members on the issue of missing migrants worldwide.

The recognition of a shared experience of structural injustice underlies the way in which Nouredine articulates his relationships with his son's disappearance. Following Yasser's disappearance and the recovery of his body, the father launches a public campaign of denunciation on social media. Through this, he comes into contact with two other families from marginalised cities in Morocco, who recount having lost their loved ones along the same Balkan route without knowing how to proceed. From that moment, Nouredine's struggle expands beyond his own grief: he mobilises to secure the repatriation of all three bodies together. When the repatriation is organised, however, the families lack sufficient funds to cover the transportation costs, and an NGO's offer to partially contribute falls short of guaranteeing coverage for all three. Yasser's parents decide to give precedence to the others:

"We decided to give them [the money] to the other two families, who were poorer than us. I know my son would have wanted it that way."

In recognising their own suffering in that of other families, Yasser's parents come to see his story as one among many. In this process, Yasser becomes a vector of solidarity: it is in the name of the disappeared that bonds of mutual recognition and collective action are forged. As with Faraah, whose horizon expands beyond the private through her intimate relationship with her son, care for a singular absence opens onto a wider terrain of shared responsibility. Yasser's father continues:

"I know that this is not only my son's story, that there are other people, many other poor and uneducated families who cannot speak. But everyone has the right to know."

The sense of collective responsibility extends beyond direct networks, encompassing those who are not involved in mobilisations. A mother recounts visiting a cemetery in Europe and being struck by the number of migrants buried there, far from home. "I saw much injustice in all those bodies there", she tells me, "So many families who perhaps, only because they are poor or uneducated, do not have the possibility of getting their children back." In bearing witness to this, she extends her denunciation to those rendered invisible by hermeneutical and structural injustice, excluded from the very possibility of reclaiming their dead.

These forms of recognition constitute the foundation of collective political imaginaries and practices, forged through the shared experience of violence and structural oppression. Underlying these collective formations is a politics of emotional sharing (see Ahmed, 2004), in which affect operates as what Zia terms "concrete rhetoric", endowed with "the power to influence the social, psychological, economic and political world" and capable of sustaining "collective politics and social alliances." (Zia, 2019:35) Within these spaces of shared pain, narratives emerge that – while rooted in distinct biographical trajectories – converge in articulating a common position toward the structures that produced the disappearance. From the recognition of a shared condition, an idea of community takes shape that refuses the exclusionary logic of the border regime, proposing instead new modes of belonging grounded in the claim for the dignity of missing loved ones and the rights of their families.

V.III. Building Presences and Visibility in Moroccan Public Sphere

*Anche se voi vi credete assolti, siete lo stesso coinvolti*³⁴

Fabrizio De Andrè

Introduction: Crossing Domestic Thresholds

As this analysis has shown, the experience of disappearance deconstructs and reshapes the relationship with intimacy and with the world at large, now mediated through the lived experience of border violence. Absence simultaneously rewrites the subjective condition and the reading of the power structures that produced it: in the destabilisation of pre-existing cognitive, epistemic, and relational reference points, disappearance triggers an interior reorganisation that must accommodate a transformed understanding of self, opening onto processes of identity redefinition. As Schmitt (2007) argues, identities are not fixed entities but processes, "constant, multiple, shifting, situated, and always becoming" (in Dikeç, 2012: 79). It is from within this subjectivity transformation that political experience takes shape – shaping imaginaries, discourses, practices – articulated, to varying degrees and in different registers, in more or less explicitly political terms: bearing demands, interrogating structures of power, contesting the order of things that produced that violence.

This subchapter moves the analysis into the public dimension of the families' claim to truth. This passage unfolds in continuity with the intimate and epistemic dimensions examined in the preceding chapters, observed as deeply intertwined throughout the political trajectory of the experience of disappearance. The thread connecting them is the passage from private loss to the socialisation – and politicisation – of pain: a process through which disrupted intimate experiences and the need for accountability surrounding them cross domestic thresholds, becoming legible as political demands within shared public spaces³⁵.

In 2024 – thirty years after the *mukhtafyn* squares – families of Moroccans who disappeared at the border took to the streets of Oujda during the May Day demonstration. Clutching photographs of their loved ones, they were marching and chanting: "Why have we come to protest? It's our children we want. Where are they?" They have since repeated the same demand before Moroccan ministries, European consulates, and the headquarters of international agencies, insisting on the question that haunts their daily existence: *what happened to our children?*

They present themselves – in modest dress, coming from different cities across Morocco – before recognised institutions of power to articulate a demand that has shaped their lived experience and that they now cause to exceed the private sphere. Through this collective act, they enter the public sphere by constituting a shared identity through the dislocation of personal experience toward public spaces (Kaplan, 1982), in which the intimate experience *disturbed* by disappearance (Huttunen and Perl, 2023) crosses private boundaries. It is within the sphere of visibility that the political dimension of their

³⁴ From an Italian song, English translation: "Even if you believe yourselves absolved, you are nonetheless implicated".

³⁵ It is important to acknowledge that this process is shaped – to varying degrees and in different ways – by the families' engagement with civil society organisations, both local and international, that constitutes a structuring condition of the experience analysed here, shaping in significant ways the terms under which families access – or do not – spaces of visibility and collective claim-making. A thorough examination of these dynamics falls beyond the scope of the present work. This is, however, a delicate relationship, embedded in the tense positioning of civil society in Morocco described in the preceding chapters. That broader context inflects the relationship between family members and associative actors, configuring it as both a site of support and facilitation, and of control and tension, producing asymmetries that complicate the reading of it.

demand is at stake: as Rancière argues, a gesture becomes political when it "displaces a body from the place assigned to it" and "makes visible what was not supposed to be seen" (1999: 28–30). By physically occupying publicly regulated spaces – streets, squares, institutional buildings – they produce what Arendt (1958) terms "spaces of appearance", contingent spaces coming into being through the concerted action and speech of a plurality of subjects, within a context where visibility is shaped by relations of power and domination. The constitution of appearance spaces is the modality through which political action and plurality articulate themselves in the public sphere (Dikec, 2012); politics, in this sense, takes shape as an act of space and visibility production. While bringing disappeared presences back to visibility and publicizing their intimacies, they claim the right to appear (Butler, 2015): their own, as autonomous political subjectivities, and that of their disappeared loved ones, rendered present through photographs, discourses, and embodied practices.

To trace this movement from the intimate to the public is to trace the modalities through which visibility itself is constructed. In what follows, the analysis traverses several dimensions through which this construction takes shape: how family members produce spaces of visibility – both physical and digital – through daily interactions and practices; how spaces of appearance are constituted and inhabited; and how these practices are negotiated within, and against, the authoritarian contexts they traverse.

Carrying the Disappeared

These practices take shape across a wide spectrum of registers, from collective mobilisation to the unremarkable fabric of everyday life. Through a series of ethnographic accounts, I trace how individual, unannounced, and not necessarily organised practices generate their own spaces and dynamics of appearance, sustaining the presence of the disappeared, with the same quiet insistence, across the ordinary movements of daily life.

The first time I meet Hamed's mother, she introduces herself as *Umm* Hamed – the name by which she has identified herself since her son's body was found. Throughout the fieldwork, I get used to address her accordingly. She wears a necklace bearing his photograph and, pointing to it, tells me: "wherever I go, whatever I do, he is always with me." Walking with her through the city where she lives, I observe her engaging with those she meets through this name, Hamed surfacing in conversation, in gesture, in the way she occupies the space around her. Through these daily encounters her profoundly intimate and thoroughly embodied relationship with Hamed is continuously socialised.

Observing *Umm* Hamed across domestic spaces – inhabited by photographs and objects that speak of her son – and in the public spaces she moves through, I am struck by how the presence that fills her intimacy is carried outward, mediating her encounters with the world beyond her home. I do not encounter her at any of the public demonstrations or collective meetings for families of missing migrants in Morocco: she explains that it is too painful to hear others speak of disappearance, and that she prefers not to share that experience in collective settings. Yet, in the ordinary fabric of her daily life, I observe her enacting a quiet and persistent inscription of Hamed's story into every space she inhabits: simply by moving through the world, she carries him – rendering visible the story and the presence of a person whom that world has rendered invisible.

Across the ethnographic fieldwork, I observe this mediated relationship between the disappeared and the public sphere taking shape at multiple levels, traversing both the physical and digital spaces that family members inhabit. It surfaces in the practice of carrying personal effects – photographs set as

phone backgrounds, images kept in bags, objects bearing faces and names – operating as quiet but persistent inscription of the disappeared's presence into the background of everyday interactions. Throughout fieldwork, I encounter recurring WhatsApp statuses and Instagram stories displaying photographs of the disappeared alongside dedicated poems, prayers, and denunciatory texts. I observe many families replacing their own social media profile photographs with that of their loved one, rendering the absent person continuously visible to anyone who interacts with them online. Family members' social media becomes an archive of disappearance, where time stratifies without passing: each sharing reactualizes the moments of loss, regularly repropounding the unanswered questions. Across different registers, these practices inscribe the presence of the disappeared into the spaces that family members traverse, sharing their stories, keeping the questions open, and compelling those who encounter them – whether in physical or digital space – to reckon, however fleetingly, with the disappeared's presence and unresolved stories of violence.

In the interaction – however brief or unremarkable – with family members, the outside world is brought into contact with the stories of the disappeared, with the pain they carry, and with the traces that disappearance has left behind. The body of the family member – itself traversed by the crisis of space, time, and presence that disappearance produces – becomes the medium through which that absence is made present: material in the questions it poses, and in the weight of the violence it bears. Across these diverse forms and biographical trajectories, what moves is a corporeality that navigates between the intimate and the public sphere, bearing witness to the violence and injustice of disappearance. The haunting presence of the disappeared in domestic spaces thus transforms into a presence in public ones, persisting in its demand for truth and recognition. In this dynamic, the violence produced by the oppressive structures producing border disappearance is socialised and rendered public, through practices of obstinate counter-visibility.

At the collective level, this is legible in public demonstrations such as the one described in the preceding section: a body of bodies carrying other bodies, enacting through their physical presence the pain and the demand to know, denouncing a violence untraceable in official accounts. At the individual level, it is present – for example – in the way Umm Hamed moves through the world: speaking of her son, physically carrying him, and bearing – in her very person – the violence of a life held in suspension. Huttunen and Perl (2023) define this dynamic as a "politics of reappearance": the disappeared's re-entry into the social and cultural sphere as political actor through practices that restore presence to those who have been excluded from systems of power. Through the movement of family members, the disappeared is restored the capacity to persist and to claim, returning to the sphere of the visible, remembering what has been removed, excluded, violated, and haunting the living with the unresolved demand that their absence carries.

During fieldwork, one moment proves particularly emblematic in this regard. A family member shows me the Facebook profile of a relative who disappeared in the summer of 2023. Scrolling through the page, I observe that it remains active, continuously addressing the experience of disappearance: posts are published, news and photographs shared, comments, about this case and similar, addressing the broader landscape of unresolved disappearances. Among these, the sharing of a news report about bodies recovered along the coast of Casablanca, accompanied by a call to initiate identification and recognition procedures. The profile's owner is no longer traceable, yet someone maintains the page in his name, restoring him voice and inscribing into the digital sphere the unresolved demand for truth that his disappearance carries.

