Migrant Syrian Cinema: Countervisualizing the Refugee Crisis

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Contents

Abstract

Migrant Syrian Cinema: Countervisualizing the Refugee Crisis is a critical engagement with the visual field of the Syrian refugee crisis as a key site of articulation of the crisis as a socio-political event. I conceive this visual field as a site of struggle that is implicated in historic and contemporary racist-capitalist and neo/colonial relations, and that is produced amidst the confrontation between visuality and countervisuality. The former, according to visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff (*Right to Look*, 2011), references the aesthetic articulation of power's claim to authority which makes authority visible, and makes it seem natural and right. The latter refuses such legitimation, and seeks to reconfigure the terms on which reality is understood and represented. The confrontation between visuality and countervisuality is a struggle that is not confined to the realm of representation, for visuality, as Mirzoeff conceptualizes it, is a discursive practice invested in organizing and ordering the world through processes of classification, separation, and aestheticizing. What is at stake is the structuring and mediation of reality.

I draw on the critical framework developed by Mirzoeff to analyze the visual culture of the Syrian refugee crisis. On one hand, I investigate the dominant discourse of crisis—a discourse produced by political establishments and mainstream media and reinforced by legal frameworks—that structure public debate and the ways in which Syrian refugees are widely represented, perceived, and dealt with, that is, as a threat to the nation-state's security, identity, and economy, or as victims devoid of any agency. On the other hand, I engage with cinematic interventions by displaced Syrian filmmakers who, to borrow political theorist Sandro Mezzadra's words, "prompt a counter-offensive" by generating counter-images, counter-narratives, and counter-histories that challenge these authoritative visualizations. As instances of migrant Syria cinema, these countervisual interventions bring to visibility other realities of forced migration that make up Syrian refugees' lived and embodied experiences: histories, memories, narratives, feelings, desires, perspectives, and claims that have otherwise been denied or concealed by hegemonic visualizations that re/produce the power relations and structures shaping the so-called Syrian refugee crisis.

Following a typical Syrian refugee migratory journey, my analysis moves across four sites: Lebanon (the first point of arrival), Turkey (a point of transit), the Mediterranean (a crossing point), and Europe (a destination). In each of these sites, I examine how political

discourse, mainstream media coverage, public debate, and legal frameworks work together to justify and shore up anti-refugee policies and practices. I do this to set up the political and social context against which I analyze a selection of Syrian films as countervisualizations. I bring together Ziad Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement*, 2017 (chapter 1); Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd's *On the Edge of Life*, 2017 in conversation with Halil Altındere's video *Space Refugee*, 2016 (chapter 2); Amel Alzakout's *Purple Sea*, 2020 (chapter 3); and Sara Fattahi's *Chaos*, 2018 (chapter 4) to analyze how these films tell different stories that disrupt the ideological and dominant perspectives of migration peddled by the media and by politicians. I explore how these films *countervisualize* not only by generating new politico-aesthetic languages that makes visible and sensible the violence of border regimes, but do so in ways that are sensorially, viscerally, and affectively engaging, and that intimate new practices of looking and new modalities of political engagement. The Syrian films discussed in this thesis constitute aesthetic and political contributions to a growing body of migrant films created by Syrians on the move, as they attempt to (self)represent their lived and embodied experiences of war and displacement, to engage the world outside through the moving image, and to offer a collective response to the visual war waged by nation-states and global mainstream media on refugees.

Resumé

"Cinéma migrant syrien: contrevisualisations de la crise des refugiés" est une analyse du champ visuel de la crise des réfugiés syriens comme élément clé exprimant l'aspect socio-politique de cette crise. Ce champ visuel m'apparait comme un terrain de lutte impliqué dans des relations racistes-capitalistes et néo-coloniales, et produit au sein de la confrontation entre visualité et contre-visualité. La première, selon Nicholas Mirzoeff (*The Right to Look,* 2011), fait référence à l'expression esthétique de l'autorité du pouvoir qui rend cette autorité visible et la fait paraître naturelle et légitime. La seconde refuse cette legitimation, et cherche à reconfigurer les termes selon lesquels la réalité est perçue et interprétée. La confrontation entre visualité et contre-visualité est une lutte qui ne se limite pas au domaine de la représentation, car la visualité, telle que Mirzoeff la conceptualise, est une pratique discursive impliquée dans l'organisation du monde à travers des processus de classification, de séparation et d'esthétisation. C'est la construction et la médiation de la réalité qui sont en jeu. Je m'appuie sur ce cadre pour étudier la culture visuelle de la crise des refugiés syriens. D'une part, j'examine le discours dominant de la crise—un discours produit par les institutions politiques et les médias et renforcé par les cadres

juridiques—qui structure le débat public et les manières dont les réfugiés syriens sont généralement représentés, considérés et traités, c'est-à-dire comme une menace pour la sécurité, l'identité et l'économie de l'État-nation, ou comme des victimes dépourvues de tout pouvoir. D'autre part, j'étudie des interventions cinématographiques de cinéastes syriens deplaçés qui, pour reprendre les termes de Sandro Mezzadra, "lancent une contre-offensive" en générant des contre-images et des contre-récits qui remettent en question ces visualisations autoritaires. En tant qu'exemples de cinéma migrant syrien, ces interventions contre-visuelles rendent visibles d'autres réalités qui constituent les expériences vécues et incarnées de la migration forcée: les histoires, témoignages, émotions, désirs, perspectives, et revendications des refugiés syriens qui ont été niés ou occultés par les visualisations hégémoniques qui re/produisent les relations de pouvoir et les structures qui façonnent la soi-disant crise des réfugiés syriens.

Suivant un parcours migratoire typique de réfugié syrien, mon analyse se déroule sur quatre sites: Le Liban (point d'arrivée), la Turquie (point de transit), la Méditerranée (point de passage) et l'Europe (une destination). Dans chaque site, j'examine comment le discours politique, la représentation médiatique, le débat public et les cadres juridiques contribuent à justifier et renforcer les politiques et pratiques anti-réfugiés. Je procède ainsi pour établir le contexte politique et social dans lequel j'analyse une sélection de films syriens: *Taste of Cement,* 2017 de Ziad Kalthoum (chapitre 1); *On the Edge of Life*, 2017 de Yaser Kassab et Rima Alhamedd que je mets en conversation avec la vidéo *Space Refugee*, 2016 de Halil Altındere (chapitre 2); *Purple Sea*, 2020 d'Amel Alzakout (chapitre 3); et *Chaos*, 2018 de Sara Fattahi (chapitre 4). J'étudie les manières dont ces films, en tant que contre-visualisations, produisent des récits alternatifs qui remettent en cause les perspectives idéologiques et dominantes sur la migration. Plus précisément, J'explore comment ces films contre-visualisent en générant de nouveaux langages politico-esthétiques qui rendent visible et perceptible la violence des regimes des frontières d'une manière qui est sensoriellement, viscéralement et affectivement engageante, et qui suggère de nouvelles pratiques de regard et de nouvelles modalités de mobilisation politique. Les films syriens discutés dans cette thèse constituent des contributions esthétiques et politiques à un corpus croissant de cinema migrant, créés par des Syriens en mouvement qui cherchent à représenter leurs expériences de la guerre, du déplacement et de l'exile, à dialoguer avec le monde extérieur par le biais de l'image en mouvement, et à offrir une réponse collective à la guerre visuelle menée par les États-nations et les médias mondiaux contre les réfugiés syriens.

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this thesis was composed on the unceded Indigenous lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, where I have lived as an immigrant and a settler for the past nine years. At the very same time that this thesis describes the effects of the forced displacement of the Syrian population and the racialized processes of border enforcement and immobilization that they face in the Middle East and Europe, it came together in the settler colonial context of Turtle Island, where land dispossession, ethnic cleansing, cultural erasure, genocide, and slavery have forcibly displaced Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands. I recognize that this colonial violence continues today and that it is embedded in all the structures which make up the settler state of Canada, and that as a settler, I am complicit in this continuous colonial process. It is not enough to acknowledge the title holders of the lands and recognize colonial violence, and of this common deficiency, I am aware. My aim is that this thesis—which advocates for equality, justice, and freedom for migrants and refugees—will form the basis of an academic and activist practice that is grounded in solidarity, and that is animated by the belief that it is only through our common anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggles that we (Indigenous peoples, settlers, refugees, and im/migrants) can all live together in dignity.

A product of colonial privilege, this thesis also constitutes the work of friendship and solidarity. I started this journey in 2015. While at times it did feel like an awfully solitary one, I was only able to carry it through with the encouragement, care, love, and involvement of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. I wish to thank them for providing me with invaluable support throughout the extended period of researching and writing this thesis, and for lifting me up in moments of doubts and exhaustion. This project would have never come to life without all of them; it truly is the outcome of collective labor. I am also indebted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Fonds de recherche du Québec for the doctoral grants that made possible this project.

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Introduction

Crisis, Migration, Countervisualization

> *What "crisis"? Whose "crisis"? Who gains, and who loses, from the labeling of the present conjuncture as "crisis"?* These are the urgent and critical questions that we must ask every time we encounter the word "crisis."
>
> New Keywords Collective[1]

> There are no refugees, only fellow citizens whose rights we have failed to acknowledge.
>
> Teju Cole[2]

> Images form, reflect and inflect our sense of the world.
>
> Krista Lynes[3]

"The larger political event has made visible, like a prism, a number of smaller constituent questions," says writer and art critic Teju Cole.[4] What small constituent questions does the migration "crisis,"[5] as a political event, make visible? Or perhaps, the question should be inversed: what larger political questions does the smaller constituent event of migration crisis make visible? In what ways does the migration crisis make visible questions of loss and displacement, of homeland and belonging, of identity and citizenship, of rights and responsibilities, and also, questions of mobility governance and containment, of mechanisms of border control and securitization, and of neoliberal and neocolonial organizing logics and structures? What are the significant sites of articulation of the migration crisis as a socio-political event? How do various mediating practices and representational modalities constitute the migration crisis as an object of socio-political, legal, and economic struggle and site of affective investment through which these questions are refracted?

Migrant Syrian Cinema: Countervisualizing the Refugee Crisis is a critical engagement with the visual field of the Syrian refugee crisis as one key site of articulation. I conceive this visual field as a site of struggle that is implicated in historic and contemporary racist-capitalist

[1] New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis," 11.
[2] Cole and Fazal, *Human Archipelago*, 237.
[3] Lynes, "Moving Images."
[4] Cole and Fazal, *Human Archipelago*, 57.
[5] My use of the scare quotes around the term crisis is intentional to mark this term as a contested one. I invoke this term throughout the rest of this thesis without the scare quotes but in the same spirit of contestation.

and neo/colonial relations, and that is produced amidst the confrontation between "visuality" and "countervisuality." The former, according to visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff, references the aesthetic articulation of power's claim to authority which makes this authority visible, and makes it seem natural and right; in other words, visuality presents authority as self-evident and desirable, and consolidates relations of power. The latter refuses and counters such legitimation.[6] As Mirzoeff explains, "confronted with this double need to apprehend and counter a real that did exist but should not have, and one that should exist but was as yet becoming," countervisuality seeks to reconfigure the terms on which reality is understood and represented by laying a "claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity…that has the autonomy to arrange the relation of the visible and the sayable." [7] The confrontation between visuality and countervisuality is a struggle that is not confined to the realm of representation, for visuality, as conceptualized by Mirzoeff, is a discursive practice invested in organizing and ordering the world through processes of classification, separation, and aestheticizing. What is at stake is the structuring and mediation of reality.

I draw on this critical framework developed by Mirzoeff in *The Right to Look* (2011) to analyze the visual culture of the Syrian refugee crisis. On the one hand, I study the dominant discourse of crisis—a discourse mainly produced by political establishments and mainstream media and reinforced by legal frameworks—that structure public debate and the ways in which Syrian refugees are widely represented, perceived, and dealt with, that is, either as a threat to nation-states' security, identity, and economy or as victims devoid of any agency or power. On the other hand, I engage with cinematic interventions by displaced Syrian filmmakers who, to borrow political theorist Sandro Mezzadra's words, "prompt a counter-offensive" by generating counter-images, counter-narratives, and counter-histories that challenge these authoritative visualizations.[8] As instances of migrant Syrian cinema, these countervisual interventions bring to visibility other realities of forced migration that make up Syrian refugees' lived and embodied experiences: histories, memories, narratives, feelings, desires, perspectives, and claims that have

[6] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*. In this book, Mirzoeff identifies and analyzes three "complexes of visuality" — the plantation complex, the imperialist complex, and the military-industrial complex — making the argument that visuality is a technology of colonization.
[7] Ibid, 1 and 26.
[8] Mezzadra, "Preface," 13.

otherwise been denied or concealed by hegemonic visualizations that re/produce the power relations and structures shaping the so-called Syrian refugee crisis.

While I focus on how political and mass-mediated discourses are, in Mirzoeff's terms, "both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority,"[9] and on how migrant Syrian cinema contests this authority and its hegemonic visualizations by offering counter-images that foreground the lived and embodied experiences of forced migration from the perspective of displaced Syrians, I want to note that there are many other agents involved in the constitution of migration and its visual dimension as a field of struggle. As scholars and Forensic Oceanography founders Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani argue, "the mobility conflict opposes migrants' movements not only to the bordering policies and practices of states, but to a multiplicity of other actors." In addition to state agencies (the police, the military, border guards) and supra-national institutions (the EU commission), these include non-state actors such as international and non-governmental organizations, researchers, artists, companies, individuals "all of which contribute, in various ways, to enabling or limiting migrants' movements in a more or less deliberate way" and to shaping the aesthetic regime of migration.[10]

Visual Culture (of Crisis)

The forced migration of Syrians has generated an abundant visual culture. Syrian cultural production is prolific, as Syrians strive to represent their lived experiences of revolution, war, and exile across media, including film, video, and visual arts. News outlets overflow with images that have become iconic visualizations of the crisis. Artists and activists around the world respond to the crisis in various visual forms to express their solidarity. Humanitarian organizations produce and circulate documentary images to nurture compassion and engagement. Politicians weaponize migration, mobilizing particular images and narratives of migrants and refugees to galvanize populist support and advance their political agendas. Social media networks abound with hashtags, tweets, and posts that mediate different opinions and politics around the question of migration. In other words, the visual culture of Syrian refugee crisis has coalesced as a highly politicized field of struggle, where competing and conflicting political aspirations, projects, and practices collide. This field—multilayered, expansive, and dynamic—

[9] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, (xv).
[10] Heller and Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 97.

provides an opportunity to explore the power of images in relation to social and political life. I engage with the visual field of the Syrian refugee crisis to examine how images are mobilized as instruments of ideology and power (their embeddedness in regimes of governance), how images themselves act (their agency and poetics), and how images play a role in enacting emancipatory politics (images as media for energizing political practices and imaginaries) in the context of migration struggles.

My understanding of and approach to visual culture is informed by media scholar Krista Lynes' reflection on contemporary media analysis (itself grounded in the seminal work of scholars that have shaped the field of visual culture and media studies including W.J.T Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk etc.). Lynes affirms that images articulate and constitute social and political life:

> ...images form, reflect and inflect our sense of the world…they are not only artefacts, but mediating interfaces in the complex social relations of the world. They act; they have material weight; they circulate, accrue value, bind communities together through common sentiment; they operationalize various other technologies (military, economic, medical). The afterlives of images are thus constitutive of their meaning. They form and inform how they circulate, what they evoke, how they are embedded in other systems of cultural value.[11]

Building on Mirzoeff's argument that "one of the key tasks of visual culture is to understand how complex pictures come together,"[12] Lynes emphasizes the need to focus not only on media objects/images themselves (and their representational, referential, or illustrative dimensions), but on the processes and practices of mediation and image operations that take place beyond the frame, and create complex cluster of meanings.[13] Of particular interest to Lynes is how images become "moving images," that is, how images move through channels of production, distribution and circulation, but also, and importantly, how images move us and bring us together in different forms of affective belonging and/or solidarity.

Further, according to Lynes, a visual analysis that is concerned with understanding how images constitute a socio-political event should not be restricted to genre, form, media, and

[11] Lynes, "Moving Images."
[12] Mirzoeff, "What Is Visual Culture," 7.
[13] Lynes, "Moving Images."

audience. Rather, visual analysis should approach a visual regime as "an interlocking uneven image field" that includes news reportage, tweets, memes, films, artworks, performative activism, journaling, blogging, as well as the visual dimension of academic scholarship, exploring these as "significant sites for the articulation of a social event."[14]

Taking inspiration from this approach to media analysis and capacious understanding of visual culture,[15] I engage with a selection of images across genre, media, form, and audience—political discourse, tweets, street banners, news headlines and reports, policy documents, videos, photographs, testimonies, and films—that constitute the visual regime of the Syrian refugee crisis to examine the role they play in articulating this phenomenon as a socio-political event. While I am concerned with the representational dimension of the material I study, I look beyond the image itself to analyze some of the mediating processes and practices, representational modalities, and image operations that constitute the visual culture of the Syrian refugee crisis as a terrain of socio-political, aesthetic, and epistemic struggle, and that make this struggle visible and memorable in the global mediascape.

The images brought together for this project are in no way comprehensive. The mass proliferation of imagery around the Syrian refugee crisis makes the task of an all-inclusive analysis impossible. The images analyzed here have been selected because they constitute significant sites for the articulation of the Syrian refugee crisis within the specific national and/or geopolitical context discussed in each chapter. The examples of political and mass-mediated discourses that I consider are significant because they visualize the broader anti-refugee politics that frames in essential ways migration debates, policies and matters of governance in each of the sites studied. The examples of countervisual cinematic interventions that I focus on are significant because they challenge and displace the hegemonic narratives in each site, producing new visual languages—that are in excess of regimes of migration and border control, of the humanitarian logic of care, and of the liberal discourse of human rights—to reclaim the right to imagine and image differently.

So, why the focus on migrant Syrian cinema? I keep going back and forth about the extent of the power of images, and whether they are able to catalyze social and political

[14] Ibid.
[15] See also Bal, "Visual Essentialism;" Mitchell, "There Are No Visual Media" and Mitchell, "There Is No Image;" Smith, "Introduction: Visual Culture Studies."

transformation. The recent documentary *Our Memory Belongs to Us* (2021) by Syrian artist and filmmaker Rami Farah offers an opportunity to critically reflect on this question. Farah brings together three Syrian activists and citizen-journalists, Yadan, Odai, and Rani—who were active during the first years of the revolution but have fled Syria and now live in exile—in an empty theatre in Paris. There, on stage, he confronts them with some of the footage they shot during key events of the first year of the Syrian revolution (2011). As they stand in front of these videos projected on a large screen and watch them together, Farah asks them to take stock of these recorded images, of the events these images document, and of the significance of their own media activism practices. One of the very first questions that Farah asks is: "Did you believe that an image of a protest would overthrow the regime?" Odai answers him with a question: "As an ordinary citizen and protester, what do you have other than your voice and your pen or camera?" And while Yadan affirms that their voices were stronger than the Syrian regime's weapons at that time, he later poignantly concedes his defeat in the face of the regime. The images of protest they recorded did not overthrow the Syrian regime. These images did not stop the war in Syria. These images did not activate international solidarity and protection to prevent the violence, loss, and destruction experienced by the Syrian people. The world continues to watch while Syrians are being attacked, tortured, killed, and displaced. What *is* the power of images?

Our Memory Belongs to Us is a sober and difficult examination of images' in/ability to resist, inspire, move, provoke, engage, and represent the Syrian revolution. And yet, even though this documentary reveals the failure of images to take down the regime, it also emphasizes the ways in which images mediate the agency of their creators, who, even as they live under siege and war, still had the power to record their truth and to tell their stories from their own perspectives, based on their own lived experiences. The images that Yadan, Odai, and Rani created are material traces that carry their voices and preserve their individual and collective memory. These traces reanimate, in the here and now, the events that the three Syrian men have lived, enabling them to re/store and re/construct their stories. And these stories will endure, beyond the events, beyond the frame of the image, beyond the storytellers. "How does one survive? By forgetting? or by remembering? I don't want to forget" insists Farah at the end of his documentary.

While I am not sure that images are inherently powerful, I remain certain of their ability to present alternative narratives which are incredibly powerful, because they shape how history is

presented, and how the story of the Syrian revolution, of the Syrian war and of the massive displacement of the Syrian people is preserved, told, and remembered. As the Syrian activist film collective Abounaddara affirms,

> we make films because it's what we can do best to support our society, which is fighting for survival…we try to represent Syrians in a just and dignified way. We want to offer a credible alternative to the regime's narrative, which maintains that Syrians who oppose it are nothing but terrorists, as well as to the media alternative, which sees nothing in Syria but Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Alawites, etc.[16]

Can images achieve revolutionary and other forms of political and social change? This remains an open question. However, as I argue in the chapters that follow, the power of the counter-image lies in its ability to claim the right to represent reality, and to represent it differently. Like Abounaddara's Emergency Cinema, the instances of Migrant Syrian cinema I engage with here "burst out like bullets to break the silence. They tell the Syrian story with great narrative intensity and make the viewer look at reality differently."[17] Migrant Syrian cinema intervenes in and affects the discursive field of migration and its visual iconography by generating a different view of reality; migrant Syrian cinema mediates political and social claims that demand a radical rethinking of migration and borders from the perspective of refugees; and migrant Syrian cinema opens a space for new subjectivities and identities to emerge, and new modalities of political engagement and solidarity to be activated. To draw on Mirzoeff again, migrant Syrian cinema lays a claim to "a right to the real."[18]

The Crisis (of Migration)

The Syrian revolution-turned-war has, since 2011, displaced millions of Syrians inside Syria or forced them out of their homeland to seek refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Europe. Referred to as "the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time," the forced movement of Syrians constitute a significant part of global migratory flows that have been framed by dominant political, media, and humanitarian discourses as migration crises since 2015. That year marked a decisive turning point in the development of contemporary discourses of migration. Due to the increased pace and scale of migratory movements from the Middle East and Africa to Europe,

[16] Abounaddara as cited in Filmlinc, "'The Emergency Cinema' of the Abounaddara Collective."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look,* 7.

the European Union declared that a migration crisis was underway and called for urgent governmental solutions to contain, stop, and deter these movements. Critical migration studies scholars have argued that the undesired movements of people from the Middle East and Africa—undesired from the perspective of nation-states—were, and still are, produced as crisis *because* they constitute a radical challenge to the European border regime and to its ability to control practices of freedom of mobility. As Nicholas de Genova puts it:

> What presents itself as a "crisis" of territorially defined state powers over transnational cross-border human mobility—in short, what is fundamentally a moment of governmental impasse on the European scale—has been mobilized and strategically deployed as "crisis" or "emergency" for the reconfiguration of tactics and techniques of border policing and immigration and asylum enforcement.[19]

Thus, starting 2015, the term crisis became a more or less standard frame of reference through which to understand and govern the undesired and illegalized migratory movements of people across and within the borders of European states.

The potent framework of crisis was also expanded to designate "unauthorized" migratory movements more generally. It was leveraged by governments across the globe to justify the intensification of bordering practices and the enforcement of even stricter migration control regimes invested in curtailing cross-border mobility The discourse of crisis, mobilized by various European politicians (including Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Boris Johnson, and Victor Orbàn) justified the sealing of Fortress Europe's borders against the "tidal waves" of migrants incoming from Africa and the Middle East. Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency in the USA bolstered his plan for a new wall along the US-Mexico border to keep Central and South Americans out, and to make America great/white again. Scott Morrison's infamous "stop the boats" slogan supported the Australian Defence Force's Operation Sovereign Borders which sought to prevents asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iran, and Sri Lanka from entering Australia by boat. Anti-migrant discourses do not only operate along the lines of a North-South divide. For instance, the problematization of the mobility of South-Eastern Europeans into Northern and Western European countries blurs this dividing line. [20] So do the anti-Syrian refugee policies and practices that have been ramping up in Lebanon and Turkey to make it increasingly difficult for

[19] De Genova, "Introduction: The Borders of 'Europe'," 5.
[20] New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis," 32.

displaced Syrians to enter these countries or to stay in them. To put it differently, since 2015, the discourse of crisis has been highly politicized, and its logic remains central to any discussion related to migrants or refugees, whether in the Global North or Global South.

Why crisis? Our current historical juncture is characterized and structured by a proliferation of crises—economic crises, financial crises, political crises, migration crises, environmental crises, health crises. As anthropologist Janet Roitman argues, crisis is "the most common and most pervasive qualifier of contemporary historical conditions."[21] What is at stake, she explains, is the construction of meaning, the regulation of narratives, the production and circulation of knowledge, the writing of history. As Roitman asserts,

> Crisis is a term that is bound up in the predicament of signifying human history, typically serving as a transcendental placeholder in ostensible solutions to that problem. It is a primary enabling spot for the production of knowledge. Making this blind spot visible means asking questions about how we produce significance for ourselves. At the least, it means asking how we produce 'history.' At most, it means asking how we might construct accounts without discerning historical significance in terms of ethical failure.[22]

To put it differently, crises (including the migration crisis) are not only sites of political and social struggle, but also sites of epistemological struggle. A critical engagement with the discourse of migration crisis and with its narratives and visual representations entails making visible this crisis' blind spot. It entails considering which questions the discourse of crisis privileges and which ones it forecloses; how this discourse frames the stakes of migration debates, policies, and governance; what its areas of erasure are; what its narratives and modes of representations want us to see and do, and what they prevent us from seeing or doing.

My understanding of and engagement with the migration crisis takes its intellectual, political, and ethical inspiration from the seminal work of a network of scholars working in the fields of critical migration and border studies, including Nicholas de Genova, Charles Heller, Glenda Garelli, Sandro Mezzadra, Lorenzo Pezzani, and Martina Tazzioli, many of whom are part of the New Keywords Collective. This collective is invested in problematizing the very language of crisis, and interrogating the dominant discourse that surrounds and superintends how we speak of and think about the conjuncture of migration and crisis, from the vantage point of

[21] Roitman, "The Stakes of Crisis," 18.
[22] Ibid, 19

experiences of border and migration.[23] Both collectively and individually, these scholars have been actively and critically engaging with the European migration crisis, analyzing the various processes, mechanisms, and technologies deployed by the European migration and asylum control regime to govern contemporary migratory movements to and within Europe. Their scholarship, in their own words, "directs critical scrutiny toward the frameworks and practices of governmental intervention enabled and energized by the proliferation of 'crisis'."[24]

For these scholars, the production of particular forms of mobility as problematic, as undesirable, as intolerable, as *crisis,* is inextricable from a postcolonial politics of class and race. As the New Keywords Collective insists,

> We must immediately confront the diverse ways in which the problematization of particular mobilities as 'migration' raises questions of difference and 'foreign'-ness that may be overtly constructed in either cultural or narrowly legal terms, but are nonetheless principally constituted according to logics of race and class.[25]

This framework, which challenges the postcolonial constitution of a European/white identity and borders in relation to a putative non-European and non-white "outside," generates a crucial lens to understand the dynamics of the crisis *in* and *of* Europe, and the ways in which the European border regime is structured by enduring colonial logics and practices of racial and class differentiation. While it centers Europe and is invested in critically examining South-North migration, the framework that these scholars have developed has been theoretically and analytically generative for this project, even when I consider non-European sites of analysis such as Lebanon and Turkey and investigate South-South migration. These scholars' postcolonial critique of the governance of migration has encouraged me to center the question of race and class in my analysis, and to radically question the conceptual and discursive categories that structure the governance of borders, migration, and asylum. The aim of this project is to contribute to their critique by challenging how the migration crisis is visualized in a way that continually reinforces the power relations and structures that assemble and are assembled by migration and border control regimes.

[23] New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis," 3-4.
[24] Ibid, 5.
[25] Ibid, 32.

While this critical scholarship sheds light on the institutions, technologies, instruments, and practices invested in the governance of cross-border migration, it doesn't solely cast migrants as the object of the exercise of governmental power. Rather, the critical migration and border studies scholarship that informs my work calls attention to the "new spaces produced by the diverse manifestations of the autonomy and subjectivity of the migrants and refugees themselves."[26] This perspective insists on an analysis of migratory movements as a constitutive force in migration struggles. Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias and John Pickles explain what the framework of autonomy of migration entails:

> Autonomy of migration refers to a rapidly developing series of ideas that reflect a kind of Copernican turn in migration studies in which the focus has shifted from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shape those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices.[27]

Or, as political theorist and border studies scholar William Walters succinctly puts it, scholarship that focuses on the autonomy of migration asserts "that migration worlds are being made from below by migrant movements, and not just by the powerful governments of the global North."[28] This approach accounts for the social, political, and cultural effects of migratory flows, and acknowledges migration as an autonomous power and a force of transformation. And yet, as De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli contend, while the autonomy of migration perspective places migrants' agency, movements, and political subjectivities at the center of its analysis, it refrains from adopting a liberal (and romanticizing) articulation of migrants' migratory movements. That is, rather than framing migrants as "free and sovereign individuals" and engaging with their practices as "purely subversive or emancipatory acts," the autonomy perspective understands

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[26] Ibid, 5.

[27] Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles, "Riding Routes and Itinerant Borders," 895. See also Nicholas de Genova's "The Incorrigible Subject" on the politics of incorrigibility articulated through migrants' struggles; Manuela Bojadzijev and Serhat Karakayali's "Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism" on connecting the autonomy of migration as a social movement and as an emancipatory politics to other social struggles against exploitation and oppression; Sandro Mezzadra's critical analysis of the relation between migration and contemporary capitalism from an autonomy of migration perspective in "The Gaze of Autonomy"; Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos' *Escape Routes* on mobility as a form of imperceptible politics of escape; and Papadopoulos and Tsianos'"After Citizenship: Autonomy of Migration" on the mobile commons of migration.

[28] Walters, "Reflections on Migration and Governmentality."

migrants' movements as autonomous practices of freedom that arise from and are exercised within "the marginal leeway in which migrants and refugees move."[29]

The crisis, for these scholars, is thus both an opportunity to reveal the underlying logic and the workings of contemporary regimes of border and migration control *and* to show that the power of these regimes is not totalizing and can never fully contain migrants and refugees' movements. As New Keywords Collective indeed affirms, the declaration of a state of crisis or emergency has a productive dimension. For the migration crisis can be apprehended as a generalized crisis of the regimes of migration and border control that are constantly unsettled and forced to reshape themselves by the force and effects of migrant and refugee movements.[30]

The constant flows of Central American migrant caravans in the face of border violence. The persistence of Mediterranean migrant crossings despite the reinforcement of border surveillance and policing. The ever-resurrecting "Calais Jungle" migrant encampment against its continuous destruction by state powers. Grassroot political organizing such as the refugee and asylum seeker welfare and advocacy organization RISE in Australia, which is entirely governed by refugees, asylum seekers, and ex-detainees. The endurance and proliferation of Syrian cultural production under conditions of duress—war, forced migration, and exile. These are all but some examples of migrants and refugees' actions and practices that "exceed the ability of migration policies and state authorities to fix and control them."[31] Migration is not only a site of governmental intervention, management, and control. It is a site of escape and flight. A site of tensions and negotiations. A site of resistance and persistence. A site of counter-knowledge production and circulation. A site of creation. A site of community and solidarity. A site for new political subjectivities and imaginaries.

Following the lead of critical migration and border scholars, who conceive the migration crisis as a site of struggle (over mobility and space), I approach the visual culture of the Syrian refugee site as a site struggle—a site of governance *and* of political praxis. As I seek to contribute to the debates activated by these scholars from a media studies perspective, I engage the field of the visual as an object of analysis to show how it shapes and is shaped by the politics and aesthetics of the border and migration control regimes and by the autonomy of migration and

[29] De Genova, Garelli, Taziolli, "Autonomy of Asylum?" 259-260
[30] New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis," 5
[31] Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles, "Riding routes and itinerant borders," 896-897.

representation. By autonomy of migration, I mean the agency of Syrian refugees in exercising their freedom of movement, despite any and all attempts to control and to regulate their migratory movements. By autonomy of representation, I mean the agency of Syrian refugees in exercising "the right to look"; that is, they claim autonomy from authority/power and its visualizing processes and practices by capturing the conditions and realities of their struggles and making them *visible* through different forms of experimentation and self/ representations. In both cases, autonomy refers to migrants' actions and practices that exceed the ability of migration and border control regimes to contain them physically and aesthetically.

Migrant Syrian Cinema

In Moving Images: Mediating Migration as Crisis (2020), media scholars Krista Lynes, Tyler Morgenstern and Ian Alan Paul note that migration crises are constituted as "objects of political contention, affective investment, and legal maneuver" by a "wide range of mediating processes and representational practices."[32] Taking inspiration from this argument, *Migrant Syrian Cinema: Countervisualizing the Refugee Crisis* engages with various representational forms and mediating practices that constitute the Syrian refugee crisis as object of political contention, affective investment, and legal maneuver. Following a typical Syrian refugee migratory journey, my analysis moves across four sites: Lebanon (the first point of arrival), Turkey (a point of transit), the Mediterranean (a crossing point), and Europe (a destination). In each of these sites, I examine how political discourse, mainstream media coverage, public debate, and legal frameworks work together to justify and shore up anti-refugee policies and practices. I do this to set up the political and social context against which I analyze a selection of Syrian films as countervisualizations.[33]

I bring together Ziad Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement*, 2017 (chapter 1); Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd's *On the Edge of Life*, 2017 in conversation with Halil Altındere's video *Space Refugee*, 2016 (chapter 2); Amel Alzakout's *Purple Sea*, 2020 (chapter 3); Sara Fattahi's *Chaos*, 2018 (chapter 4) and, drawing on an interdisciplinary framework, analyze how these films countervisualize by producing alternative narratives that rupture the hegemonic visualizations of the crisis and challenge the politics of hyper- and in-visibility onto which these visualizations are

[32] Lynes, Morgenstern, Paul, "Introduction: In and Against Crisis," 28.

[33] My research methodology mainly entails a qualitative interpretive analysis of this primary material (the films, political discourses, news reports, policy documents, photographs, videos, tweets etc.) to show how these construct and mediate particular versions of reality/the world.

founded. However, I am not only interested in how these films tell different stories from "the stereotyped images peddled by global media outlets and televised news broadcasts…that so dominated and obscured the wider landscape of life, resistance, work and art,"[34] but also in how they countervisualize by generating new politico-aesthetic languages that make migration struggles visible *and* sensible. As the filmmakers experiment with the documentary form, they are able to capture and represent refugees' lived realities—the material, emotional, and psychic effects of war and displacement—in ways that are sensorially, viscerally, and affectively engaging. To the exception for Altındere's video, all four films privilege the lived, felt, and embodied aspect of forced migration. Combining a sensory approach to documentary-making with an observational aesthetic, an affective narration, and poetic imagery, the filmmakers create a sense of proximate intimacy for the viewers and immerse them in refugees' realities. In other words, the films lay a claim to a different reality, and confront the viewers to reckon and come to term with this reality.

In chapter 1, I explore *Taste of Cement* as a visual articulation of the hyper-exploitation of Syrian refugees-workers in Lebanon. Through the material and poetic mediation of cement, Ziad Kalthoum creates an affectively charged narrative and a multisensorial aesthetic that is attuned to Syrian refugees-workers' embodied struggles and that makes the material conditions of their displacement and exploitation in Lebanon perceptible to viewers, while also representing refugees-workers as a collective labor force and foregrounding their essential contribution to place-making. In chapter 2, I examine how Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd's auto-ethnography *On the Edge of Life*, which is set in an abandoned rest house in Turkey, creates a sensorially rich and poetic environment that draws in and immerses viewers both into Kassab's psychic space and into the physical space where Kassab exiled himself after fleeing Syria (and following a short stay in Lebanon), and after losing his brother. Through a sensory approach paired with an observational aesthetic and an affective narration, the film engages the viewers in an intimate relation with its subjects (Kassab and Alhamedd) and their struggles, and generates an experience of looking that is akin to witnessing. I put this film in conversation with Halil Altındere's fabulation *Space Refugee*. Drawing on science-fiction themes and aesthetics and featuring a former Syrian astronaut who currently lives as a refugee in Turkey, this video suggests that space is the place for Syrian refugees. Through this work, Altındere formulates an

[34] Bidayyat, "About us" (Bidayyat.org).

alternative future for displaced Syrians, that is, he refuses the cancellation of the future that the bleak reality of Syrians living in Turkey (and elsewhere) predetermines by imagining and imaging an otherwise. In so doing, he pushes the limits of viewers' political imaginaries, inviting them to expand their sense of the possible in a moment characterized by political impotence. I engage with *On the Edge of Life* and *Space Refugee* as two related forms of political practice/response to the current predicament of Syrian refugees in Turkey—the former mediates a withdrawal from reality and the latter mediates a refusal of it—to argue that both interventions counter the structural depoliticization of Syrian refugees. In chapter 3, I focus on Amel Alzakout's *Purple Sea* which records her experience as a survivor of a shipwreck that struck the migrant boat she was travelling on as she was attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece. *Purple Sea* provides a counter-narrative of border violence experienced by Syrian refugees in the Mediterranean through a submerged perspective that is captured by Alzakout's wrist camera and mediated by the sea. The film immerses the viewers under water, pulling them into the heart of the struggle unfolding under the surface and viscerally connecting them to Alzakout's and the other passengers' agonizing struggle. In Chapter 4, I engage with *Chaos* as a countervisual intervention that challenges the dehumanization of Syrian refugees in European political and media discourses. By bearing witness to and translating three Syrian women's experiences into images, Sara Fattahi makes visible the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of war and exile. She mobilizes the observational sensibility of ethnographic filmmaking and an aesthetic of extreme close-ups to affectively engage the viewers and bring them in as co-witnesses to the Syrian women's struggles, thus soliciting a different form of relating. Further, as she weaves the ghostly figures of a deceased Austrian poet and her doppelganger within the testimonies of the Syrian woman, she creates a bridge that connects Austria to Syria to explore shared conditions of violence, loss, and displacement across time and space.

