

A Dialogue on Absence

Between Aleksander Motturi, Kitso Lelliott, Martina Tazzioli and William Walters, based on questions provided by Erling Björgvinsson and Nicholas De Genova

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Erling Björgvinsson, Nicholas De Genova, Kitso Lelliott, Aleksander Motturi, Martina Tazzioli, William Walters

Erling Björgvinsson and Nicholas De Genova: Each of you engages with the challenge of materialising absence related to the theme of migration in your work be it the absence of voices, documentary evidence, historical accounts, archives, investigative access, and so forth including the absence of access to the conditions of possibility for knowing or evaluating the truth. In your work, how do you conceptualise, visualise, analyse, or narrate these absences? And what epistemologies do you draw upon when doing so?

William Walters: I would start by proposing a distinction between kinds of absence, or, more specifically, kinds of absence/presence. If we were to follow in the tracks of Actor Network Theory, we would say that all thinking and writing involves a play of absence/presence. If we are analysing, say, soil erosion in the Alps, the soil in question is absent inasmuch as most of us who talk about soil erosion in the Alps are actually not present with it, physically in the mountains. Which is a good thing, since all those visitors hasten the process in question. Nevertheless, soil erosion is made present through various chains of translation and inscription, which transport traces of the soil into scientific forums like conferences, laboratories and academic journals: they make the soil present in the form of tables, statistics, photos, testimonies, narratives, perhaps even samples, and so on, accumulating the translated soil in particular settings where it can be worked on by experts. However, there is a second, more specific kind of absence/presence, which has to do with a cluster of situations we could group loosely under the heading of “secrecy”, all those situations in which certain actors take particular steps to obstruct these translations. They make it difficult to gather and transport traces, accounts, data, etc. about specific events, places, issues.

Take, for example, sites of detention and deportation. Access to detention centres in many countries is closely guarded. Social researchers, journalists, and, as we have seen very recently, even US Congress people are often not very welcome. What happens? Does the issue become absent in scholarly or public forums? Does it become absent in some kind of absolute, total way? I think such absolute absence is a kind of limit or extreme case what legal scholar David Pozen calls “deep secrecy”.^[1] But in the vast majority of cases something leaks, word gets out,

etc.

Aleksander Motturi: I agree. Does art not in a broad sense give shape to this kind of leaking out? I am interested in this conception of absence associated with secrecy. In literature when we are successful we are often able to fictionalise the deep secrecies that are at stake. It makes me think about the diversity of forms of human interaction that take place between people in unequal power positions at borders. Some are violent, such as those we see now when European border police attack refugees. Others are of another character, more solidaristic, caring and even loving. Around ten years ago, for instance, I co-wrote a play with Johannes Anyuru in which a love story between a refugee and an officer in a Swedish detention centre was the focus.^[2] I am sure there are also many examples of non-fictive narratives that encapsulate those sorts of relations and interactions in depth. The forms of fiction always depend on the idea of freedom that is given when there are no restrictions of the sort that come with (scientific) truth claims. As writers we quite often work as if we were embedded within the realm of deep secrecy.

William Walters: I am interested in these latter situations and wonder: what changes in the chains of inscription, translation, and transportation when the issues in question are restricted, classified, closed, taboo, or just generally difficult to access? I see my work not primarily as inventing methods or tools to make absences present although that is sometimes necessary so much as studying the forms that knowledge takes when absence takes the form of secrecy. I will give some examples. Because there is quite a bit of secrecy that surrounds deportation flights, rumours start. You get the circulation of rumours about, say, the use of drugs to sedate people undergoing forced deportations. Another example: because some of the most coercive forms of deportation happen behind closed doors, reconstruction becomes a form of making absence present. This reconstruction can take various forms, each of which generates different kinds of affect. There is the reconstruction of a forced removal that the Swiss activists Augenau produced, using actors, but which was performed in a clinical, technical manner. There is also the short video I discussed in my contribution, *Seamless Transitions* by James Bridle.^[3] Here the scene of deportation is reconstructed using heterogeneous data sources, which are translated into a CGI film. But no attempt is made to make any humans, whether deportees, guards, police or others present. There are no humans or any other forms of life in the film, just a series of interiors. Instead, the palpable absence of humans is made into a presence itself.

