

**Transgressing borders through the digital: Tunisian Harraga's
'counter-maps of disagreement' on social media**

Mazzara, F.

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Transgressing borders through the digital: Tunisian *Harraga*'s 'counter-maps of disagreement' on social media

ABSTRACT

Within the context of digital border technologies, this paper undertakes an analysis of the use of social media by people on the move. The main case study analyzed here consists of social media clips taken during the crossing of the Mediterranean liquid border by young Harraga, (الحرقة) an Arabic word used in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco to define 'those who burn the borders', in other words, those who try to reach Europe from the Maghreb via unauthorized routes. These videos represent an attempt to reframe the mainstream narrative of the undocumented and undesired migrants through what I define as a 'counter-map of disagreement'. Going beyond the visual regime of criminality, and establishing a new paradigm of self-determination and agency, these counter-maps reverse the logic of the border while transgressing it. Through a multimodal analysis, this article examines the Mediterranean border from the perspective of people on the move, who are shaping a new digital gaze and narrative. Rather than viewing borders solely as violent and divisive tools, they also depict them as sites of contestation, as porous and fluid.

KEYWORDS: Digital border, *Harraga*, Counter-maps of disagreement, Social Media, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Images of crowded boats, corpses, wreckages, unsafe dinghies, and life jackets abandoned on the shores have become a *leitmotif* in the mainstream discourse of the Mediterranean passage over the last decades, anchoring undocumented movement to a semantics of death, risk, irresponsibility, anonymity, and fear. From the perspective of migration and cultural studies, this article intends to contribute to the destabilisation and decolonisation of gazes and narratives around unauthorized movement in the Central Mediterranean. The latter is a contested liquid border that has, for decades, been the stage for a 'Border Spectacle' (De Genova 2013), highly detrimental and dehumanising to people on the move (Horsti 2008; Bischoff et al. 2010; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Mazzara 2019; Avraamidou 2020; Cantat et al. 2023).

The toxic political narrative promoted by European governments has propagated a systemic approach to migration that, over the past decades, has justified the existence of increasingly fortified borderlands, where the primary objective is to keep undocumented migrants out, regardless of the limited safe and legal routes available. The growing reliance on digital border technology has made

border enforcement even more sophisticated in its efforts to detect and penalise border transgressions, often at the expense of human rights.

The present study contributes to recent ‘digital migration studies’ scholarship that problematises the use of top-down securitarian technologies, while also bringing to the attention the counter digital narratives shaped by people on the move with less sophisticated digital tools, such as smartphones. The article makes specific reference to short videos taken by Tunisian *harraga*, an Arabic word that refers to young travellers who undertake the crossing of the Mediterranean through undocumented routes.

Recent studies have focused on the analysis of the visual representation of Tunisian *harraga* through self-made videos (Figge 2017; Bayramoğlu 2022), films (Rivera-Escartin, and Johansson-Nogués 2022; Orlando 2018), and documentaries (Fakih and Horchani 2017); or more generally, around cultural expression (Souiah et al. 2017), focusing on their function to destabilise the politics of representation around the experience of illegalized migration. This article is situated within this existing literature but aims to expand it. By applying the theoretical framework of ‘counter-mapping’ (Tazzioli 2023) and dissensus’ (Rancière 2010), I argue, that these videos taken with a smartphone to document the *Harraga*’s journeys and then posted on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, constitute ‘digital counter-maps of disagreement’ – a term I use to indicate strategies for disrupting the hegemonic migration discourses through alternative ways of seeing and understanding borders. The alternative here, as the article will unfold, is a radically different visual framework marked by sentiments of excitement and joy, contrasting sharply with the narrative of crime and vulnerability that deprives migrants of any agency. In other words, these digital video clips and reels are not just about re-mapping physical spaces but also about contesting the ideological and political frameworks that define migration and mobility¹. This is done, I shall argue, through performing a ‘joyful agency’ that challenges existing semantics associated with unauthorized crossings.

To analyse the short clips posted by *harraga* on social media platforms, I will employ a multimodal method that allows for an in-depth examination of the visual and textual elements within the clips, focusing on how meaning is constructed through imagery, symbols, and narratives. Semiotic analysis will uncover the connotations embedded in the visual signs, while discourse analysis will explore the broader social, cultural, and political contexts shaping these representations. By examining both the content and its framing, this methodology will highlight how *harraga* rely on social media to challenge dominant narratives and articulate their lived experiences.

