

Migrant struggles and moral economies of subversion: mimicry and opacity

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ABSTRACT

Border regimes are pervaded by moral economies that justify practices of regulation and control. This article attends to the moral economies that animate migrants' struggles and related practices of subversion. Based on a reading of moral economies close to E.P. Thompson's original formulation of the concept, it investigates the norms and beliefs that are carried by migrants' practices of appropriation. By showing that these practices are, from migrants' viewpoint, just and legitimate insofar as they defend or restore traditional rights, customs and entitlements, the analysis destabilizes dominant framings of migrants as cunning tricksters. Moreover, the analysis of the moral economies of migrants' border struggles allows to distinguish between two different logics of appropriation. To this end, I mobilize two figures of thought from postcolonial theory. First, Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry captures the logic of practices that repurpose mechanisms of control in ways that allow migrants to obtain a visa, asylum, or a residency title (subversion through documentation). Second, Eduard Glissant's work on opacity enables us in turn to theorize practices of appropriation that rely on the creation of ambiguity and multiplicity to counteract authorities' attempts to assign migrants a unique stable identity by means of biometrics (subversion of documentation).

KEYWORDS

Autonomy of migration; biometrics; colonialism; identification; resistance

Introduction

The notion of moral economies has experienced a meteoric rise in the social sciences. It was first introduced by the historian E.P. Thompson (1963) to highlight the moral dimension of looting and other forms of direct action in the context of rising food prices in eighteenth-century England. In border and migration studies, the concept has predominantly been used in two ways: first, to show that migration regimes are pervaded by a set of moral norms and values which inform distinctions between deserving and undeserving migrants along lines of vulnerability and meritocracy (e.g. Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2014; d'Aoust 2017; Fassin 2005; Willen 2015; see also Stielike et al. 2025); and second, to investigate how moral economies – in the sense of the circulation

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and distribution of moral beliefs and values – shape social relations and economic transactions within migrant communities (e.g. Gross-Green 2014; Horton 2015; Isabaeva 2011; Pool 2021; Rodriguez 2015; Simoni and Voirol 2021; Velayutham and Wise 2005). However, relatively scant attention has been paid to the moral economies that animate migrants' struggles within and against contemporary border and migration regimes, as well as related practices of subversion, refusal, and appropriation.

In this article I therefore explore some of the moral beliefs and values that emerge in the practices that migrants deploy to appropriate mobility and residency in the context of today's biometric border regimes. The reason for this focus is that biometric databases and identification practices have become the most central method for state authorities to govern human mobility by translating mobile individuals into legible, traceable subjects (Broeders and Dijstelbloem 2016; Frowd 2017; Leese 2022; Scheel 2023). Through this example, I seek to open up a research agenda on the moral economies of migrants' border struggles that runs against the grain of the two lines of research outlined above. Importantly, it brings the notion of moral economies closer to its original thrust to serve as a 'legitimising notion' (Thompson 1971, 78) that allows us to show that migrants' struggles, just like the struggles of the working class in eighteenth-century England, are not reducible to economic needs or a 'rebellion of the belly' (Thompson 1971, 77). Rather, migrants' struggles and related practices of appropriation and subversion are animated by and carry a set of moral values and beliefs which demonstrate that migrants cannot be reduced to tricksters, 'vile liars and truth distorters' (Griffiths 2012), as they are framed by narratives feeding into the securitization of migration. Instead, the notion of moral economies allows to advance an understanding of migrants' struggles as essentially political struggles over rights and resources that are – from the perspective of their protagonists – legitimate and just. To initiate this research agenda, this article provides a first response to the following question: What are the moral economies that animate and pervade migrants' struggles and related practices of appropriation within and against today's biometric border regimes?

Methodologically, the following analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork on migrants' border struggles in their embodied encounters with biometric databases at various sites of control. These sites relate most notably to the Visa Information System (VIS) in the context of the Schengen visa regime and the digitalization of Germany's asylum regime after the 'refugee crisis' of 2015–2016. These locations include the consulates of Schengen member states, border checkpoints at a North African airport, and the registration unit of Berlin's migrant reception center.¹ The research was carried out in 2012 (consulates and border checkpoints) and 2019 (migrant registration center). In total, my research included more than 20 days of participant observation at these sites and more than 60 interviews with frontline and senior officers, NGO representatives and migrants and visa applicants. Two methodological clarifications are needed in this context. First, some may object that the chosen research sites – consulates and a migrant reception center in Berlin – do not constitute 'real' borders in the geopolitical sense. In contrast, I argue – in line with numerous other border and migration studies scholars (e.g. Bigo 2011; Broeders 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) – that the selection of these research sites illustrates that – due to the externalization and internalization of migration controls beyond geopolitical dividing lines – the sites and forms of border and migration control have multiplied, resulting in the fact that today's borders 'are dispersed a little everywhere' (Balibar 2003, 1).

Second, some readers may wish for more empirical examples of migrants' practices of appropriation and related border encounters. However, the arguments put forward in this article are primarily of a conceptual nature. Hence, accounts of specific border encounters serve illustrative purposes. The limited number of ethnographic accounts of migrants' embodied encounters with the actors, means and methods of control does not, however, constitute a methodological problem. Following Sarah Ahmed, I argue that a particular encounter always carries traces of broader social relations. This is because 'encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular – the face-to-face of this encounter – and the general – the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism' (Ahmed 2000, 9).

