

Externalizing Anti-Blackness: Racialized Immobilization and Migrant Counter- Archives in Tunisia's Borderlands of Abandonment

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Abstract

This article examines the EU's border externalization in Tunisia as a racialized project of governance rooted in longer genealogies of anti-Blackness and exclusion. Drawing on feminist, embodied ethnography, it traces how fast and slow violence—expulsions, bureaucratic immobilization, and everyday racism—govern and devalue Black migrant life. Yet through practices of care, documentation, and solidarity, migrants produce counter-archives that make this violence legible and contest its legitimacy. The article reveals externalization as a mechanism of racial domination and a terrain of political presence.

Keywords

border externalization, anti-Black racism, migrant counter-archives, slow and fast violence, Tunisia

Introduction and Methods: Decentering Europe, Rethinking Border Externalization through Embodied Methodologies

Since the 1990s, Tunisia has become a central site in the European Union (EU) strategy of border externalization (Boubakri and Mazzella 2005; Cassarini 2020). Rather than an isolated case, Tunisia operates as a key node within a broader regional regime of anti-Black violence, immobilization, and desert expulsions. Across the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, and



Morocco), these mechanisms operate as a transnational regime that sorts mobility and belonging along racial lines.

Tunisia's strategic role stems not only from formal agreements but also from regional transformations: the militarization of the central Mediterranean, the Tunisian Revolution of 2011, and the Libyan civil war. Framed as a key partner of the EU in migration governance, Tunisia has simultaneously become a racialized laboratory where colonial logics of control are reactivated under the guise of cooperation, reworking older genealogies of servitude and racial hierarchy within the postcolonial state. These trajectories have been shaped through long-term, negotiated forms of authority that cannot be reduced to colonial rule alone (Bayart 2000).

This article asks how border externalization in Tunisia functions as a racialized project of control, knowledge, and violence—one that reactivates colonial hierarchies of Blackness—and how Black migrants confront and reconfigure these logics through situated, embodied practices of documentation, care, and resistance.

Since 2011, sub-Saharan migrants have faced increasingly systematic restrictions on movement, institutionalized precarity, and exposure to both state and social violence. This analysis takes shape in a moment of profound political and racial upheaval, marked by the 2023 wave of anti-Black violence and expulsions that followed President Kaïs Saïed's public speech linking sub-Saharan migration to a supposed demographic threat (France 24 2023). These events exposed the racial foundations of migration governance and reshaped everyday affective and social relations of surveillance and solidarity.

The article draws on four months of ethnographic fieldwork (June–October 2023) and three years of residence combining participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations with about twenty-five migrants from Cameroon, Congo, Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria, Sudan, and Côte d'Ivoire, and six migrant-support organizations in Tunis, Sfax, Medenine, and Zarzis. Five interviews and multiple exchanges were also held with Tunisian residents—shopkeepers, vendors, taxi drivers, and neighbors in working- and middle-class areas of Greater Tunis—to understand how racism and exclusion are reproduced and negotiated in daily life.

Fieldwork took place in cafés, ports, and association offices, with many encounters with women at home or in community associations. Access relied on trust-based networks with local associations and direct contact in public spaces; all participants gave oral consent and pseudonyms are used throughout. Because fieldwork unfolded amid heightened repression, I avoided police-surveilled border zones and minimized visibility (including meeting often at night).

I use the term sub-Saharan migrant critically, aware of its colonial genealogy and the power relations embedded in its use. In Tunisia, the term circulates across policy, humanitarian, and popular discourse to designate all Black people from Africa south of the Maghreb, regardless of class or nationality. It thus operates as a racialized category conflating skin color, geography, and social status, reproducing hierarchies inherited from slavery and colonialism. I retain it not to endorse but to expose its epistemic violence—while acknowledging that some migrants strategically reappropriate it as a fragile site of solidarity and political visibility.

The methodological framework draws on feminist critical geography and postcolonial theory (Hyndman 2004; Mountz 2011) and on feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge that emphasize how knowledge emerges from embodied encounters. This approach treats border externalization not as a neutral technical apparatus but as a racialized field of knowledge, visibility, and violence that reactivates precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial hierarchies of Blackness in North Africa—used here as a heuristic shorthand, not a fixed periodization (Bayart 2000).

A feminist intersubjective approach foregrounds how bodily gestures, movements, and affects unsettle state-centered border frameworks. Everyday practices often deemed “pre-political” Mezzadra and Neilson 2013—including dress, care, and micro-movements through which life persists—are constitutive of political agency. Centering migrant standpoints (emic vision), this perspective examines how violence, illegalization, and exclusion are lived and negotiated through the body. It resonates with feminist and anti-racist scholarship on migration in the Maghreb that critiques Eurocentric categories such as “crisis,” “transit,” and “vulnerability,” and recenters Black migrants’ lived experiences (Palladino et al. 2025).

Building on this approach, border externalization produces not only control but also counter-archives: embodied, collective practices of documentation and care through which migrants render visible the violence that targets them. Drawing on Tazzioli’s (2020) notion of the migrant counter-archive, these acts of witnessing function as epistemological and political interventions, revealing how domination and resistance are intertwined within Tunisia’s racialized border regime.

The discussion traces continuities of racial formations—from precolonial slavery and colonial rule to postcolonial nation-building—and their contemporary rearticulation at the intersection of EU-driven externalization and Kaïs Saïed’s authoritarian consolidation. By mobilizing xenophobic and anti-Black discourses echoing the French far-right “Great Replacement” theory, the regime reframes entrenched hierarchies as a national-security imperative. Externalization operates within racial capitalism (Robinson 2021), where racialized (im)mobility produces disposable bodies, intersecting in Tunisia with European migration governance (Ong 1996).