Having been exposed to derogatory and dehumanising mainstream narratives of illegalized migration from Africa to Italy for three decades, I intend to use my privileged position as a Western

¹ The concept of counter-mapping in relation to *harraga* has been extensively analyzed by Khaoula Zitouni (2023); she examines how would-be *harraga* challenge the neocolonial border regime by creating alternative mappings and subverting normative cartographies.

scholar, from Southern Italy living in the north of Europe, to amplify current practices of resistance enacted by under-represented groups. I do this as an act of solidarity with the ‘undeserved’ and of rejection of the State framing of mobility struggles to decolonise Western gazes and discourses.

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP STRATEGIES OF BORDER TECHNOLOGIES

In recent years, digital technologies have been adopted and developed by destination countries to monitor and regulate the movement of undesired travellers who rely on unauthorized and unsafe routes to reach places deemed safer or more desirable. These individuals often leave behind difficult circumstances of deprivation, persecution, conflict, or simply seek to fulfil their right and desire to move freely, despite the challenges of obtaining documents.

The EU border governance has been relying on increasingly more sophisticated ‘smart’ digital systems to identify those believed unworthy of rescue or protection for decades, and has managed to turn its border space into what Csernatononi has defined as ‘high-tech Fortress Europe’ (2017: 179). One example is the iBorderCtrl project, a 2016–2019 European trial of AI technologies aimed at enhancing border security and consequently facilitating processes of criminalisation (iBorderCtrl). This gaze prioritises the ‘spiralling of the securitisation of migration’ (Bello 2020), framing human mobility as a potential threat, rather than facilitating safe passage.

Within this scenario, the Mediterranean Sea has become a focal point for digital border surveillance. Lorenzo Pezzani and Judith Sunderland examine how Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency – has utilized drones to monitor migration in the Mediterranean and transmit information to the Libyan Coast Guard. This has enabled the interception of migrants and their return to Libya, despite substantial evidence of brutality conducted by Libyan authorities toward unauthorized migrants (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The rise of digital and biometric technologies in relation to human movement has sparked significant academic interest across disciplines (Dijstelbloem and Broeders 2015; Huc-Hepher 2021; Glouftsios 2018; Leurs and Smets 2018; Dijstelbloem 2021; Smets et al. 2020; McAuliffe 2021; Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022; Sandberg et al. 2022; Salah et al. 2023), leading to the emergence of an interdisciplinary area of study called ‘digital migration studies’ (Leurs 2023; Ponzanesi and Leurs 2024).

Within this prolific field, scholars have explored the role of technology from various perspectives, including the perspective of the people on the move, who increasingly rely on digital media to facilitate and document their migratory experience. As Latonero (2015) notes, digital tools like ‘social media, mobile apps, online maps, instant messaging, translation websites, wire money transfers, cell phone charging stations, and WiFi hotspots have created a new infrastructure for movement as critical as roads or railways’ (n. pag.). This ‘digital passage’ infrastructure (Latonero and Kift 2018; Gillespie et al. 2018) enables migrants to self-regulate their mobility, bypassing state-centric control regimes. A ‘do-it-yourself migrant’ approach (Dekker et al. 2018; Collyer 2007) that

highlights how migration is fundamentally an autonomous struggle ‘encompassing the social and subjective aspects of mobility beyond state control’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 184).

Among digital tools, smartphones are particularly transformative, enabling ‘connected migrants’ (Diminescu 2008) to navigate the complexities of their journeys. Smartphones provide vital information about routes, survival strategies, and ways to remain connected with loved ones, and in so doing, they challenge the immobility imposed by border regimes. Dekker et al. (2018) refer to these individuals as ‘smart refugees’, emphasising how smartphones empower migrants with information and communication resources that are crucial for decision-making and for mitigating the vulnerabilities of unauthorized journeys.

Despite their transformative potential, the use of smartphones is not without challenges. Gillespie et al. (2018) highlight how smartphone practices are dependent on precarious and unpredictable infrastructures, such as WiFi, SIM cards, charging stations, and power sources. These material systems, often fragile, pose significant limitations to the empowering aspects of connectivity. Nevertheless, smartphones remain essential tools for migrants, even serving life-saving functions, such as SOS calls made via satellite phones during distress at sea (Swartz and Stierl 2019). Beyond connectivity, smartphones also play a vital role in documenting human rights violations. For example, Creta and Denaro (2022) have conducted a study on how Eritrean migrants in Libyan detention centres have used smartphones to expose atrocities through social media. By posting images and texts online, these migrants have challenged the dominant and normalized narratives of border securitisation and state protection, while risking their lives, by revealing the hidden brutality of EU externalized border practices.²

