

Migration, race and the racializing strategy of borders

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Let us be reminded that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution

—Toni Morrison, “Racism and Fascism” (1995).

We, the Blacks ... come from a long line of runaway slaves who managed to survive without passports.

—James Baldwin, “Black Power” (1968).

Black is, and Black ain't.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952).

We live in dark times. With perils too numerous and diverse to enumerate, resurgent fascism and ascendant authoritarianism are undoubtedly among the most urgent of these menaces. Notably, the ideological currency of both is ordinarily a reactionary nationalism that, ever more pervasively across the globe, is geared around spectacles of border “crisis” and migrant “invasion,” whereby alarmist discourses animate a more or less explicitly *racial* politics of migration (De Genova, 2005, 2013, 2017, 2018). The data, the mere “information,” even the knowledge, do not suffice if we seek the genuine understanding and the veritable wisdom to navigate the urgency of the intellectual, ethical and political choices before us. I therefore open this short reflection with an assemblage of three epigraphs, all taken from the work of three of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, none of them academics, all of them Black. In a condensed but powerfully evocative way, they refer to the inextricable themes of fascism, escape, survival, resistance ... and race.

The question of the relevance of race for migration studies is a vexed one; however, above all because the question, on its face, tends to be premised on the assumption that we know what “race” is. So, allow me to be blunt: Whenever we treat race as a “natural” (biological) attribute that serves to describe physical differences among ostensibly identifiable “groups” or categories of human beings, we become complicit with racism by recapitulating its fundamental assumptions. Race is not a natural fact: race has no objective validity in biology. Race, therefore, is not a pre-political (“natural”) dimension of identity (neither in an individual nor collective sense). Rather, race is a socio-political fact, produced over centuries of conquest, genocide, colonization, enslavement, and oppressive violence, hierarchy, inequality, and institutionalized legal injustice. Through the short-circuit of “race,” the bodily paraphernalia of heritable phenotypic and anatomical variety among human beings have been regimented and naturalized into crude categories of “group” differences associated with common kinship and shared ancestry,

which could then be ideologically conscripted to codify those eminently social and political inequalities. Race is thus a pseudo-scientific fabrication that has served retroactively to rationalize and justify one of the defining mechanisms for hierarchically sorting and ranking people in our modern era of global colonial/postcolonial (racial) capitalism. As a socio-political fact, race has always been a matter of life and death. Racial identities are therefore eminently socio-political identities and, as such, have long played a vital role in diverse social and political struggles over the systemic inequalities of power, wealth, and prestige. Race is consequently a crucial and necessary analytical category with which to understand the systemic inequalities and injustices of the modern world, but not as a presumably self-evident descriptor of categorical physical differences among human beings. Race is eminently historical and mutable—the ever unstable and contradictory product of continuous and ongoing socio-political processes of “race”-making and struggles over the meanings and consequences of racial distinctions: *racialization*.

There is frankly no way to understand migration in the contemporary world without a critical sensitivity to the central and constitutive role of racialization and the long pernicious legacies of colonial and postcolonial racism. There is, in other words, no adequate way to comprehend contemporary migration processes outside a critical analysis of a global/postcolonial socio-political order that has been consolidated through a centuries-long global regime of white supremacy. From this point of view, we cannot possibly think properly about migration without recourse to the critical insights and analyses of Black studies (De Genova, 2023). The thinkers from whom I have selected the opening epigraphs all happen to have been African Americans, but their thought—as Black people in the modern world—was *global* in its scope and pertinence and intrinsically articulated with worldwide struggles for decolonization, for as Toni Morrison notes, “African and African American writers ... have a long and singular history” of confronting the problems of borders and foreignness (2002/2020:8). Indeed, as Farah Griffin demonstrates, “the migration narrative emerges as one of the twentieth century’s dominant forms of African-American cultural production” (1995:3). That “migration narrative” was always fundamentally about desertion or escape from intolerable oppressive conditions—discrimination, persecution and violence—and may thus be understood to have been both a matter of refugee flight and, no less, a form of resistance. Of course, referring to the “foreignness” of Black people in the New World, Morrison has in mind first of all the experience “of not being at home in one’s homeland; of being exiled in the place one belongs” (2002/2020:8). But these key themes from the Black experience are indispensable for the larger tasks of problematizing nationalism, citizenship, (post)colonialism ... and borders—all of which must be central to any meaningful inquiry in migration studies.