Historically and ethnographically, the article moves from dominant archives (colonial, state, European) to migrants’ embodied counter-archives. Drawing on Nixon’s (2011) distinction between slow and fast violence, it shows how bureaucratic exclusion underpins spectacular raids and expulsions, producing Blackness as a marker of disposability while simultaneously generating practices that contest this regime.

The article is organized in four parts. The first part situates Tunisia’s migration regime within long genealogies of racialization and (im)mobility linking precolonial slave trades, colonial rule, post-independence nation-building, and post-revolutionary hierarchies of Blackness. The second part traces how European agendas and Tunisian strategies co-produce a racialized apparatus of containment—what Bayart (2000) calls logics of extraversion. The third part turns to the ethnographic present to trace how externalization materializes through abandonment and documentation, as migrants transform violence—desert deportations, bureaucratic immobilization—into testimony and counter-archives that challenge state silences, where vulnerability and care become political acts. Finally, it shows

how law and everyday racism manufacture “illegality” and bind slow bureaucratic harm to fast, spectacular violence, while care and documentation turn endurance into political presence.

Tracing Black (Im)mobilities in Tunisia: Historical Legacies and Racialized Sub-Saharan migrations

Building on recent critiques of Eurocentric approaches that reduce externalization to a merely European strategy of migration control (Cassarino 2014; Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015), I situate Tunisia’s border regime within its own racial histories and hierarchies, showing that externalization is not merely delegated control but a racialized project rooted in local genealogies. Externalizing anti-Blackness addresses this gap by situating border externalization within Tunisia’s own racial genealogies—rooted in precolonial slave trades, colonial rule, and postcolonial nation- and state-building (Davis 2023; Montana 2015; Mrad-Dali 2005)—and by foregrounding the historical and contemporary racial formations that shape Tunisia’s migration politics. For centuries, Tunisia—and North Africa more broadly—has been intertwined with Europe and sub-Saharan Africa through complex socio-political and racialized mobilities. The Mediterranean was not only a space of European colonial domination but, earlier, of Ottoman authority, corsairing, cross-Mediterranean exchanges, and trans-Saharan slave trading that embedded hierarchies of Blackness and anti-Blackness in Tunisian society.

Yet much of this pre-nineteenth-century history has been obscured by colonial archives and historiography, which recast modern Tunisia as beginning with French rule. Consistent with the approach outlined above, I treat this colonial periodization as an archival effect rather than an analytic frame. In doing so, historiography erased earlier Mediterranean mobilities and effaced the negotiated power relations between North African and Southern European authorities, thereby naturalizing colonial domination as the decisive rupture in Tunisian history and legitimizing French rule as the starting point of modernity.

Against this backdrop, the nineteenth century saw the consolidation of trans-Saharan commercial and slave routes, incorporating Black sub-Saharan populations into systems of exploitation and racial subjugation that prepared the ground for European colonial rule (Montana 2015). These layered formations shape migrant (im)mobilities today, while EU-Tunisia externalization rearticulates them within a postcolonial regime of racialized control.

More recently, in the early 21st century, Tunisia has become central to the neoliberal Euro-North African border regime and the EU’s border externalization project, through successive frameworks that tied European funding to border surveillance and readmission agreements (Cassarino 2014). These arrangements established Tunisia as a buffer zone for African mobility and deepened its entanglement with European logics. As recent scholarship shows, these entanglements reproduce long racial genealogies within Tunisia’s present (Scaglioni 2020). This continuity between colonial practices and the postcolonial present underscores Tunisia’s dual role as both a “transit zone” and a fragile refuge.

At the same time, dominant debates on migration have long centered on the “Harraga” (Zagaria 2019)—young North Africans rendered illegal by visa regimes and forced into perilous sea crossings—a focus that has obscured the experiences of sub-Saharan migrants living in Tunisia. Once there, I soon encountered thousands of migrants from countries such as Eritrea, Sudan, Cameroon, Congo, and Guinea. Many had endured months or years in

destitute conditions—overcrowded in dilapidated apartments or precarious shelters—while waiting either to cross to Italy or secure protection in Tunisia.

Sub-Saharan migration in Tunisia, increasingly visible since the early 21st century, is marked by significant diversity but is frequently reduced to racialized stereotypes rooted in slavery's legacies. Testimonies from migrants describe insults such as *'abīd* ("slaves"), *wsīf* ("domestics"), or *kahlūsh* ("negro"), while interviews with Tunisians in Greater Tunis in 2024 revealed more ambivalent perceptions: migrants were seen as both vulnerable and threatening, dirty, uncivilized, or thieves. These representations—circulating through media and political rhetoric—reproduce colonial hierarchies and sustain anti-Black racism targeting both sub-Saharan migrants and Black Tunisians (Abdelhamid 2018).

Yet alongside this highly visible racialization of precarious migrants, there was also a less publicly acknowledged presence of West African professionals during the temporary relocation of the African Development Bank to Tunis in 2003, which brought roughly 20,000 expatriates and helped frame Tunisia as a relatively accessible destination (Cassarini 2022). As Scaglioni (2020) emphasize, these racial genealogies are not static legacies but active structures shaping both the stigmatization of precarious sub-Saharan migrants and the ambivalent inclusion of African elites. This underscores that externalization cannot be reduced to an EU agenda imposed from outside but must be understood as a racialized project rooted in Tunisia's own histories of hierarchy and control.