Aleksander Motturi: The absence of humans is made present either with a theatrical reconstruction of a forced removal or advanced CGI techniques. The computer-generated images in James Bridle's work are very strong and revealing, as it is not only humans that are absent, but, in a way, humanity as such. Everything, every image, is computerised, not only the targets of the drone operators but also the immigration appeal courts, where, James Bridle informs us, "the security service is presenting evidence against you, and you don't get to see that evidence".^[4] I came across an interview by Bridle and his collaborator, Jörg Majer, who says that they "didn't want to take it to an absolute real space, we wanted it to feel like it is still idealised or somehow virtual. So we are not pretending to know exactly what it is like in other words. It was important to have a slightly diagrammatic feel to the whole experience."^[5] Here, again, we have the unknown at work at the core of the creative process, but this is also intended, as Bridle explains: "The whole court is designed so that parts of it are hidden from public view. So unlike most courts, which anyone can go and visit, there are sessions in that court that no one is allowed to see, not even the person who is being defended."^[6]

Martina Tazzioli: Questions of absence and presence and their dynamic interplay are, first, strictly connected to the politics and regime of visibility, that is, to the epistemic and political conditions that establish, within a specific spatial-temporal conjuncture, what can be seen and what remains under the threshold of visibility. This

is quite glaring in the field of migration, where absence and presence are eminently a political issue, before and beyond the actual *being-there* of migrants. Indeed, migrants might be *there*, that is physically present in the public space, however, remaining invisible. This concerns not just migrants' presence, but also their acts: in fact, when migrants act, collectively or individually, they are often turned into riotous and threatening subjects and their struggles are criminalised as dangerous or discredited as non-political. This is in fact a way of being (politically) invisible, despite being present to the point that such a presence is feared, or, on the contrary, there might be small groups of a few migrants, what I have also called "scanty multiplicities", which are associated with a "crisis" or an "emergency" and their presence in space becomes a source of social panic. The "fear of small numbers" shifts the attention from absence/presence towards question of intolerable or excessive presence, which however, does not depend on numbers and quantity as such.^[7]

In light of that, as William argued, the epistemic stake is less to unveil and highlight the presence of those who are made absent, than to study and disrupt the economy of political visibility that sustain unequal and racialised power relations. This is a strategic consideration as well. Indeed, turning absence into a visible presence might be counter-strategic: for many migrants' physical presence and persistence in a certain space depends on not being (too) visible. These are ultimately also the limits of counter-mapping practices, when these are conceived in terms of making visible what remains absent on the maps.

Yet, if it is important to nuance questions of absence/presence in relation to visibility and invisibility on the one hand, migration is an interesting analytical lens for the more in-depth unpacking of the theme of absence, or better, of the ghostly absence on the other hand. Indeed, in studying data, statistics and numbers about migration, we are constantly confronted with unknown and undecidable absences. Think about statistics of migrants who died at sea or of missing migrants: despite the attempt to estimate the gaps between official numbers and actual deaths, these latter could never be counted exactly due to the so called "ghostly shipwrecks". Thus, via migration, questions on absence and presence push us to problematise the quest for evidence that is quite widespread in the social sciences. So, here the question is: to what extent does the interplay between absence and presence enable us to think another politics of knowledge than the one centred on providing evidence?

Aleksander Motturi: I think that the question of imagining another politics of knowledge is indeed an important question that needs to be addressed. It has to do with the politics and ethics as well as aesthetics of representation, which is fundamentally always at stake here. In addition to the conception of absence as deep secrecy and the idea of ghostly absence we might add another category: the demonised absence that is present in the politics of fear. I am not sure evidence as such is the problem in epistemology, but the problem is perhaps to be located in the currents of ideas that make us interpret evidence to support and strengthen the fear of deep secrets and demonised ghosts. Independent of what the evidence is pointing at, or even proving, the idea of crisis is being activated. In describing immigrants as "being (politically) invisible, despite being present to the point that such a presence is feared" Martina has I think captured the double bind at stake here.