The smart digital infrastructure on which people on the move have been relying before, during and after their journey is part of, what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) have defined as the ‘mobile common’: the capacity of creating, sustaining, and renewing the practices, and emotions that support the movements of mobile people. These mobile commons emerge through ‘thick everyday performative and practical justice’ (22), enabling a ‘subversive mobility’ to ‘resist, overturn, or escape [...] forms of mobile governance, territorialization, and securitization’ (Sheller 2018: 20, 17). In line with this viewpoint, Creta and Denaro (2022) argue that these practices should be framed as ‘acts of immediate justice’, essential for supporting the daily lives of migrants (166). The velocity of these just acts is facilitated by the digital medium, whose affordable accessibility permits a fast, direct, and shareable communication of various stages and emotions of the migration experience.

To ensure this call for mobility justice is fully recognized, Martina Tazzioli (2023) proposes that we reposition our focus on how we conceptualise the techno-hype in debates on border technologies. Specifically, Tazzioli argues that it is crucial to move away from a state-centred

² The EU has supported Libya with funding for migration management and border controls through the EU Trust Fund for Africa since 2017 (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). This approach is known as externalisation of borders.

perspective on the use of technology in border governance, or at least to avoid using it as the starting point. This implies a ‘counter-mapping’ that ‘disjoin[s] migration from governmental reason; that is, it implies not crafting migration as a problem’ (2), or ‘as something to govern and control’ (4). This allows for a reframing of the analytical lenses applied when it comes to the study and research of the use of border technologies on and by migrants.

The effort required here is to acknowledge the everyday practices of migrant struggles and the use they make of technologies to hijack the system of control and regulation put in place by sovereign states. Isin and Ruppert (2020) refer to these everyday uses of digital technologies performed on the internet as ‘digital rights claims’ that come to produce political subjectivities. Rights claims are made to ‘criticize practices we find objectionable, to shed light on injustice, to limit the power of government, and to demand state accountability and intervention’ (Zivi 2012: 4). In contexts of unauthorized migration, the contested practices are those aimed at immobilising individuals who are conversely willing and determined to move, viewing this as a universal right rather than an illegal trespass of sovereign territory. It is about claiming the right to mobility.

This article embraces the counter-mapping proposed by Tazzioli as a theoretical framework and proposes an analysis of specific forms of self-representation staged by *Harraga* travellers, who take advantage of their digital presence on social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook), to create an imaginative and alternative realm of rights-claiming that transcends state tactics of control.

TUNISIAN HARRAGA AND THE DIGITAL COUNTER-MAPS OF DISAGREEMENT

The Arabic word *harraga* (حراقَة) literally means ‘those who burn’, referring to the act of burning identity documents or metaphorically burning through borders, laws, and restrictions that stand in the way of travellers who want to reach Europe from the Maghreb and more generally from the African continent. It is a bold and often desperate response to harsh socio-economic conditions, political instability, and a lack of opportunities in their home countries (Hadfi 2013; Souiah 2013).

Tunisia is one of the countries affected profoundly by the *harga*³, increasingly more since the 2011 revolution, which led to a growing social frustration, lack of opportunities, corruption and desire to escape, shared especially among young working-class individuals who do not have easy access to a Visa (Chamekh 2021). Tazzioli and Garelli have described the relation between the revolution and the consequent human movement as a ‘migrantization’, to refer to the ‘heterogeneous experiences of becoming a migrant’ in the aftermath of the Arab uprising in Tunisia (2017: 9).

³ *Harraga* (حراقَة) is the plural noun of *Harrag* (حراق), ‘the person who burns’ or the undocumented migrant; while *Harga* (الحرقة) is the word that defines the action of the *Harraga*. For a history of the term *Harraga*, see M'charek, A. (2022), ‘Harraga: Burning borders, navigating colonialism’, *The Sociological Review*, 68: 2, pp. 418-434.

Tunisia serves as both a country of origin and a key transit point for migrants, especially those aiming to reach Europe through the Central Mediterranean route. An increasing number of sub-Saharan African migrants have been passing through Tunisia as part of their journey over at least the last decade (Meddeb and Louati 2024). Even though the undocumented crossing of the Sicilian channel from Tunisia is a practice shared by both Tunisians and sub-Saharans, this article focuses specifically on the experience of Tunisian *harraga*.

The *harga* is an activity that involves entire communities in Tunisia, activating a series of social expectations and resulting in humiliations and stigmas if the act of crossing and achieving success in the destination country is not accomplished. As Rivera-Escartin, Johansson-Nogués (2022) observe, ‘it is seen as the duty of the *harrag* to become a success in Europe, not only to provide economic means and expensive gifts for the family, but the success entails having proven their self-worth and obtained personal dignity, which is in turn transferable to the family and the wider community back home’ (6). *Harraga* are also subjected to pressure from the government and the wealthier, more educated segments of society, which often view the *harga* as an unpatriotic activity of the lazy.

