The Petrification of the Image

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We start with two images: from the air, of tarps and cops; on the ground, a pair of hands outstretched.

Or we start with an image remembered of a forest teeming with vines and snakes, and heat, and danger. No place to be civil.

The Jungle

On the 22nd of September 2009 at 8am, six hundred CRS officers entered the wooded area outside Calais, France where migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan had been camped out over the course of several years en route to trying to get into the UK. Although over 1500 people lived in these camps, the publicity of the upcoming raid led several of them to leave beforehand, leaving about 278 migrants there, at least half of them children. It took the CRS 15 minutes to pass through the human shield created by activists and to clear the camp, sending the migrants to detention centres across the country and minors to the Metz-Queuleu detention centre. Then the bulldozers came in and razed the site.

My point of entry into this event is the violence embedded in calling where the migrants were living ‘the jungle’. The press explains that it comes from a Pushtun word for the forest, but that does not fully explain its significance, or why it became a catch-all term for the living conditions of the migrants outside of Calais. When migrants escaping the raid moved to the Gard de Nord in Paris, the press dubbed the Park Villémin nearby as the Parisian jungle.

The term ‘la jungle’ became a modular term that linked migrants to the outdoor spaces where they camped. But there are other lives that arise in the circulation of the image of ‘la jungle’ that is separate from what it meant when it was coined by the migrants themselves. Part of what makes this image so easy to circulate is that, congealed within, are several ways of framing and controlling migration.

It is what Hito Steyerl would call a poor image from an imperfect cinema—an image whose value increases with its easy circulation. The dissolution of bodies into the landscape gets congealed into an image that takes on its own life and enters into the world of exchange value. And what of the use value, the event itself? Steyerl calls the residues of
the poor images the wretched of the screen.

The heightened attention to space and the life of things and bodies reveals the inner processes and logics of the event, or more precisely its immanent aesthetics. In other words, rather than making a film or taking photographs, the event itself produces its own imagery that contains an aesthetic quality germane to its historical and political existence.

I.

This is an attempt to take stock of the razing of ‘la jungle’ migrant camp, to see what afterimages this event produces—both material and immaterial—and the life that such images have. I want to look at the circulation of three kinds of stories that bury and supplant the event itself within the zombie-like circulation of images in the aftermath of a violent event.

I am interested in the life that is embedded in the circulation of the image produced by a name like ‘la jungle’. The destruction of space—the violence of the razing that piles emblematically over the violence of incarceration and the quest for asylum—transmutes the image of the jungle into something profanated, but also animated in a monstrous condensation of person and land (that as an image is an actor).

The ideological work in linking these migrants to a space called ‘la jungle’—especially in an urban setting like Paris—is quite clear, configuring them as inhabiting a state of nature, charging them as other and as somehow primitive. I would like to push this further and argue that the ‘jungle’ describes a congealed landscape, or what Adorno, in The idea of natural history would call ontologized ahistorical nature—evoked in the service of containing migrants—that plays a sleight of hand in invoking a specific spatial location but then conferring on it a primordial, ahistorical quality.

‘La jungle’ is a site that constantly produces images. What is staged is the irruption of history and fable in the invocation of the term. In Hindi, ‘the jungle’ is the word for forest, but in its transition to the West it gains another meaning. The jungle connotes a wildness, a zone of danger, the victory of the viral and uncivilized. It is feral like Mowgli, the child of the commons, who Peter Linebaugh describes as standing at the threshold between the lost life of the wilderness and the civilizing gesture of enclosure. What is the razing of the jungle then but a rootout of the virus of otherness contaminating the inside; of the alternative of commons to the striation of border control. The jungle is of another place and time—it can and must be purged. Mowgli and the jungle as repository of fable and myth are transmuted through violence into objects both magical and profane.