The overall purpose of the following analysis is thus to discern two different modes of appropriation in the context of biometric border controls, each of which exemplify a distinct moral economy that drives and animates them. I draw on two concepts of postcolonial theory to unravel and theorize these different logics of appropriation and their cohering moral claims, beliefs and values: Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry and Eduard Glissant's (1997) work on opacity. In this way, the following analysis demonstrates that both contemporary mechanisms of border and mobility control, as well as practices of resistance and subversion directed against them, carry colonial histories, legacies, and continuities.

These arguments are developed in four sections. After reviewing how border and migration studies have taken up the notion of moral economies, I outline an understanding of moral economies that is inspired by the literature on the autonomy of migration (also abbreviated as AoM). This approach focuses on how moral norms and beliefs become manifest in migrants' border struggles and related practices of appropriation. The second section traces the colonial continuities and legacies of Europe's biometric border regime to explain why the subsequent analysis applies two figures from postcolonial thought – mimicry and opacity – to analyze migrants' struggles and the moral norms and values carried by them. The third section draws on research that shows how aspiring migrants use fictional identity documents to try to obtain a Schengen visa, thereby identifying a mode of appropriation that follows a logic of mimicry. The fourth and final section was inspired by an encounter that I observed at a migrant reception center in Berlin. It elaborates on a mode of appropriation that insists on migrants' right to opacity, which works against the attempts of European border control authorities to render migrants knowable and governable by rendering them traceable and re-identifiable.

From im/moral border regimes to moral economies of appropriation

The popularity of the notion of 'moral economy' implies that it has been used in very diverse and at times contradictory ways (Palomera and Vetta 2016). Consequently, any study mobilizing the notion of *moral economy* for analytical purposes has to explicate its own understanding of the concept. The British historian E.P. Thompson invoked a 'moral economy of the poor' (1971, 79) to refute the reduction of so-called food riots in eighteenth-century England to mere 'rebellions of the belly' (1971, 77). To counter this 'economic reductionism', Thompson proposed an interpretation of food riots as a form of direct action that 'operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate

and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc.’ (1971, 79). Hence, following Thompson, a moral economy describes ‘a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community’ and it was the violation and resulting ‘outrage to these moral assumptions’ (1971, 79) – and not hunger or soaring food prices alone – which prompted a crowd to engage in direct action such as the looting of bakeries.

This emphasis on economic relations also characterizes James Scott’s understanding of moral economies. For Scott (1977), the conditions for open rebellion by dominated groups arise ‘when a sense of injustice emerges as a result of the implicit agreement about the scope of tolerable exploitation being broken’, as Didier Fassin (2009, 1247) aptly summarizes Scott’s take on moral economies. However, in contrast to open rebellion and the other forms of direct action analyzed by Thompson, Scott’s analysis focuses more on the moral economies of ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ (Scott 1985). He emphasizes that practices of subversion, such as pilfering, trespassing, poaching or petty theft of grain, should not be reduced to mere coping mechanisms. They constitute important forms of class struggle that are decisive for determining how economic resources are distributed.

However, as the concept of moral economy proliferated across the social sciences, there was a shift of emphasis from economy to moral aspects (Palomera and Vetta 2016). Instead of a set of moral beliefs and values revolving around economic relations in the sense of a moral *economy*, the concept has been increasingly used in the sense of an economy of *morals*, understood as ‘the production, distribution, circulation and use of moral values, norms and obligations in the social space’ (Fassin 2009, 1257). This shift of emphasis from the economy to the moral is also reflected in the concept’s reception and integration in border and migration studies, where it has inspired two main lines of inquiry.

First, scholars have exposed the moral economies that pervade contemporary border regimes and their practices of migration management (see Landau 2025; see also Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2012; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2014; d’Aoust 2017; El Qadim et al. 2021; Fassin 2005; Pellander 2015; Willen 2015). What these analyses show is that, aside from vulnerability (Fassin 2005), there exist a range of other parameters and moral values through which the merit of migrants is assessed. These factors include civic performance in the sense of proving to be a ‘good citizen’, assimilability in terms of ‘cultural fit’, and economic performance, since legal residency literally has to be earned (see Lambert 2025; see Manser-Egli 2025, see also: Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2012; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2014; Welfens 2022; Willen 2015). However, contemporary border and migration management is also shaped by other moral values, such as notions of honor (İşleyen 2018) and ‘moral economies of suspicion’ (d’Aoust 2017) that evaluate the relationships of transnational families on the basis of morally laden understandings of ‘proper relationships’, parenthood and Western ideas of romantic love (Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Scheel 2017; Welfens and Bonjour 2021).

A second line of inquiry focuses on the moral economies within migrant communities and how they shape relations and exchanges within them, as well as related migratory practices (e.g. Alpes 2017; Gross-Green 2014; Horton 2015; Isabaeva 2011; Pool 2021; Rodriguez 2015; Simoni and Voirol 2021; Velayutham and Wise 2005). One important theme within this literature concerns the question of how certain morally informed

beliefs and expectations shape social ties and economic exchanges, such as gift giving or remittances between emigrants and their communities in countries of departure (Gross-Green 2014; Isabaeva 2011; Simoni and Voirol 2021; Velayutham and Wise 2005). However, these moral economies generate immense pressure for both migrants and young people who are expected to migrate, as shown by the frustrations, feelings of guilt and coping strategies of young people who cannot or do not want to satisfy the demands and expectations imposed on them (Rodriguez 2015).