Through a series of interviews conducted in Zarzis with a group of *harraga* and the communities around them, Zagaria identifies important ambivalences around the *harga* in Tunisian society. She argues that older generations, for instance, tend to accuse younger ones of chasing after easy money and Western capitalistic ideals with the intention of triggering ‘jealousies’, and as a consequence fuelling the *harga*; while the young travellers, interviewed by Zagaria, present a different view on the reasons for their attempted unauthorized crossings, that strictly connected to structural injustices and state neglect (Zagaria 2019: 64).

After Frezer, Figge associates the *harraga*’s act of burning – which symbolises ‘a cancellation of consensus’ (2017: 24) towards the European enforcement of borders – to other acts of burning marking historical moments in Tunisia, such as the street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation as an act of resistance to police eviction in 2010. A gesture that triggered a series of actions leading to the Jasmine revolution and ultimately to the Arab Spring:

I would suggest, then, that the practices of the *harragas* are linked to that of self-immolation. Instead of setting themselves on fire, the *harragas* burn their papers and risk their lives to escape the social death they face in their home countries. By entering the boats and crossing. (24)

If Tunisian political and social conditions represent a strong push factor for *harraga* to engage in acts of burning, Europe, conversely, is the pull factor that attracts hopeful and determined young travellers. These two contrastive poles are part of an ‘emotional geography’ (Rivera-Escartin and Johansson-Nogués 2022: 7) made of hope and disillusion (Souiah 2018), that *harraga* consciously embrace. Despite knowing that they might experience isolation, exclusion and racism in Europe and

even in Tunisia, *harraga* attempt the burning as an act of social redemption, which is first and foremost an act of resistance to the ‘crimmigration’⁴ enacted by both Europe and Tunisia, the latter seen as a buffer zone and a pre-frontier to Europe (Badalič 2019).

Harraga and have contributed conspicuously to the documentation of their struggle mainly via digital narratives, where imagination plays a considerable role in the preparation and development of the migratory project (Mastrangelo 2018).

A key practice in the experience of the *harga* – before, during, and after the ‘burning’ – is the use of selfie-videos to document the emotional turmoil of the migratory experience, including their deep desire to leave. Easily accessible on digital platforms by searching hashtags like *#harraga* (or the variation *haraga*), *#harga* and *#ghorba*⁵ or their respective Arabic transliteration (العُربة, الحرقَة, حرقَة), these videos are part of a broader process of digital self-representation. Smartphone videos uploaded to YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram by Tunisian *harraga*, aim at documenting the emotional experience of crossing the Central Mediterranean Sea via unauthorized and illegalized routes. These videos capture mixed feelings of fear – due to the risks involved – nostalgia – due to feelings of homesickness and sadness of leaving their home – and ultimately excitement from breaking the ‘existential immobility’ (Hage 2019; Jacobsen et al. 2021) imposed by the ‘stuckedness’ of waiting: waiting for accumulating enough money to pay smugglers, for the right time to leave, or for favourable weather conditions.

For the purpose of this article, I will focus on *harraga* videos posted on a publicly accessible Instagram page called ‘lghorba_tn7’.⁶ The account, based in Tunisia, joined the platform in July 2023. With 236 posts and over 32,000 followers, it serves as a repository of self-represented stories of migrant journeys and settlement. The profile image appears to be taken in Paris, as a portion of the Eiffel Tower, probably a stock image (Zitouni 2024) is visible in the background. The foreground is dominated by an Audi with a visible license plate, while a woman is seen from behind, her identity deliberately obscured.

The meanings associated with this image must be understood in connection with the textual elements presented in the account’s profile, which include references to four European countries – Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – common destinations for Maghrebi *harraga*. The expression *l_g_h_o_r_b_a* حكايات, which translates to *ghorba* tales, reinforces the storytelling aspect of the

⁴ In 2006, legal scholar Juliet Stumpf coined the term ‘crimmigration’ to address the growing convergence between criminal and immigration law in the United States. The term is now part of the migration studies lexicon (Stumpf 2006).

