

THE VISUAL POLITICS OF CLIMATE REFUGEES

Whether voluntary or coerced, or somewhere in between, migration responds to a network of forces that are rarely monocausal. Economic conditions connect with social factors, such as religious persecution or ethnic discrimination, and these join with biopolitical forces, including governmental legal frameworks and elaborate border control systems. In other words, migration too defines a site of intersectionality, which I am redeploying here as a politico-ecological analytic placed in relation to the discourse of climate refugees, wherein mobility expresses itself precisely through multiple and multiply entangled vectors of causality. This is especially the case when it comes to images of migrants that are also migrating images, endlessly recontextualized visual assemblages, as much at their origins as at their often transitory destinations, which may frustrate structural analysis of larger conditions. At a time when mainstream media defines the dominant conventions of migrant representation, it is urgent to overcome its tendency to focus on the faces and biographies of individuals and impacted communities—including children, adults, and families, at various points of passage—if we are to get at what lies behind migration in the first place.

When migration responds to environmental disturbances—including drought; sea-level rise; and extreme weather events, such as floods, fires, and cyclones—out of which emerges the recently proposed category of “climate refugees” (those forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, owing to destructive climate transformation), we face a stubborn regime of visual representation that tends to occlude intersecting factors. This happens despite the fact that “there is no way to confront the climate crisis as a technocratic problem, in isolation. It must be seen in the context of austerity and privatisation, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all,” as Naomi Klein explains.¹ The problem is that many anti-austerity activists rarely discuss climate breakdown, and environmentalists seldom mention war, racism, or occupation, leading to compartmentalization on each side reinforced by the restrictive visibility of environmentally determined migration. That compartmentalization, also expressed visually, carries political implications in that migrants are typically viewed as disconnected from histories of socioecological entanglement that render many of our governments complicit in the very production and management of migration. And by ignoring those entanglements, it makes it easier for reactionary commentators, policy makers, and politicians, in acts of contemporary scapegoating, to situate the displaced as agents of injustice and themselves (somewhat perversely) as the victims.

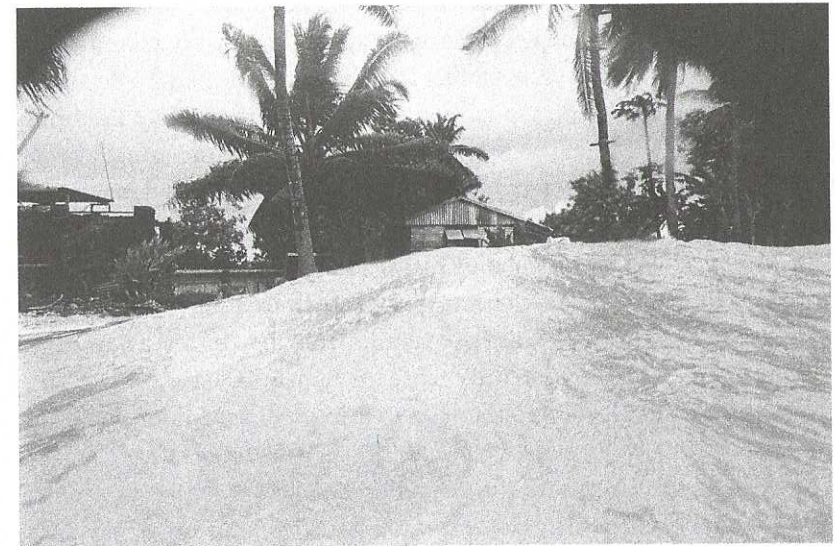
In the near future, the stakes are set to grow more intense with what some are warning is a coming globalization of “climate apartheid,” a system of institutionalized disparity regarding environmentally motivated displacement that will likely be exacerbated by racism and xenophobia.² Creating ever new possibilities for migrant labor exploitation founded on the material dispossession and political disenfranchisement of multitudes, “the insecurity of the migrant ensures the security of capital,” argues Ashley Dawson, who observes how migration tends to drive down wages, produce a depoliticized mobile workforce, and spread precarity.³ As such, the migrant represents the exemplary subject of corporate globalization. These circumstances will only worsen if we continue down the present path of growing neoliberal austerity, ethnonationalist populism, and unmitigated anthropogenic climate disruption. Against that eventuality, it becomes imperative to generate critical visual resources—central to the formation of a properly political analysis—in our activist and social movement responses, in order to aid in the collective transformation toward a just world.

Consider three examples of recent climate refugee photography that speak to the abovementioned concerns. First is that of the *Collectif Argos* (Argos Collective), a French group of photojournalists and humanitarians who presciently dedicated an image-text series from 2010 to climate refugees. In their portfolio depicting the low-lying Maldives—presented both on the collective’s website and in their book *Climate Refugees*—the Indian Ocean lands appear threatened by rising seas, coasts subjected to erosion, and buildings collapsing on shrinking shores. The images portray inhabitants in scenes of flooding that are increasingly common these days, scenes where the Argos Collective plots the Maldives on the front lines of climate change migration. Moving beyond the science of climate change to its social implications, journalist and Argos member Guy-Pierre Chomette explains that “we wanted to emphasize the human dimension, especially for those most vulnerable.”⁴ Their images do just that, declining in the process, however, to represent the Maldivians’ political agency in mobilizing support for critical climate response, including the responsive governmental policies of, and demands for justice-based decarbonization made by, President Mohamed Nasheed (in office at the time of their research). Their photos consequently tend to neglect the more complex causes of climate change located in the centuries-long fossil fuel development of industrialized countries, in favor of focusing solely on the world-ending effects in South Asia. In another series that operates according to a similar logic, the Argos Collective pictures the South Pacific island of Tuvalu, from a low perspective behind a wave, as if the land is already under water. Forming part of their series called “A Polynesian Requiem,” images such as this transform future potential into alarming present reality, resonating with catastrophist narratives of humanitarian discourse. Not surprisingly, critics accuse its agents of construing victimizing identities for their subjects, abstracted from sociopolitical frameworks, in relation to which photographer-humanitarians model themselves as the heroic bearers of aid. Risking a self-serving mode of what Carol Farbotko calls “wishful sinking,” these images correlate with a photography of fatalism based on climate determinism, where the future is already written and the past obliterated from the field of view.⁵

Second, take John Stanmeyer’s *National Geographic* photography, specifically those that capture Syrian refugees in the midst of the notorious 2015 migration crisis. The images accompany “Fleeing Terror, Finding Refuge:



