

# Figures of the migrant: Structure and resistance

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I would like to begin by thanking Dr Kotef and Dr Little for taking the time to engage my work so thoughtfully. Their essays have raised so many important points and intersections that I am afraid I cannot respond to all of them. I would, however, like to take up two specific threads that ran through the essays: structure and resistance.

## Kinetic structures

*The Figure of the Migrant* is neither a history of migration nor a philosophy of migration in the traditional senses. It is neither an empirical chronology of historical events, nor is it an abstract political theory of rights, norms, contracts, freedoms, and so on. I am thus extremely grateful to Dr Kotef for pointing out what others may not have seen as a key methodological novelty at work in *The Figure of the Migrant*: “it is a philosophical work that uses the history of the world as its building materials ... (the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat) are therefore more than historical figures. Each represents a certain directionality, pattern, drive, and force of mobility whose significance goes well beyond this figure’s epoch.” This unique method is what gives the work its hybrid style, which both grounds theory in history and extracts from history a strictly immanent set of concepts adequate to this history. I think a short clarification of this point will make my response to my reviewers a bit more coherent.

An effect of this method may be that those trained in philosophy might find a lack of pure or universal concepts, and historians may find that numerous persons, figures, and events have fallen through the cracks of such sweeping historical moves. If the aim of *The Figure of the Migrant* was to produce an abstract political theory or to produce a history of Western migration, then it would have failed. However, this was not the aim. The aim was to introduce an entirely new set of political concepts strictly adequate to several major figures of the migrant, thus inverting the typical tendency in liberal, state-centric, and citizen-centric political theories and political histories. The aim was to identify kinetic structures, patterns, tendencies, or forms of circulation that served to both expel migrants and expand various social formations.

This is a completely different notion of “structure” from that found in both structuralism and post-structuralism. A kinetic structure is not a reductive anthropocentric domain

that explains all the others (power, language, economics, the unconscious, and so on), nor is it a total domain with no “outside” to it, or even some combination of such domains (Freudo-Marxism). Kinetic structures are not anthropocentric because what is in motion are matters both human and non-human with their own kinetic agency. Kinetic structures are not reductive or total because what is primary is not the kinetic structure itself but the flows that compose, decompose, and recompose it.

Kinetic structures are not a priori. Like the owl of Minerva, theoretical practice flies at dusk after the day has done and looks back on its immanent conditions. However, once it has seen the practical and historical conditions of its own appearance, it then describes them, not from nowhere, but precisely from the very point from which it is at: the present. Theoretical description is thus always backward looking, like Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s *Angel of History*. The *Angel of History* theoretically faces the past but is continually and practically propelled blindly forward into the future. As Marx writes of his method in the Postface to the Second Edition of *Capital*:

Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an a priori construction. (C, 102)

The kinetic concepts at the beginning of *The Figure of the Migrant* are not a priori, but are immanently extracted from the past, from the perspective of the present. This is quite different than the typical “conceptual” approach found in most political theory (including certain ahistorical versions of structuralism and post-structuralism) and from more straightforward empirical histories.

Dr Kotef and Dr Little are keen to see the value in this method’s difference from those that came before it, but they are also keen to identify a key problem posed by this new method.

### *The problem of the singular*

The problem with structures of any kind is that they risk becoming conceptually homogenizing and reifying. As Kotef quite rightly says, “Whereas [structures] can provide a political and theoretical foundation only if they are built into a dialectic of change, of detailing, of differentiations, they also tend to blur the details or side-line those which do not fit well ... I would therefore propose reading the necessary gaps [such structures] entail as an opening for further conversations rather than a claim concerning the flaws of the argument.” And as Little and her students are right to respond, “the images of Japanese internees standing behind a barbed wire fence looked much like Holocaust photographs, but ‘surely nothing could compare to the Holocaust’.”

I take this point very seriously and think that both Kotef and Little point us in precisely the right direction toward addressing this issue. Kotef recommends that we “fracture the migrant” by showing the sub-figures within the major four figures laid out in *The*

*Figure of the Migrant*. I completely agree and I appreciate that Kotef sees that this position is not incompatible with my own. The four figures I studied are not the only figures of the migrant; there are many more that we can study using the kinopolitical method.

More specifically, however, the primary confusion here is that I included denationalized refugees in the category of the proletariat when in fact many, but not all, of these refugees did not work. While many worked illegally, there were and are today many refugees who would like to work but cannot or do not want to work illegally. Marx calls this non-working surplus population the “latent surplus army,” which waits in the wings in poverty and desperation until the market needs them. Technically, just because someone is not working at any given time does not mean that they are not part of the vast “lumpen proletariat” or even the “stagnant population” which is fundamentally “unemployable.” This is one possible response to thinking of stateless refugees as part of the lumpen proletariat. Another, and what I was going for in pages 108–111, was that the kinetic pattern of elasticity that defines that the working economic proletariat is actually the same elastic pattern that defined the process of denationalized surplus populations. Instead of economic equilibrium, the aim was to produce a racial or social equilibrium. In this sense, the economic and non-economic populations were part of the same pattern of elastic circulation: the same elastic proletariat. But I see how this is confusing, given the typically economic definition of the proletariat.

