SOLROUTES

Beyond absence: an ethnography of border violence struggles in Morocco

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Funded by the European Union (ERC, SOLROUTES, 101053836). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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Index

1. Introduction

The third node of Antenna Morocco has been dedicated to the analysis of how disappearances and deaths at the borders generate relationships of support and forms of collective mobilisation, pursuing the reflections started during the second node. The report of the second node, "Questioning Solidarity for Border Disappearances", offered a preliminary account of the observation of search practices undertaken by family members and travel companions of people who disappeared at the border, highlighting how such disappearances generate ties and experiences of solidarity.

Our field research followed stories with different but interconnected trajectories, linked to the experience of disappearance, death and borders: stories of people who disappeared along the routes, of repatriated bodies, of shipwrecks and of waiting. We documented the disappearances of Moroccan citizens and sub-Saharan people on the move - in unauthorised transit in Morocco - who disappeared or died at the border while trying to reach Europe. In parallel, we met travelling companions and family members facing the uncertainty of not knowing what happened to their loved ones and developing a deep sense of injustice.

In these stories, disappearance creates an absence that becomes a powerful presence for those close to the disappeared. The disappeared impose themselves through their non-presence, creating a void characterised by uncertainty about their fate: the hope that they are alive coexists with the fear that they could be dead and the anxiety of having no means for getting information. In the cases in which the body is found, the ritual of mourning can take place, but this does not always fully satisfy the relatives' need for truth, while they still wonder about the circumstances leading to this end.

This report aims to explore the tension between two opposing dynamics: on the one hand, the control mechanisms that produce the absence and invisibility of deaths and disappearances; on the other hand, the practices of solidarity that transform absence into a space for mobilisation and protest. By analysing stories of disappearances and searches, this study examines how the experience of absence generates new forms of relationship, belonging and political action, and how these practices propose counter-narratives to the invisibility of border violence.

At the centre of the investigation is an analysis of how disappearances and deaths at the border are produced by specific political regimes and legal systems; and then the ways in which family members and fellow travellers process the absence, transforming private mourning into a public question of justice and truth. These forms of processing and mobilisation necessarily confront a socio-political context characterised by a strong control of civil society and a public narrative rigidly directed by the State, and which requires constant negotiation of the ways of navigating it.

The reflections shared here do not claim to be exhaustive, but aim to contribute to a deeper and more situated understanding of the social and political dimensions of border

disappearances, acknowledging in these experiences the generative potential of forms of solidarity and resistance.

2. Introduction to methodology

2.1. Methodology

This report is based on data collected over a six-month period, from September 2024 to February 2025, through field research conducted in various cities in Morocco: Rabat, Casablanca, Oujda, Tangier, Tetouan, and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Each of these cities represents a significant node in the trajectories of mobility and mobility-disruption, and presents networks of solidarity to migration. The field research was developed through meetings with family members of people who disappeared or died during border crossings, with people on the move (PoM), and civil society actors engaged in support and advocacy actions in Morocco.

The methodology adopted was primarily based on the ethnographic approach, relying on participant observation as a tool to capture daily practices, social interactions, and how absence is experienced, processed, and transformed into attempts at collective action. The prolonged immersion in the field allowed for establishing relationships of trust with the interlocutors, an essential element for accessing narratives and spaces not immediately accessible.

In parallel with ethnographic observation, unstructured interviews were conducted with various actors from the aforementioned categories, particularly Moroccan families, sub-Saharan people on the move (mainly from Sudan and Guinea), and civil society actors - Moroccan, sub-Saharan, European - belonging to associations, NGOs, or informal networks. The meetings with family members represented a particularly significant moment of the research, offering access to the intimate dimensions of absence and the daily confronting strategies. Interviews with people on the move highlighted the collective dimension of the experience of disappearance, showing how this fits into a broader experience of precarity and invisibilisation. The dialogue with civil society actors finally allowed for understanding how solidarity relates to deaths and disappearances at the border and attempts to organise support. These experiences were observed both in their private and public dimensions, analysing how the practices of processing absence and forms of mobilisation fit into the Moroccan public context and clash with the political apparatus of control and containment of civil society.