Martina Tazzioli: Finally, questions of absence and presence emerge on an epistemic level, in terms of the politics of knowledge that sustains our way of writing about migration. Absence can be associated with a lexicon of lack, void, failure, disappearance, loss and inadequacy. But it can also be mobilised, in a more positive way, as an analytical starting point to address how borders work, not (only) through constant surveillance and total identification, but also through much more dispersed and loose mechanisms of control, through partial non-registration and through the will of not governing and not seeing too much. This also helps in re-conceptualising absence itself, not as lack of something, but in a more productive way, as a part of heterogeneous modes of

governing through confusion. Therefore, from this point of view, absence is not necessarily the opposite pole of presence; if we focus on migration governmentality, both notions presence and absence should be analysed beyond binary oppositions and, instead, rethought from within this range of undefined, blurred conditions like opacity, confusion and governing through partial non-control.

Kitso Lelliott: The dismissal of othered histories, those articulated in forms that are not legible through empirical modalities of engaging with the past, are of particular interest to me. I think through absence as knowledges that come from a place of epistemological difference from the hegemonic that has been particularised as Western and that has come to be articulated through languages of academic norms. Taking this as a foundational instance of elision, I think about the multiple manifestations of absence produced by this exclusion of epistemic difference. I think through the residues of the nineteenth-century idea that people without history or proper knowledge more broadly are of a lesser tier of personhood. I work in the space of negotiation and tension between various forms of knowledge and the implications this has for the hierarchisation of humans. I am particularly concerned with histories pertaining to the oceanic transits across bodies of water that both separate and connect communities, engaging with the ways in which histories of power and subjection that formed over bodies of water live in the contemporary. I connect the dispensability and killability of othered bodies to the denial of knowledge as it is epistemologically different from the hegemonic and histories negated as they are articulated through these othered epistemologies. As such I work to make space for these othered knowledges, explore ways of articulating difference so that it cannot be dismissed and reconfigure absence so that it might be understood as not being absence at all. Working through visual arts I use my body as site, as repository of the many permutations of erasure, while being a body enunciating across multiple modes of articulation so I might “be” and “sound” out across those many erasures.

Aleksander Motturi: As a fiction writer I do not really draw upon epistemologies, in the sense of theories of knowledge at least, not that I am aware of in the process of creative writing, which of course does not mean that there are no epistemologies that are useful for a reader in understanding literature in general; the distinction William makes of different forms of absence is clarifying. For fiction writers there are manifold ways of shedding light on existing mechanisms of power and knowledge, but literature can never let itself be reduced to the philosophical endeavour of illuminating the condition of knowledge. There is at the same time always an absence in yourself, which you do not know about when writing, an absence you do not fully understand, but that somehow “demands” an answer, which cries out for redress or is urgently in need of a sort of solution, or resolution. This inner absence residing in the heart of the writer is there also when the work is focused on external absences, gaps of knowledge, the world out there (we), among the wretched migrants of the world, not only bare lives that are in the hands of epistemologies, power, wealth. As a writer of fiction you need to be receptive to the void residing in yourself as well as the absence of voices, documentary evidence, all those things you mention in your question. And each work of literature requires its own method of operating with absences.

If I can recall all methods and ways in retrospect I would need too much space to describe how I have been working so far, but there seem to be a frequent use of different layers of subjectivity in my work, both in the essay film *Thaumazein*, and some of my novels and in other works I have been engaged in.^[8]

In *Thaumazein* I reference clips from a documentary on the case of Peter Ekwiri, who was dumped by Swedish migration authorities in Ghana after he fled from the war zones of the border between Sudan and Uganda. The reason they dumped him in Ghana was that they did not believe in his account of the flight lines, and in order not to seem arbitrary they made use of a private company, called Equator, which claimed that through a kind of

“language analysis” and studying his accent in broken English they could detect Peter Ekwiri’s true, national, identity. My aim was not simply to remind the public of the atrocity, but also to reveal how migration authorities worked in secret (with language analysis) as well as the consequences (of Peter Ekwiri being dumped in the wrong country). I was involved in his case after the documentary was broadcast on Swedish television, and knew he was still in prison until we started campaigning for him through the Clandestino Festival quite soon after the first edition of festival he was released from prison. I became more interested in what interests were served by the image of Peter Ekwiri as refugee and victim of violence from a democratic European welfare state which is a type of trauma fetishism that reduces the refugee to a victim without the capacity of reflecting on the world. This is also the focus in the case of my latest novel *Onåbara* (The Unreachables) in a Syrian refugee who wants to tell his story to a writer in Sweden where he has been granted asylum is portrayed.^[9] In my novel *Broder* (Brother) it is even more apparent, as there is a quite systematic use of different levels of subjectivity of the writer, of me as a writer, of me as brother and the writer’s transcribed sessions with his psychoanalyst.^[10]