The purging of the jungle and the mining of its fabular past is measured by another fantasy: the spanning of the English Channel. From the beginning of the 19th century French scientists like Albert Mathieu and Thomé de Gamond proposed plans to build tunnels under the channel—first with horse drawn carriages, lit with lamps; then as an underground railroad. These utopian plans saw a future without Mowglis—neat lines floating across space, unencumbered by any trace of the unwanted. A mythical future.

To Adorno, history and nature—when examined separately—take on an ontological, mythical quality. Mythical history is that which is separated from the specificity and the locatedness of nature while mythical nature, divorced from history or a sense of progression, is configured as a perpetual cycle. This sense of perpetuity and ahistorical nature is evoked in the term ‘the jungle’.
From this point of view, the problem of housing migrants is seen as an unending cycle of containment and infiltration in constant alternation, where the problem of migrants is displaced onto nature and built space.

The intersection of history and nature in the form of natural history, however, reveals the contingency, the transitory nature, the tactical quality of both. We can see what these reified concepts look like once they disenchant one another. These remnants of reified nature are the only way we can move from the world of appearances and totality, to things. In terms of this discussion, the primordiality, the ahistoricality, of the term ‘the jungle’ is demythified by revealing its complicity with the enforcement of the UK and the EU border regimes, and with revealing how the reification of migrant living conditions is used in the mobilization of unfeasible spatial solutions.

Agency comes in the appropriation and disenchantment of these reified objects, in unmasking of the ‘primordiality’ of the jungle, the persistence of migrants who in spite of the varieties of terrible living conditions, in fact have remained a constant presence in Calais, even at the expense of their own skin, their bodily borders and health. These living conditions need to be changed, but the agency of migrants in the face of these draconian measures cannot be denied. The border then inflects upon and collapses not only the registers of the body, territory and state, but also shows how the border is drawn in the assimilation of the abject body from above; and how resistance lies in the demythification of that process from below.

II.

We come to the media event—this is theatre. This is an image of the aftermath of the highly publicized razing of the jungle. The jungle is the stage, the media its chorus and the interior minister Eric Besson’s visit, that of the conquering hero. This media event inhabits a site that is both evacuated of its migrants and meaning, and, in that evacuation, makes for an image that circulates with all the greater ease.

This turn to landscape as a means of control is an ongoing strategy of containing migrants in this site that did not begin with the jungle. To this end, I would like to describe the built space of the Sangatte refugee camp that preceded the establishment and the destruction of the jungle outside of Calais.

The Sangatte Refugee Centre was originally a storage facility used in the construction of the Channel Tunnel. The centre was opened in August 1999 to provide food and shelter to migrants in
Calais hoping to get to the UK to claim asylum status, and to prevent them from camping in a park in the heart of Calais. The building—a 25,000 square metre old storage house—had no heat, and few showers, and its target capacity of 700 inhabitants was quickly exceeded, reaching 1800 in the first year alone.

The tightening of the border to the UK turned Sangatte into a city. As Didier Fassin notes, “with its circulation of people among a city of large tents, its huge canteen where long queues waited for meals, its prefab buildings housing administrative and medical services, and its open space for Muslim worship, this “small town” began to acquire distinctively urban features”. But it was a city with flaws, where overcrowding, overflowing toilets and bleak prospects for crossing made it a difficult place to live. As one migrant states in the 2002 documentary Le Piege de Sangatte, “There are two kinds of jails you can say, one is the kind you are trapped and closed in. The other one is where they don’t let you go anywhere. Not accepting and not letting anywhere. In my point of view we’re in the second kind of jail”.

The sense of being trapped had its legal implications. Often migrants sought to go to the UK since they spoke the language and had relatives there. They also hoped for better living conditions than what they found in France. Also, as Mark Thomson states, police outside the centre often prevented migrants from receiving multilingual pamphlets with procedural information on applying for asylum in France.