The Generative Narrative Workshop (GNW) of the third node involved collaboration with the Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI) through two joint exploratory missions in Morocco, aimed at observing the practices of detention and internal deportations experienced by people on the move in Morocco and analysing them according to a combined legal-

sociological perspective. This collaboration resulted in the report "Untraceable: Border practices and enforced disappearance in Morocco".

2.2. Methodological reflections on the ethnography of absence

After the conclusion of the GNW of the first node of the Morocco Antenna[1], the participants expressed interest in continuing the theatrical experience. For this reason, together with Dado, the theatre instructor, we organised a second workshop with the same group two months later, collectively establishing an agreement on what the workshop would entail.

The first day was marked by an intense expressive activity that revisited the performance of Rabat, life in Morocco and the violence of the border regime. However, only one of the eleven participants showed up on the second day. After another day of absence, the workshop was suspended. We could not understand why the stage had remained empty all these days. The participants found individual reasons for their absence, and later some relationships within the group disintegrated, without us really knowing what dynamics had occurred.

Yet the empty stage seemed full of meaning. What was it telling us? It was not just the absence of performance, but rather the renunciation of representation.

Doing ethnography of absence is reminiscent of the image of the empty stage. Working effectively on disappearances means researching something that exists in its negation of appearance. It means constantly relating to absence, something that was and should be there, but is not, or at least is not visible. It means relating to people and places imbued with this non-appearance, in constant contact with absence. The presence of absence is part of the ethnographic experience. I record it in my ethnographic diary, after meeting Noura, a woman whose brother, Mohamed, disappeared in June 2022 along the Canary Islands route:

> *One thing strikes me about this visit: the non-presence of Mohamed. When I think about it, I recall the living room of Noura's house, where I sat to chat with her grandmother and her. Next to the room where we later lay down with little A. to watch the evening TV series. These walls infused with Mohamed's story, who is now gone. He too was sitting on those sofas. There is a photo of Noura's father who died from an illness last year – he is still there in this way, the body is buried, Noura talks about him and gets emotional, sends a kiss towards the photo and another towards the sky. Where is Mohamed? His photo isn't on the wall, he is nowhere*[2].

For us ethnographers, used to being in a field and relating to what is there, it becomes difficult to give an account. Navaro examines the research methods of social scientists who study mass violence in its aftermath, and who must contend with the absence of survivors, the

[1] The Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop held in Rabat in March 2024, together with a group of young people on the move originally from Guinea and undocumented in Morocco, as part of the SOLROUTES project.
[2] *Fieldwork diary,* Beni Mellal, *March 2024,* Michela Lovato.

erasure of traces, and the concealment of truths. "The ethnographer," she writes, "is faced with the unknowability of what they are studying"(Navaro, 2020). She thus proposes using "negative methodologies" to describe research methods that deal with absences and concealments: for example, the study of traces, silences, and testimonies of relatives.

There is a central void, and the researcher makes a series of attempts to reach the centre of that void through the stories of witnesses, travelling companions, family members, through the traces left behind and the study of the context.

The stories encountered in Morocco are fraught with uncertainty: uncertainty about the fate of the disappeared, uncertainty about the future, about possibilities. *Is he alive or dead? Was he killed by the police or did he fall into the river? Will we have news or not? Is he in prison in Italy or has he been kidnapped?* Uncertainty determines the narrative, rich in attempts at interpretation, suppositions, fears, and hopes. An absence that is inexplicable. On the part of the researcher, the relationship with uncertainty is also profound: how to interpret the stories and data, how to read the context and convey all this, in a situation where many things are difficult to explain. "A disappearance produces not only the absence of the person" writes Navaro (2020), "but also the absence of knowledge. (...) Under the constant threat of the irrecoverability of the story." I write again after visiting Noura:

> *I enter Mohamed's house. I never knew him, but now I am with his family. My mind rationalizes, I tell myself that he disappeared in a shipwreck almost a year ago, on one of the most dangerous routes from Morocco, and that it is very unlikely that he is alive. The Atlantic Ocean, every time I see the enormous waves, I wonder how a boat can cross them while staying upright. On the other hand, there is the tension of hope that he is still alive, which they keep close by speaking of him in the present tense, considering the options of where he might be: in prison, somewhere in Spain. I perceive his desperation to leave, so much that I would like to leave myself. And now the wait for Mohamed to return through that door, and start playing with the canaries*[3].