The Syrian filmmakers whose work is discussed here embed their own lived reality in a broader collective experience. Their subjective stories tell a bigger his/story, their films are a meeting between the personal and the historical. Writer and translator Lina Mounzer affirms that war is "a raw wound at the core that simply and only begs to be told, no matter how." And she wonders: "what is it that brings me to the page? What brings me back, again and again, to the war? To the site of that wound and the need to try and make sense of it through language? Is it

the desire to know or the desire to be known?"[35]Mounzer's writing impulse—her need to narrate—driven by her lived experience of the Lebanese civil war is akin to Syrian filmmakers' cinematic impulse to visually record and reflect on their own experiences of the Syrian war and of exile. They are driven by the urgency to tell their stories. The filmmakers need to know and to be known; their experiences are raw wounds that need to be made sense of and that beg to be told. Their storytelling becomes a restorative and healing craft that conveys their experiences of living as much as it attempts to make sense of these experiences. It is a craft that is invested in witnessing, recording, resisting, and leaving material traces that will endure and carry their stories. For Mounzer, the English language that she writes in is "a tool as available to raw beauty as it is to hegemonic violence…the only way to redeem it for all of us who it marginalizes is to fight our way out of those margins and insist on being part of the text."[36] In a similar way, the cinematic images produced by Ziad Kalthoum, Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd, Amel Alzakout and Sara Fattahi (and many other Syrian filmmakers) are tools that enable them to fight their way out of the margins of the Syrian refugee crisis' visual field, and to insist that their stories are a central part of this field.

While the investigation of how and where these films are produced, distributed, circulated, and how they are consumed/received is beyond the scope of this project, I want to note the wave of independent Syrian films that has emerged in the wake of the Syrian revolution to document and narrativize the revolution, war, and displacement, from the perspectives and lived realities of Syrians (and in response to the Syrian regime's official image/narrative and media's reductive framing).[37] These films move globally, through various infrastructures, from film theatres and film festivals to art galleries and private screenings, increasingly reaching new and more diverse audiences. As Syrian journalist, writer, and filmmaker Dellair Youssef asserts,

> Syrian cinema has reached new levels and spaces after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in the spring of 2011, and gained a new large audience interested in Syria and its crisis. This interest led to the screening of Syrian films in places previously unknown

[35] Mounzer, "War in Translation."
[36] Ibid.
[37] The films are too numerous to mention, but see for instance the work of Rami Farah, Ameer Fakher Eldin, Afraa Battous, Orwa Al Mokdad, Maya Shurbaji, Wael Kadlo, Soudade Kaadan, Jalal Maghout, Liwaa Jazji, Ammar el Beik, etc. For an insightful analysis of post-2011 Syrian cinema, see Syrian director and screenwriter Nidal Hassan's "Syrian cinema: motion picture in the age of transformation."

> to Syrian cinema; from Upper Egyptian cafes and Berlin bars to global festivals, passing by international movie theatres and festivals.[38]

The Syrian films discussed in this thesis constitute aesthetic and political contributions to a growing body of migrant films created by Syrians on the move, as they attempt to (self)represent their lived and embodied experiences of war and displacement, to engage the world outside through the moving image, and to offer a collective response to the visual war waged by nation-states and global mainstream media on refugees.

As a member of "Regards syriens," a collective involved in organizing an annual program of contemporary Syrian cinema at the Cinematheque Québécoise in Montreal since 2016, I have engaged with a significant number of films made by Syrian filmmakers since the beginning of the revolution in 2011. Produced under conditions of political and social struggles, these films offer multiple and alternative perspectives of what it means to live in war and exile, and attest to the strength of a cinema created by Syrians seeking justice, equality, and freedom. *Migrant Syrian Cinema: Countervisualizing the Refugee Crisis* has been an opportunity to engage more profoundly with some of these films—that continue to be a source of intellectual, political, and aesthetical inspiration—to think *through* and *with* them. These instances of migrant Syrian cinema are the driving force of this thesis.

This project is also an opportunity to support and elevate these works within Anglophone North American academy and beyond. As an emerging Arab scholar, I am committed to build on the work of Arab cultural practitioners and scholars, and to produce and disseminate critical knowledge for and about the Arab world and its diasporas. The project's contribution to the fields of media studies, critical migration studies, and visual culture studies foregrounds the works of Syrian artists, and supports and advances their struggle against hegemonic visualizations that re/produce the power relations and structures shaping the so-called Syrian refugee crisis. Such a contribution is necessarily invested in decolonizing knowledge-production.

While scholars across disciplines and areas of study (including policy studies, medical and health studies, international development studies, migration and refugee studies, legal studies, economic studies, women studies, etc.) have examined various aspects of the Syrian refugee

[38] Dellair, "The Audience of Syrian Cinema in Germany."

crisis,[39] none has investigated the crisis as a socio-political event that is, as Lynes eloquently puts it, "constituted and articulated in and through different multilayered, frictional but interconnected cultural spheres in the global system."[40] In other words, the crisis hasn't yet been investigated as a site of aesthetic, political and epistemic struggle opposing those forms of visualizations that buttress nation-states' bordering practices and consolidate their power, to cinematic countervisualizations that claim other realities from the perspectives and lived experiences of displaced Syrians.

The cinematic works at the heart of this thesis have not yet been the subject of extensive academic analysis, nor have they been brought together as a body of cinematic works that intervenes in and destabilizes the visual regime of the Syrian refugee crisis at a crucial moment when representation too, is in crisis. In a moment of crisis, what is the significance of representing? What is its aim? And what are its effects? How do you represent the material effects of the violent global migration and border control regimes that govern cross-border human mobilities on the lives and bodies of migrants and refugees? One extremely problematic response is the iconic and globally-circulated photograph of the lifeless body of three-year Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi—washed ashore on a Turkish beach in September 2015 after he drowned as his family was trying to reach Europe by boat—which was echoed across the globe, four years later, by the equally iconic photograph of the lifeless bodies of Salvadorian father Óscar Alberto Martínez and his two-year old daughter Valeria Martínez laying side by side on the bank of the Rio Grande where they had attempted to cross to reach Texas. Writing about Óscar and Valeria Martínez's photograph, Cole sheds light on the asymmetry and racial disparity between those whose pain and traumatized bodies are turned into news, and those who consume the news. Reflecting on the political and affective impact of images of extreme suffering, and their ability to catalyze change, Cole incisively asks, "What sort of person needs to see such photographs in order to know what they should already know? Who are we if we need to look at

[39] See for instance Achilli, Luigi, "Syrian Refugees in Jordan;" Aranki, Dalia and Olivia Kalis, "Limited Legal Status for Refugees from Syria;" Baban, Feyzi, Suzan Ilcan, and Kim Rygiel, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey;" Akgündüz, Yusuf, Marcel Van den Berg, and Wolter HJ Hassink. "The Impact of Refugee Crises on Host Labor Markets;" Benček, David, and Julia Strasheim, "Refugees Welcome?" Berti, Benedetta, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications;" Charles, Lorraine and Kate Denman. "Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon;" Janmyr, Maja, "Precarity in Exile;" Parkinson, Sarah E and Orkideh Behrouzan, "Negotiating Health and Life;" Turner, Lewis, "Explaining the (non-) Encampment of Syrian Refugees;" Yıldız, Ayselin, and Elif Uzgören. "Limits to Temporary Protection."

[40] Lynes, "Moving Images in Contemporary Media Analysis."

ever more brutal images in order to feel something? What will be brutal enough?"[41] His pressing question reiterates what scholar Hamid Dabashi had asked, in response to artist Ai Wei Wei's infamous recreation of Aylan Kurdi's iconic photograph: "Does Ai Weiwei – could Ai Weiwei, or any other artist—succeed to overcome the mimetic impossibility of representing this particular reality? What are we supposed to think and feel and do, when faced with such a representation of human tragedy? How do we come to terms with such a reality?" Art, as Dabashi adds, "cannot be made to consume the terror of reality."[42]

The films I engage with in this thesis offer a political, aesthetic, and ethical response to the question of representation (of crisis and of suffering). These films document and represent Syrian refugees' struggles without compromising refugees' dignity and without denying their agency. These films mobilize different forms of experimentation and modes of aesthetic representation to generate new visual and political languages that make visible migration struggles in ways that cannot be consumed. In other words, these films exceed traditional formats (of news reportage and of the humanitarian, activist, or mainstream documentary) and the political limits of empathy to intimate new practices of looking and new modalities of engagement.

Exiled Syrian intellectual, writer and political dissident Yassine al-Haj Saleh speaks about migration as a social movement constituted by refugees and their allies, who together, challenge the prevailing social and political order. He says:

> The model for new movements could be that of refugees appropriating the world and those conscientious people welcoming and helping them. I feel that states, the richest and most powerful in particular, consider refugees a far more serious threat than terrorist groups. They are right.[43]

What I ultimately want to argue is that the countervisual culture of the Syrian refugee crisis, produced by Syrian filmmakers on the move, also constitutes an aesthetic and political movement that challenges the prevailing social and political order. This movement, heterogenous and yet collective, is a creative force in motion that is defined by autonomy and that is transformative, because it demands a radical rethinking of forced migration from the perspective of refugees which produces the state, and not migratory movements, as a crisis. These films

[41] Cole, "A Crime Scene at the Border."
[42] Dabashi, "A portrait of the artist as a dead boy."
[43] Al-haj Saleh and Heintz, "Dissidents of the left: in conversation with Yassine al-Haj Saleh."

renew political imaginaries (of a world without borders), possibilities (for just and equal living) and solidarities (grounded in shared experiences of dispossession, oppression, and exploitation). These films are sites for critical knowledge-production, resistance, and social and political transformation.

**A note on terminology:* Following the example of critical migration scholars, I uphold the term refugee in this project (except for chapter 3, where I analyze a film by a Syrian filmmaker who refuses to be labeled as refugee) to refer to displaced Syrians even though I recognize the stigma and assumed passivity associated with this terminology and even though I am critical of—and indeed reject—the governmental partition that differentiates between migrants, refugees, and citizens. The classification of populations according to these discursive categories produced by international law reifies divisions and power relations and reinforce borders. This classification excludes migrants from the international regime of protection and recognition that the refugee status (allegedly) affords; it also divides migrants and refugees (outsiders) from citizens (insiders) along the line of belonging (to the nation state) and national identity. Further, as migration scholars Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli have argued, these normative categories of differentiation are ossified, and do not reflect the contemporary realities and experiences of migration. They observe:

> …every act of migration, to some extent—and in a world wracked by wars, civil wars and other more diffuse forms of societal violence, as well as the structural violence of deprivation and marginalization, perhaps more and more—may be apprehensible as a quest for refuge, and migrants come increasingly to resemble "refugees," while similarly, refugees never cease to have aspirations and projects for recomposing their lives and thus never cease to resemble "migrants."[44]

And yet, as these scholars contend, we need to take the demands and claims of migrants who identify themselves as refugees seriously, while interrogating the border and mobility control regimes that puts these institutional and juridical categories at work to criminalize, illegalize and securitize cross-border movements. So, while I understand cross-border mobility as an exercise of freedom and not as a right to be granted by nation-states to "deserving" people, and while I believe that all borders, including those that separate the normative categories that govern

[44] De Genova, Garelli, Tazzioli, "Autonomy of Asylum?" 242.

migration, should be undone, I use the term refugee to affirm displaced Syrians' claims to safe shelter and livelihood, and emphasize nation-states' responsibility to give offer them protection, residency, work, healthcare, and education. I follow the example of urban scholars Mona Fawwaz, Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Harb and Dounia Salamé who hold on to the term refugee throughout *Refugees as City Makers* (a study of the transformative role that Syrian refugees play as city-makers in Lebanon) to assert that "[displaced Syrians] bore the cost of a violent war and a brutal political context that forced them out of their homes, but also that their presence…is legitimate under international law."[45] Put differently, the use of the term refugee is an acknowledgment of the conditions of duress that have forced Syrians out of their homelands, as well as a deliberate position against the on-going criminalization of Syrian refugees' presence and labor. This term refugee is not used here, as De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli put it, "as a rarified and exclusionary legal category," but is mobilized as "strategic essentialism."[46] That is, while I recognize some displaced Syrians' reluctance or refusal of this label/status and of the asylum regime that governs it, my use of this term seeks to recognize Syrians on the move as political agents who demonstrate their agency by claiming their right to mobility and protection despite the restrictions enforced by the border and migration control regimes they encounter.

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[45] Fawwaz, Gharbieh, Harb, Salamé, *Refugees as City-Makers*, 5.
[46] De Genova, Garelli, Tazzioli, "Autonomy of Asylum?" 245.

Chapter 1

Of Place and Cement: Syrian Refugees and Workers in Lebanon

There is unemployment: it is the refugees.
The economy is in crisis: it is the refugees.
Garbage and pollution are slowly killing the environment: it is the refugees.
There are traffic accidents: it is the refugees.
There is no electricity: it is the refugees.
There is no water: it is the refugees.
The summer is too hot: it is the refugees

Walid el Houri[1]

…amid the luxury and ostentation of downtown Beirut, asphalt is poured, toilets are cleaned, streets swept, garbage collected, customers served, shoes shined, taxis driven, kiosks manned, and shops and homes built by unorganized, insecure, low-skill Syrian Labor.

John Chalcraft[2]

The story of the Syrian body as seen by Lebanese eyes is not a new one, it dates back to the time when Syrian workers migrated to Lebanon and became cheap labor, around the country's largest institutional and urban development in the 1950s…. Somehow labor exploitation disappears onto the Syrian worker's body, thereby making it ontologically different and alien, not just for middle- and upper-class Lebanese but for their fellow Lebanese workers as well.

Lamia Moghnieh[3]

Since 2011, as hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon, the figure of the Syrian refugee has absorbed the attention of the government, the media, and the public. Represented by Lebanon's populist politicians, by the large sector of the population that supports them, and by mainstream media as a threat and burden to the nation-state, the presence of Syrian refugees has ignited heated debates centered on the negative impact of refugees. Syrian refugees have been blamed for everything from traffic jams and electricity cuts to the collapse of the economy and the degradation of the environment. During a news conference held to address the

[1] El Houri, "There is a rotten stench."
[2] Chalcraft, "Labour in the Levant," 33.
[3] Moghniyeh, "How to read the Syrian body."

surge in the number of Syrian refugees in the country, a Lebanese government official warned that "the Syrian refugee crisis is the biggest crisis threatening the Lebanese entity."[4]

The language of crisis is not specific to Lebanon. The world over, governments and the media mobilize the discourse of refugee or migrant crisis, reanimating nationalist projects and galvanizing populist sentiments to garner support for their political agendas. This discourse frames refugees and migrants as surplus to the national body. Refugees and migrants are portrayed as invaders threatening the nation's borders, sovereignty, economy, and identity. They must be stopped, contained, and disciplined. As anthropologist Miriam Ticktin puts it, "contemporary media is replete with imagery of invasive others. These others take different forms, but perhaps the most recognizable are humans, particularly those crossing borders, like migrants and refugees."[5] Who gets defined as Other? What are their attributes? Alterity differs from place to place and with time, and can be based upon race, class, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or language. In the United States, the Other is Mexican or Muslim. In Europe, the Other is African or Middle Eastern. In Lebanon, the Other is Syrian.[6] Everywhere, the discourse of crisis activates fears and anxieties around alterity, producing and justifying bordering practices that exclude and dehumanize migrants and refugees.

Anthropologist Lamia Moghnieh recounts on her blog two stories that were told to her about Syrian refugees, which reveal the ways that Syrians are othered in Lebanon. The first story was conveyed by a Lebanese taxi driver who is trying to help his son find a job. Discussing a potential opportunity at a local fast-food joint, the taxi driver expressed that while the exploitative working conditions are appropriate for the Syrians working there, because Syrian workers are "used" to misery and to sordid settings, these conditions are not suitable for his son. The second story was relayed by a Lebanese feminist scholar during a conference against torture organized for Lebanese police officers. She was commenting on an incident that took place a week prior to the conference, where a Syrian baby was lost and died during a storm that flooded Syrian refugees' tents. The scholar voiced her disgust and anger at refugees and their

[4] *The Daily Star*, "Bassil: Refugees Threaten Lebanon's Existence."
[5] Ticktin, "Rewriting the Grammars of Innocence."
[6] Each country has multiple figures of the Other (in Lebanon, the Other is also Palestinian and the non-white foreign migrant worker) and its own particular socio-political and geo-political particularities which shapes how the "Other" is constructed. For an in-depth analysis and theorization of the historic and complex socio-political relations between Lebanon/Lebanese and Syria/Syrians see Elisabeth Picard's *Liban-Syrie ,intimes étrangers: un siècle d'interactions sociopolitiques*, Éditions Actes Sud, 2016.

"irresponsibility" towards their own children. The baby's mother, according to her, had no understanding or instinct of motherhood. In the two stories, a particular conception of the Syrian body transpires. The first narrative describes the body of the Syrian worker as always already disciplined for hard labor; a body *made* for exploitation. The second narrative portrays the body of the Syrian mother as always already *lacking*. Hers is a body that doesn't have the capacity to mother and doesn't possess the instinct to protect her children. In the two stories, the Syrian is produced as essentially different, as lesser than the Lebanese.

Moghnieh contends that the dehumanization of Syrian refugees was preceded by the dehumanization of Syrian labor. The current racist discourse against Syrian refugees which permeates public opinion in Lebanon today, is, in fact, born from a racist ideology that is state-produced, institutionalized, and hegemonic, and that pre-dates 2011.[7] It is a discourse that is rooted in a long history of exploiting Syrians as cheap labor, starting from the 1950s onwards, and framing Syrians as lesser Others to justify their exploitation. The current anti-refugee rhetoric and policies prevailing in Lebanon have further solidified this process of othering. The Lebanese government, with the support of the media, has used Syrian refugees as a scapegoat for all its failures and portrayed them as a crisis for the country. As the political and media rhetoric of crisis bleeds into popular discourse, it shapes how Syrians refugees are widely perceived in Lebanon. They are seen as excess, as intolerable "burden" and/or existential "threat" to the country, they are perceived in terms of cost and/or risk. This narrative justifies the state's exclusionary and discriminatory practices against Syrian refugees, while completely erasing their labor and other essential forms of contribution to place-making in Lebanon.

What alternative narratives and political possibilities arise from centering the question of labor in the analysis of the politics of migration? The two stories relayed by Moghnieh provide a framework for this question and for my analysis of the tension between the exclusion of Syrian refugees by the Lebanese state's anti-refugee discourse and their inclusion as labor power in Lebanese markets. In this chapter I take Lebanon as a site to study how the dominant representation of Syrian refugees, as a threat and burden to the nation-state, has shored up policies and practices that deliberately illegalize Syrian refugees with the aim to render them vulnerable and therefore exploitable, while also rendering their labor and contribution to place-making invisible. Through a critical analysis of a series of tweets by former Foreign Affairs and

[7] Moghnieh, "How to read the Syrian body."

Emigrants Minister and current Member of Parliament Gebran Bassil, I parse the political rhetoric that shapes the anti-Syrian refugee discourse. I focus on these tweets because they are both indicative and productive of the increasingly hostile climate for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and because they epitomize the Lebanese state's racist and nationalist discourse which has framed Syrian refugees, and other communities before and with them, as intolerable Others. And yet, I argue that the anti-Syrian refugee discourse—which attempts to exclude Syrian refugees socially, politically, and spatially—conceals the ways in which the Lebanese state engages in what theorists Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have called "differential inclusion."[8] That is, the state's exclusionary discourse is premised on a capitalist logic which filters migrants through various borders (legal, cultural, social, spatial etc.), in order to include their labor power as a commodity under new conditions of accumulation, exploitation, and domination.

When I refer to Syrian refugees in this chapter, I am speaking about working class Syrians, who labor in various sectors of the menial economy and who form a significant part of Lebanon's "unskilled" labor force. These are the Syrians whose mobility is tightly controlled, whose labor is exploited, and whose rights are denied. They are to be distinguished from wealthy Syrians who own businesses, properties, land, or capital in Lebanon, who rub shoulders with the country's privileged elite, and who circulate freely to/from and within Lebanon. They are also to be distinguished from the sizable Syrian creative class that has migrated to Lebanon since 2011.[9] It is precisely this distinction between different "categories" of migration that highlights that migration struggle in Lebanon (and elsewhere) is also a class struggle. As economist and blogger Mahmoud Mroueh asserts,

> It is imperative to expound the underlying class dynamics of Lebanese racism against Syrian refugees as this racism is fundamentally and typically classist. Syrian migrant workers have dominated construction and other labor-intensive sectors of the Lebanese economy since colonial times…'Syrian' came to signify an unskilled, uneducated laborer in the Lebanese psyche, as the vast majority of Syrians with which the Lebanese regularly interacted were of the working class.[10]

[8] Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method*, 157.
[9] Many intellectuals, writers, and artists, including the filmmaker whose work is discussed in this chapter, have transited through Beirut, and have significantly contributed to the regeneration of the city's arts and culture scene.
[10] Mroueh, "Anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon."

I look at the present condition of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, from the perspective of labor, to contend that under the discourse of crisis and the rhetoric of othering/demonization/abjection/exclusion lies the material fact of the hyper-exploitation of Syrian labor.

I engage with *Taste of Cement* (2017), an essay film by Syrian filmmaker Ziad Kalthoum as a visual articulation of this hyper-exploitation, and I explore the ways in which this film countervisualizes by bringing to visibility Syrian refugees *as* labor force. As it follows Syrian male refugees laboring on a construction site in Beirut and documents their everyday life, the film offers a reflection on the material conditions of displacement and exploitation. *Taste of Cement* folds geopolitics and economy back into the elemental medium of cement to recast its meaning and power: in the film, cement is an affectively charged material that activates Syrian refugees-workers' memories of war and displacement; cement is a substance that saturates the atmosphere to structure the refugees-workers' embodied experiences of exploitation and oppression; and cement is an element that mediates the crucial role played by Syrian refugees-workers in the re/construction of Beirut, that is, in the making of place. Through the material and poetic mediation of cement, Kalthoum creates a multisensorial aesthetic that is attuned to refugees-workers' embodied experiences, their struggles, and their labor power, and that makes the material conditions of their exile and exploitation perceptible.

The politico-aesthetic engagement of *Taste of Cement* with the issues of migration and labor provides a crucial entry point to the question of post-2011 Syrian displacement to Lebanon, as it apprehends and represents this movement from the point of view of the subjective struggle of (gendered) labor. The film provides a counter-narrative that foregrounds Syrian male refugees' hyper-exploitation as construction workers while making visible their collective contribution as city-builders. This perspective destabilizes the dominant discourse of crisis—which frames the refugees only in terms of threat and burden and erases their essential labor—while countering the humanitarian rhetoric that represents Syrian refugees only as passive aid recipients. This perspective also has important implications for the ways in which the political subjectivity of refugees is imagined and constructed, as it articulates a different relation between subjects and place by emphasizing the constitutive role refugees collectively play in producing Lebanon, as place, through their labor. By inviting a reconsideration of Syrian displacement from a different lens, that of labor, this perspective conjures a political imaginary that is grounded in

the recognition of common vulnerabilities—engendered by exploitation—and thus in the recognition of common struggles. In so doing, this film prefigures a form of solidarity/alliance that would bring together different refugee communities, migrant workers, and Lebanese citizens, all of whom have been produced as vulnerable and exploitable subjects by the Lebanese State.

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"If you love Lebanon…"

Urban studies scholars Mona Fawaz, Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Harb and Dounia Salamé refer to the dominant modalities of representing refugees as "refugee talk." They observe:

> *Refugee talk* is in vogue. When sponsored by international organization, it adopts a tone of human destitution…in this context, refugees are mostly represented as powerless and passive aid recipients. They are depicted as mere victims of external pressures that have forcefully displaced them and exposed them to the violence of host communities… Conversely, within the dominant discourse deployed by political leaders and the mainstream media, refugee talk typically favors the vocabulary of security, fear, risk, and the existential threats posed by cross border mobility. It depicts a 'receiving state' suffering an 'exogenous shock' as a 'host community' is 'invaded' by a 'wave of refugees' that threatens the livelihood, coherence, work, health, way of life, and perhaps even its sovereignty.[11]

Produced and propagated by politicians and mainstream media, solidified, and institutionalized by legal frameworks and state policies, and embraced by a significant number of Lebanese citizens, refugee talk has been ramping up in Lebanon in the past years. An infamous series of social media statements by Lebanon's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants and current Member of Parliament Gebran Bassil reveals the politics at work in refugee talk. On June 8, 2019, Bassil posted a video documenting a public campaign—launched by the youth wing of the Free Patriotic Movement (FMP) political party of which Bassil is president—against shops and businesses who employ Syrian labor. The video shows members of the party standing outside of a restaurant where Syrian refugees work, chanting the Lebanese national anthem, and shouting to Syrian workers to "go back to their country." Alongside the video, Bassil tweeted a

[11] Fawaz, Gharbieh, Harb, and Salamé, *Refugees as City-Makers*, 4.

caption that read: “If you love Lebanon, hire a Lebanese worker.”[12] As part of this campaign, flyers were distributed across Beirut. [13] These flyers called upon Lebanese citizens to denounce businesses or shops employing Syrians; they carried the following message: “Protect Lebanese workers and file a complaint about violators. Syria is safe for return and Lebanon can no longer take it.” [14]

This rhetoric obscures the structural problems underlying Lebanon’s ongoing economic (and social, political, financial, and environmental) collapse by turning the blame onto Syrian refugees, who are portrayed as key contributors to the breakdown of the country, and accused of competing with Lebanese citizens for jobs and pushing the wages down. This rhetoric reorients people’s anger, frustrations, and anxieties away from the government towards Syrian refugees. This situation is, in no way, particular to Lebanon. Populist and self-serving leaders around the world have embraced an anti-migrant and/or anti-refugee stance to galvanize popular support in times of crisis. Researcher, journalist, and filmmaker Walid el Houri argues that:

> The failure of the ruling parties to come up with a way that their corruption can continue to flourish without the fast destruction of the economy and people's livelihood, means that the only solution is to find a scapegoat. And what better scapegoat is there than refugees? After all, refugees are one of the world’s most loved scapegoats: from the US to Europe, growing fascist movements have climbed the ladders of democracy on the backs of migrants and refugees.

In Lebanon and elsewhere, the failures of governments are displaced onto refugees. From the housing shortage in Canada and ecological losses in the USA to the upsurge in terrorism in Europe and the total collapse of Lebanon, refugees are the designated scapegoats.

The FMP’s campaign against foreign workers is a response to Bassil’s call to arms to defend Lebanon’s identity against the threat of Syrian refugees. On June 7, 2019, a day prior to sharing the video, Bassil posted a series of nationalistic tweets that portrayed Lebanese identity as essentially different from, and superior to, the Syrian identity through a rhetoric of racial purity and genetic superiority. How did he justify this claim? Bassil contended that “Lebanity”, a

[12] As a member of parliament and head of the Free Patriotic Movement, Bassil has significant influence and following on social media. As of April 2022, he had approximately 650k followers on twitter.
[13] Chehayeb, “Anti-Syrian refugee sentiment.”
[14] People were invited to text photos or videos to the youth wing of the FPM. A phone number was provided to that end.

term he coined in English to refer to one's affiliation to Lebanese identity, culture, history, and territory, is not only related to one's citizenship, but that it is also genetic. He tweeted: "Lebanity is above any other affiliation; it is our blood kinship, it's our belonging to a civilization/culture and history, and it is what the Arabic expression 'territory unites' refers to."[15] Lebanity, he affirmed, distinguishes the Lebanese people from other communities (that is, Syrians) in that it has brought Lebanese people together and strengthened their unity, and has given Lebanese people the ability to resist forced displacement (unlike Syrians). He stated:

> We have devoted a concept to our Lebanese identity, above any other affiliation, and we have said that it was genetic, since it was the only explanation for our similarity and distinction, for our bearing to live with each other and our adjustment to each other, for our flexibility and our unity together and for our ability to come together and merge on the one hand and for our refusal to be displaced and seek asylum together on the other hand.[16]

Bassil's rhetoric is both ethnocentric—because it is steeped in a racist ideology of genetic distinction and superiority—and normative, because its understanding of belonging cedes primary power to the nation-state in determining who gets to be a citizen and to have access to the rights that this status confers.

The citizen (Lebanese)/non-citizen (Syrian) divide articulated by Bassil categorizes and splits people along national lines, excluding anyone who is not a citizen (in this case, Syrian refugees) from access to political and socio-economic rights. This divide is also grounded in a nationalistic fallacy that falsely portrays Lebanese identity as monocultural, monoethnic and monoracial, erasing for instance the common historical relations and exchanges between Lebanese and Syrians that predate the colonial redrawing of boundaries between Syria and Lebanon and the division of populations along the Lebanese-Syrian border. "Lebanity" is not as clear-cut as Bassil portrays it, as affiliation to culture, territory, identity, and history is complex and exceed the citizen/non-citizen divide. As Fawaz, Gharbieh, Harb and Salamé contend, "…any discussion of forced population displacement between Syria and Lebanon needs to be premised on the acknowledgment of kinship relations, cross-border marriages, and long-established labor networks through which thousands of Syrians maintained relations in various

[15]@Gebran_Bassil (translation from Arabic my own).
[16] @Gebran_Bassil (translation from Arabic my own).

Lebanese areas since the division of the region into nation-states."[17] By distinguishing Lebanese citizens from other communities and affirming that only they belong to Lebanon and that therefore, they should be put first, Bassil is inciting/justifying discrimination against Syrian (and other) refugees and migrants. His rhetoric not only constructs Syrian refugees as essentially different and lesser than Lebanese, but it also defends their deprivation of rights and protection under the pretext that they are not citizens.

The rejection of Syrians from the body of the nation is entrenched in a particular form of Lebanese nationalism that distinguishes and distances Lebanese identity from other Arab identities, portraying it as exceptional. As Mroueh suggests,

> …part [of racism against Syrian nationals and Syrian refugees] stems from archaic notions of Lebanese exceptionalism, rooted in different forms of (sometimes violent) Lebanese nationalism that is antithetical to pan-Arabism or even the Arab label. Lebanese nationalism has historically been exclusionary - as are all nationalisms - and isolationist, in that it accentuates differences between the Lebanese and other Levantines or other Arabs while downplaying shared attributes and characteristics." [18]

That is to say that the production of the figure of the refugee as a surplus to the nation-state is a phenomenon that is not contemporary. The very notion of any nation-state has been founded on and structured against the exclusion of Others (refugees, migrants, nomads, non-citizens etc.) outside of its territorial, political, and cultural borders.[19]

Bassil's xenophobic and racist discourse is illustrative of the hostile anti-refugee climate pervading Lebanese politics and society today. This discourse is supported by mainstream media. As journalist and researcher Nouran El-Behairy's analysis of the coverage of Syrian refugees in *An-Nahar* and *As-Safir* (the two biggest Lebanese newspapers) reveals, these newspapers actively engage in stigmatizing refugees. Their coverage portrays refugees as a voiceless and helpless mass, as bogus opportunists, or as threats to national identity and security.[20] The anti-refugee hostile climate is also reinforced by legal frameworks—themselves supported by the Lebanese state security apparatuses—that are dedicated to containing the movements of Syrian

[17] Fawaz, Gharbieh, Harb, and Salamé, *Refugees as City-Makers*, 9.
[18] Mroueh, "Anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon."
[19] See Thomas Nail's extensive analysis of this process of othering in *The Figure of the Migrant*.
[20] Nouran, "Burden or Brothers? Media Representations of Refugees."

refugees to/in the country and to shaping refugees' subjectivities. While during the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 they were able to cross the Syrian-Lebanese border unconstrained, Syrian refugees have faced a proliferating number of laws and policies since 2014 that have sought to govern their mobility and legal status. During that year, Lebanon's top security agency, the General Directorate of State Security, introduced measures to curb the entry of Syrian nationals such as restricting entry to Lebanon to "exceptional circumstances."[21] State Security also imposed costly and restrictive residency renewal regulations that made it very difficult for Syrian refugees to maintain residency permits. Refugees who were not registered with the UNHCR were forced to find a Lebanese sponsor to remain legally in the country, or to find a Lebanese individual to "pledge responsibility" for them.[22] In 2015, the Lebanese government asked the UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees, practically excluding all newly displaced Syrians from the rights and protection that the legal status of refugee confers. Due to these new measures and regulations, most Syrian nationals lost their legal standing, and were put at risk of arrest, detention, and violence.[23] Simultaneously, State Security organized a crackdown campaign on "illegal" Syrians. Together with the public prosecution offices, State Security sought to pursue and arrest Syrians who were "unlawfully" present in Lebanon.

These measures—compounded by imposed curfews, the constant raid and destruction of refugee camps', and mass evictions[24]—are some of the key mechanisms of a regime invested in criminalizing Syrian refugees, and in producing them as "illegal," and thus vulnerable and exploitable subjects. Lawyer and researcher Nizar Saghieh writes:

> These measures constitute evidence that Lebanese authorities have adopted a policy that can rightly be called "manufacturing vulnerability". Such a policy aims to strip various groups of their fundamental rights in order to reject their presence and facilitate their exploitation. This policy will not only strengthen the Lebanese authorities' ability to intervene and reign arbitrarily, but, in many cases, also put victims of such a policy at the

[21] Issued on 31 December 2014, these new regulations provide a list of six types of visa categories (including tourism, education, medical treatment, and business) that Syrians must obtain to enter Lebanon. All visas require supporting documents to meet the requirements and must be approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Interior.
[22] Human Rights Watch, "How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse."
[23] The "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon" report (published by the UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP in December 2017) states that 74% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon above the age of 15 lacked a legal residency.
[24] Human Rights Watch, "Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees."

> mercy of other people. The affected groups are left with two solutions: they either leave Lebanon, or accept exploitation. In some cases, the latter may amount to forced labor and, subsequently, human trafficking.[25]

Saghieh is arguing that the Lebanese state manufactures the vulnerability and dependency of certain communities, including Syrian refugees, in order to respond to Lebanese capitalism's structural reliance on hyper-exploited labor. These dynamics shape the country's migration regime and inform the racist and xenophobic discourse that support its exclusionary practices. Indeed, the state's policies produce various groups including refugees and migrant workers as vulnerable and thus as exploitable, which in turn, fuels a xenophobic and racist popular discourse that make this violence plausible (refugees and migrant workers are exploitable *because* they are lesser).

