

Within this multiplicity and relationality of temporalities, *Vertigo Sea* also projects what Akomfrah calls an “afterlife of the image,” according to which an image, any image, necessarily implies a future. This imaging and viewing-time-to-come define a utopian dimension intrinsic to image making, a virtual futurism embedded in cinema as a political ontology of endless materialization and anticipation. As such, cinema, in Akomfrah’s hands, manifests a protest against finitude, as well as against the idea that representation can totalize experience and colonize significance, as if the image can ever be(come) complete or self-sufficient (which, as we have seen, informs his recent postanthropocentric filmmaking, as much as *Vertigo Sea*’s triptych multiplicity). As Akomfrah contends, artists, as image makers who insist on emancipating the infinite, act as “custodians of a possible future,” implying a future of viewership too, a future reality impacted by the artwork, as well as a future context unanticipated by the filmmaker, which also reveals the present as necessarily incomplete and non-totalizable.³⁸ Developing the same line of thinking, can we not also say that remembering past tragedies and imaging present wrongs—on the world-historical levels of slavery and colonialism, species extinction, nuclear war, and anthropogenic climate disruption—can also, in fact must, entail proposing, even cultivating, alternate futures? If so, perhaps what *Vertigo Sea* offers is, ultimately, optimism, if not without its cruelties: where past injustices have failed to utterly destroy their aftermath, we can maintain hope, despite all, of a different time to come. If that time will not necessarily redeem what has been, then at least, as dramatized by Akomfrah, it insists on holding historical failings within the realm of visibility—so that they will not ever be forgotten in the creation of future alternatives.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACKOUT

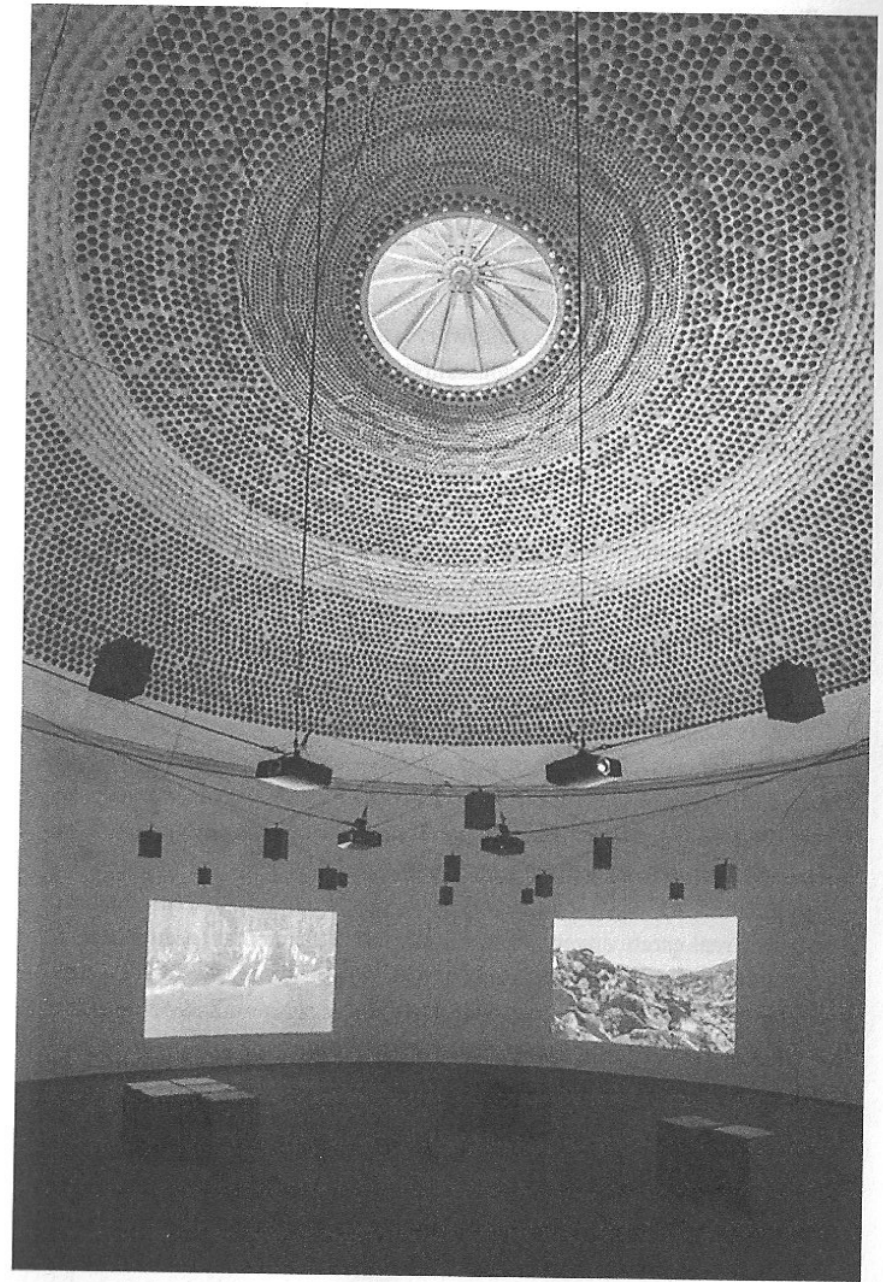
THE NECROPOLITICS OF EXTRACTION

In view of spreading sacrifice zones given over to resource mining, accompanied by exploitative international trade agreements and the finances of debt servitude, what newly mutated forms do the cultural politics of opposition take? And how are artist-activists materializing the images and sounds of decolonial emancipation against late-stage capitalism’s rapacious commodification of anything and everything? With reference to the artworks of Angela Melitopoulos, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ursula Biemann, which variously consider geographies of conflict in such regions as Greece, Puerto Rico, Canada, and Bangladesh, this chapter considers a range of artistic approaches that adopt and extend further an aesthetics of entanglement, drawing together social justice politics and ecological matters of concern. Doing so, these practices reveal complex causalities and effects of global extractivism, offer new imaginaries of intersectionality, and propose forms of movement building and solidarity with those on the frontlines of opposition.