Entering the Square

While sharing the experience of mobilisation of the family network she belongs to, Hafida recounts the spontaneity of the passage from private gatherings toward public demonstrations. She recounts:

“After a while, we families went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs office, in one of the Saada buildings: we presented ourselves and filed a missing person report, so the State could at least contact other States; perhaps they could access information better than us, who are merely private individuals. We sent letters and held demonstrations, awaiting a response. We waited, waited, but in vain. [...] Then we turned to the Red Crescent, but there too, the same thing: they didn’t respond. Afterwards, we held a demonstration at the European Union in Agdal, in Hay Riad. We sent a letter, they received us and listened to our suffering. Thanks to the mediation of [*name of an association*], they welcomed us and forwarded our letters to the Red Crescent.”

The idea of *taking to the streets*, as Hafida relates, followed the lack of responses in the families search process and request for support, pushing family members to broaden the public reach of their demand. By reporting her experience – which over time has structured itself into a sustained series of public manifestations, including sit-ins and demonstrations held across different spaces – she begins by recounting the exhausting and frustrating search process. Their search traversed the political-institutional space, articulating itself as a request for support and engagement with numerous interlocutors deemed involved in the process – called upon regarding themes of identification, search for disappeared persons, border violence, lack of socioeconomic and political support for families of missing migrants, and disappearance itself. In this process, the act of asking – and waiting – for information becomes itself a public and contestatory act: the demand to know, finding no adequate institutional reception, is gradually displaced from the private interactions into a shared public space. As she underlines, it is the experience of systematic non-response that led the families to meet and gather in front of the European Union office in Rabat.

In recounting the first demonstration held by her family network, Hafida emphasises that they found themselves roughly ten in number, predominantly women, coming from peripheries of the Rabat-Salè region. It was one of the first demonstrations, she recounts, and they were not yet well organised. Already in that first experience, however, they were negotiating their presence in Moroccan public space and presenting themselves to articulate a demand that, for them, exceeded the strictly private. They were not subjects typically participatory in urban political life; rather, they had been relegated to its margins by the structural processes regulating public space in Morocco, where access to and recognition within the public sphere is differentially distributed along lines of class, gender, and racial identity, and so on.

The following analysis traces the process through which family members construct a collective presence in shared public and politically regulated spaces in Morocco, attending to how the intimate experience is mobilised in order to elaborate and assert a form of moral and political authority that becomes constitutive of the legibility of their claim in the public sphere. To do that, I reflect here on a significant ethnographic event, during a public meeting held in Rabat among institutional actors, civil society representatives, and relatives of missing migrants on the theme of border disappearances. On that occasion, various families from different Moroccan cities participated. I report in my ethnographic notes:

Family members were seated in the front row and were first, during the introductory round, to take the floor. They presented themselves describing their relationship with the disappeared person. One woman began by introducing herself by name and adding: "I am a Moroccan mother"; the second simply stated: "I am here for my son, disappeared ten years ago." She then passed the microphone to the woman seated beside her: "I am a mother and I am searching for my son, disappeared on October 15, 2023; I want to know what happened to him." Another stated: "We are here to make our children's voices heard. Today we are only a few, but we are everyone's voice. My son disappeared in August 2021 and I still have no news of him." And so forth. They held photographs of their loved ones, raising them as they spoke; the portrayed faces, young and sometimes smiling, remained visible to the public.

The group described in these ethnographic notes was heterogeneous in composition: family members were present on that occasion either as private individuals or through local associations, bringing with them distinct personal histories and trajectories. Alongside a small number of Tunisian mothers and sub-Saharan family members, there were women and men from the regions of Oujda-Saidia, Casablanca-Settat, Rabat-Salé, and Beni Mellal-Khenifra. The convergence of different subjects from different Moroccan areas materialised a shared demand, concerning all of them and others – the ones unable to be there. *We are a few, but we are everyone's voice.*

Family members did not present themselves through their own name or private identity, but through the experience that has reconfigured their subjectivity and which they were publicly embodying: the disappearance of someone they love. The kinship bond with the disappeared grounds and animates this presence in public space, what Zia (2019:35) terms "affective law." Where governmental law – in the Kashmiri context Zia examined – is itself responsible for disappearances, affective law constitutes an alternative system of sociopolitical practices, drawing its legitimacy from the bonds of loyalty and care that family members maintain with their loved ones and positioning itself in opposition to central power. Grounded in this intimate entitlement, family members enter public space carrying an experience that would otherwise remain confined to the domestic sphere, socializing the prolonged waiting, the unanswered questions, the disturbing absence that structures daily life. By recounting the stories of their loved ones, posing questions and demanding truth and justice, they positioned themselves as interlocutors toward publicly recognised actors, despite the lack of previous political experience or formal social capital.

In several cases I observe how during public meetings family members mobilize kinship ties as a source of political legitimation, mobilising intimate registers – anguish, disorientation, care – as the primary language of their political claim. For example, during a manifestation held in front of the Spanish consulate in Agadir, a mother shouts:

"We want to know where our children are. We are suffering. Now we live on the street, sleep in stations, in the open. We have left our homes and our children alone."

Or again, during an international meeting held in Rabat, a father shares:

"Not knowing the truth about my son makes me suffer a lot. It is killing me inside."

The sharing of the intimate sphere – inhabited by profound suffering – proves socially and culturally recognisable, constituting a form of affective politics (Zia, 2019; Fassin and d'Halluin, 2005), where emotional and familial repertoires are rendered politically legible. While the preceding analysis has

emphasised how it is in the dislocation between private experience and public space – where the intimate is made political – that the transformative force of this mobilisations resides, it is important to observe that the language and posture through which family members construct their public presence are built around culturally recognised elements, drawing on shared frameworks of meaning that render their claim legible to those they address. By performing the traditionally recognised role of caregiver, family members move through institutional contexts in ways that would otherwise be foreclosed to them. It is familial suffering that justifies and legitimises their presence in public space, and that mediates the level of contestation their presence can sustain. Across the demonstrations observed during fieldwork, care is performed within public spaces: I observe family members crying and shouting in front of institutional buildings, their bodies and voices carrying intimate suffering into the architectures of state power.

Returning to the scene of the mother shouting in front of the Spanish consulate in Agadir, I observe how her performance of maternal suffering enables her to construct a socially acceptable and morally legitimised activist identity opposing the "spectacle of disappearance" (Zia, 2019). Dressed in traditional Moroccan clothing, she mobilises the markers of her maternal identity as the organising principle of her public discourse – deploying a culturally sanctioned register that both grounds her presence in public space and structures the terms of her claim. This experience, like Hafida's and other family members', underscores the importance of reading mobilisations for border disappearances at the intersection between gender and class. Family collectives observed in this research are composed predominantly of women – mothers, daughters, and sisters of disappeared persons – and persons from suburban contexts. Their presence in politically regulated spaces thus constitutes, in itself, a negotiation with the normative frameworks that govern their visibility: entering public space through the very roles traditionally assigned to them, they simultaneously reproduce and subvert the terms of their own exclusion from it.

The gendered configuration of protest does not imply that the mobilisation experience of disappearance is exclusively feminine; in my ethnographic research, I have also worked with male relatives of disappeared persons, active in search and political processes. In this sense, to avoid romanticising the role Moroccan mothers have in this experience, the intention is to critically observe how gender identity is mobilised within protest space in the Moroccan authoritarian framework, attending to what it reveals both about the force and the constraints of this form of mobilisation. In Morocco, male presence in public contestation contexts is historically exposed to more intense forms of repression by Moroccan authorities. This repressive differential, inscribed in broader state control dynamics, renders female-composed protest relatively more practicable in the local political context. Reflection must therefore attend to the relationship among corporeality, gender, and forms of public representation in Morocco. The centrality of the maternal figure in activism around enforced disappearance is well documented across diverse contexts, from authoritarian regimes (Zia, 2019; Biondi, 2025; Taylor, 2012) to contemporary border regimes (Rivera Hernández, 2017; Huttunen, 2025). In Morocco, this configuration draws on culturally embedded notions of maternal suffering and mothers' roles as caregivers: female bodies – or more precisely, maternal bodies – mobilise culturally recognisable symbolic repertoires that simultaneously render their public presence in protests for disappearance relatively more acceptable. In this sense, women's participation in family movements for missing migrants constitutes a distinctive form of *gendered resistance* (Menin, 2017; Zia, 2019), operating within, and simultaneously against, the normative frameworks that regulate their access to public space.

While performing the traditionally assigned roles, women involved in the mobilisation operate a strategic reappropriation of their socially accepted positions, turning them into instruments of access and legitimation within a deeply gendered public sphere. The construction of the activist mother's identity thus structures itself through negotiation processes with the context they navigate, building moral authority claimed in confrontation with the Moroccan power apparatus. The complexity of this process surfaces in the experience a woman recounts about demonstrations conducted together with other mothers. During a protest, she recounts, police intervened violently:

"A policeman came and pushed a mother, she who was already suffering the torments of hell for the loss of her son. She was crying and shouting: 'I want my son, bring him back to me, help me find him!' She was asking for support, but the police came and pushed her, without caring about her feelings and her suffering. They had no respect for her pain."

"Thank goodness some husbands intervened on that occasion, otherwise... otherwise... something even worse would have happened."

Hafida recounts in a similar episode:

"A policeman grabbed me and asked me to identify myself. I responded: 'I am a disappeared person's sister. You, instead, who are you? How dare you touch me?'"

The two episodes – and the ways in which the women recount them – allow us to observe how the constructed position of the family member is now mobilised, now negotiated in confrontation with authorities. In the first case, police violence is described as a morally illegitimate act insofar as it is perpetrated against a mother who *was already suffering the torments of hell*: it is the experience of suffering for the loss of her son that confers upon her the moral legitimacy of contestation, while the violent gesture of the policeman becomes illegitimate precisely in the moment when it disavows her lived experience and her right to truth. The imbalance that emerges in this clash between the activists – females – and the authorities – males – reveals the inherently gendered nature of the confrontation itself. In the woman's narration, what reestablishes a relational equilibrium in the repressive dynamic is the intervention of the husbands. This moment exposes a critical tension within the mothers' activist strategy: while their moral authority derives from socially recognised roles as suffering caregivers, this very position simultaneously circumscribes the boundaries of their agency when facing the coercive apparatus of the state. The policeman's violent act toward the grieving mother represents a rupture in the expected social script, a moment where the moral weight of maternal suffering fails to protect these women from physical aggression. It is when masculine figures enter the scene that the confrontation is defused, not because the mothers' claims suddenly gain moral validity, but because the patriarchal structure governing the interaction recognises and responds to male authority in ways it refuses to acknowledge female grief and protest. The husbands' intervention thus operates within the same gendered logic that structures state power itself: their presence reestablishes order by reaffirming masculine mediation as the necessary condition for negotiation with authorities.