As one of his first acts as Interior Minister, Nicholas Sarkozy closed down the Sangatte Refuge Centre in 2003. The centre was described by UK Home Secretary, David Blunkett as a “festering sore” in relations between the UK and France. As a ‘magnet’ for migrants and ‘evil’ smugglers, it became the scapegoat for the ‘problem’ of migration. In other words, Sangatte as a reified site became the cause of migration flow, rather than a spatial stopgap in a crisis of living conditions. After its closure, as migrants again lived precariously on the street, under bridges and in parks in Calais and Paris, the media and the government began speaking warningly of the spectre of a “Sangatte 2”. Sangatte 2 was a spectral place that evoked the principle of the magnet as space—haunting the discourse around immigration in Calais, preventing the establishment of alternate living quarters, and restricting humanitarian organizations to providing food rather than shelter.

One anonymous member of the borderless camp that summer described the walk to the camp: “a six lane highway, littered with signs of human habitation: abandoned blankets and shoes, and narrow tracks along the roadside. We met groups of men going in both directions, and they looked at us with unmasked surprise, wondering who were these strange white-folk, who were not the police, but were out walking their sunset trails. Grim destitution: pockets of cardboard cities, huddled up against old industrial warehouses, and hundreds of people queuing for food.”

The camps and personal property were destroyed on a regular basis by the police, well before the September raid. There were no showers and the water at the beach was heavily polluted. There was an outbreak of scabies, and many migrants had leg injuries, and cuts as a result of falling from trucks and off fences.

El-do--: The desire for asylum in the UK, was described in The Guardian and elsewhere as a quest for Eldorado—a spectral place, like that of Sangatte 2 that belies the stringency of what the migrants are contending with. Reports like that by La Coordination française pour le droit d’asile describe barriers to migrants applying for asylum to France, including: the lack of facilities for the many unaccompanied minors; the negative experience of their reception; the lack of procedural information on seeking asylum; the distance of Arras, the nearest centre from Calais; the lack of accommodation. This is on top of the continuous harassments, fines for camping and frequent incarceration that migrants in Calais face on a daily basis.

III.
This is a publicity still taken from the 2010 film *Qu’ils reposent en revolte*. It is an image of the hands of a migrant who has attempted to burn his fingerprints off so that he can avoid identification. His hands carry the imprint of the law and of his own journey. The grainy texture of a film shot in black and white is as much an image as the hands and scars themselves. We cannot look, and yet we cannot look away.

One of the biggest deterrents is the first safe country agreement, otherwise known as Dublin 2 (in the meantime Dublin 3). This law requires the migrant to seek asylum in the first EU country that they have entered and been fingerprinted in—which in many cases is Greece or Italy, where facilities are the least predictable, the rate of success in being granted asylum is very low, and the treatment of asylum seekers is very harsh. The looming presence of this third country, and the threat of being deported back there, is so unacceptable to many migrants that it became a common practice in ‘the jungle’ for them to try to erase their own fingerprints—by drinking chemicals and by burning off the skin on their fingertips.

The act of self-injury resonates with the terribleness of living conditions of the camps. It also forms a limit concept—making the migrant body, the state and the international law inextricable, and collapsing several registers of border control. The implication of the body within the topology of the border shows its relation to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. According to Kristeva, the dissolution of boundaries gives rise to the abject. To Kristeva, the boundary between the body and outside becomes difficult to differentiate from the body itself, making what is outside—the excremental, the grotesque and the unwanted—a part of the self. It dissolves the orderedness of identity and the world, and ushers in a state of indeterminacy, in-between-ness and ambiguity.

The implication of the abject body collapses the registers of the state, territory and body onto the border. It also calls attention to the different strategies of containment that borders operate on, and the fears that are concomitant with their dissolution. The relocation of migrants from the parks of Calais to the Sangatte Refugee Centre, to the habitation of ‘the jungle’ outside Calais, can be seen as spatial, environmental strategies of containment in response to the infiltration and visibility of migrants in city centres. In this context, the border shifts around as well. Through the Touquet Treaty, the UK border controls move into Calais, into train stations, and into jurisdiction of private companies like Eurostar. International law is established between EU states to circumvent internal laws in dealing with migrants. A game of pass-the-parcel is played between municipality and centre, between nations, around accountability in dealing fairly and systematically with asylum seekers.