Saghieh's argument resonates with Mezzadra and Neilson's conceptualization of "differential inclusion." In *Border as Method: Or, The Multiplication of Labor*, Mezzadra and Neilson examine the relations between labor, capital, law, political power, and subjects to contend that new borders, beyond the geopolitical demarcation dividing nation-states, are emerging, and proliferating in the service of capital expansion. These borders—urban, legal, temporal, linguistic, symbolic etc.– articulate global flows of people (as well as information and commodities) under new forms of accumulation, exploitation, and domination. That is, rather than blocking the global flows of people (and ideas and objects), borders recalibrate and govern those passages to produce labor power as a commodity for global labor markets. Mezzadra and Neilson's analysis problematizes the common understanding of borders as devices of exclusion by reconceptualizing borders as devices of both violent exclusion *and* violent inclusion that select and filter migratory and laboring subjects to subjugate and exploit them. [26]

Lebanon's policy of manufacturing vulnerability, then, could be understood as a mechanism of differential inclusion. It is one instance of the mechanisms and technologies of migration control regimes that govern the global transfer of migrant labor. And yet, this mechanism has its local particularities. This policy of manufacturing vulnerability builds upon the Lebanese authorities' previous experiences in dealing with socially marginalized groups. Saghieh observes that the governmental measures illegalizing Syrian nationals are the result of a

[25] Saghieh, "Manufacturing Vulnerability in Lebanon."
[26] Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method,* 7-8 and 146.

series of "experiments" that have historically produced Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, migrant workers, and underprivileged Lebanese as extremely vulnerable subjects in Lebanon. The country's discriminatory legislative response to the arrival of Palestinian refugees in the wake of the 1948 Nakba, its practice of "legal deportation" of Iraqis who sought asylum in Lebanon following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and its restrictive and exploitative Kafala sponsorship system governing migrant workers (especially domestic workers[27] but also Syrian workers that migrated to Lebanon pre-2011) have all paved the way for the measures that are currently deployed by the Lebanese authorities against Syrian refugees.[28] Lebanese citizens are not exempt from these practices. Their rights and benefits are also contingent on the will and whim of the government. Manufacturing vulnerability, Saghieh insists, is an integral part of the ruling regime which relies on a relation of dependency between citizens and the ruling class in Lebanon.

The anti-Syrian rhetoric and practices in Lebanon should thus be situated within a global regime of labor governance as well as within a local regime of disenfranchisement. Both regimes aim to produce a permanent condition of dispossession, precarity, and exploitability, especially for vulnerable people on the move. The hostile anti-Syrian climate in Lebanon is not only a response to a refugee crisis, but also the atmospheric element of global and local regimes of labor exploitation. As for the policies that reinforce this climate, and that are dedicated to manufacturing the vulnerability of Syrian refugees, they constitute the rearticulation of a historic labor relation—premised on the exploitation of a menial and cheap Syrian labor force by the Lebanese state and by capital for decades—under new conditions of dispossession, domination, and exploitation.

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Cement: A Poetic and Political Mediation

Taste of Cement (2017), an essay film by Syrian filmmaker Ziad Kalthoum, explores this historic labor relation and its material conditions through the embodied experiences of Syrian refugees-workers. *Taste of Cement* follows construction workers, as they move between their worksite, a tower in the making, and where they live underground, in the underbelly of the same structure.

[27] According to the 2018 Human Rights Watch report "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Worker Rights," an estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers, primarily from Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Nepal, and Bangladesh, are excluded from labour law protections in Lebanon.
[28] Saghieh, "Manufacturing Vulnerability in Lebanon."

The workers are displaced Syrians who have sought refuge in Lebanon. Their trajectory is familiar. It has brought thousands of Syrian workers to Lebanon for decades in search for work. Since the 1950s, Syrians have been migrating to Lebanon to mainly take jobs as sales and "unskilled" services employees, and as manual workers in the fields of construction, agriculture, public works, quarries, manufacturing, and transport.[29] Syrians have come to constitute a significant addition to the Lebanese labor force, their labor and contribution essential to the making of Lebanon. As a workforce, Syrians have been vital to the country's economy, especially during the three decades of economic boom following Lebanon's independence in 1943, and to its massive post-war reconstruction projects, particularly in Beirut. As *Taste of Cement*'s narrator wryly observes, Beirut, ravaged by 15 years of civil war, by a fierce Israeli bombing campaign in 2006—and, I would add, by the devastating explosion of 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate in its port on August 4, 2020— still wakes up to the sound of construction since the civil war ended in 1990.

In his influential study of Syrian labor migrants in Lebanon (pre-2011), Middle Eastern history and politics scholar John Chalcraft describes a structural, well-established, and long-standing labor relation. [30] Lebanon's economic development not only depends on Syrian migrants' labor power, he argues, but the very condition of its possibility is the exploitation of this labor power. Syrian workers work hard, in difficult jobs, and in dangerous conditions. They work for long hours and for low pay. They are denied job security and benefits. They have no income guarantees. They have no access to trade unions or collective action. They are deprived of political rights and social protection. They often reside in slums. They are stigmatized and marginalized. As Chalcraft's study reveals, while Syrian workers have historically been included in economic terms, they have traditionally been excluded from systems of rights recognition and protection. Syrian workers have constituted a backbone for the Lebanese economy, and continue to do so today, as refugees, under even harsher and more exploitative conditions.

How is labor power commodified? How is the flow of refugees re/articulated under new conditions of dispossession? How are working lives made vulnerable to abuse and exploitation? Lebanon's restrictive residency regulations targeted at Syrian refugees perform this work. The country's residency policy deliberately illegalizes Syrians, thus heightens the risk of their arrest

[29] Chalcraft, "Labour in the Levant," 43.
[30] Chalcraft, *Invisible Cage*.

and detention for unlawful presence, and importantly, heightens the risk of abuse and exploitation. By denying them the right to residency (and thus the right to work legally), this policy forces Syrian refugees, who need to support themselves, into any form of employment and puts them at the mercy of their Lebanese sponsors or employers. According to a Human Rights Watch report from 2016, the new residency requirements imposed by the Lebanese state in 2014 pushed Syrian refugees underground, creating a large undocumented community that lives at the margins of Lebanese society, and that is vulnerable to a range of abuses.[31] Another study reveals that a significant number of adult Syrian refugees are currently bound to their employers in a relation of forced labor via violence, harassment, intimidation, and physical restrictions on their mobility.[32] The study also points to the endemic sexual exploitation of female Syrian refugees—in return for rent, food, employment—as well as the prevalence of child labor amongst Syrian refugees.[33]

Economic hardship and precarious living conditions attached to displacement, compounded by the Lebanese state's policy of manufacturing vulnerability and illegality, produce Syrian refugees' labor power as a cheap, disposable, flexible, and exploitable commodity for the Lebanese labor market. Chalcraft speaks of a "hostile labor regime" that has historically governed Syrian migrant workers. This regime, he says, is socially and deliberately produced to exploit labor power:

> A hostile labor regime such as this…is neither a backward hangover from a traditional past, nor simply an automatic product of the economic functioning of globalizing capitalism. Instead, the disciplines of commodification are a social production, understood as the way in which persons, inevitably attached, as bearers, to the labor power they sell—are put to work, disposed of, deployed, exposed to stigma and violence, shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused.[34]

Taste of Cement countervisualizes by making visible some of the current articulations and material conditions of this hostile labor regime—a regime produced by a combination of state power, political parties, political ideology, legal frameworks, patterns of accumulation, and

[31] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Residency Rules Put Syrian at Risk.".
[32] Jones, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon are falling into slavery and exploitation."
[33] UNICEF, "Survey on Child Labour." According to this report, a majority of Syrian children in Lebanon have joined the labour force, working in the field of agriculture and in occupations that are considered hazardous and dangerous.
[34] Chalcraft, "Labour in the Levant," 34.

attributions of race, gender, and nation. In the film, a shot of a street banner reads: "Warning: Syrian workers are forbidden from the streets after 7pm. Violators are punishable by law." The 7pm curfew imposed on Syrian workers practically prohibits them from leaving the construction site after work. It forces them to literally disappear into the darkness, through a hole in the ground. The film contrasts scenes of the workers as they labor at vertiginous height with scenes of the workers in their underground dwellings. The contrast between these two spaces/worlds is stark, emphasized by slow scenes that capture the workers as they ascend or descend. Above the ground, expansive shots of an emerging luxury skyscraper overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the city Beirut. Under the ground, claustrophobic shots of extremely rough makeshift living quarters drowned in darkness. A concrete prison that encloses the workers when they are not working, trapping them in dire living conditions, severing them from being part of the place they are building, and from participating in its everyday life. Syrians, as *Taste of Cement* shows, are only tolerated as exploitable labor, not as refugees bearing rights and requiring protection.

Still images, *Taste of Cement*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

The curfew banners are one bordering practice amongst many others that control Syrian refugees and workers' presence and mobility in the city. These banners, official and unofficial,

have appeared across Lebanon to ban Syrians from dwelling and circulating in public space.[35] They have become emblematic of the hostile climate that the government's anti-Syrian discourse has created. The banners re/produce this hostile climate, making this climate not only visually, but affectively perceptible. Everywhere in Lebanon they surround Syrian refugees and workers to make them feel unwanted. These banners vary in language but not in audience. Some are directly addressed to Syrians or Syrian refugees; some are directed to foreigners or foreign workers; others speak to Syrian brothers. All of them warn "Syrian brothers"/"Syrian refugees"/"Syrians"/"foreigners"/"foreign workers" that they are subject to a curfew, usually from 8pm to 6am, under the penalty of the law. On the pretext of preserving general safety, Syrian brothers/Syrian refugees/Syrians/foreigners/foreign workers are forbidden from gathering or being in public space, and from circulating on foot or on motorbikes. These curfew banners seek to produce a fear of the "Other" by representing Syrian refugees and workers as a threat to Lebanon's security.

Migration scholar Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that the anti-Syrian refugee discourse needs to be located within broader expulsion politics, as it has been "recycled and recited in Lebanon towards many 'Others', before and alongside Syrians."[36] In 2018, in the run up to the Lebanese elections, a banner in Beirut read: "The day will come when we tell the Syrians: gather your things and everything you stole, and leave." These words are the words of the late-Lebanese President, Bashir Gemayel, who is pictured in the banner. His words were not referring to the presence of Syrian refugees post-2011, but to the Syrian military presence in Lebanon prior to 2005. The 2018 banner summons a deep-rooted anti-Syrian sentiment to reinscribe it in current context, reorienting it towards Syrian refugees. This sentiment stems both from a classist disdain towards Syrian workers, and from a general animosity towards Syrians—who were perceived as unwelcome invaders—as a result of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon.[37]

The current anti-refugee discourse is also a re-enactment of Lebanon's rejection of Palestinian refugees. For Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, the "No Palestinian will remain on Lebanese soil" slogan, plastered on the walls of Beirut from 1973 on, resonates in this banner. Lebanon has

[35] Traboulsi and Adnan, "Banners in Dialogue."
[36] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Anti-Syrian banners and graffiti in context."
[37] Chalcraft, "Labour in the Levant," 31. Following the participation of the Syrian army in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and its military and political control over the country (1991-2005), Syrians, particularly workers in Lebanon, were seen by the Lebanese as "a fifth column for a Syrian project of occupation", even though they were contracted by the Syrian army on terms that were just as exploitative as the norm in Lebanon.

indeed had a fraught history as a hosting country, and has sustained a complex relationship to refugees since the Nakba. While Lebanon is "home" to a large Palestinian refugee community who have lived in Lebanon since they or their ancestors were expelled from Palestine during the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the country has systematically refused to incorporate Palestinian refugees into the national body. The situations of the Palestinian refugee and the Syrian refugee each has its own geopolitical particularities, and yet, the same exclusionary discourse, policies, and practices have shaped the ways in which Palestinian and Syrian refugees are produced as Others.[38] Specifically, the government's fixation on the "threat" that Syrian refugees pose to the coherence of national identity and to Lebanon's sectarian and demographic balance is a reiteration of a similar exclusionary logic and rhetoric that has targeted Palestinians since 1948. The post-2011 anti-Syrian banners are thus both a visualization of the state's border and mobility control regime, and a manifestation of a recursive expulsionary politics that has targeted and marginalized various communities since 1948, and that is today directed at Syrian refugees and workers.

Still images, *Taste of Cement*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

[38] It is worth noting that the discourse of alterity operates differently in both cases: the exclusion of Palestinians is justified on the basis of the struggle against Zionism (the Lebanese state claims that Palestinians are not given permanent residency or citizenship as this might jeopardize their right of return), while the new kind of racist discourse/practices against Syrian refugees are justified on the basis of finding a governmental solution to the refugee crisis in Lebanon.

In *Taste of Cement*, the marginalization of Syrian refugees-workers is expressed both visually and through the voice-over. As the narrator says, from 7am until 7pm, as they work, Syrians are above Beirut. And from 7pm until 7am, as they dwell in their living quarters, they are below Beirut. And yet the city is 24 hours above them, out of reach, even when they are standing at its highest point. The workers see Beirut, but it doesn't see them. Shots conjure Beirut through the refugees-workers' eyes, while other capture the workers as they are looking at Beirut. They see the city, but always from great distance and height, or from behind machinery, iron bars, and holes. They see Beirut, but they can't reach it. They are kept at a distance, day and night contained in/by the tower, as their presence is not tolerated.

It is difficult to see something and not be able to grasp it.

The windows of the tower are our only connection to the city.

From the roof I see the sea, the blue sky, the city, and its clouds,

akin to an image, pasted along the frame of the tower.

A wallpaper, wrapping the horizon around us.

These words, uttered by the narrator, suggests Beirut as an image that the workers are neither *in* nor *of*. They are excluded from Beirut, a city that is erected on their shoulders, a city that is erected through their labor, while their labor rendered invisible.

The refugees-workers don't speak to the camera, their struggle told through sparse, poetic, and an affectively charged narration. One voice for all their voices. One intimate story amongst many others. One embodied experience of exile that is collective. The narrator speaks of his father's experience as a Syrian who migrated to Lebanon to work as a builder after the end of the Lebanese civil war. The narrator also speaks of his own experience as a Syrian refugee who fled the war in Syria to seek refuge in Lebanon, and where, following the steps of his father, he is working as a builder. He fled Syria after his house was destroyed and he was buried under its rubbles. He says:

The sound of drilling was piercing.

I woke up.

I could not move or shout.

Our house was covering me.

It was in my mouth.

In my nose.

In my eyes.

People were shouting: is anybody there?

They drilled all day along until they found me.

That's what they told me.

The taste of cement was eating my mind.

With the smell of death.

I ran away.

Into the void.

Suddenly, I found myself buried in another hole, under the ground.

When I first arrived, they told me: "no bombing, no shelling here!"

But still cement surrounds me.

I can't escape.

The life of Syrian refugees-workers in Lebanon and the war they fled in Syria bleed into each other. The two worlds merge as their images are superimposed, juxtaposed, or fade into each other. Images of construction cranes and images of war tanks. Images of Beirut in reconstruction and images of Syrian cities, perhaps Aleppo or Homs, reduced to ruins. Images of the tower's underground where the Syrian workers are imprisoned, and images of buildings in Syria brought to the ground, their residents entrapped. The distance between Lebanon and Syria is erased by the pounding and drilling and roaring sounds of the worksite' machines that echo the sharp sounds of war machines shattering Syrian cities into pieces. The film's soundscape weaves the incessant noise of construction in Beirut with the raw sounds of war and destruction in Syria, blurring the line that separate them.

Still images, *Taste of Cement*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

The distance between these two places is likewise erased by the lingering smell and taste of cement. The bitter smell and taste fill the narrator's mouth, ears, and eyes as he is buried underneath the rubbles of his house in Syria. The same smell and taste find him in Lebanon, permeating his body as he labors as a construction worker. This smell and taste are familiar to the narrator, and not only because they recall the war at home. They remind him of his father, as they stuck onto his father's body long after he returned home from Lebanon. The smell revealed his father's return and presence, while the taste infiltrated every morsel that his father fed him. The taste and smell of cement disappeared when his father passed away. Cement, in Kalthoum's film, becomes an affectively and sensorially charged elemental material that evokes physical memories of childhood longing, of a raging war, and of the suffering of exile. Its taste and smell summon the yearning for all the fathers, brothers, sons that left Syria and their families to work in Lebanon; and they summon the physical devastation and trauma experienced by Syrians since the beginning of the war.[39]

Cement also mediates the material conditions of hyper-exploitation and oppression that Syrian refugees-workers are subjected to on the construction site. The film shows how, for twelve hours a day, Syrian workers labor with cement. They transport it. They sieve it. They mix it. They pour it. They spread it. They drill it. Cement's dust hangs in the air, fills their bodies, sticks onto their skin, and lingers in their minds. For the remaining twelve hours, cement contains them, as they are confined to their makeshift living quarters made from raw concrete. The materiality and meaning of cement are recast in this film. Cement is no longer a mere material source that is transformed into buildings and infrastructure. As an element, cement saturates the atmosphere to structure the embodied experiences of Syrian refugees-workers. The workers cannot but touch it and inhale it, and when they do, cement transforms their bodies. It attaches itself to their skin and their lungs, and floods all their senses. Its smell and taste, as the narrator observes, are inescapable. Cement blurs the boundary between body and infrastructure, making both permeable. As cement particles become embedded onto/inside their bodies, Syrian refugees-workers become of cement. And as they work the cement, it becomes of them. Syrian

[39] Ziad Kalthoum's own displacement is documented in his first film, *The Immortal Sergeant* (2013). The film deals with the schizophrenic daily life and encounters of Kalthoum. As the revolution started in Syria, Kalthoum was held in the army reserve and assigned to run the Basel Al Assad theatre in Damascus, transformed into a military base. After his shift was over, he would return to his normal life, working as assistant director for Mohammed Malas. The film ends with Kalthoum deserting from the Syrian army and migrating to Lebanon.

refugees-workers are transformed by cement—it eats their skin and soul the narrator tells us—and they transform it into a tower through their sweat and blood.

Still images, *Taste of Cement*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

Media scholar Nicole Starosielski argues that "elements are not things…they are processual, dynamic, and interactive...Elements *compose*. They are relational. Elements never fully stand alone. They attach, bond, and transform."[40] *Taste of Cement* is attuned to the relational dimension of cement which binds bodies to infrastructure, and to its power, as an elemental medium, to materially compose an atmosphere of hyper-exploitation and oppression. In other words, the film explores the implication of this material substance in the creation of a climate that is hostile and toxic to Syrian refugee materially, not only figuratively.

The opening scene prefigures the film's elemental consideration of cement as a material medium of extraction and exploitation. Close-up shots focus on the wounds that quarries have ripped apart Lebanon's mountains, forever altering the country's geography and landscape. The shots are attentive to the surface of these wounds, foregrounding the coveted material elements that compose the mountains. Another long shot from the opening scene captures mechanical diggers and bulldozers as they carve and hollow the inside of a mountain to extract the raw materials needed to produce concrete for Beirut's re/construction.

[40] Starosielski, "The Elements of Media Studies."

The assault on Lebanon's mountains for extractive purposes intensified in the wake of the civil war, a result of the Lebanese state's policy of post-war reconstruction and a real estate boom that were concentrated in Beirut. As scholar Rami Zurayk puts it, "driven by the city's gargantuan appetite for (re)construction material, sand and limestone quarries spread like wildfire on Mount Lebanon."[41] Cement then (which is essentially made of limestone), not only mediates the exploitation of labor power, but of natural resources too. Cement not only eats the skin and the soul of Syrian workers, but it also eats Lebanon's mountains, destroying wildlife, slashing pine tree forests, and wiping off ridges, valleys, and watercourses.

Still images, *Taste of Cement*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

Cement, in this film, becomes an elemental medium that mediates Kalthoum's reflection on the horror of war, the sorrow of exile, and the brutality of exploitation of bodies and of natural resources. With/through the material mediation of cement, Kalthoum creates an aesthetico-political language that allows him to represent Syrian refugees-workers' embodied experiences of war, displacement, and exploitation sensorially. *Taste of Cement* appeals to smell, taste, touch, and sound through an evocative narrative and sensuous imagery—which has been criticized for over-aestheticizing the struggle of workers. This multisensorial evocation releases the memories embedded in the senses of the Syrian refugees-workers, and conveys their embodied experiences in a way that engages the viewers to sense the material conditions of these experiences.

Cement also mediates the crucial role played by Syrian workers in the reconstruction, or the making, of post-war Beirut. It is the very fabric of the place that Syrian workers build. Mognieh reminds us of the immense contribution of Syrian workers to the making of Beirut. She writes:

> …the city of Beirut itself was built, developed, renovated, and made into a cosmopolitan city by the blood and sweat of Syrian workers. Who built your city? Who constructed all

[41] Zurayk, "The writing on the walls."

> your buildings? One by one with his bare hands? Who assembled Beirut's entire infrastructural system? Who planted and took care of your trees? Your gardens? And your lands? Who picked up your fruits and vegetables and transported them to the market? who fixed your cars? Who fixed your electricity? Who built your roads? Your highways? Who cleaned them? This city stands tall over the shoulders of Syrians.[42]

Taste of Cement provides a counter-narrative to the ones produced by the dominant discourse of crisis. The film's representation of Syrian workers as essential contributors to place-making challenges the rhetoric that depicts Syrian refugees solely in terms of threat and/or burden. It also counters the humanitarian discourse that shapes refugee talk, and that reconstitutes Syrian refugees as objects of humanitarian assistance rather than active subjects that shape or make reality. This discourse and its imagery represent refugees as aid recipients, devoid of any agency, will and collective power.

While *Taste of Cement* sheds light on the exploitative and oppressive conditions that Syrian workers experience in Lebanon, it does not victimize Syrian workers. Rather, the film acknowledges their historic struggle and collective contribution by documenting the transformative role they play as city-builders. The film records the minute, everyday actions through which Syrian workers transform cement to re/construct Beirut, and in so doing, recognizes them as a vital and collective force behind the making of Beirut as place. A place they are officially forbidden from being part of, and yet, a place they know, make, and are made of, a place they belong to through their labor. Put differently, *Taste of Cement* countervisualizes by acknowledging Syrian refugees-workers' contribution that materially makes place, and insisting that they are, literally, of place.

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As it refracts the question of Syrian displacement through the lens of labor, *Taste of Cement* implicitly suggests a reconceptualization of Syrian the refugee crisis in Lebanon in terms of an anti-capitalist struggle, generating a political imaginary that is centered on the notion of common manufactured vulnerabilities. It suggests, or even prefigures, the possibility of migrants, refugees, and workers solidarity. [43] Political sociologist Amro Sadeldeen has indeed argued that

[42] Moghniyeh, "How to read the Syrian body."
[43] For a discussion of Syrian workers' political subjectivity, see Philip Proudfoot's PhD thesis "The living dead: revolutionary subjectivity and Syrian rebel-workers in Beirut" (2016). Proudfoot describes how these "rebel-

a social movement started to coalesce in Lebanon prior to the October 17 Revolution in 2019 (and in way, participated to the initiation/activation of the Revolution). This movement brought together the claims of Lebanese workers, of Palestinian and Syrian refugees, and of migrant workers' (particularly female domestic workers), all of whom are deliberately produced as vulnerable subjects by the state, for social justice and economic equality.[44] During the revolution, various radical anti-racist, feminist, queer, and labor rights groups joined forces to propose a different conception of what it means to have a good life in Lebanon—a conception that challenged the nationalist frame that usually dominates political claims, including the demands of the Revolution—by expanding that frame to include Syrian and Palestinian refugees as well as migrant workers. The coalition of these various groups called for solidarity around shared experiences of dispossession, and articulated collective demands including the right to work, the right to respectful working conditions, the right to affordable rent, the right to social protections.[45]

A more recent conversation with Sadeldeen draws a less optimistic picture.[46] He observes that the complexity and fragmentation of the political landscape in Lebanon as well as political disagreements among activists have weakened the coalitions and solidarities that had emerged during the Revolution. And yet, as anthropologist and political scientist Yasemin Ipek would argue, what could be retained is the expansion of the political imagination and the possibility of forging solidarities across class, nationality, religious and political affiliation through shared conditions and common demands for social change.[47] Could *Taste of Cement* be apprehended as a gesture towards the possibility of subaltern solidarities? The possibility of a new form of solidarity that bring together Syrian refugees and other marginalized communities in a common struggle against the Lebanese state's practices of exclusion and its policy of manufacturing vulnerability and exploitability? As the film sheds light on the hostile labor regime that governs the labor of Syrian refugees-workers, it reveals the structural violence of this regime which

workers", based in Beirut experienced and lived out the Syrian revolution at a distance, and how their rebel identities are formed in conditions of forced displacement.

[44] Sadeldeen, "The Double-Bind of Refugees in Lebanon."

[45] See for instance, "el balad bise3 el kil" (the country is big enough for all of us) campaign for labour rights for all; "Lihaqqi" (for my right), a grassroot political and social change movement campaigning for rights for everyone; the Anti-Racism Movement, a grassroot collective by Lebanese feminist activists and migrant workers and its campaign Abolish Kafala (the abusive sponsorship system governing migrant labour) etc.

[46] Personal exchange, July 31st, 2021

[47] Ipek, "Activists-in-Becoming."

shapes not only their reality, but that of other marginalized communities too, producing them all as vulnerable/exploitable subjects. By rethinking displacement from the perspective of labor, the film hints at a possible terrain for a collective struggle—uniting all exploited communities across nationality, religion, political affiliation—against Lebanon's hostile labor regime and through common demands for equality. Further, as it emphasizes Syrian refugees and workers' essential contribution to place-making—which is erased by the discourse of crisis and the dominant framing of refugees as threat and burden—the film reformulates the question of belonging not in terms of "Lebanity" or citizenship, but as rootedness *through* labor. Through its focus on labor, *Taste of Cement* gestures towards a form of solidarity that is grounded in a relational conception and politics of place—a conception and politics that emphasize how different communities with heterogenous identities collectively engage in place-making, and through that engagement, practice their belonging. Could we, then, understand *Taste of Cement* as a countervisual invitation to a different understanding of "what it means to have a good life in Lebanon", one that is not restricted to Lebanese citizens, but include all communities whose contributions to place-making are essential?[48]

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[48] See Sleiman and Girma's "The Place Is Not the Place" on the collective creation of Lebanon's as place by its many residents including refugees, migrants, non-IDs, and citizens.

Chapter 2

From the Edge of Life to Outer Space: Withdrawal from/Refusal of Turkey's Border Politics

> Istanbul, and Turkey more generally, is a station, or rather a trap, according to some Syrians. They do not want to connect with it and are not interested in building social relations outside of their work or residence place. Turkey is where you wait until you have saved enough money to undertake the crossing of maritime or terrestrial borders to Europe. Istanbul, for most Syrians, is a non-place.
>
> Yassine Al-Suweiha[1]

> Rather than addressing Syrians as refugees or as people who might obtain permanent residency and possible citizenship in Turkey, Syrians instead are governed through temporary protection and humanitarian assistance… Syrians are not viewed as political subjects who have the right to make claims to rights but rather as victims, who are in Turkey as guests who should be thankful for the ad hoc charity they receive.
>
> Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan, Kim Rygiel[2]

Today Turkey "hosts" the largest number of refugees in the world, the majority of whom come from Syria.[3] This is due not only to its proximity with Syria and to its geographical position—Turkey lies along migratory routes leading from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to Europe—which makes it both a destination and transit country. It is also due to the Joint Action Plan that Turkey struck with the EU in 2015, following the significantly increased movements of migrants and refugees from these parts of the world to Europe, particularly Syrians displaced by the war who are seeking asylum. This plan is a "coordinated response" by the EU and Turkey to the "challenge" of the migration crisis, implemented as "a matter of urgency."[4]

What exactly, is a matter of urgency here? The framework of a humanitarian discourse would suggest that the main objective of this plan is to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to Syrian refugees. In reality, the EU-Turkey agreement, as scholars Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan and Kim Rygiel argue, is structured by border politics. The agreement reveals the EU's recent shift towards the securitization of its borders, a shift that seeks to safeguard European territory, identity, and culture from the "threat" posed by "disorganized", "chaotic,"

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[1] Al-Suweiha, "Images from the Syrian Labor Community."
[2] Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, "Playing Border Politics."
[3] UNHCR, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey."
[4] European Commission, "EU-Turkey joint action plan."

"irregular" and "dangerous" migratory flows, especially in the wake of 2015.[5] As I discuss in this chapter, the plan is one instance of the EU's strategy of border externalization, which consists of stretching the EU's borders into other countries' sovereign territories and outsourcing migration control and border enforcement to these countries' authorities. In more simple terms, the EU subcontracts Turkey to contain migrants and refugees before they reach Europe, and in so doing, it also evades its legal responsibility (as per the Geneva Convention) to provide protection to displaced people who are in need and are seeking asylum. In exchange for "its taking an increased role in the sequestration and resettlement of Syrian refugees," the EU promised Turkey an accelerated EU membership.[6] This agreement, far from being animated by a humanitarian impulse, is transactional in nature, objectifying and commodifying migrants and refugees' lives to solidify Fortress Europe and serve regional and national border politics and interests. Further, this agreement not only governs refugees' mobility but also their subjectivity. The EU-Turkey Joint Action plan indeed depoliticizes refugees as it shifts their status from rightful refugees to "illegal" migrants, and in so doing, reconstitutes them as targets of border security policies and actions, rather than political subjects.

As my critical analysis of the political, media, and public discourse around Syrian refugees in Turkey in this chapter shows, the EU-Turkey agreement also instrumentalizes refugees for political ends. Similarly to Lebanon, Turkey welcomed Syrian refugees with open doors at the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011. However, the country quickly witnessed a shift of political and public mood, as a growing anti-refugee sentiment took hold of political, media, and public discourse, resulting in institutionalized discrimination and xenophobic public backlash against Syrian refugees. Turkish media have represented Syrians as criminals, beggars, and burglars, as well as culturally different, while on social media networks hashtags such as "Syrians Get Out" and "I don't want Syrians in my Country" have trended. Exploiting and sustaining this hostile climate, self-serving politicians in Turkey, like those in Lebanon, used Syrian refugees as leverage to further their political agendas and garner popular support. They turned Syrian refugees into the ultimate scapegoat for the government's shortcomings and failures, shifting the blame for Turkey's protracted economic crisis onto them. In addition to navigating this climate of public and political hostility, Syrian refugees must also contend with

[5] European Commission, "EU-Turkey joint action plan."
[6] Lynes, Morgenstern, Paul, "Introduction: In and Against Crisis," 27.

the insecurities caused by Turkey's temporary protection regime. As a plethora of testimonies published on the online platform for Syrian voices *Al Jumhuriya* shows, this regime makes Syrian refugees vulnerable to various forms of precarity, and renders them exploitable as labor power. As it institutionalizes precarity and exploitation, this regime, as Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel argue, reconstitutes Syrian refugees as helpless victims, and deprives them of political agency and rights.

However, what I am really interested in exploring in this chapter is how this depoliticization process, which unfolds through regional and national border politics, is resisted and aesthetically countered in artistic practices. For this, I turn to two artistic interventions that mediate two different but related forms of political practice: withdrawal from and refusal of the present moment, and of the politics that shape it. The first is *On the Edge of Life* (2017), an essay film by Syrian filmmakers Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd. This film documents Kassab's withdrawal from social and political life through a self-imposed exile in an isolated rest house in Turkey. Kassab's withdrawal could be read as a form of disengagement from reality, that is, as a passive stance deprived from politics. However, drawing on the work of scholars Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois, I want to argue that Kassab's withdrawal should be interpreted as a necessary political gesture that acknowledges that he is damaged by his lived experience of war and displacement, and that opens a space for him to reconstruct and reorient himself in a damaged world. Kassab has indeed chosen to retreat "to the edge of life" and to delve into himself, following the murder of his brother by a bomb in Syria. He withdraws so he can process his grief and reckon with his traumatic experience. In other words, his withdrawal is an essential action for his psychic and emotional survival. The rest house where Kassab's journey inside himself unfolds plays a key role in the film, as its isolation and bareness mediate Kassab's process of withdrawal and self-introspection, while also reflecting his psychic and emotional state. This is captured by Kassab's camera, which records the house's textures, sounds, colors, and surroundings, creating a sensorially rich and poetic environment that draws in and immerses the viewers into the space of the rest house *and* into Kassab's interior space. This sensory approach, combined with an observational aesthetic and an affectively charged narration by Kassab, engages the viewers in a proximate relation with the film's subjects (Kassab, Alhamedd, and the rest house), and generate an intimate experience of looking that is akin to witnessing. The film offers viewers an embodied experience of war, loss, and displacement, and in so doing,

counters dominant representational practices which frame and reduce Syrians refugees to victims or threat, without accounting for their lived experiences, subjective realities, and agency.

The second intervention is *Space Refugee* (2016), a film by Istanbul-based Kurdish artist Halil Altındere. This film documents a different form of political practice, that of refusal. Half documentary half speculative fiction, this film stems from the encounter between the artist and former Syrian cosmonaut/current refugee Mohammad Faris. *Space Refugee* imagines and images the refusal and full flight of Syrian refugees from the unbearable and dystopian realities of refugeehood towards an alternate future in outer space, and proposes Mars as the ultimate refuge. One way to read this work is to dismiss it as an exercise of escapism, a naïve fantasy of a utopian society that distracts our attention from the real problems that refugees are facing on the ground, whether in Turkey or elsewhere. Another is to understand it as dystopic because it suggests that Syrians, unwanted in Turkey/on earth, are forced out to space and into oblivion. And yet another, more generous and generative reading of this work, I suggest, would be to understand it as an imaginative intervention that generates a counter-representation of Syrian refugees by centering the role of Syrians in past and future narratives of space exploration. It is an aesthetic intervention that articulates a political project through which another reality for Syrian refugees is articulated. The film, in effect, imagines Syrians' refusal of the oppressive conditions that structure their reality and their refusal of a cancelled future that this reality pre-determines. By presenting a speculative alternative to the current reality, the film's narrative expands the sense of the possible, even if through fabulation, at a crucial moment when any imagination (and practice) of an otherwise feels foreclosed. Put differently, *Space Refugee* challenges the prevailing sense of political impotence produced by border politics by opening a space for radical ideas to penetrate and affect imagination.

Taken together, these two films present politically potent responses to Turkey's border politics and the vacuity of the "humanitarian" stance of the EU-Turkey deal. Beyond their aesthetic contribution, these films demand to be approached as strategies with political, ontological, and epistemological potential. They countervisualize as they engage in imagining and/or practicing alternatives to the current predicament of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and intimate that withdrawal and refusal *matter* as forms of social and politico-aesthetic practices.

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Border Politics: The EU-Turkey Deal

In a memo published by the European Commission (which jointly oversees the Joint Action Plan's implementation with the Turkish government) the EU-Turkey plan is characterized as an understanding between the EU and Turkey to coordinate responses to the migration/refugee crisis "in a spirit of burden sharing." Framed as a "humanitarian endeavor" with "human dignity at its core," the plan claims to address the crisis on three fronts: by tackling the root causes of the massive "influx" of Syrians; by supporting Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey; and by cooperating to prevent "irregular migration flows" to the EU.[7] The Joint Action Plan is, in effect, a responsibility-transference, rather than a "burden"-sharing deal. It is part of the EU's effort to redesign its policy frameworks to put an end to unwanted migration from the African continent and the Middle East through the regulation of migrants and refugees' movements *before* they reach Europe itself. The Turkey-EU deal is one instance of the EU's key strategy of border "externalization", defined by critical migration scholars Maribel Casas-Cortes et al as "the process of territorial and administrative expansion of a given state's migration and border policy to third countries."[8]

This strategy not only allows the EU to circumvent its responsibility in addressing the migration/refugee crisis, but also to evade its international humanitarian obligations towards refugees according to the principle of *non-refoulement*, enshrined in Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention.[9] Unwilling to open its doors to Syrian refugees and/or to grant them full support and rights once they are on EU territory, but reluctant to officially resile from its humanitarian obligations, the EU essentially subcontracts Turkey to contain refugees within Turkish territory before they reach the EU, that is, before they are able to make asylum claims. The deal shifts the "burden" —and indeed the crisis itself—from the EU to Turkey. As the New Keyword Collective observes, "insinuating that the 'crisis' itself has been, in effect, inflicted upon 'Europe', the highest-ranking figures in the EU have concurred that it is the proper role of the states in its wider 'neighborhood' to solve the 'crisis."[10] Considered part of Syria's "own

[7] European Commission, "EU-Turkey joint action plan."
[8] Casas-Cortes et al, "New Keywords: Migration and Borders", 73.
[9] The 1951 Refugee Convention is the key legal document that defines the term "refugee", and outlines the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of States to protect them.
[10] New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis: New Keywords," 8

region", Turkey is made responsible for "managing" and "solving" the migrant/refugee crisis in exchange for political and economic incentives.