For the reconstruction of stories, we rely primarily on dialogue with three different groups of actors: the families of the disappeared, travel companions, and solidarity actors providing support. Through them, there is the attempt to narrate the experience of disappearance, the background of the border and the processes that disappearance produces, be they political or social. The family members and travel companions, involved in the research, proved to be the main custodians of the stories of their disappeared loved ones, being the keepers of memory and the principal actors in search efforts. The interlocutory relationships on the fieldwork required managing two things: on one hand, the relationship with the person who was speaking, strongly marked by the sharing and the difficulty in controlling the emotional burden

[3] Ibidem.

of the dialogue; on the other hand, the impact these had on the interviewer, the experience of the so-called vicarious or secondary trauma (Smith et al, 2023).

To address these ethical and methodological issues, I attempted to adopt a reflexive approach regarding the interviewer-interviewee relationship. I always sought to establish a transparent relationship with my interlocutors, clarifying from the outset my identity as a researcher and the objectives of my work, favouring a non-directive interview approach. In an attempt to return narrative agency to the interviewed subject, I tried to reduce my intervention in structuring the discourse, allowing a self-managed narrative to emerge and giving the interlocutor decision-making autonomy over content and communication methods. When it was perceived that the emotional burden was becoming excessively burdensome, I would interrupt the conversation or suggest a pause.

Regarding the self-reflective dimension of the research, protocols for self-care and monitoring of the psycho-emotional well-being of researcher were inserted into the methodology; resorting, when necessary, to temporary suspension of field activity or restructuring of interview sessions, inserting myself into reflections on the need for an ethically situated ethnography in the context of research on vulnerable subjectivities and traumatic themes (Benson and O'neill, 2007).

Regarding the relationship with the solidarity field, the research had to face a restricted and controlled civil society space. NGOs and associations working with migrants are subject to direct, profound, and limiting control apparatus with respect to movements and exchanges. The relationship, especially with some actors who proved fundamental for the research, required time, trust, and negotiation.

Morocco, as already described in previous reports, represents a complex research terrain on sensitive issues such as migration and disappearances, characterized by multiple layers of control and limitations. The surveillance regime has generated a climate of generalized distrust that has influenced the collection of ethnographic data. Access to these key interlocutors required a prolonged process of trust-building, characterized by constant negotiations of my position as a researcher, and in general, I found myself dealing with incomplete data, conflicting versions, and inaccessibility to various things.

My position as a foreign researcher simultaneously represented a privilege and a limitation: while it guaranteed me a certain freedom of movement and partial protection, it also accentuated distances and complicated access to certain informal networks, and in fact placed me at a particular level of visibility within the context. I constantly had to negotiate my presence, adapt methodologies, and accept that certain spaces remained inaccessible.

3. The Border Regime and the production of disappearability

> "*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 completely. We were desperate. We called Helena. 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*".[4]

At the end of October 2024, Tely, a key contact for our research field in Morocco, managed to reach Tenerife after embarking from Tan Tan. His journey, which began from Guinea Conakry in 2022 with an extended transit through Morocco, had finally reached its destination: the boza in Europe.

In the interview I conducted with him in Madrid in December 2024, he told me about the moment of crossing. He dwelled on the conditions of the journey: the frightening Ocean, the solitude and invisibility of the crossing, the general fear. He recounts trying to convince himself that many people have crossed and arrived safely, but he is aware that many others have died there. "Do you know how many bodies remain there (*in the middle of the Ocean*)?"[5].

In these years of movement, Tely has lost several friends and travel companions along migration routes; death inhabits the borders, he knows that the zodiac could capsize at any moment. During the interview, Tely lingers on the moment when the boat passengers feared they would die, and then, the arrival of rescue: it is an intense moment, full of pauses and silences. The sentences are short and concise, repetitive. He emerged safe from that border, but the awareness that he might not have made it was profound. "Now I tell my brothers in Morocco not to take to the sea, it's too dangerous"[6] he continues during the interview.

Tely reports the conditions that made him vulnerable to disappearance and death: what Laakkonen defines as *disappearability*, understood as the set of cumulative constellations of precarity that migrants face in unauthorized mobility, which exposes them to disappearance (Laakkonen, 2022). He describes the technical unpreparedness for crossing, the lack of diesel, the fact of being alone in the middle of the sea, beyond the reach of rescue, the unpredictability of the sea. Disappearability is the "threat of dying without anyone knowing it" (Laakkonen, 2022), the condition where the boat could go down without anyone being able to do anything

[4] Interview with Tely, Madrid, 13.11.2024, English, Michela Lovato.
[5] Ibidem.
[6] Ibidem.

or know about it. "I myself at that moment no longer knew whether I was alive or dead"[7], continues Tely, describing how disappearability is an existential condition.