The Tunisian Revolution of 2011 ushered in unprecedented socio-political and racial transformations. The fall of Ben Ali's regime revived national debates on migration and boosted the visibility of sub-Saharan populations, while also fostering the emergence of migrant rights organizations. Although the Anti-Racism Law of 2018 marked a historic legal victory—making Tunisia the first Arab country to enact such legislation—it also combined high-level presidential backing with Black Tunisian grassroots mobilization. Black Tunisian activists, in the wake of the 2011 revolution, organized through associations such as Adam, M'nemty, and Aqaliyet to denounce everyday racist insults and press for constitutional recognition and for the commemoration of slavery's abolition (Abdelhamid 2018; Scaglioni 2020). Yet the law did not apply to irregularized foreign nationals, and some foreign civil-society actors later described feeling instrumentalized and sidelined.

Shortly thereafter, the outbreak of the Libyan civil war (2011–2014) forced thousands of sub-Saharan migrants residing in Libya to flee to southeastern Tunisia. The Choucha refugee camp became emblematic of Tunisia's post-revolutionary migration policy (Mottet 2016).

During this period, "humanitarian reason" (Fassin 2012) became central to a new phase of securitized migration governance. The Tunisian state, endorsed by the EU, delegated significant roles to intergovernmental organizations (IOM, UNHCR) and local allies and civil society actors (Tunisian Red Crescent, Arab Institute for Human Rights) to implement migration strategies through managerial, technocratic, and short-term humanitarian assistance frameworks (Dini and Giusa 2020). This new technocratic humanitarianism blurred the line between care and control. EU cooperation reconfigured Tunisia's post-revolutionary space into treacherous geographies of criminalization and precarity for sub-Saharan Africans. Almost fifteen years after the Tunisian Revolution, the state's historical securitarian approach has not only persisted but intensified. Today, irregularized migrants face escalating violence

and exclusion under policies designed to immobilize or expel them, keeping their bodies far from Europe.

Between Troubled Waters and the Desert of Abandonment: Border Externalization and Racial Violence in Contemporary Tunisia

Since the 1990s, Tunisia has steadily consolidated its role as a key actor in Mediterranean border policy by signing strategic agreements with the European Union (EU) aimed at containing migration. The EU-Tunisia Association Agreement of 1995 was the first formal framework linking aid to Tunisia's cooperation on border control and the readmission of irregularized migrants. Consequently, Tunisia's consolidation as a migratory containment space is embedded in a logic of co-production, whereby European pressures and Tunisian state interests converge in a racialized governance of Sub-Saharan migrants. This convergence also reflects what Bayart (2000) describes as logics of extraversion: Tunisian authorities selectively appropriate European funds, technologies, and discourses to pursue domestic goals of control and legitimacy.

Subsequent milestones—the Marrakech Declaration (2018), the EU-Tunisia Border Security Agreement (2019), the renewal of the Mobility Partnership (2021), and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of July 2023—reinforced this axis of the EU's border externalization paradigm in Tunisia. This cooperation further militarized border spaces while expanding the state's internal capacity for policing and control. However, these policies were not solely responses to EU pressures; they also reflected internal strategies for social and political control. Since the early 2000s, the authoritarian Ben Ali regime leveraged European migration agendas to reinforce domestic authority (Cassarino 2018). Tunisia's active participation in regional migration control mechanisms—such as the Berne Initiative and the establishment of the International Migration Management Agency in 2005—illustrates how the state used border externalization to strengthen internal surveillance and legitimacy. Law 2004-660 criminalized migrant mobility and solidarity, aligning Tunisia's migration policy with the European security paradigm while consolidating an internal infrastructure of repression.

Thus, the interests of the Tunisian state and the EU are not antagonistic; they have converged in constructing a racialized regime of migration control.

The externalization process has led to the systematization and normalization of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean since the early 21st century. For sub-Saharan migrants, Tunisian coasts—and increasingly the country's interior—have become literal and symbolic borders between life and death. Hundreds have perished on increasingly treacherous routes toward Europe. This "normalization of death" functions not merely as a side effect but as a political technology sustaining the racialized structure of mobility between Europe and Africa. While Wolfe (2016) illuminates the persistence of colonial logics in Tunisia's border regime, these dynamics also reveal the country's postcolonial specificities. Border externalization reactivates practices of identification, management, and confinement rooted in colonial rule, yet they are continuously reworked through local political bargains and state strategies.

Over the past few years, this racialized governance has directly affected Tunisia's internal migratory geography. Externalization policies have created a funnel effect toward Sfax. In early 2023, increased policing and the militarization of southern borders in Zarzis and Médenine closed alternative routes. Such repression shifted migratory flows toward Sfax—

where smuggling networks consolidated routes toward Italian shores. Following the speech by President Kaïs Saïed on February 21, 2023—in which he linked sub-Saharan migration to a conspiracy to destabilize Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity—raids and deportations intensified. Authorities conducted raids in popular neighborhoods of Greater Tunis, such as Bhar Lazreg and Bab Alioua, dismantling makeshift shelters and forcing people to relocate to Sfax.

The shift towards an even more repressive migration policy was marked in June 2023. On June 6, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni met with President Saïed to coordinate measures to curb departures toward Europe. Just four days later, on June 10, Saïed visited Sfax and publicly reaffirmed that the only solution to the migration crisis was the strict enforcement of the law, indicating that no efforts would be made to regularize the migration status of sub-Saharan individuals.