In the second episode, Hafida demonstrates an alternative mode of claiming authority. When faced with the policeman who grabs her, she explicitly invokes her moral position while simultaneously challenging his: *I am a disappeared person's sister. You, instead, who are you? How dare you touch me?* Here, maternal suffering becomes an active rhetorical instrument of direct contestation. Hafida's response configures her familial identity as a confrontational assertion of moral superiority, directly challenging state authority.

Taken together, these episodes illuminate the complexity of the negotiation at stake. Gendered roles are neither simply reproduced nor straightforwardly subverted: they are strategically instrumentalised, selectively deployed, and actively renegotiated in confrontation with the power apparatus. The moral authority constructed through the figure of the grieving mother or sister operates simultaneously as a resource and a constraint, opening access to public space while circumscribing the boundaries of permissible action within it.

Negotiating the Spaces of Protest

In publicly sharing the experience of disappearance, family members must confront the Moroccan context, where space for civil society is controlled and repressed and where, as already emphasised, public discourses on sensitive issues remain highly centralised (Bogaert, 2018; Natter, 2014). Negotiating within this repressive context means engaging with both direct and manifest forms of repression, as well as with more subtle practices of control.

To understand the dynamics of control and mobilisation, it is important to underline that the experiences I present in this section span a significant time period: from 2021, when the issue of border disappearances was considered taboo, to 2025, when a relative public opening can be observed. This progression is evident in my own field research: between 2023 and 2025, I observed a gradual increase in public initiatives and a progressive structuring of demonstrations, outcomes of profound negotiations between civil society, authorities, and family collectives. Today, the issue gains limited visibility in Moroccan public debate – while never reaching the levels observable, for example, in Tunisia (Sossi, 2014; Oliveri, 2016; Stimmattini and De Gourcy, 2022) – yet it remains within clear boundaries, traced and surveilled by the authoritarian framework.

In November 2024, I attended a demonstration in Rabat, held one morning on a weekday. What follows are ethnographic observations from that day, which advance the analysis of mobilisation dynamics. I wrote in my field diary:

A group of family members of disappeared migrants has organized a gathering in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rabat. I sit in a café across from the meeting point, with the intention of observing a bit and understanding how and when to approach. At the demonstration there are about thirty people, mainly women; there are also some children. They hold signs with photos of their missing loved ones. There is a journalist with a video camera filming the demonstrators who are speaking. The demonstration is held under the arcades in front of the medina, a point that during daylight hours is crossed by the coming and going of people. As time passes, someone joins the crowd, someone stops to look and leaves.

On the other side of the street stands the daily and consistent apparatus of auxiliary forces and police. Men in plain clothes, evidently military, approach to photograph those present; then, uniformed agents gather—police, auxiliary forces, and army. I cannot hear what they say, but within a short time the protest group moves and is then dispersed.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I chose not to openly participate in public protests related to the issue of migration disappearances, except on two occasions. This position responds to a complex and sometimes unclear evaluation of the context in which my research takes place. Political protests in Morocco confront a highly surveilled and militarized context; in this scenario, my public presence has always been the object of negotiation: on one hand to preserve the sustainability of the field research – made of relationships, access to spaces, trust built over time – on the other hand not to impact the context with my presence, evidently non-Moroccan and white. This position is crystallised in the image

described in the notes: sitting in a café drinking mint tea, at a safe distance, evaluating when and how to approach. Never completely inside, never completely outside.

In the specific moment observed, the research field sees different temporalities intersecting: I am sitting still trying to understand what to do, in a dilated sense of indecision; the group is standing, demonstrators take turns in front of the video camera, around them people stroll in the typical weekly morning of Rabat's market; law enforcement approaches and moves away, always remaining in the scene, wanting to emphasize their presence, and delimit the boundaries of what is happening. Shortly after, in fact, they will disperse the crowd. I then received a message from a European colleague, active in family collectives and present at the protest, advising me to "avoid approaching the group" since the "police prohibited her from participating". The plainclothes policeman who asked her to identify herself told her that only family members of the disappeared are authorised to participate and pointed out that she, too, personally, needs authorisation from the authorities to be there. One of the relatives present at the demonstration subsequently tells me that the dispersal was motivated by the absence of formal authorisation for the gathering; she notes, however, that the temporal proximity of French President Macron's official visit probably intensified the climate of surveillance and raised the threshold of the authorities' intolerance toward any form of public assembly during that specific week.

The episode of November 2024 exemplifies the contemporary dynamics of mobilisations for border disappearances in Morocco: a public space shaped by strict surveillance and partial tolerance, where repression manifests now through controlled methods, now through direct violence. This framework represents the culmination of progressive negotiations. The first demonstration organised by Hafida and her family network in 2021, in fact, presents a significantly different configuration of the relationship between protest and repressive apparatus. She describes the event thus:

"We made announcements about our situation; we started to denounce it publicly; for this reason the State was worried and the authorities... we talked about it to put pressure and hope to increase searches, also to raise awareness and involve families of other missing persons. We wanted to hold a sit-in, but families did not show up: we only gathered 11 people. [...] It was a first violent occasion: families were repressed by violent action and forced into silence."

Faraah too reports that, when, together with the other families in the network, they began to structure forms of public mobilization and confronted repressive and violent interventions by law enforcement. She recounts that during a protest held in 2021, demonstrators were struck by a police charge, an episode in which she suffered a broken arm. The coercive reaction of authorities signals the absence of political willingness to grant legitimacy and public space to the issue. Hafida emphasises how, over time the family network has restructured its forms of protest differently, adopting negotiation strategies:

"Now, we who have created the WhatsApp groups continue to talk among ourselves [...] we also do it to organize demonstrations, to organize ourselves among members of different groups: you know, to take to the streets and do our actions, you can't do it alone; we always need people. But if there is any notice or invitation to take to the streets, we share it in all our groups, as much as possible, so that more people are aware of it and can participate; we need to understand how many women among the mothers will join, so we count people and evaluate whether the number is sufficient to proceed or if it's not enough. Then we write the official communication: we cannot do anything in the street without previously informing the authority. Otherwise, they can easily intervene and ask us why we didn't inform them."

And we always inform available journalists: if we are alone, we will surely find a strong, repressive reaction, that is, they wouldn't let us do anything. At that point then we identify the right place for the action and communicate it to the authority; then they give notice of it to the Royal Court".

Hafida's testimony highlights the structuring of a repertoire of collective action that develops in response to the experience of repression. The literature on collective action (see Della Porta & Diani, 2006) demonstrates how such tools are adaptive practices that enable marginal groups to negotiate visibility and safety in public spaces. The practice that emerges is configured as constant negotiation, where the public dimension of protest is calibrated through protective devices that make its expression possible, while simultaneously reducing its exposure to institutional violence.

Hafida is aware of the authoritarian context in which she and the other family members must move, and conveys it with lucidity. She recounts noticing, at all protests and initiatives they organise, men in plain clothes filming the faces of all participants, useful for police identification. She recounts that, to obtain authorisation to demonstrate, family members must request the mediation of a legally registered association, which is denied to them as private individuals. She recounts that when they tried to constitute themselves as an association with a group of family members, authorisation was never granted. Faced with this repressive framework, she shares the awareness that, to guarantee themselves a possibility of access to public space, she must negotiate with all this and mobilise a series of elements to temper their public presence. Hafida emphasises the importance of numerical visibility in their demonstrations: a visible collectivity functions as a form of protection. Alongside the mass of participants, then, the presence of the press is essential.

The role of media in managing protest in an authoritarian context is complex. The press has historically been used by civil society in Morocco to contain the repression of demonstrations (Menin, 2017): the presence of journalists and cameras operates as a protective device, making the use of direct violence more costly for authorities. However, it is important to emphasise that media coverage of family members' mobilisations is largely local, limited to Moroccan outlets that operate within specific political constraints and reproduce humanitarian language politically positioned against Europe. Access for international journalists is often obstructed by authorities through formal and informal mechanisms, including denial of accreditation, intimidation, and restrictions on movement³⁶. This selective control of media access profoundly affects the conditions of mobilisation visibility, with the ultimate result of keeping the issue circumscribed within national borders. This element emerges consistently with my difficulty accessing public protest space during fieldwork, described at the beginning of the section, and with the fact that my proximity, as a white person, was repeatedly controlled and obstructed. A Moroccan activist explains to me that there is profound fear on the part of authorities toward white people who approach sociopolitical issues in Morocco, since they might be "journalists, lawyers or spies", and that this increases the level of suspicion.

Returning to the position of family members in demonstrations, another element on which accessibility to public space is played out is the discursive repertoire. In the public discourses observed in my field research, family members privilege markedly humanitarian tones: they present themselves, as emphasised previously, as family members who want to have information and support for their loved ones. In this request, they reproduce a critical narrative regarding the European border control regime, a discourse that is often privileged in public knowledge on the issue: at demonstrations, in fact, slogans

³⁶ See, for example, the case of the French journalist who reported on Attaouia and was expelled.

and signs against Europe recur. For example, I observe how a mother's speech during a demonstration in front of the Spanish embassy in Agadir carefully balances criticism of Spanish authorities with expressions of loyalty to the Moroccan monarchy, which is also considered a discursive strategy. She says:

"The embassies haven't told us anything. And the *samsar* [smuggler] is still free; we ask Spanish authorities to help us know something about them. Long live the king, we ask him to help us find our children. They are all still very young."

And again:

"Where have you gone, authorities? Our children have disappeared. Zero ministers, zero embassies; families are suffering. Where are the embassies? Families are suffering. Days have passed, and many more will pass."

On a demonstration banner, it reads:

"The families of the disappeared ask authorities to stand by families, mothers and fathers, to know the truth about the fate of their children".

The interlocution with Moroccan power moves within precise boundaries. In the case just described, the claim narrative is directed mainly toward European and Moroccan representatives – the latter responsible for not supporting the search by family members – and symbolically recalls those considered the cause of their loved ones' disappearance: the European border regime and traffickers. In this case, too, in fact, signs against Fortress Europe stand out. In this narrative commonly legitimised in Morocco, any reference to Moroccan authorities is mediated by humanitarian tones and an explicit recognition of the *Makhzen*'s authority: *long live the king*. During demonstrations, alongside photos of the disappeared and banners against Europe, the photo of King Mohamed VI often waves.

The existence of a constraint, linked to recognition of royal legitimacy, emerges clearly when a sister warns me about a certain Umm Khalid, a woman who lost her son on the central Mediterranean route. She is described as "a dangerous madwoman", that "sometimes proposes to hold demonstrations in front of the Royal Palace" and that for this reason "it's better to leave her alone". The very proposal to demonstrate in front of the symbol of monarchical power is perceived as an unacceptable transgression, capable of compromising the sustainability of mobilisation.

The path of claiming rights carried forward by Yasser's family, on the other hand, presents a different mobilisation experience. Yasser disappears alone along the Balkan route, and his family is left to search for him, without the support of a family network to share the experience. The father recounts solitary protests in institutional places between Casablanca and Rabat, in public offices and in front of Parliament, claiming rights for his family and justice for his son. His language – public and private – is highly politicised. He explicitly holds the Moroccan government responsible for the conditions that push Moroccan citizens to migrate and for institutional negligence in supporting families who have lost their loved ones during the migration process, in addition to openly accusing European neocolonial policies. On Europol's official Facebook page, he comments in this way on an article boasting the dismantling of a trafficking network:

Where is justice and human rights in Croatia and in Morocco for my son YASSER (migrant) [...], [left] without investigation despite having lodged two complaints with the police concerned. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Moroccan Embassy in Zagreb did nothing except telling me that they can't do anything.