This condition of vulnerability is produced by the contemporary border regime. The lack of access to legal migration systems pushes people toward unauthorized mobility, which, to evade the control system, requires a degree of invisibility. Under these conditions, people on the move are also invisible to possibilities of support or monitoring of their conditions, in hostile environments.

It is important to emphasize how this vulnerability is legally constructed, through a system that illegalizes certain bodies based on origin and status. Migration policies establish a stratified system of illegality with different degrees of precarity and visibility (Gazzotti, 2021), that create consequent hierarchies of illegality, exposing some groups, in the case of Morocco sub-Saharan unauthorized migrants, to greater degrees of violence. The collaborative work with ASGI, as we will see later, aims to deepen the legally constructed dimension of disappearability.

A concrete example of institutionalized violence emerges from the story of Babacar, a Sudanese man I met in Casablanca in 2023. Babacar is a survivor of the Melilla Massacre – when, on June 24, 2022, he and other aspiring crossers were violently attacked by Moroccan police in front of the Barrio Chino barrier. On the other side, Spanish police watched, pushing back those who managed to pass.

Babacar recounts the days of pressure experienced from the police in Morocco, for him who is black and without documents, and the choice to try again when an online appeal calls for a mass assault. He describes the undisturbed arrival at the border, then the police surrounding them and beginning the attack.

> "*They hit us with anything, gas, stones. Some initially managed to escape but I remained, I had told myself 'today either we pass or we die'*[8]".

Of the thousands of people who attempted the crossing that day, 23 people on the move died and 70 are still reported missing. In the period following the massacre, Moroccan authorities worked to cover up the event; identification procedures were not initiated, and even today there are family members and travel companions who do not know the fate of their loved ones. Many people that day were arrested and deported to various cities in Morocco, in precarious conditions and many with injuries: some people have not been traced since then. Disappearability is the threat of dying and that this remains not only invisible but also unpunished. It is part of the social and political construction of the border, which instrumentalizes the Ocean or acts through the direct control of authorities to remove illegalized bodies.

[7] Ibidem.
[8] Interview with Babacar, Casablanca, October 2024, English, Michela Lovato

This dynamic generates a pervasive “culture of terror” (Tecca, 2023) among people on the move, who witness the loss and disappearance of travel companions and friends. For those in movement, the disappearance of the other becomes a constant reminder of one's own possible erasure, producing a condition of existential vulnerability that adds to the already precarious material conditions. And it also has a deterrent effect: since June 24, 2022, Babacar has not attempted the crossing to Europe again.

3.1. The Legal Dimension of Disappearability: the GNW with ASGI

The collaborative work with ASGI has attempted to reconstruct and observe the processes that construct the disappearability of people on the move in Morocco. The object of analysis was migration policies in Morocco, particularly the systematic practices of arbitrary arrests and internal deportations primarily experienced by sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, and the practices of detention and pushbacks at the border. The intention was to observe how these practices are politically legitimized and how they can constitute situations of forced disappearance. According to international law[9], enforced disappearance occurs when: a person is deprived of liberty; there is involvement of authorities; there is an attempt to conceal the situation of deprivation.

In this sense, pairing a legal perspective with ethnographic observation allows us to grasp the more juridical aspects that constitute the violence experienced by unauthorized migrants in Morocco, highlighting the processes through which the legislative apparatus constructs and legitimizes specific forms of exclusion, and genuine forms of institutional violence. Legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012) is defined as the normalized but cumulatively harmful effects of legislative frameworks. The two sociologists analyse how migrants' vulnerability is legally constructed, starting from the convergence between migration law and criminal law as a form of violence. The collaborative work involved conducting two exploratory missions in Morocco, between ASGI and SOLROUTES, and the joint analysis of ethnographic material collected by the Morocco Antenna regarding border practices experienced by sub-Saharans: in particular, testimonies on detention policies and internal deportations discussed in the first node.