The local dimension of this crisis was exacerbated by a power vacuum in Sfax. On January 6, 2023, President Saïed dismissed Sfax's governor, Fakher Fakhfakh, without naming a successor. This left Tunisia's second-largest city leaderless at a moment of migratory and social crisis, allowing tensions to escalate. In May and June 2023, hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants were forced to sleep in the streets and squares of central Sfax—especially around markets and public transport hubs—after police raids dismantled their dwellings in neighborhoods like Bab Alioua and La Marsa in Greater Tunis. Although this crisis was produced by state violence, it was swiftly reframed as a threat by residents and amplified in the media. Amid this vacuum, on June 25, residents of Sfax organized a demonstration demanding the expulsion of migrants in the name of public security and order, drawing on state discourse and EU-driven securitization.

The crisis reached a critical point on the night of July 3–4, 2023, when a 42-year-old Tunisian man was stabbed during a fight with three sub-Saharan migrants. News of the murder spread rapidly via social media and was instrumentalized by local politicians and media to justify violent responses. In response, groups of residents organized patrols in the city center, detaining and physically assaulting sub-Saharan migrants. Videos depicted explicit brutality: migrants forcibly evicted from their homes, beaten, and publicly humiliated in the streets of Sfax. Police and National Guard raids followed, detaining hundreds of migrants and transporting them to the Algerian and Libyan borders. Human Rights Watch (2023) reported that at least 1,200 migrants were deported within a few days, abandoned in desert areas without water or food. This combination of fast violence—raids, beatings, mass deportations—and slow violence—legal restrictions, bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining residence permits, and the criminalization of African mobility—reflects a racialized assemblage of border control. Fast violence appears as the culmination of a longer regime of immobilization and exclusion targeting Blackness.

On July 16, 2023, two weeks after the mass deportations, the EU and Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on migration control and economic cooperation. Negotiated by Giorgia Meloni, Ursula von der Leyen (President of the European Commission), and Mark Rutte (then Dutch Prime Minister), the agreement provided 208 million euros in exchange for intensified surveillance and control of Tunisia's borders, consolidating the country as an extension of EU's frontier. In sum, the externalization process in Tunisia is a colonial practice of control sustained by institutional racism and the country's subordination to European dynamics. Externalization operates as migration control and as a mechanism that reproduces racial and colonial inequality across the Euro-African border

regime, reinscribing hierarchies of mobility and disposability. These racialized continuities reveal how Tunisia's migration regime not only governs mobility but also produces an archive of power—a structure of visibility and silence that determines whose lives are recorded and whose are erased. In what follows, I examine how migrants contest this regime by assembling counter-archives of presence and resistance.

Abandoned but Never Again Alone: Black Counter-Archives in the Face of Racist Expulsions, State Truths and Official Silences

Medou, a 29-year-old Guinean man, spends his afternoons in a café in the Soukra neighborhood of Greater Tunis, where sub-Saharan migrants gather after long days working on construction sites. His melancholic gaze, quiet presence, and stammer stand out amid a group of men who recount their former lives, express longing for home, and discuss plans to one day cross the sea to Italy.

"I only want to speak because I'm searching for my wife and daughter who disappeared in Sfax in July 2023 when the police arrested us and expelled us into the desert," Medou confides softly upon learning that I am collecting migrant testimonies. He left Guinea in 2017 with his wife and son for Algeria (Oran), where he survived nearly two years. Like many sub-Saharan migrants, Medou could not avoid arrest and was expelled by Algerian state agents into the desert near the Nigerien border. Traumatized, he left Algeria again and moved to Tunisia in 2021 following acquaintances' advice to settle in Sfax before relocating to Tunis, where our conversation took place. Medou describes himself as "a survivor of anti-Black racism"¹ (translated from French by the author, original interview, Tunis, August 2024) having lived in irregularized and racialized conditions in Algeria and Tunisia amid constant fear of insults, physical attacks, and expulsions. Over conversations, he explains how EU border externalization policies prevent *"the poor from reaching Europe"* and also influence *"Arabs,"* who, in turn, exploit Black people wherever they are.

They took me, they beat me, and they sent me to the police station... We were hundreds of people; there were several buses and vans. We traveled for a long time and I found myself in the desert at the Algerian border... We had no water, no food, and there were deaths. It's not only the police beatings that kill, but also the loneliness. And that hurts, my friend. I'm afraid they'll send me back there again, into the desert.

He testifies, visibly shaken after having survived a month in the desert near the Algerian Tunisian border (following his expulsion from Sfax in July 2023). Now homeless and sleeping on a mattress atop a ruined house on the outskirts of Tunis, Medou is determined to denounce the violence he suffered in the summer of 2023. Walking through Sfax, he and his colleagues were arrested in broad daylight, then taken by bus and abandoned at the Algerian border. Between July 2 and 6, 2023, about 1,200 West Africans were arrested, beaten, and expelled toward Algeria and Libya—simply for being Black. Human Rights Watch (2023) later

¹ All interview excerpts cited in this article were originally conducted in French. Unless otherwise indicated, translations into English are mine.

confirmed the deportation of over a thousand sub-Saharan migrants. Since then, Medou has not seen his family and still searches for them, fearing they too were expelled.

Medou's testimony reveals a harrowing reality:

We were in the desert, nobody wanted to save us: the Algerians didn't let us enter, and the Tunisians didn't let us return. We were stuck in the middle, wounded—my face swollen from the beatings. We tried to calm ourselves, to think of what we could do, because out there there was no water, no food, no shade, nothing—it was so hot.