The first space in which he moves to denounce his son's disappearance and then demand the truth is the digital one. Through the media campaign, mobilisation reaches various people, including institutional actors and Moroccan civil society, from whom Yasser's father recounts that he feels isolated and obstructed. He recounts that, when he published videos on Facebook about his son's disappearance, he was repeatedly invited to stop the campaign:

"One day a Moroccan journalist contacted me and told me to calm down. No one ever published my story in a national newspaper."

"When I went to do the procedures for the repatriation of the body, an official told me: 'If you stop, we'll help you repatriate the body'."

When he recounts his experience, he emphasises the sense of solitude and isolation experienced in his battle. He underlines this at an international meeting organised among civil society organisations dealing with missing migrants, where he intervenes to recount his story, adding that he "had to fight this battle alone", because in Morocco "in truth, there are no associations that help family members of the disappeared". The experience shared by Yasser's father reveals soft control mechanisms that operate through marginalisation, rather than through direct repression. His sense of isolation is determined by the level of subversion that characterises his battle, in the refusal of the humanitarian attitude regarding the issue and, on the contrary, in the use of a repertoire of direct and explicit denunciation, not only toward the European Union, but also toward Morocco and the country's social and political structure. Unlike Hafida's collective, which over time has found methods of negotiation to guarantee themselves a portion of political space, Yasser's family, after years, denounces the marginalisation of their cause.

Reading together the experiences of family collectives, of which Hafida is part, and that of Yasser's family allows reflection on the dynamics and boundaries of mobilization in authoritarian contexts. Analytically, we distinguish a *hard* control regime – characterised by visible repression – from a *soft* control regime comprising marginalisation, blackmail, and conditioning, each with different effects on mobilisation capacity and the sustainability of claims. The interactions at different levels between authoritarian power and family members' contestations are delineated according to differential relations of political legitimacy, in which the right to public mobilisation is negotiated through adherence to clear power dynamics, which, within certain measures, seem to be able to be confronted, but not openly subverted.

VI. Returning Bodies: On Restitution and Contested Truth for Border Disappearances

Introduction

The preceding chapters explored how communities and those close to the disappeared formulate, through their intimate relation with absence, a political demand for resolution. This chapter turns to the question of what might respond to that demand, reflecting on how the concepts of truth and restitution are understood and articulated within the lived experience of disappearance at the border. As the preceding analysis has shown, the collectivisation of the experience of disappearance gives rise to a political claim, rooted in the conviction that the disappearance is produced at the intersection of systems of oppression and profound structural injustice. In a context where unknowability and concealment are constitutive dimensions of violence itself, what does it mean to speak of truth? What resolution must account for?

In the case of the Attaouia group³⁷, the Court of Marrakech initiated criminal proceedings against the traffickers, charged for the loss of 51 Moroccans. Through this action, Moroccan authorities publicly performed the administrative resolution of the matter, establishing case closure. During a conversation with Alaa, one of the family members involved in the research – whose brother did not disappear in this specific event, but who positions herself as a solidarity subject within the community of relatives – she shared critical reflections on the sentence, observing that prosecuting the smugglers is not “what the families need”, since – as she argues – “the trial has not brought their children back.” From her perspective, publicly prosecuting those who organised the journey is not the kind of restitution they are demanding, as it does not provide them with evidence of death, nor the bodies, nor does it clarify the circumstances of the disappearance.

The point Alaa raises – what can “bring back” someone who has disappeared – is a central knot in this research. This question invites us to problematize the notions of resolution, truth, and restitution, centring on the tension between the irreversibility of death/disappearance and the need for forms of return. How can a disappeared person be brought back?

This chapter does not seek to provide a definitive answer to this question, as each experience of disappearance is irreducibly singular, generating different needs and consequent demands that cannot be generalised. Rather, my intention is to dwell within the demand for truth and justice itself, exploring what kind of truth is being sought and what kind of response might bring closure to the claim.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Morocco and Croatia, this chapter analyses two cases of short-term border disappearance that ended in death, in which the bodies of the disappeared were recovered and repatriated to their families. The act of bodily restitution – and the consequent definition of disappearance as death – serves here as an analytical entry point from which to problematise the concept of restitution itself. In both cases, the discovery of the body, situated within an ongoing pursuit of truth by those close to the disappeared, triggered new dynamics of claim-making, and unsettling rather than resolving the fractures produced by disappearance – in one case in particular, keeping open a haunting demand for truth that remains, as yet, unanswered.

The ethnographic reflection centres on the returning bodies, and on different processes their return set in motion. Three groups of actors are implicated in these processes – the families of the two young

³⁷ The case concerns 51 Moroccans, mainly from the village of Attaouia (Marrakech), who disappeared during a collective attempt of unauthorised migration towards the Canary Islands in June 2023.

men, border authorities, and a network of solidarity actors in Croatia – each engaging with the recovered bodies from distinct positions, investing them with different meanings and articulating different stakes in relation to truth and restitution. Following Das's (2007) reflections on the body as a surface upon which power dynamics are inscribed, the dead body configures itself here as a site of competing symbolic meanings. It is, in this sense, a terrain where dynamics of oppression and resistance intersect among the multiple actors claiming it, variously unsettling and contesting the concepts of truth and restitution.

VI.I. Disappearance, Violence, and Forms of Return

In the experience of disappearance, we see how border violence extends into the social and affective fabric of communities of origin, generating a multifaceted haunting experience that disrupts intimate and social relations (Huttunen and Perl, 2023), produces administrative and legal ambiguities around status and rights (Citroni, 2025), precipitates economic loss and connected complications (van Selm et al., 2020), and inflicts psychological trauma, ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), and frozen grief while creating ritual and spiritual liminality when proper burial rites are denied (Kojima, 2023). In this experience, violence is perpetuated through the continuous denial of knowledge and recognition. As observed in the previous chapters, within its intimate experience practices and discourses of claim-making can emerge.

Academic literature on disappearance and mass violence examines the various ways in which attempts have been made to bridge the fractures created by disappearance. These experiences operate across multiple registers, varying across cultural, historical, and political contexts, as well as in relation to the specific nature of the disappearance itself: for example, through the death certificate that bureaucratically sanctions the transition from absence to certified death (Ferrándiz, 2013; Robins, 2013); through commemorative practices and collective memory initiatives that work symbolically to inscribe the disappeared within the social and political fabric (Huttunen, 2016; Wagner, 2008); through the maintenance of a phantasmatic presence in the social and emotional space of survivors (Kwon, 2008; Gordon, 2008); through the recovery of bodily remains and the performance of dignified burial (Perl, 2016; Verdery, 1999; Crossland, 2013); and through juridical forms of reparation (Citroni, 2021). These practices attempt to respond to a multiplicity of needs articulated by those in close relation to the disappeared, allowing us to trace the diverse and interconnected dimensions that constitute restitution as a plural and contested process. Restitution is, by nature, complex and layered, shifting in response to changing needs and demands of each singular experience, resisting any fixed or universal form. Family demands give expression to diverse and at times competing expectations, including the return of remains, the production of truth, the attribution of responsibility, the reconfiguration of interrupted social bonds. In this sense, restitution configures itself as a non-linear process, operating simultaneously across material, symbolic, social, and political registers.

The material dimension of restitution – expressed in demands for the exhumation and identification of remains – occupies a central place in the mobilisations of families of the forcibly disappeared (Rosenblatt, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2013; Kovras, 2017). Across diverse geopolitical contexts, it has constituted a primary axis of family-led activism, articulating a claim that is simultaneously affective, juridical, and political: the demand for the return of the body (Robins, 2011; Wagner, 2008). The right of families to know the whereabouts of their loved ones' remains and to have them returned is recognised as an integral component of the right to truth, as enshrined in the United Nations

Declaration on Enforced Disappearances and elaborated in subsequent jurisprudence (Citroni, 2025:493).

Yet I intend to observe here how the recovery of remains in itself – while often central to families' claims and mourning practices – does not always dispel the intimate experience of uncertainty and haunting or satisfy the broader demands for truth and justice that disappearance generates. As already underlined in the theory chapter of this work, the retrieval of remains does not always lift the *veil of disappearance* (İşlekel, 2019:340), insofar as it can leave unresolved the circumstances of death, the attribution of responsibility, and the broader dynamics of violence that produced it. The premise here is that, whereas in non-violent disappearances a degree of closure may be afforded by neutral acts – such as the recovery of remains –, in contexts where disappearance is produced through direct or structural violence the linearity of such a process looks more complicated. In these contexts, in fact, the severed and suspended bond between families and their disappeared loved ones – as examined in the preceding chapters – is overdetermined by the unjust and violent nature of the disappearance itself, by the structural persistence of the border regime that produced it, and by the erasure and invisibilisation policies that extend its violence into the everyday dimensions of families and communities lives. It is within this framework that this study interrogates how the concept of restitution can be understood in relation to the specific configurations of border violence and oppression, and how it is mobilised in families' pursuit of truth. The emerging reflection, thus, invites us to interrogate how demands for truth and justice – and the consequent understanding of restitution – take shape in relation to the political processes and structures of power that produced the disappearance in the first place. This, I argue, is the crucial axis around which this study should turn.

Governing the Dead Body³⁸

In the relationship between family members and the disappearance of their loved ones, the materiality of the body holds deeply symbolic significance. Several interviews I have conducted convey the sense of waiting for a body. Khalifa, an NGO worker in Casablanca, invites me to go to "the beach" to see "mothers walking back and forth, or standing still at the shore, waiting for the return of their children's bodies". Alaa affirms this when a neighbour spreads the word that the young people who left the day before having died, saying that "if it were true, the sea would have returned the bodies." The imaginary of disappearance anticipates that the body will return, to tell the story of what became of the person it held, to close the cycle of questions haunting the families. In this sense, the body is central to the demand for truth. A body is a trace (Crossland, 2009), material evidence of what happened, which somehow forecloses the possibilities regarding the presence of the disappeared person: they are not detained, not alive, not elsewhere.

Bodies hold meaning insofar as they represent the former person as the "presence of an absence" (Macho, 2000:99), ultimately making tangible something that was previously absent in its absence (in Perl, 2018:197). They allow a relationship with the absent person, structured by rituals and practices that socially enable the pacification of the disappeared person's presence, who previously was something wandering in uncertainty and liminality, and now becomes inscribed in the register of the dead. The *janaazah*, the Islamic funeral prayer, sees the community gather to pray for the soul of the deceased and accompany them into the divine world of death: there they have a place, for themselves and for their loved ones. The time passing from death to *janaazah* is socially structured: any absence of

³⁸ This text refers to *bodies*, *corpses*, and *cadavers* to highlight the different meanings attributed to the dead subject: it is a body when it is socially and politically recognised, a corpse when it is deprived of subjectivity, and a cadaver as a forensic object (see Heller-Roazen, 2021).

proper practices interrupts the spiritual and social cycle of that person's life, leaving the spirit suspended³⁹, deprived of recognition of death and accompaniment toward divine mercy, a wandering soul that asks the living for a way to rest in peace.