Bringing in the critical perspectives of Black studies not only provides essential tools for thinking about race and racialization, then, but also serves to “de-migrantize” migration studies by unsettling the ossified partition between experiences of “internal” migration and transnational, cross-border migratory and refugee mobilities, and thus also troubling the epistemological and methodological reflexes that recapitulate rigid separations between (“native”) citizens and migrant (“foreign”) non-citizens. Moreover, critical perspectives on race and racism also assist in destabilizing the inescapably problematic distinction between “migrants” and “refugees” that is operationalized as a governmental mechanism for sorting and ranking various human mobilities and ultimately for subjecting differently categorized people on the move across nation-state borders to discrepant forms of control, surveillance and violence. Furthermore, the routine, purportedly “administrative” operations of border policing, immigration enforcement and asylum adjudication often tend to be extravagantly punitive modes of sovereign (state) violence that are overwhelmingly enacted against people who are deemed to be “undesirable” and “suspect” (illegalized or criminalized) non-citizens, and who are likewise very commonly racialized as “ethnically,” “culturally,” or “religiously” inassimilable and inimical to the presumptive “national” identity of the destination country. These often-unstated or dissimulated *racial* features of the domination and subordination enforced against migrants through border and immigration regimes therefore command that their analysis both inform and be informed by the analogous forms of carceral state violence that are targeted upon racially subjugated ostensible citizens (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023).

Inevitably, in a world where a disproportionate number of migrants and refugees hail from the formerly colonized countries of the so-called Global South in search of prospects for a better life in the richest (often formerly

imperial) countries, it is increasingly common that migrants come to be generically racialized simply as “migrants,” or “asylum seekers,” or indeed, more contemptuously, as “illegal aliens,” whereby such apparently race-neutral terms actually signal a kind of amorphous racial non-whiteness that has become inextricable from derisive and derogatory discourses of nativist anti-immigrant hostility (De Genova, 2005, 2018; Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022). In any event, there are affinities and intersections among those who come to be variously racialized according to their particular “foreign” nationality and those racialized “minority” populations of ostensible citizens in the destination countries. Furthermore, the long-term settlement and reproduction of migrant communities commonly become synonymous with the burgeoning of new (or renewed) racial “minority” communities—provoking the perennial anxieties of the dominant racial group over the migrants’ perceived “failure,” suspected incapacity, or alleged refusal to “integrate” and “assimilate.” Hence, every discourse of “migration” tends to be a proxy for unresolved disputes over race.

Again, “race” here must be understood to not be equated with any simplistic partitioning of humanity into some relatively small (if ultimately, innumerable) number of naturalized “racial” sub-divisions, as if they had any objective basis in nature. Any and every “group” difference that can be construed to somehow correspond to common kinship and shared ancestry is intrinsically susceptible to racialization, and racial distinctions constantly mutate and proliferate under distinct socio-political circumstances and in their historically specific contexts. Importantly, this means that distinctions ascribed to various categories of migrants and refugees—putative differences of “national origin” (“Chinese,” “Mexican,” “Moroccan,” “Turk,” “Afghan,” “Syrian,” and so on), or affiliation to larger geographical regions, such as “Africa,” “sub-Saharan Africa,” “the Middle East,” or “Asia,” or linguistic heritage (“Arabs,” “Latinos”) or religious orientation (“Muslims”)—are themselves frequently *racialized* distinctions, and may often assume previously unanticipated racial significance in the contexts of migration. The dynamics of racialization are always historically and socio-politically specific and therefore ethnographically verifiable. It is the task of any properly critical enquiry in migration studies, then, to grasp these processes of racialization as a defining and constitutive feature of what is at stake in the sorting, ranking and bordering of humanity into separate and distinct categories.

And let us be never forget, as Toni Morrison reminds us, that long before there comes a “final solution,” there is—as its necessary and inescapable prelude—precisely this first, preliminary “solution” by which humanity is subjected to the bordering strategy of racialization and the racializing strategy of borders. That is to say, every state border is necessarily implicated in the production of the spatial difference that is most commonly called “national” and serves as much to distinguish between not only the territories so partitioned but also the separate “peoples” inhabiting the spaces thereby divided. As a strategy for producing spatial differences between ostensibly separate and distinct human “groups,” coded as “nations” and thus affiliated by “birth” with common kinship and shared ancestry, borders and the nationalist metaphysics that they uphold are always prone to racialization. This racializing strategy of borders, then, merely amplifies and multiplies the inherently bordering strategy of racialization itself, which is always intrinsically a matter of inserting and enforcing artificial borders that sub-divide the natural unity of the human species into the antagonistic socio-political contrivances of “race.”

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

NA.

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How to cite this article: De Genova, N. (2024) Migration, race and the racializing strategy of borders. *International Migration*, 62, 273–276. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13331>