His words convey not only physical pain but the crushing loneliness that accompanies abandonment in an unforgiving environment.

Despite these dire circumstances, Medou's group organize amid imminent death, contacting human rights organizations and migrant support groups in Tunisia, and recorded videos that soon circulated on Facebook, X (Twitter), and TikTok. Medou and his companions shared photos, identity documents, GPS coordinates, and detailed testimonies of their injuries and experiences. From her office, the director of a major human rights organization explained that her organization was among the first to establish contact with migrants abandoned in the desert. Since no NGO was permitted to approach them directly, the migrants' own recordings became crucial evidence to pressure the authorities.

On July 10, 2023, Tunisian authorities transferred hundreds of migrants from the Libyan border to various IOM shelters in Médenine and Ben Guerdane, though dozens remained under harsh conditions for weeks. According to Human Rights Watch (2023), at least twenty-five migrants died from extreme heat and dehydration, some killed by security forces. The real toll was likely higher, as many were stripped of their phones and left unable to call for help.

The speech by President Kais Saïed in February 2023, combined with the mass expulsions in July and the systematic escalation of this extreme violence throughout 2023, underscore the state's indifference and denial of any responsibility, despite irrefutable evidence gathered by the migrants themselves. In response to international criticism, Tunisia's Interior Minister, Kamel Fekih, dismissed the allegations as "unfounded," and the president labeled accusations of abuse as "lies" (Al Jazeera 2023). Meanwhile, some Tunisian citizens interviewed—like a 50-year-old man named Zizou—expressed skepticism about the authenticity of the migrant videos, claiming they were old or manipulated. This reflects a conspiratorial mindset that distances the state's violent practices from reality. For many Tunisians, across different social backgrounds, the state still appears as the guarantor of order and civility, and such extreme violence is seen as exceeding its legitimate capacities to exercise force, rather than as a manifestation of them.

Such denials of violence expose how states fabricate legitimacy—a process illuminated by Hannah Arendt (1967). She offers critical insight into the mechanisms through which totalitarian and authoritarian regimes—such as Tunisia's—consolidate and normalize power. She shows that authority is sustained not only through coercion but through the systematic reiteration of official narratives that, through repetition, acquire the status of truth. Political lying reconfigures reality, fabricating coherence that sustains authoritarian rule. In Tunisia, hegemonic narratives and intensified state control—fueled by the EU's border-externalization

agenda—render lived experiences themselves acts of contestation rather than passive endurance. Survival becomes the dismantling of the narratives through which the Tunisian state and the EU claim moral legitimacy.

Documentation (photos, videos) and testimonies, like Medou's, are essential to expose security force involvement and the cruelty migrants face when expelled and abandoned. The February 2023 presidential speech and expulsions drew on a racialized construction of Black migrants as threats, legitimizing violence. Migrants' photos and videos thus emerge as resistance against the "power of the archive" (Trouillot 1995), and its selective representation of history.

Trouillot argues power is intimately connected to history production and the silencing of narratives that don't conform to dominant discourses of Western modernity—especially those of racialized, impoverished populations excluded from liberal citizenship. Schwartz and Cook (2002) show that archives—far from neutral—structure memory, organize domination, and sustain forgetting and exclusion, reinforcing the epistemic hierarchies through which states produce legitimacy and silence subaltern histories.

Progressive criminalization, censorship, and suppression of critical voices show that the Tunisian state relies on its own unchallenged truths—primarily through its media. As Arendt (1967) notes, state authority assumes the a priori validity of its mandates, implying no one may criticize them.

If Arendt illuminates how bureaucracies fabricate state truths, and Trouillot how archives institutionalize silence, Tazzioli's (2020) notion of the migrant counter-archive specifies the practices through which migrants reassemble dispersed traces—testimonies, images, routes, material remains—to contest these regimes of visibility and truth. I understand these counter-archives as embodied and situated practices of knowledge-making that expose racialized violence while reclaiming the right to narrate and to appear.

Reading Arendt from the present of border externalization, however, requires confronting the silences that traverse her thought. Her reflection on bureaucracy and state truths remains crucial for understanding how administrative reason classifies lives and determines which bodies are deemed worthy of protection. That reason—anchored in a Eurocentric imaginary that erased colonial violence and the racialization of bodies (Owens 2017)—is also bound to a conception of political action built upon the exclusion of care and vulnerability (Honig 1992), reproducing a division between the political and the domestic that effaces the materiality of the body. From this double reading, freedom in Arendt seems to depend on speech and rational distance, while gestures, affects, and interdependence are depoliticized. Against this, migrant counter-archives—videos, photographs, testimonies—shift truth from the state to the exposed body that documents its own abandonment. In that exposure, the margin ceases to be merely the edge of exclusion and becomes a space of radical possibility, where vulnerability and care turn into sources of thought and political action (hooks 1989).

Migrants' testimonies reveal the magnitude of violence inscribed in border-externalization policies and how they interpret or denounce everyday state aggression. By documenting police practices and working with Human Rights Watch, migrants render intelligible a denied collective experience and articulate new meanings of denunciations and justice grounded in dignity and racial equality, with national and global repercussions. Their

growing political awareness leads them to reconsider their trajectories and to unveil how Tunisian and EU border policies conceal histories of domination behind discourses of order, security, and legitimacy.