The significance of these practices lies in their capacity to inscribe the dead within a socially and spiritually recognised order – transforming wandering absence into situated death. Central to this process is the symbolic work performed upon the body: the meaning conferred upon it, and the ritual practices through which a life is socially closed and reintegrated into a shared human experience. This is fundamentally a political operation: mourning and burial practices are publicly regulated, and it is through this regulation that meaning is conferred upon both life and death.

Drawing on studies of the biopolitical management of dead bodies (Hegel, 1977; Butler, 2004, 2009; Das, 2007; Scheper-Hughes, 1992), we recognize practices of governing corpses and their meaning as sovereign practices, sites through which power over life and death is exercised, contested, and reproduced. The dead body emerges, in this framework, as a terrain upon which sovereign power operates, inscribing social hierarchies and political orders onto differential levels of grievability (Butler, 2009). Within this framework, the denial – or improper conduct – of death practices constitutes a denial of recognition, producing a space in which neither life nor death can be acknowledged or made legible (İşlekel, 2017:341). The denial of this recognition thus holds the power to sustain the *veil of disappearance*, maintaining both the person and the body in a condition of suspension, ambiguity, and dispossession.

İşlekel (2017) develops this insight through the concept of "necro-sovereign assemblages", observing the bodies governance technologies employed to produce and distribute death, as in the case of mass graves and improper burials, thereby establishing a power that transcends the dichotomy between life and death. In these cases, the author writes:

"What is at stake is not killing, nor even letting die; rather, it is about erasing and rendering life and death absent. Spaces open up where there is neither life nor death: neither a life that can be surveilled and regulated, nor a death that can spectacularize the sovereign's power; neither a life that can be witnessed, nor a death that can be mourned." (Ibid:351)

While the production and distribution of death have long been theorised as a sovereign practice, to make bodies escape from the dichotomous categorisation of life and death configures itself as an instrument of power (Autcher, 2014). What is at stake, more broadly, is the production of deaths that are denied entry into the ontological sphere of death itself, evacuated of public significance and denied of the very right to die. A death that *kills* death (Garibian, 2014:19). Autcher recognises the state as an *arbiter of ontology* (Ibid.:117), whose authority resides not just in deciding who is made or let to die, but in determining what counts as life and death in the first place (Nienass and Delano, 2016:438). Through the denial to *let the dead die*, sovereign power persists in its governance over bodies and over the political meaning attributed to their endings. The product of such governmental practice, Autcher (2014) argues, is the maintenance of bodies in a liminal dimension that is neither life nor death, creating a haunting dimension. As, according to this understanding, haunting emerges "not from the dead, but from the

³⁹ The term *rūḥ mu‘allaqa* ("suspended soul" or "suspended spirit") indicates, in classical and exegetical Islamic tradition, the state of the soul considered 'suspended' or "waiting" between bodily death and final resurrection: a soul that no longer belongs to earthly life but has not yet entered into the fullness of definitive afterlife. It is a descriptive notion used by Quranic commentators, theologians, and mystics to account for the intermediate condition of the soul during the period of *barzakh*, its experiences, and the moral consequences of the actions performed in life.

structural conditions of possibility that create death itself. Haunting is already contained within the ontology of the State, which decides on being" (Ibid:101).

The denial of recognition in death operates, in this sense, as a political practice of oppression that transcends death itself, perpetuating, beyond the threshold of biological life, the systematic negation of the political and social worth of those whose lives, in Butler's (2004) terms, were never fully recognised in the first place.

The Politics of Restitution

The liminal condition analysed traverses the experience of disappearance: it is against this backdrop that the restitution of remains in contexts of violent disappearance must be read. Within this framework, the central concern shifts to how families relate to this condition of denied political and public recognition of death in relation to their needs for truth and justice for the disappeared. At the centre of this process lies no longer just the recognition of death as the endpoint of a disappearance, but the political terms on which that recognition is – or is not – granted. In the cases of remains recovery, this process is shaped by the recognition accorded to the body itself and by the sphere into which that death is inscribed: it, in turns, profoundly shapes the experience of mourning itself.

In their study of grassroots memorial practices for those who died at the US-Mexico border, Delano and Nienass (2016) examine the diverse meanings of public practices of mourning of migrants – often unidentified – bodies, identifying two distinct registers. On one hand, there are memorial practices that function as acts of closure, responding to the need to afford a dignified commemoration to the ending of those lives and recognising them in spiritual and humanitarian terms. On the other hand, there are practices oriented towards restoring political and public life to those bodies: here the aim is not to bury, but "to re-present *a life out of order*, and to assert a visible void against 'the partition of the sensible' that forecloses the visibility of absences and the 'glaring absence' that structures public life" (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013:196, in Delano and Nienass, 2016:441). Mourning, within this framework, emerges as a space in which the denial of life and death to migrant bodies – as a practice of structural violence – is rendered visible as act of contestation.

The argument advanced here is that the refusal of a depoliticised death can operate as a form of resistance and agency, while keeping open the demand for restitution. If the deprivation of full death is understood as an effect of biopolitical dynamics operating simultaneously on living and dead bodies, it can be reappropriated as a strategy of resistance, where keeping the dead alive configures itself as a hauntological practice through which the demand for truth and restitution is kept open. Ghosts are the excluded who return, carrying with them "what the State tries to forget" (Nienass, 2015:129), and operating as a destabilising presence that unsettles the established order. They are, in Autcher's words (2014:101), the ungrievable lives that "continue to haunt as spectres, to disrupt frameworks of ontology that distinguish a life of value from one without, one which may as well be dead, and in fact is dead in the eyes of the state, and as a result to disrupt frameworks of statecraft." In this sense, looking at ghosts becomes a mode of conceiving hauntological resistances to these closures (Ibid:170). Haunting, in this reading, is configured as an active political practice, a form of agency that refuses to let the disappeared die. While Autcher locates haunting within the violent apparatus of the state, this study contends that it could be understood as a relational and contestatory practice through which families challenge state power and advance political claims, refusing to acquiesce in the erasure of recognition from the deaths – or disappearance – of their loved ones and insisting on their inscription within the public and political domain.

The historical trajectory of family mobilisations offers several emblematic cases in which collectives of relatives of the disappeared have publicly refused certain forms of state-offered restitution as an explicit political stance. I have already mentioned that in Morocco some families of the *mykhtafyn* rejected the financial compensation offered by the *Makhzen*, refusing to engage with any process of reckoning with the past that was not explicitly political in nature. Their demands centred on the kingdom's commitment to the exhumation and identification of remains as an act that would have constituted a formal acknowledgement of the Moroccan government's responsibility for the deaths it had produced. In Argentina, the proposal by the Argentine state to exhume and return remains to the families of the *desaparecidos* generated profound tensions within the broader mobilisation for truth and justice, ultimately producing a fracture within the *Madres* movement itself (Edkins, 2011). For a part of the movement, accepting the remains in the absence of a corresponding political will to prosecute those responsible for the disappearances was experienced as a form of complicity with impunity. In both cases, the state-offered closure would have foreclosed, rather than advanced, their demand for truth.

What these experiences reveal is that restitution should be read as a political act, traversed by symbolic practices and contested processes of meaning-making that cannot be reduced to, nor fully contained within, its material dimensions.

VI.II. Situating the Ethnographic Cases

Before turning to the ethnographic analysis, it is necessary to situate the two cases and introduce the broader context in which they are embedded. This study is grounded in the stories of Yasser and Ahmed, two young Moroccan men who died during their journey to Europe, and in the mobilisations for truth and justice surrounding their deaths. The ethnographic and analytical reflection engages three groups of actors: border actors, the families of the two young men, and solidarity actors, each relating to the recovered bodies and to their stories from distinct positions.

Yasser and Ahmed disappeared along the Balkan route, and their bodies were found along the Mrežnica river, in the border area between Bosnia and Croatia. Croatia constitutes, in this research, a relative extension of my ethnographic experience, connected to the primary fieldwork conducted in Morocco through the route undertaken by those who disappeared. This connection was developed through a period of exchange with the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, a centre involving several people of the local solidarity network considered in this study, and through which I came to know the families of Yasser and Ahmed in Morocco.

As for the Croatian migration landscape, even if the country functions also as a destination place, the focus here is on its role as a transit country along the so-called Balkan route. Its position within regional migration dynamics has shifted considerably over the past decade, shaped by successive transformations in border policy strongly inflected by the country's regional relationships and its progressive integration into EU policies' framework. The Western Balkan route emerges as a distinctive site of contestation, shaped by the intersection of migrants' border crossings and EU migration governance (Hamersak et al., 2020), alongside the exponential growth of Frontex involvement and the deepening of collaborative arrangements with the European Union, including the transfer of surveillance technologies and expertise (BVMN, 2023). During the period known as the "long summer of migration" (Kasperek and Speer, 2015), Balkan states – including Croatia – played an active role in facilitating the onward movement of migrants towards Central and Northern Europe, with Croatian institutions organising the transit of several hundred thousand people across its northern and western

borders (Šabić and Borić, 2016). Following the closure of the formalised corridor in March 2016, this facilitative role gave way to a regime of intensified border militarisation and enforcement, extensively documented and denounced by civil society organisations for the systematic violence of pushback practices (BVMN, 2022). This regime has been accompanied by a profound climate of criminalisation of migration and of solidarity movements documenting abuses and providing assistance to people on the move. Against this backdrop, Croatian civil society has nonetheless remained an active site of contestation, organising critical responses to securitarian migration management and expressions of solidarity (Sacco, 2026; Hameršak et al., 2020), while acts of grief activism (Hameršak and Čebren, 2025; Hameršak, 2022) have also emerged, articulating public demands for accountability for border deaths.

It is within this context that the stories of Yasser and Ahmed, and the practices of mobilisation they have generated, are situated. Both young men came from relatively privileged geographical and socio-economic contexts in Morocco, with their families possessing the economic, relational, and cultural resources that enabled them to repatriate the bodies and, to varying degrees, to mobilise for truth. In Yasser's case, his father's history of political opposition shapes the linguistic register he employs, as well as his critical stance toward the border regime and Morocco's national political dynamics. In both cases, the disappearance generated a deep-seated need to know, translating into a political claim that intensifies and takes on new forms through the dynamics activated by the return of the body. The two cases share similar routes, though traversing different temporalities and paths of mobilisation. Yasser disappeared in 2020, and over the years his family has sustained an active and ongoing mobilisation for truth. Ahmed disappeared in 2024 and, after an initial moment of claim-making, his family's mobilisation gradually slowed.

The two cases examined here trace divergent trajectories – despite emerging from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds – thereby revealing the difficulty of operationalising or generalising the experience of disappearance and restitution. My purpose in bringing these two cases together is not to compare or synthesise experiences, but to acknowledge the complexity inherent in each situation and to examine how families navigate a context that holds them responsible for their loved ones' fate, in the absence of any institutional support. Access to resources, transnational networks, geographic proximity, and the capacity to sustain prolonged confrontation are likely to shape which forms of counter-narrative become possible, while the burden of pursuing truth falls entirely on families themselves.