3.1 Guillaume Collanges / *Collectif Argos*, Thudi (Laamu Atoll), Maldives, January 2007. Courtesy of the artists.



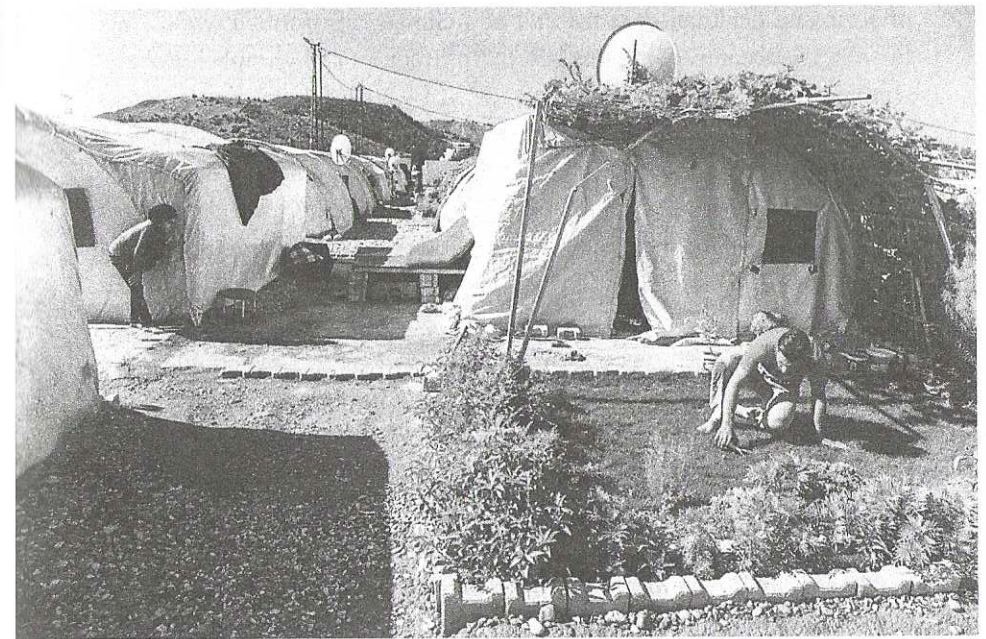
3.2 Laurent Weyl / *Collectif Argos*, Funafuti atoll, Fongafale island, February 2006. “The tsunami which struck Asia is on everybody’s mind. Whatever their temperament, most Tuvaluans associate this catastrophe with what awaits them as sea levels keep rising. 01/02/2006.” Courtesy of the artists.

Millions of Syrians Escape an Apocalyptic Civil War, Creating a Historic Crisis,” an article by Paul Salopek that describes the conditions of some 100,000 displaced, including many ethnic Kurds, who crossed into Turkey near the Mürşitpınar border, many coming to occupy a refugee camp near Kilis.⁶ The photographs, corresponding to what Salopek describes as “a vast panorama of mass homelessness,” present what we can term a photography of faces—a system of representation that dramatizes the plight of the uprooted by focusing on their visual appearance with all possible pathos (what the Argos Collective calls the “human dimension”), but which is largely detached from the sociopolitical and geo-economic frameworks that complexly led to that homelessness.⁷ The visualizations stress figurations of physiognomic and gestural affect, as well as their sympathetic environmental frames, including austere camp conditions, where resignation and dread are allegorized in the dark, cloudy atmospheres. The photography, in other words, transforms the dislocated into the readily consumable media category of refugees. It is true that the prevailing affect of melancholia is, in other images of Stanmeyer, mitigated by highlighting practices of creative survival in difficult circumstances, as when inhabitants are shown tending their small gardens, offering informal education for children, and providing everyday care for one another. However, the humanizing tendencies of these portrayals work to visually substantiate the article’s abstract and abstracting statistics, as faces dissolve into numbers.

These photographs depict some of the approximately 1.6 million Syrian war refugees in Turkey, with another 8 million displaced internally within Syria (compared to a total 12 million dislocated in the Middle East overall as of 2015), according to Salopek’s narrative. While the ravages of the Islamic State, the roles of Saddam Hussein and Bashar Assad, are briefly mentioned, Salopek foregrounds a quote by Jason Ur, a Harvard archaeologist who explains that “population displacements have a long and sad history in the region” and have occurred “repeatedly over the last 3,000 years at least,” thereby further removing migrants from their historically specific circumstances.⁸ The focus of the images too remains fixed on the refugees themselves, visually freezing the displaced into personal-interest stories. Contrary to Ur’s *longue durée* perspective, it’s as if we are looking through a telescope fitted with historical and political blinders—past Syrian geopolitics, decades of emergency rule, the transformative dynamics of globalization, uneven economic liberalization, petrocapiatist developments, uprisings of political Islam, chronic conflicts with Israel, contentious relations



3.3 John Stanmeyer, photograph of Syrian refugees, September 2014. “Up to 5,000 Syrians from Kobani amass at the border with Turkey on Friday evening, next to the Turkish village of Dikmetas. On this day was the beginning of the exodus when 200,000 Syrians, mostly Kurds, crossed into Turkey in 72 hours.” *National Geographic*, March 2015.



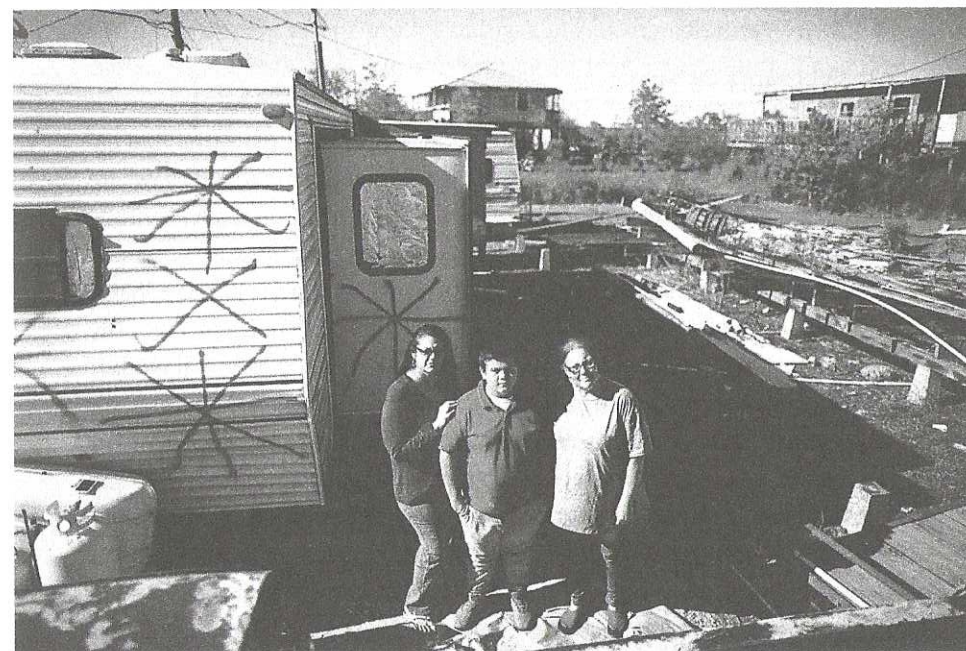
3.4 John Stanmeyer, photograph of the Nizip 1 camp, September 2014. “Mohammad Magelk grooms the oasis he has created in the dusty Nizip 1 camp, where more than 11,000 Syrians now live.” *National Geographic*, March 2015.

with Iran, and interethnic and religious conflicts, all exacerbated by multiple years of environmental crisis, including a severe multiyear drought.⁹ The ultimate point for Salopek is the visual construction of empathy, shaped by pronominal identification with the dislocated, which describes the intended photographic viewing process as well: “You take a step. You exit one life and enter another. You walk through a cut border fence into statelessness, vulnerability, dependency, and invisibility. You become a refugee.” Like the Argos Collective’s repertoire, Salopek’s text and Stanmeyer’s images invite Western audiences to identify with the subjects in mirror-image formation but one absent any visual infrastructure that would aid in revealing the inextricable complexities of the nonsubjective, geopolitical, and socioecological causes behind Syrian migration.