The use of the language of humanitarianism in the Joint Action Plan is not incidental. It is rather a hallmark of the EU border regime, and one of the main justifications for border securitization and externalization. As Casas-Cortes et al argue: "humanitarian and securitarian discourses are simultaneously mobilized to both protect the right of migrants and to enforce border policing strategies and govern migration."[11] The entanglement of the humanitarian and securitarian discourses in the EU-Turkey deal is evident. The externalization of the EU's borders to Turkey is framed both as an effort to provide humanitarian relief to refugees *and* an effort to protect the EU from the intrusion of "irregular" migrants and refugees, especially after the 2015 dramatic increase in the number of people arriving by sea, via Turkey, to seek asylum in Europe. This Joint Action Plan is transactional in nature, and "turns refugees into tradable commodities" says writer and activist Harsha Walia.[12] According to the plan, commonly known as the EU-Turkey "deal", "irregular" migrants and refugees arriving from Turkey to Greece would be returned to Turkey. For every Syrian returned from the Greek Islands (that is, a Syrian whose migratory movement is deemed "irregular" or "illegal", the EU agrees to resettle one Syrian refugee who had waited inside Turkey. The EU also agrees to provide 6 billion euros in aid to support Syrian refugees in Turkey. Finally, The EU commits to accelerate the lifting of visa requirements for Turkish citizens, to continue working towards the upgrade of the Customs Unions, and to re-energize Turkey's accession process to the EU. As for Turkey, it commits to take all necessary measures to prevent new "irregular" migratory routes to the EU via land or sea from opening by increasing surveillance and border patrols.[13]

Taking stock of the deal a year after it came into force, Amnesty International asserts that the EU failed to fulfill its promise of ensuring that a safe and legal way out of Turkey is made available to refugees: "As of 27 February 2017, the number of Syrian refugees transferred from Turkey to EU member states was 3,565 – a number made even more negligible when contrasted

[11] Casas-Cortes et al, "New Keywords: Migration and Borders," 74
[12] Walia, *Border and Rule*, 114
[13] European Commission, "EU-Turkey joint action plan."

against the 2.8 million Syrians currently in Turkey."[14] Another report, by Human Right Watch, argues that the very premise on which the EU-Turkey deal is based—namely, that Turkey is a safe first country of asylum or safe third country of refugee resettlement—is flawed. As the report explains,

> Syrian asylum seekers can only benefit from a temporary protection regime in Turkey, allowing them to live there, but not granting them the convention's full protection. They continue to face many obstacles to registration, access to education, employment, and healthcare… And while Turkey has been generous in hosting over 2.7 million Syrian refugees, it has effectively sealed its border with Syria and has shot at and forcibly returned women, men, and children fleeing violence, persecution and human rights abuse in that country.[15]

The deal, then, reflects that the EU is much more concerned with the securitization of its borders that with the safety and dignity of Syrians and other displaced peoples. While the increased tightening of EU borders in recent decades have not deterred refugees from attempting the journey to Europe in search of safety and of a better life, it has turned them into "illegal" migrants through various policies and practices (including bilateral re-admission agreements such as the EU-Turkey deal) and pushed them to rely on smugglers and resort to dangerous modes and routes of travel.[16] In addition to being commodified, Syrian refugees are also depoliticized, as this shift in status from rightful refugee to "illegal" migrant deprives them from refugee status and rights, and reconstitutes them a threat to the EU's sovereignty (and targets of its border control policies) rather than political subjects.

The Joint Action Plan not only deals in refugees' and migrants' lives, it also unabashedly instrumentalizes the crisis and refugees. While the EU mobilizes the discourse of an urgent crisis to justify the externalization and securitization of its borders, the Turkish government cynically uses the crisis as leverage in its negotiations with the EU. This becomes particularly clear when Turkish president Erdogan weaponizes the desperation of refugees and the racism/xenophobia of Europe as he threatens time and again to open Turkey's borders with Europe—thus reviving the

[14] Amnesty International. "The EU-Turkey deal." Another report by the Migration Policy Institute, taking stock of the deal five years on, states that between Mach 2016 and 2021, "slightly more than 28,000 Syrian refugees were resettled in the European Union from Turkey, far short of the maximum 72,000 outlined in the deal." See Terry, "The EU-Turkey Deal."
[15] Human Right Watch. "The EU-Turkey Deal is No Blueprint."
[16] Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, "Playing Border Politics."

spectre of the 2015 crisis—if the EU doesn't meet his demands. In 2020, Erdogan carried out his threat, opening Turkey's land border with Greece to refugees in an attempt to pressure the EU into politically and militarily supporting Turkey's operations in Syria. However, the hundreds of thousands of refugees who gathered at the border were violently pushed back by Greek military and riot police, deployed to protect he border and prevent refugees from crossing into EU territory. As journalist Ramzy Baroud puts it, "refugees are finding themselves held hostage to selfish political calculations that view them as burden or pawn."[17]

This is not only true in the EU-Turkey context, but on the domestic level too, where opportunistic politicians instrumentalize the issue of Syrian refugees to advance their political agendas. Turkey's open-door policy towards Syrian refugees in the early days of the war in Syria was used by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his administration to claim the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led government moral superiority and to revitalize Ottoman imaginaries amongst Turks. As researcher Arthur Jennequin explains:

> On the one hand, [the management of the refugee crisis] has permitted the AKP to marginalize the opposition and to flatter its own conservative electorate, framing its "refugee-friendly policy as a moral obligation derived from Islamic tradition…On the other hand, the hosting of Syrian refugees in the Turkish territory has contributed to fuel neo-Ottoman imaginaries by asserting a continuity between Turkey and its past history as an empire, legitimizing Ankara's repeated interferences in the Syrian conflict.[18]

According to the open-door-policy, Syrians were able to Turkey without a visa. Any Syrian crossing the border to seek safety in Turkey was welcome, and was granted a temporary protection status. As the war in Syria persisted and the number of refugees kept growing, Turkey's domestic political and economic crises were compounded by the challenges of hosting millions of Syrian refugees.[19] The persistence of the war in Syria saw the number of displaced Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey grow and cast doubts on the prospect of refugees returning to Syria soon, making the cost of hosting refugees difficult to sustain, both politically and economically. The government's "refugee-friendly" position and hospitality started to fade,

[17] Baroud, "Syrian refugees deserve better."
[18] Jennequin, "Turkey and the Weaponization of Syrian Refugees."
[19] Karataşlı, "The Political Economy of Erdogan's Syria Gamble." These crises were particularly manifest in the mass anti-government uprising triggered by the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and later, in the 2016 attempted coup to topple the government.

replaced by an atmosphere of hostility that is today palpable in the discourse and policies of all political parties as well as in the anti-refugee sentiment spread wide amongst the Turkish population.

While in the beginning of the war, refugees were welcomed by Turkish society as "guests", with time, public opinion turned against them. A 2018 study by the Center for Migration Research (Istanbul Bilgi University) found that more than 85% of the Turkish population supported the repatriation of Syrian refugees.[20] Turkish citizens perceive Syrian refugees as a burden to the state, and a threat to their economic and social interests. They accuse refugees of taking away jobs, driving wages down, straining public services and reducing the availability of affordable housing. Many also believe that Syrian refugees enjoy preferential treatment from the government and are granted privileges that are denied to Turkish citizens, including access to free housing, monthly salaries without work, and university admission without taking mandatory exams. Syrians are also seen as a threat to public order and safety, and held responsible for a perceived increase in the country's crimes, including theft, rape, and violence.[21] Such negative perceptions, based on myths and misconceptions, are sustained by fake news campaigns that spread wildly on social media and fuel a fierce anti-refugee rhetoric. Teyit, a Turkey-based independent fact-checking organization dedicated to preventing false information from spreading on the internet, published a report where it identified thirteen misinformation campaigns about Syrian refugees in Turkey. [22] As journalist Ayse Karabat argues,"Syrians are in the crossfire of political polarisation, usually ending up as digital collateral damage."[23] As these viral campaigns circulate and gain traction and attention, they re/produce and intensify people's feelings of resentment and anger towards Syrian refugees, which in turn, drive individual acts of violence targeted against Syrian individuals or communities.[24]

This anti-Syrian sentiment is further heightened by the belief that Syrians are culturally different and cannot/do not want to adhere to Turkish norms and values.[25] In "Recognizing Strangers," writer and scholar Sara Ahmed argues that the figure of the stranger is produced

[20] Sazak, "Turkey Can't Host Syrian Refugees Forever."
[21] International Crisis Group, "Turkey's Syrian Refugees."
[22] Teyit, "13 false information about Syrians living in Turkey."
[23] Karabat, "How Syrian refugees became victims."
[24] Al-Jazeera, "Turkey detains dozen after Syrian shops attacked."
[25] International Crisis Group, "Turkey's Syrian Refugees."

through its association with danger (to the space of the community), and that this feeling of danger is exacerbated by cultural difference which allows and justifies the reinforcement of boundaries between the "we" (citizens) and "them" (non-citizens including as migrants, immigrants, refugees) to secure the safety of the home-nation. As Ahmed observes, "the recognizability of strangers is determinate in the social demarcation of spaces of belonging: the stranger is 'known again' as that which has already contaminated such spaces as threat to both property and person." [26] In Turkey, the Syrian refugee is recognized as a stranger who is out of place. A stranger who doesn't belong to Turkish society and on Turkish territory, and whose exclusion/expulsion, expressed in the collective desire for Syrians to be repatriated, would restore safety and stability for Turkish citizens. This feeling of forced estrangement is captured by writer and journalist Raja Salim who fled Syria to Lebanon in 2012, and from there, moved to Turkey in 2014 first to Gaziantep, then to Istanbul. She describes the hate and hostility towards Syrian refugees as palpable feelings that stem from fear and resentment of Syrians (and other Arab refugees) who are perceived as invaders, criminals, beggars who threaten the well-being of Turks and take away benefits who are due to them. As Salim explains, Syrian refugees are recognized/referred to as "yabanci" (the Turkish term for foreigner/stranger), dealt with condescendingly, and systematically subjected to discriminatory practices and racist discourse.[27]

Instead of alleviating the rising societal tensions between Syrian refugees and their host communities, and devising policies to integrate Syrian refugees into Turkish society and to give them equal rights, Turkish politicians politicize this public hostility and weaponize the correlation between Turkey's protracted economic crisis and the Syrian refugee population in the minds of many voters to shift the blame for high inflation, increasing unemployment, and other problems onto refugees. As Baroud argues, the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election exemplifies the ways in which opportunistic politicians are scapegoating Syrian refugees and underscores the growing anti-refugee sentiment among ordinary Turks.[28] The AKP candidate Binali Yildrim affirmed that Syrian refugees were not here to stay, and promised to deport any Syrian refugees who violate Turkish law, while the Republican People's Party's candidate (and winner) Ekrem Imamoglu, who was also supportive of calls for Syrian refugees to be repatriated home, referred

[26] Ahmed, "Recognizing Strangers," 20.
[27] Personal communication with Raja Salim, February 18, 2022.
[28] Baroud, "Syrian refugees deserve better."

to the refugee issue as a "severe trauma" to the Turkish people. [29] He vowed to protect the Turkish people's interests, and not to allow Syrian refugees to "change the color" of Istanbul. On the night of his election, the hashtag "#Suriyeliler Defoluyor" ("#SyriansGetOut") was trending on social media.[30]

In addition to this climate of public and political hostility, Syrian refugees have to contend with the insecurities caused by Turkey's temporary protection regime. While I have used the term refugee to refer to displaced Syrians seeking safety in Turkey, legally speaking, they are not recognized as such. This is because while Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, it maintains a geographical limitation that excludes non-European from full refugee status. Displaced Syrians in Turkey are instead granted a temporary protection status, that is, the legal right to temporarily reside in Turkey with access to limited social services such as basic healthcare, education, and social assistance, without a pathway to obtain permanent residency or citizenship (except for a number of highly skilled and qualified Syrians). As Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel argue, the absence of a clearly defined legal framework/process for granting and protecting Syrians' rights combined with an ever-changing and arbitrary registration process (which is required to access these social services) renders Syrians vulnerable to various forms of precarity, from housing and education to employment.[31] Syrian refugees are also made more vulnerable to exploitation. Under this temporary protection regime, Syrian refugees need a work permit to be able work legally. But the high cost of this permit (which is covered by the employer) and the complicated administrative process to obtain it encourage employers to hire Syrian refugees illegally, and to exploit them as cheap and disposable labor.[32]

A series of testimonials by Syrian refugees titled "Istanbul Is Not Ours" and published on *Al Jumhuriya* (an online platform for Syrian voices) sheds light on Syrian refugees' collective experience of precarity and exploitation, while retaining the individuality of each story and struggle. In "A Basement Full of Threads", Bashir Amin, a communication student and displaced Syrian who smuggled across the Syrian-Turkish border in 2013 to seek temporary refuge in

[29] Ahval, "Syrians not in Turkey to Stay."
[30] Alioglu-al-Burai, "Turkey must do more to integrate Syrian refugees."
[31] Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, "Playing Border Politics."
[32] This, of course, is the case for most refugees not all, for as Syrian writer Shirin Al Hayek explains in "Istanbul, the Closer Deception," it is difficult to talk about Syrian exile in general terms, as this state differs according economic and cultural class. Often, this difference is significant between on the one hand, the elite and the educated, and on the other hand, those who are in search for their livelihood and their future between Turkey and the West.

Istanbul, shares his own experience of exploitation in the textile industry. Like many Syrians in Turkey, Amin worked in various garment factories in Istanbul to sustain himself. These factories, he says, are one of Istanbul's hidden worlds:

> …a world full with the ugliness of basements whose secrets are only known to their survivors, for Istanbul's basements are different from the basements that we have known or heard of. Its basements are crowded with foreign workers, like a rotten pack of cigarettes that has crossed multiple borders to reach the hand of a poor old man.[33]

Amin's poetic reflection portrays the textile industry as an underground world, both literally and figuratively. Literally, because garment factories and workshops are typically located in basements that isolate the overworked workers from natural sunlight, from the city and its other inhabitants, and from its social life. Figuratively, because these workshops and factories are part of an underground economy that relies on the illegal employment and exploitation of Syrian refugees and other foreign workers. Amin describes the dire working conditions he was forced to endure, from very long working hours and physical hardship of the job to the climate of disrespect, the little pay, and the lack of any right or benefit. Any objection or request for improving work conditions were out of the question, as other Syrian (and other) refugees, struggling to make ends meet, were desperate to find a job and willing to put up with the exploitation. Syrians in Turkey, as Amin's testimony shows, were treated as cheap and expendable labor force.

Jian Ibrahim's contribution to the series explores the precarious living conditions that displaced Syrian women face in Turkey. Her piece, based on her own experience and on the experiences of two other Syrian women, Zeinab and Nour, focuses on housing in Istanbul.[34] Ibrahim explains the only accommodation that their low-income could afford was a bed in a room shared with five or six other low-income women. These women "residences," common in Istanbul, are typically based on an oral agreement with the landlords, rather than on a legal contract. Their informal aspect renders their residents vulnerable because their housing security depends on the whim of the landlords and of other residents. As Ibrahim observes, these residences deprive Syrian women from the sense of privacy, comfort, and safety that are normally associated to the notion and space of home. These residences, that none of the women

[33] Bashir, "A basement full of threads" (translation from Arabic my own).
[34] Jian, "Al-Haremlik: Escape, Surveillance, and Revelation.

feel she can call home, only provide a temporary respite from their fear of loneliness and homelessness, and amplify their feeling of living a precarious life in limbo. Raja Salim also speaks of her struggle, as a single woman, to find housing in Istanbul. She was systematically rejected by landlords as soon as they would find out that she's Syrian. They would justify this rejection by explaining that they do not rent to yabanci (foreigners).[35]

These testimonies illustrate the ways in which Turkey's temporary protection regime institutionalizes insecurity, precarity, and exploitation. This regime frames the limited rights that Syrian refugees have access to as temporary measures of humanitarian assistance (in the same way that the EU border regime does), forcing upon them a particular form of subjectivity. As Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel insightfully observe, national and regional border politics work together through the EU-Turkey deal to deprive Syrian refugees of political agency and reconstitute them as humanitarian objects. In their words: "such border politics aim to strip Syrian refugees of their political subjectivity and ability to claim rights under the international refugee protection regime by reconstituting Syrians—and indeed the figure of the refugee—as objects of humanitarian assistance rather than political agents with rights." [36]

This process of depoliticization, unfolding both nationally and regionally, was accompanied by a series of measures to restrict the mobility of Syrian refugees to, within, and out of Turkey. Starting in 2016, Turkey implemented a series of measure to tighten its borders: it ended the visa-free policy for Syrians arriving by sea or by air; limited border-crossing through land to official border posts only; built a security fence to protect its border with Syria, and encouraged border guards to shoot at Syrian refugees to prevent them from crossing. Turkey also began to frequently and completely seal its border with Syria, leaving displaced Syrians stranded in makeshift camps on the Syrian side of the border.[37] These restrictive measures aimed at limiting the number of Syrian refugees coming into Turkey were coupled with policies that sought to regulate their movements within Turkey. The Turkish government enforced a travel permit system between provinces within Turkey that prohibited Syrians from leaving the province they were living in, and obliged Syrian refugees to return to the provinces where they were initially registered, even if they were living and working elsewhere. The government also

[35] Personal communication with Raja Salim, February 18, 2022.
[36] Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, "Playing Border Politics."
[37] Makovsky, "Turkey's Refugee Dilemma."

required an exit visa or permit for Syrians who wish to leave Turkey temporarily or permanently. In parallel, the government embarked on a campaign in Syrian neighborhoods and subway/bus stations to ensure that refugees were complying with immigration laws. The implementation of these policies was followed by systematic waves of unlawful deportations and detentions, coercive returns, as well as forced relocations within and between cities. Syrian writer Hathifa Fathi observes that these policies impose a state of "forced residence" onto Syrian refugees, and have transformed Turkey into one large prison with invisible walls.[38] Interestingly, the introduction of these measures and policies coincided with the signing and implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, a coincidence that is not incidental, for as Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel argue, these measures and policies not only sought to control refugees' mobility to and within Turkish territory, but also to limit arrivals to the EU.[39]

The Turkish government's effort to tighten Turkey's borders and restrict the mobility of displaced Syrians, coupled with the country's legally ambiguous refugee protection regime, has created untenable living conditions for Syrian refugees, and has left them with three dismal options, argues Baroud. Returning to war-torn Syria. Staying in Turkey and coping with unemployment, poverty, exploitation, limited mobility, and an increasingly hostile environment. Risking their lives to cross one of the Turkish-Greek borders to the EU, where they would attempt to claim rights to international protection, and where they would face equally difficult conditions of marginalization, dehumanization, and exploitation.[40] And yet, many still opt to leave, for as Syrian writer Shirin Alhayek expresses, Turkey doesn't hold the promise of a permanent home, and therefore, cannot be but a transit site:

> …for many Syrians, Istanbul does not offer a future in exchange for what it takes from the present. It does not promise anything, and it does not offer the slightest guarantees provided by European countries, which makes it an exile before exile, a station that takes what you know about your motherland before handing you a transit card to Europe. Few people come to Istanbul to settle; most Syrians leave.[41]

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[38] Hathifa. "Syrians in Turkey."
[39] Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, "Playing Border Politics."
[40] Baroud, "Syrian refugees deserve better."
[41] Al Hayek, "Istanbul, the Closer Deception" (translation from Arabic my own).

Withdrawal to the Edge of Life

On the Edge of Life (2017), an essay film by Syrian filmmakers Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd, suggests another possibility, even if temporary, outside of the three dire options outlined by Baroud. The film indeed mediates and documents the suspension of the dire and precarious circumstances that are imposed on Syrian refugees, capturing a moment where Kassab deliberately chooses to retreat from reality—by isolating himself geographically, socially and politically—to contend with what he has lived through, catch his breath, and reflect on his experience of war, loss, and displacement (and their enduring after-effects) before the world narrows on him again.[42] The film follows Kassab and his partner Rima Alhamedd's exilic journey from Syria to Sweden, overviewing their brief passage through Lebanon and focusing on their stay in a rest house in Turkey. *On the Edge of Life* captures the state of dislocation and prolonged estrangement that characterizes the multiple and diverse lived experiences of Syrians. The prelude to a dossier on Syrian exile published by *Al Jumhuriya* observes that exile has become a condition that is inseparable from the experience of any Syrian, even those who haven't been forced to move geographically:

> It is inconceivable for us Syrians today to think of ourselves outside of our exilic condition. Each of us has a unique story to tell. Some have not left Syria, yet they live an internal state of exile; amongst those who left, some rejected exile, while others accepted an exile that did not accept them. Our friends and relatives are scattered across all four quarters of the earth. Our never-ending recounts merge inside and outside, identity and estrangement, east and west, and north and south. Exile has become the home of those who don't have one.[43]

On the Edge of Life thus contributes to a growing archive of films that represents Syrians' collective experience of war, forced migration, and exile, while also making this experience concrete and specific by grounding it in the individuality of Kassab's subjective story. The film documents Kassab's lived experience of a double exile: an exile *in* the world (a collective condition imposed onto all Syrians as a result of the ongoing war) and an exile *from* the world (Kassab's voluntary choice to exclude himself geographically, politically, and socially from the world). Kassab's self-imposed exile or retreat from the world could be understood as an

[42] Moussa, "Syria…On the Edge of Life."
[43] Al Jumhuriya, "Exile" (translation from Arabic my own).

apolitical move, one that allows Kassab to renounce action and disengage from reality instead of confronting it. As scholars Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois observe, politics are "generally understood to be all about engagement, intervention in real-life issues, a struggle over the manifold ways in which to organize society, about agency and direct action." And yet, they also argue that withdrawal "means anything but depoliticization;" that it is a political gesture that lends itself to both micropolitics (in the form of selfcare and of seeking deeper understanding of oneself) and to macropolitics (a deeper understanding of the world through a deeper understanding of oneself).[44] Hesselberth and de Bloois write that:

> To withdraw is to acknowledge that one's environment—be it physical, social, economic, or political—is damaged, that oneself is damaged. To withdraw in this context is not foster the fantasy that we may escape the world once and for all, but rather, to seek refuge in order to reorient ourselves in this damaged world."[45]

I want to argue that Kassab's withdrawal, documented in *On the Edge of Life*, is a form of political practice that entails a disengagement from the current state of politics to "reconnect and reconstruct." As he withdraws from the present moment and from the politics that shape it—the ongoing war in Syria and the subsequent loss and mass displacement of Syrians, Turkey's temporary protection regime which institutionalizes precarity and marginalization for Syrian refugees, and the EU's refusal to recognize the international rights of Syrian refugees—Kassab reconfigures the experience/meaning of exile from a condition that is forced onto him, and that commodifies and depoliticizes Syrian refugees, to a condition that he intentionally creates and cultivates to reconnect with and reassemble his damaged self, and to reorient himself in a damaged world.

The film starts the day that Kassab and Alhamedd leave Syria, with scenes from the small green room that they shared in Damascus, and the voice-over of Kassab reflecting that this might be the last day they see their homeland. A long shot, taken at night from a car travelling on Lebanon's main highway, reveals that they have fled the war to seek refuge in Lebanon. A series of images, some metaphorical and others more literal, represent their experience in Beirut and encode the temporal dimension of their displacement. Contemplative shots of the Mediterranean Sea. Melancholic depictions of Beirut's urban landscape seen from their apartment's windows. A

[44] Hesselberth and de Bloois, "Toward a Politics of Withdrawal?"1-3.
[45] Ibid, 6.

close-up of Alhamedd's face as she listens to dreadful news from Syria on the radio. A shot of Kassab and Alhamedd, on their balcony, as she plays a nostalgic tune on the oud. A blurred and grainy image of Kassab's father, speaking to them from Syria via a choppy video call. Together, these fragmented images create an affective and expressive mood that evokes the forced experience of waiting and the feelings of powerlessness and alienation that come along with it. Kassab and Alhamedd are waiting for a refugee visa to Europe that will never come. They are waiting for a new Lebanese work permit and residency card. They are longing for their families who stayed in Syria and who long for them, waiting to be reunited. They are waiting for news from home. They are waiting for war to end. They are waiting to return home. Their waiting, structurally imposed by the war and by migration and border control regimes, elicits a particular form of subjectivity that permeates the scenes recorded in Beirut. Kassab and Alhamedd are caught between the unfolding present and an uncertain future, with little power to affect their situation. The way they inhabit time (and space), as suggested by the images, is inherently passive and liminal. They are waiting *for*, rather than waiting *to* or waiting *on.*[46] Here, exile also transpires as a temporal exclusion. As Syrian-Lebanese filmmaker and researcher Rami El-Nihawi remarks, "exile is more than geographical exclusion; it is a rupture in time, a crack in the narrative of the exiled self."[47]

[46] Bandak and Janeja "Introduction: Worth the Wait."
[47] El-Nihawi, "Rami Al Nihawi on Exile and Home."


Still images, *On the Edge of Life*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

Upon receiving the news of his brother's killing by shrapnel in Aleppo, Kassab decides to leave his apartment and Beirut. He is driven by the desire to be somewhere else, somewhere far away, to process his grief and mourn the death of his brother. He expresses the need to withdraw from the world and delve inside himself when he says, in the voice-over:

> I don't know where to go with the immense sadness that is inside of me.
>
> The sadness, the anger, the blame.
>
> I wish I could be near my parents, as they are the only ones who can console me, and I am the only one who can console them. We could share our sadness together.
>
> I want to go somewhere far away.
>
> I want to go inside myself.

Kassab's journey inside himself unfolds in an abandoned rest house, located between the cities of Yalova and Bursa in Turkey, where he and Alhamedd have retreated following a short stay in Istanbul.[48] While *On the Edge of Life*'s synopsis states that the rest house is in Turkey, nothing in the film reveals the time, place, or even the background of the film's events, emphasizing Kassab's geographical and socio-political withdrawal from the present moment into his psychic and emotional space. The rest house is itself withdrawn. It stands alone, in an empty lot behind a desolate highway, surrounded by fields and forests. The rest house's isolation is amplified by its emptiness. Its expansive interiors are barely and very rudimentarily furnished. It provides Kassab with the marginalization that he voluntarily seeks, enabling him to cut off from the world and live off the grid to care for and reconnect with himself and the world.

Kassab's only connection with the outside world is his communication with his family, which takes place via recorded voice messages and skype calls. These sonic fragments play a

[48] Personal communication, March 2022.

role as essential as the images that his camera record, building a narrative arc that helps the viewers situate Kassab's experience while also creating a sense of "intimacy akin to co-presence" by giving viewers access to Kassab's private exchanges with his family.[49] Like all Syrians who have left Syria and loved ones behind, war and displacement have brought a radical shift in their relationship to family, home, and to the disappeared. This relationship takes a new form in exile, one that is shaped by digitized/mediatized communication. In the rest house, his family is at once absent and present, far and yet close, physically distant but emotionally proximate. Communication technologies enable Kassab to stay connected to, and to cultivate intimacy with his family, despite his exile. They ask about each other and share news and memories, as they try to stay part of each other's everyday lives and to bridge the geographical gap that separate them. These exchanges, as Kassab has expressed, are also a way to keep a material trace of his family members before they disappear. He recorded their voices and preserved them in/through the film, out of fear of losing them too.[50]

And yet, as communication scholar Joscelyn Jurich argues, while the mobile phone or computer is the primary mode for Syrian refugees to connect with family and friends who stayed in Syria, it is also a primary site of witnessing the obliteration of people and homeland.[51] In *On the Edge of Life,* Kassab repeatedly looks at digitized photographs of his deceased brother. He stares at his brother's image for long minutes, touches the screen to enlarge it and scrutinize its details more closely. He is haunted by the loss of his brother, unable to accept his death because he wasn't there when it happened. "You haven't seen anything" his sister tells him in the film. "The only memory you have of his death is the bad news. You weren't present, you weren't with him in the house, in the room." As researcher Nicolas Appelt writes,

> The voice messages as well as the Skype conversations with the parents and sister of the director of *On the Edge of Life* mingle with void: that of the static landscapes of the Turkish countryside and that of the road when leaving Beirut. Then appears a figure of the absence. It corresponds as much to that of the relatives – namely the brother who disappeared, killed by a bomb that fell on Aleppo – as to that of the country. The

[49] Jurich, "Poetic documentary as visual ethnography,"49.
[50] Personal communication, March 2022.
[51] Jurich, "Poetic documentary as visual ethnography," 50.

> hypnotic landscapes refer to the impossibility of seeing and understanding the real-life experience of those who stayed in Syria.[52]

Kassab's experience of loss, suffering and mourning, mediated by his phone and laptop, is a solitary and alienating experience. An experience that permeates the images of the film and that is also intensified by the isolation of the rest house and the emptiness of its surroundings.

The film is visually marked by figurations that establish an aesthetic and social division between inside and outside. These figurations—the most recurrent of which is the motif of the window—are conceptual metaphors for the border that Kassab has intentionally drawn to separate himself from the world; they demarcate a line that protect his personal and intimate sphere, which is contained by the rest house. By choosing to self-exile, Kassab withdraws from the present moment to carve his own reality outside of space and time—on the margins, at the edge of life—where he can, at least temporarily, disengage from the limitations and the difficulties dictated by Turkey's migration control regime, and from the uncertain future that their condition of refugee imposes upon him. He reappropriates exile, intentionally estranging himself in/through the rest house to process his grief and reassemble himself. Here, he and Alhamedd seem to be waiting too, but their waiting is no longer a passive state imposed by an external political situation and a decrease of possibilities, but an intentional state of dwelling in time. Their waiting in the rest house constitutes a particular engagement in, and with, time and space; an active engagement that is necessary for reckoning with the trauma of war, with the loss of Kassab's brother, and with the pain of displacement, and that is essential for their self-preservation and psychic survival.

[52] Appelt, "'You Haven't Seen Anything'/'I Have Seen it All'."

Still images, *On the Edge of Life*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

What I want to argue is that political subjectivity *can be* recovered from withdrawal; that while Kassab's withdrawal could be interpreted as a moment of incapacitation and passivity, a moment of complete and utter absence of agency, it should rather be read as a political gesture. In the last voice-over, Kassab says:

> I am not the same person as the one who left Syria when he was 25 years old.
>
> The person who wanted to talk about freedom and prison, about homeland and longing.
>
> Not the same person who said goodbye to his country through an image of his partner standing against the window of their small underground room.
>
> Not the same person whose eyes sparked with his love of life.
>
> I am a mere body. A body without a cause; without a soul; without feelings.
>
> A body unable to cry. An incapacitated and useless body.
>
> A body robbed of life; robbed of memories.
>
> I am the bleeding body, damaged by shrapnel and buried in the garden where he spent his childhood.

As Hesselberth and de Bloois would maintain, a conventional understanding of political action and agency wouldn't recognize a political subject in the words uttered above and in this body without a cause. However, I want to suggest that Kassab's withdrawal (from the system of migratory injustice) and his divestment (from the subjectivity of refugee) are constitutive of a political act. Beneath the surface of what appears as passivity, as incapacitation, as surrender, lie a survival strategy, his need to heal, his desire to reconstruct and reorient himself in a damaged world. Even if it is difficult to identify and describe the political substance of the subject of withdrawal precisely because it is hidden/submerged under the surface, I want to speculate that Kassab's withdrawal, mediated and documented by *On the Edge of Life*, enables the emergence of a new sense of political self, that of a filmmaker engaged in countervisualizing and telling a

different story than the ones peddled by politicians and the media. While it is shaped by his attempt (and perhaps failure) to make sense of life amidst the absurdity of war, the violence of loss, and the pain of displacement, Kassab's act of withdrawal enabled a crucial act of creation. His withdrawal provided the space and time necessary for him to contend with his personal experience and to develop a cinematic language to process, capture, and convey this experience through an audio-visual record that intervenes in the visual field of the Syrian refugee crisis. Put otherwise, *On the Edge of Life* not only mediates and documents Kassab's political gesture of withdrawal, but is itself a creative political intervention that enables Kassab to heal and repair in the face of a violent rupture of meaning, while also countering the representational politics of the Syrian refugee crisis.

The rest house is the refuge that contains Kassab's journey and orients his emotions, which fill and reverberate across the rest house's space. In *On the Edge of Life,* the rest house indeed emerges as a main protagonist, functioning both as a vessel that holds Kassab's journey of internal exploration and a metaphor for Kassab's psychic and affective state. The rest house's textures, colors, sounds, and surroundings, captured by Kassab's camera, create a vivid and immersive aesthetic-sensual environment that mediate Kassab's journey inside himself. In/through the rest house, the film takes the form of a sensory auto-ethnography that is invested in conveying Kassab's emotional and psychological state to the viewers not (only) through words, but through sensory evocations. The bareness of the rest house. The sparsity of its interiors. The decay of its walls. The rust on the furniture. The desolation of its surroundings. The enveloping silence. The bleak light coming in from its windows. The deep blackness of the night outside. The sound of the wind blowing in the fields. The quiet in the garden at night. The rainstorm raging outside. The incessant and numbing noise of the trucks, travelling on the nearby highway. Every scene imparts a sense of being there, immersing the viewers in the physical space of the rest house and in Kassab's internal space. Rather than articulating a linear story for the viewers, these fragmented and poetic images form a collection of sensorial impressions that evoke the impact of war and displacement. *On the Edge of Life* is one instance of what Jurich describes as "a sensory visual ethnography of the material and emotional residues and remains that permeate environments of war, mass murder, sexual violence, colonial violence."[53]

[53] Jurich, "Poetic documentary as visual ethnography", 45.

Still images, *On the Edge of Life*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

In addition to its sensory approach, *On the Edge of Life* embraces an observational aesthetic that characterizes the sensory ethnographic film. This aesthetic, as anthropologist Lucien Taylor describes it, "favors long takes…and a tempo that is faithful to the rhythms of real life and that discourages cutting, directing, reenacting, interviewing."[54] The camera observes Kassab and his partner, paying intense and careful attention to their expressions and their everyday life. It records some of their quotidian moments through meditative shots devoid of dialogue. A close-up focuses on Al-Hamedd's face lit up by her laptop. Other shots show her outside leaning pensively against the background of the highway, or standing in the kitchen. A long take shows Kassab sweeping dust outside the rest house, another follows him as he walks through the surrounding fields. Multiple takes of Kassab capture him as he is contemplating the horizon, or a storm outside, or his own reflection in the mirror/in a reflective window glass. Some shots feature both Alhamedd and Kassab, as they lie in bed trying to find sleep, or as they sit on the couch smoking cigarettes and skyping with their parents. The camera not only observes Kassab and Alhamedd, but it also observes the rest house and its surroundings, registering some of its features and capturing its essence. These observational shots dwell in everyday details and gestures, providing the viewers with an intimate and proximate perspective on Kassab's internal journey, and generating a form of engagement that is akin to the experience of witnessing. Reflecting on the potential of the sensory ethnographic film, Taylor asks:

[54] Castaing-Taylor, "Iconophobia," 75.

> What if film not only *constitutes discourse about* the world but also (re)presents *experience* of it? What if the film does not *say* but *show*? What if the film does not just *describe* but *depict*? What then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions?'[55]

On the Edge of Life offers a thick depiction of Kassab's embodied experience to the viewers —showing not only telling his psychological state, depicting not only describing his emotions— through a cinematic language that combines an observational aesthetic with a highly engaging sensory and poetic evocation. The film's thick depiction not only immerses the viewers in Kassab's affective and psychic space. As a visual ethnography, it "opens up alternative forms of knowledge through mood, tone and affect" that disrupt the dominant representations of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and elsewhere.[56] Countering both the framing of EU-Turkey's border politics which reduces Syrian refugees to humanitarian objects, as well as the dominant representation of Syrian refugees as a burden or threat in Turkish political, media and public discourse, *On the Edge of Life* offers an countervisualization that is grounded in an embodied experience of war, loss, refugeehood, and exile, and that constitutes both a testimony (of a subjective experience) and trace (of the collective experience) of Syrian displacement.

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Space is the Place (for Refugees)[57]

Space Refugee (2016), a film by Istanbul-based Kurdish artist Halil Altındere, documents a different form of political practice, that of refusal. A refusal of the present moment and of its oppressive conditions. A refusal that carves a space and time outside of reality not in a remote and abandoned rest house in Turkey, but in outer space. *Space Refugee* provocatively proposes that space *is* the place for Syrian refugees. Increasingly finding themselves unwanted and rejected in Turkey, in Lebanon, in Europe, or elsewhere, Syrian refugees ought to seek refuge on Mars, portrayed in the film as the ultimate haven for the forcibly displaced. As former astronaut and current Istanbul-based Syrian refugee Muhammed Ahmed Faris, who is the protagonist of the film, intones: "I say to the countries that stand against refugees, and unfortunately, many countries stand against Syrian refugees and deny them and their children the right to safety…we will build cities in space for them, and I will go with them to Mars, where there is safety and

[55] Taylor, "Iconophobia," 86.
[56] Jurich, "Poetic documentary as visual ethnography", 52.
[57] This title takes its inspiration from Sun Ra's Afrofuturist science-fiction film *Space Is the Place* released in 1974.

freedom. Where is freedom on earth? There is no freedom on earth, there is no dignity for humans on Earth."

Still images, *Space Refugee*, Courtesy of Pilot Gallery and the artist.