Erling Björgvinsson: In relation to the politics and ethics of representation, how do you negotiate your position as artist, writer, or academic when engaging in such work? Specifically, how do you negotiate your own position in relation to the absence you are working with? And how do you address such gaps for those to whom you address your work? How does it affect the way you understand publics? How do you negotiate what to disclose and what not to disclose?

Martina Tazzioli: In my case, I started to be interested in this topic in relation to migration through my encounter with counter-mapping and critical cartography. Counter-mapping does not solve the limits and conundrums of representation, in particular if conceived in terms of unveiling what is hidden and of making visible what is rendered invisible. Yet, counter-mapping can help in problematising our understanding of the politicality of migration. First, by questioning the assumption that migrants struggle according to what Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos have called the “double R axiom” of Rights and Representation.^[11] And, in a more positive manner, counter-mapping might be used as a way to generate an analytical sensibility about things that are under the radar of the political, or that are not assumed to exist. In this sense, the task of engaging in a non-cartographic counter-mapping approach responds to this challenge of undoing representation or bringing it to its limits.^[12]

William Walters: When we speak of absence and presence, or secret and public, it would be a mistake to project a great, singular binary onto these terms. When Kitso speaks of “epistemological difference”, it is important. So is the notion of “ghostly absence” that Martina offers us. These terms challenge such binaries. When knowledge of something be it an event, a process, a violence, a struggle is “absent”, it is usually absent in a relative rather than absolute way. Let me illustrate this point in very concrete terms: when I first became interested and concerned with the question of deportation, I found it striking that within activist networks and communities of migrant solidarity you could see that planes, airlines and airports featured very prominently as symbolic fields, as zones of intervention, etc. Activists would identify Lufthansa or British Airways as very complicit in expulsions, and they would do so, obviously, for tactical and polemical reasons.

But when I read what scholars had to say about deportation, how they theorised it, this matter of aviation machinery was quite marginal. The focus was on law, policy, states, security, but not really on the means of transportation without which this regime could not function. Those ‘transits across bodies of water’ that Kitso mentions were missing. So it was present in some regions of practice, but largely absent in others. My work on air deportation has thus in part taken off from the insights produced by those activists. I made no great discovery, uncovered no great secret, instead I have worked by expanding on a knowledge, an insight, a tactical

point of view that concrete struggles brought into being. I hope that my work will shift the focus somewhat within academic research, and perhaps even feed back into those struggles. According to Andrea Brighenti, Maurice Merleau-Ponty once said that the invisible is not something that happens to entirely out of sight. Rather, it is “here without being an object”, and helping to forge things as objects is a contribution scholarship can make.^[13]

Aleksander Motturi: I don’t know, I am ambivalent about the concept of negotiation when it comes to how I interpret the relation I have to my own work. There is also an absence of focus on the diversity of desires at the bottom when we speak of representation of the wretched of the earth, if I may use that Fanonian phrase. The idea that we as artists or scholars or activists have to do work in order to do justice to the absent voices is at the centre, certainly. This urge is unavoidable in every emancipatory struggle (for justice), in which the hegemonic representation of an identity is part of a power machinery that serves the status quo. But I am also interested in the question of understanding the structures behind this struggle, in the double bind that appears in the discourse of trauma.

Nicholas De Genova: Questions of absence seem to also intrinsically relate to questions of *presence*. How does your work aim to evoke some sort of enduring presence, connection, or continuity that remains in the wake of an apparent absence?