Third, consider images of the “first climate refugees” in the US, those located on the southern coast of Louisiana in Isle de Jean Charles, as captured in 2016 by photographer Josh Haner of the *New York Times*. The lavish color images show a landmass teetering at water’s edge threatened with submersion, where more than 90 percent of the island has washed away since 1955. (The watery territory was appropriately the inspiration for “the Bathtub,” the setting for Benh Zeitlin’s Oscar-nominated 2012 film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which tells a dystopian, enchanted tale of Delta survival in the midst of structural debilitation at the end of a climate-transformed world.) We learn in the accompanying text by Coral Davenport and Campbell Robertson that “human-caused climate change” has warmed the planet, bringing “rising sea levels, stronger storms, increased flooding, harsher droughts and dwindling freshwater supplies,” in addition to more extreme and destructive hurricanes.¹⁰ Isle de Jean Charles has been further harmed over the last few decades by water channels cut by loggers and carbon geographies terraformed (or better: petroformed) by oil companies, though none of these are identified in the text or shown in Haner’s photographs, which instead focus on local residents, “among the nation’s most vulnerable,” including Native Americans of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe and the United Houma Nation. Violet Handon Parfait, her son, Reggie, and her mother, Theresa Handon, appear in one image standing on a raised wooden walkway just in front of the wreckage of Parfait’s trailer house destroyed by Hurricane Gustav in 2008, a category 2 superstorm that wrought more than \$8 billion in damage; and Marlene Autian, Laura Broussard, and Joann Bourg are pictured amidst a flowering field outside their home on Isle de Jean Charles, as if witnesses to their own undoing and facing an uncertain future. With



3.5 Josh Haner, aerial view of Isle de Jean Charles, 2016. *New York Times*, May 2, 2016.



3.6 Josh Haner, Isle de Jean Charles, 2016. Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribal members Marlene Autian, Laura Broussard, and Joann Bourg in front of their house. *New York Times*, May 2, 2016.

their figures typically facing the camera, appearing unsundered to their precarious situation, these images are on the whole less victimizing than the Argos Collective's Tuvaluans or Stanmeyer's Syrians, but they still focus in tunnel-like vision on the subjective effects of climate change. Neither the article nor the images mention or visualize the relation to earlier episodes of colonial displacement, going back centuries, or the impoverishment of local peoples within postindustrial neoliberalism. If they did, then climate would expand to sociopolitical dimensions, economic determinants, and military causalities. Nor do they comment on the fact that the very government that is funding the massive relocation effort of Isle de Jean Charles's population with \$48 million in federal tax dollars is the same one that subsidized past fossil fuel development and land-engineering projects in the region that have rendered the coastline increasingly uninhabitable. The tremendous gulf between, on the one hand, US interior secretary Sally Jewell's fatalistic pronouncement ("We Will Have Climate Refugees") and, on the other, Chief Albert Naquin's dark premonitions of his people's defutured existence, one gradually blinded by dissolving transgenerational memory ("We're going to lose all our heritage, all our culture. . . . It's all going to be history") remains unaddressed.¹¹ That is the gulf of fatalism's violence.

THE SPECTACLE OF MISERY

A number of observations follow in relation to this admittedly brief but exemplary survey of the mainstream visual culture of climate refugees, where "mainstream" represents the doctrine of dominant institutions (corporate, governmental, educational, media), which tend to amplify and perpetuate narratives about "the way things should work" in the interests of the wealthy, privileged, and powerful.¹² Three general concerns rise to the surface. The first concerns the practice of **figuration-over-contextualization** in mainstream media representation, where images of climate refugees mirror the dominant media's visualization of refugees in general. We find therein a spectacle of victimhood seen through a voyeuristic lens that migrates figures from the ground of historical and structural causes, focusing instead on personal traumas, limited background contexts, and present physical circumstances. The situation parallels trends in international humanitarian law and human rights practice, which often produce figurations detached from complex structural determinations, as notes Eyal Weizman, director of the Forensic Architecture project: "They tend to extract an individual (victim or perpetrator, alive

or dead) from the messy physical or political ground in which they were embedded." Conversely, "establishing field causalities requires the examination of force fields, causal ecologies, that are nonlinear, diffused, simultaneous, and involve multiple agencies and feedback loops."¹³ By occluding "field causalities" and the complexity of their networked formation, mainstream media images of migrants—including those cited above—produce similarly incomprehensible abstractions, phantasms of social breakdown, and inexplicable forces of invasion, often narrated as threatening to European and North American reception. These fictions easily become weaponized, fueling and perpetuating extremist political rhetoric, further detaching migration from its compound determinants, which, were they taken into consideration to begin with, would introduce and require very different solutions and modes of address than the ones typically on offer.

My second observation is that the commercialized media of these conventional images tends to generate **increasingly extreme narratives**. During 2015, more than one million migrants reached Europe (mainly Greece and Italy) via the Mediterranean, as reports the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), charged with protecting the rights and well-being of displaced people worldwide. Of these migrants, 84 percent came from the world's recent top ten refugee-producing countries—including Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq—informing UNHCR's research findings that most of those arriving in Europe were fleeing war and persecution.¹⁴ The massive displacement was said to constitute "the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War," the magnitude of which jeopardized the commitment of the European Union (EU) to open borders within its Schengen territory (the area comprising twenty-six European states that officially abolished internal passport controls in 1995 and which still, albeit increasingly precariously, remains in effect today).¹⁵ Migration—or rather dominant perceptions of it—has also threatened the EU's welfare policies, its fundamental political cohesion, and its commitment to democratic principles. Meanwhile, the "crisis" has been manufactured and largely narrated by a corporate (anti)social media frenzy characterized by sensationalist reporting and imaging. These depend on algorithm-driven news feeds like Facebook that market and intensify affects of fear and outrage, often directed against migrants, designed to maximize online consumerist engagement without regulation or ethical compass.¹⁶ Media ecologies of othering—constituting a mix of visual presentation and captioned extremism, progressively intensified by algorithms—lead in turn to right-wing

hate speech making increasingly shocking and outlandish claims with ever greater visibility (including those of the UK's Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, France's Marine Le Pen, the Netherlands's Geert Wilders, and Hungary's Viktor Orbán).¹⁷

With this alarmist framing of migration, we face what some have called an "Islamic invasion"—a typical example of fear-mongering xenophobia once thought beyond the pale. But now, propelled by horrific terror attacks in Europe and the US—where in fact there has been greater right-wing neo-fascist violence, legitimated by the Trump administration, in recent years—and couched in a reactionary media environment, politicians feel increasingly licensed to draw generalizing and stereotyping conclusions about all migrants.¹⁸ Their rhetoric is amplified particularly in the sensationalist press, alarming for its stoking the fires of apocalyptic populism, according to which adherents are willing to support drastic measures (such as bombing problems away) in anti-democratic expressions of world-destroying resentment.¹⁹ Such extremist sentiment, needless to say, lends further support to building walls and militarizing border security—with full-spectrum dominance technology, including a near-future of automated weaponry with right-to-kill robotics and biotech applications that target genomic patterns keyed to ethnic traits—as the dominant framework with which to "address" migration.²⁰ Within this context, migration figures as a criminal menace attended to by a billion-dollar-a-year industry rather than as an involuntary mode of behavioral adaptation for human survival in complex and often insufferable emergency conditions predicated upon colonial injustice and structural racism, or as an opportunity for cosmopolitan hospitality and humanitarian empathy for those in desperate need.²¹ Instead of locating the causes of migration in Western policies of austerity, unfair trade agreements, neoliberal structural adjustments, endless military interventions, and resource wars, migrants are alternately blamed for being responsible for their own displacement, or shown to be the victims of so-called natural disaster, in other words, crises devoid of context.²² It is this process that is propelled by mainstream media's image regime.