In bringing these two cases into dialogue, I attend also to how temporality and my own methodological positioning shape the contrast between them. I encountered Yasser's family four years after his death, at a point when their mobilisation was already consolidated and publicly visible. My relationship with Ahmed's family, by contrast, began in the immediate weeks following his death and extended over approximately eight months – a period marked by acute grief and the weight of decisions regarding whether, and how, to pursue accountability. The temporal dimension is analytically significant: mobilisation unfolds over extended and uneven periods, punctuated by pauses, hesitations, and structural obstacles. At the time of this research, the efforts of Ahmed's family were concentrated on the repatriation of his body; once the body was returned and the funeral rites performed, their mobilisation gradually subsided.

VI.III. Yasser and Ahmed, and their bodies

Yasser Bendahou Idrissi⁴⁰ disappeared along the Balkan route in 2020, at the age of 27. Shortly before embarking on the route from Turkey, he wrote on his Facebook profile: "You have to achieve your goal, even if you die." He became unreachable on May 24 – people close to him did not know his whereabouts and searched for him. On June 6, his father received a video on WhatsApp from an unknown number, showing a forest and a river, with a backpack on the shore and a corpse floating in the water. Authorities would recover the cadaver two days later; rigor mortis suggested that death had occurred on May 31.

Yasser disappears. He disappears while he must be invisible, to evade border control operations: he moves at night, in the forest. Denying himself to the visible world is instrumental to crossing the border; he promises to become visible again, at least to his family, once he reaches the other side. However, here the movement stops, and his presence blurs: Yasser remains trapped in his invisibility, not reappearing again. Family members search for him, report his disappearance on social media and to the authorities. The video the father received on WhatsApp reveals how Yasser's story ended: his lifeless body is a testament to the fate he met, a stark reminder of the impossibility that he is still alive. His sister, residing in France, travels to Zagreb to identify the body; the autopsy report declares him dead by drowning.

Yasser's family insists that more detailed investigations be conducted to establish the circumstances of death, appealing to Croatian and Moroccan authorities and to Interpol. Instead, the cadaver is buried on June 20 in the Croatian cemetery of Skakavac, without prior notification to the parents. There it remains buried, despite the parents' requests for exhumation and investigation – on the ground, at the foot of other marble tombs, with a wooden plaque bearing an Islamic crescent and the grave site number. The remains would be exhumed two years later, to be repatriated to Morocco on November 26, 2022.

Along the same river, on September 9, 2024, Ahmed's body is found, three days after his disappearance. Once the police recovered his corpse, Bachar – Ahmed's cousin, living in Italy for over thirty years – accompanied his uncle to proceed with identification procedures in Zagreb.

Ahmed was 30 years old when he decided to leave; he embarked on the Balkan route with three other young men from North Africa, leaving his wife, seven months pregnant, behind in Casablanca. A few weeks after his death, I met his cousin Qamar in Casablanca. In her hands were the only traces she had received: photos of Ahmed's corpse. She showed them to me – a face wrapped in a white cloth, black hair dishevelled, mouth half-open, one eye more swollen than the other. "He looks like he's sleeping, but he's dead," Qamar said. She told me that, according to the report the Croatian authorities issued, Ahmed died by drowning in the river, but the family did not accept this version. Zooming in on the photo of her cousin, she commented: "Does this look like the face of a body that's been in water for three days? Shouldn't it be more swollen? I don't believe it." Shortly thereafter, Ahmed's body was repatriated to Morocco through the mediation of the Moroccan embassy and the payment of thousands of euros.

Bachar describes the moment of identifying his cousin's corpse in Zagreb, speaking of a room with police and a white sheet in which the body was wrapped. He recounts being able to see only the face, then tears blurred his gaze; after a few minutes, the police asked him to leave the room. Ahmed's family is left alone to relate to his corpse, and, while having the body reduced the anguished search for the

⁴⁰ The full name is used at the explicit request of the family.

young man, it opens up a series of questions and suppositions. Qamar and Bachar insistently wonder what happened to Ahmed, how he *really* died. Qamar is the first among the Moroccan family members I engaged with who used a particular verb while speaking about her cousin's story: "he has been killed." Her way of talking about it is clear-cut and strikes me: he has been killed, and now they want to know by whom.

For Qamar and Bachar, the answers lie in the body they were not able to see. The body is a trace and bears traces, laden with the semiotic violence that testifies to its intensity, here hidden by a white veil and by the limited access afforded by Croatian authorities. For Qamar and Bachar it would be enough to lift the white veil to glimpse the truth of what Ahmed experienced, challenging the epistemic authority that maintains he died by drowning. "Maybe there are other signs on the body," Qamar continues, "maybe gunshot wounds, or other injuries that tell a different version?" Ahmed, covered by a veil, is a mute corpse, "a body disintegrated of the capacity to speak" (Salvador and Denunzio, 2019), deprived even in death of the possibility to tell his story.

The father of Yasser also rejects the autopsy reports on his son. For years, he has requested the reopening of investigations, not accepting the version that claims he accidentally fell into the water. If that were the case, it would mean no one is *responsible*. With the return of Yasser's remains to Morocco, the parents request a second autopsy, which Moroccan authorities refuse without an official explanation. Now, Yasser's remains rest in Fez, and Ahmed's in the Casablanca cemetery, not exactly in peace.

Focusing on the modalities of managing the dead bodies of Yasser and Ahmed allows us to grasp the tensions between invisibility and visibility, in the conflict between the power dynamics exercised on the body by authorities and the attempts at resistance in the families' demands for clarification. On one hand, there is the need to know, formulated in the request to recover the body, to conduct investigations and an appropriate autopsy examination; on the other hand, denial by authorities. The bodies of the two young men remained floating in water for several days before being recovered by Croatian authorities. Yasser's body is buried shortly thereafter, despite the family's insistent request that it be retained – or returned to Morocco – for further investigations. This treatment of deprivation is also reserved for him once repatriated to his country of origin. Ahmed's body is handed over to Moroccan consular authorities and, after substantial payment by family members, repatriated to Morocco. In both cases, the corpses are subject to summary investigations, which conclude by establishing accidental death, thereby closing the public bodies management process. These modalities reveal that even in death, Yasser and Ahmed are subject to the biopolitical dynamics of the border, which rendered them disappearable and now govern their corpses, exercising control over their material management, their political significance, and their relationship with their families of origin. Both in movement and as corpses, their bodies are not considered worthy according to the epistemic frameworks of the power structures (Butler, 2009), and are therefore *bare* in life, as well as in a death without recognition.

The Demand for Truth for Yasser and Ahmed

From the discovery of the bodies to their efforts to reconstruct what happened, both families reject the official version of accidental death. They emphasise that this is not the truth: not having a truth to reconcile with is what prevents the families of Ahmed and Yasser from being able to move forward. In their search for answers, they mobilise to gather information, demand investigations, and to identify

those responsible for their loved ones' deaths. Each family begins, in their own way, to pursue accountability.

In September 2025, I travel to the place where the bodies of Ahmed and Yasser were found. There is a bridge, the riverbed, waterfalls, and a forest all around. I go with Marijana Hamersšak, a local researcher, and selma banich, artist and activist, both working on migration issues. They explain that, in previous years, this passage was active along the Balkan route, and that consequently the level of militarisation was high and pervasive throughout the territory. They recount that border police used to patrol the bridge, thereby pushing people on the move to travel along the water to avoid being seen. "The waterfalls look calm," they point out to me, "but walking through them, many people slip".

Tracing back to the people travelling with their sons, Ahmed's and Yasser's families surmise that their sons' falls into the water occurred in both cases during pushback operations. The four young men travelling with Yasser were, in fact, located in Bosnia a few days after the young man's disappearance. The testimonies of Yasser's travel companions report confused and conflicting versions regarding the moment of the man's disappearance: some say he threw himself into the river, others that he chose to go alone before the police arrived, still others that when the police arrived, everything was very chaotic and they scattered. The police arrive, and shortly after, Yasser is floating in the river, while his companions are deported to Bosnia. The way Yasser disappears seems to have no reliable witnesses.

Regarding the travel companions of Ahmed, it appears the police intercepted them while crossing the river: they are arrested and taken to a police station, and Ahmed's body is recovered three days later in the water. The survivors, however, have not been available to provide their account of the events to the family, leaving the precise circumstances of Ahmed's death unverified and contested.

Qamar and Bachar take on the burden of managing identification and repatriation procedures for their uncle, Ahmed's elderly father, who they feel could not bear this weight. Their initial response is to seek support: they contact an Italian association working on disappearances, requesting assistance in pushing for further investigations. But they soon retreat from this path, determined to shield Ahmed's father from "further suffering" in a situation where, as Bachar emphasises, "we will never know anything anyway". Left with no viable avenue for truth, they carry the thousand questions about their cousin's death in isolation, bearing the weight of epistemic violence that denies them answers while compounding their sense of vulnerability.

Noureddine and Maryam, Yasser's parents, face a different trajectory. When their son disappears, they launch a search campaign that transforms into a demand for clarification once his body is found. They experience the violence of enforced distance – unable to reach their son without a visa for Croatia – and must manage the absence from afar, immersed in feelings of oppression and powerlessness. Since Yasser's disappearance, they have undertaken sustained mobilization through public protests. In this process, they connect with European solidarity actors, inserting themselves into and actively mobilizing transnational networks focused on border deaths. Their efforts include filing complaints with Croatian police, pressuring Moroccan authorities for action, and seeking intervention from international bodies.

The first time I meet Yasser's family, Noureddine shows me a folder thick with documents: photos and data reconstructing Yasser's journey and the moment of his disappearance. There are images, posts, and information collected online about the people his son was traveling with and the *passeur* he had entrusted himself to. Noureddine contacted them one by one, collecting their testimonies and meticulously cross-referencing the information. There are maps, autopsy reports, and the death certificate. The printed sheets are filled with handwritten notes – contradictions, reflections, questions.

It is the reconstruction work the family has conducted in their attempt to find answers about their son's death: a private archive that, in Taussig's (1984) sense of the power of documentation in contexts of violence, constitutes an act of counter-power, a claim to knowledge within an oppressive system. Nouredine has translated his dossiers into Croatian, English, and French and shared the material with Croatian and Moroccan authorities, as well as with international police. He has sent over 200 faxes to the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support his demand for investigations but has received no response.

In November 2020, he launched an online petition addressed to the Attorney General of Croatia, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Attorney General of the Kingdom of Morocco, demanding the reopening of investigations. The petition gathered over 6,000 signatures. The text reads:

"I demand the truth about the real events that led to the tragic death of my son YASSER [...] declared 'drowned' [...] by the Croatian authorities. His body was found [...] and buried [...] without my consent, without informing me [...] even though in my numerous and continuous communications with the Moroccan Embassy in Zagreb and the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs [...] I clearly requested and strongly insisted that my most basic right to keep my son's body in the morgue and repatriate it after the autopsy in order to hold his funeral and bury him near me in Morocco be respected. No legal investigation actions are taken by the Croatian or Moroccan authorities in order to reveal the real facts and details of his death. I can't support with this injustice that's killing me."