Ultimately, Medou's testimony exemplifies what Tazzioli (2020) conceptualizes as a migrant counter-archive: an insurgent and dispersed form of documentation through which migrants transform experiences of abandonment into collective political resistance and counter-knowledge against state-sanctioned erasure. His detailed account of being forcibly expelled into the desert functions as both a personal trauma narrative and a critical intervention that challenges dominant state and security institution archives. This aligns with Gross-Wyrtzen's (2020) analysis, which argues counter-archives rearticulate marginalized histories, providing an alternative epistemological space for silenced voices of racialized migrants to assert their existence.

Moreover, Medou's narrative resonates with Wolfe's (2016) perspectives on the politics of visibility and dehumanization of Black bodies under externalized border control. Documenting his ordeal—through photos, videos, and testimonies on social media—is an act of resistance disrupting the continuous reproduction of racist state narratives. Medou transforms individual suffering into collective defiance against a State that criminalizes mobility and enforces racial hierarchies.

Trapped in the Tunisian Margins: Racial everyday Law and Stolen Temporalities

"It was evident: you went out on the streets and saw many Black brothers walking, buying, and working in certain businesses, living there. Now, all that has disappeared since the President spoke," says Malox, highlighting the exodus of hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants from Bhar Lazreg after the Tunisian President's racist speech in February 2023, and its aftermath. Originally from Douala (Cameroon), Malox is 35 and has lived in Tunisia for nearly a decade. Yet he remains undocumented and lives precariously in Bhar Lazreg with his partner and newborn son.

Since the 2011 Revolution, the neighborhood has become a hub for sub-Saharan migrants due to existing networks, cheap rents, limited police presence, and proximity to the wealthy La Marsa. Many migrants work there in domestic labor, construction or hospitality. Unpaved streets, unreliable water, and piles of uncollected waste mark Bhar Lazreg as one of Tunis's most neglected areas, also considered unsafe, with crime rising in recent years. Malox notes that growing aggression, theft, and insults in recent months have made life increasingly dangerous for sub-Saharan migrants in Bhar Lazreg. He now returns home before dusk and avoids going out at night. Yet this dense neighborhood of roughly 50,000 residents has also been revitalized by sub-Saharan communities, who have opened shops, markets, cafés, cultural centers, and even a small church.

Like many others, Malox did not originally intend to stay in Tunisia. He left Douala in 2011 hoping to become a professional footballer in Europe and support his family. After years of effort, he arrived in Tunisia in 2015. He spent his first year in Tunis living in an overcrowded building in very precarious conditions. There, he realized that sub-Saharan migrants were criminalized by the state and largely ignored by humanitarian groups and most Tunisians. His first months revealed the criminalization of Black migrants and their near-total exclusion from humanitarian and local networks.

Confronted with these violences, and having built social networks and emotional attachment to Tunisia, Malox decided to stay and gradually adopt a political stance against the racist practices and policies that dehumanize migrants. He often says he *"feels he has something to do here for his community."*

He initially founded a small independent association to foster the integration of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia but as racial state violence grew in 2023, it shifted to denouncing anti-Black racism and organizing cultural, artistic, and sports events to encourage dialogue and sociability between migrants and Tunisians, promoting coexistence despite permanent deportability and criminalization as 'Black'.

The President's February 2023 speech, coupled with the worsening situation for sub-Saharan migrants—increasingly undocumented, vulnerable, and immobile—prompted Malox to intensify collective action. He tried (unsuccessfully) to legalize his association for protection and sought new funding sources. The turmoil of February 2023 had severe consequences for migrants in Bhar Lazreg, exemplified by Aicha, a 24-year-old Cameroonian who has lived there since 2017, when she fled civil war at home. Disillusioned with her prospects, she is unemployed, has no stable income, and has been undocumented for three years.

Aicha initially hoped to study in Tunisia, find work, and support her family. But she entered on a three-month visa and overstayed; as fines accrued beyond her means, she had to abandon her studies and rethink her future. *"You have to get your documents in order to regularize your status, otherwise you fall into penalties. For us Black people, they are nothing but penalties,"* she recalls. Her financial situation steadily worsened, making her increasingly determined to cross the sea to Italy. She feels constantly rejected and demeaned by locals and observes that conditions for "Black people" have deteriorated since her arrival. Especially vulnerable as a woman, she has endured repeated street insults and has been assaulted and sexually harassed on public transport. These experiences prove to her that anti-Black racism undermines her very existence in Tunisia—a country she now regards as home.

Like Aicha and Malox, all the migrants I interviewed report routine racism in Tunisia's public spaces and workplaces, a pattern intensified after the President's speech. Hostile looks, gestures like covering one's nose, racist slurs, assaults, and theft are common—all occurring with impunity. Alexander Weheliye (2014) argues that racialization dehumanizes, pushing certain bodies—especially Black ones—outside the category of the human and associating them with animality. For sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, insults, disdainful gestures, and accusations of foul odor are symbolic acts of this dehumanization. Such acts reinforce racist stereotypes and cast Black individuals into an abject, sub-human status, tied to notions of dirtiness and irrationality.

Of the 13 migrant women interviewed, approximately 90% reported experiencing harassment or sexual violence in public, particularly on transportation. In Tunisia, the Black female body remains hypersexualized through colonial and slave-era tropes that render it simultaneously desired and devalued.