⁵ The Arabic term *ghorba* (الغربة) conveys exile, estrangement, and being away from home, often evoking feelings of displacement, longing, and homesickness experienced by migrants and exiles

⁶ Despite the page being publicly accessible, I acknowledge that its use in research involves ethical considerations, particularly regarding consent and potential impact. However, as this is a general public page with no identifiable contact information, it is not possible to request permission directly. Importantly, the individuals featured in the videos are anonymised to protect their identities.

page, emphasising narratives that are self-made and digitally produced to document the specific experience of migration and its related struggles.

The Instagram videos posted on this page varied from clips documenting moments of their lives in European cities, marked by the presence of architectural landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower or the Milan Duomo, as a testament to the success of the passage, to clips documenting the actual sea crossing. The latter share certain patterns: The videos are typically just a few minutes long and consist mostly of shaky, low-resolution, amateurish footage depicting the sea, the boat, and its passengers. Some videos focus on the engine on the boat that cuts the sea, some highlight the sunset or sunshine, others focus solely on the young men and women aboard the boat, showing smiling faces and the Victory sign. Frequently, the camera moves in a circular motion, capturing the faces of the passengers one by one as they speak, shout, joke, sing, or laugh directly into the lens (Figge 2017: 25-26). The mood is collectively joyful and excited, and there is always music to accompany the images, an aspect I shall return to later.

A video stands out for its contagious excitement (Lghorba_tn 2024). A group of mainly men are shouting and moving frantically on the boat, their growing joy fuelled by the realisation that they have finally identified, though unseen in the video, some form of rescue possibility. The sky is clear, and the travellers are mostly wearing shorts, showing naked torsos, suggesting summer heat. Encouraged by the other passengers who are holding smartphones to record the moment, a young man triumphantly activates the red flare distress signal to attract attention, hoping to trigger a rescue operation and ensure safe arrival in Europe. What follows is a celebration, all passengers join in shouting joy and relief and lifting their arms as a sign of victory and success, while the song *Filamen Ya Mina* by Tunisian rap singer D-Boy plays in the background, amplifying the emotional moment. The title is in Tunisian dialect and translates in English as *Farewell/May You Be Safe Mother*. The chorus goes along these lines: ‘Farewell mother, pray for me, a stranger in a foreign country, as time passes, I begin to forget that I left my dear mother’.⁷ The song is a tribute to the feelings of nostalgia and sorrow associated with leaving one's country and mother behind, while also capturing the sense of estrangement in a foreign land.

Without the paratextual presence of the hashtags that make explicit reference to the *ghorba* and *harraga*, or of the comments from people that wish them well (ex: ربي يسهل ليهم, ‘May Allah make things easy for them’)⁸, there is no other visual evidence that the people travelling in this boat are in the act of trespassing a highly securitized liquid border, the Mediterranean Sea, the same border that

⁷ [When not indicated otherwise, translation from Arabic into English have been kindly provided by Tunisian scholar Khaoula Zitouni].

⁸ For an analysis of religious allusions woven in unauthorized migrants’ testimonial narratives that also relate to sociocultural understandings of the migratory phenomenon as well as its symbolic dimensions, See Zitouni 2024.

in pre-Schengen times could be comfortably crossed by paying an affordable ferry ticket. Apart from the red flare, nothing else in this video suggests a risky journey either. None of the passengers is seen wearing a life jacket, and there is no presence of any military apparatus. The video offers a brief glimpse into a moment of excitement, resembling a summer boat trip at a tourist destination.

The multimodal presentation of text, images, and sound serves as a tool that supports a process of self-representation and *harraga* identity building. Bhandari and Bimo use the term ‘self-making’ to refer to the set of intertextual and flexible practices and conventions that occur in both the production and consumption of the multimodal object that constitutes identity creation online (2022: 3). One key feature that strongly contributes to this identity formation is the consistent presence in these videos of Tunisian rap songs. In an article examining the role of Tunisian rap in the *harga*, Mohamed Chamekh highlights how these rap songs often explore the emotional dimensions of migration, including exile, loneliness, and misery, while those focusing on the push factors driving individuals to migrate through unauthorized routes can be considered as acts of cultural and political resistance against poverty, corruption, and nepotism (2021: 48).⁹ This also applies to those lyrics, Chamekh argues, that directly address the draconian European border regime. The songs serve as a tool to further justify and frame the act of leaving as an act of right claiming, the right to live a better life, and most importantly the lyrics tend to reflect ‘a way of mocking the stigmatizing image attached to undocumented migration’¹⁰ (Salzbrunn et al. 2015: 39). The aspect of ‘mocking’ is the real subversive element of these cultural productions, as I will consider further in the next session.

The meaning of the songs, it could be argued, is only accessible to an Arabic speaking listener, which of course limits the effectiveness of the message for a non-Arabic audience; however, the rap as a genre of popular music functions as a powerful political framework, as it is commonly recognized as a tool for expression, resistance, storytelling, and identity formation.

