

The Redistribution of the Sensible: Photography and Contemporary Migration¹

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Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

I first met him in January 2017. He is a man in his late-twenties from a West African country who, after several months, found himself on a Greek border island, not far from the Turkish coast. He left, pursuing his

dream. But he also left because of political persecution. He used to be politically active in his own country, he tells me, but I should have guessed anyway: his oratorical skills were impressive. His party was the main

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¹ It is with gratitude, affection and comradeship that I am offering this contribution to Susan Pollock, for her inspirational writings which have shaped me as a scholar since my graduate school days, for her fighting spirit, for her friendship. I look forward to many more years! All photographs included here were taken by the author between 2016 and 2020, with the exception of the photograph on page 677, which was taken by migrant collaborators in Moria, Lesbos, in the autumn of 2019. Maria Choleva and Eva Mol made useful comments on the text. All faults are my own.

opposition party in the country, but he himself seemed to have been involved in political feuds with opponents, also including members of his extended family. He arrived on the island on a speed boat along with many others, wearing one of the orange or grey life vests sold or even produced in small, backstreet shops on the Turkish coast, but whilst proclaiming to be *Yamaha*, or at other times “*Yamaxa*”, were obviously of questionable standards and buoyance. Thousands of such life vests, together with other remnants of border crossing are regularly gathered from the beaches and re-deposited at a site near Molyvos, an ex-municipal dump that is now known across the world as “the life-vest cemetery.” Such objects and materials are often treated by local people and NGOs alike as trash, as environmental pollution and as an eyesore which needed to be removed, placed out of sight, as soon as possible. Yet,

ironically, their secondary, mass accumulation created a contemporary monument, a highly photogenic site, a dark heritage memorial, already featured in thousands of photographs published in the world’s media.

It was one afternoon at the port of Mytilini when he and I met. He was one of the few people, mostly from West Africa, who had agreed to leave the tents in the over-crowded and freezing detention and processing centre for an old warship docked at the port. The ship had been sent by the government to operate as temporary shelter, in the midst of the heaviest winter for decades. Most of the other migrants had refused to stay in the ship, fearing that it was an elaborate ploy: “they want us in the ship so that they can easily deport us back to Turkey as soon as we embark”, they told me.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

My interlocutor, let's call him Ahmed, showed trust, fearing that his body would not be able to cope with the snowfall had he stayed in the tent. "When in Istanbul", he tells me, "I found myself almost in a warzone, with all the bombs that they were going off. And I thought I had left all that behind when I fled home", he noted, as he happened to witness, *en route*, Turkey's internal political turmoil. He was clearly worried and concerned but also determined. He had already developed links with many others, especially people from Africa. "In this jungle", he tells me, "all Africans are brothers..."

I saw him again six months later, in July. He was back in the main detention centre, not in a tent this time, but in a pre-fabricated container, the infamous ISO boxes, which he shared with many others. But the camp time, the time of waiting, had taken its toll. His application for asylum had been rejected, but he had the right to appeal. As with all border-crossers, he was allowed to leave the camp but not the island while his case for asylum was being considered. His most important possessions while there, along with his smart phone, were several pieces of paper, some original, some photocopied. He showed me a couple of these papers, kept safe inside plastic sleeves. Several of them were to do with his situation back home: evidence that he was chased by the police, medical examinations. Others had to do with his life on the island. Perhaps most important of them all was a piece of paper identifying him as someone who had gone through the initial process of registration and is applying for asylum. Like others, he often had to produce that piece of paper, his temporary ID, going in and out of the camp or going to the town. I had seen bus conductors on the island asking to see that piece of paper before they could even issue a ticket. The border is not by definition a static material reality, it is a situation, an instance, a relationship, you do not leave it behind once you cross. You carry it with you.

He had started losing hope and confidence in the whole process. He was considering whether or not to apply for an appeal. His lawyers were very good, he tells me, but too few for the many thousands of cases. "Rather than exhausting each case, they are exhausted by them", he proclaimed one day, stressing each word. His oratorical skills would surface from time to time. I saw him at his happiest when he was able to connect with refugee rights activists, and participate in workshops held in solidarity camps. He would tell me about migrant political mobilisation inside the camp, whilst at the same time expressing suspicion and distrust for some of the so-called "community leaders": the go-betweens or representatives of each, nationally defined migrant community, who operated as such with the encouragement of the camp authorities.

