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Yto Barrada’s photographs *Tunnel—Disused Survey Site for a Morocco–Spain Connection* (2002) and *Landslip, Cromlech de Mzora* (2001) are two of a larger series dealing with international, continental, and cultural boundaries (*A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project, 1998–2004*). The series title refers to the Strait of Gibraltar, the narrow channel that separates Europe from North Africa while simultaneously connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean. Prior to 1991, Moroccan citizens were able to cross the strait and enter Spain on a regular basis, but Spain’s signing of the Schengen Agreement that year effectively closed this connection. Although not the sole barrier to crossing the sea, the Strait of Gibraltar has come to stand for the much larger cultural, political, and social divide between the two continents.

Throughout The Strait Project, Barrada uses photographic documentation of the Moroccan city of Tangier to obliquely represent the separation between North Africa and Europe. The series transports the viewer to a region coded in fantasy and “otherness,” even to this day. Through Barrada’s lens, landscape, domestic interiors, and street scenes activate the city, portraying it as a multivalent site of both stagnation and potential. While Barrada never depicts the physical separation between Spain and Morocco, The Strait Project finds other ways to evoke the reality of migration and exile. Although Tangier is only nine miles from the Spanish coast, that number...
fails to capture the magnitude of the linguistic, cultural, and political distance that separates it from Europe.

Art historian T. J. Demos has argued that Barrada’s photography “is freed from representation….The documentation of bare life…can only take place negatively, that is, indicated through the lacuna, blurs, and blind spots that mar the image, but also open up possibility within it….” Demos references Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s controversial construct of bare life, which Agamben defines as the point at which life and law become indistinguishable. On a practical level, the condition occurs when everyday actions are completely subsumed under the power of the state. In the case of Tangier, bare life is apparent in the construction of the city’s identity, solely through its proximity to Europe and the resultant restrictions placed on mobility.

This tension Demos notes between negative space and possibility permeates Tunnel and Landslip. The former frames an abandoned survey site for a project that would have connected Tangier with Spain, while the latter juxtaposes in the foreground a naturally occurring erosion (the “landslip” near the ancient megalith of Mzora, approximately thirty miles from Tangier) with a pastoral field in the background. This essay will explore how Barrada’s photographs suggest gaps, boundaries, and connectivity, without resorting to their straightforward depiction. In doing so, Barrada navigates the nuances between documentation and aestheticization. She compels the viewer to question the nature of artificially constructed boundaries as well as the natural, cultural, and psychological impediments to human mobility.

Landslip, Cromlech de Mzora depicts a pastoral landscape divided. Rolling green hills occupy the middle and background, while the foreground reveals a rupture. A mud-filled stream flows down the divide, disappearing into the verdant distance. An isolated group of trees sits to the upper left. The sky behind is dominated by a grayish-white, undefined cloud cover. The only sign of human intervention is a nondescript dirt road. It is that geologic rift, however, that captures the viewer’s attention, evoking a fault line, a deep disturbance within the earth. The rift is both frozen in time and yet continually evolving—the viewer can make out loose rocks barely adhering to the steep sides, indicating that the landslide is ongoing. The ground is inherently unstable, reflecting the danger intrinsic not only to such geologic change but also to political instability and the complex nature of larger divides. Rather than simply dismissing religious and political differences as mere social constructs, Barrada reminds us of the physical obstacles to movement. Reading the photograph in terms of the larger series, it is as if the trauma of separation—Northern Africa from Southern Europe—is both recorded and prefigured in the landscape.

The title Barrada gives to this work is significant as it refers both to the landslide in the foreground and to the ancient monument known as the Cromlech of Mzora. A cromlech traditionally refers to a circular array of large stones, Stonehenge in the United Kingdom being the best-known example. The Neolithic-era Cromlech of Mzora, however, is a circular mound more than 177 feet in diameter that rises to around twenty feet high at its apex. The mound is bordered with a ring of smaller stones, anywhere from three to seven feet tall, and is located close to the present-day town of Assilah, thirty miles from Tangier (and the strait). 3 No part of the monument is visible in Barrada’s photograph, but the association with the megalithic structure adds much to the interpretation of the piece and draws a connection to a long, unbroken past. The Cromlech of Mzora was a source of legend, one cited in the mythology of Ancient

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Greece. The disjuncture between the ancient civilization of legend and the ruins that remain leads the viewer to consider that longer history—the rise and fall of empires and how, through it all, the land stands as witness. In particular, the juxtaposition of the prehistoric with the contemporary, punctuated by that deep divide in the earth, speaks to the transient nature of geopolitical boundaries. After all, when the Cromlech was first constructed, the artificial divides between Spain and Morocco, Christian and Muslim, did not yet exist. The European Union, the Schengen Agreement, and the rest of the political entities that restrict movement across the strait become denaturalized within a timeframe that spans millennia.

To cross that watery divide from Tangier to Spain, one must travel by ferry, a journey that takes around two hours, arriving in the Spanish town of Algeciras. Migration in both directions across the strait is a reality for millions of people each year, and the present-day ferry system is not equipped to handle the volume. The governments of Morocco and Spain have spent more than a quarter century discussing the complex nature of constructing a tunnel between the two coasts, but logistical issues continue to keep plans at the level of speculation. In 2009, long after the completion of Barrada’s photographic exploration of Tangier, the commission set up to explore construction of the strait tunnel issued a report that called into question the feasibility of the project. In light of this later development, Barrada’s *Tunnel—Disused Survey Site for a Morocco–Spain Connection* is both a monument and a memorial to this undertaking.