The short clips, in their multimodal entirety, expose aspects of the migrant struggle rarely depicted in mainstream media – an affective journey that radically contrasts with the scopic regime imposed by dominant silencing strategies of criminality, death and vulnerability. Shared on public social media platforms, these videos transcend the victim/criminal dichotomy that typically defines official media portrayals. In doing so, they confront the European viewer¹¹ – one of many potential audiences, albeit unlikely – with a multimodal experience that is unsettling and unexpected. It is a representation that does not follow the rules of humanitarian calls for compassion and pity or the ‘crimmigration’ call for fear and anger; it is a radically different paradigm that these multimodal videos are setting, a ‘diasberspace’ as Saskia Huc-Hepher has called it (2021), the combination of

⁹ Chamekh argues that *harga* songs reflect class identity through their themes of social inequality and use of Tunisian *darija*, a colloquial Tunisian variation, making them especially resonant with working-class youth.

¹⁰ My translation from French.

¹¹ By ‘European viewer,’ I refer to the mainstream public gaze on migration in Europe, which is largely shaped by governmental narratives of crimmigration and subsequently reinforced through media coverage that amplifies this perspective.

diaspora, cyber and space, which is a collective platform for both explicit and intentional (self-)representations (10).

Bayramoğlu observes that these short clips ‘represent border crossing as a joyful experience whereby migrants show agency, not victimhood – producing a countervisuality that is at odds with both humanitarian and racialized imagery of migration’ (2023: 596). The concept of countervisuality, that Bayramoğlu borrows from Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011), is particularly crucial here. Mirzoeff argues that countervisuality is the act of resisting and challenging dominant ways of seeing that are imposed by authority, institutions, or power structures. This visibility is grounded, according to Mirzoeff, within the logic of plantation slavery, imperialism, and the present-day military-industrial approaches to control perception, dictate meaning, and reinforce hierarchies through images, surveillance, and representation. Conversely, countervisuality emerges as a response to oppressive visual regimes (e.g., colonial imagery, state surveillance, propaganda) that also opens up the possibility of producing new perspectives aimed at empowering marginalized voices, as the *harraga* videos have shown.

This is not to downplay the risks associated with unauthorized journeys, nor to romanticise an act of disobedience. These ‘immigrant-produced mediated narratives’, as Bishop (2019) defines them, are ‘outlaw discourses in the sense that those who tell them refuse the logic that governs the status quo’ (41), which tends to criminalise the acts of moving despite the lack of the legalized alternatives. By claiming rights they do not have, they stage scenes of ‘dissensus’ which is a way of resisting and reimagining conventions (Rancière 2011). For Rancière, ‘these rights are theirs when they can do something with them to construct a dissensus against the denial of rights they suffer’ (2012: 305-306). By combining Tazzioli’s concept of counter-mapping with Rancière’s notion of dissensus, I propose the term ‘digital counter-maps of disagreement’ to specifically define the *harraga*’s strategy of talking back to and countervisualise border surveillance mapping and related discourses, through digital rights claims that employ tactics of mocking the border through ‘joyful agency’.

Most importantly, these digital stories and rights claims serve the purpose of counter-balancing the lack of an ‘ideal speech situation’, as defined by Habermas (1971), where all parties engage in dialogue freely and as equal, with no force prevailing, and where ideas are evaluated solely on the basis of evidence and reason. As Bishop recognises, this is an impossible scenario in the immigration debate, which is instead ‘deluged with power imbalances that affect both speaker and listener at every turn’ (Bishop 2019: 6). And yet, the *Harraga*’s short ‘acts of capture’ (Figge 2017: 28), I argue, represent a glimpse of resistance to the top-down border technologies of securitisation, offering a democratic space of self-witnessing that escapes control and manipulation. Once uploaded to the internet, these videos enter a space of public sharing that reject the European necropolitical border regime: ‘It is only by uploading that they constitute a public – probably local and also limited in terms of views or clicks – bringing the moving and speaking or singing bodies in the boats to appearance’ (Figge 2017: 29).

The next sections explore further these acts of ‘self-representation witnessing’ (Rae et al. 2018) and countervisual strategies. I do so by referring to two specific videos not previously discussed in the literature on this topic, which, from the perspective of this article, represent an even sharper rupture with the politics of representation of the *harraga* journey.