WITHDRAWAL OF VALUE AND AGENCY

An epic four-channel video installation of 109 minutes, commissioned by and shown at *documenta 14*, Angela Melitopoulos's *Crossings* (2017) presents an interlinking of people and multispecies environments, matter and history, mutating finance and shifting agencies, defining a globalized political ecology of inequality and dispossession. Made with collaborators Angela Anderson, Maurizio Lazzarato, Pascale Criton, Oktay Ince, and Paula Cabo Guevara, the piece offers several complex intersections, which build complexity through images and sounds, one such intersection focusing on the financial interests arrayed around the planned industrial extraction of gold, copper, and rare earths from the Skouries mine in the Halkidiki Peninsula, near Thessaloniki in northern Greece. That extraction site has created a socioecological conflict with locals and environmentalists—as well as with forests, rivers, and their more-than-human inhabitants—that continues to this day. Those exploitative interests, seeking to dig out materials from the earth and transform them into economic value, are shown in Melitopoulos's work to connect directly to the EU-driven withdrawal of political agency from the Greek citizenry. As dramatized by the astonishing reversal of the 2015 bailout referendum by Alexis Tsipras of the formerly considered left-wing Syriza government—voted into office explicitly to challenge EU dominance of domestic policy—the popular rejection of austerity economics imposed by Brussels as the condition of continuing membership in the Eurozone was itself rejected by the government at the behest of European financial demands (what Syriza's former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, a political casualty of that very reversal, likened to neocolonial “gunboat diplomacy”¹). These two formations—the opening up of Greece to transnational mining interests and the betrayal of popular sovereignty by treacherous EU politics—speak to the global conditions of extraction today and enter into direct correlation, as well as conflict, in *Crossings*. In this regard, the video reveals a politico-ecological territory much like Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, considered in chapter 1, but does so in ways much more analytical and discursive, particularly given its researched and theoretical voice-over commentary on the conditions it investigates.

In one of *Crossings*' passages, environmental activists are shown passionately protesting the wanton destruction of regional forests and rivers by mining companies, including Eldorado Gold of Canada and the Greek subsidiary Hellas Gold, and are seen to be brutally suppressed by



2.1 Angela Melitopoulos, *Crossings*, 2017 (installation, *documenta 14*).
Courtesy of the artist.

militarized police. With these scenes, we confront the widespread fact that police charged with enforcing law tend to protect corporate power rather than defend democratic will, as state violence compounds the agonies of political disenfranchisement and material dispossession. As such, *Crossings* visualizes nothing less than the complex workings of extractivism, the dominant paradigm of advanced capitalism. According to theorists Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, extractivism identifies both historical and current modes of wealth accumulation based upon the withdrawal of raw materials and life forms from the planet's surface, depths, and biosphere in the production of financial value, which runs in coordination with expansive politico-economic and sociotechnological systems pledged to its operations.² Fundamentally, extractivism comprises a calculus of accumulation by dispossession, building on the terms of David Harvey, a withdrawal without corresponding deposit (except in the form of waste, disease, and death), which transforms whatever it touches—be that mines, forests, rivers, oceans, or human and nonhuman life—into economic value, employing whatever means at its disposal, including machinery, architecture, labor, finance, logistics, and media.³ For Macarena Gómez-Barris, the global “extractive zone” identifies “the violence that capitalism does to reduce, constrain, and convert life into commodities.”⁴ While that extractive zone for her is largely located in the Global South, a more comprehensive analysis of its dispersed and interconnected processes would necessarily extend it to all reaches of the planet. Indeed, for Mezzadra and Neilson—whose take is useful particularly for their expansive definition not limited to resource mining—it includes virtual processes as well as dense materials, prison labor and debt servitude, bioprospecting, genetics, and informatics. It drives real estate speculation, tuition and rent increases, as much as structural neglect and privatization, and bends policy and trade agreements to its will. Extractivism consequently designates a common motivating logic of institutions, museums, universities, corporations, and states within late neoliberal capitalism, organizing their trade deals, social forms, labor policies, data mining, energy systems, and technologies. As a global formation, “the ‘new urban frontier’ is continually opening in diverse contexts, prompted by the appropriation and expropriation of spaces, values, infrastructures, and forms of life that are submitted to capitalist valorization.”⁵ It is this multivalent frontier that is the focus of *Crossings*.