This hypersexualization renders the Black female body what Hortense Spillers (1987) calls an "available body," stripped of autonomy and open to symbolic and material appropriation. This notion, born under slavery, reappears today in a racialized regime that leaves Black women especially vulnerable to sexual violence while reinforcing their social exclusion. Sexual violence against sub-Saharan women is thus not an isolated occurrence but

part of a continuum of structural violence that has long denied Black women control over their bodies and movement. Everyday gestures and insults can therefore be read as expressions of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011)—not always manifesting as direct physical assault, but corrosive, continuous practices that erode dignity and social presence.

In Tunisia, Blackness itself functions as a marker of vulnerability, exposing sub-Saharan migrants to daily racial violence and social exclusion. This legacy of slavery makes them hyper-visible as suspect, “available” bodies while rendering them invisible as political subjects. As Nicholas De Genova (2017) notes, the border is not only geopolitical but inscribed on racialized bodies, transforming people into walking embodiments of the border. Trapped in double marginality, they endure harassment and disdain in public while their experiences and political demands remain ignored. Externalization policies only intensify this dynamic, further reinforcing their precarity and exclusion.

After years living “undocumented” and immobilized, Malox and Aicha exist in a suspended temporality. Tunisia has become home, yet anti-Black racism continually undermines their lives. They cannot go to Europe—visas are impossible and crossings too dangerous. They cannot return home, as years of fines from illegalized status are prohibitive. Nor can they move freely within Tunisia, where road checkpoints lead to arrests and expulsions.

Amid this suspended existence, small gestures of solidarity sustain daily life. Acts of mutual care—sharing food, protecting each other from police raids—emerge as practices of endurance that unsettle the division between the political and the domestic, recalling feminist redefinitions of resistance as embodied and relational rather than heroic.

Tunisian labor and residency laws, coupled with the lack of any asylum law, form a legal framework that criminalizes and racializes sub-Saharan migrants, trapping them in structural precarity. Tunisia, despite being party to international refugee conventions, lacks any effective asylum mechanism or path to protection. Stringent regulations make it nearly impossible for migrants—especially sub-Saharans—to regularize their status. This legal system not only controls mobility but actively produces “illegality,” leaving them in a state of permanent vulnerability.

Once their 90-day visa-free period expires, migrants incur weekly fines that quickly accumulate into thousands of dinars—far beyond their means. For years, the IOM attempted to negotiate with the Tunisian state to reduce or abolish these fines, though without success. Unable to pay, they remain stuck in legal limbo—unable to regularize, leave, or work formally—a form of “stolen time” (Khosravi 2018) where waiting itself becomes a tool of control. Nixon’s notion of “slow violence” (2011) helps explain how bureaucratic immobility harms migrants. Endless delays, mounting fines, and precarious living conditions inflict cumulative harm on material and psychological well-being. This slow bureaucratic violence intertwines with episodes of rapid violence—police raids, mass arrests, expulsions into the desert, and racist attacks. Together, slow and fast violence form a continuum that produces vulnerable, exploitable bodies while reinforcing racial control.

This exclusionary regime has a clearly racial dimension. Sub-Saharan migrants face fines, police harassment, and legal barriers, whereas Europeans (mostly white) can live and work in Tunisia irregularly without consequence. This double standard reflects a colonial hierarchy in which whiteness signifies legitimacy and Blackness threat.

The deliberate production of migrant “illegality” is a state strategy to regulate mobility through structural precarization. It operates as a racializing assemblage (Weheliye 2014), where law and social norms converge to subordinate Black migrants. By imposing unattainable permits and unaffordable fines, Tunisian law actively illegalizes Black migrants.

This legal violence continually reactivates colonial racial hierarchies, turning them into “non-right-holders” and cheap labor sustaining the economy.

Interviews with migrants like Malox and Aicha reveal that this condition is lived as a profound racial injustice: an intentional strategy of exclusion. The state appears hostile and opaque, its bureaucracy endless and violent. These practices have produced a widespread disenchantment with the law after repeated, futile regularization attempts. To many, the Tunisian state seems less a set of social institutions than an arbitrary and indecipherable apparatus of migration control.

Despite this harsh environment, Malox, Aicha, and others in Bhar Lazreg manage intermittent work routines and fragile emotional stability. Paradoxically, immobilization and exclusion push them to organize and redefine justice itself. Malox and Aicha have embraced what Foucault calls a political task: to critique institutions that claim neutrality—or, in Tunisia’s case, invoke order and protection—by revealing their hidden violence (Chomsky and Foucault 2006, 40).

Accordingly, they denounce the racialization and exploitation of Black migrants, and the discourses that legitimize it. Their struggles highlight silences and destabilize official narratives of what the Tunisian state—and European border externalization—should be. Furthermore, Malox “provincializes Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000) by pursuing alternative projects in Tunisia. He invests in local networks and forges new aspirations—alternative life trajectories in the face of foreclosed futures. These struggles are not just defensive; they generate new political subjectivities that reclaim humanity, mobility, and equality. By embracing a Black African identity and organizing at intimate, bodily scales, migrants like Malox and Aicha transform survival into new forms of political existence through collective practices of care and mutual recognition.

Through his small, informal association in Bhar Lazreg, Malox and a small team have documented cases of abuse, oriented affected migrants toward NGOs and humanitarian actors, and organized cultural and ecological activities—from street theatre to collective clean-ups—that create spaces of encounter between Black migrants and Tunisians. These actions, though modest, transform everyday survival into political presence. Aicha’s participation in workshops and testimonies denouncing racial harassment equally contributes to this dispersed work of documentation and solidarity.