THE FEMALE HARRAGA AND THE GLAMOURIZATION OF UNAUTHORIZED CROSSINGS

The sharing through digital tools and platforms of personal, first-hand stories of unjust irregularized movement and their related struggles, frustrations, hope and ambitions – in other words stories of agency, autonomy and self-determination – opens up, as we have seen, new ways of contending the ‘porocracy’ – in other words the futile effort of sovereignty to regulate the inherent porosity of borders (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2013: 180).

In this last part of the article, I shall refer to ‘digital counter-maps of disagreement’ performed specifically by female *harragates* (Kime 2020) on social media. Given the highly risky arrangement that involves dealing with *passeurs* (smugglers) in places that are restricted to male socialisation (Rivera-Escartin and Johansson-Nogués 2022: 4) and the lack of safety in crossing the sea via unauthorized routes, women are a minority among the *harraga* and yet have become an increasingly consistent presence in social media videos documenting the *harga*.

The videos taken by young women¹² tend to be characterized by a distinct aesthetic that mirrors influencer-style approaches to self-representation videos and photos. They look confidently into the camera, they wear make-up, smile and project an image that is relatable to generations of social media users. The clips, in these cases, tend to focus on the young woman only and on her ‘authentic’ experience, rather than on other passengers or actions happening around them. This approach allows them to subvert dominant migration narratives of vulnerability and criminality by positioning themselves as active storytellers.

Two videos are particularly relevant in the context of this article since they bring to the fore the problematic limitation of the mainstream and dominant discourse and scopic regime to interpret and respond to the ‘digital counter-maps of disagreement’. In 2021, in the midst of COVID-19, two Tunisian female TikTok influencers, 18-year-old Sabee al Saidi and 21-year-old Chaima Ben Mahmoud, embarked on two separate undocumented crossings of the Sicilian Channel from Tunisia to Italy in search of a better life, within the same month, November. Using their smartphones, they

¹² Some examples can be seen on a Facebook page called *Clandestino Infomigrant* a depository of several *harraga*’s clips that document the journey and other aspects of the migratory experience. For examples of videos taken by young women during the crossing, see: video 1: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/398862363252773>. Accessed 04/06/2025; Video 2: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/467895082813824>. Accessed 04/06/2025; Video 3: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/2053247045191774>. Accessed 04/06/2025; video 4: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/516849287654228>. Accessed 04/06/2025.

document their journey across the Mediterranean, in line with the *harraga* practice explored in this article. Short clips and photographs taken on the boats are then shared on their social media profiles. The two young women are shown in a dingy waving happily at the camera and posing in confident postures for the entertainment of their followers.¹³

What happens next, however, is what makes these examples of digital counter-narrative particularly interesting. Several news outlets picked up the videos, identified the young women and published their pieces on the same days, 14 and 15 February 2021, raising concerns and criticism about their actions. Some of the News titles used to report on the stories read, ‘Tunisian women’s posts glamorize risky migrant crossings’ (AP News¹⁴; Ebel 2022); ‘Des Tunisiennes glorifient les traversées des migrants clandestins’ (Kapitalis¹⁵); ‘Tunisian women's posts glamorize risky migrant crossings’ (Independent¹⁶); ‘Tunisian Influencers Glamorize Risky Migrant Crossings to Europe’ (Haaretz¹⁷); ‘Tunisian social media influencers glamourise migrant crossings’ (The National¹⁸; Rushton 2022); ‘Tunisian TikTokers accused of ‘glamorising’ deadly Mediterranean migrant crossing’ (Metro¹⁹; Krasteva 2022); ‘The Tik-Tok migrants: Tunisian influencers film their illegal immigration to Europe on a packed dinghy - then post boasting images of their spending sprees, BMW rides and trips to the Eiffel Tower’ (Daily Mail²⁰; Davies 2022); and ‘Migrant TikTok influencers accused of ‘glamourising’ dangerous Mediterranean crossing’ (Telegraph²¹; Bowman 2022).

The narrative across these news accounts is rather accusatory, portraying the young women’s interpretation of the *harga* as an attempt to solely frame a highly risky and potentially deadly journey as a ‘carefree trip’ from Tunisia to Lampedusa, Italy, and ultimately to Paris. Sabee Al Saidi and Chaima Ben Mahmoud, in fact, continue to post photos documenting their lives in Europe, often featuring landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower. Even though there is a brief reference to interviews with the two women, who share their convincing reasons for undertaking the controversial journey and their fear and terror in crossing the sea in an unsafe manner, the tone remains accusatory and dismissive.

The criticism centres on the claim that these young women give an unrealistic impression of life in Europe to desperate migrants, reinforcing the assumption that the possibility of a better life in

¹³ Both women are social media influencers in Tunisia, with nearly 2 million followers on TikTok and Instagram between them, as reported by *The Associated Press*.