The first half of *Space Refugee* recounts Faris' journey from astronaut and national hero to dissident and refugee, interspersing archival footage and photographs from his days in the Syrian army and his journey in space with present-day interviews. Nicknamed the Neil Armstrong of the Arab World, Faris made history as the first Syrian and first Arab astronaut to go into space. He was born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1951. Following his graduation from the Syrian Air Force Academy as a fighter pilot in 1973, Faris served in the Syrian air force as aviation instructor on the supersonic jet fighter and interceptor aircraft MIG21. His purpose, he says in the film, was to defend his country and its skies—not to kill his fellow countrywomen and men as he was required to do by the Syrian regime after the eruption of the Syrian revolution. In 1985, he was selected amongst a group of other pilots to participate in Intercosmos, a spaceflight program that invites cosmonauts from allied countries to join Soviet space missions. Following two years of intensive training at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City in the Soviet Union, Faris flew into space together with two Soviet cosmonauts on board the Soyuz TM-3. They were heading to the Mir space station, where Faris would conduct scientific experiments and photograph his country from space.[58]

The 7 days, 23 hours, and 5 minutes that Faris spent in space in 1987 changed his life, he told *The Guardian*. "When you have seen the whole world through your window there is no us and them, no politics."[59] Elsewhere, he again conjures this outer space vision of a world beyond borders, a vision of a world that transcends the socially and politically constructed identities and structures that engender division, differentiation, and exclusion. He observes: "When you go up

[58] Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Muhammed Faris."
[59] Garthwaite, "From astronaut to refugee."

there, you realize there are no borders, no countries, no nationalities. Just Earth. Mother Earth."[60] During his space mission, Faris decided to dedicate himself to educate his people in astronomy and science, and to help other Syrians become astronauts so he can relay this privileged perspective of the world. However, his project for a national space science institute was met with rejection by then Syrian president Hafez Al Assad. Faris explains that Assad intentionally kept the Syrian people uneducated and divided. "That's how dictators stay in power. The very thought of giving the people the vision that a space science institute would give them was dangerous," explains Faris.[61]

Faris returned to the Air Force where he trained men to fly jet fighters and ranked up to Major General. When civil uprisings erupted in Syria in 2011 as part of the wider Arab Spring movement, Faris joined the protestors, marching in Damascus to rally for justice, freedom, and dignity and to demand peaceful reforms. As the state responded to the peaceful protests with violent repression, Faris decided to defect from the Syrian regime and to seek refuge in Turkey, joining millions of other Syrians who were—and are still—forced to leave their homes and their country to find safety elsewhere since the beginning of the revolution turned war. In 2012, Faris "illegally" crossed the Syrian border into Turkey with his family, becoming the highest-ranking Syrian defector to date. Today, he still lives as a refugee in Istanbul, where he consults with the Turkish government on refugee rights to support fellow Syrians in Turkey. Faris also lectures high school and university students around Turkey on space and astronomy, and advocates space exploration as a form of intercultural and scientific exchange. He is a member of the Syrian National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, a Syrian opposition bloc.[62]

It is in Istanbul that Faris met Altındere and agreed to be the subject of *Space Refugee.* In this multimedia project,[63] the centerpiece of which is the 20-minutes film of the same name, Altındere draws inspiration from the life of Muhammed Ahmed Faris to throw into relief the refugee crisis. Following an overview of Faris' journey from astronaut to oppositionist, the film touches on the issues of displacement and exile. Describing his crossing journey from Syria to Turkey as hard and risky, Faris poignantly expresses how Syrians are forced to cross mountains,

[60] Ghazal, "The first Syrian in space."
[61] Garthwaite, "From astronaut to refugee."
[62] Batycka, "An Homage to a Syrian Cosmonaut."
[63] In addition to the film, *Space Refugee* also features portraits of Faris, some beside his Russian colleagues, painted in a realist style, and an interactive VR installation headset that enable the exhibition visitors to experience the Mars colony.

deserts, and seas—and who often die doing so—to flee the war in Syria and seek safety. As he recounts his experience, a series of footage and photographs accompany his words to visually portray the violence that war and displacement have forced upon Syrians, and to evoke the hardship they are subjected to as legal and safe routes to asylum become more and more difficult. Images of Syrians fleeing cities in ruins. Images of displaced Syrians traversing hundreds of miles on foot across borders. Images of displaced Syrians undertaking the treacherous Mediterranean Sea crossing from Turkey to the Greek Island aboard a precarious rubber raft. Images of barbed wire fences and border guards patrolling militarized zones, perhaps on the Syria-Turkey border. Taken together, these iconic images, which have become emblematic of the refugee crisis, illustrate how border regimes, including the EU's and Turkey's, are invested in rendering border-crossing journeys arduous and dangerous to deter refugees from seeking asylum.

Faris' account not only speaks of the violence of border regimes, but also alludes to the emotional and psychological violence of exile. "Leaving one's homeland is akin to leaving one's mother, leaving her warm embrace, leaving history" he says, capturing the sense of painful rupture and loss experienced by people displaced from their homelands. These words echo Edward Said's powerful reflection on the state of exile, where exile is, as he so eloquently puts it, "the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home." Exile, he adds, is "like death, but without death's ultimate mercy" as it tears one apart from "the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography."[64] Exile, as both accounts intimate, is a reality that is forced upon one, not a reality that is chosen. It is a reality that forces one to leave homeland, and to scatter across countries, languages, cultures, and identities. Exile is an experience of profound dislocation, haunted by a sense of loss and an unyielding feeling of longing to one's homeland. Exile and the dislocation that it engenders are also structural, in Faris and Said' case indicating the fractured political reality of the Middle East which has caused, and still causes, the displacement of various peoples.

And yet, as it spotlights refugees' plight, *Space Refugee* imagines a response to the refugee crisis that entails an even more radical tear. A tear that pulls one apart not only from homeland, but from planet Earth all together. In its second half, *Space Refugee* takes a speculative turn to explore the premise of outer space as a sanctuary for Syrian refugees. Faris

[64] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 138.

takes on an astro-hero role again, this time leading fellow displaced Syrians to their eventual destiny in outer space. Fictionalized scenes follow a man and two children, dressed in space suits adorned with the Syrian flag, as they explore the arid and rugged landscape of Mars. Representing the imaginary Palmyra space mission (as indicated by their branded suits) the three cosmonauts, accompanied by a space rover, are there to start a new civilization as their ancestors had done a long time ago on earth. “We, the Syrian people, are the sons of civilization, the sons of history. We built human civilization 10,000 years ago…Syria gave humanity the first alphabet, first civilization, first agriculture, first mining…we will rebuild Syria and can even rebuild all of the planets of the solar system” Faris solemnly declares in the film. Later, he muses: “[Syrians] were the first to refine iron in human history, so we can refine the iron that exists on Mars’ surface. It is scientifically proven that Mars is very rich in iron, so we can refine this iron and build a civilization again.”

Still images, *Space Refugee*, Courtesy of Pilot Gallery and the artist.

The speculative scenes on Mars are interweaved with recordings of skype discussions with Turkish experts about the feasibility and practicalities of setting up a colony on the red planet. Umut Yildiz, a researcher from NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, explains that Mars is a good candidate for a human colony. It is the closest planet to earth. It is habitable, unlike Venus and Mercury, because it is far enough from the sun not to be too hot. And unlike Jupiter or Saturn, Mars is solid, which means that humans can land and build and live on its surface. "People are going to live on Mars. This is the next destination" asserts Yildiz. Another researcher from NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, Alper Aydemir, clarifies that transporting materials from earth is extremely costly because it takes up to a year to reach Mars. Humans will have to build almost everything directly on the red planet to be able to sustain life. This can be achieved by sending 3-D printers that will enable humans to create whatever they need to settle. As the three cosmonauts teleport down into a cave, the film pans through digital renderings of underground buildings and their spacious and minimalistic interiors. Architect Sefer Çaglar, from the Istanbul-based Autoban Design Studio, points out that he took inspiration from the underground cities of Cappadocia, Turkey, to envision and design what a Martian colony could look like. Humans on Mars will have to live underground until scientists find a way to build or form an artificial atmosphere around the red planet, explains Çaglar. The atmosphere of Mars is very thin and as a result, the level of radiation on its surface is very high.

Still images, *Space Refugee*, Courtesy of Pilot Gallery and the artist.

As *Space Refugee* comes to an end, one of the cosmonauts uproots a stem from the ground and examines its roots, where a potato has grown. This scene, which suggests that humans were able to grow their own food on Mars, is followed by a shot that reveals an over-the-ground infrastructure and geodesic domes, again signifying a successful colonization of the red planet and the realization of Faris' fantasy. This is when, against a black screen, Faris' voice rises to proclaim that "we will build cities in space for [refugees] and I will go with them to Mars, where there is safety and freedom." The film closes with footage of the Soyuz TM-3spacecraft (the one that carried Faris to space in 1987) taking off, accompanied by the live commentary of a Syrian news anchor fervently declaring: "God is with you. They sky is with you. The sky opened its door and came to you. The sky came to you, Mohammed Faris. The sky came to you to embrace Syria."

One could dismiss Faris' fantasy of building safe and free cities for refugees in space as naively utopic, and critique Altındere's proposition that "if no country wants them, let's send the world's refugees on Mars"[65] as whimsical and indulgent. While *Space Refugee* is framed as the artist's engagement with the refugee crisis,[66] it could be reproached for being an exercise of escapism, eluding a direct and deep engagement with the crisis by opting for a speculative and fictional treatment of this issue. *Space Refugee* doesn't deconstruct the Turkish government's

[65] As cited by *The National* newspaper, Altındere declared during *Space Refugee*'s opening in London: "I say to people: If you don't want the refugees here, then send them to Mars when they can be pioneers and live their lives there." McElroy, "The Syrian astronaut who is now a refugee."
[66] La Biennale di Venezia 2019, Halil Altındere.

racist and nationalist rhetoric, or challenge its practices of othering, marginalization, or exploitation of Syrian refugees. The work doesn't confront the climate of hostility that Turkish politicians, mainstream media, and the public have created, or denounce the prevailing anti-Syrian refugee sentiment. Nor does the work advocate for changes in existing structures and policies to support refugees and to restore their rights here on earth. Rather, *Space Refugee* mediates an artistic fabulation, exploring Altındere's vision of outer space as the ultimate refuge for the displaced and unwanted. In his review of *Space Refugee* for the art forum *Hyperallergic*, art critic Dorian Batycka disregards Altındere's artistic intervention as "a gesture that felt somewhat empty, idealistic, and unprincipled — almost as if Altındere was treating the refugee crisis with a kind of humorous and ironic disdain."[67] I want to argue that *Space Refugee* is much more that an empty, idealistic and unprincipled gesture; that it should be apprehended as a politically-charged and productive intervention that disrupts the visual regime of the Syrian refugee crisis and expands the limits of political and social imaginaries with respect to the global border and migration control regime.

Space Refugee performs an important political move in the realm of the visual. The film generates a counter-visualization of Syrian refugees that destabilizes the frame through which they are typically portrayed and perceived—that is, either as helpless victims or a threat. In *Space Refugee* Syrians are represented as both the descendants of one of the most ancient civilizations on earth *and* the initiators of a new civilization on Mars. A reference to the rich history and deeply rooted culture that has influenced ancient and modern civilizations can be found in the name of the mission, Palmyra.[68] This counter-framing takes a particularly relevant resonance today when, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the ensuing mass displacement of the Ukrainian population, global mainstream media have rushed to describe Ukrainian refugees as "civilized", contrasting them with "uncivilized" refugees like Syrians to argue that they are more deserving of sympathy and solidarity.[69] This racist discourse of "us" (European, white and "civilized") vs. "them" ("uncivilized" people of color and Black people who come from "impoverished" and "remote" countries in the third world where war is always raging anyway) underpins how refugee communities are perceived and un/welcomed by nation-

[67] Batycka, "An Homage to a Syrian Cosmonaut."
[68] Palmyra is one of the oldest cities in Syria and one of the most important cultural centers of the ancient world.
[69] Bayoumi, "They are 'civilised' and 'look like us'."

states today. The unwavering global solidarity with and warm reception of Ukrainian refugees by European nations stands in stark contrast with the hostile stance and anti-refugee measures that non-white refugees have been met with, in Europe and elsewhere. *Space Refugee*'s counter-framing is not radical because it doesn't contest "civilization" as the measure of the worth of people, but rather, it acknowledges "civilization" as a criterion for deciding whether suffering people are owed a moral obligation of respect and care. And yet, the film does challenge the racist way in which Syrians are generally perceived by representing Syria as a land of history and civilization, and by portraying Syrians as the holders of crucial knowledge, transferred through time and space, to enable the development of a new world on Mars.

Knowledge alone, however, is not enough. Technology too, is essential to make space exploration and colonization possible. This is expressed by Faris, who states as he addresses a group of children that "space belongs to whoever wants to learn and has power. Space belongs to no one, but whoever has got the technology can go to space, and those who don't, can't." Here, Faris acknowledges that access to space exploration is fraught with power and technological inequalities. And yet, as the film suggests, technology's potential can be subverted and coupled with knowledge to "build cities for [refugees] in space, where there is freedom and dignity, and where there is no tyranny, no injustice." One can't help noticing the tension inherent in the film's twin project of emancipation from earthly border regimes *and* space colonization. The dream of refugee escape and the legitimate desire for a blank slate revert to the notion of civilizing mission, and to the project of colonial settlement and extractivism. The tension between speculation/utopia and pragmatism/reality is formally reflected in the contrast between, on the one hand, the film's speculative narrative that is visually represented by the fictionalized scenes on Mars, and on the other hand, the film's mobilization of techniques from conventional documentary, such as the inclusion of talking heads, which rely on positivist understandings of the real to support this speculative narrative. Is it possible to isolate the utopia of space travel from colonial economies?

I want to argue that in *Space Refugee*, space travel is not a project of frontier exploration/conquest/domination as the ones pioneered by the likes of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos (even though one of the scientists interviewed actually cites Musk). Rather, space travel is envisioned as a utopian project, an attempt to build a different kind of world, a world that offers safety and dignity and freedom to refugees. Altındere's vision opens a space—or perhaps opens

Space itself—to imagine a new home for refugees beyond border regimes, a utopian outside where they can model a new life and new forms of social and political organization that transcend histories/realities of inequality and injustice. Art historian and critic Eva Diaz writes:

> Outer space, where so few have been, remains a preeminent projective space in the cultural imagination: the place wherein reside fantasies of rebirth, of re-invention, of escape from historical determination of class, race, and gender inequality, and of aspirations for just societies beyond the protection of the Earth's atmosphere.[70]

Drawing on Diaz, I want to propose that *Space Refugee* articulates a speculative/fictional political project which imagines outer space as a utopian space to express a yearning for a haven for refugees, and to visualize a different reality for them. Is it possible to say that this utopic image of space takes its inspiration from Faris' vision of planet earth as a world that is not carved up by borders, countries, or nationalities, a world where there is no "us" and "them" and no politics? Is it possible to argue that the film mobilizes space's emancipatory potential and speculatively transposes Faris' vision to Mars to open-up a new space for imagination at a moment where the imagination of an otherwise here on earth feels impossible? I want to argue that in a present that is increasingly bleak and dystopic for Syrian refugees—because it is tainted by the traumatic experience of forced displacement, the difficulties and dangers of border-crossings, the precarity of refugeehood, and the pain of exile—*Space Refugee* becomes a medium through which Syrian refugees' dream of finding a place to inhabit beyond border regimes is expressed. A place that does not require permits/visas/residence cards, a place that isn't governed border regimes, that is, a place beyond nation-states' structures of recognition and differentiation.

Space Refugee offers a vision for a refugee haven that not only transcends historical determinations but also oversteps the exclusionary logic of nation-states and their claims of sovereignty over land and people. As air and space law specialist Nazli Can explains in the film, "outer space is not subject to any type of claims of sovereignty by means of use or any other ways of usage. So that's the reason why we cannot say that anybody can own any property in space." *Space Refugee*, then, explores the vision of a free space—free from the postcolonial power relations that get projected on, and attached to, refugees' bodies to other them; free from the exclusionary logic and practices of nation-states that determine who un/belongs on national

[70] Díaz, "We Are All Aliens."

territory; and free from ownership in the propertied market capitalist sense. *Space Refugee* reformulates the image of space as "public commons and place of projective imagination" as Diaz would have it.[71] This particular image of space transpires in the scene where Faris speaks to the children. Faris tells them that space belong to no one (and thus to everyone) and invites them to imagine themselves in space, insisting that it is a possible dream (attainable through education) in a moment when any future is made difficult for them to imagine. Syria is destroyed. Its people, including the children, are displaced. Their freedom of movement is restricted. Access to citizenship (and thus to permanent stability, to rights, to belonging) is foreclosed. A return to the homeland is all but impossible. By educating the children in astronomy and science, Faris is both relaying and activating his vision of a borderless world.

Space Refugee mediates a countervisualization of refugees *and* of space, while it also generates, as media theorist Jussi Parikka puts it, a "counter-future."[72] Analyzing a heterogenous set of artistic discourses and audio-visual practices from the Near and Middle East (including Larissa Sansour's sci-fi film trilogy, Sulaiman Majali's "Towards Arabfuturism/s" Manifesto, Ayman Baalbaki's sculpture *Helmet*, and Halil Altındere's *Space Refugee*), Parikka describes them as forms of counterfuturisms and cultural politics of imaginary times. These are expressions of postcolonial artistico-activism that build on the aesthetic and philosophical work of Afrofuturism to complicate/disrupt normalized notions of times by writing alternative histories and articulating imaginaries of times-to-come. Parikka argues that in these artistic practices, time is mobilized as an active and effective force to both investigate the current political moment and its conditions and to "harbor any sort of liberating potential that works against the existing times."[73] Such works connect the issue of temporality to postcolonial struggles in the realm of visual culture as they imagine alternative temporalities through which voice, subjectivity, and time are restored to those who have been dispossessed of voice, subjectivity, and time. In Parikka's words:

> Instead of merely accepting a cancellation of the future, or the representations of cool dystopia of the Middle East or the Far East, addressing the generative power of time functions as a way to invent different horizons of existence as well as to connect them to

[71] Díaz, "We Are All Aliens."
[72] Parikka, "Middle East and other futurisms."
[73] Ibid, 41.

> the lived genealogies of dispossession. This can be seen as a central part of post-colonial theory and practices in writing historical lineages of colonial pasts while also generating potentials of future and the new that are not already prescribed in set temporal coordinates or continuums.[74]

Isn't this what *Space Refugee* does? The film's narrative imagines a refusal of the oppressive reality collectively experienced by Syrian refugees, and a refusal of the cancellation of the future that this reality predetermines. In other words, *Space Refugee* challenges the foreclosure of the future for Syrian refugees and the prevailing sense of political impotence produced by an ever-stricter global border regime by generating a speculative political fiction that carves a space/temporality outside of the usual representation of past and present, and responds to the hope that another future is possible. *Space Refugee* inscribes itself, as Parikka, Lamia Suleiman, and other scholars and writers have argued, in a body of creative works that are "heavily invested in experimenting with history, revision, technology, and the absent future" in relation to the Arab world with the aim to generate alternate futures or re-write the past so as to change the present.[75] As Suleiman puts it, these "Arabfuturist" works mobilize science-fiction tropes and futurist aesthetics to "to deconstruct and reconstruct history in a manner that infiltrates territorial and mental borders." [76]

In a way not dissimilar to Afrofuturist interventions that, as educator and poet Sofia Samar puts it, "insist on lowercase histories as a means of unlocking other futures, which are always located, like a secret code, in sounds and images from the past," *Space Refugee* engages in the revision of History through the excavation of a peripheral story (from archival audio-visual footage) that draws the contour of another possible future.[77] By spotlighting Faris' contribution to space exploration, the film directs us away from the macro-narrative of early space exploration, typically represented as a space race between the two dominant colonial superpowers of the time (the USA and the Soviet Union), towards a micro-story that contests the prevailing perception of the Arab world's technological backwardness. It is both an aesthetic and epistemological intervention that contest Europe's hegemonic and orientalist narratives. As writer and curator Perwana Nazif argues that "astronauts, spaceships, and intergalactic travel all

[74] Ibid, 43.
[75] Suleiman, "Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism."
[76] Ibid.
[77] Samatar, "Toward a planetary history of Afrofuturism,"177.

seem light years away from anything one associates with the Arab world—at least in terms of its mainstream media portrayal." [78] *Space Refugee* not only inserts the figures of Syrian cosmonauts in the narrative and representation of future human exploration and settlement of Mars. The film also mobilizes techno science-fiction and highjacks the tropes of astronauts, spaceship, and intergalactic travel to generate a counter-history that reestablishes a forgotten connection between space exploration and the Arab Republic of Syria, which in turn, opens the possibility for a future—the creation of an outer space refugee haven—that is not, to reiterate Parikka's words, "already prescribed in a set temporal coordinates or continuums."[79] The film is, to borrow writer, theorist, and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun's formulation for Afrofuturist artistic interventions, a "chronopolitical act" that creates "temporal disturbance" by reorienting history and challenging the logics that predetermine a dystopic future.[80]

As it portrays Syrian refugees as cosmonauts building a new world on Mars, *Space Refugee* uses temporal and spatial dislocation to express both a disenchantment with the oppressive reality faced by Syrian refugees and a refusal of this reality. The film acknowledges Syrian refugees as political subjects who take matters in their own hand and restore their own subjectivity/voice/time by refusing to acquiesce to border regimes' power and their governing structures and practices here on earth, and by shaping a future that cannot be contained by these regimes. In other words, the film challenges the depoliticization of Syrian refugees by the EU-Turkey deal (and by the crisis discourse more generally), insisting they are subjects of histories, not objects of History. As a political practice, refusal, like withdrawal, presents a particular relationship to time. Yet, this relationship is different. Withdrawal is a temporary or transitory disengagement from reality that allows one to take a breath before reconsidering the terms under which one lives in this world, and potentially reach a position of refusal. Refusal reflects a more ontological position from which one re/thinks and re/imagines one's existence outside of reality's parameters. I want to suggest that *Space Refugee* expands the limits of political imaginaries by pushing against the ontological as well as the epistemological and political limits that border regimes impose on Syrian refugees, and renders refusal an expression of this new political consciousness. Here, as scholar Paulina Sobczyk's asserts, science fiction "acts as the

[78] Nazif, "Arabfuturism: Science-Fiction & Alternate Realities."
[79] Parikka, "Middle East and other futurisms."43.
[80] Eshun, "Further considerations of Afrofuturism," 297

vestibule of collective consciousness through which radical ideas have a chance to penetrate the collective imagination", and mediates an assertive opposition to, and refusal of, the existing world.[81]

Rather than dismiss *Space Refugee* as pointless or strategically unhelpful aesthetic intervention because it doesn't come to grips with the power relations that structure Turkey's border regime, I want to foreground its political salience by arguing that the film's mobilization of science-fiction themes and aesthetics to enact a politics of refusal expands an ever-narrowing sense of political possibility and an ever-shrinking ability to imagine how the world could be otherwise. The film's speculative fiction allows a breaking out of a difficult present and a move beyond a dystopic future, providing a productive tool through which to investigate and challenge the conditions of the present moment. Critical border studies scholar Ann McNevin speaks to the role of imagination in transformative politics. She observes that while it is crucial to attend to the structural conditions and historical forces that shape and are shaped by the global border regime, and to deconstruct the racist systems and patterns and the constellations of power that justify and enable this regime, it is equally, if not more crucial to engage in providing "reconstructive alternatives." For McNevin, imagination plays an essential role in transformative politics, because it opens "pathways that are urgently needed to restore a sense of possibility to the question: where to from here?" [82]

So, where to from here? Where to, from the institutionalization of refugee precarity, from the criminalization of mobility, from the hyper-exploitation of refugees' labor, from the rise of xenophobic, racist, and nativist discourses, from the closure and militarization of borders, from the incessant refugee and migrant drownings in the ocean and deaths in the desert, from the actual abandonment of asylum by Europe, from the proliferation of detentions centers, refugee camps and other holding facilities? It is possible, at this very moment, to imagine a world without nation-states, without borders, and without the normative categories of differentiation and classification (such as citizen/refugee) that divide people along the lines of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, and that dictate who belongs and who doesn't, who has the right to move and who doesn't, who is welcome and who isn't? Can the fabulation of a such world in outer space renew our political imagination and consciousness, reenergize our solidarity, and revitalize

[81] Sobczyk, "Space is the Place."
[82] McNevin, "Border, migration, and the urgency of imagination."

our sense of what is politically possible *here* and *now*? It may be that *Space Refugee* evades tackling the issue of the refugee crisis in a direct way. But what it does do is invest in affecting political and social imaginaries through its refusal of Syrian refugees' oppressive reality and of the cancellation of their future. As the film imagines what *might be,* it opens a breach for radical and ambitious ideas (a world with no borders and where justice and freedom and dignity are for all) to infiltrate public debate and to challenge the status quo, as well as to fight political paralysis at a moment where any hope for transformation seems foreclosed by the global consolidation and militarization of border regimes. As Suleiman puts it, Arabfuturist works holds the potential to "turn our dystopian realities into a 'pan-utopian' inquiry of the present, from the perspective of a future."[83]

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[83] Suleiman, "Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism."

Chapter 3

Oceanic Mediation: Syrians' Mediterranean Sea Crossings

I hear a helicopter. What is it doing here? It whirls up the waves. I see a red light inside the helicopter. Are they filming us? Where will these images end up? On YouTube? On television? Regular news or breaking news? What will you call us? Refugees? Criminals? Victims? Or just numbers? Fuck you all! Stop filming!

Amel Alzakout[1]

We live in a world filled with images that are captured, edited, and published at hyper speeds. Images referring to images. Our political, ethical, and intimate lives are constructed around images, through images, and in images.

Abounaddara[2]

I lie on my back, under the surface of the water. The sea is purple. I feel the warmth with every pore of my body. I'm not afraid anymore.

Amel Alzakout[3]

On October 28th, 2015, a migrant boat attempted to cross the Northern Aegean Sea from the Western coast of Turkey.[4] The wooden fishing vessel, old and overcrowded, carried over 300 passengers from Syrian, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Kurdistan. It was heading to the Greek island of Lesvos, one of the European Union's outermost land borders, and a main entry point for migrants and refugees into Europe. Three kilometers off the coast of Lesvos, the boat capsized and sank, resulting in the death of at least 43 passengers and the disappearance of many others, whose fate is still not known.[5] This incident is one of many deadly ones that occurred during "the Long Summer of Migration", which saw over one million migrants and refugees—half of them Syrian—reach Europe's shores, and over 4000 lives lost in the Mediterranean.[6] One of the passengers who survived the shipwreck was Syrian artist Amel Alzakout. Displaced to Turkey by the war in Syria and wanting to reunite with her partner who is in Germany, Alzakout

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[1] Amel Alzakout, *Purple Sea* (excerpt from voice-over).
[2] Abounaddara, "The Right to the Image for All."
[3] Amel Alzakout, *Purple Sea* (excerpt from voice-over).
[4] The Aegean Sea is an elongated embayment of the Mediterranean Sea between Europe and Asia. In this chapter I don't differentiate between the Aegean and the Mediterranean, and will be referring to both as the Mediterranean Sea.
[5] Forensic Architecture, "Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe."
[6] UNHCR. "Over one million sea arrivals."

had decided to undertake the clandestine sea crossing journey with smugglers as all "legal" routes remained blocked for her. Wanting to document this unusual journey to keep a memory of it both for herself and for her partner, Alzakout was carrying her filming equipment, including a waterproof camera attached to her wrist. The wrist camera was turned on all the time, recording different points of Alzakout's journey. It captured the smuggler's office in Istanbul, the bus ride from Istanbul to the coastal city of Izmir, the walk from the bus to the beach, the boat journey across the Aegean Sea, the shipwreck, and its aftermath.[7] When the boat capsized and sank, Alzkout's filming equipment was all lost except for the wrist camera, which kept recording the unfolding of this tragic event in the sea. What images did her camera capture? How did it render the incident? In what ways did the mediation of the sea shape the meaning of the images generated?

> Film scholar Erika Balsom observes that:
>
> In the great magnitude of the oceans…resides a vast and fluid archive traversing nature and culture, one that has been richly captured in the cinema. It is an archive of horror, wreckage, survival, and beauty, within which histories of capitalist accumulation and still-reverberating traumas flow alongside the captivating wonders of marine environments and the romance of waves.[8]

The footage captured by Alzakout's wrist camera—footage that registered wreckage, horror, death, and survival as they unraveled in the sea—was originally only intended for the artist and her partner. However, the footage took on two other lives in the wake of the shipwreck. At the request of Alzakout, it was used by Forensic Oceanography as material evidence to reconstruct and analyze the unfolding of the incident, and to call for accountability for the shipwreck and lives lost.[9] The footage also forms the basis of *Purple Sea* (2020), a documentary co-directed by Alzakout and her partner Khaled Abdulwahed. *Purple Sea* provides an account of the tragic event from Alzakout's own embodied and situated perspective, portraying her and her fellow

[7] Mennig, "Fleeing to Europe – A Personal Story."
[8] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling*, 14-15
[9] Forensic Oceanography is a project initiated within the Forensic Architecture agency by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011. It seeks, in its founders' words, "to critically investigate the militarised border regime imposed by European states across the EU's maritime frontier, analysing the political, spatial, and aesthetic conditions that have transformed the waters of the Mediterranean into a deadly space for the illegalised migrants who attempt to cross it."

travelers' agonizing experience of struggling in cold water for hours after the shipwreck, as they awaited rescue. [10]

In this chapter, I use *Purple Sea* both as an entry point and as object of analysis to engage with the sea as material and aesthetic space of migrant struggle, that is, a space that both assembles and is assembled by the politics and aesthetics of the European border regime and by the autonomy of migration and migrant representation. Drawing on the work of Jason de León, I examine the sea as a mediator of the European border regime's violence.[11] The Mediterranean Sea, a crucial passage for Syrians fleeing the war in Syria to seek refuge in Europe, have been transformed by the EU's migration control policies and practices into the deadliest border for migrants in the world. The EU border regime intentionally funnels migrants through the sea, capitalizing on the sea's physicality—waves, currents, and wind—to block their movements to Europe. But it's not only the sea's naturally hostile terrain that makes migrant crossings perilous. As scholar Lorenzo Pezzani argues, the multiplicity of legal regimes governing the Mediterranean Sea produces it as a legally ambiguous space that enables/justifies state violence against migrants at sea.[12] Further, the shift to securitization, manifest in the reduction of search and rescue operations and the reinforcement of border surveillance and control through various mechanisms and tools, have also contributed to weaponizing the sea.

Anti-migrant violence also unfolds in the aesthetic realm. Scholars and Forensic Oceanography co-founders Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller speak of "the aesthetic regime of the European Union's maritime frontiers" which shapes the modalities of representing migrants.[13] Animated by the logics of security and humanitarianism, this regime produces images that naturalize the illegalization of migration and visualize migrants either as a threat to Europe or as helpless victims in need of saving. As I analyze several major media outlets' reports of the October 28 shipwreck, I show how this media coverage is shaped by and contributes to the Mediterranean Sea's aesthetic regime. Misrepresenting the EU authorities' intervention in the aftermath of the shipwreck as a successful rescue operation, when in fact, the intervention contributed to more migrant death, these media accounts obscure the deliberate and structural

[10] Following Alzakout's refusal to be categorized as refugee, I will use the term migrant or travelers or boat passengers in this chapter to refer to displaced Syrians on the move.
[11] De León, *The Land of Open Graves.*
[12] Pezzani, "Liquid Violence."
[13] Heller and Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography."

nature of the EU's policies which are intended to police and repel migrants rather than ensuring their safety. The media reports, structured by the presentist lens of episodic news, focus on the shipwreck and its aftermath as newsworthy tragic event, while occluding the historical conditions and systemic forces that have led to it. In so doing, media accounts leave the EU border regime and deadly policies unchecked and unchallenged, and hide the violence to which they subjects migrants. Further, these reports represent migrants' trauma and suffering in a way that reproduces the power relations embedded in the EU border regime, and that folds the incident into naturalizing and depoliticizing narratives.

Purple Sea undoes these erasures by countervisualizing border violence. It captures how the sea is weaponized by EU governments to block migrants' movements and to punish them for seeking to reach Europe, as well as to deter future migrants from doing so. And yet, the sea in *Purple Sea* is not only an agent of the EU's aesthetic and physical border regimes. It is also an elemental medium that powerfully mediates a cinematic counter-account of the October 28 incident. In *Purple Sea*, the sea is mobilized as an aesthetic and epistemological medium that defamiliarizes the familiar—that is, the typical representations of migrant crossings that dominate the global media landscape—and re/arranges the relation of the visible, sayable, and sensible in a way that ruptures the aesthetic regime of the Mediterranean frontier and the politics of in/visibility on which its violence is founded .[14] Ocean humanities and media scholar Melody Jue asserts that approaching the ocean as a medium enables the estrangement of terrestrial biases and the recalibration of normalized conceptions, thus opening a space for a new way of perceiving, thinking, and understanding the world.[15] This is precisely what *Purple Sea* does. Mainly constituted of underwater shots, *Purple Sea* submerges the viewers into the heart of the struggle that is happening *in/through* the sea. The mediation of the sea enables the emergence of what writer and scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris calls "a submerged perspective," which reveals to the viewers what lies below sea surface beyond their normative modes of apprehension.[16] This new form of perception (new ways of sensing and seeing) opened up by *Purple Sea*'s submerged perspective makes visible/sensible what should be made visible/sensible—that is, the extreme brutality of Europe's border regime and the material violence that it inflicts upon migrants at sea.

[14] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
[15] Jue, *Wild Blue Media.*
[16] Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone.*

And it does so by affectively and viscerally engulfing the viewers, and forcing them to politically engage with the film. Through oceanic mediation, *Purple Sea* produces a counter-visualization of the crossings that disrupts the flow of images of overcrowded vessels, shipwrecks and traumatized travelers that saturate the global mediascape, and confronts the viewers with the material realities that arise from the ways in which South-North cross-border mobility is governed.

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The Mediterranean Sea: An Agent of Death

The ocean should not be approached as a stable object. As Jue asserts, "what the ocean 'is' is a matter of 'for whom'."[17] What *is* the sea for Syrian migrants? The Mediterranean Sea is a lethal space that migrants are forced to cross as they attempt to enter the EU through its maritime borders. The natural forces of and at work in the sea—the waves, the currents, the cold, the winds—form a formidable obstacle that migrants are forced to struggle against. The natural environment's active participation in migration and border control is insightfully conceptualized by anthropologist Jason de León. De León's study of the role that the Sonoran Desert of Arizona plays in the governance of migrants who cross the Mexico-US border suggests that the desert should be understood not as neutral natural terrain, but as a crucial element of the US Prevention Through Deterrence policy that is actively implicated in perpetuating border violence against migrants. This policy funnels migrants into the desert, deliberately channelling them through dangerous crossing areas characterized by extreme environmental conditions and high risk of death. As de León argues, the US federal Border Patrol weaponizes the Sonoran Desert, transforming it into a killing field that punishes undocumented migrants by inflicting pain, suffering, and death onto them, with the aim to deter future migrants from attempting the crossing.

León draws on the concept of "hybrid collectif" to theorize border control as a structure that is "equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown."[18] Here, nature is one central component whose interaction with other components of the system produces violence and death. Nature is an "actant" with agency that contains the movement of migrants and has disastrous consequences on their bodies and lives. This is made possible by the very

[17] Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 3.
[18] De León, *The Land of Open Graves*, 39.

materiality or physicality of the desert. The structural violence of the border is constructed in/through the desert, whose extreme environment and rugged terrain make it a hostile and perilous crossing point for migrants, and thus, an effective ally for border enforcement. As the desert performs this border violence out of sight/site, it displaces any responsibility and accountability of migrant suffering and death from state agents.[19] The natural forced of the desert take the blame for the damage and loss inflicted on migrants' bodies and lives, thus obscuring the structural and systemic violence of the US immigration and border policy. In de Léon' words, "nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding the blame for any victims the desert may claim."[20]

The Mediterranean Sea can be thought of in the same terms. In the absence of safe and legal routes to international protection in Europe, migrants are funneled into the sea, forced to undertake perilous crossing journeys, and rely on dangerous smuggling networks to make these crossings possible. The sea, like the desert, has become a key partner for EU border control authorities who strategically weaponize it to perform the EU border regime's work, that is, to regulate migration and control migrants. The dangers posed by the sea's natural forces transform maritime routes into deadly passages, acting as a wall that halts migratory movements before they reach EU terrestrial borders. As the sea often subjects migrants to painful and sometimes deadly experiences, it also acts as a form of punishment for those undertaking the journey without authorization, as well as a form of deterrence for future migrants.