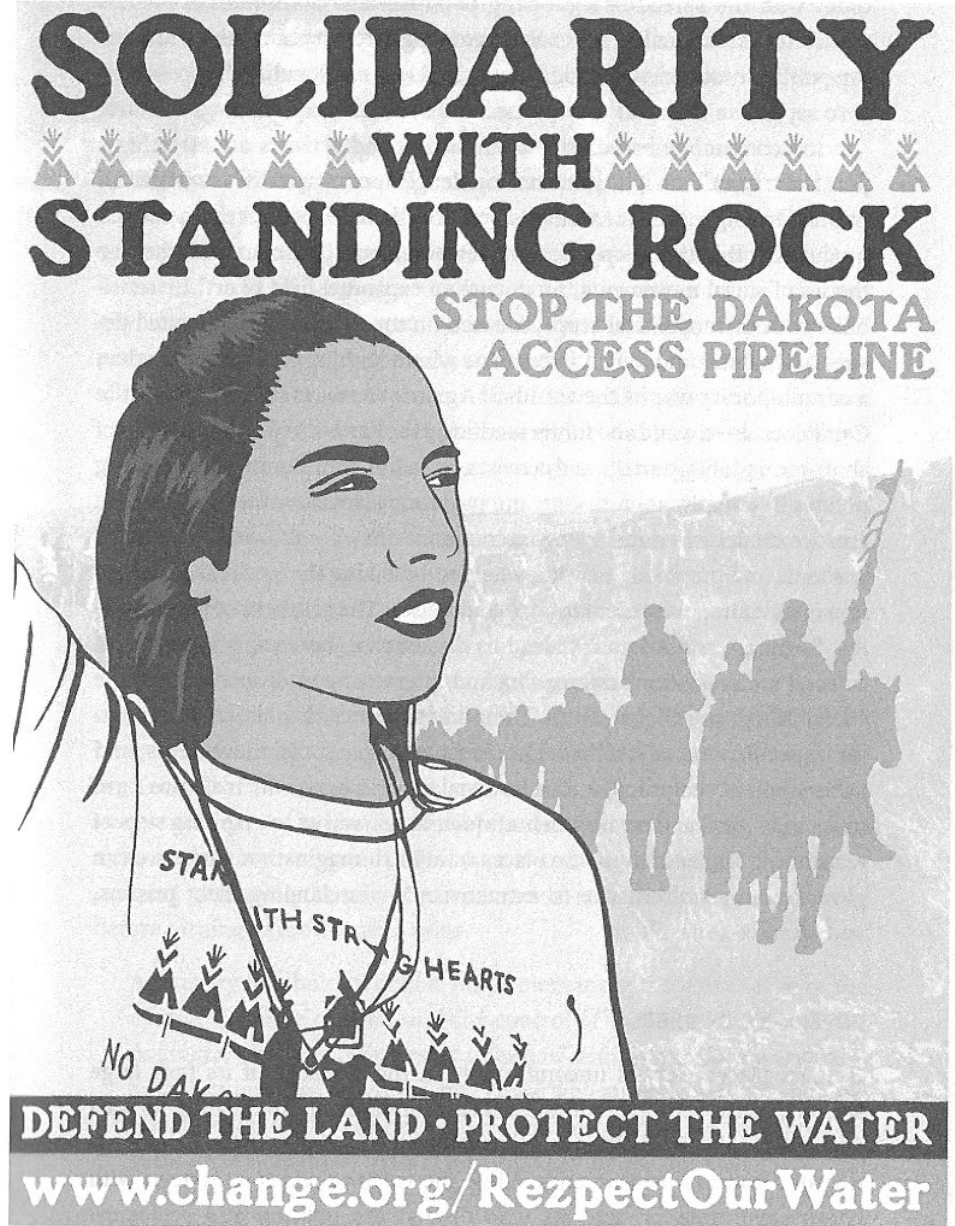
WAR OF THE WORLDS

While Melitopoulos's video may be focused on the case of Greece, the extractive logic it uncovers is pervasive worldwide in the global movement toward illiberal politics, authoritarian economics, and growing socioeconomic inequality. The current US administration is representative of this nexus, where disaster capitalism and expanding sacrifice zones converge under its reign, linking politico-financial and natural resource exploitation to the overwhelming benefit of corporate, elite wealth, facilitated by corrupt governance. Such an arrangement not only mobilizes disasters for further neoliberalization (particularly intensifying its investment logics of privatization, pro-corporate trade deals, and the elimination of welfare and social spending) but also produces countless disasters in its wake. For instance, the 2017 US tax plan, forced through Congress with little public support, lowers corporate rates from 35 to 21 percent, constituting a trillion-dollar transfer to the wealthiest, just as the same bill opens the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve to oil, gas, and coal drilling and exploration (with formerly protected US coasts to follow). The maneuver joins the pillaging of public finances to natural resource mining, moving the US toward historically unprecedented levels of environmental threat and economic disparity (a logic that was repeated in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic).⁶ According to this formation, again global in character, taxes are weaponized in asymmetrical class war, with the financial gains used to subsidize the fossil fuel industry. Politics become reduced to a massive police operation, as multitudes lose faith in representative systems, and not surprisingly, enviro-economic structural adjustments are accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of civil liberties and press freedoms.⁷ At the same time, democracy, as a political project of popular sovereignty, regulatory authority, and accountability, becomes increasingly hollowed out by corporate power, economic inequality, and corruption, as civil activism becomes increasingly subject to control, repression, and illegality.⁸ Indeed, environmentalists are exposed to growing state violence and extrajudicial killings, as dramatized by the case of Berta Cáceres in Honduras, who joined with the Indigenous Lenca people in waging a grassroots campaign that successfully pressured Chinese state-owned Sinohydro, the world's largest dam builder, to pull out of the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project in the Central American nation. She is one of thousands of activists murdered in recent years, and in a country operating under the US-supported 2009 deposal of democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya. Moreover,

her case forms part of an international trend of increasing levels of state and corporate violence visited upon environmentalists, Indigenous activists, and independent journalists opposed to extractivism's current world order.⁹

In this antagonism that pits petrocapiatalist states against land and water protectors and in many instances Indigenous peoples—from Greece to Brazil, Honduras to the Philippines, Indonesia to Russia—biopolitics (the governance of human lives) transforms into necropolitics (the administration of death) and scales up and down to geontopolitics (the governance of the relations between life and nonlife), constituting an ascendant politics of earth-being in our age of extraction.¹⁰ Such is clear with the #NoDAPL struggle at Standing Rock, which figures as one recent hypervisible focal point of Blockadia, the expansive and transnational conflict zone meeting the extractive zone at every turn in which grassroots movements are set in opposition to petrocapiatalist developments and the invasions of its infrastructure.¹¹ In 2016 members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, part of the Oceti Sakowin, joined by numerous other Indigenous nations and countless allies, challenged the construction of the Dakota Access Pipe Line (DAPL), expressing popular resistance to both the exploitation of fossil fuels and their placing natural environments and water sources at risk, and the negation of Indigenous rights in the face of ongoing neocolonial land grabs and domineering corporate-state sovereignty. A central part of the struggle involved challenging the corporate-state complex's attempt to control and manage the difference between life and nonlife—specifically when it comes to oil and water. When water protectors insisted upon *mni wiconi!*, or water is life! / water is alive!, in the face of militarized police advances and private security assaults, shielded bulldozers, chemical weapons, and menacing police dogs, the event constituted both a biopolitical rift over human rights, with necropolitical implications, and a geontopolitical challenge to the neoliberal logic whereby elements, environments, and nonhuman life forms are violently reduced to commodities within the unfolding drama of an ecologically devastating and climate-changing economy of accumulation by dispossession.¹² In this case, the accumulation of financial wealth brought about the dispossession of ecosystem reproductive capacities and the dispossession of Indigenous self-determination.

At a time when contemporary politicians increasingly flirt with neo-fascist (alt-right) formations, events such as Standing Rock's #NoDAPL struggle speak to the delegitimizing of liberal electoral politics as it merges with antidemocratic corporate power. The situation continues to unfold



2.2 Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes, *Solidarity with Standing Rock*, 2016. Courtesy of the Just Seeds Collective and the artists.

today with the spread of right-wing populism and authoritarian politics worldwide. Yet there has also been a growing intensity of thinking and living politically otherwise outside that domain—as at Standing Rock—which is to say in the civic realms of mutual aid societies, experimental cultures, and the community-based arts, where artists and activists are asserting a politico-aesthetic imagination that challenges petrocapialist extractivism. In proliferating instances, aesthetic practices themselves shift character and modulate within this geopolitical framework; the artistic blurs with the aesthetics of social movements, producing an expanded field of artistic sensibility with cosmopolitical scope, focused on the formation of liberated desires and values, and joined in contexts where nothing less is at stake than a contemporary war of the worlds.¹³ Against the extractivist logic of the Capitalocene—a world and future sacrificing the Earth itself to the interests of short-term profits—artists and activists, as well as communities set on doing politics differently, are restoring and inventing alternative forms of life and creative modes of ethical being-in-common. They are drawing on existing wisdoms and proposing new knowledges, remaking the world as we know it in imagination, representation, and practice. The artworks of Melitopoulos, Biemann, and Allora & Calzadilla do just that, covering a spectrum of cultural manifestations referencing and intervening in diverse sites in the Global North and Global South. Their practices include political documentary, speculative analysis linked to insurrectionary social movements, and gallery-bound sculptural and audiovisual experiments, which all give form to sociopolitical and environmental violence, as well as to inspiring sites of resistance.¹⁴ Indeed, these are places of radical imagination where we can glimpse futures alternative to extractivism's wastelands, debt prisons, and sacrifice zones.¹⁵