In either case, I admit the issue of sub-figures is not and cannot be fully resolved in *The Figure of the Migrant*. I think the kinetic structuralism developed in *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015) and *Theory of the Border* (2016) avoids reductionism, constructivism, and closed static structures (since they are constantly moving), but beneath every pattern of circulation, there will always be more and different patterns. This is no reason to give up political analysis, but precisely the opposite: we have to multiply it at every level. There is no single master or total analysis.

Thus, as Little so wonderfully solves the problem, the analysis of kinopolitical structures merges continuously with the “micro” analysis of kinesthetic structures of affect, sensation, and qualities in the arts and in the singularity of experience. As her literary and historical examples make clear, politics and aesthetics are not two separate domains treating different kinds of content, or even parts within a whole, but are rather completely continuous with one another. The singular affects described in Jacob’s literary rendering of the attic fugitive, for example, are both aesthetic and political *at the same time*. Aesthetic because singular and affective; political because lived patterns of slavery and racism in the American South are nothing other than the collective movement of all their affects.

Patterns of circulation, or kinetic structures, are completely immanent to the affective qualities that compose them. Affects never occur in isolation. Their collectivity is what connects them to the world, to shared sensations, to memory, to history, and thus to politics. The affect of suffering in a Japanese-American internment camp is what it is precisely because it is part of a larger pattern of collective suffering, even if each suffering is singular. The singularities are not parts of a whole, but stars in a constellation or historical pattern of motion. The arbitrary historical division between art and politics is thus reunified in the study of kinetic structures. The issue of “canvas size” is therefore not a problem to be solved, but, as Kotef says, always an opportunity for new work, for multiplication. No one work will ever be able to capture the patterns of motion at all levels.

What keeps art and politics together is history. History grounds affects in their concrete, collective context and conditions of emergence, and history also keeps political theory from straying into a priori concepts and ahistorical speculations. In Part III of *The Figure of the Migrant*, I provide a singular case study for exactly this reason. There is no ahistorical theory of the migrant or the border *in general*. Any “general” theory must emerge from history. History is also the link I see between the works of Dr Kotef, Dr Little, and myself.

## Resistance

*The Figure of the Migrant* does not provide, as Little says, any kind of program or normative theory of what “we ought to do.” This is true in part because this is not up to me or anyone else in particular. It’s up to all of us. Change occurs historically and practically, not speculatively. More importantly, however, the key to locating trajectories of resistance has been and still is in the most marginalized figures of the migrant. This is one of the reasons I chose to write a book focusing on some of the most brutally disposed figures of Western history. These same figures have also been the source of the most creative experiments for being and doing otherwise. Kinetic structures are constantly changing, so the question is not change versus stasis. Dominant territorial, political, juridical, and economic structures or patterns of circulation tend to change through expansion and expulsion. Migrant counter-powers, however, tend to continuously change their whole pattern of motion toward increasing feedback and mutation. Some historical examples from the book include slave revolts, maroon societies, peasant struggles, and communes.

The important takeaway is this: it is the movement of the migrant that is primary both in the constitution of the historically dominant patterns of social motion and in the corresponding forms of resistance. This is not a coincidence. It is precisely because the movement of the migrant is constitutive that it is also capable of acts of resistance and counter-power. In the case of Little’s literary examples, it is precisely through the micro-movements of incarcerated migrants—which both reproduce the dominant daily patterns of the camp and also deviate from this pattern, even in small ways—that homely acts of migrant subjectivity are developed. It is precisely the kinetic acts of habit, custom, “rituals and motions,” and circulation that transform the most “un-homely spaces” into more homely ones where something like resistance, no matter how small, can survive.

Life in many camps, as Little says, is not defined by strict immobility but by circulation through the camps or in the flow of the labor line. Resistance introduces a swerve into the dominant pattern of incarcerated circulation. This can take the form of the runaway slave, the mother who breaks from her work flow to feed her daughter, acts of sabotage, strike, and so on. The acts of migrant resistance are historically specific, and are covered in depth in the book, but what they all share in common is precisely what Little observes: they are all pedetic to one degree or another. The swerve starts as apparently isolated but can also be further developed into meta-stable social formations: the maroon society, the commune, and so on.