This collaboration resulted in the report "Untraceable. Border Practices and Forced Disappearances in Morocco" which analyses border policies and how these may configure situations of forced disappearance. In Morocco, the legal framework of Law 02/03 criminalizes irregular migration and provides for penal measures against unauthorized migrants, determining a systematic illegalization of people on the move. The border produces illegalization, and this condition makes individuals vulnerable to detention and deportation, as theorized by De Genova (2017).

[9] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), adopted by General Assembly resolution A/RES/61/177 in December 2006 and came into force on 23 December 2010.

Several key elements of forced disappearance are evident in Morocco's treatment of migrants. Indeed, the conditions of detention and deportation, which follow arbitrary arrests and do not respect formal procedures, make migrants *disappearable*: during deportations, migrants are deprived of means of communication and are deported to peripheral locations, deprived of support means to return; when arrested, families are not notified of the status and place of arrest, and access to communication with them is not guaranteed. Through mechanisms of illegalization, racialization, and systematic suspension of rights, the border regime creates the structural conditions for disappearance and invisibilization of people on the move.

4. Struggles and solidarity against border violence

4.1. Absence as a space for mobilization

This research examines the experiential and affective dimensions of absence in the context of migration-related disappearances and how it can be configured as a space of contestation. During Tely's sea crossing, periods of communicative disconnection generated deep concern in his social network, including fellow migrants in Taqadoum and our research team monitoring his situation from a distance. This brief episode of uncertainty, lasting only a few days, offers a preliminary insight into the temporal and affective experience of waiting that characterizes cases of disappearance.

The absence of the loved one persists after the disappearance, in the daily lives of those close to them. It becomes a tangible presence, mediated through photos, daily rituals, and conversations. When I visit the home of Haida, Yasser's mother, I am struck by the number of photos of her son throughout the house. Yasser died along the Balkan route in 2021, and since then, his family has been demanding the truth about what happened. In every corner of the house, there is a reference to her son, photos of him as a child or kid, writings of phrases he used to repeat; his bedroom still remains untouched[10]. Mohamed, Noura's brother, whom I mentioned in the methodological section, is not portrayed in photos around his house, but he is constantly present in family conversations: "When will he return..." or "This is my brother's favourite soup"[11] and so on.

People relate to the absence of their deceased or missing loved one in their daily lives. During interviews conducted with family members and travel companions of disappeared persons, various connections are made alongside the narration of their loved one's story. For example, several family members recount that their loved one had attempted to apply for a visa to a European country before embarking without authorisation. After time and money spent, the visa was denied, and therefore, unauthorised mobility has become the only means of movement. Or they share about the conditions of life before their loved one left. For instance, Azim disappeared after departing by speedboat from northern Morocco in 2022. He couldn't find work and didn't have enough money to enrol in university. While telling her son's story,

[10] Fieldwork Diary, Ifrane, November 2024, Michela Lovato.
[11] Fieldwork Diary, Beni Mlall, 27 March 2024, Michela Lovato.

Azim's mother expresses a broader criticism of the socio-economic conditions that drove her son to leave:

> "*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 want to have? So of course people try to leave for Europe because here everything is held back by the government*.[12]"

The relationship with absence pushes reflection on why their loved one left, why they couldn't do it safely, why no one rescued them. On why, in front of a border, some pass and some don't; on what are the structural causes that determine this disparity, and what power relations are determined by borders.

Babacar, Tely, and others describe the violent and precarious life of sub-Saharan people on the move in Morocco, and the frustration of having to daily experience repression from Moroccan authorities, deportations, and arrests. Babacar expresses this frustration in front of the Melilla border, where he decides to stay despite police attacks - "I told myself 'either we pass or we die'."

The absence recalls the injustices experienced by the disappeared persons, their travel companions, and the family members themselves. Alongside attempts to process the absence, there is an awareness that a situation of violence and injustice produced it. Yasser's father continues:

> "*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 fulfil himself. He wanted to fulfil himself as a human being. Isn't it unfair that he couldn't do that in his own country? Isn't it unfair that he couldn't do that freely in Europe?"*[13]

It becomes a matter of justice and addresses social injustices in Morocco and the violence of the border regime. Haida, Yasser's mother, continues:

> "*My son wasn't a criminal, he didn't do anything wrong, the Koran says that the earth belongs to everyone, but you know... It's the system, so he had to take that path. (...) If he hadn't been afraid of the police, he wouldn't have thrown himself into the river, he could have walked calmly. At least in Europe, the police aren't there to protect you?"* [14]

In this process, disappearance becomes a space for claiming rights and solidarity. The stories of the disappeared meet each other, creating bonds based on shared experience. Yasser's parents recount that their son's body was to be repatriated along with those of two young Moroccans who died along the route, but that the supporting funds from an NGO would not have been enough for all three repatriations.