GOVERNING BY DEBT

Crossings places viewers uncomfortably in the crossfire of its four large screens, constructing an audiovisual confrontation approximating its war-zone geography (even if this is ultimately unapproachable in the secure setting of a gallery environment). While the video provides interviews with Greek environmental activists who discuss the political and ecological stakes of their struggle, it also expands that rift zone to Greece's refugee crisis, including the views of migrants interned at the Idomeni camp, located north of Thessaloniki, and at the Moria Camp on the island of Lesbos, just

off Turkey's coast. Migrants speak of life made impossible in the deteriorating conditions in their home countries of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, each variously torn apart by US-supported political authoritarianism, endless war, ethno-religious conflict, and soul-killing impoverishment. It becomes clear that migration is itself symptomatic of the social breakdown that occurs in the face of political tyranny, economic inequality, and environmental-military violence—in other words, the very extractivist order that has had such devastating effects on homelands in the Middle East and Africa. Asylum seekers tell of desperate conditions in the infamous camps, the cruelty of police and guards, and the interminable waits that make their experience of dislocation (ultimately a dislocation from existential security) allegedly worse than life in places like war-torn Afghanistan. While these circumstances explain the many protests against camp conditions and migration policies—some of which are shown in *Crossings*—Melitopoulos's video also sees in these demonstrations contemporary echoes of ancient slave rebellions staged in the same region. The Laurion mines of southern Attica, like those in Halkidiki, were mined by forced labor more than two thousand years ago, as the video points out, and rebellions then, as now, materialize(d) demands for political transformation.¹⁶

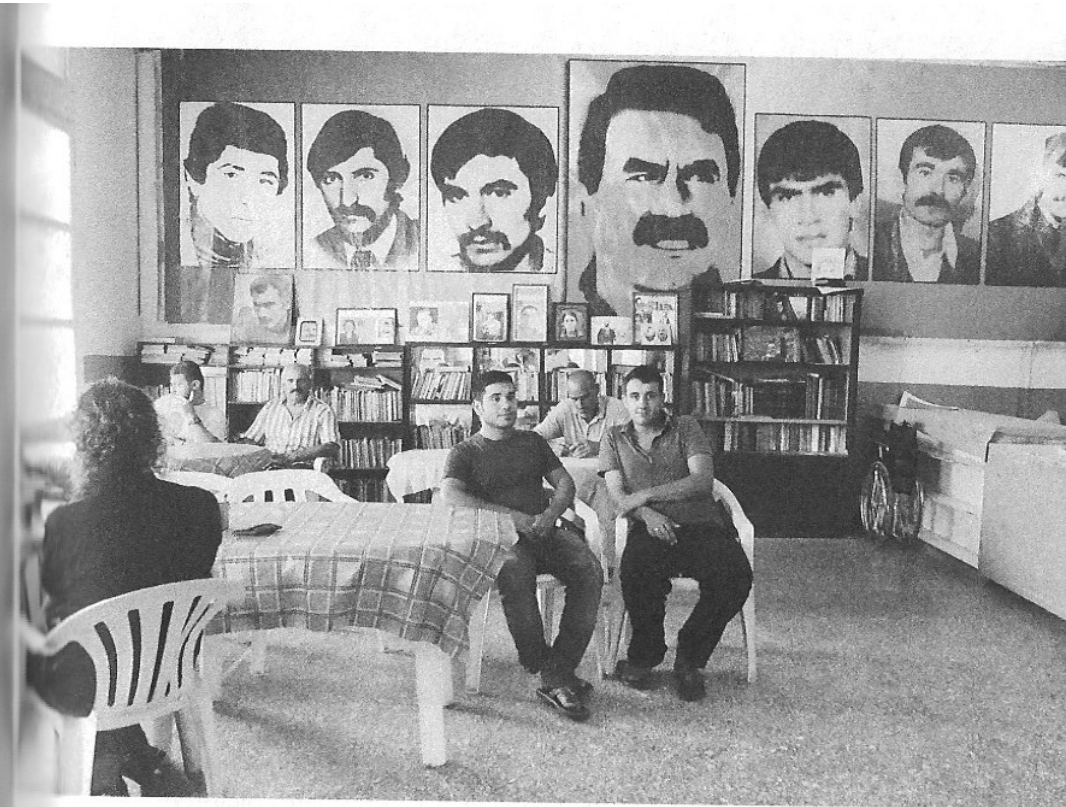
The cries of resistance are thus the “signs and sounds of an epochal reconfiguration,” as *Crossings* observes. “Where are we going? What has happened? Here we are in a land of passages where various wars are crossing: economic, strategic, racial, and sexual wars,” runs Melitopoulos's voice-over near the beginning of the film. It continues its analytic progression, spoken over images of a Greek port and migrant transit point—one crossing portraying the microcosm of a world-transforming global event—before turning to the Skouries mine.

A territory that holds a double experimentation: the governance by the destructive force of debt, and the control of mobility of refugees and migrants. We are not witnessing a clash of civilizations but a war of subjectivities installed by capitalism. Those who struggle with the demons of national identity, racism, sexism, and xenophobia are facing the experience of departure, trials of poverty; they are the ones who have trust in the unknown. The “Wretched of the Earth” who trek towards the different Norths are halted by frozen and fearful European subjectivities. In the Chaosmosis of these times, they open possibilities that many others do not want to see. So they are surrounded by walls and shielded from

vision. The imposed politics of debt is an economy that aims at the objects of war but with other means: Wars that are abandoning arms and military conflict. They become an affair of politicians, scientists, and even bankers. Wars that are not merely bloody, and the means of conducting them are not solely military. Economy, and notably financial economy, has replaced military means and given rise to “nonbloody” wars.