Martina Tazzioli: I think, as Nicholas suggested in his article “The Queer Politics of Migration”,^[14] the slogan of the migrants’ mobilisation in the US, “we are here, and we are not leaving!”, very well encapsulates the persistent, enduring presence of migration that exceeds any state strategy apt at making them invisible or taking them away. Similar slogans have circulated in Europe over the last few years: in 2015, for instance, migrants stranded in the Italian city of Ventimiglia, at the French-Italian border, chanted “We are not going back”, a motto that subsequently circulated across Europe. Through such a motto they observed that their presence in Europe could not be erased. This is for me related to questions of temporality and with engaging in a politics of knowledge that connects produced absence with fleeting temporality, and the sedimented memory of migrants’ struggles.

Kitso Lelliott: From the onset I do not separate myself from the questions that I deal with: I work from my own experience of being marked as other in a number of different ways, and work to articulate from my own positionality. While I do engage with themes that are in many ways distant from myself, in time, geography and circumstance, the work I offer deals with some underlying concerns that I too am implicated in. It is from a space of an us/we that I focus the thrust of my interventions. While my experience is not the same as that of a girl on the threshold of the Mediterranean giving up everything she has, and more, to get to Europe, or of a young woman 300 years ago forcibly held in the bowels of a ship headed to a future unknown to her, our lives are all marked by a racial and gendered logic that counters out experience of the world. It is from my experience of this world that constitutes us as dispensable that I might speak my own truths from my own experiences that are marked, or touched by theirs and in turn my enunciations are constituted by a common among us/we that might shift something in a world that marks us as absence.

Aleksander Motturi: I used to tell myself that giving attention to the particular case of Peter Ekwiri as I did when Clandestino Festival was born almost two decades ago that I am tying my hands behind my own back. I will not be able to continue the development of the festival project without the presence of the questions that once engaged many people in its creation through the case of practised refugee dumping or “deportation” which, in my vocabulary, was a word previously used only when it came to the Holocaust trains. In that sense, the festival

can be seen as an immaterial statue, a cultural monument in miniature to how border politics has been installed in Europe on the one hand, and all the forms of activism, art and cultural engagement that have been there to resist the very same politics on the other. So it remains in the wake of an absence of reason. At the same time, the ideological framework has no doubt gone through quite some radical changes during these two decades. If anything, we are perhaps reminded of how much worse things have turned out, as a project of this kind would have never been able to start up at the moment.

Erling Björgvinsson: How does absence relate to your understanding of the relationship between historical reality/ facts and fiction, visualisation, and simulation?

William Walters: I would not want to suggest an absolute opposition between on the one hand a world of facts presumably pertaining to the real, and on the other what we call fiction, simulation, or imagination. I think the regions on either side of this great boundary, this great division, are crossed over and co-constitutive in all sorts of ways. As Aleksander mentioned earlier, fiction has often been a really important medium for articulating “deep secrecies”, which cannot be expressed otherwise. Some of this is nicely explored by Luc Boltanski in his book *Mysteries and Conspiracies*.^[16] In it he looks at the genres of crime fiction and, somewhat later, the spy novel, which emerged at the early decades of the twentieth century. He relates these new genres to shifts that were happening in the social sciences, which, taken together, posited the existence of a *real* reality, a deeper reality, often a sinister reality of malevolent forces. So you could say that certain developments in fiction and aesthetics played an important role in shaping what we consider to be our modern real, the deep real against which we judge the fictional. The point is not to understate the differences concerning these regions of knowledge production. Science and literature are different regimes of knowledge after all. The point is perhaps to understand their functions and effects from a strategic point of view. Under state communism and certain other forms of dictatorship fiction became an important mode of truth-telling, a viable and tactical mode of expression, when other modes of truth-telling were prohibited, either by censorship or threat of violence. Timothy Melley makes a not dissimilar argument in his book *The Covert Sphere*.^[16] Why are movies and books about “the national security state” so popular? In part because it is in this domain that we can know, debate, deliberate the activities of secret government, activities that official secrecy insulates from the scrutiny of the political public sphere. So fiction and simulation compensate for a public debate that official secrecy precludes; they mark the point of its impossibility. Spy fiction becomes a kind of ersatz publicity.

Nicholas De Genova: In your work, absence also seems to be intrinsically related to issues of historical contingency, ephemerality, and erasure, if not processes of outright historical eradication, suppression, and silencing. How do you mobilise a critical attention to absence in a manner that heightens our sensitivity to these questions of erasure/eradication?