The third point concerns the term *climate refugee*, which makes matters worse owing to its juridico-political nonrecognition, even while environmental dislocation stands to grow substantially in the near future. Measured in sheer numbers, recent demographic shifts may be relatively insignificant compared to what lies ahead. Already in 2019, there were approximately 17.2 million uprooted by weather-related events, compared to 10.8 million

owing to conflict, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.²³ With the looming global "climate departure"—the moment when we pass beyond the historical range of meteorological averages toward catastrophic environmental breakdown—set to occur in the mid-twenty-first century (should no mitigation of greenhouse emissions occur), we can expect between 250 million and 1 billion people to be on the move by 2050.²⁴ Owing to climate transformation, this event would produce 250 to 1,000 times the number of migrants who made it to Europe in 2015.²⁵ These future multitudes include subsistence farmers, fisherfolk, and coastal dwellers, most located in the Global South, who will move inland and northward in hopes of better lives, economic opportunity, existential security, and sheer survival. In addition, research now predicts that coming climate disruption will precipitate the largest transfer of wealth (northward and westward, exacerbating existing inequality) ever in the US and globally, should no mitigation take place and economic arrangements continue as they are today.²⁶ In this regard, environmental factors compound socioeconomic ones, leading to more violence and inequality and providing further motivating conditions for migration.²⁷

If climate refugees are at the center of what Christian Parenti terms the "catastrophic convergence" of contemporary poverty, violence, and climate change, then it defines indeed "the most colossal set of events in human history."²⁸ That these elements are difficult to distinguish is highlighted by Rebecca Solnit, who argues that "climate change is violence," in the sense that environmental transformation results from criminally negligent behaviors in corporate and governmental practice, including the polluting and logging of tropical rain forests, failing to regulate healthy drinking water, and contributing to climate breakdown through fossil fuel extraction while funding climate denial (all continuous with long histories of colonial extraction).²⁹ Making matters worse is recent economic history. After decades of Western-led neoliberal structural adjustments, promoted by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Council, debtor states worldwide have been stripped of resources, their institutions of education, health care, housing, and infrastructure substantially defunded. They have been left with few provisions to help establish safe, secure, economically vibrant, and environmentally sustainable homelands, compromising as well their ability to adapt to environmental transformation. These factors then exacerbate poverty and violence, which leads to more migration in turn.³⁰

There is, however, no easy solution for addressing climate migration in the framework of existing migration law, within which the climate refugee remains an invisible figure (the 1951 Geneva Convention, for instance, grants refugee status only to those fleeing persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, social association, or political opinion, representing the legal codification of separateness that an intersectional approach would challenge). Some legal theorists argue that recognizing environmental refugees under the Geneva Conventions would grant them international protections, independent of state law.³¹ To that end, the term *environmental refugee* was proposed by Essam El-Hinnawi in a 1985 United Nations Environment Programme policy paper to identify “those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption,” which means “any physical, chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or resource base) that render it temporarily or permanently unsuitable to support human life.”³² However, not only does this definition lack any traction in international law decades later, but there is still no operative climate refugee category. It also proves exceedingly difficult to formalize it, as well as distinguishing between intertwined causal elements in assigning climate refugee status. In addition, it is not currently legally possible to discriminate between environmental and climatological causalities, a situation exemplified and reinforced in dominant visual regimes of representation. Migrant images, as we have seen, tend to present spectacles of misery that overlook the complex determinants of socioenvironmental dislocation, which begs the questions to which I will return below: *How might we conceive alternative representational systems that enable the juridico-political recognition of climate-based migration according to an expansive definition of what climate means?*

THRESHOLDS OF INDISTINCTION

In addition to expanding the Geneva Conventions, recognition of climate refugees could also occur, analysts point out, by developing existing international law (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, for instance), or extending the mandate of the UNHCR.³³ There are nonetheless several reasons to question this route as an adequate response to climate-induced displacement, especially in a neoliberal era where political and legal formations manage the selective differentiation of migrants according to race, class, and religion. First, it is difficult, and even impossible,

to define environmental causes and separate them from poverty, war, or any of the factors coextensive with the effects of climate change, as mentioned above. The climate refugee, by definition, represents an intangible figure, a relentlessly conceptually mobile one, owing to the impossibility of disaggregating its sources of displacement. Climate change exacerbates an already complex set of challenges for vulnerable populations, including uneven access to water, land, and infrastructure resources, as much as institutions, capital, and legal recourse.³⁴ Indeed, many political theorists remain skeptical of establishing further complex and likely confusing distinctions in classifying refugees, as “it will leave plenty of room for thresholds of indistinction that leave the final decision on the status of life up to sovereign power,” which can then abuse ambiguity in oppressive ways.³⁵ Second, placing climate refugees under the UNHCR’s jurisdiction will not simply grant rights to refugees; it also threatens to transform them into the victimized objects of humanitarianism, selectively recognized within liberal rights regimes, where aid can be withdrawn at any time, while larger structures of power and systems of inequality go unaddressed. Consider, for example, the displaced of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, some 400,000 people, including many African Americans with limited economic means who lived in New Orleans’s Lower Ninth Ward, who encountered demeaning conditions in their Superdome-turned-camp environment in the days after the superstorm, with wholly inadequate federal assistance in subsequent years. That dystopian scenario—uniting institutional and environmental racism, economic precarity, climate change disaster, and militarized police response—foreshadows one potential future treatment of climate migrants worldwide.³⁶ Or take the migrants subjected to Trump’s border regime, including the incarceration of children of divided families (there were approximately 70,000 migrant children held in federal custody during 2019). With that situation, we encounter the outright rejection of asylum claims amid the heightened militarized response to an overwhelming humanitarian disaster caused largely by decades of damaging US foreign policy (including environmental disaster) in Central America, constituting new extreme levels of postliberal, nationalist, and openly racist xenophobia.³⁷ Many migrants, commonly deemed “illegal,” are in fact already subjected to a system of endless camps, bureaucratic hurdles, emergency temporality, and degrading circumstances. All of which feeds the telescopic presentism of disaster photography, which, in turn, exacerbates the defutured existence of the displaced.³⁸

The third concern regarding the challenged climate refugee concept is that, as noted above, its legal nonrecognition follows the logic of much humanitarian visuality in addressing the effects of climate change rather than the causes. The problem is that, as discussed above, much visual culture—particularly the photography of mainstream media—tends to contribute to myopic portrayals of migrants, figures who appear abstracted from complex determinants, detached from the vector of intersectionality that is migration. In these portrayals, the human-interest story rules, the narrative that focuses on migrants themselves, with the media industry mining consumable biographies and their troves of moving affects for commercial ends. Many artists also participate in this iconographic machine, or go further, producing migrant images that offer well-intentioned empathic gestures but figure as guilt-relieving identifications, as when Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei had himself photographed posing as if dead on a Lesbos beach, representing Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee who tragically drowned in 2016 while attempting to reach the EU. The image of Kurdi's body washed ashore near Bodrum, Turkey, was reproduced internationally. It is images like these that keep viewers entranced, with eyes fixed upon a photography of faces, while the structural causes remain invisible. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek observed in 2015,

The first thing is to recall that most of refugees come from the “failed states”—where public authority is more or less inoperative, at least in large regions—Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Congo, etc. This disintegration of state power is not a local phenomenon but a result of international economy and politics—in some cases, like Libya and Iraq, a direct outcome of Western intervention. It is clear that the rise of these “failed states” is not just an unintended misfortune but also one of the ways the great powers exert their economic colonialism.³⁹

One gets no sense of this complexity, however, from Ai's image, nor much more from the artist's film *Human Flow* (2017), which traces the migrations in recent years of vast numbers of people globally. To make the latter work, running at nearly two and a half hours, Ai visited more than twenty-three countries, including such war-torn hotspots as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, as well as numerous refugee camps in Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, Kenya, Germany, and France. Using innovative approaches to filmmaking, including copious iPhone and aerial drone footage, the documentary highlights



3.7 Ai Weiwei, posing as Syrian refugee toddler Alan Kurdi (whose body washed ashore in the Turkish town of Bodrum in September 2015), 2016.