Adding to this incisive account of newly emerging economic warfare, *Crossings* includes interviews with refugee camp inhabitants who are members of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK, Kurdistan Workers’ Party), which continues to defend autonomous zones beyond state sovereignty and against extremist formations like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northern Syria and Turkey. In these interviews, migrants discuss their revolutionary politics and affirmatively profeminist culture as well as their support for Kurdish leader and PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, who, remarkably, was influenced by US social ecologist Murray Bookchin and his 1960s and 1970s anarchist theories of libertarian municipalism and environmental well-being.¹⁷ Set in crisis conditions like these, the militant implications of current social movements become explicit. Just as one older Halkidiki-based antimining activist is shown admitting his hopelessness regarding the possibilities of conventional political transformation in the present antidemocratic EU system, speculating that violent resistance may be the only remaining response in Greece to current “nonbloody” wars, PKK refugee camp residents sing songs in praise of revolutionary guerrillas set to the Greek bouzouki. In the brutal conditions of war fought by economic means, wherein debt is a weapon of mass destruction and migration a descent into powerlessness, life must be defended by any means necessary. Such militant convictions lead *Crossings* to its unsettling concluding speculation: if democratic voting offers no effective means of politico-ecological phase shift—whether in ancient slave-holding states of patriarchal imperialism or in today’s postneoliberal unfolding of authoritarian capitalism—then we must look beyond electoral politics, to a diversity of tactics, for ways of reclaiming justice, equality, and environmental livability, inventing new solidarities and collective efforts on those bases. In pointing this out, *Crossings* provides a crucial step in bringing these various intersections to the foreground, articulating both the stakes and the promise of emergent formations at the inextricable juncture of politics, economy, and ecology.

most beautiful has allow to be a woman in the world of the north of the mountain, and in the north of the mountain.



2.3 Angela Melitopoulos, *Crossings*, 2017 (still showing Lavrion migrant camp with PKK supporters and a poster image of Abdullah Öcalan). Courtesy of the artist.

CLIMATE CRIMES

Similarly advancing a relational geographies approach to global petrocapi-talist extraction, and with an explicit focus on the politico-ecological en-tanglements between North and South, Ursula Biemann’s short video *Deep Weather* (2013) begins by depicting the topography of Canada’s Alberta Tar Sands, one of the greatest sources of climate disruption on the planet and another conflict zone. On the grounds of what was once a pristine boreal forest, corporations have industrialized an area roughly the size of England, mining dirty and hard-to-access hydrocarbons in the form of bitumen, a heavy, black oil mixed with clay, sand, and water, whose processing requires intense fossil fuel energy and leaves all sorts of toxic leftovers on the land. In the process of clearing the forest’s biodiverse ecology—the critical zone



2.4 Ursula Biemann, *Deep Weather*, 2013 (still). Courtesy of the artist.

of life commonly denigrated as “overburden” by the mining industry—corporations have transformed the land into what Biemann’s video terms so many “carbon geologies.” Doing so, extraction firms such as Conoco-Phillips, Petro-Canada, and ExxonMobil have brought ruin to the natural environment and heavily impacted the lives of First Nations peoples who live nearby, among whom cases of cancer, asthma, diabetes, and mental illness caused by air and water pollution have risen dramatically over the last decade. This includes the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN), for whom “the land is the essence of the ACFN’s culture, values, and spirituality,” and who have filed grievances against Shell for practicing ecocide as well as against the Canadian government for reneging on historical treaties and failing to protect the health of Indigenous populations (though so far these lawsuits have been without success).¹⁸

Deep Weather forms part of Biemann’s extensive research-based video practice that has investigated several other sites of extractivism—including *Forest Law* (2014), co-created with Paulo Tavares, which examines petrocapi-talist drilling in the Ecuadorian Amazon along with Indigenous resistance



2.5 Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, *Forest Law*, 2014 (installation shot). Courtesy of the artists.

that adopts a rights-of-nature defense; and *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012), which considers water politics along the Nile and explores how water engineering relates to local agroecologies, the hydropower of farmer collectives, and revolutionary politics.¹⁹ The video begins by providing aerial shots of the vast oil fields in the Athabasca River region. Narrated by the artist in a whispered voice-over (or rather, a hushed and humbled voice-under, as if personifying nonhuman being, or the Earth herself), the audio track speculates about the geological impacts of these corporate activities both locally and globally:

Day and night they mine the black sediments and boil the Athabasca water to separate the tar from the clay. The toxic fluids collect in lakes where rhythmic explosions keep the birds from bathing in acid. The wildlife has retreated, the traplines are empty, the elders call the spirits, the young ones sing rap songs, and the acid wind’s hissing, “Evolution isn’t fast enough. Mutate!” For a hundred more years, there is enough stuff here for heavy fuel that will bring toxic clouds over the boreal woods and continue to warm and swell the seas, no longer to be witnessed but elsewhere, in equatorial zones.

Offering a meteorological visualization of similar environmental dynamics, research architect Adrian Lahoud has undertaken in a separate context a geospatial analysis-cum-artistic project linking aerosol emissions, including carbon and sulfates, in the Northern Hemisphere, with desertification and warming in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. His conclusions show how “climate change” is far from uniform in impact and results in unevenly distributed environmental consequences. Drawing on high-resolution NASA computer modelings of the atmospheric circulation of natural and industry-made particulates, as assembled by William Putman of NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, this interconnected system constitutes, for Lahoud, “a new geopolitical cartography that ties together distant fates, linking industrialization in the North to deprivation [and climate disruption] in the South.”²⁰ More, his modeling of forensic climatology provides a means for addressing what Lahoud calls “climate crime,” where the perpetrators include not only the petrocapiatist industry but also UN climate negotiators who institute global warming targets based on uniform averaging, but which spell future disaster for underdeveloped regions in the South owing to higher predicted regional temperatures. Doing so, he, like Biemann, opens the term *climate* to juridico-political definition, one that in his case amounts to nothing less than a crime and transgression against African populations, against more-than-human life, and against the Earth. While 2 degrees Celsius warming may represent the internationally agreed limit for near-future global averages, different regions are predicted to be more or less affected. That abstract figure seems relatively innocuous. However, the difference between 1.5 and 2.0 degrees Celsius warming has been calculated to correspond to approximately 150 million human lives, designating people who would die from air pollution alone (disproportionately affecting the underresourced and impoverished), according to earth science professor Drew Shindell, which, as David Wallace-Wells points out, is the equivalent of twenty-five Holocausts.²¹ Such daunting figures belie the celebratory tone of UN climate agreements, which generally exclude the voices of the powerless in underdeveloped nations. Yet the results will be profound. In the case of the common UN-agreed scenario of 2 degrees warming, “Africa will burn,” according to Sudanese diplomat Lumumba Di-Aping and Nigerian environmentalist Nnimmo Bassey, whose activism has exposed a new order of politico-environmental violence practiced through “weapons of math destruction,” indicting the abstract calculations of these selectively international deliberations (De-Aping’s claim, made against negotiators



2.6 Ursula Biemann, *Deep Weather*, 2013 (still). Courtesy of the artist.

at COP 15, United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009, was part of the inspiration for Lahoud’s project).²² The problem is that, given their very obtuse character, the agreements and their implications seemingly surpass the ability of any court at present to prosecute the crimes—particularly at a time when agency and culpability are distributed across complex systems of information, regulation, and governance (which not only includes the antidemocratic power politics of transnational assemblies like the UN’s but also increasingly cybernetic and algorithmic forms of artificial intelligence built into climate modeling systems).²³ Proposing cases for future justice, the visualizations of Lahoud are prefigurative, and Biemann’s *Deep Weather* provides a case study of additional evidence.