¹⁴ *The Associated Press* (AP) is an American not-for-profit news agency headquartered in New York City.

¹⁵ *Kapitalis* is a French-language Tunisian news website launched in March 2010.

¹⁶ *The Independent* is a British online newspaper.

¹⁷ *Haaretz* is an Israeli Newspaper.

¹⁸ *The National* is a UAE state-owned English-language daily newspaper published in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

¹⁹ *Metro* is a British freesheet tabloid newspaper.

²⁰ *The Daily Mail* is a British daily tabloid newspaper published in London.

²¹ *The Telegraph* is a British daily broadsheet newspaper published in London.

Europe is inherently denied to *harraga* by default. By doing so, the media accounts reconnect the stories to normalized and acceptable narratives that associate migration only with risk, death and irregularity, raising the alarm and demonising social media as merely deceiving tools, rather than empowering tools of (self)-representation.

The news articles report on the fact that the two women wear make-up and smile, in other words, they project a ‘distorted’ (counter-)visuality that does not fit any established visual criteria of the regimented gaze. What is particularly striking is the consistent reliance on the term ‘glamourize’, that creates a further association not only to irresponsibility but also to triviality, the triviality and superficiality of the influencers’ world that post daily clips and reels on social media in an aesthetically appealing manner, mostly to profit from the selling of beauty products. Glamourizing these women’s acts of disagreement, in fact, reveals more about the mainstream misogynistic gaze (Mulvey 1975) imposed on women’s digital self-witnessing than about the content itself. Rather than recognising this performative joy as a complex strategy of resistance, survival, or emotional coping, this gaze disciplines female agency, insisting that women, particularly migrant women, must perform victimhood to be taken seriously. Hemmings would call this an ‘affective dissonance’ that addresses the ‘gap between self-narration and social reality’ (154). The mainstream approach to these reels denies women’s agency and reinforces patriarchal norms about who is allowed to appear joyful, and when.

On the other hand, I argue that by capturing a dangerous journey through platforms typically associated with entertainment, these influencers mock the very idea of the border, disrupting dominant and misogynistic narratives of order and violence, and ultimately challenging the political logic of borders through joy, agency and self-witnessing.

CONCLUSION

After an overview of the top-down digital technologies tools used to manage unauthorized migration in the Central Mediterranean, this article moves the focus to a practice of digital representation used by people on the move as strategies of rights claims and countervisuality. Using Martina Tazzioli’s concept of ‘counter-mapping’ and Jacques Rancière’s concept of ‘dissensus’, the article has proposed the concept of ‘counter-maps of disagreements’ to define specifically the digital self-representation tactics to take control of the narrative and to hijack the established criteria of vulnerability and illegality that dominate the second-hand representation around them.

I have done so by referring specifically to clips and videos posted by Tunisian *harraga* and *harragates* on social media that rely on ‘joyful agency’ to resist the triviality and violence of borders. As this article has demonstrated, what might initially appear as an irresponsible and insensitive action actually signals resistance to a stagnant political situation that keeps people from the global South marginalized within a geopolitical power struggle that violates their human rights.

The *harraga* and *harragates* clips send back an image that does not want to trigger feelings of pity, compassion or even fear, rather a sense of discomfort and absurdity that is in itself a response to the absurdity and violence of borders.

I argue that social media videos posted by *harraga* and *harragates* – as they ‘proudly’ cross borders – act as digital counter-maps of disagreement. Through self-representation, these videos construct counter-narratives and assert digital rights.

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CONTRIBUTORS DETAILS

Federica Mazzara is Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster, London. Her research focuses on the intersections of migration, representation, and cultural practices, particularly examining how contemporary art and activism challenge dominant narratives about people on the move. She is the author of *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and the*

Aesthetics of Subversion (Peter Lang, 2019), which examines how activist and artistic expressions challenge dominant migration narratives and foster political dissent; the same year she co-curated the exhibition *Sink Without Trace* at the London's P21 Gallery, which addressed the issue of migrant deaths at sea. Mazzara contributed to the collective writing project *Minor Keywords of Political Theory: Migration as a Critical Standpoint* (2022), a key work in critical migration studies and the autonomy of migration. She is currently working on a new research project called 'Mocking the Border: Carnavalesque Resistance in Times of Migration'.

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Contact: University of Westminster, School of Humanities, 309 Regent Street, W1B 2UW, London, UK

Email: f.mazzara@westminster.ac.uk

Orcid : 0000-0003-4940-4236