[12] Interview with Fatima, Rabat, February 2025, Darija, Michela Lovato.
[13] Interview with N., Fez, November 2024, French, Michela Lovato.
[14] Interview with Haida, Ifrane, October 2024, English, Michela Lovato.

> "*Together with my son's body, there were two other bodies to repatriate, but the NGO's funds were not enough for all three. So we decided to give them to the other two families, who were poorer than us. I know my son would have wanted this*."[15]

Haida recognizes herself in the suffering of other families, recognizes Yasser's story in that of many others. From these experiences of loss and disappearance arise solidarity bonds between people who share the need for truth and justice. This solidarity arises from the recognition of shared suffering, and becomes the projection of a political community, which rejects the exclusionary logic of the border regime and proposes new forms of belonging based on recognition and the claim for dignity. Babacar recounts this when speaking about the Melilla massacre, which has since become a central moment in the life of the Sudanese community in Morocco:

> "*The 24th of June is a special day for us. Like Independence Day, we remember those who managed to get through and those who died. 24th of June. Every Sudanese person in Morocco knows about it, because they lost a Sudanese friend or brother*."[16]

And Yasser's father also recounts it:

> "*I know that this isn't just my son's story, that there are other people, many other poor, uneducated families who are unable to speak. But everyone has the right to know*."[17]

In spaces of shared grief emerge narratives that, while starting from different trajectories, recognize a common position with respect to the political system. Different stories that unite in the awareness that deaths and disappearances are not accidental but structural consequences determined by the border regime and by internal socio-political injustices. In attempting to process absence, family members and travel companions advance claims that contest the regime of differentiated mobility and the militarization of borders. In this way, the individual's story is inserted into a collective demand for truth and justice.

4.2. Forms of solidarity and repressive context

This section does not aim to delve deeply into the methods of mobilising against border violence. Rather, it aims to introduce the topic, provide a preliminary understanding of the context in which these forms develop, and examine how certain political conditions may hinder or enable certain forms of solidarity more than others.

The impulses of solidarity and protest discussed in the previous paragraphs have to confront the Moroccan context, where the space for civil society is highly controlled and repressed, and where, as we have noted several times, the public narrative on a number of issues is highly directed by the state. Mobilisations for truth and justice for the deaths and disappearances at

[15] Ibidem.
[16] Interview with Babacar, Casablanca, October 2024, English, Michela Lovato.
[17] Fieldwork diary, Rabat, February 2025, Michela Lovato.

the border therefore have to negotiate with a highly repressive environment, with different dynamics depending on the issues involved.

In the case of sub-Saharan migrants, the policies of criminalisation and illegalisation they experience in Morocco make it difficult for them to access public space. Demonstrating in public, moving within the country to search for their loved ones, or simply presenting themselves at a police station would be a risky exposure that would not help their search. The spaces in which they move are therefore private or digital, as already mentioned in the report of the second node.

When it became known that the boat on which Abdelkarim had embarked had been shipwrecked, his companions from Taqadoum organised a funeral for him without a body, in a private house, paying the local authorities for permission. After the events in Melilla in June 2024, a commemorative mass was organised in the cathedral of Rabat, attended by students and people from sub-Saharan Africa on the move. The digital space, as explored in the previous node of the Moroccan Antenna, is used to disseminate reports of missing persons and to denounce border violence.

Regarding Moroccan citizens, they have relatively greater access to public space, albeit controlled. They are not subject to the restrictions on movement imposed on undocumented sub-Saharans and somehow navigate public space by negotiating with the control apparatus. Noura shows me videos of the demonstrations in which she participates with the families involved in the journey during which her son disappeared: in all, they are the relatives of 51 people. She shows me a video of them in front of the Spanish consulate in Agadir, with photos of relatives and banners[18]. During the protest, a mother publicly expresses the frustration shared by the families, carefully balancing criticism of the Spanish authorities with expressions of loyalty to the Moroccan monarchy, a discursive strategy to be able to demonstrate in public. She shouts:

> *We want to know the situation of our children, We want to know if they are alive or dead, The embassies have told us nothing, And the smuggler is still free, We ask the Spanish authorities to help us know something about them, We suffer, Now we live on the street, we live in stations, outside, We have left our homes and our children alone. Long live the king, we ask him to help us find our children, they are all still very young*.