One equatorial zone currently impacted by Tar Sands emissions is portrayed in the second half of Biemann’s video, where the socio-environmental consequences of fossil fuel climate breakdown are witnessed in Bangladesh’s Ganges-Brahmaputra delta. Bringing the camera down to a human-scaled ground level, *Deep Weather* shows the collective efforts of coastal communities to construct barriers against the rising seas. Some volunteers (generally

women) are seen packing sandbags with mud by hand, while others (mostly men) deliver them to the growing seawall, slowly building up the buttresses to contain the water. Motivated to protect their homes and communities from submersion, their manual labor contrasts sharply with the high-tech extractive infrastructure in Canada, as the unequal access to technology and land-engineering resources is dramatically juxtaposed. Providing another version of forensic climatology, a climatology of techno-natural entanglement, Biemann's relational and speculative analysis demonstrates how disparate geographies are linked by industrialization and climate disruption. The monumental effort carried out by Bangladeshi collective labor represents nothing less, in Biemann's video, than a human externality of the oil industry, including the Tar Sands, a consequence generally disavowed by corporations and states alike (the distant climate change impacts of extraction, for instance, failed to mitigate the pro-drilling policies of both the conservative Stephen Harper and the liberal Justin Trudeau administrations in Canada²⁴). Andrew Ross, in explaining the guiding principles of the climate justice movement, asks, "Is there a way to make rich nations pay climate debts to developing countries that have already felt the effects of climate change?"²⁵ Yet while this logic is solid, in envisioning a future of environmental justice, one wonders what form of debt could possibly repay such impacts as those shown in *Deep Weather*.

With a predicted sea-level rise of three feet—a low estimate for near-future impacts—20 percent of Bangladesh would be under water, displacing more than thirty million people, including Dhaka's coastal population of sixteen million.²⁶ Indeed, the Bay of Bengal is the largest delta region on Earth, and when its ocean surges fifty to sixty miles inland during storms, the ocean salinity already contaminates drinking water supplies and renders agricultural land less fertile. What is the cost of those lost homes and livelihoods? The result spells disaster for the region and will propel future waves of intensified climate migration. As Christian Parenti observes of this region, "perhaps the modern era's first climate refugees were the five hundred thousand Bangladeshis left homeless when half of Bhola Island flooded in 2005," not far from the delta where Biemann shot her footage.²⁷ By 2050, some twenty-two million people may be forced from their homes in Bangladesh owing to climate change. The response of neighboring India to this threatened social destabilization is to construct a militarized wall along its 2,500-mile border with Bangladesh, while the country's Hindu Right are mobilizing for the mass expulsion of Muslim immigrants in the present,

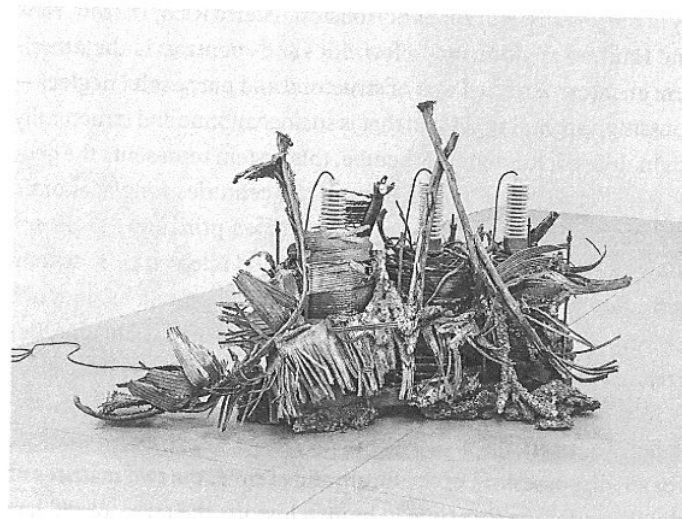
initiating a massive project of ethnic cleansing. Although Biemann's video does not confront these precise developments, it does diagram migration's larger causes, placing them in visual relation to their effects. It thereby builds a framework for understanding displacement that implicates Western industry and petroculturalism in relation to one flashpoint of militarized conflict and demographic upheaval in the Global South.

In recent years, the anthropogenic melting of Himalayan glaciers has at times swollen rivers that disastrously pour into Bangladesh from Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and India, even while the loss of ice threatens future water supplies. Swaths of the Sundarbans—the world's largest mangrove forest located in the Ganges River delta—have already begun to disappear in the rising seas. How can we visualize such scenes of territorial loss, as the Earth's topography transforms in ways that are incomprehensible in magnitude and infinite in complexity? Though Biemann's video helps in modeling artistic research methodologies, it is only a beginning. Climate breakdown defies the imagination and its representational powers, part of what the writer Amitav Ghosh calls our era of "the great derangement" of climates and culture alike, even while many artists are nonetheless making efforts at creative intervention, struggling against the tide.²⁸ Along with Brazil's Amazon, Montana's Glacier National Park, and the Congo Basin, the Sundarbans are considered vanishing geographies, which shockingly offer further sites of commodification via climate-change tourism, exemplifying extraction's general logic of destructive production and productive destruction—nothing less than a race to the bottom in a world of finite lands and resources. Faced with catastrophic territorial loss, our market system—"free" merely from regulation, in effect—can seemingly only see opportunities to intensify its economic logic of scarcity: the less land available, the more it will be worth. Indeed, the global travel industry is taking note, increasingly highlighting those areas as "destinations to see before they disappear," through its own aesthetics of destruction designed to attract disaster tourists.²⁹ Biemann's poignant analysis of the causes of climate disaster contests such fatalistic narratives: not only does *Deep Weather* depict the collective efforts to fortify geographical defenses, it also identifies the industrial sources of catastrophic environmental transformation, and, against them, portrays the building of the collaborative agencies of resistance.