Over the last few decades, more than forty thousand migrants have perished at/through the sea, victims of what Pezzani calls "liquid violence." But it's not only the sea's natural forces that are at work. As Pezzani argues, the proliferation and spatial entanglement of different jurisdictions and legal regimes in the Mediterranean Sea (including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Search and Rescue Zones, ecological protection zones, areas of maritime surveillance etc.) contribute to turning the sea into a lethal entity. The sea, as he puts it, is transformed into "a deep zone characterized by ambiguous and contested gaps between legal borders." [21] Resulting from the overlaps, different interpretations, and conflicts of delimitation of

[19] Ibid, 16
[20] Ibid, 29-30.
[21] Pezzani, "Liquid Violence."

the Mediterranean's maritime borders, the sea's legal ambiguity has been strategically leveraged by state actors to carry extraterritorial operations against migrants (such as patrols, interceptions, or pushbacks) or to refrain from intervening to rescue migrants in distress.[22] This legal ambiguity is not the result of a faulty system, but a structural characteristic of the EU maritime borders and an active part of the "hybrid collectif" that is the EU border regime.

The sea is not only exploited to do the dirty work of EU border control, but also to render invisible the consequences of this regime. When migrants attempting to cross the sea to reach Europe drown, their bodies usually wash up on Libyan or Turkish shores, or just vanish in the water. The sea, like the desert, hides or erases the evidence of the crime happening at the threshold of Fortress Europe. And when it doesn't conceal the evidence, it takes the blame for the crime. Some media report blamed the sea for the October 28 shipwreck. *CBS News* report explains that migrants drowned due to the work of natural forces as "winter weather in the Aegean Sea changed for the worse, turning wind-whipped sea corridors into deadly passages for thousands crossing from Turkey to Greece."[23] *The New York Times* cites an anonymous official, either from Frontex or to the Greek national coastguard force, stating that "It was bad weather; thankfully we had boats nearby and the response was quick."[24]

When the sea itself doesn't take the blame, smugglers do. The European Commission's website affirms that "the loss of migrants' lives at the hands of smugglers in the Mediterranean Sea reminds us of the acute need to tackle migrant smuggling, using all of the legal, operational, and administrative levers available."[25] Here again, public attention is diverted away from the structural violence of the Europe's anti-migrant policies and their lethal effects, as smugglers are solely blamed for the suffering and dying taking place at the EU maritime borders. As migration scholar Hein de Haas puts it,

> …the EU has been caught up in a vicious circle in which increasing number of border deaths lead to calls to 'combat' smuggling and increase border patrolling, which forces refugees and other migrants to use more dangerous routes using smugglers' services. Longer and more dangerous routes means more people who get injured or die while

[22] The "left-to-die boat" case is an illustration of how the sea's legal ambiguity can be deliberately used to excuse cases of non-assistance to migrants in distress. See Left-to-Die boat investigation on Forensic Architecture's website.
[23] Chalasani, "Hundreds of migrants rescued off Greece."
[24] Kitsantonis, "Greece Saves 240 as Boat with Migrants Capsizes."
[25] European Commission, "Migrant Smuggling."

> crossing borders, which then leads to public outrage and calls for even more stringent border controls.[26]

This is not to say that smugglers are not also responsible for migrants' death at sea, but that it is the increasingly difficult migration and asylum-seeking processes and the intensified surveillance and militarization of border control that have pushed migrants towards more dangerous routes across the Mediterranean Sea and produced the need for smugglers. It's the EU anti-migrant policies that re/produce the smugglers industry that they claim to fight, and in so doing, also produce a pretext for the re-enforcement of borders and the development of the military-industrial complex invested in border control.

In addition to the militarization of Fortress Europe's maritime borders—which involves the deployment of military forces and equipment to prevent migration at sea—and the deployment of the European Border Surveillance systems (such as EUROSUR) and technologies (including radars, satellites, and drones) to "secure" these borders, the reduction or suspension of search and rescue (SAR) vessels operated by European states in the Mediterranean Sea have also had deadly consequences on migrants in recent years.[27] Claiming that SAR operations acted as a pull factor for migrants and encouraged them to undertake the crossing, the EU states replaced them with border control operations. One example is Operation Triton, set up by Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) to support EU member states in effective border control by curbing migratory movements through the central Mediterranean region. Triton's primary focus was border control and surveillance as well as "combatting" cross border crime, including people smuggling.[28] It is worth noting that while it did engage in search and rescue, this operation was confined to Italy's territorial waters and parts of the search and rescue (SAR) zones of Italy and Malta, even though most rescue missions take place beyond that area, closer to the Libyan coast.[29] European States have also actively impeded, criminalized, or halted the work of NGOs dedicated to the search and rescue of migrants at sea. For instance, Proactiva (an NGO that played a key role in saving passengers from the October 28 shipwreck) have seen some of its members criminalized and prosecuted for "smuggling" or "facilitating human trafficking", and

[26] De Haas, "Don't blame the smugglers."
[27] Amnesty International, "Ending Mare Nostrum search and rescue."
[28] Frontex, "Joint Operation Triton (Italy)." It is also worth noting that while it did engage in search and rescue, this operation was confined to Italy's territorial waters and parts of the search and rescue (SAR) zones of Italy and Malta, even though most rescue missions take place beyond that area, closer to the Libyan coast.
[29] Nielsen, "Mass drowning prompts talk."

have had its operations limited by various governments.[30] As part of its efforts to secure its borders and halt migratory movements, the EU has also outsourced border control to third countries (including Turkey, Libya, and Niger) in exchange for financial and logistical support.[31] This broad shift to border securitization not only transformed the sea route into a perilous passageway for migrants.[32] It has also lifted the issue of migration and border control from the realm of politics to the space of exception, thus justifying the intense surveillance, policing, and militarization of the EU's maritime borders and fueling the narratives of threat/crisis.

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Mis/Representing a Crime Scene

In a memorable scene of *Purple Sea*, which includes one of the film's few shots above water and the only shot deliberately recorded by Alzakout in the aftermath of the shipwreck,[33] the wrist camera films a helicopter hovering over Alzakout and the other boat passengers fallen at sea. Alzakout notices the red light of a recording camera filming them from the helicopter. In the film's voice-over, she says:

> I hear a helicopter.
> What is it doing here? It whirls up the waves.
> I see a red light inside the helicopter.
> Are they filming us?
> Where will these images end up?
> On YouTube? On television?
> Regular news or breaking news?
> What will you call us? Refugees? Criminals? Victims?
> Or just numbers?
> Fuck you all!
> Stop Filming!

Alzakout is raging against the hyper-mediatization of the Syrian refugee crisis and the oversaturation of the global mediascape with sensationalist discourses and images that claim to

[30] Campbell, "The Wrong Catch."
[31] Villa, "Outsourcing European Border Control."
[32] This shift has been accompanied by a rise in migrant death rate, see Lloyd-Damnjanovic, "Criminalization of Search-and-Rescue Operations."
[33] Mennig, "Fleeing to Europe – A Personal Story."

represent displaced Syrians. Her outburst exposes the constructed and political nature of the discursive categories that are typically used in mainstream media, social media platforms, and political discourses to frame Syrians by way of deliberate and repetitive circulation. Syrians are refugees. Syrians are criminals. Syrians are victims. Syrians are mere numbers. Syrians are statistics. Syrians are a faceless mass. "Fuck you all! Stop filming!" Alzakout demands. This is addressed both to the person recording the shipwreck from the helicopter and to the multiplicity of actors—including states and their various agencies and institutions, journalists, researchers, activists, artists, filmmakers, and international and non-governmental organizations—who shape what Heller and Pezzani refer to as the "aesthetic regime of the European Union's maritime frontiers." They argue that this regime is undergirded by the logics of security and humanitarianism, "both of which have become fundamental rationales, discourses, and practices" that cut across the policies and practices of governmental and non-governmental actors and that also shape the modalities of migrant representation.[34] These logics co-exist in constant tension and flux, "with migrants being constituted simultaneously as 'a life to be protected *and* a security threat to be protected against."[35] In other words, these actors (re)produce and circulate images and narratives that represent Syrians as a threat (to national borders, security, economy, identity, culture) or/and as victims devoid of will and agency in need of (white) protection and saving.

Such representations have material effects on the migrants. On one hand, the representation of migrants as imminent threat normalizes their deliberate illegalization, as well as naturalizes borders and justifies their intensified securitization and militarization. Further, this form of representation reinforces the racial hierarchy between white citizens whose rights and safety are being protected by the border regime and non-white non-citizens who are trespassing EU territory, and who need to be stopped and contained by this regime. On the other hand, the representation of migrants as victims, which relies on the spectacularization of their suffering—that is the objectification of their bodies and commodification of their pain—is also harmful. This form of representation produces migrants as objects of empathy and pity, rather than willful political subjects. It too reproduces power relations and racial hierarchies between those producing and consuming images and those whose bodies are represented in and consumed through images.

[34] Heller and Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography,"97.
[35] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason* cited in Heller and Pezzani,"Forensic Oceanography," 97.

How was the October 28 incident depicted in mainstream news? And how were migrants represented? The shipwreck, which had occurred within EU territory—280 meters within Greek territorial waters more precisely—made EU agencies responsible for the search and rescue operation. The incident was widely covered by international media and reported as one of the biggest rescue operations mounted by the Greek Coast Guard and Frontex. "Greece Saves 240 as Boat with Migrants Capsizes" reads the headline a *The New York Times* article,[36] while *Reuters*' reads "Greek coastguard rescues 242 migrants as boat sinks and three drown."[37] CBS news' headline is "Hundreds of migrants rescued off Greece"[38] and *The Guardian* reports that "Greek coastguard rescues 242 people after boat capsizes off Lesbos."[39] However, an investigation carried out by Forensic Oceanography at the request of Alzakout with the aim "to understand how such a deadly shipwreck could occur in a narrow strip of water, so densely populated, and heavily monitored by EU agencies"[40] shed light on the real unraveling of the incident. Cross-referencing Alzakout's footage with other audio-visual sources from rescuers, activists, and journalists, as well as with weather data and long-range thermal footage filmed by artist Richard Mosse for his three-channel HD video project *Incoming*, Forensic Oceanography was able to reconstruct the boat's journey, the shipwreck, and the rescue operation. The outcome of the investigation, which demonstrates that the operation was, in fact, greatly mishandled by the Greek Coast Guard and Frontex, contradicts and disputes the claim reproduced by mainstream media that the coastguard and Frontex carried out a successful and competent rescue.[41] Forensic Oceanography's analysis shows that the vessels of Frontex and the Greek Coast Guard were deliberately underprepared and underequipped for search and rescue—a result of the EU's policies which are intended to police and repel migrants rather than ensuring their safety—and had thus *led* to migrants' death. Further, Forensic Architecture's investigation brought to visibility the crucial role played by activists and fishermen in the search and rescue operation. Their contribution stood in stark contrast to the incompetency of the EU states, but was erased by/from the dominant narrative which mainly credited Frontex and the Greek Coast Guard for the rescue operation. The structural nature of the EU states' incompetency, which had

[36] Kitsantonis, "Greece Saves 240 as Boat with Migrants Capsizes."
[37] Reuters Staff, "Greek coastguard rescues 242 migrants."
[38] Chalasani, "Hundreds of migrants rescued off Greece."
[39] Associated Press in Athens, "Greek coastguard rescues 242 people."
[40] Forensic Architecture, "Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe."
[41] Forensic Architecture, *Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe, Lesvos, Aegean Sea* 24-minute video.

devastating effects on the "rescue" operation, was entirely absent from mainstream media reports.

The conclusion of Forensic Oceanography's investigation is corroborated by Spanish lifeguard and founder of the search and rescue NGO Proactiva Open Arms Gerard Canals, who was involved as a rescuer in the October 28 incident. He too, emphasizes that the Frontex and Greek coastguard vessels were not designed nor equipped to rescue migrants at sea. The Greek coastguard vessels were patrol and interceptor boats with a 2.5 to 3 meters high main deck that made it impossible for migrants to climb in, or for coastguards to pick people out from the water, especially in rough conditions.[42] These large and solid vessels also posed a significant impact risk to the survivors struggling in turbulent waters. Oscar Camps, director of Proactiva, was also present on the incident scene, reported that none of the coast guards actually got into the water to rescue people nor threw them life rafts (that should be available on every patrol boat), thus failing to save many lives that could have been saved.[43] The Frontex ship, built for high seas, was also too big and made it difficult to pull people out of the water, while its exposed propeller posed an important risk for the survivors at sea. Its small dinghy, destined to shuffle people from the sea to the ship, was misused and then not used at all by the Frontex crew, says Canals.[44]

Further, Frontex and Greek Coast Guard vessels didn't have any equipment for rescue (such as floaters or blankets), and their crews weren't trained or able to perform CPR on rescued migrants or to provide them with first aid.[45] Unlike the Frontex and Greek Coast Guard crews, Canals and his team played a vital role in the rescue operation. They were the first one to reach the migrants. And they worked for hours going back and forth on their jet-skis to bring migrants close to the Frontex and Greek Coastguard's boats, and then getting in the water to swim with people from the jet-skis to the ships' decks. They also got onto the ships to perform CPR to people who needed it. As the Forensic Architecture report confirms, Proactiva was the only actor on the scene properly prepared and equipped for rescuing people at sea. Its team was supported by Greek and Turkish fishermen who volunteered to help with the operation, and effectively helped pulling survivors out of the water.

[42] Healy, "Who Do You Save?"
[43] Forensic Architecture, *Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe, Lesvos, Aegean Sea* 24-minute video.
[44] Healy, "Who Do You Save?"
[45] Ibid.

Frontex's mission, clearly articulated by its Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri, is to "protect" the EU's external borders, help the EU to "deal with" the large number of migrants, perform surveillance, and "combat" cross-border crime.[46] Put differently, Frontex is conceived as a key component of the EU's border security regime. And yet, media coverage framed Frontex and Greek coastguards' act of border control as an act of saving migrants. Media coverage of the events, including the reports by *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *The Guardian,* and *CBS News* occlude the bordering practices enacted by Frontex and national coastguards that have endangered the lives of migrants in the first place. The reports do not question Frontex and the Coastguard's structural incapacity to effectively rescue migrants and bring them ashore to a port of safety, despite this being a legal duty and moral obligation according to the United Nations Convention of the Law of Sea.[47]

There are other remarkable omissions and absences in these media reports. For instance, the reports don't investigate why the passengers of the sunken boat remained in the water for hours, unassisted, while numerous "rescue" vessels were present on the scene. The reports do not challenge the EU's policies of closing its borders to migrants and refugees, which funnel migrants through rough seas and lead to their death on a massive scale. The reports do not question the transformation of the sea into a heavily policed and militarized border zone, nor hold anyone or any entity accountable for the death incurred at the EU's maritime borders. The reports do not mention the political and economic conditions that have forcefully displaced Syrians (and other migrants) and driven many of them to risk their lives in search of safety. The reports do not include the complex personal histories of the migrants, and always refer to migrants as a nameless mass or as statistics (how many migrants attempt to cross the sea, how many have died doing so, how many have survived etc.). The reports do not discuss the conditions of interception nor the fate of migrants after the rescue operation, that is, detainment, marginalization, exploitation, and deportation. These mainstream media reports are structured by the presentist lens of episodic news framing, that is, a framing which focuses on specific (and typically tragic) events occurring in the present moment. This framing isolates events from the histories that led to them and the futures that follow them. By focusing on the shipwreck as tragic event and reporting its story through the frame of a rescue operation which occluded any analysis

[46] Frontex, "Greek Prime Minister meets Frontex Executive Director."
[47]Røsæg, "The duty to rescue refugees."

of the conditions that produced this shipwreck, mainstream media actively participate in obscuring the violence of the EU border regime, and hinder the possibility of a critical discussion of the histories, structures, and economies of violence on which this regime is founded.

While none of the reports speaks of migrants in terms of threat, they are framed as a problem or issue that requires governmental solutions. The story is reported from the point of view of the EU border regime, that is, a point of view that privileges the discourse of an on-going migration control crisis (of which the shipwreck is one manifestation) that urgently needs to be solved. *The New York Times* quotes a coastguard official; *Reuters* quotes a coastguard spokeswoman and the Greek shipping minister, who is also quoted in *The Guardian* article; the *CBS* article cites Greek coastguards. The voices/narratives/demands of the boat passengers are absent from these reports.

A Greek Coast Guard helicopter flies over a Frontex vessel trying to rescue refugees and migrants, after a boat carrying more than 200 people sunk while crossing part of the Aegean Sea from Turkey, near the Greek island of Lesbos, October 28, 2015. REUTERS/Giorgos Moutafis

Photographic images also emphasize the "rescue" operation led by Frontex and the Greek Coast Guard. For instance, the image above, which shows the helicopter that Alzakout refers to in *Purple Sea*, was distributed by the news agency *Reuters*. The image is described in the *CBS News* report as a Greek coastguard helicopter attempting to rescue migrants at sea, without any mention of how, while trying to provide visual overview of the scene, the helicopter stirred the waves higher and stronger, further endangering the lives of migrants and drowning the sounds of their emergency whistles.[48] Instead of supporting the rescue operation, the helicopter actually made it more difficult by exacerbating the rough conditions that migrants were already

[48] Chalasani, "Hundreds of migrants rescued off Greece."

struggling against. Other images sought to portray the predicament of the migrants who survived the shipwreck. These images—of women and children crying as they arrive to the Greek Island of Lesvos (*CBS News*), of exhausted children being carried from the boat to the shore by volunteers (*CBS News)*, of distraught migrants being escorted by volunteers (*The Guardian*[49] and *Newsweek*[50]*)*, of doctors trying to revive a baby in critical condition (*Reuters*[51] and *The Irish Times*[52]) and paramedic treating a child (*The New York Times*[53]), of wearied migrants resting in a chapel in Lesvos after the rescue operation (*Reuters*)— always portray migrants in extremely precarious and vulnerable conditions. The continuous visual re/production of such images enacts a form of violence onto migrants. As the activist Syrian film collective Abounaddara observes:

> The persons whose humanity is suppressed in images from wars, mass violations of human rights and other similar situations are not allowed to speak. Their humanity stops at the rights of bystanders to freedom of expression. You can have the dignity of a person or be a victim, but you are not allowed to be both; and, most importantly, you are not legally allowed to choose what you want to be. Your wounds can speak, but you cannot.[54]

Abounaddara is arguing that the framing of Syrians as victims and the depiction of their bodies and pain via images of extreme suffering are not only the result of aesthetic choices, but of political and ethical choices that deprive Syrians of their right to the image, their right to dignity, and their right to self-representation. While Abounaddara is commenting on the hyper-mediatization of the war in Syria and on Western media's impulse to reduce the Syrian people to bare life, its reflection could be extended to the hyper-mediatization of the Syrian refugee crisis and its dehumanizing representation of Syrians. The images discussed above depict Syrian migrants in situations of extreme duress, objectifying their bodies and commodifying their traumatic experiences for news consumption and for political/ideological purposes. Whether they seek to portray migrants as an "issue" or a "crisis" that require urgent governmental and/or humanitarian "solutions", or to nurture empathy and activate the conscience of Europeans from afar, these images construct migrants as radical Others—colored, poor, desperate, wretched—in

[49] Reuters Staff, "Greek coastguard rescues 242 migrants."
[50] Westcott, "Lesbos Volunteers Recount Harrowing Refugee Rescues."
[51] Reuters Staff, "Greek coastguard rescues 242 migrants."
[52] Lynch, "Desperate Scenes on Lesbos."
[53] Kitsantonis, "Greece Saves 240 as Boat with Migrants Capsizes."
[54] Abounaddara, "The Right to the Image for All."

need of containing or of saving, and in so doing, solidify the aesthetic regime of the EU maritime borders.

These images reinforce and naturalize, rather than challenge, the asymmetry between European nationals consuming the news and the "others" whose pain is commodified and turned into news, without their consent. These images indeed reveal and reproduce racial disparity in the representation of traumatized bodies, for as Teju Cole notes, while "spectacularly terrible images" of Black and brown bodies are readily published in mainstream media, "newsworthiness rarely brings destroyed white bodies to the front page of the newspaper."[55] Further, these images reproduce the violence of the borders by portraying migrants' traumatizing experiences as a consequence of their decision to "illegally" breach the EU borders (since the existence of borders and their increasing militarization are never questioned by the narrative), rather than the catastrophic effects of a brutal regime invested in illegalizing certain racialized and classed populations and excluding them from accessing European territory. As Cole puts it, "the images show foreigners getting what they deserve and, far from being an indictment, they portray a natural order." These images thus preserve the status quo rather than catalyze social or political change. Cole incisively observes that the truth that these images portray is not migrant suffering or death, but the participation of news consumers in the crime being committed by governments against migrants. He says:

> The bitterest truth might be to show that the crime was committed by the viewers of the photograph — that this is not news from some remote and unconnected reality but that it is rather something you have done, not personally but as a member of the larger collective. It is *you* who have undermined their democracy, *you* who have devastated their economy, *you* who have denied their claim to asylum. These are not strangers requesting a favor. They are people you already know, confronting you with your misdeeds.

And yet, rather than confronting the images' "bitterest truth", viewers "look, and look, and then…put them away." [56]At best, these images elicit sympathy, shock, sadness, pity, before news consumers move on to the next tragic event. In *Purple Sea,* Alzakout confronts the viewers of the film about their participation in the perpetuation of violence against migrants when she asks, in

[55] Cole, "A Crime Scene at the Border."
[56] Ibid.

the voice-over, if these images make *you* feel guilty. Do they? Is *Purple Sea* able to draw its viewers beyond sympathy, or empathy, or sadness, or pity, and to engage them politically?

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From Within/Through the Sea: Countervisualizing the October 28 Shipwreck

Reflecting on the ubiquity of cameras today, and the resulting barrage of images that represent migrants' bare life and mass death at sea and on the shores of Fortress Europe, Balsom asks: "What is an adequate strategy for the representation of an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe? Does such a thing exist?"[57] I want to argue that *Purple Sea* is one adequate strategy for the representation of the ongoing catastrophe that is the migration crisis, and of the brutal consequences that this socio-political event has had on the lives and bodies of migrants. *Purple Sea* documents the rarely documented—the struggle of migrants told from their own perspective. Drawing on the footage captured by her wrist camera, Alzakout produces a countervisualization of the October 28 incident that reclaims the right to the image, to dignity, to self-representation, and that unsettles the asymmetric relationship between those representing and those represented. The footage performs a double political function. First, by helping Forensic Oceanography to redraw the event and contest the narrative of Frontex and the Greek coastguards, the footage opens a possibility for Alzakout and fellow passengers to hold EU governments accountable for the death incurred at sea. That is, the footage constitutes material evidence for the reconstruction of a crime scene that occurred at the threshold of Fortress Europe, and for legal claims that seek to shed light on the truth and bring justice to the migrants. Second, the footage was used by Alzakout to produce a cinematic intervention that troubles the Mediterranean frontier's aesthetic regime and ruptures its flow of images. Alzakout counters the generic and well-worn images of successful rescues and of traumatized and illegalized migrants attempting to cross Fortress Europe's maritime borders with a personal testimony of the shipwreck, generated through the particularities of her own embodied and situated experience as a migrant struggling on these very borders.

Purple Sea relays Alzakout's experience of struggling in the water as she wants to tell it, in her own way, with her own words and images, on her own terms. Alzakout says: "I didn't want to be seen or dealt with from another perspective. I didn't want to be seen as a group, to be

[57] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling*, 59.

narrowed down to being a refugee or a migrant or a number. We are individuals."[58] And yet, while *Purple Sea* is a deeply personal film, and the "I" in the voice-over is narrated through Alzakout's voice and recounts her particular hi/story, this film also represents a collective experience—that of being forcibly displaced by war, of facing torturous asylum-seeking processes, of being forced to migrate clandestinely and in perilous conditions, of experiencing a shipwreck, and of struggling in the water for hours. The "I" is at once individual and multiple. The "I" is one particular his/story amongst the hundred others that could be told. As Alzakout insists, "I didn't want to make a film about refugees – who we can see everywhere in the media from different perspectives –because I insist that we are individuals, we have our own life."[59] The "I" simultaneously represents Alzakout's and everyone else's struggle—everyone who was on the same ship, or on any other ship, at any other time, as Alzakout puts it.[60] Alzakout is the subject experiencing the aftermath of the shipwreck. She is also a "war correspondent," witnessing and recording the struggle of others, her fellow passengers, capturing their pain, fear, fight for survival, and death.[61] The film's representation of this individual and collective experience reveals the brutality of the EU maritime border and the reality of its material effects on the lives and bodies of migrants, without misrepresenting them as illegal or criminal, and without reducing them to victims or to numbers/statistics. In other words, *Purple Sea* is an act of countervisualization that troubles the aesthetic regime of the EU's maritime borders and that lays a claim to the shaping of reality. How does *Purple Sea* countervisualize? What reality does it claim? What aesthetic strategies does it mobilize to unsettle the aesthetic regime of the maritime frontier and to challenge its inherent power dynamics?

Through an aesthetic articulation that engages with the ocean as an environment for expression/representation, *Purple Sea* performs a radical gesture that affectively and viscerally incorporate the viewers into the traumatic experience of struggling in the water, while refusing narrative as a form that can order the reality that the film depicts. In *Wild Blue Media* (2020), Melody Jue argues that a milieu-specific analysis—particularly, an analysis that takes place in the milieu of the ocean—recalibrates our ways of knowing and sensing by estranging our terrestrial and anthropocentric bias and providing a new environment of interpretation. This

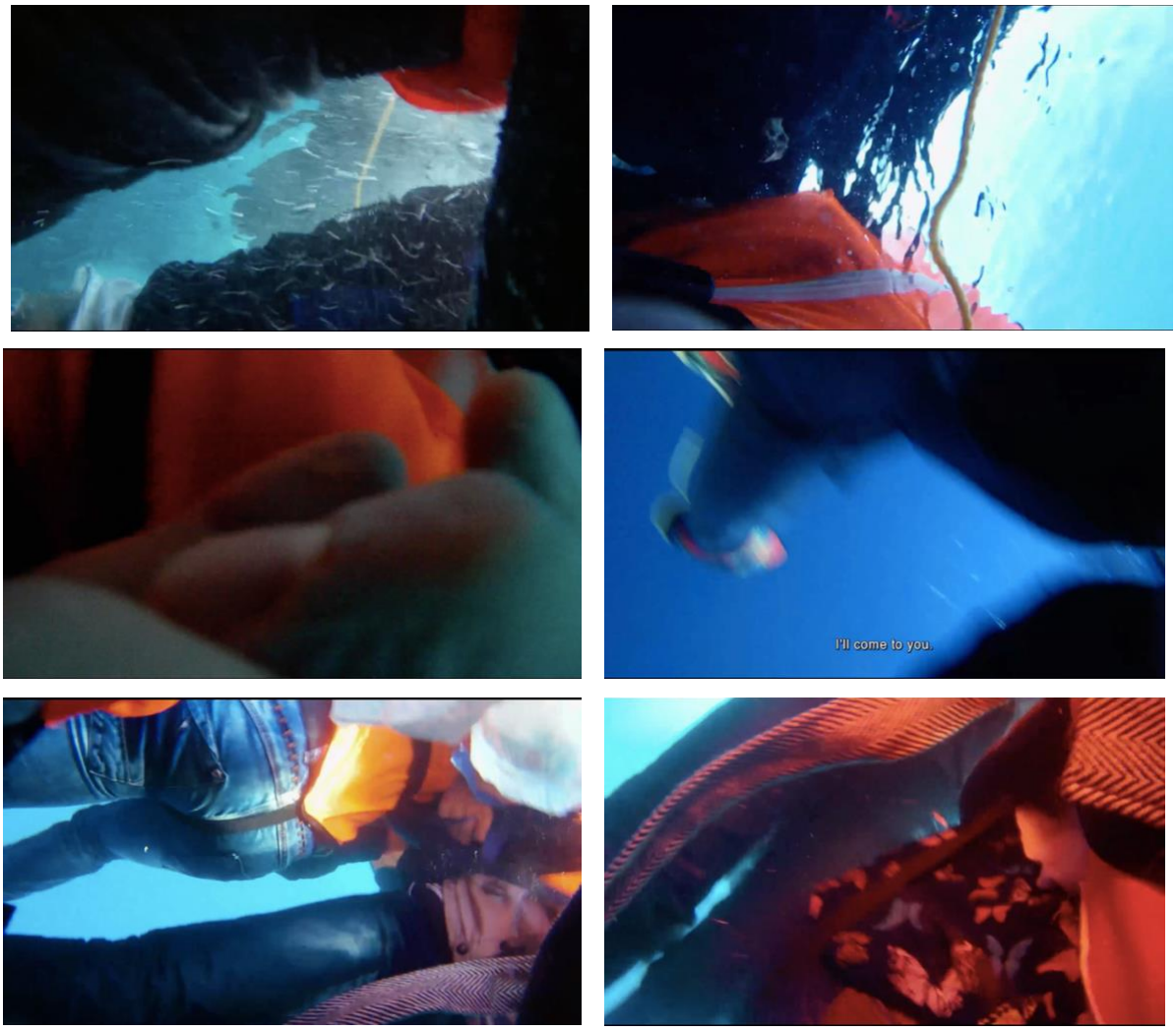
[58] Alzakout in Mennig, "Fleeing to Europe – A Personal Story."
[59] Ibid.
[60] Anthology Film Archives, "Purple Sea: Q&A with Amel Alzakout."
[61] Alzakout describes herself as "war correspondent" in the film's voice over.

"conceptual displacement", as Jue calls it, generates new points of view from within the water that challenge the normative ways in which we perceive, interpret, and speak about the world. Jue is underlining the affordances of articulating the ocean as a medium, of *thinking within and through* the ocean from the embodied and situated perspective of the observer interacting with the ocean. *Purple Sea,* essentially made of images that Alzakout's wrist camera captured underwater, foregrounds a vantage point "from within the water column" to generates a story that "dwells with the challenges of narration from this point of view."[62] Underwater, it is harder to know where one is, which way is up, down, left, or right. There is no horizon. No direction. Time stops. The lack of reference points creates a sense of spatial and temporal disorientation that is further amplified by the constant flux of the water. This sense of oceanic disorientation is experienced and recorded by the wrist camera, which moves constantly and randomly—because it is not oriented by Alzakout's intention—at the pace of the sea's currents and waves and with Alzakout's body. The images generated are lopsided, unstable, unframed, fragmentary. They capture the corner of a life jacket, clutched fingers, a phone, the fragment of a yellow rope, a pack of cigarettes, a floating diaper, legs in jeans, a child's small feet, colored sneakers, the belt of a coat, the butterfly pattern of a blouse. These are the immersed details, or rather, the indexical images of a crime that is unfolding at sea at the threshold of Europe, communicated to the viewers through and from within the water column.

As they dwell within this unfolding tragedy, the viewers hang onto these fragments that connects them to the people struggling at sea, and that ground their viewing experience in minute details that don't compromise the dignity of the migrants being represented. The mediation of the sea conceals migrants' faces. The cries and emergency whistles that viewers hear are stifled, heightening viewers' awareness and sense of the catastrophe that is unfolding above water, without giving them direct access to this catastrophe. The underwater images of *Purple Sea* are brutal and disturbing because they reflect migrants' encounter with disaster and their struggle against the lethal EU maritime border. And yet, these images are able to represent the traumatic experience of the shipwreck and its aftermath without violating the sanctity of migrants' suffering and pain. How so? Balsom argues that "water is transparent but the voluminous sea is not; its great mantle conceals, blocks vision" (p.55). She calls the oblique and opaque mediation of the sea "oceanic". It is precisely this oceanic mediation, shaped by the sea's materiality, that

[62] Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 17.

produces images and sounds that are not easy legible and discernible. We are not accustomed to seeing images or hearing sounds that are mediated by water. Our perception of the world is shaped by the conditions of land, which we have taken for granted.[63] As it shifts the representation of the shipwreck from the terrestrial/superficial (water surface)/aerial environments to the oceanic environment, that is, from within the water, *Purple Sea* generates a underwater aesthetics that undoes both the violence of invisibility (which erases migrants' struggles at sea) *and* the violence of visibility which dehumanizes migrants and objectifies their bodies. The film's oblique perspective, enabled by oceanic mediation, succeeds in representing Alzakout and her fellow passengers' traumatic experience(s) spectacularizing their suffering and death.



Still Images, *Purple Sea,* Courtesy of the filmmaker.

[63] Ibid, 3.

These indexical images, which capture migrants' encounter with disaster and their struggle against the lethal EU maritime border from within the water, are brutally concrete, material, and embodied. They represent the actual struggle taking place in/through/against the sea from a perspective that is not usually available to image viewers. And it is precisely their concreteness, materiality and embodiment that make them so disorienting and so traumatizing, and allows them to counter the abstraction of the generic images and mainstream narratives that depict the October 28 shipwreck and its aftermath. These images counter the abstraction of border violence and its catastrophic effects on migrants; they counter the abstraction of migrants into a nameless/faceless mass and voiceless statistics; they counter the abstraction of the presentist framing which focuses on the Event as just another newsworthy tragedy. These images capture the brutal reality of struggling against the waves and the cold seawater, against the pull of gravity, against exhaustion, and against the ruthlessness of EU's maritime frontier. In other words, these images capture the essence of the *struggle* between the EU border control regime and the autonomy of migrants who are determined to cross the sea, undeterred by its rough conditions and its transformation into a lethal border that poses great risk to their lives.

Sandro Mezzadra explains that the autonomy of migration is "a gaze on mobility that allows us to highlight the political stakes of migratory movements." *Purple Sea* precisely provides this gaze and performs the political work of foregrounding the politicized nature of sea crossing by migrants. The film suggests that while the mass displacement of Syrians since 2011 should be interpreted in relation to its structural environment—that is, that the forced movements of Syrians are driven by the war in Syria and directed by agents of the EU border regime and smugglers—these migratory movements also have an autonomous force hat drives them. *Purple Sea* highlights a tension between the sea as a space of control and the sea as space of flight. The film shows the sea as a border zone where migrants are contained, punished, and made to disappear; it also portrays the sea as a site of migrant resistance against the EU's policies of border and migration control. By attempting to cross the sea and breaching Fortress Europe's defence, Alzakout and her fellow travelers are refusing the EU's bordering practices and exercising their right to freedom of mobility and to safe refuge. Put differently, they are articulating political claims that cannot be fully and effectively contained by the EU border regime. *Purple Sea* captures this tension in a concrete sense, from the vantage point of the sea,

representing one moment of oceanic encounter between, on the one hand, migrants who decided to undertake the crossing despite the hostile conditions of the sea and the anti-migrant policies awaiting them, and on the other hand, the EU's border and migration control regime.

Alzakout and her fellow passengers' agency is also asserted and radically recovered through by *Purple Sea*'s affective and aesthetic gesture, that intentionally traumatizes the film's viewers (especially Euro-American viewers) in a way that mainstream media images of traumatized migrants never succeed in doing. While those images of suffering insulate their viewers from any affective encounter with the trauma that produces and follows the moment of suffering captured by the image, *Purple Sea* confronts its viewers with that trauma in a durational way, forcing them to experience it affectively and viscerally *as* trauma, which is to say as traumatizing. This is made possible by oceanic mediation, which allows a particular perspective, mediated by the thick opacity and fluidity of the sea, to come into being. It's what Gómez-Barris calls a submerged perspective, generated from within the water column and demanding a different form of attention and care.[64] A perspective that shifts how the October 28 incident is represented, and how it is seen/sensed/felt. This perspective immerses the viewers under water, pulling them into the heart of the struggle and connecting them to this agonizing experience viscerally, sensorially, affectively. "Here is how it feels!" the film intimates. Viewers are plunged into the depth of the ocean, where, as they follow the camera's movement, they too feel dizzied, disoriented, lost, panicked. There is nowhere to go. *Purple Sea* engulfs the viewers in the trauma in which they are complicit, performing the opposite political work of mainstream media images. What is powerful about the film is not simply its aesthetic exposure of this trauma (which is what those mainstream media images are designed to do), but the way in which it deploys this aesthetics in a politically assertive way, placing the viewers in a situation where they are constantly forced, for the entire duration of the film, to ask themselves a series of very political questions: Am I complicit in this tragedy? Should I be looking at this, or should I look away? What does it mean that I *can* look away? How long will this endure? What do I have to do to make it stop?

[64] In *The Extractive Zone*. Gómez-Barris discusses artistic engagements that emerge in response to extractive capitalism and its ruinous effects, exploring how their submerged perspectives generate the possibility of renewed perception and formulates decolonial aesthetics and politics. While my analysis of the sea here is doesn't frame it as an extractive zone, I still find Gómez-Barris' concept useful in thinking about *Purple Sea*'s underwater perspective and the ways in which it reveals the hidden/unseen, and how in so doing, it opens a space for new ways of perceiving that exceeds the dominant discourse, its representation, and its narratives.