The image of the reified abject body parallels the congealing of the landscape of the jungle in the promulgation of border controls. From this perspective, Sangatte’s description of a ‘festering sore’—draws its appearance of veracity from the real health problems of its inhabitants, and collapses the semantic distance between the two. Continuing this logic, Sangatte contains the disease of migrancy while the infiltration of migrants into the parks of Calais and Paris infects these cities. Finally, ‘the jungle’ is a primordial and unconfined space of disease, where the humanitarian concern with living conditions collapses into the hands of the state that purges or vaccinates it.

The act of destroying fingerprints, and the image produced and circulated, recapitulates the moment of its inception. In 1858, William Herschel—the Chief Magistrate of the Hooghly district in Jungipoor—was finalizing a contract with construction worker Rajyadhar Konai to purchase some ‘ghooting’, a binding material to build light roads. When Konai was about to sign the contract, Herschel was inspired to ask Konai to
make a stamp of his hand on the contract. Herschel had no thought of the actual imprint and its veracity. It was, rather, the gesture of implicating Konai’s hand and, by extension, his body into the contract. “I was only wishing to frighten Konai out of all thought of repudiating his signature hereafter.” He wanted to frighten Konai into honouring the contract by marking him and using that mark as a contract.

This gesture of pulling a hand to a document in the building of a country road in colonial India bookends the moment of refusal and violent abject agency in the refusal of Dublin 3. In both moments, the land is encoded into the hand, and the moment of frightening Konai—the ‘native’ non insurgent—into honouring his commitment to supply materials for building the road is negated by the territorial tracks scored painfully on the hand of the migrants travelling not in the margins, but towards the metropolitan centre and refusing the paper, legal and territorial trails leading them there.

CONCLUSION

Between the poor image and the wretched of the screen lies the ambivalent potential of the image that resides between revelation and profanation. The wretched of the screen, the event itself is the object always in excess of the poor image that circulates. Congealed in the images is the tension between what is inside and outside its frame. Thus the image of ‘la jungle’ contains at its margins the bodies of the migrants who live there; the hands and burned fingerprints of these migrants encapsulate the journey from Italy, or Greece, to France; the prehistoricity of ‘la jungle’ always contains the fantasy of its own expulsion.

These images are de-congealed and torn apart by a method—what Derek Gregory calls a montage, that swoops from the air to the ground, and is punctuated by irruptions of history and memory. This is, following Sebald, a natural history of destruction where the agency of the body is only recuperable in this collage of multiple angles of space that is punctured by time and ravaged in a hollowed out media event.

In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon says: “The appearance of the settler has meant in terms of syncretism the death of the aboriginal society, cultural lethargy, and the petrification of individuals. For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler. This, then is the correspondence, term by term, between the two trains of reasoning.”

Petrification means to feel fear in the face of the power of the settler. But more importantly, petrification means to turn to stone, and this turning into stone is only measured when the settler turns into a decaying mass, into the earth as well, into a rotting corpse. And in this reckoning is where another life can arise again. The native here could be the migrant or the refugee and the settler could be the colonizer and the arm of the state, and in their material relations is embedded the turning into stone, decaying into earth. A liminal but spaced space inhabited by what Mbembe calls the difference between the living dead and the plain dead.

But this isn’t enough. Is there an analogous way for humans to become nature through the ravages of capital just as nature becomes animated under its guise? In a lecture in Philadelphia, Silvia Federici describes how the labourer becomes the object of his labour. Through thousands of generations of labour, the farm worker becomes a cow, the tiller becomes the fruit of the soil, the sailor becomes the rhythm of the waves by lying on floor of his ship and finding his way home. Here the pivot is the act of labour that is the site of transmutation. This is the positive register of becoming nature. What is its negative? It is the turning into stone, the production of death at the border, the turning of
the state into a corpse, and the native into stone and an image ingrained. But this isn’t enough.