

Book Review of Chouliaraki, Lilie and Georgiou, Myria 2022. *The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power*. New York: New York University Press, 245 pp



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BOOK REVIEW

OLGA TKACH ID

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Co-authored by two professors of media and communication studies, Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou, *The Digital Border* is a rigorous and critical analysis of the structural inequalities behind contemporary human mobility, especially from the Global South to the edges of Europe. It draws on rich empirical data, including ethnographic research in the fishing village on the island of Chios, Greece, as well as urban ethnography in several European cities and digital ethnography, which includes media texts representing migrants and digitally mediated initiatives to give voice to them. With this book, the authors join the vibrant international debate on border management and securitization, as well as the humanitarian missions of international NGOs, triggered by the influx of refugees into the 'Mediterranean global south' (Mainwaring 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Panebianco 2022). Chouliaraki and Georgiou focus on how societies where migrants arrive deal with them through multifaceted border policies and practices. They mobilize the concept of the digital border, understood as the techno-symbolic assemblages of the territorial border and the platformed narratives of the symbolic border that regulate migrant mobility, bodies, and identities. Crucially, the digital border functions as a hybrid terrain where militarized security, humanitarian care, and activist solidarity coexist in different combinations across space and time (pp. 2–26). The conceptual focus on the receiving society is clearly reflected in the authors' ethical statement. They decided that it would be morally more appropriate to refrain from engaging with populations on the move—migrants who have just landed, anxious, exhausted, and desperate for boat tickets—and instead pursue encounters with actors of reception (p. 38).

Two interrelated sections constitute the main content of the volume. Section I: The Territorial Border examines three domains of external border practices enacted on the island of Chios: the military securitization and protection of European borders, represented by the registration center for refugees; the securitized care of humanitarian professionals and service provision; and the volunteer work of noninstitutional local actors of solidarity and care at arrival points (p. 33). Military securitization, with its

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Olga Tkach, PhD

Docent in Sociology, Kone
Foundation Fellow at
the Helsinki Collegium of
Advanced Studies (HCAS),
University of Helsinki, FI

olga.tkach@helsinki.fi

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digital practices of biometric governance, reminds us of the over-studied biopower of borders that reduces individual migrant profiles and personal narratives to abstract codes of race, ethnicity, and religion. In turn, the bordering work of NGOs providing humanitarian aid and protecting migrants' lives is interpreted as humanitarian securitization. The authors argue that while migrants are perceived more personally in this realm, still NGO representatives actively use digital means for surveillance of migrants, but not for horizontal interactions with them and for giving them a voice. In contrast, volunteers recognize the humanity of migrants, actively use digital means to stay in touch with them, and thus manifest "compassionate activism." For Chouliaraki and Georgiou, this sphere opens up a real possibility of meaningful connection and emotional identification with migrants—a possibility of their humanization (p. 55). However, they point out that even volunteers, as a privileged and resourceful part of host communities, do not avoid the practices of othering migrants. The authors reveal that, to some extent, all gatekeepers end up dehumanizing migrants in the name of humanity (p. 56).

Turning from external to inner borders, Chouliaraki and Georgiou build on previous research (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019) and analyze how multicultural neighborhoods in Athens, Berlin, and London mobilize digital infrastructures of ordering and bordering to regulate migrants' lives, and how migrants themselves use these infrastructures to find pathways to urban participation. In doing so, they reveal three spheres of the inner border: securitized self-responsibility (job centers as spaces of migrant biopolitics); securitized precarity (state-sponsored training as a version of migrant control rather than providing access to the labor market); and conditional conviviality (solidarity rooted in everyday encounters and civic life). The authors prove that migrants find themselves in the system of migrant entrepreneurialism or self-reliance as the dominant market ideal where they are responsible for their economic well-being. This system multiplies external surveillance within cities and across urban neighborhoods, as well as in places of work and education. However, networked commons, or sites of connectivity between citizens and non-citizens across cities, transcend the internal border and provide migrants with at least some ontological recognition and basic human rights. The commons can be built through convivial experiences of education (language cafes and other examples of grassroots pedagogy), cultural encounters or convivial stages of artistic performance, and political activism. Although this does not fully compensate for the need for sustainable infrastructures of care, the authors highlight the role of digital infrastructures or social media as emancipatory tools that give voice to the oppressed and maintain bonds of trust among them.

Based on a cross-national content analysis of the online press in eight countries, Section II: The Symbolic Border illuminates the practices of verbal or visual media representations of migrants. It shows how migration news generates suspicion through the victim/threat binary, legitimizes discourses of fear, and enables the triumph of the politics of securitization. Notwithstanding 'ecstatic humanitarianism' and the rhetoric of hospitality as a historical legacy of the continent, the arrival in Europe of civilians fleeing deadly conflict zones in Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq is represented as a potential harm. The abstract rhetoric of solidarity continues to focus on self-protection rather than life-saving measures. The linguistic muteness of migrants in official media texts dehumanizes them as non-Western 'others' and exiles from the political sphere. The authors conclude that the journalistic economy of voice reproduces the geopolitical logic of humanitarian security and orientalist hierarchies of human life that they encountered during their fieldwork on the Greek island of Chios. However, the cases of

voicing migrants through different project initiatives, such as collecting their stories of mobility told in different languages, revealed that migrants normalize and maintain the dominant security rationalities and remain subordinated to Western discourse. The case of refugee radio established in Hamburg by a refugee was mentioned in the book as a possibility for strong political messages of migrants as agentic subjects speaking with full names and professional attributes, but this voice is still weak and subaltern (pp. 162–164).

While I read the book with great interest, I missed some important elements in the text. First, the connections between different digital means and segments in bordering policies and practices (i.e., biometrical governance, official and social media, messengers, and other means of digital communication and control), as well as the related technical and symbolic digital powers of different actors, are not always clear. Second, an explanation of why the authors do not differentiate between migration and refugeeeness, nor consider the diversity within both, would make the analysis more meaningful. Furthermore, although the silencing of migrants in European societies, including academia, is the central critical statement of the book, the voices of refugees are also unheard in this research, apart from an exclusion mentioned in the endnote on page 200. More vibrant narratives from all possible actors involved in the operation of the digital border would strengthen the conceptual statements of the book. Third, the temporal and spatial framing of the empirical data collection for this book is not clear. It is presented as a patchwork of different research sites and data sets, so it would be great to have them all in a separate section to grasp the scale. For example, on page 37, Section 1, refers to 10 days of intensive fieldwork in Chios in December 2015 as ethnography, but how and when was other data organized, and how do different segments of data collection relate to each other?

Overall, this book is much more than its title promises. It is a loud and well-crafted call for fundamental human rights and a deep analytical work that critically explores the structures and practices of inequality in citizenship and mobility. The book reveals a complex combination of humanitarianism and dehumanization of border work based on a pedagogy of crisis in Western societies that has the security-migration nexus at its core. In such a context, Chouliaraki and Georgiou call for ‘alternative imagination’ instead of ‘the crisis imaginary’ that continuously legitimizes the status quo when migrants are seen as a potential threat, and devaluates even minimal care of non-state actors and the dignity of people on the move.

I believe that *The Digital Border* is important reading for students and scholars of human rights, mobility inequality, borders, migration, media studies, and the digitalization of everyday life. I recommend it not only to academics, but also to educators, civic activists, and employers who want to give migrants a voice, not just to speak on their behalf.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Olga Tkach, PhD  orcid.org/0000-0002-0464-2305

Docent in Sociology, Kone Foundation Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies (HCAS), University of Helsinki, FI

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