Barrada depicts this survey site as abandoned, a condition more prosaically described in the title as “disused.” The bare concrete platform stands in stark contrast to the vivid blue sea in the middle ground. Rust corrodes the steel beams that cut the photograph almost in half diagonally. Together, the blue and the rust make for a spare palette within this minimalist composition. A lone weight hangs from a cable, frozen in space, completing the delicate composition.

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4 As recounted by Plutarch in the first century AD, the Cromlech of Mzora is the probable location of the tomb of the Libyan giant Antaeus, killed by Hercules during one of his Twelve Labors.
5 The proposed tunnel was intended to carry upwards of nine million passengers per year. See Giles Tremlett, “By Train from Europe to Africa—Undersea Tunnel Project Takes a Leap Forward,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2006; http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/20/spain.travelnews.
wonder how long it has hung there, hooked to the neighboring cable. The entire apparatus rests on a flat, concrete surface, but even this has chipped away, with a solitary weed forcing its way upwards. All the elements are in place, suggesting a stable, albeit neglected site, but the viewer can make no sense of the structure, its purpose, or even its scale.

*Tunnel* renders the present ancient, while *Landslip* alludes to the presence of the ancient. In both of these images, time dissolves and creates distance. It is no coincidence, then, that Barrada turns to two sets of ruins to remind the viewer of the malleability of time. Ruins, traditionally, go hand in hand with absence, in this case the palpable absence of the human figure. This is not the case for much of the series, in which Barrada photographs the inhabitants of Tangier in ways that are both intimate and yet removed from the immediacy of daily life in the city. For *Tunnel* and *Landslip*, however, human presence is implied through what has been left behind. This human involvement is more evident in *Tunnel*, to be sure, but it permeates *Landslip* in the lonely dirt road that winds through the landscape of Mzora.

Barrada’s choice to present her photographs from this series in a variety of sizes lends its display the air of a curio or travelogue. In person, the viewer must negotiate the different dimensions, stepping toward or away from the photographs accordingly. Across the series, however, Barrada consistently maintains a square format, unlike traditional landscape photography. While the proliferation of similar formatting on social media sites such as Instagram has rendered this a common sight, from 1998 through 2004, when Barrada was shooting the Strait series, this choice of format would have echoed the then-obsolete Polaroid. These images both allude to and deny the instant gratification of the Polaroid, as well as its disposable nature. Combined with their lack of human presence or temporal markers, these photographs also exude a timeless, enduring quality. The scale, however, is somewhere in between, too large for the immediacy (and intimacy) of the Polaroid, and too small for monumental landscape.

We, the viewers, hover in between modes of interpretation and, much like the inhabitants of Tangier, find ourselves in a limbo of sorts. On the one hand, Barrada’s entire series emits the slice-of-life aesthetic of an instant camera, occupying that gray area between documentation and
aestheticization of bare life. The ethical implications of aestheticizing this condition are numerous, however, and run the risk of experiencing enjoyment at the expense of others.

The lack of context, the minimalism of the elements, and the aforementioned in-betweenness of format and scale give the viewer no clear answer as to Barrada’s intent with the series. As others, such as the critic Nadia Tazi, have observed, the photographs are “consistent with a certain tendency of contemporary art that attempts to ‘document’ realities and ordinary practices in a manner that is both politically modest and formally understated.” In other words, Barrada focuses on the banality of everyday life in order to characterize a much larger social and political system. Specifically, these photographs interrogate how the decisions of those in power affect the lives of ordinary people, those living on the “wrong” side of the strait. Barrada is not the only contemporary artist to work in this mode. Her work has been discussed frequently in conjunction with Steve McQueen and Emily Jacir, to name just two. Both McQueen and Jacir have used documentary (film and photography, respectively) to interrogate the economic disparities created by barriers to immigration. Barrada’s contribution to this mode of image-making is, I would argue, the way she creates a portrait of a border zone without resorting to clichés.

This lack of cliché keeps us guessing. As Barrada herself has stated, “approaching something indirectly is a form of elegance and, in a paradoxical way, of precision.” By choosing to forego the stereotypical depiction of the boundary between Spain and Morocco, Europe and North Africa, Barrada reveals far more about the reality of this border zone. This condition is one of desire but, at the same time, palpable ennui. Anthony Downey, in his review of the series, notes that this paradoxical nature of the photographs stems from Tangier being both a place of transit and stagnation. The muted colors throughout Barrada’s series support this conclusion. The images evoke a life spent in perpetual limbo—the state of the would-be emigrant, the refugee, or the expatriate. The disjuncture between Tangier as imagined tourist paradise, vibrant and

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8 Yto Barrada, quoted in “Conversation between Sina Najafi and Yto Barrada,” in Yto Barrada, ed. Lionel Bovier and Clément Diiré (Zurich: JRP/Ringier), 146.
exoticized, and the city’s portrayal as a gloomy way station on the path to Europe drives this reading of the work.

I wonder, however, if the constant subordination of Morocco in this comparison is truly what Barrada’s work implies. If Tangier is a paired city longing for its European counterpart yet forever thwarted by geography and geopolitics, then what to make of Spain’s position? By restricting immigration and actively discriminating against ethnic minorities, Spain (and the rest of Europe) also loses. Barrada only portrays Tangier, and the viewer is left to fill in the other side of the map. Does Algeciras exude that same ennui, and could we find similar paradoxes throughout the major European capitals? The question is at once absurd, for these tensions—between movement and stasis, longing and memory—are a part of any transcultural milieu. The strait that divides may appear to leave Morocco and North Africa in a subordinate position, but Barrada’s series is intentionally ambiguous about where (and how) to draw the line.

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