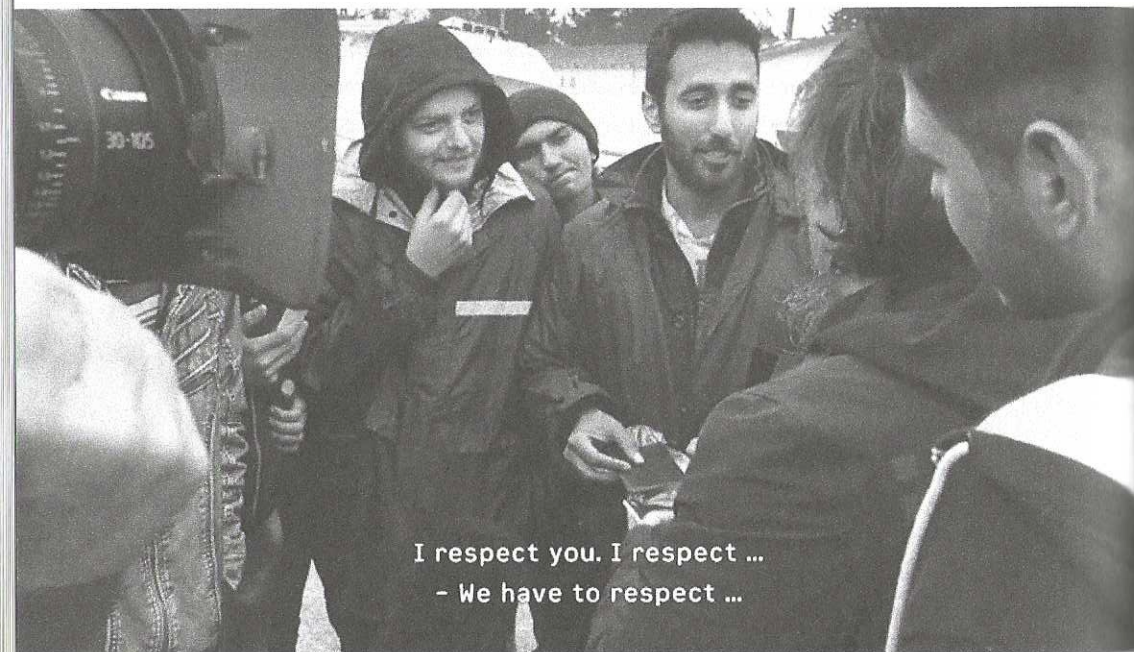
scenes of wretched passage in miserable conditions, wherein migrants, living in makeshift tents and vulnerable to cruel border guards, appear hungry and unsheltered, beaten down and yet still determined. These images are set disjunctively within captivating cinematic displays of dramatic Mediterranean sunsets contrasting the Sahara's arid yellow-orange deserts with the deep-green tropics and the infinite blues of oceans. As such, the film marks a sea change in understandings of globalization. In contrast with 1989 and that subsequent era's erstwhile promise of a unified world of post-Cold War openness, when a mere eleven countries around the world possessed border fences and walls, thirty years later there are more than seventy, many protected with full-spectrum military surveillance systems and high-tech defenses, constituting a new epoch of nationalist xenophobia.⁴⁰ And matters seem to be getting only worse. While the ocean may appear to some as a navigable expanse of possibility, with new lands of opportunity on the horizon, it remains for the unfortunate an uncrossable barrier, and for all too many, a mass grave.

While its journalistic focus on the lives of migrants is a familiar human-interest trope in mainstream media, Ai's *Human Flow* nonetheless distinguishes itself as a cinematic feature. Yet its methodology is recognizable across the board: to portray the involuntarily dislocated as human beings who have stories to tell, feelings to share, grievances to be heard—in other words, the aim is to rescue these figures from the impersonal statistics and dehumanizing abstractions that invite invisibility and ignorance, and worse, xenophobia and racism, which in turn fuel the cruelties of securitization and militarization. Certainly a tragedy occurs when the most vulnerable become inescapably entangled in migration's carceral systems. Constituting human rights abuse, such brutal measures are unfortunately increasingly the rule, propelled by the collective intolerance on the rise in many parts of the world. *Human Flow*, in this regard, comes as an antidote. One of the film's areas of focus is the EU during 2015. As Boris Cheshirkov of the UNHCR explains in the film, we are living at a time of demographic shifts not seen since World War II, amounting to more than sixty-five million on the move, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people. Yet rather than investigate the circumstances of this precarious situation, admittedly much less easily translated into cinematic form than subjective portrayals, the focus of *Human Flow*, as with the imagery of the Argos Collective, John Stanmeyer, and Josh Honer, remains largely on human effects.

As Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Department of Culture and Information—Palestinians being the world's largest group of refugees—poignantly observes in the film, "Being a refugee is much more than a political status; it is the most pervasive kind of cruelty that can be exercised against a human being by depriving a person of all forms of security, the most basic requirements of a normal life, by cruelly placing that person at the mercy of some inhospitable host countries that do not want to receive this refugee." Ashrawi's observation is affirmed by others in *Human Flow*: Ustaz Rafik, Rohingya community leader, speaks of campaigns of rape, pillage, and persecution against the more than 500,000 Rohingyas fleeing to Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia; Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director of Human Rights Watch, discusses the internal chaos of Greece's Idomeni camp and the hardships of its diverse inhabitants; and Dr. Cem Terzi of the Association of Bridging Peoples, in Izmer, Turkey, where some three million Syrians have recently sought shelter (some

pictured by Stanmeyer), explains how today's refugees are commonly deprived of international rights, offered no jobs, have little income, and are consequently vulnerable to authoritarian government policies and militarized controls. There is certainly an ongoing need to bring compassionate visibility to these figures—who on global average live for twenty-six years displaced from their homes—so that their representational erasure does not compound their geopolitical dislocation.

