Israeli photojournalist Amnon Gutman recently published a series of photos on the New York Times website that document Palestinian migrant workers crossing the border into Israel. The grainy, black and white prints show the workers running through holes in the border wall, sleeping in littered washes, and sitting shackled together after being caught by Israeli officials. The photos are clearly influenced by similar projects along the U.S./Mexico border, both in their style and content. Without captions we might easily mistake the geography of the West Bank for that of Mexico, and the Palestinian subjects for migrants from Latin America.

While Gutman’s work attempts to document what he sees as the realities of Palestinian labor migration, I would argue that the photos are delimited by their narrow scope and by the residues of American affective influence. Like much of the well-known work from the U.S./Mexico border (such as that by Ken Light), Gutman’s edit focuses solely on the process of illegal crossings and fails to acknowledge the history and discursiveness that brought us to captured moments. Gutman’s migrants are not products of their stories, but instead racialized spectacles.

As many scholars (Schmidt Camacho, Chavez) have pointed out, border photography often plays an important role in creating the stereotypes needed to erect and maintain racial barriers in settler colonial states. In the 1980s and 90s the U.S. saw a proliferation of this imagery after NAFTA and neoliberalization created a stream of brown bodies that threatened the American body politic. Today, at a time when settler colonial states such as the U.S. and Israel are actively engaged in shifting and re-creating their borders to deal with the consequences of modern colonial governance, photography has once again emerged as a central aspect of control. In the U.S. for example, the debate around Arizona's SB 1070 re-saturated the media with one-dimensional and racialized border imagery. And in Israel, where thousands of Palestinian refugees recently rushed the border on Al Nakba day, and where walls, checkpoints, tear gas and bullets are used daily to constantly shift and recreate the borders, there appears to be a heightened sense of vulnerability that is accompanied by a stream of stereotypical images that dehumanize their Palestinian subjects.

Building this comparison is not only productive in excavating the racial fears of settler colonial states, but also helps us see a clear material representation of the affective, cultural, and political bonds these two countries have developed while struggling to police their respective states and constantly shifting borders. It is no coincidence, I argue, that that visual representations from these two countries look so much alike, but instead the consequence of two very similarly structured systems that are both working to maintain evolving forms of colonial governance.