During the 2023 mass expulsions toward the Algerian and Libyan borders, they—like many neighbors—sheltered dozens of evicted migrants and coordinated networks of assistance and information through social media and messaging groups. These digital and material circuits circulated testimonies, photos, and alerts that challenged official silence and created collective records of state violence. Through such acts of shelter, communication, and testimony, they transform survival into political practice, distinguishing everyday prejudice from the structural racism embedded in Tunisia’s migration regime.

These intertwined practices of care and documentation materialize the migrant counter-archive: living, embodied records of endurance and solidarity through which migrants make visible what the border regime seeks to erase. Yet this politicization of presence carries great risk: efforts to document, testify, and denounce also make them vulnerable in a context where migrant solidarity is criminalized. Tunisian authorities intensified their repression of civil society in 2024, raiding at least three NGOs and prosecuting staff from more than fifteen organizations, including the anti-racist Mnementy (led by Saadia Mosbah), Terre d'Asile Tunisie (with Sherifa Riahi as program coordinator), and the Association des Enfants de la Lune de Médenine (presided by Abdallah Saïd; Nawaat 2025).

Through their daily acts of endurance, creativity, and collective presence, migrants like Malox and Aicha assemble their own political archives—of relation and persistence—against the official ones that render them illegible or disposable. In this sense, these counter-archives are not repositories of memory but living practices through which marginalized subjects inscribe themselves into history and reclaim the power to appear.

Migrant struggles—especially Black migrants in places like Tunisia—are not only about material access or rights; they also expose the structural violence that renders some bodies illegitimate and some lives disposable. Becoming visible is necessary yet ambivalent, since it means entering a racializing archive that classifies, criminalizes, and reduces migrant existence to a manageable category. The right to have a place is not merely territorial but also epistemic and political: it is a struggle to rewrite the terms on which Black migrant presence is represented, archived, and silenced.

Unmasking the Regimes and Unveiling Their Guts: Toward a Politics of Racialized Externalization and Migrant Resistance

The externalization of borders in Tunisia cannot be understood solely as a technical delegation of the European Union's migratory control to the Tunisian state. Beyond, the process also involves the importation of European racial and supremacist grammars that intertwine with local dynamics historically rooted in racial exclusion and the subalternization of the Black body.

Thus, externalization not only reconfigures external borders but restructures internal geographies, transforming cities such as Sfax and peripheries like Bhar Lazreg into racialized internal borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), where criminalization unfolds through fast and slow violence (Nixon 2011). In this regard, Sfax has been turned into a strategic node of migratory containment, where practices such as mass deportations and police raids (Queirolo Palmas and Cassarini 2025) are enabled by a bureaucracy that gradually illegalizes migrants: the impossibility of obtaining documents, endless fines, and exclusion from formal work. These slow violences create the vulnerability that legitimizes expulsions and public perceptions of migrants as disposable. In turn, peripheral neighborhoods like Bhar Lazreg operate as internal borders marked by precarious housing, spatial segregation and constant racist aggression. The contrasting experiences of Medou, expelled into the desert in 2023, and of Malox and Aicha, living in permanent precarity, illustrate this racializing assemblage. Deportations to the desert are an explicit form of fast violence: disciplinary acts seeking the physical and symbolic expulsion of racialized bodies. Meanwhile, Malox and Aicha endure slow violence through legal and bureaucratic exclusion, labor precarization, and everyday and sexualized racism. Together, they reveal how mobility, existence, and political horizons

are reduced to stolen time (Khosravi 2018), where waiting and uncertainty become technologies of control.

Nevertheless, these individuals also generate forms of resistance. Malox has built local solidarity networks through cultural, artistic, and sports activities in Bhar Lazreg, while Aicha articulates a discursive resistance by critically denouncing everyday racialization and sexual violence through her testimony. In contrast, Medou has transformed his marginalization into an act of defiance by documenting his ordeal and mobilizing fellow exiles amid the harsh isolation of the desert environment. These embodied practices counter racial violence and invisibilization, generating new political forms of existence through micro-corporeal and intersubjective solidarity practices (Federici 2010). Despite exclusion, they act politically on bodily and communal scales, creating everyday spaces where alternative forms of life and resistance against the Euro-Tunisian racial regime emerge.

This dialectic between fast and slow violence is not merely a typology of harm but a racialized mechanism through which border externalization operates. These violences also generate their own counter-archives: migrants' embodied acts of documentation, testimony, and care expose the very regimes that produce their disposability. Linking the production of violence to the production of knowledge, this articulation reveals that racialized externalization functions simultaneously as a field of domination and as a terrain of resistance.

These intertwined dynamics reveal the racialized architecture of the externalization regime, grounded in the state's technologies of control and denial. The Tunisian state, by importing white-supremacist logics and reinforcing its own racial-colonial history, turns Sfax and Bhar Lazreg into geographies of criminalization and racialization. Simultaneously, migrants respond by producing new forms of political subjectivity, challenging slow violence through solidarity, everyday micro-resistance, and epistemic defiance. It is precisely through migrant counter-archives that these logics are confronted and reimagined—transforming spaces of abandonment into sites of political life and epistemic resistance.

Ultimately, border externalization operates as a racialized field of governance and contestation, where struggles over mobility, visibility, and belonging intersect. In this light, the migrant counter-archive emerges as both an analytic lens and a political horizon through which to apprehend the racialized logics of externalization. It captures how migrants, through their situated acts of documentation, solidarity, and endurance, unsettle the epistemic foundations of the Euro-Tunisian border regime. Rather than mere subjects of control, they become co-producers of historical knowledge and alternative futures, transforming spaces of abandonment into archives of political life.

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