Yet *Human Flow* neglects the historical and present circumstances of migration; nor does it implicate its filmmaker or audience, other than in one singular scene in which Ai playfully exchanges his passport with a grateful Syrian migrant, telling him, "I respect you," speaking in a heartfelt manner. If only injustice could be repaired by individual ethical behavior alone.⁴¹ While *Human Flow*'s exposure of migrant gloom is significant, offering an important wake-up call for those otherwise unaware, there is nonetheless all-too-little reflection on the structural forces driving migration beyond the familiar vague generalities of war and climate change. In this regard, *Human Flow* ultimately defines a cinema of liberalism: to manifest empathy for the wretched of the Earth in an effort to humanize the dispossessed and disenfranchised, but doing so in the absence of any proposals for structural transformation. While the formula offers reassuring visions of redemption, manifested in images of encompassing filmic splendor and Ai caring for the less fortunate, it leaves viewers with a nagging feeling of undefined guilt and no clear solutions. Empathy is a position few of us would oppose. But we also need to take matters deeper in terms of interrogating the causes of the oppressive conditions that make life miserable for multitudes and that propel displacement. Once those causes are understood, proposals can be more readily designed for structural changes to the systems that produce inequality in the first place. This is a basic recipe for a properly political film—political because it would challenge the systems of resource distribution, including the international trade agreements, inequitable access to technology, corporate monopolies, legacies and continuations of colonialism, and practices of institutional discrimination that maintain inequality. If climate change is, as Eyal Weizman argues, the telos of colonial modernity, rather than simply its accidental outcome, then what else would it mean to challenge its terms?⁴² Such a film would have little to do with the vacant clichés of *Human Flow*, including its concluding proposal that "we must learn to live with each other," articulated by Dr. Kemal Kirişçi, senior fellow of the liberal establishment Brookings Institution.



3.8 Ai Weiwei, *Human Flow*, 2017 (still).

In making such hollow suggestions, *Human Flow* in the end offers little to meaningfully challenge the material circumstances of inequality that are at migration's roots, circumstances that are only growing worse today. Indeed, climate breakdown, as *Human Flow* also points out, will only exacerbate drought, hunger, and ill health for millions in coming years. The next few decades of environmental transformation will likely provoke unprecedented migrations, pressuring all the world's borders, leading to even more extreme versions of insecurity, impoverishment, and suffering than those witnessed in 2015. For glimpses of that dystopian future, one need look no further than contemporary Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, as portrayed in *Human Flow*, where a half-million residents have recently fled ISIS's brutality, itself a complex manifestation of endemic poverty, authoritarian politics mixed with religious zeal, privatized militaries, and the West's disastrous Middle East policies. In one passage, Mosul's horizon appears as a conflagration of burning oil wells spewing purplish-black smoke into toxic skies. With this spectacle of disaster that holds life hostage to a living hell, one can begin to understand the warnings of Maha Yahya, director



3.9 Ai Weiwei, *Human Flow*, 2017 (still showing Mosul, Iraq, October 2016, after Iraqi and Kurdish forces began a protracted battle to retake Mosul with American, British, and French support; ISIS fighters set fire to Mosul's oil fields as they retreated, with some 300,000 people displaced).

of the Carnegie Middle East Center, who observes how refugee children in Lebanon's expansive camps have no access to schools, grow up without optimism, and are thus vulnerable to exploitation and extremism. It is their future that is burning like the skies of Mosul, suggesting a living death beyond the end of the world. *Human Flow* appropriately quotes the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in summing up the refugees' zombie-like outlook, with the poem's lines superimposed over a haunting full moon: "You killed me . . . and I forgot, like you, to die."

FROM EFFECTS TO CAUSES

In the preceding pages, we have encountered the Argos Collective's imagery of humanitarian fatalism, Stanmeyer's migrant photography, Haner's aesthetic of presentism, and Ai's cinema of liberal empathy—a veritable panoply of mainstream media and artistic visualizations of climate refugees. In the rest of this chapter, I consider three diverse approaches that challenge

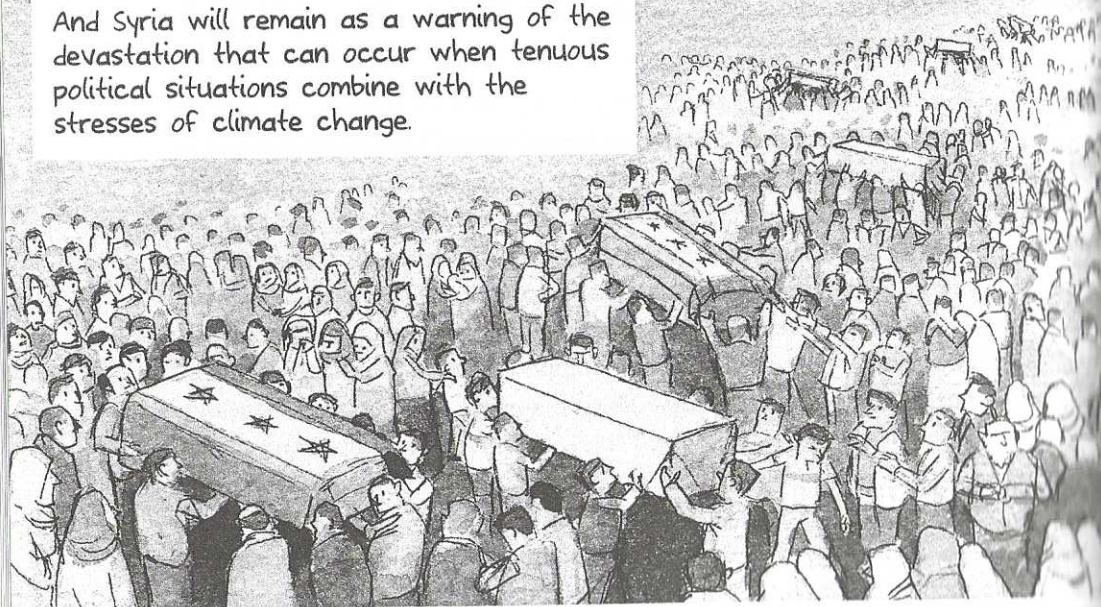
Even if this climate-stressed country recovers politically, Syria is on path to lose nearly 50% more of its agricultural capacity by 2050.



If current rates of greenhouse gas emissions continue, more extreme droughts will return and water shortages will worsen.



And Syria will remain as a warning of the devastation that can occur when tenuous political situations combine with the stresses of climate change.



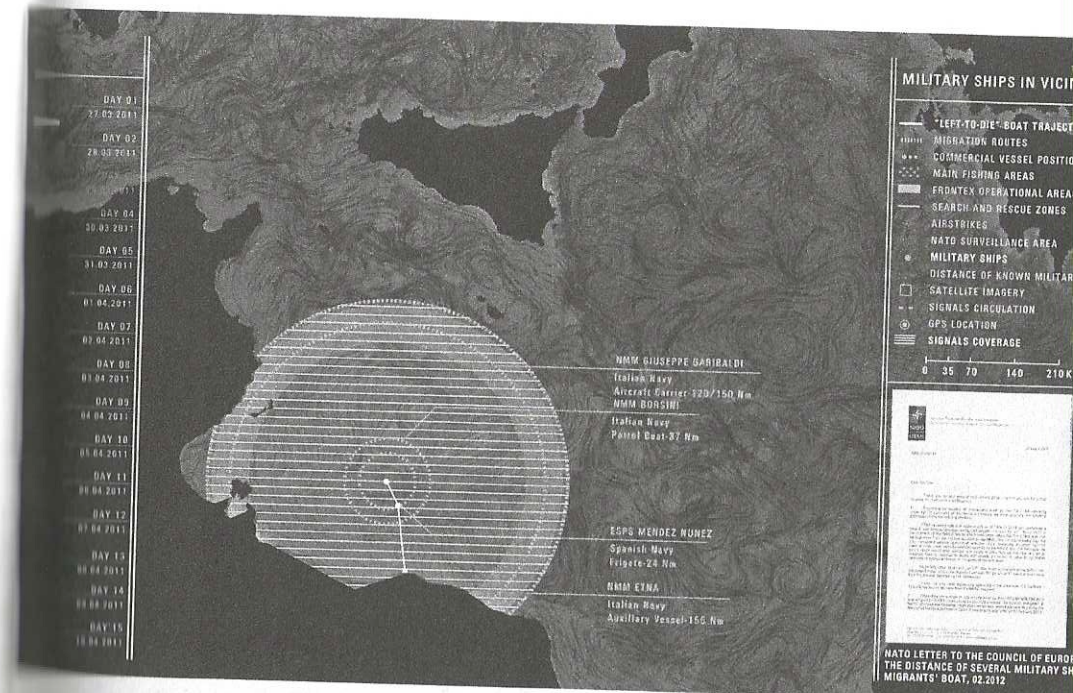
3.10 Audrey Quinn and Jackie Roche, *Syria's Climate Conflict*, 2014 (comic). Courtesy of the artists.

