"Who Are the Rightful Inhabitants of this Earth?" A Critical Analysis of Migration Representations and Border Practices

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Abstract:

Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou critically explore the complexities of migration, power relations, and technology. They challenge dominant rationalities surrounding migration, proposing a nuanced understanding of borders as both territorial and symbolic. The authors' self-reflexive approach and inclusion of migrant voices adds depth to the study. The book critiques recent theories on dehumanization and victimization, offering a multi-layered perspective on border practices.

Wer sind die rechtmäßigen Bewohner_innen dieser Erde? Eine kritische Analyse von Migrationsdarstellungen und Grenzpraktiken

German Abstract:

Lilie Chouliaraki und Myria Georgiou erforschen kritisch die Komplexitäten von Migration, Machtstrukturen und Technologie. Sie hinterfragen dominante Rationalitäten im Zusammenhang mit Migration und schlagen ein nuanciertes Verständnis von Grenzen als sowohl territorial als auch symbolisch vor. Der selbstreflexive Ansatz der Autorinnen und die Einbeziehung von Migrant_innenstimmen bereichern die Studie. Das Buch kritisiert aktuelle Theorien zur Dehumanisierung und Viktimisierung und bietet eine vielschichtige Perspektive auf Grenzpraktiken.

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"Who are the Rightful Inhabitants of this Earth?" A Critical Analysis of Migration Representations and Border Practices

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"'Who are the rightful inhabitants of this earth?' asks Achille Mbembe, and 'What do we do with those who do not have a claim to earth?'" (p. 171). *The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power* by Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou takes the Cameroonian philosopher's conceptual questions as a basis from which to explore techno-symbolic assemblages of inner and outer country borders. Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou are both professors at the Department of Media and Communications of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Both authors have an extensive background on migration and media discourses, with several publications each, making them leading experts in the field of critical border, media, and migration studies.

The Digital Border presents an interdisciplinary examination of migration and mobility practices. It includes on-site observations and interviews near border crossings and in various European city centers, the scrutiny of social media and web projects, and an analysis of online news sourced from various national news websites within the EU. Additionally, it includes a study of four Europe-wide institutional and online grass-roots initiatives. The monograph is thus situated in the fields of critical border, journalism, critical migration (and media) studies, as well as digital urban studies, critical race and class studies, but also photography theory, visual (security) studies, and media ethics. The positioning of the book in numerous research fields and diverse primary sources already indicates a comprehensive study of the border workings as an assemblage, on two levels: the territorial border and the symbolic border. The first section of the book discusses the territorial border, for which the authors conducted fieldwork on the Greek island Chios, an entry point for arriving migrants. For this section, they also conducted interviews with migrants who live in cities such as Berlin, London, and Athens. The second section focuses on the symbolic border (e.g., silencing, collectivization, and decontextualization

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of migrants in media narratives). Thus, the authors share a number of direct quotes of migrants who tell of their feelings of "anxiety […] that their presence in the city is a constant struggle to balance tenuous requirements and prove something" (p. 69). In the words of some of those migrants, "we are not what the media here portray us to be. This is something facing Syrians in particular. We are not criminals. We are not here to take money from the state. The media here is full of those portrayals" (p. 69). Chouliaraki and Georgiou demonstrate a high level of engagement with personal migrant stories, making systemic discrimination in urban cities more visible and more readily understandable for the reader.

The authors' aim is to critically examine and challenge the dominant narrative surrounding migration, exploring its mediation networks and discourses. They propose an advanced theoretical framework that sees borders as both material and symbolic assemblages, emphasizing the interconnected nature of the territorial and symbolic border. The authors advocate addressing issues of exclusion and power dynamics in migration by simultaneously concentrating on physical border controls, such as technological securitization, and the portrayal of migration in Western media narratives and images. This approach requires a profound and rich understanding of migration dynamics and power structures.