Kitso Lelliott: By being and enunciating, by taking up space and speaking my truths through my many languages, both sanctioned and delegitimised, I hope to work on the reality that would negate my being and the epistemes that can account for it in a way that is not already marked by negation. I engage with the possibilities for speaking from spaces of elision through a conception of ghosts and haunting: I start from the idea of elision with reference to enunciations and knowledges produced as marginal through processes of disavowing the legitimacy, value or presence of ways of knowing and being that are “othered”, as they are different from hegemonic norms that emerged in the Global North. Elision, however, suggests that the subsumed is always, and regardless of its omission, present among and a part of that which is spoken, written and recognised. In my enunciation, there is a “presencing” of the ghostly that articulates the elided towards the possibility of that which is denied, making its presence in relation known in a moment of haunting. It is through this language of the

spectral, which is integral to my engagement with the elusive slippages in time, space, “reality”, hegemony and absences in relation to enunciations from spaces of elision, that my work attest to the presence of multiple contesting epistemes and their contingent realities. By locating myself and the focus of my work in the space of the elided, I aim to enunciate from precisely the space that hegemony would disavow, marking the presence of what had been produced as absence.

William Walters: I find this language of ghosts and haunting that Kitso mobilises very forceful and important. I like the idea of the ghost as that which marks an excess, a life or event passed that cannot be consigned or wholly contained by the past, something never entirely buried nor predictable. It’s not a language I have used much, but I ought to. Perhaps that’s down to my childhood fear of ghosts! As Avery Gordon has shown, haunting should not be alien to sociology; it should not be the monopoly of psychics and occultists.^[17] It is true that to insist on the materiality of haunting might rob the concept of much of its affective force. At the same time, I think any sociology of haunting should factor in questions of technology without being reductive about haunting. That point is nicely made by Philip Ball in his wonderful cultural history of the invisible.^[18] He shows, for example, that when the photograph first emerged in the 1830s it was seized upon as a means to reveal the invisible as much as it was used to document the visible. In other words, I don’t think ghosts float freely across time and space. Our notions of haunting are always materialised not just in histories of loss and violence but in technical practices as well.

Nicholas De Genova: Is an engagement with absence somehow inherently or necessarily also about loss, longing, or yearning? In your work, are these themes a pertinent way to appreciate what is at stake? How so?

Erling Björgvinsson: And how do you address the risk of re-erasing or producing yet another absence when working with absence? How does the violence of erasure play a role in your work? Does any form of creative and analytical work inevitably entail certain amount of violence? If so, can such violence also be productive?

Kitso Lelliott: This is a concern that has always troubled my work, but I have found this troubling to be productive and generative in many ways. It challenges me to keep my thoughts and enunciations orientated around a collectivity that I am, although only partially, implicated in. My interventions have been developed through the presence of a body that is denied value, Being or ontological resistance in the “real”, shaped by coloniality. The relationship between the body of this elided Being the ghost and the world that produces it as such, is where I hope a troubling of the hegemonic might occur. I use my own body to mark this space that is not just of significance to my experience alone. I offer my body to a collectivity, so that I may become a vessel for others to enact their desires and agency. Here I am thinking through ancestrality, as I am concerned with histories that attest to the elided humanity of subjugated peoples, I rely on “othered” modes of recollection, on memories and ancestralities alongside [His]tories and archives to re-member them. I am interested in the idea that marginalised subjects are implicated in each other’s stories, because they share a denial of self on account of their humanity being invalidated. I consider the implications of my performance and embodiment of the ghostly presence and how this gesture is tied to ideas of possession and lending one’s body to be inhabited by spirits. I navigate this problematic of re-erasing in this move away from a discrete singular authorial I as writer or artist and taking up a place within a collectivity, which I draw from in making the enunciations that concern us all. This always entails a negotiation and a communion in a space where I cannot be separated from the concerns the work I offer is enmeshed in.

