


Chapter 10

Fragile Inquiry in Borderlands: Embodied Gestures and Democratic Persistence in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*

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ABSTRACT

*Migration scholarship has shown how sovereignty creates zones of disposability and suspended life. By focusing on exposure, it has overlooked minor, improvised gestures through which migrants recompose political life under abandonment. This chapter responds to that gap by introducing fragile inquiry, defined as gestures through which migrants enact world-making. It makes three contributions to migration studies: (1) it theorizes hope as gestural practice rather than sentiment or strategy; (2) it develops a method of close gestural reading paired with narrative cartography; and (3) it reconceives migration as democratic experimentation under ruin. Drawing on Dewey, Rorty and Addams, it treats Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* as a literary archive of life-sustaining micro-practices. Detailed readings, from Murad's shoreline maps to Faten's "maybes" and Halima's theft accusation, reveal hope as active world-making. Fragile inquiry challenges necropolitical paradigms and points toward policies that nurture migrant-led improvisations for democratic persistence.*

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), an English language novel by a Moroccan American writer. The book follows the lives of Moroccan migrants who risk their lives crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in fragile boats, hoping to reach Spain. Written at a time of growing debate about migration across the western Mediterranean, the novel makes clear what is at stake: the chance to survive, the hope of dignity, and the struggle to be recognized as full human beings.

The chapter asks a central question: how can the smallest actions of migrants, such as kneeling on the sand, whispering a vow, or sharing food, be understood not only as survival tactics but also as ways of creating meaning and political life when official structures have failed them? As Khosravi (2007) notes, "In an era of global inequality of mobility rights, freedom of mobility for some is only possible through systematic exclusion of others" (p. 321). To explore this, I develop the concept of fragile inquiry, a framework that treats these gestures as creative methods of democratic persistence. In this view, hope is not a distant dream or vague feeling. It is a practical form of politics that emerges when institutions collapse.

To ground this framework, I draw on Dewey's (1938) theory of inquiry, Rorty's (1989) notion of redescription, and Addams' (1964) ethics of relational democracy. These thinkers help illuminate how everyday acts, however small, can be read as sources of knowledge that reconfigure abandonment. By reading *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* closely, the chapter not only critiques necropolitical accounts of sovereign power but also argues that migrants are not merely victims of violence. They are also creators of knowledge, theorists of survival. A striking moment illustrates this shift in perspective. Murad, one of the migrants, feels "the sand against his feet" after fourteen kilometers adrift in the Mediterranean. His trembling body is not simply surviving; it is sketching a new political geography in the ruins of sovereignty (Lalami, 2005, p. 42). Migration here is reframed: not just a story of loss, but also of latent world-making. This raises the broader question that guides the study: how do minor, embodied gestures in forced mobility contexts enact provisional forms of politics under abandonment?

The chapter is organized into seven sections. Section 2 lays out the theoretical framework, bringing together pragmatist inquiry, necropolitical critique, and relational ethics. Section 3 situates the work within broader debates in migration and border studies, highlighting gaps in trauma-centered, affective, and necropolitical approaches. Section 4 describes the methodology, which combines close reading of gestures with narrative mapping. Section 5 presents five interlocking findings, spatial, temporal, necropolitical, solidaristic, and collective forms of fragile inquiry, that reframe migration as experimental world-making. Section 6 synthesizes these

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