the terms of photography's familiar spectacle of misery, voyeuristic imagery, and commercialized figures of decontextualization. By exploring the entanglements of socioecological genealogies of migration, these modelings also provide a compelling visual culture of causes. The first example is *Syria's Climate Conflict*, a nonfiction web-based comic from 2014 written by Audrey Quinn and illustrated by Jackie Roche. In this open-access work, the New York-based journalist and media artist narrate a story that tells how Syria was afflicted by a multiyear drought between 2006 and 2009, which wreaked agricultural disaster, driving urbanization and impoverishment. "Nearly a million rural villagers lost their farms to the drought. They crowded into overcrowded cities like Daraa. In the cities, the water problem became even more dire. There weren't enough jobs. Once prosperous farmers were lucky to find work as street sweepers," the text explains.⁴³ With their hand-made materiality still evident in the digital representation, the comic's constructed medium implicitly signals the absence or limited availability of critical visual analogues that are properly photographic and which might otherwise reveal the wider historical, geopolitical, and environmental intersections. As such, the piece speaks to the need to creatively develop and provide politico-ecological analysis of this and similar contexts in legible visual terms.

With Syrian cities deprived of their capacities for caring for the internally displaced, their inhabitants have been increasingly exposed to uncontrollable violence, eventually igniting civil war, despotic repression, international military intervention, and mass exodus—complex processes that are also depicted by Quinn and Roche in word and image. As recent research has shown, the intensity and duration of the recent Syrian drought have triggered enormous dislocation across the Mediterranean, forming a significant share of the origins of Syria's civil war.⁴⁴ While military rationality views climate change as a "threat multiplier," endangering present and future stability and reinforcing intensified security response, we have seen how images of climate refugees can easily aid and abet just this sort of reasoning. *Syria's Climate Conflict* offers the reverse, showing how the historical entanglement of "austerity and privatisation, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all," in the words of Naomi Klein cited earlier, have produced migrant formations in the first place. Though seemingly simple visually, the comic's powerfully direct narrative offers surprisingly expansive historical depth, partly through the sequencing of images, a storyboard approach to organizing visual information that also offers affective and suspenseful narrative form. While a certain figuration organizes

the storyline, the focus is rather on the historical and geopolitical framing of circumstances, moving from human flows to field causalities where anthropogenic weather too becomes an agent of the unfolding sociopolitical events. In this regard, the animated format of *Syria's Climate Conflict* proposes an experimental diagram for a relearning exercise in radicalizing historiography and visual approaches to the multiple intertwinements of socioecological displacement. Even if Quinn and Roche's project is short on some details, it nonetheless dramatizes a poignant intersectionalist account of climate migration in the choices for inclusion it does make.

My second example is Forensic Architecture's analysis of the Left-to-Die Boat, in which sixty-three migrants lost their lives on the Mediterranean in 2011 while trying to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa from Tripoli, Libya. The travelers, intent upon escaping the chaos of the civil-war-torn country, faced tragedy when the onboard motor broke down only a few hours into what should have been an eighteen-hour trip. They were consequently left adrift for fourteen days without receiving any assistance in one of the most intensely monitored seas on Earth, the NATO maritime surveillance area. Of the original seventy-two passengers, only nine survived, which became the focus of Forensic Oceanography, a component of the London-based research agency Forensic Architecture, which mobilizes interdisciplinary practice—spatial analysis, legal scholarship, art and filmmaking, software design, investigative journalism, and archaeology—in order to establish evidence that it presents in political and legal forums and human rights reports. This particular case focused on how the Mediterranean has lately been turned into a complex geopolitical zone of adjacent, overlapping fields of maritime ir/responsibility pertaining to NATO member states that are legally accountable to those in distress. However, that very geospatial complexity also enables criminally negligent state behavior—one type of field causality that leads to mass mortality. Producing a “selective militarized mobility regime,” NATO members expose migrants to death at sea by nonassistance, even turning “the perpetual flow of currents into a deadly weapon” that allows boats to drift in and out of territorial zones, according to “*Liquid Traces: The Left-to-Die Boat Case*,” a 2012 video of eighteen minutes put together by Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, and SITU Research.⁴⁵ This case still only taps the surface of catastrophe: indeed, since 2014, more than eighteen thousand migrants have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean, according to the Missing Migrants project (although the precise number of those who suffered nonassistance has not been established).⁴⁶

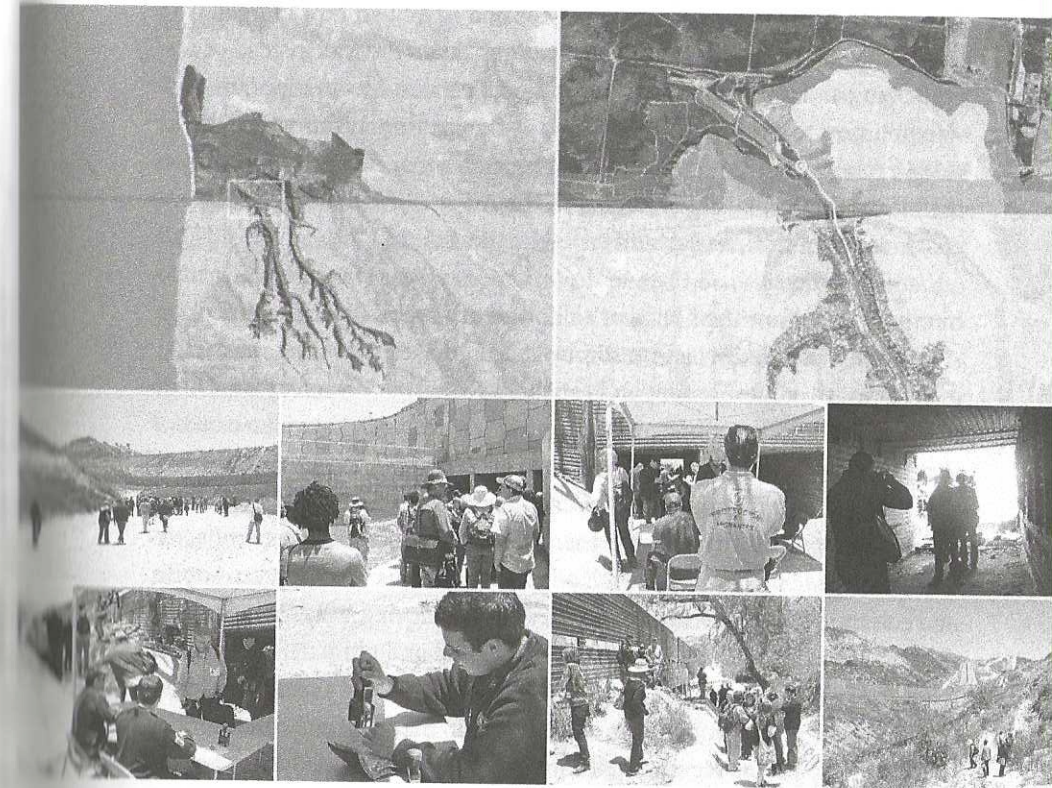


3.11 Forensic Oceanography (Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani), “Liquid Traces: The Left-to-Die Boat Case,” 2012 (still). Courtesy of the artist.