DISASTER CAPITALISM

An alternative to the documentary-essay approaches of Melitopoulos and Biemann—where video-footage making truth-claims unfolds within speculative-analytical frameworks of critical interpretation—Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's recent work assembles an audiovisual and sculptural poetics that draws together politics and ecology, particularly as they co-materialize in the scars of past and ongoing extractive violence in Puerto Rico. Theirs is also an intersectionalist aesthetic with materialist roots, formed of fragmented machinery and industrial architecture drawn from sites of international trade, transportation infrastructure, and energy generation. Their sculptural piece *Blackout* (2017) presents a large section of an electromagnetic power transformer that exploded in Puerto Rico in 2016. The explosion led to one of the many power failures that have plagued the island in recent years; scandalously, the one in summer of 2017, six months after the hurricane season hobbled the electricity system, left a majority of Puerto Ricans still without power. The fragments of ceramic insulators and transformer coils that appear in *Blackout* were sourced from the Aguirre Power Plant in Salinas, a station operated by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA). Chronically (and possibly strategically) underfunded as a national utility set up in 1941, and nominated recently for privatization (where structural neglect primes the market for institutional investment), PREPA is also one of the largest bond issuers responsible for the island's current and growing \$74 billion debt. *Blackout* draws these strands together, giving experimental form to the joining of debt servitude and energy production, as climate breakdown and petrocapi-talism converge.

As the artists make clear in their research notes for the piece, creditors of the island's debt include US investment firms and vulture hedge funds that profit by recuperating dues, even if they come at the expense of brutal structural adjustments, not dissimilar to the debt subjection of Greece.³⁰ Consequently, Puerto Rico's economy, controlled currently by an unelected Financial Management and Oversight Board appointed by the US Congress in 2016, according to the stipulations of PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), siphons resources from the country's public university system, hospitals, pensions, infrastructure maintenance, and public schools (179 were closed in that year alone, and even more recently) and redirects the funds to creditors, effectively placing profits over people. The result is what some call the formation of a debt colony,



2.7 Allora & Calzadilla, *Blackout*, 2017. Courtesy of the artists.

which is only exacerbated by the island's environmental misfortunes.³¹ Serving as a US colony from 1898 until 1952, Puerto Rico has existed as a commonwealth since then, one beholden to the mainland's interests according to the conditions of economic servitude. While the island's economic configuration, implemented over decades of US policy and constitutional law, has produced a situation of massive indebtedness, it simultaneously structurally excludes the option of declaring bankruptcy, which is commonly available to US cities and corporations in financial duress, and instead prioritizes loan repayments over social welfare expenditures.³² The frayed, mangled, and corroded body of Allora & Calzadilla's resonant sculpture presents a state of material decomposition that sources and expresses this depraved politico-financial and socio-environmental situation, precisely embodying these unjust economic distortions, structural disfigurements, and legal maladjustments, revealing them for the massive failure they are.

Some activists believe that the overwhelming debt—approximately \$123 billion, when factoring in the country's \$49 billion pension burden—is simply unserviceable or even illegal. These opponents are demanding debt forgiveness or at least economic development first, though the Oversight Board, beholden to corporate stakeholders, will likely continue to do everything in its powers to guarantee immediate repayment before all else. Others contend that with ever more multitudes subjected to politico-economic disenfranchisement in a world of growing resource inequality—dramatized

particularly in the postdisaster zones of Houston, Puerto Rico, Detroit, New Orleans, and Haiti, to mention only a few cities and countries in the Americas that form an interconnected web of structural and purposeful neglect—we are witnessing a spreading *blackout* that is socioeconomic and structurally racist in origin. Indeed, for Achille Mbembe, this system represents the geographical expansion to global proportions of the centuries-long economic violence of profound inequity that once characterized primarily the slavery of those of African origin. Now called “precarity” and released from strictly racial classification (though this is not to say that racial capitalism does not persist—it clearly does), *blackout* designates what Mbembe terms the “becoming black of the world”: “Across early capitalism, the term ‘Black’ referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible). Now, for the first time in human history, the term ‘Black’ has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world*.”³³ The phrase designates the globalized blackout of impoverishment, necropolitics, and dispossession—the dispossession of the power of self-determination, of control over and belief in one’s future, even the free access to time and the possible. To Mbembe’s diagnosis of this new norm of precarious and defutured existence, I would add the material exposure to extraction’s waste zones, befouled elements, colonized atmospheres, toxic externalities, and public health emergencies, where becoming black (in lowercase to connote its more-than-racial character) is evidenced in urban pollution, degraded water, mismanaged waste, and indebted and diseased bodies (even though this negativity does not totally define the category, as we will see). While its zones may be expanding globally, exposure is still based on differential vulnerabilities and unequal resources of protection, with the interconnected relations between the two inspiring further cycles of commodification (targeting health care, education, and housing as much as the primary elements of water, air, and soil, each encountering ongoing cycles of privatization and extraction).

In joining energy production with financial debt servitude, Allora & Calzadilla’s *Blackout* identifies the key neocolonial logic of extraction, which is, as we have seen, operative in the environment of finance capital that has itself become globalized.³⁴ The two are indeed intimately connected, justifying their double metonymic referencing in the piece’s literal inclusion



2.8 Allora & Calzadilla, *Blackout*, 2017 (installation with performers). Courtesy of the artists.

of the electromagnetic transformer from an indebted public utility—a transformer that can be understood here as being once a generator of both energy and financial flows, as well as of pollution, climate disruption, and debilitation. The fact that PREPA runs primarily on fossil fuels, despite being located on a Caribbean island rich in solar potential, and that its energy’s high cost (three times what US mainlanders typically pay) is borne by Puerto Rico’s captive consumers, only reinforces the significance of the connection of energy and debt production.³⁵ For Puerto Rico’s debt is symptomatic of the global arrangement by which the world’s eight richest people own as much wealth as the bottom half of the human population, some 3.6 billion, whereby enrichment is also cause and consequence of impoverishment.³⁶ We see this situation playing out further in Puerto Rico’s dwindling population (some 135,000 left the island between 2013 and 2016 alone), as multitudes of these US citizens have moved to the US mainland for economic survival (creating yet another vanishing geography, a land with ever fewer people); meanwhile, a new class of upwardly mobile venture capitalists, crypto-currency speculators, and real estate developers are moving in to repossess the idyllic lands and benefit from tax advantages to do so.³⁷

To these dynamics, Allora & Calzadilla add a sonic dimension, transforming *Blackout*’s transformer into an operative tuning device for a vocal-acoustic performance based on *mains hum* (2017), an original score by composer David Lang commissioned for the piece. It begins with a resonant quotation by US founding father Benjamin Franklin: “In going on with these

Experiments, how many pretty systems do we build, which we soon find ourselves oblig'd to destroy! If there is no other Use discover'd of Electricity, this, however, is something considerable, that it may help to make a vain Man humble." Franklin's words are ultimately rendered illegible in the music itself (as if nothing—neither history nor ethics—is freed from the transformer's distortions). But the irony, of course, is that this so-called humbling of man—referenced indirectly by the humming singers, who, in matching the humming pitch of the transformer, transform these words into a collective buzzing that builds off the sonic continuum of *Blackout's* machine—has been far from the case. Even in the shadow of multiple power failures, including the recent period following 2017's summer of disaster, the burned-out mass of existing infrastructure on the island still inspires visions of yet more economic potential. Out of the ashes emerge ever-greater machinic monsters of wealth accumulation, and, as the paradigm of disaster capitalism expands, catastrophe affords further opportunities for advancing ever-more-intense neoliberal and extractive agendas, even as the social movements of opposition rise in turn.³⁸