Throughout *Purple Sea*, the flow of these countervisual underwater images is intermittently disrupted by shots taken above water. Against the limpid blue sky and under the glaring light of the sun, migrants, with their bright orange jackets, suddenly become hyper-visible. Their cries for help and the piercing sound of their emergency whistles also become hyper-audible. But only for fleeting seconds. For *Purple Sea* doesn't dwell above water. Viewers glimpse a face here, catch a phrase there, before the camera dips under the surface again, taking them underwater. These shots, recorded by Alzakout's camera when her wrist was above the surface, reveal the tension between two representational modes, or two perspectives. Above water, an aerial, terrestrial, or superficial modes of representation. Above water, legible images, and discernible sounds. Above water, violent images that deprive migrants of their humanity, dignity, and agency. Above water, images beloved by mainstream media, images that leave the viewers indifferent, or at best, elicit their empathy. Under the water, an oceanic mode of representation. Under the water, a submerged perspective that generates illegible images and undiscernible sounds. Under water, unbearable images of violence that depict the reality of struggling in the water, and that make this catastrophe palpable/sensible. Under water, a countervisualization that incorporates viewers in the traumatic experience of that struggle and forces them to confront the material effects of border control regimes, and their responsibility in keeping these regimes in place.

The surface of the water is not only a threshold of representation, but it is also a threshold of documentary genre. Above water, images gesture towards the unfolding of a story. They point towards the possibility of recognizing a setting, a plot, a character, and the possibility of identifying a linear narrative that organizes the movement of the film from point to point through time. Under water, the possibility of a linear story is diluted, spatial references are obliterated, time comes to a halt, and only fragments anchor the viewers' senses. The submerged perspective, oblique and opaque, generates a disorienting experience. Underwater images perform political work on the viewers that is unsettling, because they incorporate and implicate them affectively and viscerally, and are able to do precisely because being in/under the water invokes a form of mediation that denies the distance and legibility required for narrative.While mainstream media visualizations and coverage insist upon and perform the reduction of complex and brutal structural conditions not just to events, but to stories or narratives with all the limiting conventions thereof—a beginning (the fateful choice to embark), a crisis (the shipwreck), a

resolution (the rescue) —*Purple Sea* refuses narrative and storytelling. It denies the viewer the relief that comes with the narrative resolution of a familiar story arc. There is no story here, no resolution, no relief, not for the migrants and not for the viewers who are now implicated in this traumatic experience by the film. The film's refusal of a narrative resolution forces the viewers into a political position: they either look away, or do something to stop this ongoing disaster, because though the film will stop at some point, there is no (happy) ending here. Crucial to this aesthetic possibility is the mediation of the water, and the sense of disorientation that it generates. While mainstream media accounts and visualizations of migrant "events" adopt terrestrial, aerial, or superficial perspectives that provide the orientation according to which a narrative can be structured, thinking with/through the water structures a destabilizing experience that challenges the viewers expectations of what a documentary should offer—a non-fiction narrative that takes the form of a story—[65] in addition to challenging their perception of migrant crossings, which is largely impressed by media regimes. As Jue promises, the ocean, as a mediating environment, provides an estrangement effect through which a a new form of sensing and knowing takes place.

The camera itself also plays a crucial role in generating a new form of knowing and new mode of representing. When the boat started to sink and Alzakout fell into the water, the camera on her wrist kept filming. The camera kept turning on and off, on its own, capturing and preserving traces of the event from under the water. It registered certain moments, movements, bodies, objects, sounds—creating memories of its own encounter with the sea and with disaster. Alzakout was aware that the camera was recording and that it was doing so sporadically, but the images that the camera shot were beyond Alzakout's intentionality or control, to the exception of one.[66] Further, the camera had no screen, so Alzakout couldn't see the images that it was recording. These images, produced through the camera's non-human automation, point to a form of technological agency in the documentation of the event. The camera attached to Alzakout's wrist could be considered as an extension of her body, recording images from a unique perspective, that of her embodied and situated experience. The images are jolting and unstable not only because the camera is moving to the rhythm of the sea, but also because the camera moves with Alzakout's body, registering her struggle for survival. And yet, the perspective of the

[65] Story, "How Does it End?"
[66] The helicopter shot, as mentioned earlier, is the only one that was deliberately recorded by Alzakout.

camera did not align with Alzakout's own perspective. As she expresses in an interview about *Purple Sea*, the images recorded by the camera on October 28 did not correspond to her memory of the event. [67] When the camera is underwater, it is filming what Alzakout can't see from above, conveying a different perspective of the event. Is it possible that if Alzakout had complete agency over the camera and over the shots that it was capturing, the film would likely have been more of an "above the water," narrative, than a "below the water" non- or anti-narrative? Is it possible that this is why Alzakout added a personalized and narrative dimension to the film via the voice-over?[68] The narrative of the voice-over, which mostly recalls above–the–water or out-of-the-water experiences, does not even come close to rendering the truth of what is recorded, without intention, by the camera and microphone under the water. In this case, what would be truly radical about *Purple Sea* is its transcendence of this limitation, enabled not by what the filmmaker controlled, but by what she did not control, that is, the camera. The camera, then, is not only a key witness and recorder, but an active mediator of reality, shaping how the event is captured, remembered, and represented.

In a jarring contrast with the accidental nature of the footage, with the fluidity and opacity of images, and with the non-linear form of the film, the voice-over in *Purple Sea* delivers a deliberate and structuring narrative. Alzakout's calm and composed voice rhythmically punctuates the visual unfolding of the film, recalling crucial memories from her life, in a sequential (albeit fragmented) way. A childhood incident, the ongoing war in Syria, exile in Istanbul, the encounter and separation with Khaled Abdulwahed, the impossible and absurd asylum process, her meeting with the smuggler, the crossing journey—from Istanbul to Izmir to the shore to the ship to the collapse of the ship— and her struggle in the water. Weaving in Alzakout's observations with her sensations and feelings, her doubts and questions, her desires and dreams, the voice-over's fictionalized and poetic narrative evokes a complex personal hi/story that is delivered through an intimate, poetic, affective, and sensorial account of Alzakout's memories. These are memories of the moments that have led to the very instance of being/struggling in the water, interlaced with memories from the future that exceed this moment (the shipwreck) and that conceive a life after it. By conjuring past and future memories into the

[67] Mennig, "Fleeing to Europe – A Personal Story."
[68]This raises the question of whether the story form enforces limits not only on mainstream media representations of migrant realities, but also on the self-representations by migrant filmmakers and writers themselves.

present, Alzakout's narrative disrupts the temporality of the dominant discourse (around the shipwreck and the migration crisis more broadly) which is always fixated on the present moment and the imminent urgency of an event (the shipwreck/the crisis), and which thus severs the event from its history and its aftermath. Alzakout's narrative connects the event to larger structural forces and socio-political conditions that have led to it and that typically remain out of frame in ahistorical and generic mainstream coverage. Her narrative also potentializes the event, imagining/projecting a desired future premised on the realization of the migratory journey.

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I want to go back to Jue's assertion that "what the ocean 'is' is a matter for whom," and to reflect on her affirmation elsewhere in the book that "…images of bodies underwater resonate differently, depending on specific geographies, cultural histories, and race"[69] to ask again: What *is* the ocean for Syrian migrants? What do *Purple Sea*'s images of migrant bodies underwater evoke? In what ways do these images resonate? The sea is a borderzone activated through various migration control policies and practices of deterrence into a hostile geoscape that threatens the lives of migrants. It is a central component of the "hybrid collectif" that is the EU border regime, and that is invested in blocking migratory movements from the Middle East and the African continent to Europe. It is precisely the sea's role as an active agent in the EU's fight against migration that is brought to the fore by *Purple Sea*'s images of bodies underwater. The film captures migrants' struggle in/against the sea, showing its crucial mediation of border violence and death, and its contribution to the production of painful and traumatic crossing experiences that migrants endure, and sometimes don't survive.

And yet, what these images also suggest is that despite the securitization and militarization of Fortress Europe's borders, and despite the significant reduction in the search and rescue operation, migrants remain undeterred, and still risk their lives to reach the continent by sea. Their number has not decreased.[70] Their movement has not been contained. The sea is, for migrants, a route to freedom, safety, and political and economic stability. A route to a better life. The sea is, and remains, a contested space. As writer Philip Hoare eloquently puts it, the sea is both Mare Nostrum ("our sea" in Latin, the Roman name given to the Mediterranean), invoking imperial power over territory, and Mare Liberum, "a phrase that speaks to the notion

[69] Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 20.
[70] De Haas, "Don't blame the smugglers."

that the ocean can liberate." [71] Mare liberum is a site where migrants exercise their right to freedom of movement. It is a space that mediates the movement of their ungovernable bodies that radically challenges and breaches Fortress Europe's borders. The sea is a space of loss/damage and a space of liberation. From Germany, Alzakout expresses, "I lie on my back, under the surface of the water. The sea is purple. I feel the warmth with every pore of my body. I'm not afraid anymore."

Purple Sea's underwater images also emphasize the interconnection of struggles against anti-migrant and anti-Blackness ideologies, policies, and practices. These images not only conjure the haunting of the current refugee crisis, but that of the Middle Passage too and of its forced crossings and marine deaths. The images of migrant bodies in *Purple Sea* evoke, to borrow the words of writer and scholar Christina Sharpe, the bodies of enslaved Africans, "thrown, jumped, dumped overboard" across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage.[72] *Purple Sea*'s haunting images are themselves haunted by the spectres of the transatlantic slave trade, recalling the violences of colonial histories and imperial expansions. These images connect the pain and trauma of forcibly displaced peoples across time and space, shedding the light on the similar necropolitical and racist logics that animate/d Middle Passage and Mediterranean crossings. As Christina Sharpe affirms, the slave ship lives on in various forms, including the migrant ship. She says:

> In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhood, to those ongoing crossings of and drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp and the school.[73]

The sea, then, connects the Middle Passage to ongoing crossings and drownings, and embeds the politics of the current migration crisis within colonialism and the history of Atlantic chattel slavery, thus connecting migrant struggles to the afterlives of slavery. In Alzakout's "I can't breathe" cry in minute 30:50 of *Purple Sea* resonate the last words of Eric Garner, words that

[71]Hoare, "'The sea does not care.'" Philip Hoare observes that the revival of this term by the Italian government invokes imperial power, rather than responsibility, over this maritime territory.
[72] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19.
[73] Ibid, 21.

have become a rallying cry against the Anti-Black systemic racism and police brutality in the USA, as well as an expression of solidarity with the Black struggle.

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Chapter 4

War and Exile:
Bearing Witness to Syrian Women's Experiences

> The only way to make borders meaningless is to keep insisting on crossing them: like a refugee, without papers, without waiting to be given permission, without regard for what might be waiting on the other side. For when you cross a border, you are not only affirming its permeability, but also changing the landscape on both sides. You cross carrying what you can carry, you cross bearing your witness, you cross knowing that you are damageable, that you are mortal and finite, but that language is memory, and memory lives on.
>
> Lina Mounzer[1]

> The pace and scale of international mobilisation in support of Ukraine, both online and offline, has stirred curiosity and skepticism, laying bare that other conflicts, from Syria to Palestine and Afghanistan, failed to garner a similar reaction from the international community.
>
> Rodayna Raydan[2]

Historian Ilan Pappé recently published a critical reflection on the West's response to the conflict in Ukraine. In this piece, he formulates four assumptions that shape the West's engagement with the Ukrainian crisis and reveal the West's racism and xenophobia. One of the four assumptions he identifies is "white refugees are welcome; others are less so." As Pappé observes:

> The EU's unprecedented collective decision to open its borders to Ukrainian refugees, followed by a more cautious policy by Britain, cannot go unnoticed in comparison to the closure of most European doors to refugees from the Arab world and Africa since 2015. The clearly racist hierarchy, distinguishing life seekers on the basis of color, religion, and ethnicity is abhorrent, but unlikely to change soon.[3]

The response of Europe to the suffering of the Ukrainian people has brought into focus the indifference of the international community towards displaced Syrians and other non-white refugees. While Europe's national governments are welcoming Ukrainian refugees with open doors and arms, they have been—with the help of European institutions and global media—drumming up a wave of anti-migrant sentiment and devising ever-more exclusionary policies to

[1] Mounzer, "War in Translation."
[2] Raydan, "'Uncivilised and proud'."
[3] Pappé. "Les quatres leçons de l'Ukraine" (translation from French my own).

reinforce Europe's border regime in the face of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

The displacement of Ukrainians is perceived and treated as a humanitarian catastrophe, triggering compassion, solidarity, and support towards Ukrainian refugees from European nations, media and the public. In contrast, the displacement of Syrians and other refugees from the Middle East and Africa has been framed as a migration management and border control "crisis" threatening Europe and requiring urgent governmental interventions to contain migrants and refugees' mobility. As critical migration scholars Nicholas de Genova Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli argue,

> …what has been designated unanimously by European authorities as a migration or refugee crisis…signals an impasse for the effective and efficient government of multiple cross-border mobilities that is figured as 'crisis' only inasmuch as it signifies a crisis of *control*—a crisis of the sovereign power of the European border regime.[4]

In the face of the intensified and undesirable migratory movements from the Middle East and Africa to Europe, a "crisis" was declared in 2015, and mobilized in political discourse and mass-mediated public debate to justify the strengthening and expansion of Europe's border regime through a variety of strategies. This putative crisis indeed triggered a cascade of preemptive and reactive responses to stop, deter, contain, and punish migrants and refugees, and reconfigured the figure of the refugee from "object of European compassion, pity and protection" to security threat. [5] Following a short-lived moment of openness towards Middle Eastern and African refugees during the summer of 2015, when former German Chancellor Angela Merkel famously pledged "Wir schaffen das!" (We can do it!) to declare Germany open to refugees and affirm Germany's ability to absorb their large number, EU-wide migration control and border enforcement policies and actions have expanded in every dimension and direction. The deployment of Frontex to police and control the EU's borders (which I touched on in chapter 3) , the development of the hotspot system by the EU commission and the establishment of migrant and refugee camps in Italy and Greece, the criminalization of humanitarian interventions, the crackdown on migrants' and refugees' secondary movements across EU member states, and the externalization of the EU's borders (an instantiation of which is the 2015 EU-Turkey deal

[4] De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli, "Autonomy of Asylum?" 254.
[5] Ibid, 9.

discussed in chapter 2) are all examples of the various strategies deployed by European countries to contain undesirable migratory movements to and within Europe. In 2022, the reinforcement of the migration control regime reached a further stage, as the UK signed a controversial deal that allows the relocation of "illegal" asylum seekers to the eastern African state of Rwanda. The aim of this new policy is not, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed, to break people-smuggling networks, but rather, to externalize (and thus eschew) the UK's legal obligations towards asylum seekers.[6] Denmark, in a move to mirror the UK's offshoring of asylum processing and protection, is currently in talks with Rwanda about setting up a similar procedure for the transfer of asylum seekers from Danish soil.[7]

These policies are, in effect, racialized deterrence measures that respond to the putative threat of the so-called migration/refugee crisis. As media theorist Sandro Mezzadra argues, rather than responding to the challenge of intensified migratory movements from the Middle East and Africa to Europe from 2015 onwards by "envisaging a democratization of borders and taking up the opportunity for imagining a different Europe as well as different relations between Europe and its multiple outsides," European countries, institutions and media have been leveraging the discourse of crisis to produce unwanted migrants and refugees as a threat coming from outside of "a supposedly stable and ordered European space."[8] To neutralize this "threat", anti-migrants and anti-refugee policies have proliferated, and continue to do so, to violently govern the mobility of migrants and refugees whose movements to Europe are unwanted and "unauthorized."

In this chapter, I examine the differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees vs. Syrian and other non-white refugees in governmental responses, political discourses, and mass-mediated debates. While I acknowledge that this present-tense analysis risks being premature—it is possible that anti-Ukrainian sentiment will arise in western Europe after the initial, superficially hospitable reception subsides—it still exposes the racist and xenophobic logic that structures the EU border regime and animates political and media discourses. As my analysis shows, various politicians, known for their hardline position on immigration and their anti-refugee stance against displaced people from the Middle East and Africa (whom they cast as a civilizational and security threat), have openly expressed their solidarity with Ukrainian refugees and opened their

[6] Smout and Uwiringiyimana, "Britain plans to send migrants to Rwanda."
[7] Attiah, "Why Britain's deal with Rwanda on migrants is so repulsive."
[8] Mezzadra, Preface.

countries' doors for them. My analysis also shows how, in a similar shift of political mood and change of heart, mainstream media pundits have argued that Ukrainian refugees are deserving of empathy and solidarity, unlike displaced Syrians and other refugees from Global South nations, because of their ethnicity, religion, and European identity and culture. And for the first time, in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing massive displacement of Ukrainians, the European Commission activated the Temporary Protection Directive that had been in place since 2001, in order to protect the lives and rights of Ukrainians, allowing them to live, travel and work in the EU. This racist logic creates a binary of "good"/deserving refugees (white/Christian/Ukrainians) and "bad"/undeserving refugees (non-white/Muslim refugees), thus creating a division amongst refugees fleeing similar situations of warfare and human rights violations.[9] In turn, the discriminatory and racist binary creates an interpretive frame that dehumanizes non-white refugees and normalizes the violence they are subjected to. To draw on philosopher and theorist Judith Butler's work, this dominant interpretive frame devalues non-white lives and produces them as ungrievable and unworthy of protection. It is a frame that precludes possible solidarities with non-white refugees, as well as between non-white and white refugees.

Chaos (2018) an essay film by Syrian filmmaker Sara Fattahi, is a countervisual intervention that challenges the dehumanization of Syrian refugees in Western political and media discourses. In this film, Fattahi explores the notions of home and exile, the radical sense of alienation attached to displacement, and the ways in which war shapes memory and dreams, through the stories of three Syrian women.[10] As it makes visible the three women's subjective experiences of life in war and exile, *Chaos* counters a double violence. First, the film counters the violent abstraction of media coverage which tends to focus on spectacular events—rather than on the subjects whose lives and death are structured by these events—and thus to erase the stories and experiences of Syrian refugees. Second, the film counters the systemic violent erasure of Syrian women's perspectives from media accounts of war and exile. Drawing on translator and writer Lina Mounzer's reflection on translation, I argue that Fattahi is performing an act of translation. She is translating the three Syrian women's thoughts, feelings, and dreams into a visual language, and as she does, she is bearing witness to their experiences which are absented

[9] Especially when Ukrainians and Syrians are both fleeing Russian bombs.
[10] Cohn, "Filmmaker Sara Fattahi on Bringing a Woman's Perspective of War."

from the dominant narrative. In other words, she is recording, carrying, and retelling their stories to make these stories, and the memories they hold, endure in the face of erasure and forgetting. By privileging the testimonial form, which foregrounds the individual (each woman is a subject of focus), the subjective (the lived and embodied reality of each woman), and the particular (the context which shaped the trajectory of each of the woman), Fattahi is also marking the singular importance of each of the three women's experiences and restituting their sense of agency as survivors. That is, she challenges the typical framing of women as voiceless and powerless victims while also opening a space for individual and collective mourning, healing, and memory reconstruction.

As it explores the women's internal worlds/wars rather than war itself, *Chaos* foregrounds the embodied aspect of the traumatic effects of war and exile. The film translates the women's feelings, dreams, and thoughts into cinematic images that affectively and viscerally engage the viewers, and solicit a different mode of relating. Viewers are drawn into the women's stories; they too, bear witness to the women's lived experience and quiet suffering. This bearing, as Mounzer argues, enables a crossing—beyond language, culture, nationality, gender—from self to other, and holds the potential of engendering a relation of care and solidarity, rather than one of pity or empathy. This crossing is facilitated by the ghostly figure of Austrian poet and writer Ingeborg Bachmann. Her experience of WW2 and of exile, poignantly expressed in her writings and interviews, haunts the film. Her words capture the three women's experiences. They also capture Sara Fattahi's own thoughts and feelings, her desire to make sense of war, and her urge to capture and represent war's psychic and emotional effects. Bachmann's words create a bridge between the three stories and the filmmaker, and most importantly, a bridge across time and space. Her words intimately link Vienna (the poet's city) to Damascus (the filmmaker's city), and WW2 to the war in Syria. They reanimate past violence in the present moment and reveal the universality of the traumatic effects of war, and in so doing, intimate the possibility/necessity of a form of solidarity that emerges from a shared conditions of violence, destruction, loss, and displacement.

To translate the lived experiences of war and exile of her three subjects, Fattahi employs the observational sensibility of ethnographic filmmaking and an aesthetic of extreme close-ups. Her gaze, however, is not a neutral one. It is personal and reflects her intimate connection to the subjects portrayed. Her camera places the viewers in a relation of proximity with the subjects,

immersing them in women's intimate worlds, and breaking the distance between them. Fattahi is inviting the viewers to engage in a different practice of looking, one that is not premised on the consumption of images of war and violence, but rather, one that is animated by the desire to make sense of war and reckon with its effects together with the filmmaker and the women portrayed. In other words, Fattahi, through *Chaos*, is opening a space for politics and solidarity.

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"White refugees are welcome; others are less so"

While Europe's massive mobilization and solidarity with Ukraine are rightly expressed, they simultaneously expose Europe's racist (and Islamophobic) logic and Eurocentric bias, and its double standards in dealing with refugee crises. In his article, Pappé quotes the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov's infamous statement that "these [Ukrainian] are not the refugees we are used to. These people are Europeans, intelligent, educated people. This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, who could have been even terrorists."[11] This racist logic finds its echo in Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer's comment on the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Nehammer highlighted the deep sense of European "kinship" that has led the Austrian government to open the country's door to refugees from Ukraine, despite Austria's general restrictive asylum policies, when he affirmed, "we are a European family, and families stand by each other."[12] In contrast, he had affirmed his immigration hardliner stance in 2020 when he vowed to stop refugees and migrants fleeing the Middle East and the African continent from crossing Austria's borders to prevent a repeat of 2015.[13] This double standard is also apparent in Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's position towards different refugee communities. While he had warned migrant and refugees from the Middle East and Africa that "we aren't going to let anyone in" in December 2021, in February 2022 he affirmed to Ukrainian refugees that "we're letting everyone in."[14] Such differential treatment also shapes Denmark's approach to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, local authorities across Denmark decided to accommodate displaced Ukrainians. This effort was led by the Danish Immigration Service, the same agency that had been, for the past months, revoking the residency permits of Syrian refugees originating from

[11] Pappé, "Les quatres leçons de l'Ukraine."
[12] Berger, "400,000 Ukrainians flee to European countries."
[13] Reuters staff, "Austria says it will stop any migrants."
[14] Associated Press, "Europe's different approach to Ukrainian and Syrian refugees."

Damascus and its surrounding areas to force them back to Syria under the pretext that they no longer needed international protection. This deportation campaign followed the Danish government's declaration that these regions of Syria were now safe to return to, despite the UN's conclusion that Syria was still witnessing serious human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.[15] These are some examples that illustrate the radical shift of attitude towards refugees in the wake of Ukraine's conflict, from a hard anti-migration stance towards Syrian refugees and other displaced people from the Middle East and Africa to an open-door and open-borders position for Ukrainian refugees.

The racist hierarchy that informs the unequal governmental response to refugees also transpires in the ways in which different communities of refugees from Ukraine are being treated. *Associated Press News* reported that as people struggled to flee Ukraine to safer spaces, several accounts emerged of non-white residents and students being racially profiled, discriminated against, abused, and illegally and violently pushed back as they tried to cross Ukraine's borders with Poland, Hungary and Romania.[16] Videos and testimonies shared on social media under the hashtag #AfricansinUkraine expose a "white Ukrainian first" informal border policy, whereby non-white refugees are given second priority to humanitarian aid and to entry, after white Ukrainians. The visual footage and personal accounts that circulated describe how nationalist white Ukrainians and Ukrainian authorities were brutally preventing Black students from boarding trains and buses headed to the border, and even removing them from buses and trains after they had boarded. Black students described the blunt segregation they experienced at Ukraine's border with Poland, where refugees were separated in two lines, one for white Ukrainians and one for visible minorities.[17] Students also recounted being turned back at the Ukrainian-Polish border by Ukrainian border guards or sent back to the end of the refugee queue.[18] And when they did succeed in crossing borders, non-white refugees were attacked by racist nationalists. In Poland for instance, nationalists have initiated social media campaigns to spread fake news about violent crimes committed by non-white people fleeing Ukraine, and have

[15] Hardman, "Denmark's Mismatched Treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees." See *Sending Aya Back*, a documentary released by UK newspaper *The Guardian.* This documentary follows the journey of Aya, a Syrian teenage refugee in Denmark, as she faces deportation following the revoking of her residence permit by the Danish government. The documentary is accessible on *The Guardian'*s website.
[16] Brito, "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees."
[17] Barhoush, "What the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis Reveals."
[18] Chebil, "'Pushed back because we're Black'."

physically abused groups of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian refugees as they arrived at Przemyśl train station, and shouted "go back to your country" at them.[19]

These double standards structure European asylum-seeking policies more broadly. As Ukrainian started to flee the war in their country to seek safety and protection in neighboring countries, the EU triggered, for the first time, the Temporary Protection Directive. This directive is not new. It was established in 2001 as "an exceptional measure to provide immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who are unable to return to their country of origin."[20] The directive is to be triggered when the European Council agrees via a majority vote on a proposal by the European Commission that there is a mass influx and attendant risk that EU countries' asylum systems would not be able to cope with the demand, which would hinder the efficient operation of these systems and adversely affect the rights of refugees seeking international protection.[21] This directive was already in place during the wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, and yet, it had never been used before. The protection and rights that it grants were not extended to the people forcibly displaced from these countries, under the pretext that these refugees did not meet the required criteria to activate this directive.[22] The International Center for Migration Policy Development reports that there were attempts to put the Temporary Protection Directive into effect following the mass movement of people from North Africa to Europe in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, during the peak of refugees and migrants arrivals to Europe (particularly displaced Syrians) in 2015-2016, and in the context of the massive flight of Afghans in the aftermath of the Taliban take-over in 2021. However, these calls didn't garner enough support from the European Council.[23] The directive was triggered for the very first time in March 2022 to give permanent residents in Ukraine who left the country to escape war (from 24 February 2022 onwards, the day Russia invaded the country) temporary protection that would last for at least one year, and that can be extended depending on the situation in Ukraine. Under the Temporary Protection Directive, displaced residents from Ukraine are entitled to a residence permit and a work permit, as well as access to housing, medical and social welfare assistance,

[19] Tondo and Akinwotu, "People of color fleeing Ukraine."
[20] European Commission, "Temporary Protection."
[21] Ibid.
[22] Barhoush, "What the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis Reveals."
[23] International Centre for Migration Policy Development, "The War in Ukraine."

education for children and teenagers, and banking services. They also have the right to move to another EU country before their residency permit is issued (that is, they can choose their country of residence), and they enjoy the right to move freely in EU countries for 90 days within a 180-day period after their residence permit is issued. Finally, displaced residents from Ukraine have the right to apply for international protection in the EU (asylum) in addition to the right to temporary protection.[24]

The EU's open-door policy for displaced Ukrainians stands in stark contrast with its hostile position and exclusionary policies towards other, non-white refugees who are framed as "invaders", "terrorists", "criminals", "undeserving economic migrants", and "bogus refugees." These refugees are not welcomed with open arms and doors, but rather, are contained even before they reach Europe, pushed back at its borders, placed in detention centers and temporary refugee camps without proper aid or protection, confined to an endless state of limbo without proper access to employment, health care, education, and other social services. Unlike displaced Ukrainians, non-white refugees are always already suspicious and "are not in fact considered to be the genuine bearers of any presumptive (purportedly universal) 'human right' to asylum" as de Genova puts it.[25] That is, they are always already considered unworthy recipients of the refugee status.

The racist European political discourses and governmental practices bleed and blend into media coverage. Western media play a significant role in perpetuating the myth of "good" (deserving and desired refugees) and "bad" (undeserving and undesirable) refugees, and in solidifying the dichotomy of "us" (white, Christian, European) vs. "them" (non-white, non-Christian, non-European) that is at work in processes of othering and dehumanizing. Media coverage on the Ukrainian conflict has repeatedly valorized white lives over others through a comparison/distinction between Ukrainian refugees whose lives matter and should be protected, and Syrians and other displaced people from the Middle East and Africa whose lives don't matter and are unworthy of protection. Journalist Kelly Kobiella, reporting for *NBC news,* put it very bluntly when she stated that "these are not refugees from Syria. These are refugees from neighboring Ukraine…these are Christians and white…" The level of empathy triggered by the suffering of Ukrainians was also directly linked to their "race" by Ukraine's deputy chief

[24] European Commission, "Information for people fleeing the war in Ukraine."
[25] De Genova, *The Borders of Europe*, 7.

prosecutor David Sakvarelidze during a television interview with the *BBC,* when he said that "it's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair being killed, children being killed every day by Putin's missiles and his helicopters and his rockets." What he's implying is that when non-white and non-European people with brown eyes and brown hair (like Syrians) are killed every day by Putin's missiles and helicopters and rockets, it's not emotional for him. Sakvarelidze's racist comment wasn't challenged or denounced by the *BBC* host, who instead, replied "I understand and respect the emotion" before moving on to another question. The killing of Syrians and other non-white people whether in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, or Latin America is normalized and therefore tolerated. That is, it doesn't necessitate the extension of the international community's care and solidarity. As journalist and *Racial Justice* editor Sonali Kolhatkar incisively puts it, "Europe is giving its colonialist heritage a new lease on life. We see echoes today of the dehumanization that enabled European colonization of the Global South and the enslavement of generations."[26]

In other media reports, the differentiation between two categories of refugees was based on perceived levels of civility. "Civilized" Ukrainians were contrasted against the presumed barbarity of brown and Black refugees coming from "uncivilized" nations. Journalist Daniel Hannan, writing for the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, remarks that "they [Ukrainian refugees] seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections, and read uncensored newspapers. War is no longer visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone."[27] *CBS News* senior foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata echoed Hannan's chauvinistic observation, affirming that Ukraine "isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European—I have to choose those words carefully, too—city where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it's going to happen."[28] His carefully chosen words as he puts it expose his slanted rhetoric and blatant racism. Finally, in a direct comparison between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, journalist Philip Corbé of France-based *BFM TV* affirmed that "we're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin, we're talking about

[26] Kolhatkar, "Why Don't We Treat All Refugees as Though They Were Ukrainian?"
[27] Hannan, "Vladimir Putin's Monstrous Invasion."
[28] Kesslen, "CBS News's Charlie D'Agata Apologizes for saying Ukraine more 'civilized."

Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives."[29] The level of civility is ludicrously measured not only by refugees' "Europeanness" and their blue eyes and blond hair, but also by their ownership of Netflix and Instagram accounts, their ability to vote, their access to uncensored newspapers, and by their cars. What European/Western journalists are basically arguing is the following: Ukrainian refugees are civilized like "us" (in contrast to non-white refugees coming from the Middle East, or Africa or South Asia) and that's *why* they deserve our empathy, care, and solidarity, unlike the Others. In toher words, Ukrainians are rendered "palatable" as refugees *because* they are represented and perceived as similar.

These are just some of many deeply troubling media portrayals that expose the unguarded bias of the journalists who produced them, the racist and orientalist implications of the journalists' analyses, and the limits of their solidarity, that, as has become even more obvious in the media coverage of the Ukraine crisis, is measured by race, ethnicity, and religion. Those journalists have framed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as shocking and unacceptable, and the suffering of the Ukrainian people "here" in Europe as a painful and unbearable human tragedy. In contrast, as their racially-determined support for Ukrainian refugees imply, the forced displacement, suffering, and death of peoples from the Middle East and Africa are acceptable and even expected because these populations are "uncivilized," and because the third world nations they come from are naturally prone to conflicts and always already embroiled in violence. As writer Moustafa Bayoumi puts it, "these comments point to a pernicious racism that permeates today's war coverage and seeps into its fabric like a stain that won't go away. The implication is clear: war is a natural state for people of color, while white people naturally gravitate toward peace."[30]

In *Frames of War*, Butler offers a critical reflection on the visual and discursive dimensions of war. She argues that the ability to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war—that is, the ability to act on the senses by regulating what can be seen and what can be heard—is a pre-condition to war recruitment and waging, as this control ensures the cultivation and maintenance of popular consent. Embedded journalists visually and discursively solicit consent through approved media reports that produce a particular framing of reality where war is perceived, as Butler puts it, "an inevitability, something good, or even a source of moral

[29] Bayoumi, "They are 'civilised' and 'look like us.'"
[30] Ibid.

satisfaction" This frame is also, as Butler adds, "a way of giving account of whose life *is* a life, and whose life is effectively transformed into an instrument, a target, a number, or is effaced with only a trace remaining or none at all."[31] In other words, this frame makes a distinction between who counts as living and who does not count, or what Butler refers to as "grievable lives" and "ungrievable lives." While the media coverage cited above isn't focused on war recruitment or waging but rather, on soliciting/activating empathy, care, and solidarity for displaced Ukrainians, its logic operates precisely through the distinction between who is worthy and deserving (white Europeans that look and behave like "us") and who is not (non-white Others). These media reports ascribe more importance and more value to the lives of white victims of war over others. White Ukrainians are welcomed in Europe and immediately granted asylum because their lives are deemed valuable, grievable, and thus, in need of saving and protection from the threat of violence and death. Syrians (and other refugees) are dehumanized, and their experiences of war normalized to justify their exclusion and expulsion from European territory and from its regimes of rights recognition and protection. Their suffering and death elicit less mourning and create less media attention precisely because these refugees are not white, that is, because their lives do not count and are unworthy of protection. These are lives that are ungrievable. These are lives, in Butler's words, that "cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed…."[32]

The unequal distribution of value of life and the racist logic organizing the hierarchy of refugees that orient the media coverage of the Ukrainian war didn't stand uncontested. The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA), based in the US, issued a statement condemning the racist bias permeating the coverage of war in Ukraine, and denouncing the "pervasive mentality in western journalism" that normalizes tragedy in the Global South.[33] Several outlets including *The Guardian*,[34] *The Los Angeles Times*[35] and *Al Araby*[36] published critical analyses that expose Western media's racism and its mechanisms of differentiation between grievable and ungrievable lives, which is not only evident in the journalists' rhetoric

[31] Butler, *Frames of War*, ix-x
[32] Ibid, xix
[33] The AMEJA Statement in response to coverage of the Ukraine crisis.
[34] Bayoumi, "They are 'civilised' and 'look like us.'"
[35] Ali, "Western press reveals grim bias."
[36] Raydan, "'Uncivilised and Proud.'"

but also transpires in the sheer amount of coverage that the conflict in Ukraine and the suffering of its people have received so far. On social media, a multitude of users strongly criticized the racist comments uttered by journalists and media pundits (including the ones quoted above), pointing to the double standards in their reporting on the conflict in Ukraine compared to similar crises happening in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia, and elsewhere.[37] Other critics have bombarded media commentators with emails and editorial complaints, denouncing them as biased, hypocritical, selective, and racists.[38] Social media users and activists from the Middle East, Africa and Asia flooded social media platforms with the hashtag #uncivilised to challenge Western media's bigotry and hypocrisy, and to celebrate their identity, culture, and heritage. This form of digital and mediated activism generates and promotes counterpublic narratives[39] that challenge and reshape public debates around refugees from the Global South. Such activist interventions contest non-white lives' normalized unworthiness and ungrievability, and in so doing constitute, according to Butler, an essential form of resistance against the induced precarity, transience, and dispensability of non-white lives.[40] This is a form of resistance that is invested in undoing the socially, culturally, and politically constructed division between white and non-white lives, and affirming and insisting that brown and Black lives matter in times of war (and in times of peace too).