In sum, the moral economy lens has allowed scholars in border and migration studies to show that neither the rationale of contemporary border and migration regimes, nor the exchanges and transactions within migrant communities, are reducible to an economic logic. In view of the original thrust of the concept to analyze conditions for open resistance (Thompson 1971) and clandestine action (Scott 1977) of marginalized groups against relations of exploitation and domination, it is however surprising that the moral economies that animate migrants' border struggles have received little attention thus far.²

In this article I therefore propose a new line of research that focuses on moral economies as they manifest themselves in migrants' struggles and their attempts to appropriate mobility and other resources within and against border and migration regimes. As indicated in the introduction, this line of research operates at the intersection of two bodies of scholarship.³ Its conceptual basis resides in a dialogue between the notion of moral economies – understood with Fassin (2005, 365) as an 'economy of moral values and norms' – and the autonomy of migration approach (AoM).

In brief, AoM offers scholars a heuristic model to investigate border regimes and migratory processes, from the perspective of migrants, with a focus on the struggles that migrants experience (cf. Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007). As its name suggests, AoM attributes moments of autonomy – that is, moments of uncontrollability and excess – to migratory movements and practices regarding any attempt to control and regulate them. Hence, migration emerges as a field of struggles over access to mobility and other resources. These struggles are initiated and sustained by migrants' practices of appropriation, that is, the tactics that migrants deploy to appropriate mobility and – after their arrival – to secure viable employment and housing, and – in the long run – legal residency and citizenship (Scheel 2019).

What the notion of appropriation highlights is the intricate intertwinement of migrants' practices with the mechanisms and methods of border control, which they try to repurpose and recode into means that facilitate the appropriation of mobility and other resources (Scheel 2019). Due to the highly asymmetrical power relations which characterize border and migration control, practices of appropriation mostly operate – like the acts of everyday peasant resistance described by James Scott (1985) – under the radar and have to remain undetected in order to be successful (Scheel 2019). Hence, when we bring the study of moral economies of migration into dialogue with AoM (and its call to study border regimes from migrants' perspective with a focus on their struggles and related practices of appropriation), this opens up a new research agenda that focuses on the moral economies that underpin and animate these practices and struggles. At the same time, this dialogue brings the concept of moral economy closer to its original impetus, namely, to study the moral norms and beliefs

that animate the struggles of marginalized groups against relations of domination and exploitation which are perceived as intolerable and unjust.

One analytical and political advantage of the study of moral economies inherent to migrants' struggles resides precisely in the original thrust of Thompson's conception of moral economies to serve as a 'legitimizing notion' (Thompson 1971, 78). In this way, the study of the moral values and beliefs that provide the foundation for migrant practices of appropriation and subversion allows us to counter the framing of migrants as deceptive tricksters or 'vile liars and truth distorters' (Griffiths 2012) by demonstrating that migrants perceive these tactics as legitimate and just means to counteract practices of government that they themselves experience as intolerable and unjust. Studying the moral economies of migrants' border struggles thus offers a valuable resource to counter the 'trickster narrative' which features prominently in the securitization of migration (Scheel 2022).

Moreover, the following analysis demonstrates that the study of moral economies of migrants' struggles allows us to discern different modes of appropriation. It mobilizes two figures of thought from post-colonial theory – namely: Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry and Eduard Glissant's (1997) work on opacity – to grasp the moral values and beliefs as they manifest themselves in the tactics and practices that migrants deploy to appropriate mobility to and residency within and against Europe's biometric border regime. Drawing on conceptual resources from post-colonial theory enables us to show that while contemporary mechanisms of border control – such as biometric databases based on fingerprinting – evince colonial legacies and continuities, so do the practices of subversion and struggles geared against these mechanisms and technologies of control.

Tracing the colonial legacies and continuities of Europe's biometric border regime

The biometric border regime of the European Union (EU) consists of a growing number of databases which are meant to facilitate the re-identification of undocumented migrants and – in the case of the Visa Information System (VIS) – travelers from countries with a 'high migration risk'. All three of the most important migration-related databases operate based on fingerprints. They include Eurodac (the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database, which stores the fingerprints of asylum seekers and apprehended unauthorized border-crossers), the VIS (for visa applicants) and the Schengen Information System (SIS, which contains the fingerprints of migrants who are banned from re-entry). Taken together, these three databases cover all possible modes of entry for migrants to the EU: through unauthorized border-crossings (Eurodac and SIS), by applying for asylum (Eurodac), or by overstaying a Schengen visa (VIS; cf. Broeders 2011).

The overall rationale of this biometric border regime resides in the translation of human beings hitherto unknown to European state authorities into legible subjects by rendering them – via the use of supposedly unique corporal features such as facial images, fingerprints or iris scans – re-identifiable and traceable (Leese 2022; Pelizza 2021; Scheel 2023).⁴ Traceability refers to the ability of authorities to reconstruct the bureaucratic trajectories – and partly also the journeys – of individual migrants by

gathering, exchanging and linking digital traces that migrants leave behind in encounters with state authorities, such as when they apply for a visa or asylum, cross an international border, or are apprehended by the police (cf. Bonditti 2004; Glouftsiou and Scheel 2020). The central objective of Europe's biometric border regime – to render migrants legible and traceable – confirms the observation that practices of bordering have, to a significant extent, become knowledge practices (Scheel 2024).