The authors succeed in answering "how the techno-symbolic assemblages of the border work (mediation); how [these assemblages] restrict or enable struggle and resistance (agency) [and] how they change in time (historicity)" (p. 19). Chouliaraki and Georgiou meticulously demonstrate how border and migration practices should understood as multi-layered dimensions that involve networks of remediation, intermediation and transmediation, rather than as one-dimensional accounts of humanity and dehumanization, as most of the literature in critical border and data studies suggests. "The network of *remediations*" (p. 20, emphasis in the original) illustrates how news journalism in mass and social media shapes public perceptions of borders. For example, using narratives of illegal border crossings from migrants or their perilous journeys to link "[t]he territorial border as a site of reception […] with the symbolic border and its imaginaries of security, humanitarianism, and migration" (p. 21). Intermediations describe the connections digital networks create between migrants, "security forces, humanitarian groups, [and] local populations" (p. 20) whereas transmediations foster "online connections [and] offline relationships between those arriving and those receiving them (NGOs, activist, volunteers) at various border locations" (p. 20).

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The methodology of *The Digital Border* is innovative and intriguing in that it employs multiple types of primary sources: combining a social sciences approach (i.e., field observations, interviews, statistics and quantitative measures) with cultural studies methods (i.e., media content analysis, qualitative in-depth analysis of migrant narratives), applying recent theories of dehumanization and victimization. It provides an in-depth explanation of how migrants are dehumanized and victimized at border crossings in media narratives offline and online, while at the same time highlighting the shortcomings of those narratives, particularly in their applications of reductive classifications of victim and threat.

The authors draw on some of the most influential scholars dealing with meaning-making practices, such as Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Roland Barthes to critique border and media studies regarding migration narratives, seeking to counter the reductive binary notions of victim and threat. In my opinion, the book's strength lies in the ability to challenge and question migrant representation, which "begins by re-emphasizing that victimhood and threat are by no means a straightforward representation of binaries in the empirical pool of our study" (p. 144). Thus, the authors go beyond recent research, which has so far concluded that migrants are in most cases dehumanized by being treated through sets of numbers and statistics, in addition to the dehumanization at military security at the borders, i.e., through biometric classification or AI-driven technologies that "reproduc[e] the racial biases that are already coded into the humanmade algorithms of their automated classification systems" (p. 34). The authors point to an assemblage of the dehumanization by military security at the borders with "ambiguous discourses of humanization, reflected in […] the selective recognition by security forces of some migrants as 'people like us' and in the denial of such recognition to others" (p. 43). For instance, registration officers valued AI-driven technologies not only for the purpose of security, but also for their speed and efficiency in "reducing the waiting time of families with small children or the sick who 'should not stand in queue for too long'" (p. 42). Indeed, the authors fully recognize the border's dehumanizing effects, but also see practices at the border as an infusion of "tenuous judgments and emotions, where the 'perpetrator/benefactor/victim' nexus can be fluid, rendering biopolitical monitoring a more complex and self-reflexive process than we have seen in relevant literature" (p. 54).

Further, the authors highlight their awareness of their own positionality as privileged researchers in Western academia with its inherent biases as well as being migrants themselves

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who moved from southern Europe to its "'core' and so having experienced, over the years, Europe's own racialized migration and competing nationalisms" (p. 18). It is this recurring humility and self-reflexive tone of the monograph that questions the limitations of recent studies, while indicating the authors' own position in knowledge production that differentiates this book from recent scholarship.

Additionally, the authors include voices of migrants who live in European cities, thus allowing migrants to speak for themselves; on the other hand, they decided not to include migrants from border arrival points into their data collection because they "felt that it would be ethically inappropriate to approach them for quick, 'soundbite' interviews as they stood in line for hours, tired and anxious, waiting for their debriefing interviews or as they tried to rest in the UN camp before continuing their trip" (p. 19). This statement shows that the authors put in practice their ethical concerns, viewing migrants as equal human beings.

The Digital Border is a self-reflexive account that challenges media and border narratives of dehumanization and victimization, while simultaneously interrogating recent literature that presents these narratives as one-dimensional binaries. The authors offer a comprehensive and fruitful critical analysis of the techno-symbolic assemblage of the border and in the words of Achille Mbembe, take up discussions of "those who do not have a claim to earth" (p. 171).