Bearing Witness, Translating, Countervisualizing

In "War in Translation: Giving Voices to the Women of Syria" writer and translator Lina Mounzer reflects on the process of translating dispatches from Syrian women (of all ages, from all walks of life, and living across Syria) as part of a project for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. These dispatches, published on the women's blog section, provide first-person accounts of life under war and siege, from the perspectives of women. For Mounzer, the act of translating these stories cannot be reduced to a mere act of transposing words from one language (Arabic) to another (English). It is in essence, she argues, an act of bearing witness: an act of listening to and passing on these stories that cannot but must be contained within language to make them endure, and to ensure that the memories that they hold live on. This act of bearing

[37] Al-Jazeera, "Double Standards."
[38] Raydan, Uncivilized and Proud."
[39] See for instance Sarah J. Jackson & Brooke Foucault Welles on counterpublic networks in "Highjacking #my NYPD" and "#Ferguson is everywhere."
[40] Butler, "Grievability', 15.

witness is necessary and urgent, as it counters the prevailing narrative that informs how the war in Syria (and wars in the Middle East more generally) are widely perceived, understood, and engaged with. Echoing Butler's argument about the dominant frame that shapes war's discourse, Mounzer writes:

> We know how language itself can wage war against us, by mimicking the same casual dehumanization of a bomb. Everyone you know and love: terrorists. Militants. Strategic targets. Collateral damage. The leveling of your neighborhood: an unfortunate mistake. The razing of your city: the birth pangs of a new Middle East. Seven dead, twenty wounded. Forty-one dead, ninety-three wounded. 1.2 million refugees. 2,000 migrants. All the life squeezed out of them so that they fit into one headline. Sentences become coffins too small to contain all the multitudes of grief. The trauma, recreated in words: countless particularities flattened and rubbled into one. In the mediatized narrative, your individuality, your personhood, is not a right you are granted by virtue of being human.[41]

In their coverage of wars taking place in the Middle East (and other parts of the Global South), Western mass media tend to focus on key events that are deemed newsworthy, rather than on the individuals who are experiencing the wars, and whose lives and deaths are structured by those events.[42] In the context of the war in Syria, and since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in spring 2011, Western media have disregarded people's daily lives under conditions of duress—violence, destruction, death, loss, displacement—and their personal stories and experiences. The multiplicity of Syrian experiences and perspectives are obscured, as the Syrian people are represented either as statistics or as a nameless, faceless, and voiceless mass in media reports. Unless, as Mounzer observes, one is able to lift oneself up and out of this media erasure through the exceptionalism of one's life or the spectacle of one's death.[43] The activist Syrian film collective Abounaddara also notes that western media coverage not only renders invisible the complexity of Syrians as human beings, promoting a reductive image that stereotypes Syrians either as victims or as violent subjects (who are used to and partake in violent conflicts), but it also renders invisible the complexity of the revolution-turned-war, representing the war in Syria

[41] Mounzer, "War in Translation."
[42] First person testimonies and human-interest stories do sometimes appear in mainstream media. While the impetus behind these is to "humanize" refugees and individualize their experiences, they raise questions such as what stories are worth telling and which ones are likely to spark more empathetic identification, and also shed light on the problematic category/framing of "human" more generally.
[43] Ibid.

as a confrontation between two protagonists with, on the one side, the Syrian president and dictator Bashar al-Assad, and on the other side, Jihadist extremists.[44] Bearing witness to singular stories of war and exile—that is, seeing, listening, feeling these stories, carrying these stories, and retelling and reimagining these stories—is a shoring up against the flattening and erasure of the particularities, complexities, subjectivities of Syrian experiences by the dominant frame of war. It is, as both Mounzer and Butler argue, an essential form of resistance.

I want to argue that *Chaos* (2018), an essay film by Syrian filmmaker Sara Fattahi, is a work of translation from oral testimonies to cinematic images, a work that bears witness to Syrian women's experiences, and that disrupts media's dominant frame and discourse on war and refugeehood. The film counters mere war reporting and its obsession with events and "objective" facts with a subjective narrative that not only foregrounds the particular/the individual/the personal, but also privileges women's perspectives in doing so. *Chaos*, in effect, undoes a double erasure, for women's personal stories are made invisible twice. First because personal narratives are of little interest to mainstream media in general, and second, because women's perspectives in particular have no place in the media coverage of the Syrian revolution and war. The voices of women are usually left out, unless they're victimized and presented as helpless, and their suffering exploited for sensationalist purposes.[45] *Chaos* "bears witness to the scarred existence of survivors [of the war in Syria]," recording the effects of violence, destruction, loss, and forced displacement through first-person accounts of life in war and in exile.[46] The film mobilizes the testimonial form to tell the stories of three Syrian women, living in three different cities. They are geographically distant, their trajectories and stories different, and yet, all three of them have experienced life events that are traumatic. Raja is in Damascus. She has stopped speaking to others, completely isolating herself in her somber apartment to grieve for her murdered son. Hiba left Syria following the death of her brother. She sought refuge in a village in the North of Sweden, and like Raja, lives in complete isolation in her apartment where she tries to process her traumatic experience and cope with her mental illness (both of which are intensified by exile) through paintings. The third is the filmmaker herself,

[44] Abou Naddara, cited in "Secretive Filmmakers Record."
[45] Syrian Female Journalists Network, "Women in emerging Syrian media."
[46] International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, *Chaos*' synopsis.

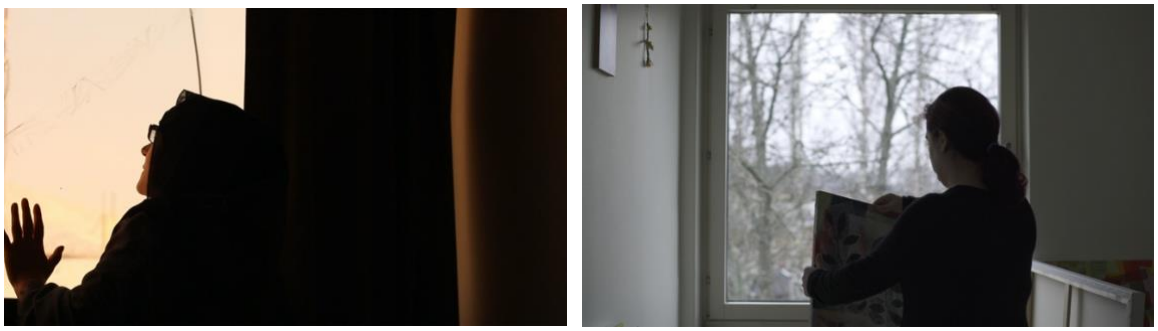
who was displaced from Damascus to Beirut to Vienna, where she struggles with her geographical and cultural dislocation and faces an unknown future.

The film's testimonial approach attests to its commitment to the continuation of individual as well as collective life beyond catastrophic events and devastating experiences. It follows what media scholars Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker refer to as "the critical shift from a politics of 'victims' and victimhood to one of 'survivors' and agency" within the framework of social suffering.[47] In their introduction to the *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* anthology, Sarkar and Walker note:

> Whereas to stress victimhood even from an empathic perspective is to disregard survivors' resolute resourcefulness, turning them into hapless pawns of geopolitical maneuvers doubling as philanthropy, testimony is one of the most tenacious expressions of a desire to overcome adversity, to keep on living, to secure the future of a community.[48]

Sarkar and Walker insist on an understanding of (audiovisual) testimonial projects as social and political practices that are deeply committed to providing spaces and possibilities for survivors to find meaning in, and narrativize, their traumas. These are practices that are committed to restituting a sense of agency to the survivors, and to opening-up the possibility for individual and collective processes of reckoning, mourning, and healing. *Chaos*'s empowering potential resides in its ability to enable a form of agency in the face of media erasure and war's brutality. By offering the three Syrian women a space to make sense of their traumatic experiences and to voice their suffering, *Chaos* represents Syrian women not as voiceless victims, but as political subjects who are working through and learning how to live with trauma and loss. Further, by collecting and recording and sharing these testimonies, *Chaos* is also committed "to heal and bridge and repair in the face of violent ruptures of meaning."[49]

[47] Sarkar and Walker, *Documentary Testimonies*, 4.
[48] Ibid, 4.
[49] Mounzer, "War in Translation."



Raja in her apartment in Damascus (right) and Hiba in her apartment in a Swedish village (left).
Still Images, *Chaos* (source: https://www.chaos-film.com)

Nothing in *Chaos* reveals the time, place, or context of the three stories unfolding on screen, thus orienting viewers' attention to the psychic and emotional spaces of the film's subjects. It is only as *Chaos* progresses that the viewers glean details from the interviews that help them situate the three women's stories. As it focuses on the lived experiences of the three women and makes visible the effects of war and exile on their everyday lives, *Chaos* performs the political and aesthetic work of counter-visualizing. This crucial work is enabled by an act of translation. Mounzer explains that "translation is not just about transposing words from one language to another. But transplanting a feeling, a way of seeing the world, from one vocabulary of experience to another."[50] In *Chaos*, countervisualizing takes the form of translating the specificity of the Syrian women's experiences, perspectives, and feelings to images, that is, rendering them visible and perceptible to undo their erasure by media. Countervisualizing is also about marking these experiences, perspectives, and feelings' singular relevance. Representing/sharing the lived experiences of the three women is an end in itself, not a means to produce sensationalist narratives around particular events in the war. It is the film and its story that serve the subjects, not the other way around. This is expressed by Fattahi, who stated during an interview: "I completely excluded images that feature war as an event. We do have enough information on what is going on in Syria. But nobody will tell you how individuals, women in particular, are experiencing the war. I was interested in a documentary film about feelings and not about events."[51]

Piecing together the three stories to explore the effects of war, *Chaos* insists on the importance of individual experiences to the representation of a collective trauma. A

[50] Ibid.
[51] Fattahi and Schiefer, "'A mother and a friend- metaphors for Damascus'."

reconstruction of collective history and memory takes place through the assemblage of personal histories and memories. This process not only challenges mainstream media's abstract accounts of the war in Syria, but it also counters the devastating disruption wrought by war itself. Fattahi expresses how the war has violently interrupted and fragmented the lives of Syrians and has scattered them around the world. She says: "we are a family that is not living together anymore."[52] As it brings together the testimonies of three women who were scattered by the war to three different and unconnected countries and whose paths don't cross, *Chaos* opposes the fragmentation of a collective heritage and the dispersal of a people. The film collates back some of the broken and scattered pieces not to produce one reality or one truth, but to reassemble multiple singular perspectives and experiences into an archive of sorts that evokes what Abounaddara call "the thousand-and-one faces of the revolution."[53]

Chaos is, as Fattahi contends, a film about feelings, exploring how war works on the deepest level of one's psychological and emotional state. It is concerned with exploring the inner wars that the three women are living, rather than with representing the Syrian war itself. *Chaos* counters the generic violent images of war that are circulated by mainstream media and that "exhibit the debased corpses of Syrians in the name of an obligation for compassion"[54] with intimate images that represent the quiet suffering of Syrian women. In an excerpt from a 1971 radio interview with Austrian poet and writer Ingeborg Bachmann featured in the soundtrack of *Chaos*, Bachmann expresses,

> I do not want to write about war. That's too simple, too simple for me. Everyone can write about war; war is always terrible. But to write something about peace—about what we call peace—because, in fact, that's the war. The real war is just the explosion of this war, which is peace.

This statement not only describes Bachmann's approach to writing, but also captures Fattahi's approach to filmmaking in *Chaos*. The women portrayed, two of whom live in a state of peace in Sweden and Austria, are living what Bachmann calls "the explosion of war," that is, the traumatic effects of the incomprehensible experience of losing loved ones, homeland, one's sense of safety, and one's identity. What does it mean to live in peace in these conditions? How

[52] Cohn, "Filmmaker Sara Fattahi on Bringing a Woman's Perspective of War."
[53] Zabunyan, "Abounaddara." Abounaddara continues to use the term "revolution" to refer to what is happening in Syria today.
[54] Abounaddra, "Dignity Has Never Been Photographed."

does one carry the weight of a personal and collective trauma? How does one carry the weight of an individual tragedy and a historic hurt? How does exile affect one's traumatic experience of war? Can one ever find peace in exile, during or in the wake of war? What are the effects of displacement? Can one ever fully inhabit, and be inhabited by, more than one place/home? Can one ever belong in exile? *Chaos* strives to capture the ways in which the three subjects think of, dream, experience, and feel these existential questions. These are the questions that animate the women's inner wars, which *Chaos* bears witness to and translates into an audiovisual form to the viewers, inviting them to bear witness too. While the dominant framing of Syrians as victims or violent subjects by mass media elicits at best pity or empathy, and at the worst, indifference or contempt, *Chaos*' approach, which privileges subjectivity and brings the embodied aspect of experiences of war and exile to the foreground, engenders a sense of proximity and engagement for the viewers. It is an approach that intimates a different mode relating in this world—one that is grounded in care and solidarity— that is enabled by the film's act of bearing witness and of translation. As the film bears witness and translates the inner worlds of the three Syrian women, it performs an act of crossing from the experienced and felt and to the imaged and sensed. This, in turn, opens up the space and possibility for another form of crossing, this time by the viewers: a crossing from self to other.[55] It is this crossing between languages, cultures, countries—enabled by the subjective and affectively charged cinematic image—that challenges the categorical and politically-constructed borders that separate "us" from "them", European/white from non-European/Black and brown.

In *Chaos*, the ghostly female figure of Austrian poet and author Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973) facilitate this act of crossing. Bachmann left her city, Vienna, to live in exile in the wake of the second World War. Excerpts from an interview with Bachmann and from her writings are featured in the film as a voice-over of sorts, creating a narrative that threads *Chaos* together. Bachmann's ghost is, in Fattahi's words, "the guiding spirit" of *Chaos.*[56] Bachmann is a bridge between Fattahi's and the film, as Bachmann's voice stands for the voice of Fattahi, her words expressing Fattahi's experience and echoing the filmmaker's inner thoughts and feelings. Bachmann is also a bridge between Fattahi and Vienna, since as Fattahi expresses, she got to

[55] Mounzer, "War in Translation."
[56] Fattahi and Schiefer, "'A mother and a friend- metaphors for Damascus'."

know her city of exile through Bachmann's writing.[57] Finally, Bachmann is the bridge that connects the stories of the three women, whose lives were shaped differently by the war but whose common fears, traumas, and alienation are captured by Bachmann's words. Bachmann's words function as a link between her own experience of war and exile and the experiences of the three Syrian women, acting as a bridge that not only crosses cultures, languages, and countries, but also time and space. The poet's words are spectral traces that intimately link Vienna to Damascus, and WW2 to the war in Syria. An act of haunting takes place, where past violence resurfaces when new harm is inflicted, and new losses are sustained. Bachmann's words bring back to life the feelings, thoughts, and dreams that emerged from the poet's experience of WW2, reanimating them in the present moment to echo the feelings, thoughts, and dreams of the three Syrian women portrayed in the film. As it places the lived experiences of Bachman and the Syrian women together and blurs the borders that separate them, *Chaos* is suggesting that a form of solidarity can/should emerge from a shared experience of war and exile. Is it possible to imagine, for instance, that the Ukrainian experiences of violent displacement by war might be the ground for solidarity between Ukrainian and Syrian refugees?

Another ghostly presence haunts *Chaos.* It is the character played by Viennese actress Jaschka Lämmert, who stands as Fattahi's double and is also the doppelganger of Bachmann's spirit, physically incarnating her/her words in the film. Lämmert's character doesn't speak. When viewers see her, it's Bachmann's voice that they hear. Lämmert is at once a haunted and haunting figure. She's haunted by the filmmaker's and the poet's struggles with war and exile, which she embodies in/for the film. Her simultaneous embodiment of the psychic, emotional, and physical effects of WW2 and the war in Syria resurrects disturbed feelings from the past and troubles the present. Sociologist Avery Gordon describes haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known…haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in linear time…"[58] Lämmert's character is the figure that performs the haunting in the film, as she conjures the past and reanimates it in the present to make visible the unresolved social violence of past wars, and the ways in which they endure and reemerge through the violence of present wars. She makes the effects of this violence visible/perceptible to the viewers through her bodily performance. She too, is bearing witness,

[57] Ibid.
[58] Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,"2.

translating the poet's, the filmmaker's, as well as Raja's and Hiba's traumatic experiences into another language—one that is physical, and that extends to gestures, postures, and expressions. She is silent throughout the film, but her body conveys the anxiety, fear, pain, and alienation that structure these women's lives. Her body, exhausted, is carrying over their feelings, stories, and memories to the viewers.

Lämmert in Vienna. Still Image, *Chaos* (source: https://www.chaos-film.com)

The figure of the doppelganger emerged out of Fattahi's incapacity to film herself closely, and out of the necessity to protect herself by creating a certain distance between her and her film, her and her trauma, her and her wound.[59] While Hiba and Raja are often framed in penetrating close-ups, glimpses of their lives captured by the camera's long observational shots, and their stories conveyed through intimate interviews with Fattahi, Fattahi's own presence is elusive in the film. Except for one scene where Fattahi is shown at length and from a close angle about to enter an MRI machine, she is otherwise viewed in fragments (in an underwater sequence), in darkness (in her apartment), from behind an opaque glass (also in her apartment), from the back (as she tends to one of her plants) or from the side (as she prepares her coffee). Her voice is almost exclusively heard off-camera, as she interviews the two other women. Her own story is never revealed, only imagined through Bachmann's words, and her daily life in Vienna is suggested through Lämmert's character. Lämmert too, is elusive. As Fattahi describes, "you can hardly see her, as she is also a spirit of somebody. She doesn't really exist, and in this

[59] Fattahi and Schiefer, "'A mother and a friend- metaphors for Damascus'."

way, reflects my state of mind."[60] The camera captures her image from afar, from the back or from the side—as she roams Vienna's streets, strolls inside a museum, or walks in the underground station—and through brief glimpses of her hands and face seen in the reflection of a knife or concealed by her hair when she's sitting in a café. The way Lämmert holds herself and moves suggests a radical sense of detachment and estrangement from the world around her. Even her own apartment seems to be unfamiliar to her. She struggles to open its door. The apartment is empty, as if uninhabited. It is, as Fattahi puts it, like Lämmert doesn't really exist, a ghostly presence in the city, perhaps reflecting the filmmaker's feeling of being an outsider in a foreign/strange/unfamiliar environment, and her sense of living only as a fragment of herself in exile.

Here again, haunting is manifesting itself, for as Gordon affirms, haunting describes "those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done comes alive, what's been in your blind field comes into view."[61] Lämmert's performance suggests that even as Fattahi lives in peace, her bodily and affective relationship to her adopted "home" is a difficult and complex one. It is a relationship that is troubled by the trauma she has experienced, by what she has left behind, and by the memories she carries. This new "home" is an unfamiliar one, haunted by Fattahi's past. Fattahi explicitly describes the physically and emotionally painful experience of exile, and the strong sense of dislocation that is attached to it. She expresses living a contradiction between being physically present in Vienna while having left a significant part of herself back in Syria.[62] This unhomely feeling is also articulated by Hiba, who describes the difficulty of losing all her references—everything that she knows—because of displacement, which has torn her apart from her homeland, culture, and language, and forced her to migrate to a foreign country. "You feel out of sync with everything, you are unable to do anything," she says.

Fattahi's attempt to make sense of the war in Syria and its effects through/in her filmmaking is mirrored by Bachmann's attempt to comprehend the horrors of WW2 through/in her writing. In an excerpt from the 1971 radio interview, Bachmann asks:

[60] Ibid.
[61] Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," 2.
[62] Fattahi, "Chaos: Director's Talk" at Vienna Humanities Festival 2019.

> What does it actually mean to describe the whole of society, the state of an era's consciousness? It doesn't mean to repeat the words that society uses; it has to be depicted in a different way. And it has to be depicted in a radically different way, because otherwise nobody will ever know what our time was like. And the sickness, the torment in it, and the sickness of the world, and the sickness of this person, that is the sickness of our time, for me.

How does one capture and represent the psychic, emotional and physical effects of war? Both Bachmann and Fattahi are driven by the necessity to create a new language—be it discursive or cinematic—and to foreground female subjectivity to express the unspeakable and visualize the ineffable. Both refrain from producing an objective and rational account of war, privileging instead personal stories that capture the lived experiences of violence, loss, and displacement, from the perspective of women. For Bachmann, the sickness and torment of one person represents the sickness of society and of the WW2 era. In the same way, Fattahi engages with the catastrophic events that are still unfolding in Syria through an examination of the inner devastations visited upon three Syrian women, focusing on internal psychic and emotional wars rather than on the war itself. The Syrian women's sense of dislocation and isolation—whether in the form of a geographical, cultural, and linguistic exile attached to physical displacement, or an internal exile that manifests as a disengagement from oneself, from reality, and from life—that are portrayed in the film reflect a collective consciousness, the state of being of a whole society. The introduction to a dossier on Syrian exile published by *Al Jumhuriya,* an online platform for Syrian voices, indeed insists that all Syrians, whether physically displaced or not, are experiencing a sense of exile.[63]

To visually translate this condition, which is embodied by the three women, Fattahi deploys the "observational sensibility of ethnographic filmmaking."[64] *Chaos*' subjects, whether Hiba, Raja, or the doppelganger, are recorded and observed intimately and patiently. Through long and slow shots, the camera captures Hiba as she sleeps, paints, smokes, prepares food. It records Raja's gestures as she prays, stares out the window, or performs the daily ritual of folding her deceased son's clothes on his bed. The camera follows the doppelganger as she slowly strolls in the museum amidst Caravaggio's paintings or as she writes in a café. The gaze,

[63] Al Jumhuriya, "Exile."
[64] Landesman, "Leviathan and the Digital Future of Observational Ethnography."

although ethnographic, is not neutral or detached. It is a gaze that is not interested in capturing an objective reality from a distance, but rather, is concerned with "reflecting and communicating the intimate relationships its filmmaker[s] maintain with such reality" and with the film's subjects.[65] Fattahi's approach is personal, interactive, participatory. Her presence and proximity to her subjects are tangible. Viewers hear her voice when engages in personal conversations with her subjects. In one of the shots, viewers see her hands, as she intimately brushes Hiba's hair. She is not a detached observer, but someone who is watching and recording from the inside—from the intimate spaces of these women—bearing witness to their stories, and recording the unwinding of their thoughts and the passage of their feelings in everyday moments. A space is opened between the seer and the seen. As the camera places the viewers in proximity with the film's subjects, it closes the distance that separates them, and breaks the boundary that divides the "us" of the viewers and the "them" of the subjects represented. Viewers are solicited to engage in a practice of looking beyond that of detached observation; they are immersed in the intimacy of the women and drawn into their internal worlds as witnesses, affectively experiencing their pain, fear, and isolation.

Raja's hand (left) and Hiba's eyes (right). Still Images, *Chaos* (source: https://www.chaos-film.com)

Fattahi privileges extreme and lingering close-ups in her filming of her subjects. Her camera zooms in on a hand, on a face, or on parts of a face (especially eyes), as if searching for clues in the details of the women's bodies that it is observing to understand their grief and alienation, as if looking for traces of, windows to, or points of contact with their inner worlds/wars. Here, the signifiers of war's violence are not the typical images of the corpses or damaged bodies of Syrians that are circulated by global media. Fattahi counters this objectification/commodification of vulnerable bodies by shifting the register of visibility through

[65] Ibid.

which violence is typically represented. In *Chaos*, a hand, a face, an eye become indexes of the violence that these women have experienced, making this violence present, visible, perceptible to the viewers. During a discussion about her film, Fattahi explicitly expresses her commitment to represent social violence in a different way. "How can you feel violence without seeing it? How can you feel violence without showing it?" are some of the questions she grappled with in this film. One way is through the intimate aesthetic strategy she mobilizes in *Chaos* to capture the inner feelings and worlds of the women she's filming, and to translate them visually. *Chaos* stages social violence not as an event (as Western media do), but as a process that structures the social and embodied life of women. By attaching this violence—and the resulting suffering—to singular female bodies, *Chaos* counters the anonymization produced by media reports which tend to abstract and generalize suffering and to reduce Syrians to the categories of victims. The film reveals Fattahi's response to what media scholar Krista Lynes refers to as "the failures of certain forms of mediation to transgress the limitations of icons of suffering, with their diminishment of the complexity of different modes of survival and sociality around the world."[66] What demands are *Chaos*' images making on their viewers? These images invite a shift in the relation between the viewer and images of suffering. I want to argue that rather than lending themselves to be consumed as sensational and spectacular images, these images solicit the viewers to make sense of and reckon with violence and suffering together with the filmmaker and her film's subjects, and thus, to open themselves to the possibility of solidarity and politics.

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I want to go back to the notion of bearing witness. Mounzer traces the root of the Arabic verb "to witness" to sh-h-d. She writes:

> From "to witness," we get *shahed*, the one who witnesses; *mashhad*, the spectacle or the scene, but also *shaheed*, martyr; *istishhad*, to be martyred, to die for a cause. As if the act of bearing witness, followed to the end of one of its branches, snaps under the weight of what is seen, and you fall to your death. As if to die for a cause in Arabic is to bear witness to something until it annihilates the self.[67]

To translate, for Mounzer, is an active engagement that simultaneously entails an active surrender. A surrender to the words of the writer, and to the meanings, memories, feelings,

[66] Lynes, "Decolonizing Corporeality," 45.
[67] Mounzer, "War in Translation."

sensations, experiences, and thoughts that these words carry. A surrender that takes the form of embodiment, where the translator's body becomes a vessel to which these meanings, memories, feelings, sensations, experiences, and thoughts are transferred. The translator's body surrenders. The translator's body takes in. The translator's body embodies. The translator's body carries over, crossing from one language to another. And in that process, the translator's body is transformed. For as Mounzer contends, a translator does not/cannot emerge unscathed from the "messy" and "bloody" and "agonizing" process of translation. The act of translation is akin to a communion, or a commingling, between the translator and the writer. But this communion is not without violence, because it requires the undoing and reconstitution of the writer's words in the translator's voice and in another language/vocabulary that is foreign to them. This communion also necessitates the (momentarily) annihilation of the translator by the writer, undoing them in return.[68]

In her essay, Mounzer includes excerpts from her translation of the dispatches written in Arabic by Syrian women. In these excerpts, the "I" refers to Mounzer and to all the different Syrian women whose words and experiences she's translating. The "I" is at once singular and communal. The "I" is multiple, telling at once individual stories (including Mounzer's) and a collective history. And as Mounzer's "I" becomes indistinguishable from the "I" of the other women, her body vibrates, sobs, and loses its breath. It registers their suffering, anguish, pain, it registers their memories, it registers their stories, it registers and retells them all in her own voice and words, and re-emerges from this process of translation scarred, but with expanded knowledge, understanding, and consciousness that are beyond self and language.

Chaos also mediates a process of becoming. While the figures of Bachmann and the doppelganger are meant to protect her—by offering her a way to eschew a direct confrontation with her own trauma—her act of translating Raja's and Hiba's stories into audiovisual testimonies entail a comingling of self and other, an act of communion where the "I" becomes multiple and communal. As she bears witness to Raja's and Hiba's suffering and traumatic experiences, taking these experiences in to carry it over to the viewers, Fattahi is transformed. In the scene before last, Fattahi follows Hiba into the forest, as Hiba recounts the story of a severe bipolar episode she had suffered. Deciding on a whim to walk to Germany, Hiba had left her apartment in Sweden barefoot and underdressed, and on her way, got chased by the police and

[68] Ibid.

got lost in a thick forest. The forest, as Hiba describes it, is a terrifying and disorienting place; an "abstract and featureless geography" where one loses oneself, one's references, and one's sense of direction. As Hiba is telling Fattahi her story, Fattahi's body gives out on her. It is as if the weight of what she's hearing, seeing, and feeling becomes unbearable. The frightening feelings of loss, disorientation, and isolation that Hiba experiences in the forest amplifies Fattahi's own feelings of loss, disorientation, and alienation that are attached to her lived experience as a Syrian woman in exile. She can't hold herself together anymore. She snaps under the weight of what she is witnessing and falls, with her camera still in her hand. This shaky shot captures the moment that Fattahi is crossing over from herself to embody the pain of the translated voice, to embody Hiba's trauma which becomes hers, and which also mirrors her own trauma and suffering, her own internal war. In other words, this shaky shot captures the essence of bearing witness. Fattahi's attempt to capture and convey her subjects' feelings into images brings her back to her own wound, and to the need to make sense of it, to find meaning in it—that is, as Mounzer puts it, to witness and to be witnessed, to know and to be known.

Hiba in the forest. Still Images, *Chaos* (source: https://www.chaos-film.com)

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Epilogue

Return

In the introduction to this thesis, I mention that my chapters follow a typical migratory journey for a displaced Syrian: Lebanon as a point of entry, Turkey as a place of transit, the Mediterranean as a space of crossing, and Europe as a destination. I want to go back to this sentence and make an adjustment. Europe is not a destination, but a place of waiting. Waiting out exile. Waiting for war to end. Waiting to return. As the following lines, uttered by the narrator in *Taste of Cement* intimate:

> My Father packed my bags and reached into his pocket.
> He handed me the keys of our home and said:
> When war begins the builders have to leave to another country where the war just ended, waiting until war has swept through their homeland. Then they return to rebuild it.
> Father, I am waiting.

I want to suggest that the migratory trajectories of displaced Syrians are not linear. That they don't move from an "undesirable" point of departure (Syria) to a "desired" point of arrival (whether it is Lebanon, Turkey, Europe, or elsewhere), as dominant discourses on Syrian refugees imply. These are circular trajectories, forced by war and violence, that want to end where they started. The final destination is Syria, even if the return is not possible. What I really want to argue is that these movements were not desired, that they did not want to start in the first place. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller note the highly divergent configurations that shape how "different bodies and communities inhabit and move across familial, national and diasporic locations," while insisting that who moves, why, in what forms and under what conditions *matter.*[1] Voluntary migrations cannot be equated with the forced displacement of people due to violence, war, persecution, and dispossession. The experience of displaced Syrians, as shown in the films discussed here, is not an experience of voluntary movement. It is an experience of forced migration and of exile. As Syrian writer Mas'ab Alnumeiri points out,

[1] Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, Sheller, "Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings," 1.

> Millions of Syrians did not leave their country for tourism, nor to enjoy the picturesque sceneries of the countries they arrived in, bruised and battered. They left behind their wrecked cities, international planes pounding their neighborhoods with heavy bombs, young men going to their deaths, children disturbed by nightmares, mothers crying bitter tears of mourning, futures hanging on gun barrels, and maps carved out by nation-states with cannons and by militias with knives.[2]

Syrians fleeing the war don't want to be displaced. They don't want to be severed from their homeland, language, culture, geography, family, and their social network of neighbors, friends, and relatives. They don't want to be forced to cross borders "illegally," nor to be smuggled across forests, fields, and seas. They don't want to dodge border patrols, police forces, and armed vigilantes. They don't want to leap over fences and run across highways. They don't want to risk their lives. They don't want to face racism and discrimination. They don't want to live in precarious conditions. They don't want to be held in detainment centers or trapped in temporary refugee camps. They don't want to be exploited as cheap labor. They don't want to leave. This is captured by one incredibly poignant image in Rami Farah's *Our Memory Belong to Us* (2021), where we see Yadan, a Syrian activist, walking amongst the ruins of Daraa (his devastated hometown) while holding a sign that reads "I will not be displaced." Yadan, having fled Syria, today lives in exile.

Still image, *Our Memory Belongs to Us*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

Whether in Lebanon, Turkey or Europe, the forced migration of Syrians is dominantly portrayed from the perspective of the nation-state, which constructs migration as a problem or

[2] Alnumeiri, "The Great Exile" (translation from Arabic my own.)

crisis that requires governmental solutions. Solutions to stop, contain, incarcerate, deport, and deter Syrian refugees. As shown in this thesis, media narratives and political discourses in these places justify the marginalization and oppression of Syrian refugees on the basis that they constitute a burden to the state (because they take advantage of the benefits that are reserved to citizens), and/or that they pose a threat (as a foreign element) to the state's security, identity, and economy. Some right-wing public figures and media outlets even rationalize this anti-Syrian refugee stance by suggesting that Syrians *want* to be elsewhere; that they have chosen to move from Syria not because of violence and war, not because their bodies and lives were at risk, not because they have lost everything, but because they want better lives.[3] And while most mainstream media and political discourses do portray Syrians as involuntary displaced by war and violence, the dominant visualizations they generate *still* construct displaced Syrians as unwanted strangers rather than fellow humans and co-members of the same community, and frame the engagement of the state and of citizens with refugees in terms of rejection or temporary hospitality, rather than solidarity and inclusion.

The films discussed here countervisualize by portraying migration from the perspectives of displaced Syrians. These films suggest that Lebanon, Turkey, Europe, or anywhere else where Syrians are currently scattered, are all but transit points. They are not desired destinations. They are spaces of dislocation. While displaced Syrians' mobility is a turbulent living force that disrupts regimes of migration and border control, while their everyday resistance in exile is strong, and while their struggles promise to reconfigure the terms of migration, their longing to be/return home is always present. It is always haunting their experiences of forced migration and exile. In *Chaos*, the doppelganger's ghostly presence in Vienna evokes the filmmaker's feeling of being an outsider in a foreign/strange environment, and her sense of living only as a fragment, only as a shadow of herself in exile. This form of haunted inhabitance is poignantly captured by Hiba, another subject of the film, when she describes her unhomely feeling in/of exile. She casts the unfamiliarity of her place of exile (Sweden) against the familiarity of her home city (Damascus, Syria):

[3] This is in no way an argument that migrants who move in search of better living conditions or to pursue their dreams or desires should not be able to. Rather, it is critique of the hierarchy of deservingness upon which migration policies and practices are based.

> I am used to walls. I am used to noise. I am used to the voices of neighbors. I am used to all the details and noise of the streets. Underneath our house in Damascus, there were three blacksmiths, and next to the house there was a cemetery. That's the environment I come from, not an environment with trees. It's not like a street with a supermarket, buildings, cars, and signposts. There are no signs! There are no signposts to direct you through the abstract geography.

Exile is an abstract geography. Exile is the uprooting of Hiba from her grounded home and her re/dis/location to another site, to another unfamiliar, abstract geography. Exile is abstract because it lacks the references that defined Hiba's experience of home, her feeling of being at home, her memories, and her subjectivity. Exile is, as Syrian writer Mostapha Hayed writes, the "here" where one is always longing for an "elsewhere," the homeland, even if the return is impossible, even if the homeland can also be a place of estrangement.[4] "I want 'there' to be the possible and safe 'here' but exile is everything but that" he adds.[5] This profound feeling of dislocation and gnawing desire for return that inhabits displaced Syrians is also expressed in *Space Refugee*. While Muhammed Faris' speculative project transforms the feelings of loss and dispossession into a hope for a better world/future as it imagines a new home for displaced Syrians in outer space, his fabulation of a free, equal, and just society is haunted by the idea of return. Faris declares:

> I hope we can build cities for [refugees] in space, where there is freedom and dignity, and where there is no tyranny, no injustice…but always, man longs [for] their country and homeland, and will hopefully return to our homeland, with god's will.

In other words, even when exile is a promising possibility, it remains, as Edward Said has argued, "terrible to experience" because it is haunted by loss and a constant sense of estrangement. Said writes that exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted…the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever."[6]

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[4] Hayed, "But I want to be there" (translation from Arabic my own). On homeland as a place of estrangement see for instance the feminist and postcolonial analysis of mobility and belonging offered by Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller in *Uprootings/Regroundings* which complicates the notion of home.
[5] Hayed, "But I want to be there" (translation from Arabic my own).
[6] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 137.

The notion of homeland is a fraught one for sure. Indeed, Said later asks in the same essay: "how, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions?"[7] I can't answer this question, but bring it up to clarify that my argument is not a defence of nationalism, or an insistence that identity can only be geographically and culturally defined. Nor is it an attempt at victimizing Syrian refugees, and denying their desire/willingness/ability to rebuild their lives, and reconstitute their identity and sense of belonging in exile. This is to argue that the visual regime of the Syrian refugee crisis and the politics of fear and racism shadowing border and migration control regimes invisibilize displaced Syrians' lived experiences and realities, their feelings and desires. This is an acknowledgment that displaced Syrians' lives were broken by a radical disruption that has cut them off their land, roots, and past. A recognition that the war in Syria deprived them of the possibility of being with others in communal habitation in Syria, and that the strength of states and their borders (physical and otherwise) deny them that possibility elsewhere, at least for the present moment. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wondered, as he reflected on exile, "Where do I return? Where do I go? Forward was temporary, and backward, beset by temporariness, was scattered."[8] The answer is perhaps, as filmmaker Sara Fattahi suggests, that the only way to return, for now, is through the (fictional) image and the imagination.[9]

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[7] Ibid, 140.
[8] Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence*, 83.
[9] Fattahi and Schiefer, '"A mother and a friend- metaphors for Damascus'." Fattahi's upcoming film, tentatively titled *Calm* is the final part of a trilogy that started with *Coma* (2015) and was followed by Chaos (2018). The new film will explore the possibility of going back to Syria. It will be, as Fattahi explains, "about a woman who decides to go back to her country, and each time she tries to do so, something stops her. The only way to return to my country is in my imagination, which is why I decided the third part of the trilogy will be fictional" (see also Fattahi's Director Talk at Vienna Humanities Festival 2019).

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