However, Europe's biometric border regime, and its underlying impetus to render migrants legible and knowable, carries colonial legacies and continuities. The first biometric identification system based on fingerprinting was developed in colonial India (Cole 2001, 63–66). William Herschel, a keen administrator of the British Raj, introduced mandatory fingerprinting in West Bengal from 1858 onwards to uncover and prevent practices like the collection of pensions by natives who impersonated deceased relatives, or the hiring of third persons to pose as a convict to serve a prison sentence. Herschel believed that such practices could flourish because of British officials' inability to tell one Indian from another. He was convinced that fingerprints resemble unique, stable corporeal features that would facilitate the linkage of an individual body to an administrative record. Herschel therefore introduced mandatory fingerprinting in his jurisdiction to reduce fraud and misrepresentation. It was thus the ostensible moral reprehensibility of the colonized, and their subjection to a generalized suspicion, which spurred the search for more efficient means of social control and eventually led to the introduction of mandatory fingerprinting 'as a technique of civil, not criminal identification' (Cole 2001, 65).

The present-day databases of Europe's biometric border regime exhibit important continuities with these colonial practices. First, these databases mostly register the biometric details of migrants 'of color' from countries in the Global Souths.⁵ Moreover, the objectives that are invoked to justify the introduction of these databases predominantly concern the detection and prevention of migratory practices that are stigmatized (and in some cases also criminalized) as fraud. Examples include 'asylum shopping' (Eurodac), 'identity fraud' by 'lookalikes', or 'visa overstaying' (SIS and VIS). Hence, the fingerprint-based databases of Europe's biometric border regime constitute, like the development of the first systematic fingerprinting scheme in colonial India, a manifestation of institutionalized distrust that reigns at migration administrations and sites of border control across Europe (Scheel 2019). As in colonial India, this general suspicion concerns racialized subjects who allegedly need to be closely monitored through innovative identification and surveillance technologies and whose claims and narratives need to be tested and verified by the alternative means of truth production offered by these technologies (cf. Scheel 2024).

However, the continuities between biometric identification practices of the colonial era and Europe's present-day biometric border regime do not stop there. Simone Browne (2015) builds on Franz Fanon's work on the 'epidermalization of inferiority' (Fanon [1967] 2008, 4) to theorize the practice of slave branding as a predecessor of today's biometric identification technologies. Fanon used the concept of epidermalization of inferiority to highlight the association of blackness with backwardness and an objectionable character, as well as the internalization of these attributes of inferiority by black people after encountering white civilization. Inspired by Fanon's work, Browne argues that branding was not only a practice of painful, corporeal punishment; it was also essential to constitute the body of black people as a commodity, that is, as an

‘object among others’ that could be used, discarded, bought and sold (Browne 2015, 89–108). Moreover, branding also functioned as a technology of ‘racialized surveillance’ that allowed for the identification and tracking of runaway slaves. By branding slaves upon arrival, their ‘future chances of escape were delimited by the scars on their skin’ because the unremovable, permanent marks on their bodies allowed the identification and return of runaway slaves to their owners (Glouftsiou and Casaglia 2022, 3).

Browne sees the use of skin as a means of control, surveillance and subjugation as the crucial link between the colonial practice of branding and contemporary forms of biometric identification. To capture this link, she introduces the concept of ‘digital epidermalization’, to describe the phenomenon of contemporary forms of biometric identification translating images of body parts into pieces of digitized code that can be exchanged, linked and matched with unprecedented speed via computerized databases. Hence, Browne (2015, 110) understands digital epidermalization as a form of power which is facilitated by ‘the disembodied gaze of certain surveillance technologies [...] that can be employed to do the work of alienating the subject by producing a truth about the racial body and one’s identity (or identities) despite the subject’s claims’.

In this way, the notion of digital epidermalization describes the continuity of colonial logics of surveillance and control in Europe’s biometric border regime. Just as the scars inflicted on black bodies were meant to facilitate the identification of escaped slaves in order to return them to their owners, the systematic fingerprinting of asylum seekers and visa applicants from countries in the Global South is meant to facilitate the identification of visa overstayers and asylum seekers engaging in ‘secondary movements’ in order to return them to their country of origin (in the case of overstayers), or the EU member state in which they are supposed – according to the Dublin Convention – to apply for asylum. Moreover, much like branding in the colonial period, the mandatory, systematic fingerprinting of migrants in context of Europe’s biometric border regime operates as a ‘preemptive strike’ (Browne 2015, 100) that is meant to prevent migrants from engaging in practices such as ‘overstaying’ or ‘secondary movements’ in the first place by diminishing their chances of success.

In light of these continuities between colonial practices and logics of social control and Europe’s biometric border regime, the following analysis of the moral economies animating migrants’ struggles within and against this biometric border regime mobilizes two figures of thought from postcolonial theory: Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of mimicry and Eduard Glissant’s (1997) work on opacity. These concepts allow us to discern two different logics of appropriation and related moral economies. Moreover, they allow me to demonstrate that not only contemporary practices of border and migration control, but also the modes of resistance and subversion geared against them, carry colonial legacies and continuities. At the core of both modes of appropriation are moral economies that seek to challenge and undermine the colonial project of rendering the migrant ‘Other’ legible and knowable to control and dominate them.