HOPE IN THE DARK

With these projects by Melitopoulos, Biemann, and Allora & Calzadilla, we encounter diverse approaches to extractive zones where exploitation simultaneously implicates natural resources and finances, where ecological and economic violence are inseparable. Abstract figures and calculations are simply idealist, serving to cloak all sorts of structural violence, inequalities, and uneven material consequences. The techniques of this exploitation include earthmoving machinery as well as operational logistics, trade agreements as much as legal arrangements, police brutality and coercive economics, tax evasion and offshore accounts, although the artistic projects discussed above tend to focus on community-scaled geographies of human and environmental costs. Nonetheless, these extraction and sacrifice zones formed at the intersection of extreme weather events, environmental de- or nonregulation, and creditor-debtor inequalities also offer scenes of what Rebecca Solnit has called "hope in the dark." For Solnit, the phrase describes acts of nonexploitative mutual aid, as when, in the absence of state or NGO assistance (or despite their often militarized formations), neighbors come to each other's support, form collective kitchens, deliver disaster relief, distribute essential services, rebuild homes, and save lives.³⁹ Perhaps most directly portrayed in *Deep Weather's* account of Bangladeshi people



2.9 Allora & Calzadilla, *The Night We Became People Again*, 2017 (still). Digital HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artists.

fortifying their coastlines against storm surges, such practices also occur in the community-building and self-organized political education of Greece's refugee camps shown in *Crossings*, and in Puerto Rico's post-hurricane geographies of *autogestion*, meaning self-management, or more broadly, self-directed becoming, which is speculatively schematized in Allora & Calzadilla's cinematic visions of collective transformation.⁴⁰ In the latter's short film *The Night We Became People Again* (2017), the artists invoke precolonial Taíno cosmology as a resource for postcolonial survival. Its nocturnal scenery transitions between a cave of Indigenous mythological reference alluding to the beginning of time, and the dark interior of a decrepit Puerto Rican power plant, standing for world-destroying industrialization. The film's visuality features swirling bats and flickering stars, invoking the formation of new multispecies and astral worlds, which, in converging with a postapocalyptic imaginary of infrastructural breakdown and collective reinvention, charts

out a new configuration of postanthropocentric, postextractive social being.⁴¹ It cultivates, precisely, one sort of hope in the dark.

These practices reveal emergent spaces of potentiality, ones suggesting and building toward a politico-ecological paradigm shift, a self-governing leaderful movement overcoming the privations and manipulations of disaster capitalism, insisting on alternative futures where there were none at all. They even enliven modes of disaster communalism, or, as Ashley Dawson phrases it, disaster communism: “collaborative, altruistic, and often improvised forms of collective provision echoing Marx’s dictum ‘for each according to ability, to each according to need.’”⁴² These forms glimpse new horizons of the possible and actively construct passage into the not-yet. By insisting on the ethical imperative of collective survival, they extend beyond loyalty to capitalism in expressing the dreams of decolonial transformation and emancipatory revolution.⁴³ If so, then in those areas of disaster communism emerging in the blackouts of the energy grid following extreme weather events, we also witness *Becoming Black* as a modality of decolonized subjectivation, a building of unrecognizable and ungovernable sovereignties, of prefigurative, postcapitalist mutual aid societies, inspiring a scaling up toward transnational solidarities and a coming movement of movements.⁴⁴ As with the recent socioenvironmental mobilizations at Standing Rock and Flint, Michigan, each threatened with the blacking out of their water sources, and extending to widespread and transnational activist networks such as Black Lives Matter and BlackOUT Collective, these are aesthetic, social, and political spaces where blackout is made to flip into positive expression, a productive discontent with pessimism where Blackness becomes “a symbol of beauty and pride,” as Mbembe writes, “a sign of radical defiance, a call to revolt, desertion, [and] insurrection”; indeed, in such places, we can discern blackout as “an island of repose in the midst of racial oppression and objective dehumanization.”⁴⁵

That said, one would be right to question if these instances of volunteerist social mobilizations emerging in disaster zones—in colonized Greece, flood-risk Bangladesh, and posthurricane Puerto Rico—are not also symptomatic of neoliberal entrepreneurialism operating in the vacuum of governmental (un)accountability, where self-organization in defunded and indebted territories performs self-extracting unpaid labor, conveniently relieving the state of its responsibilities. Are these not instances where “recovery” ultimately means the return to capitalism’s status quo and even more extreme versions of it, to its dependent sovereignties and unquestioned

hegemony? If so, at what point do such collective efforts catalyze social emancipation beyond extractive capture, when blackout might designate radical degrowth economies, ecological downsizing, multispecies flourishing in postcarbon geographies—hope not only in the dark but also of the dark, a refuge of obscurity or strategic opacity resistant to surveillance, algorithmic capture, and media spectacle alike?

It is difficult to answer these questions, and to clearly separate hope from despair, especially when the topologies of revolt and normalization, desertion and capture, are so complexly intertwined, and where the effects and outcomes of these events are never simply punctual or secure. What remains clear is that we need more than ever a transnational movement answering and preempting the current distributive globalization of financial power, operating within and between nation-states that no longer function according to the logics of democratic representation and accountability, as is shown in Melitopoulos’s *Crossings*. “Ultimately, the only way to begin dismantling imperialist relations of domination and truly liberate the new debt colonies from their economic subjugation is for the working classes and social movements of both the debtor and the creditor countries to become aware of their shared interest in building a unified front against the impositions of global finance,” writes Jerome Roos.⁴⁶ What is required is greater sensitivity toward the entangled socioenvironmental conditions of contemporary extraction, as well as a renewed commitment to solidarity against and beyond inequality’s multiple social fragmentations, including those isolating various identities.⁴⁷ As Rev. Dr. William Barber, co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign that has taken up Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement in the last few years, adds, “if you’re poor, whether you’re white, black or brown, and you can’t pay your light bill, we’re all black in the dark, so we need to stand together in the light.”⁴⁸ It is exactly this need for solidarity within and through social difference that the work of the above artists show as pressing. In them—in their politics of aesthetics, in their critical pedagogies, in their amplified spaces of reception and engagement, in their liberated temporalities—we see some of the transnational social energies uniquely capable of challenging and transforming petrocaptalist systems of governance. In these blackouts of fossil and financial power, we witness the signs of radical defiance, a call to revolt, desertion, and insurrection.