William Walters: When we represent the world, we inevitably do that in ways that are partial, selective, positional, hierarchical. When we pass those representations off as universal, then, yes, we engage in a kind of

violence. That said, I am cautious about what we call violence, how we use this word, and would rather not be inflationary with it. There are all sorts of violence in the world, I don't want to trivialise that. Therefore, I don't agree with the notion that *any* form of creative work involves violence. Not all omissions, selections, not all lines of approach involve violence. If I am a singer and I perform Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne* as an up-tempo dance track, am I committing a violent act? To him? Not really. I may be trivialising the song, I may be making a fool of myself, but I don't commit an act of a violence. But I could take a different song, something that was sacred or very special for certain communities, and then, perhaps, a form of violence might be at stake. I would rather diversify our language here and canvass a range of terms to capture the space of differentiation and reinterpretation that representation entails. There is violence, yes, but there are also relations that are better described with other words. So I do not find violence everywhere just as I am cautious about finding everywhere mobility, networks, or any other fashionable categories. Let's be judicious and economical in our choice of words, not inflationary.

Erling Björgvinsson and Nicholas De Genova: Absence may customarily be imagined to be primarily a spatial matter, but it is plainly also about time and temporality. How does time figure in relation to absence, in relation to historical instances you engage with and in the work you produce?

William Walters: You are absolutely right that we should consider not only space but time when we speak about absence, or as I prefer absence/presence. It seems to me that the legitimacy of a great deal of what is done in the name of "immigration control", or "fighting illegal immigration", in the countries of the Global North depends upon particular modes of forgetting. It requires, or is bolstered by, particular forms of colonial amnesia. In Canada, governments have issued public apologies for certain injustices that the Canadian state has perpetrated against migrants and refugees arriving at our borders, or working in our mines, fields, forests and railways, at particular times in the past. For example, the way in which the Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi Germany aboard the steamer SS *St Louis* were turned away from Canada's ports. This has been recognised and indeed commemorated as an injustice through public art and speech. The point is not to dismiss public apology as an act. It can be very meaningful and important for people who live with the legacy of these wrongs, and for society at large, which need to see injustice recognised. But it raises the question whether governments are not, in our name, sometimes perpetrating injustices that look very similar when boats arrive on Canadian shores today. The past has to remain absent for these acts in the present to have a semblance of legitimacy. Or perhaps the past has to remain not so much absent as contained, bordered, placed under a different heading, seen through a different lens, grasped at a different time with another epistemology. Grasped as "history", "World War II", colonial racism, etc. I am interested in forms of knowledge, forms of creativity that transgress those epistemic borders, in transversal lines which bring those past events into an enduring conversation with the events in the present that have more than a passing structural similarity. That is something I am working on with Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani with the set of essays we have collected on Viapolitics.

Martina Tazzioli: Yes, I do also think that it is crucial to engage with temporality, which is a theme that tends to remain partially under-theorised and unaddressed in critical migration and border studies. Linking up with the above question about enduring presence, the enduring presence of migrants should be analysed both from a spatial and a temporal perspective: even if migrants are chased away, their presence and their struggles for staying have shaped the space. For instance, the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe can also be analysed from this counter-perspective: instead of assessing the extent to which migrants' presence is a burden for European states according to the EU's official narrative we should re-articulate the discourse around the theme of the temporality of migrants' struggles and presence. How has migrants' presence shaped the European space? And how can we retain a memory of such a presence that tends to be fleeting and ephemeral? How to reactivate the

memory of such an enduring, although invisibilised presence and of migrants' struggle in the present? Asking these kinds of questions allows the mobilisation of a political genealogy of struggles and presences that are discredited as sub-political, and at the same time envisaging and opening up political spaces that are not there, yet. In other words, engaging with temporality and absence might have a transformative task, instead of only being a matter of retracing what has been partially lost.

Erling Björgvinsson: How does love, desire, or spirituality play a role when engaging with absence?

Aleksander Motturi: Are those concepts not absent when scholars, artists and activists in general are engaged in questions of absence? Or it seems to me that love at most is reduced to some kind of sentimentality when it comes to its portrayal within the discourse of border politics, like in the paradigmatic case of *West Side Story*. There are exceptions, certainly. In the literary field we have writers such as James Baldwin for whom those concepts were always invoked, affirmed and given thick descriptions, not least in some of his novels, among which *Another Country* is probably the best example.^[19] Maybe this is connected to the invisibility of those being there, because there is no space to conceptualise love among identities that must be reduced to being dangerous.

Footnotes

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