Appropriation through mimicry: subversion through documentation

The notion of appropriation illuminates the intricate intertwinement of migrants’ practices of subversion and clandestine border-crossing with the means and methods of control. In this way, the concept addresses an important criticism of the

AoM approach, namely that AoM does not sufficiently acknowledge the restrictive effects of technologically ever more sophisticated and violent forms of border and migration control (cf. Scheel 2019). The core feature of appropriation as a concept is the claim that, in most cases, migrants try to appropriate mobility and other resources by repurposing the actors, means and methods of control, rather than openly contesting border and migration controls. This is due to the highly asymmetrical power relations that characterize border and migration control. Hence, practices of appropriation usually have to remain undetected in order to be successful. However, the irreducible ambivalence of migrants' practices of appropriation is always kept in mind: Since migrants are usually not able to completely usurp the means and methods of control for their own purposes, practices of appropriation often require painful concessions and compromises from migrants. These concessions and compromises usually imply further border struggles. Appropriating mobility to Europe via a Schengen visa requires, for example, providing one's fingerprints at the consulate. Based on the detailed information on the person's identity stored in the VIS, this biometric registration will allow state authorities in Europe to identify the person concerned once their visa has expired, so that they can initiate deportation procedures (Glouftsiou and Scheel 2020).

The following discussion exposes a particular logic within a set of practices aiming at the appropriation of mobility to Europe via Schengen visa that I understand, inspired by Homi Bhabha (1994), as *appropriation through mimicry*. The best example for illustrating this logic is the appropriation of a Schengen visa by means of manipulated or falsified supporting documents. A consular staff's decision to grant or to reject the issuance of a visa is primarily based on the supporting documents that visa applicants have to provide as means of proof for strong socio-economic ties to their country of origin, and which are evaluated as indicators for the applicant's 'will to return'. These documents include marriage and birth certificates as evidence of the applicant's claimed family situation, as well as pay slips, a job contract, bank statements and social security records as evidence of the applicant's economic situation. Visa applicants can therefore provide manipulated or falsified supporting documents that may satisfy the perceived decision-making criteria of consular staff (for a more detailed account see: Scheel 2019, 143–148).

The most promising documents allowing for the appropriation of a Schengen visa are called *vraix faux*, which can roughly be translated as 'real fakes'. These documents are nearly impossible to detect as forgeries because they are essentially originals. Since 'the secret is to look good on paper', as one of my respondents put it (Scheel 2019, 144), people who do not have the paperwork they need to prove strong socio-economic ties to their country of origin may ask a friend or relative who owns a company to 'hire' them on paper and provide them with a work contract and salary slips that appear to document a stable job with a high income, which is necessary for a successful visa application. Even if consular staff try to check the authenticity of the provided documents, for example by calling the company that has issued the job contract, they will not discover that the person is only employed on paper because the person answering the phone will confirm all the information as stated in the documents. In the case of 'real fakes', all the documents provided are essentially originals issued by real companies and administrations, yet they describe a fictitious employment relationship. This mode of

appropriation can thus be described as following a logic of *subversion through documentation*. What visa applicants essentially do to appropriate a Schengen visa is that they repurpose the supporting documents from tools of mobility control into a means allowing for the appropriation of mobility.

The personal interview, however, poses the greatest risk of detection. Many consulates require applicants to appear in person for an interview that allows frontline officers to test and verify whether the information in the applicant's documents actually corresponds to the answers provided in the interview, their overall behavior and dress code. Consequently, falsified and manipulated documents must be complemented by a credible imitation of the dress codes, accents, behaviors and biographical features of the *bona fide* travelers aspiring migrants purport to be. This indicates the importance of 'impression management' (Goffman 1959, 212–216) in the interview situation. If visa applicants claim to hold a higher socio-economic position than they actually have, they have to dress up and prepare for possible questions regarding their claimed profession. A salesman in a shabby business suit who purports to do business in Europe without speaking a single word of French or English or knowing the price of the goods he claims to purchase will not be believed. Migrants who try to appropriate a visa by providing manipulated or falsified supporting documents must maintain a strict 'dramaturgical discipline' (Goffman 1959, 216) that carefully follows the fictitious biographical script that their documents are meant to support. Hence, moments of autonomy of migration 'emerge, ironically, when migrants stage a convincing performance of compliance with the Schengen visa regime's formal and informal requirements, rather than in rare instances of direct confrontation and open resistance' (Scheel 2019, 147).

Homi Bhabha's work helps us to understand how the appropriation of a Schengen visa by means of manipulated documents follows the logic of appropriation through mimicry. Visa applicants engaging in such practices try to *mimic* or imitate the biographies, identity features and overall habitus of 'bona fide' travelers. This mode of appropriation evinces continuity with colonial-era forms of subversion. Following Bhabha, the practice of mimicry reveals the ambivalence of colonial discourse, whose ideology of a civilizing mission calls on the colonial subject to adopt the cultural habits, forms and values of the colonizer, while simultaneously upholding a hierarchical difference between the colonizer and the colonized. In Bhabha's words '[...] colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of a *difference that is almost the same but not quite*' (Bhabha 1994, 86; emphasis in original). Hence, mimicry emerges as a strategy of domination that aims at the reformation and civilization of the colonial subject while keeping it, at the same time, in a position of alleged cultural and social inferiority and otherness.

However, many commentators stress the subversive potential of practices of mimicry. Leela Gandhi argues, for example, that Bhabha's framing of mimicry as a form of 'camouflage' (Bhabha 1994, 90) invites a reading of mimicry as a 'tactic of warfare', that is, a "sly weapon" of the colonized [that] inaugurates the process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of *inappropriate appropriation*' (Gandhi 1998, 149–150; author's emphasis). Accordingly, the subversive power of mimicry resides in the danger that the colonized are merely staging the cultural habits, traits and values of the colonizers, without internalizing them. It is in these moments of inappropriate

appropriation and staged compliance that practices of mimicry undermine the authority of colonial discourse; mimicry risks turning ‘into mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 125).