Pedetic acts move in an unpredictable yet non-random way that both responds to their singular conditions and opens beyond them as well. Fred Moten and Christina Sharpe

both demonstrate this point in the case of Black resistance. Moten's use of turbulent or "troubled air" to describe Black resistance is not coincidental. Turbulence in air and water, as Sharpe notes, are some of the material and historical conditions that defined the slave's transport across the ocean. The turbulence of the waters, the wake left behind the slave ship, and the unpredictable nature of the weather all define the material historical conditions of Black migrant-slave transport. For Sharpe, the question is not simply one of the Fanonian "non-Being" of Blackness, but what it means to *live in the wake of the slave ship and slave society*. "What, then, are the ongoing coordinates and effects of the wake, and what does it mean to inhabit that Fanonian 'zone of non-Being' within and after slavery's denial of Black humanity? Inhabiting here is the state of being inhabited/occupied and also being or dwelling in."<sup>1</sup> The question is one of both inhabiting a turbulent zone or wake and also dwelling and being in that zone as an act of resistance. The turbulence of the wake is thus the condition for both the reproduction of Black death and the resistance of Black life. The question then is less of Afro-pessimism versus Afro-optimism, but of an Afro-turbulence. The two sides are two sides of the same turbulent spiral left behind in the wake of slavery and the slave ship.

### *The problem of home*

Expulsion takes many forms (territorial, political, juridical, and economic), but what does migrant resistance mean for "those who stay and cannot leave," Kotef asks, including "women of the propertied class who find themselves confined to the home." Little raises a similar issue in cases of the confined fugitive, incarcerated life, detained migrants, concentration camp populations, and so on. Is it accurate to call such relatively immobile persons "migrants" and to speak of their kinetic "expulsion"?

This is an excellent point and I thank both readers for raising it. I think the answer to the above questions is "yes," but not without some qualification. I think it is accurate to speak of fugitives, detainees, prisoners, and women as figures of the migrant because, as Little shows, these figures are very much in motion. To think the opposite is to buy into the fantasy of stasis, in which social power pretends it can stop or arrest bodies. But this, I have tried to show, is not at all how social power works. It does not stop and let move, it circulates. It is not a question of sovereign binary exceptions, but one of mobilization.

In fact, it is in sedentism and incarceration that we find some of the most kinetically intensive, violent, and extreme forms of kinopower at work. This thesis is fully developed in *Theory of the Border*, which was written to address exactly this issue: how is relative stasis, social confinement, and sedentism produced and reproduced? In both books, for example, I tried to show how the historical advent of cellular confinement has nothing to do with stasis, but rather an extreme micromanagement of circulation, according to a space-time table or matrix. The *horarium* used in medieval monasteries is essentially still used today in detention centers and prisons and is abided by all those confined in one way or another. On the specific question of women's confinement in the home, I have an article forthcoming in *Polygraph* called, "Three Theses on Neoliberal Migration and Social Reproduction" in which I focus on the case of modern migrant women in particular. But women have always been made migrants in their own home.

In *Figure of the Migrant*, for example, I tried to show how women's confinement is actually part of the same regime of expulsion for the time (but often worse). For example, territorial expulsion involves a double expulsion of nomads outside the territory and a confinement of women inside the territory: they are literally fenced in (see *Theory of the Border*). Ancient political expulsion (the loss of political agency) applied not only to barbarian slaves but also to the women of the *oikos* or home. Medieval juridical expulsion affected not just the "masterless men" who roamed the highways and forests but was actually much worse for the women who were not as mobile. As Silvia Federici has shown, these women were often burned as witches. Modern economic expulsion dispossesses the (lumpen) proletariat of the means of production and forces them into migration, but women's labor is directly appropriated without pay, and thus, their situation is even worse. I admit a more detailed account of migrant women's expulsion, from a kinopolitical perspective, still needs to be developed alongside closer studies of the techniques of racialization and heteronormativity.

The point I want to make is this: I define the figure of the migrant as someone who is expelled as a condition or consequence of social expansion. But expulsion is not just territorial. It can include political, legal, and economic forms of expulsion or dispossession as well. In fact, one can even become a migrant in one's own home, as I showed in Part III's discussion of places where indigenous lands were stolen and sold off to extractive industries in Mexico, which then destroyed the territory. The Zapatistas, for example, I say in the book, have become migrants in their own home. "Thus, the struggle of the migrant is not only to move freely but also to remain at home in kinopolitical autonomy" (p. 228). More examples of challenges to the right to stay home and control that home are given in Chapter 17. As peasant struggles around the world attest, someone can either become a migrant by moving away from a territory or when a territory is moved away from someone.

My aim with this book was to open a new method for study, so I hope that sympathetic readers will take note of what the book *has not done*, and in particular what Dr Kotef and Dr Little have pointed to, and develop these areas further.

## Note

1. Christina Sharpe (2016: 20).

## References

- Sharpe C (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.