Family members occupy the public space by claiming the family relationship with the disappeared in order to legitimise their presence. They emphasise the recognition of the central power ("long live the king"), and this is crucial to their demand: to have news. The demand has a humanitarian tone, and the open criticism of European embassies and the

[18] Fieldwork diary, Rabat, November 2024, Michela Lovato.

smuggler is part of the Moroccan narrative on migration: the Eurocentric vision to be promoted and the denunciation of the traffickers.

However, the family demonstrations are mediated by local associations that are registered and recognised in Morocco, not informal ones. The association acts as an intermediary, both in obtaining permits and in determining the language of the demonstration. In November 2024, I witnessed a demonstration in Rabat organised autonomously by families, without the presence of associations: various law enforcement agencies intervened to disperse the gathering within a few minutes.

Yasser's family adopts a much more politicised language, explicitly holding the Moroccan government responsible for the conditions that lead Moroccan citizens to migrate and for institutional negligence in supporting families who have lost relatives during the migration process. They publish audiovisual content on YouTube and report that they have demonstrated individually in front of the parliament in Rabat to demand the truth about their son's fate: they explain that they have not received any support from Moroccan civil society organisations and feel isolated in their own struggle. "One day a journalist contacted me and told me to calm down, no one had published my story". "I was making videos on YouTube and an official told me: 'If you stop, we'll help you repatriate the body'.[19]"

Access to and presence in public space is therefore mediated through the use of humanitarian language and open criticism of the European Union's migration policies. There is no space for other types of demands. In June 2024, for example, any demonstration to commemorate the Melilla massacre was banned. In Rabat, a group of activists still gathered to demonstrate in front of the parliament[20]: they were mainly Europeans or activists not operating in Morocco, and some Moroccan activists, still maintaining as a central element of the protest the request to Europe to open the borders.

Conclusions

The third node of the Morocco Antenna aimed to explore the intersection between border regimes, dynamics of disappearance and forms of solidarity in the Moroccan context, highlighting how absence can become a space for mobilisation and political demands. Disappearance and death at the border are structural consequences of a system that actively produces the disappearability of certain bodies. Indeed, vulnerability to disappearance is the result of processes of illegalisation, racialisation and suspension of rights that are legally constructed through restrictive migration policies and border control practices.

[19] Fieldwork diary, Ifrane, October 2024, Michela Lovato.
[20] Fieldwork diary, Rabat, June 2024, Michela Lovato.

The collaboration with ASGI, which represented the GNW of the node, allowed for a deeper examination of the legal dimension of this disappearability, highlighting how detention and deportation practices in Morocco can constitute forms of enforced disappearance. The normative framework that criminalises irregular migration contributes to creating the structural conditions for the invisibilization of people on the move, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa, and accentuates hierarchies of illegality that expose certain groups to higher levels of violence.

The processing of absence is configured as a process with both intimate and political dimensions. Family members and travel companions of the disappeared face the pain of loss and transform this experience into a critical reflection on the structural causes that determined the disappearance. In their accounts, narratives emerge that challenge the social injustices in Morocco and the violence of the border regime, inserting the individual story into a collective demand for truth and justice.

The forms of solidarity that emerge from these shared experiences of loss must necessarily negotiate a highly repressive socio-political context. Public space in Morocco is accessible in different ways depending on racial identity and legal status: while sub-Saharan migrants are confined to private or digital spaces, Moroccan citizens have access to limited forms of public demonstration, provided they are mediated by recognised associations and articulated in a language that does not directly challenge the state apparatus.

Despite restrictions and controls, forms of resistance and solidarity are emerging that, although fragmented and contingent, represent attempts to challenge the regime of differentiated mobility. From private commemorations to collective rituals, from digital denunciations to public demonstrations, practices are outlined that refuse the invisibilization of the disappeared and claim their right to be remembered, searched for and mourned.

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