This seems indeed to be the case when visa applicants provide supporting documents that are real fakes in the sense that these documents are almost original but not quite. The cruelty of mimicry, understood as a colonial strategy of power, resides in the call on the colonized to perform the cultural forms and values of the colonizers, although it is decided from the outset that these performances will be dismissed as imperfect imitations that are ‘almost the same but not quite’. In the case of the appropriation of Schengen visas through real fakes and compelling impersonations of bona fide travelers, this cruel logic of mimicry is turned into a form of revenge against Europe’s restrictive border regime. It is in the performances of seemingly docile compliance with the formal and informal requirements of Europe’s border regime that the subversive potential of appropriation through mimicry comes to the fore: By staging credible performances of mobile subjectivities such as middle-class tourists or businesspeople, whose ‘profiles’ are regarded as devoid of any ‘migration risk’, migrants erode the informal criteria that guide the decision-making of consular staff. Ultimately, such visa applications plunge the Schengen visa regime into a profound epistemic crisis (cf. Scheel 2019). Since ‘real fakes’ are nearly impossible to detect, consular staff can no longer tell whether they are dealing with a ‘real’ or a ‘fake’ tourist, student, or businessman, because the supporting documents provided could be ‘fake’, ‘real’, or ‘real fakes’.

In this way, appropriation through mimicry undermines and invalidates the selective decision-making criteria and formal requirements of Europe’s restrictive visa regime. The latter creates highly unequal access to mobility as it sets informal and formal requirements for a Schengen visa that would be impossible for most locals to satisfy because these requirements do not reflect the working and living conditions of a large share of the population (see Scheel 2019). This is also the reason why the submission of manipulated or falsified documents is widespread in many countries whose citizens require a visa for traveling to Europe. And this is also the reason why practices facilitating the appropriation of Schengen visas through mimicry are regarded as just and legitimate by many people in the country in which I conducted my own research on how Europe’s restrictive visa regime is negotiated by those subjected to it.

The appropriation of a visa through mimicry is supported by a moral economy, a ‘wider consensus in the community’ (Thompson 1971, 78), that is shared by those who are potentially excluded from access to Europe by the Schengen visa regime. ‘It is a legal way around a legal way’, says Anas, one of my interlocutors, emphasizing that ‘many people do it’. Precisely because the Schengen visa regime sets requirements for an entry ticket to Europe that do not correspond to the living and working conditions of most of the local population, many people in the North African country I have visited regard the appropriation of a visa through mimicry as nothing but a much-needed correction to a mobility regime that is, from their perspective, dysfunctional and unfair.

During my research I met dozens of people who complained about the Schengen visa requirements and decision-making criteria, which they regarded as unfathomable and unjust. For example Amir, a cab driver I met in the capital, became quite animated when I told him about my research:

I have a brother who lives in France, but I could never go to visit him and his family. I tried two times [to apply for a visa], but each time they [the consulate] rejected me. But this is what I do not understand: why can I not go to France and visit my brother? I do not want to stay there. I just want to visit him. My life is here ... I am not allowed to go there but every summer thousands of tourists [from Europe] come here to enjoy the sun, our beaches and markets, everything ... they do not need a visa, they do not know anyone here and I can't even visit my brother?

Many people, especially young people in their twenties, told me that they had not even tried to apply for a Schengen visa because they assumed that their applications would be turned down anyway. From their viewpoint, the appropriation of a Schengen visa through mimicry constitutes a legitimate act of self-authorization that contributes to the restoration of justice within a mobility regime that they view as arbitrary, and unfair.

Appropriation through Opacity: subversion of documentation

Appropriating a Schengen visa by using real fakes requires advance preparation; it requires access to social networks, financial resources, and information that not all people who want to travel to Europe may have. This explains the continuation of high-risk modes of border-crossing, such as migration in overcrowded, often unseaworthy boats. However, after a successful crossing, migrants also run up against Europe's biometric border regime. Upon arrival, they are likely to be fingerprinted to be enrolled into Eurodac and other biometric databases. Subsequently, they are also compelled to appropriate mobility, a precarious form of residency, or other resources within and against Europe's biometric border regime. In the following I therefore describe a mode of appropriation that requires less prerequisites. It offers migrants, nevertheless, an effective mode of subversion for evading deportation despite biometric identification technologies. Starting from an encounter that I observed at the registration unit of Berlin's migrant reception center in December 2019, I show that this mode of appropriation carries a set of moral norms and values that insists on what Eduard Glissant (1997) calls the 'right to opacity'.

I am sitting behind the desk of a frontline officer in the large entry hall of the registration unit of Berlin's reception center. Every morning, shuttle buses bring dozens of migrants from the accommodation unit to the registration unit, where migrants are interviewed, searched and subjected to various identification procedures, such as speech biometrics or the extraction and analysis of their mobile phone data before they can apply for asylum (cf. Scheel 2023; 2024). During the initial interview, staff from Berlin's Office for Refugee Affairs ask new arrivals about their identity, their familial and economic situation, and how and why they have come to Germany. At this stage, most migrants have already been fingerprinted at the accommodation unit so that staff can compare migrants' accounts with information they may find in national and European databases.