In this performative act of demanding truth, Nouredine articulates a claim rooted in family ties, asserting his right to know the circumstances of his son's death and to determine the fate of his body – one of his *most basic rights*. Quoting Verdery (1999), the question of body ownership is fundamentally political: who holds the authority to determine a body's public meaning, its management, and memory? Through his meticulous documentation, persistent engagement with authorities, and public mobilisation, Nouredine opposes the biopolitical logics of the border by maintaining an insistent demand for truth, which, since his son's disappearance, has shaped his daily life.

Yasser's Returning Corpse and Contested Restitution

The cadaver of Yasser was recovered in 2020, remained stranded in Croatia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was buried anonymously in a Croatian cemetery. It was in 2022 that the possibility of repatriation finally materialised for the family; still, the parents had different positions: while the father was hesitating, the mother insisted that the body be brought back to Morocco. By asking for the body, Maryam wanted her son, somehow, to return to her. Not knowing where he was created an unbearable void: Yasser was everywhere and nowhere, present in every place except beside her. "It drove me crazy to know he was far from me", she shares. She calls him back to keep him close: the void of disappearance is partially filled by the materiality of a corpse; the funeral becomes a moment to gather the family in prayer for his soul. At least now his body is in Fez, where she can visit him, reclaimed from the border's power that had denied her that proximity even in death.

Nouredine, however, was at that stage uncertain whether he wanted the body returned. Part of him wanted it to remain where Yasser had died: "Yasser was killed in Croatia and should remain there. Passersby should see that my son died there", he said. From his perspective, Yasser's body testifies to the violence he suffered and represents its culmination: it is an archive of the structural violence endured by a body that sought to move but could not. Removing Yasser from that place, in this view, means making room for invisibility. For Nouredine, the displacement of that body enacts the

completion of a process of erasure: a body that was first buried so as not to be visible is now exhumed and moved to leave no trace. By removing him from that site, Yasser's story is detached from the violent context that produced it and can no longer materially bear witness to the injustice he experienced.

After years of oppression and denial of recognition, Nouredine does not recognise his son in that corpse. It is what his son has been reduced to: a lifeless body that drifted for days before the police retrieved it, buried anonymously, truthless. A body rendered expendable by the border, now returning as a corpse that, unlike Yasser, boards a plane to cross borders and come home, bearing the marks of violence that go unpunished. By rejecting the cadaver, Nouredine demands a full restitutive return of his son, which is impossible without an established truth about what happened.

This refusal to accept the body evokes the stance of some of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who did not want to receive remains exhumed by the Argentine government, insisting on the slogan "Aparición con vida" – *they left alive and must return alive* (Edkins, 2011; Gordon, 2008:115). If the government treated returning bodies as a means to settle the claim, the *madres* made it clear that this was not what they sought. This apparent contradiction becomes legible as a refusal to accept a depoliticised death: receiving remains without a public acknowledgement of responsibility by the state was not the restitution they demanded. *We want them alive, because they were alive before, and you must explain why they return in pieces*. This position is powerfully articulated by one of the madres, Mercedes Moreno: "I'm asking for her alive, because if she isn't, I want to know who killed her and I want that assassin put in jail. If I ask for her as a corpse, then I am killing her, not the one who assassinated her" (Edkins, 2011:16). By refusing this type of official death, they kept their loved ones alive to demand political recognition.

Nouredine reflects a similar position, by claiming that private ritual is not enough to close the story that Yasser tells: a story speaking of border violence, of structural injustice and repression. As he explains:

[My son] died on May 31, 2020, and I received his body on November 26, 2022. So two and a half years. [...] he died at the age of 27. And since then, we have been waiting for him, unfortunately. And my case is the case of many women around the world and here in Morocco. [...] I am not the only one experiencing this situation. There are many families who are experiencing this situation.

Keeping Yasser undead makes him escape from a depoliticised death and contests the failed resolution of this story. Not grieving Yasser – figuratively, since his body is buried but does not rest in peace – suspends him between categories of living and dead, giving him a public life to protest the violence of deprivation and denial of recognition: now he is *haunting as a spectre* (Autcher, 2014:101), disrupting frameworks that deprive him of political significance.

In this path, Yasser's body no longer speaks only for him, transcending his personal experience. It testifies to a young Moroccan whose safe mobility to Europe was denied and who died at the border – his body as evidence of border violence (M'charek, 2018). It stands in for many others for whom, and for whose families, the claim is now being advanced. Maryam talks about the many Moroccan bodies in Croatian cemeteries, "which might belong to families who do not have the resources to repatriate them or to search for them." Those bodies speak to her of the injustice inflicted on families who "do not have the possibility of getting their children back", a right denied to those who, unlike her, lack the personal, relational, and economic resources to mobilise. "But it is unjust; it is not that because we got an education, we are entitled to this right," she says.

Yasser now embodies the injustice of other unrecovered or invisible bodies and of families left without truth, narrating and denouncing the exclusionary mechanisms that systematically produce disappearability. Dwelling in the space between unrecognized death and life, he strains to refuse to die and to recall what is hidden, excluded, and removed, naming a collective and structurally unjust experience.

VI.IV. *Our fallen comrade*: Yasser's body in the solidarity space in Croatia

I came to know the stories of both Ahmed and Yasser through a Croatian activist who is part of an informal network of solidarity actors engaged in supporting people on the move along the Balkan route. This network is not structured but composed of various individuals – activists, researchers, artists, predominantly Croatian – working in informal ways, particularly engaged in accompanying the relatives of people who have gone missing at Croatia's borders. Examining how they relate to migrant bodies at the border allows us to trace the practices through which the dead body is accorded visibility and meaning within a sustained political and affective infrastructure. The solidarity network relates to both Ahmed's and Yasser's bodies, yet in distinctly different ways. In Ahmed's case, the network activates to support the repatriation process, engaging with the family to address their expressed needs. In Yasser's case, they initiate a more extensive mobilisation meeting the family's political demands. In what follows, I focus on Yasser's trajectory to examine how his body becomes inscribed in a sustained mobilisation and is incorporated into a political trajectory that keeps open the narrative of his life and death.

Their encounter with Yasser's body is mediated by a trans-Balkan network of local associations monitoring border deaths. When the young people travelling with Yasser are pushed back to Bosnia and reach Sarajevo, they report his disappearance to a local solidarity group, which in turn contacts activists in Zagreb. From the information that there is a corpse in the Karlovac area, a search begins that will eventually lead to the recovery of Yasser's remains along the Mrežnica river.

Zagreb's solidarity network meets Yasser as a dead person: they encounter him through his corpse and resignify it to give voice to the violence it bears. This encounter sets in motion a process of *domestication of grief* (Mirto, 2019), in which Yasser's fate is claimed as belonging to them through a form of affective and political appropriation. Some local activists recount having followed burial practices, tending his grave, visiting it and trying to keep it dignified.

Two activists from the network accompanied me to the cemetery where Yasser had been buried before the exhumation. On that occasion, we brought flowers to the unnamed graves that had taken his place: the solidarity action – addressed to Yasser and to others – is articulated through gestures of care performing the intimacy of this relation. When Yasser was repatriated, they accompanied the coffin's departure at the airport to give their "last farewell". This proximity has been sustained during the years when he was buried in Croatia and continues even after his material presence is no longer there. The political dimension of the relation is performed through the inclusion of Yasser's story in demonstrations against border violence, which are carried out via media campaigns, artistic interventions, and public protests.

Yasser's parents met Zagreb's solidarity network online; from this encounter, a relationship of support and exchange developed. In September 2025, Yasser's father planned a trip to Croatia – his first visit since his son's disappearance – and invited witnesses to accompany them and document the experience.

As already mentioned, the Croatian authorities denied the family visas, while I manage to travel to Zagreb.

While I found myself relating to the absence of his family in the places where Yasser's afterlife was shaped, I was struck by how persistently present he remained in the spaces I frequented. When I entered the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, the first thing I noticed was the portrait of Yasser's face hung on a poster at the centre's entrance (Fig. 7). It is part of the "Memorial of Passage," an artistic installation created through a collaborative process between the Women to Women Collective and the ERIM research project in 2021. The memorial depicts the faces of 35 people embroidered on fabric: men, women, and children from different territories – including Palestine, Morocco, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan – who died while crossing Croatian borders. Among them is Yasser, portrayed wearing a sweatshirt and glasses. The exhibition description defines the artwork as a "spiritual and political" message:

By commemorating the lives of the people who have died on the migrant train in the Balkans, whose lives were taken by the relentless European death regime, we call for an act of excavation, paving the way for individual and collective healing, a passage from the normalization of border tragedies to communal learning, empowerment, and care.

The work's title bears a dedication: *to our fallen comrades*.⁴¹



Fig. 7 – Yasser in the Passage Memorial, WWC, online source.

I find the same image in other spaces linked to the solidarity network and beyond: in the office of a charitable association, on the stage of a public conference on social issues, in artistic campaigns organised in public spaces. The image punctures those sites with Yasser's presence, kept visible and constantly present, even though his body has been moved from Croatia and his family remains far away. Through these commemorative and symbolic practices enacted by solidarity actors – spanning both private and public spheres – Yasser's story is woven into an anti-border narrative, politically positioned. Yasser's body acquires symbolic meaning within a trajectory that articulates solidarity in response to border violence: it is inserted into what Innocenti (2023) calls a *temporary emotional community*, a relational mourning experience in which the death of an unknown person assumes personal and political meaning. His story is inscribed into an affective and political infrastructure contesting the Croatian government's involvement in securitarian migration policies, but not only that: commemorating Yasser opens the way to overcoming violence toward a process of transformative justice (Palomba, 2023) that aspires to collective transformation. Establishing truth – for Yasser and for

⁴¹ The dedication in the Memorial recalls a Croatian poem dedicated to the partisans who fell in the anti-fascist struggle: it emphasises that deaths at the border are political, since they are produced by – and in opposition to – the violent border regime.

the other fallen comrades – is a necessary part of this process, which is political and intimate together. In this experience, Yasser is kept alive to mediate a demand for justice that begins from his personal story in order to transcend it and embrace an experience that is shared and that speaks for all.

VI.V. The Impossible Restitution

Unlike most of the ethnographic accounts that compose this research, these two stories tell of bodies that return, carrying material evidence against the boundless condition of disappearance. These specific experiences of disappearance at the border find their completion in the return of lifeless bodies, opening the conditions for narrative closure and responding to the need to know of the families. Yet the bodily return does not bring resolution to the demand for truth; rather, it opens new configurations of claim-making, mobilising a broader set of actors and reactivating, in new forms, the contested terrain upon which truth and recognition are negotiated.

To follow the demands for truth and justice that these stories carry, I have traced the movement of these bodies, mapping the intimate, relational, and political trajectories that their disappearance and return generate. The returning cadaver presents itself simultaneously as a material trace, a site of ritualisation, and a terrain of contestation, subject at times to the repressive dynamics of the border, at times reclaimed by families and solidarity actors.