The video carefully reconstructs the route of the migrants in question and draws on available archival evidence (mainly videos and audio recordings) and satellite data to chart their vessel's progressive course, describe its circumstances, and investigate other ships they came across. While ultimately unable to determine responsibility for the disaster, but assembling a convincing accounting of systematic and widespread negligence, Forensic Oceanography's report has been used in a series of criminal legal cases filed in France, Italy, Belgium, and Spain, led by a coalition of NGOs attempting to hold NATO members accountable for the policies and practices that have contributed to thousands of deaths at sea. And while this specific case overlooks the root drivers of migration—the causes of displacement in the first place—the project does move beyond the human-interest stories and myopic focus on migrants' lives in much mainstream journalism, in favor of investigating the structural circumstances of the violence of dislocation.⁴⁷ In recent years, Forensic Oceanography has also explored subsequent developments around the intensification of Europe's—and specifically

Italy's—migration policies, as these latter have increasingly sought to delegitimize and criminalize NGO rescue operations and get North African countries to secure their own borders to prevent emigration.⁴⁸

In addition to building intersectionalist diagrams, cartographic investigations, and field-causality analyses, artists and activists are also imagining futures absent of the criminalization of migration and that reinvent border zones as restored ecologies of open passage. Consider, in this vein, *Cross-Border Commons* (2018), a six-minute video and part of a larger urban research project of architect Teddy Cruz and political scientist Fonna Forman, who co-head the University of California, San Diego–based Cross-Border Initiative. The short video, largely schematic with mapping diagrams and pedagogical texts, shines light on the world's “political equator,” more or less matching the Earth's geographical one, as a zone of conflict shaped by national borders, regions of economic inequality, and divided ecosystems—in other words, a diffractive spatialization of Parenti's “catastrophic convergence” of militarism, poverty, and climate change. Observing that the world's most contested borders—and showing those of US/Mexico, EU/Ceuta/Melilla, Israel/Palestine, Kashmir/India/Pakistan, and North Korea/South Korea—cluster along the same corridor of latitude, Cruz and Forman focus on the San Diego–Tijuana boundary in particular, which bisects a regional watershed and separates northern wealth, unsustainable sprawl, and a biodiverse estuary from southern wastelands, would-be-migrants, and dense informal settlements of impoverishment. As the largest binational metropolitan region in the world with more crossings than anywhere else, this border places nature and nation in direct conflict, one exacerbated by border regimes and military security, as diagrammed in the video by schematic aerial views of opposed sides of the wall. Remarkably, the two states share a watershed but have no collaborative ecological management, as we learn from Cruz and Forman's research. Instead, the area is ruled by unilateral and politicized spatial separation, intensified under Trump's harsh border policies, creating infrastructures of in/security between high-tech exclusion zones and recycled emergency shelters. The situation has also been increasingly worsened by the climate-transformed regions of Central America—running through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico—which have lost their agricultural capacities and sustainable economies owing to decades of US imperial policy. They are home to some ten million people, growing numbers of whom are joining the ranks of northward migrants.⁴⁹



3.12 Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, “Cross-Border Commons,” 2018 (still). Courtesy of the artists.

Instead of endorsing borders that produce migrants and proliferate artificial partitions in physical, psychosocial, and ecological ways, Cruz and Forman seek to “unwall” territories to germinate spaces of re-integrated, de-atomized forms of heterogeneous co-belonging.⁵⁰ With *Cross-Border Commons* they propose doing this in two ways. First, they experiment with rendering the border porous. With provisional permission from US Homeland Security (notably before Trump's election), Cruz and Forman worked in 2011 in collaboration with the NGO Alter Terra in transforming one of the normally secured border wall drains between San Diego and Tijuana into an official port of entry for twenty-four hours, with the video showing sped-up clips of people—prefigurative cross-border citizens—passing through the wall's aperture and getting their passports stamped, modeling a “social-ecological script for co-existence,” according to the video's text.

As such, they suggest an alternate conception of human flow merged with temporary multispecies circulation, breaking down the wall instead of aestheticizing and dwelling on its devastating effects. At least temporarily, but also prefiguratively, the border became a “transnational commons,” as the video explains: “a cross-border environmental ‘conservancy’ that connects the Mexican informal settlement with the American estuary, forming one continuous political, social, and ecological zone.”

In their second act, Cruz and Forman created a “cross-border community station” on the Mexican side, one of several planned university-community knowledge- and resource-sharing bases providing infrastructure for youth empowerment and collaborative education across San Diego and Tijuana.⁵¹ Showing images of happy kids gardening, the video explains that “children across the US-Mexico border are the cross-border citizens of the future.” The aim is ultimately to cultivate new affordable housing within an innovative urbanism of support services and self-determinative collectivization, producing public space that integrates inclusive social, economic, and cultural practices for coming generations.⁵² Moving away from a society that is antitax, anti-immigrant, prison obsessed, and ultimately antipublic, Cruz and Fonman’s idea is to initiate “a bottom-up public” through architecture and design via everyday acts of resistance in marginalized communities everywhere.⁵³ In this regard, their modeling of architecture designates not so much the building of urban space but the designing of new socioecological political imaginaries supporting new modalities of transnational citizenship. Their aesthetic practice is crucial for its envisioning of commoning to initiate a debordered, denationalized world, one of transitional multispecies ecologies (even while governments are generally moving in the opposite direction).⁵⁴ In other words, instead of getting states to recognize the legality of climate refugees, or representing empathy and respect, Cruz and Fonman conceptualize migrants as a force of postnationalization, inclusive equity, and ecocentric being. Generating a postanthropocentric sociopolitical composition, a community to come, their *Cross-Border Commons* supplants nationalist border zones that divide human and animal migrations alike, constituting new cross-border citizens—citizens not of states but of an increasingly urgent future of multispecies justice beyond the end/s of the current world.

TRANSFORMATIVE REWORLDING

Rather than endlessly fixating on the plight of the unfortunate through a photography of faces, those of us dedicated to structural transformation urgently need to redirect our energies toward critical investigation of the sources of climate migration. We also must imagine emancipated futures capable of inspiring communities of action in the present. The involuntarily displaced certainly deserve greater empathy and hospitality provided by institutions of transition and cosmopolitan hospitality, as well as legal protection and socioeconomic integration within a world of shifting climates and increased collective vulnerabilities. But the liberal reproduction of migrant categories, as we have seen, tends to isolate and fetishize subjective effects, conveniently releasing those who would choose not to care from both comprehending, and by extension implicating themselves within the deeper structures of political causality. Although progressive social movements offer an important way forward in demanding open borders, the global challenge of climate migration will remain unaddressed if countries in the Global North continue to help make lives elsewhere increasingly unlivable owing to environmental breakdown.⁵⁵ In the meantime, by transforming our approaches to migration from short-term crisis management to long-term and substantial system change—including not only decarbonization and habitat restoration but also greater equality and social justice for all—we can better advance the movement toward a world altogether different from the climate apartheid that awaits on the horizon of the present one.