The officer sitting in front of me (in the following: N) is trying to establish the identity of a young man who claims to come from Tunisia. According to information available in the databases, the young man has been in Europe since 2015. This was when he was fingerprinted in Italy, according to a 'hit' in Eurodac. In the same year, he applied for asylum in Germany according to a hit in Maris, the database that the Federal Agency

for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) uses for processing asylum claims. Moreover, there is a hit in INPOL, a German police database, which indicates that the young man has already served a short prison sentence. All these records have been retrieved with the help of the young man's fingerprints. However, each of the records goes under a different name, N explains to me. N now has the task of establishing the young man's 'real' identity because there is no record on him in Germany's central foreigner's register (AZR). At least, N is not able to retrieve one, neither with the young man's fingerprints, nor with the various names provided by the other records. N reasons there might have been an IT issue when the young man applied for asylum in 2015, as the electronic file in Maris contains a disclaimer: 'Generation of AZR number currently not possible'. Hence, there is the risk that N might produce a duplicate record, called a *doublet* [Doublette] – that is: a second dataset about the same person – in the AZR if he simply creates a new record for the young man, since there might already be a dataset on the young man in this database.

N turns to the young man, who also understands a bit of German: 'You already applied for asylum in 2015?' – 'Yes' – 'We have a lot of names for you in our databases. One, two, three, four, five, six. Which one is it supposed to be this time? What is your real name?' The young man says nothing and stays silent. 'Let's have a look at which name the police have for you'. N flips through the pages of a printout of the electronic file he retrieved from INPOL. 'Abdelkarim is the first name, Munahir is the last name.⁶ When you applied for asylum, it was exactly the other way around. Seems the police got it wrong', N says with a slightly sarcastic undertone. The young man sighs and starts to speak in Arabic with the interpreter who translates: 'He says, he now has a recognition of paternity. That's why he must go to the Tunisian embassy to apply for a new passport'.⁷ 'This does not interest me right now. All I want to know is his real name. But since he has already provided six different names, I have little hope that he will tell us the truth this time'. After the young man continues to respond with silence when N repeatedly asks him about his real name, N eventually gives up and copies into the computer interface the name provided in the running slip that is handed out to newly arriving migrants at the accommodation unit. It is yet another version of the young man's name: *Ibrahim Moktahir*. This name will form a crucial element of the young man's identity record, which will be stored in the AZR from now on.

What this example shows is that, also in the context of biometrics, migrants still have the capacity to undermine authorities' efforts to render them traceable and identifiable by producing multiple or ambiguous accounts about their own identity. Such practices follow a logic of *subversion of documentation*. In brief, migrants seek to undermine authorities' attempts to translate them into legible, re-identifiable subjects by engaging in practices of 'dis-identification' (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008, 215). These practices aim at disrupting the link between a migrant's body and identity records assigned to this body by government registration systems. Examples of practices of dis-identification include the use of similar yet different names and other biographical features, the mutilation of fingertips to alter one's fingerprint (Glouftsiou and Casaglia 2022; Picozza 2017), or attempts to register twice with different identity credentials in the same government information system. What all these practices have in common is that they constitute a form of 'epistemic subversion' (Scheel 2024) in the sense that they seek to undermine, through the production of multiple, ambiguous identity

records, the assignment of stable identities to migrants. In this way migrants try to remain illegible and non-traceable within Europe's biometric border regime.

It should however be noted that such practices incur immense costs and concessions for those who use them. Since they are viewed as being 'non-cooperative' by staff in migration administrations, they have little prospect of ever being able to legalize their status. Hence, like the young man at the reception center, they might be able to subvert documentation in order to undermine efforts to deport them. But this condemns them to a life under highly precarious conditions of an essentially 'illegal', non-deportable migrant.

Nevertheless, such attempts to remain illegible and unknowable are a vivid reminder of Fanon's (2018, 412) observation that 'submission to the powers-that-be [...] cannot be confounded with acceptance of that power'. In most cases, migrants cooperate in the capture of their fingerprints as well as they can. This display of docile compliance is surely implicated by the settings in which the procedure takes place. Migrant registration units are usually heavily populated with security guards and police officers. In these oppressive settings, migrants are not in a position to resist the procedure, which is mandatory and may be enforced (Glouftsiou and Casaglia 2022; Scheel 2023). They do however still have the potential to provide multiple or incoherent accounts of themselves as a way to create incoherent and illegible identity records that are linked to the biometric templates that are stored and matched in the EU's various databases.

As in the case of the food riots analyzed by Thompson (1971) or practices of poaching and pilfering studied by Scott (1977), it would therefore be a mistake to reduce such practices to mere spasmodic reactions or opportunistic tactics that are driven by mere necessity. Rather, such practices of appropriation carry a sense of justice as they revolve around a moral economy – a set of values and beliefs – which insists on what post-colonial theorist Eduard Glissant (1997, 189) calls 'the right to opacity'.⁸

For Glissant, opacity refers to 'an unknowability that is a tactic and a material condition' (Blas 2016, 150). Glissant understands opacity as a form of alterity, an insistence on difference, that defies categories, standardizations and other epistemological devices that are mobilized by dominating forces to translate alterity into something that is governable because it is transparent and understandable. Thus, the insistence on the right to opacity is essentially a refusal to submit to the imperative of transparency, understood as the epistemic basis of the 'process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought' (Glissant 1997, 189–190). In the context of post-colonial literary production discussed by Glissant, the imperative of transparency implies writing in the standardized language of the (former) colonizers in order to produce texts that are – from the viewpoint of the metropolis – understandable and comparable, instead of writing in opaque local idioms and dialects. Refuting the imperative of transparency as a strategy of domination, Glissant writes: 'The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence' (Glissant 1997, 191).