The relation between these latter actors and the bodies of Ahmed and Yasser is mediated by the experience of the border, whose violence is inscribed in the corpses themselves, in the intimate bonds it interrupted and continues to generate even in death, against the constant backdrop of the international mobility regime. Elusive and resistant to closure, they give form to the injustice of a system whose power operates through the repression of bodies and the determination of their meaning. They are resignified in order to be kept within the sphere of appearance – brought "into the realm of visibility to be significant" (Autcher, 2014:119) – so that they may bear witness to their own histories and to the violence inscribed upon them; re-politicised, in this way, so as to sustain the visibility of the act of oppression that produced their deaths and to forestall its erasure.

For the Zagreb solidarity network, these bodies constitute yet further testimony to the structural injustice of the border regime. For the families, these bodies speak of a violence that penetrates the intimate fabric of everyday life, bearing witness to the weight of oppressive relations that shape the condition of many Moroccan families and young people – and not only them – within a world order that systematically forecloses their mobility and their lives. In this process, the returning bodies do not close a story or offer a definitive answer to the demand for truth: they produce new questions – anguish, haunting, determined – articulating, in each instance, a profound claim for recognition.

Drawing on these stories, we go back to the question from which this chapter departed: how can a disappeared person be brought back? How can they be restored to those claiming a bond with them? Situating the stories of Yasser and Ahmed, we are called to imagine what it would mean to restore to a parent their child – their aspirations, their possibilities, their need to find their own way – or to return a member, suppressed at the border, to a community that imagines itself borderless. We can say it cannot be done. And yet, if the impossibility of restitution is, on one hand, the ground upon which the political force of the demand is sustained, on the other, perhaps this is no longer where the claim ultimately rests. In persisting in their pursuit of truth, Nouredine and Maryam, and the Zagreb solidarity network, enact a gradual displacement of the claim itself, moving beyond the singular loss and the recovered body, to implicate the border as a structural condition of violence, one that continues,

relentlessly, to produce disappearance and death. Their demand inscribes itself against the systemic reproduction of this violence, articulating a call for accountability that is not contained within the temporality of a single event, reaching, instead, across past, present, and future.

What these stories collectively assert is that individual experiences of disappearance and death cannot be restored while the system that produces them remains in place. They articulate demands that are, by definition, impossible within the border system itself, because responding to them, to produce truth and enact justice, would mean deconstructing that very system, calling its foundational logics into question. Within this framework, as the Croatian solidarity activists make explicit, restitution cannot be conceived without structural transformation: a transformation that belongs to the present tense, oriented toward a future yet to be realised.

Conclusions

“[...] haunting aspires to keep those whom it hails in an interminable state of arousal, remorse, agitation, and vigilance. Accordingly, it defers resolution of the immediate or general crisis to a utopian horizon.” (Lincoln e Lincoln, 2015, p. 211)

This thesis has been an intense and at times unexpected journey. Giving space to stories of disappearance and death at the border was the initial objective; the way in which these stories began to interact – with one another, with me, with the world at large – revealed itself gradually, in a succession of reflections that still I feel important to unpack and interrogate. I close this work, therefore, with far more questions than I started with, and with the need to continue engaging with the issues that the different stories and experiences have raised.

While writing, I remained in contact with the main interlocutors of this thesis – family members, people on the move, activists – following the threads of stories that are still waiting for outcomes, resolution, justice. In the meantime, news of ongoing shipwrecks – accompanied by the demands of survivors, family members, and friends seeking to recover traces of the disappeared – accumulated in the background of my days. The need to tell and to return, however partially, some measure of recognition to stories of disappearance is itself overwhelmed by the relentless accumulation of deaths, pushbacks, and deportations at the border, continuously interrupting, and pressing upon us, with renewed urgency, the question of when it will end. Our horizons appears now saturated with stories held in suspension, with missing bodies, with echoes gathering from across the seas – from Palestine, Guinea, Sudan, Iran, Lebanon, and the list does not end here – where the violence of the world continues its work of erasing bodies and the social worlds they inhabited. The sea mingles these stories and our, binding together the living and the disappeared into an unresolved condition of loss.

What disappearance does is to continuously blur the boundaries between things, overlapping stories, situations, and people that resist definition – creating a condition in which we speak of memory for something that is not, in principle, absent, not past and, above all, not over.

Engaging with disappearances at the border makes it difficult to draw clear lines between past and present. People have been disappearing at borders since before the 1990s, without this ever being fully accounted for, in a bordering process that appears to be intensifying. Thousands of people disappear at sea, under the violence of border authorities, or that of the environment itself. They return to us one by one, in the demands of their families, in recovered bodies, in our own limits that increasingly accumulate claimed absences. They show us that violence knows no borders, that it risks expanding until it submerges us all, within an ever more oppressive and constricted world order. Borders – and the political regimes that shape it – are haunted, on multiple levels, by the violence they produce, and it will become increasingly difficult to continue ignoring this.

To attend to the border as a haunted space means attending to what pulses from within it: recognising that, alongside stories of movement, bodies jumping fences, barriers, there are spaces opened and inhabited by the removal, by what was there and is no longer. There are tensions, bodies lying still, aspirations, moving absences, graves; there are the voices of those who are no longer present and of those who, among the living, are in dialogue with them. The border is here understood as a site of persistence, of return, of violence propagation, mingling times and spaces, blurring the boundaries between things and rendering the line between presence and absence irreducibly porous.

The different chapters of this thesis have sought to make room for some of the experiences inhabiting it, mobilising hauntology to attend to the obstinate return and persistence of what has been removed

and rendered removable and to follow absence stories. There are people on the move, who in the very choice to move confront viscerally the possibility of disappearing: mirroring themselves mortal in the absence of their companions, they enact practices of meaning-making, relation, and memory through which the absent are given a ritual, anchoring the disappeared to the collective experience of transit. The removed body negotiating its own removability, inhabiting it, and resisting from within for the sake of its own presence.

There are the families, who, far from the border, catch the echoes of its violence, build an intimate relation with it and, in socialising the profound disturbance that the absence of their loved ones creates, render their unjust experience public. Their demand carries the blurred contours of those they are missing, navigates across temporal registers, and invents new epistemic and relational practices through which sharing it, becoming an urgent, necessary, and stubborn demand. A demand that becomes embodied when the body is recovered: no longer deferrable, the returning body renders concrete the need for justice, exceeding the body itself and calling for a surpassing of the border as such.

In their different attempts to resist and contest total removal, diverse experiences of disappearance persist and return. Each departs from an intimate encounter with violence – disturbing, terrifying, anguishing – and through the sharing, problematisation, and socialisation of that encounter it calls it into question, giving rise to alternative practices of interpretation, narration, and imagination of the order of things. Heterogeneous stories of haunting – traversing, in different ways, spaces, bodies, relations, and imaginaries – speak of the same political landscape. Hauntology, in this trajectory, provides the analytical tools to grasp their points of departure, the dynamics through which they propagate, and the directions of possibility that this shared journey opens: to see how absence continues to produce political relations, memorial practices, and claims for justice, and how, in this persistence, the urgency of resolution makes itself heard.

In this journey, listening to – *giving voice to* – ghosts makes sense insofar as they render it unbearable for us to remain within the world order we inhabit, and necessary to imagine it otherwise. The bodies lost at the borders ask this of us, as do the hands collecting them, along with their loved ones, their fellow travellers, and those who, on the move, face this end in the hope that it is not absolute. Gaza asks this of us too, with its dead we cannot count, yet they weigh on our backs, on our streets, across the sea. They tell us that truth means accountability – and, first, awareness – and that justice means transformation.

Transformation is, in fact, a word I arrive at only at the end of this journey. It lingers in the background as I re-read the interviews and ethnographic notes, observe the points of convergence between stories and claims, and construct – each story a piece – the collective account of the deaths and disappearances I have gathered. I am able to define its meaning more clearly, and to grasp its full significance, through Yasser's story. He opens and closes this thesis, leaving it – fittingly – unresolved. To transform – these stories shout it – is the only way to restore what borders had taken away.

If stories of disappearance, on one hand, collapse the distinction between past and present, on the other they passionately propel us toward the future, gesturing toward a horizon where the world might be otherwise. The present is haunted by what has not yet been realised, remaining, stubbornly, a site of hope.

The stories of disappearance have shown us how absence becomes a site from which intimacies, relationships, frameworks of language and understanding, practices, and relations between people, citizen and state, citizen and world, are transformed. They offer a space in which to question, rethink,

and deconstruct. An occasion to imagine. Imagination – and imaginary – are words I have used frequently throughout these pages. In Arabic, *khyal*. *Khayalu mā kayfāreqnīsh* – the restless imagination.

In the theatre workshops, some of the exercises played with temporalities, moving the actors' bodies between past, present, and future. The lived experience of the frontier was rendered intertwined with memories of one's own history and with projections of the future. The circles of the future contained schools, hospitals, celebrations and music, footballers, children: things that do not yet exist, but that could be seen from there, at the foot of the border. Within the theatre space, a life beyond the frontier becomes possible, and possibility itself becomes aspiration. That same circle proposes imagination as a space of resistance to the border, and here the border is opened, deconstructed, condemned, and, ultimately, erased.

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APPENDIX I. Organizations Involved in the Research

For security and confidentiality reasons, not all organizations involved in this research are reported in this appendix. Certain entities have been omitted or anonymized to ensure the protection of participants and compliance with ethical requirements.

AIDE NGO

Alarm Phone Sahara

AMDH – Association Marocaine des Droits Humains

AMSV – Association Marocaine d'Aide aux Migrants en Situation Vulnérable

AFVIC – Association des Familles des Victimes de l'Immigration Clandestine

Association des Parents et Amis des Disparus au Maroc

AMSA – Association Migrants Solidaires d'Afrique

Caritas Internationalis

Caritas Maroc

CEFA Maroc

Clinique Hijra

Collectif des Communautés Subsahariennes au Maroc

Coordination of Families of Moroccans Stranded or Detained in Iraq and Syria

DDM – Délégation Diocésaine du Maroc

Droit et Justice NGO

ENASS NGO

EuroMed Rights

Fondation Heinrich Böll

Fondation Orient et Occident

Forum Vérité et Justice

GADEM – Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'Accompagnement des Étrangers et Migrants

Heinrich Böll Stiftung

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

NNK – No Name Kitchen Ceuta

OMDH – Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains

Progetto Mondo

Associazione Casa Sant'Antonio

Croissant Rouge Maroc

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Mancano corpi, ma questi raccontati sono quelli con cui attraverso spazi, relazioni, momenti, fantasie, desideri ed emozioni di rivoluzione

Bodies are missing, but these narrated ones are those with whom I move through spaces, relationships, moments, fantasies, desires, and emotions of revolution.

A friend wrote this poem in June '26 and gave it to me – the bodies that are missing make me feel how many bodies there are, beside me, behind me, ahead of me. The bodies present are a necessary support in my relationship with absence, which marks a path that is, in many passages, painful. Thanks to those who were present along this path – at times, constantly, in intense moments – to my family, to my families, to my friends, to the spaces that, in Genova, in Morocco, in Zagreb, in Bologna, and in Palermo, welcomed me and made me feel cared for.