Hence, the enactment of the right opacity emerges as a rejection of attempts of imperial modes of knowledge production and, at the same time, the very precondition for true dialogue and relating to each other on equal terms. This shows that, for Glissant, the 'right to opacity' resembles both a tactic to refute colonial modes of knowledge production, as well as forms of domination facilitated by them, *and* the central element

for building a political ontology that allows for human relationships which are characterized by freedom, mutual recognition and true dialogue (on this use of ‘opacity’ see also: Sayad 2004, 7).⁹ The right to opacity thus entails first and foremost the right to be untransparent to the other and to have the power to decide what kind of information a subject discloses about themselves. The political freedom derived through such an ontology of opacity resides then precisely in the recognition and acceptance of the other as a subject imbued with the authority to define their own identity, that is, the recognition of the other as a political subject with the capacity to speak (or to refuse to speak) the truth. Therefore, the painful self-mutilation of fingertips by asylum seekers, and migrants’ attempts to obscure their identities by providing different and incoherent accounts of themselves, should not be reduced to acts of deception by ‘vile liars and truth distorters’ (Griffiths 2012), as suggested by dominant discourses. Such acts should be read as a practical realization of the claim, ‘as for my identity, I’ll take care of that myself’ and thus, as a vivid reminder, ‘that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own’ (Glissant 1997, 191; 197).

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to initiate a new line of research that mobilizes the notion of moral economy to analyze the norms, values and beliefs that animate and are carried by migrants’ border struggles and related practices of appropriation and subversion. As an example, I have chosen practices that migrants deploy to appropriate mobility and other resources within and against the EU’s biometric border regime. What is key to the practices of appropriation under study is that they all aim to challenge the imperial mode of knowledge production that underpins the EU’s attempts to assign stable, unequivocal identities to migrants by means of biometrics and other technologies, such as the extraction and analysis of mobile phone and social media data (Scheel 2024). Using two figures of thought from postcolonial theory, I have shown that migrants’ practices follow two distinct logics of appropriation and carry related moral economies: Some migrants try to evade identification through feigned compliance with the formal and informal requirements of Europe’s border regime by performing the dress codes and biographies of bona fide travelers (*appropriation through mimicry*). Other migrants try to remain illegible by consciously producing multiple, divergent, or ambivalent accounts of themselves in encounters with authorities (*appropriation through opacity*). What the use of these figures of thought highlights in both cases are legacies, histories and continuities to the colonial period that are carried, not only by the mechanisms of control of today’s biometric border regimes, but also by the practices of subversion operating within and against these regimes of government and control. However, many other figures of thought and modes of analysis are possible and offer opportunities for future research to expose the moral economies of migrants’ border struggles and to uncover the logics of related practices of refusal, resistance, and subversion. Doing so is important in both analytical and political terms. Most importantly, it offers a viable resource to counter the dominant framing of migrants as cunning tricksters whose excessive agency needs to be tamed and controlled through ever more pervasive security practices and technologies.

Notes

1. To conduct my field research, I had to agree to certain conditions in different locations, and one of these was not to name the specific locations in which I performed research. While members of staff at the reception center in Berlin were fine with revealing the name of the city, the consulates only granted me access under the condition that I would only write about a North African country, but not reveal the country in which the consulate was located, nor the EU member states represented by the consulates.
2. The only notable exception is the work of Roberto Beneduce (2015), who identifies a ‘moral economy of lying’ among asylum seekers who at times embellish or even invent stories of political persecution to satisfy the selection criteria of highly restrictive asylum regimes.
3. It is important to note that the moral economies of migrants’ struggles are, of course, related to both the moral economies of border and migration regimes as well as the moral economies that shape socio-economic transactions and relations within migrant communities. For example, the expectation to succeed with their migration project, which is central to the moral economies of migration in migrants’ communities of origin, helps to explain the persistence with which migrants pursue their migration projects and why are they often engage in high-risk practices of border-crossing and outright self-harm to satisfy these demands and expectations. In this article I do not have the space that would be needed to explore these entanglements further.
4. I write ‘supposedly unique’ here because the assumed uniqueness of biometric features like fingerprints has been questioned (cf. Cole 2001; Scheel 2019).
5. People from Middle Eastern, African and Asian countries account for example for the majority of records in Eurodac; the eight most important countries of origin for asylum applications in the EU in 2021 were Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Nigeria and Morocco. In this context, it is important to note that refugees from the Ukraine are exempt from registration in Eurodac because they are entitled to a resident permit on humanitarian grounds because of the invocation of the mass influx of refugees by the EU and thus do not need to apply for asylum (European Commission 2022). Likewise, most of the 124 countries whose citizens need to apply for a Schengen visa before they can travel to the EU’s Schengen area are in Africa and Asia (see Scheel 2019). Hence, as in the case of Eurodac, most of the fingerprints stored in the VIS belong to migrants ‘of colour’ from countries of origin in the Global South.
6. All names provided in this account are invented to protect research participants.
7. The recognition of paternity for a child with German citizenship entitles a man assuming the legal duties of parenthood for the child to a resident permit in Germany, provided that he fulfills his caregiving responsibilities.
8. Glouftsiou and Casaglia (2022) also interpret the self-mutilation of fingertips by asylum seekers as an enactment of the right to opacity.
9. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who emphasized this point.

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