Our conversation continued online for months, after I had left the island and he stayed behind. Some days, his message was the first to arrive on Messenger in the morning: 'Good morning, sir'. I would respond, and wait. There was nothing. It was just the "Good Morning". Or maybe, that was it, that was enough. In the end, he decided to take the risk, to leave the island clandestinely, and continue his journey to the mainland. "I do not feel safe here", he kept writing to me. He had stayed for a few days in a squat on the island operated by a solidarity group, but the fear of police raids was constant. From the mainland he wrote to me a few times. He considered staying in some of the squats and solidarity structures but decided against it, fearing that these too would be raided. He was continuing his journey, but the border was travelling with him. I lost contact a few months later. There were a few messages that had arrived in the middle of the busiest period of the semester for me. I failed to respond at the time. When I tried to contact him later, there was no response. I could see that he was still active, at least on-line, even

continuing on-line political activity in his own country by posting various videos. In my last attempt to contact him I realised that he had decided to keep a very low profile, and even blur, or cover his own digital tracks. I do not know what the current situation

is. He could still be living clandestinely in Athens or another city, he could have moved on and tried to continue his journey to western and northern Europe, or he could have been arrested and deported.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

I have decided to start this piece with extracts from my fieldwork notes, not only because they do, I think, help me introduce some of the main threads that run through the broader project upon which this article-photo essay is based but also because I wanted to conjure up the presence amongst

us, me the writer, you the viewers and the readers, of the people, the things, and the contingencies that shape this project: an on-going archaeology or archaeological ethnography of contemporary migration which I started in 2016, taking the border island of Lesbos as my main field site. This is

a border not only between Turkey and Greece but also an external border of the European Union, in effect a border between the Global South and the Global North.

I wanted to conjure up their presence, their embodied, material and sensorial lives but not show their faces. Their faces, their bodies, I have not, with one or two exceptions, photographed, and the photos I have of them are mostly group photos they themselves asked to take, with me. And these are not for show. I wanted to conjure up the memory and the image of the young man I met a couple of years ago and with whom I spent an agonising couple of hours trying to find his cell phone, which he had lost, on his walk back from Mytilini to the Moria camp. Moria was the largest refugee camp in Europe; some would say, also the worst such camp in Europe, if not the world. The camp was completely destroyed by fire in September 2020, and a new, even more militarised camp was built inside an army shooting range, not far from the old camp. That man who had lost his phone was from Gaza. As he was showing to me his ID issued by the Greek authorities, stating, in ominous red ink, that he is not allowed to leave the island, I was reflecting on the irony: he escaped a homeland, Gaza, which had become for him an open air prison, to cross into Europe and find himself again imprisoned on an island while waiting for his asylum application to be processed.

Or let me conjure up the presence of my friend from Pakistan who fled fearing for his life and who became a chef on Lesbos while waiting for the asylum process to be completed. I can testify to his culinary skills, to the care he put into his cooking, especially his chicken biryani. As the conservative Greek government which came into power in 2019 had promised more, and faster, deportations, and delivered on its promises, he told me that he received the decision he was dreading: his asylum application was rejected even on appeal, and he was fearing

arrest and imminent deportation. As he said to me on chat, "I will be killed if I get sent back".

Or take another friend, Farzad Zakria from Afghanistan who arrived on the island of Lesbos with his wife and five children, fleeing persecution and the bombs in Kabul. Farzad could still hear the screams of a mother who lost her 10-year-old daughter, Roya, on the short crossing from Turkey to Greece. He, however, went on to found with others, and in the midst of the chaos and desperation of Moria, a migrant-operated, self-support organisation called, *Waves of Hope for the Future*. At the very beginning, he installed a whiteboard on a makeshift tripod in the open air, and started teaching children who were sitting on the grass or on an abandoned sofa. Now, *Wave of Hope* has been embraced by many migrants living in various camps on the islands and on the mainland, and has taught thousands of children and adults, while it also runs libraries, and arts and painting classes.

It was in such an arts studio in Moria (now burnt down in the September 2020 fire) where I met Shukran, a painter and a singer from Afghanistan who had arrived on the island in late 2019. Amongst the paintings in his studio, one in particular captured my attention. The canvas showed a man with a large, professional camera, photographing another canvas which depicted the now famous photograph of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy found dead on a Turkish seashore in 2015. In fact, Shukran had himself previously created the smaller painting depicting that photo of Kurdi, so here he had repainted a painting of his, based on the photo. He told me later that what he painted on this canvas is a real life moment, depicting a visit to his studio by an Italian friend who took an interest in the small, original painting and wanted to photograph it. Perhaps unintentionally, Shukran's painting is a comment on the visual economy of migration photography; on

the efficacy of certain images to stand for the dangers and perils of border crossing; and on his ability to capture this process with his canvas and his acrylic paints, to slow it down.

I could have written pages upon pages about these people, and many more besides. But I will not show their faces, I rarely take photos of them.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

Since 2015, we hear and read about the “migration crisis”, an expression which, in the European context, signifies mostly the major Syrian exodus and the crossing into Europe of migrants fleeing war and persecution. Others, however, have spoken instead of a “reception crisis” on the part of the elites and the Global North, a reception crisis which perhaps betrays the inability of the European and white elites to deal with the unfinished, on-going histories of colonialism, and the effects of contemporary neo-colonial, imperial adventures. Global migration in the modern era did not start in 2015, it is as old as national borders, and migration within

the Global South has intensified in recent decades, but it has been mostly ignored by the Global North. The moment that started in 2015 signalled a major shift, sparked by the Syrian war and mass exodus: suddenly, global migration became much more visible in the Global North, partly because many millions of people are now at the borders between the Global North and the Global South attempting to cross, and many of them succeed.

Images, mostly photographs, enable, structure, and sustain such visibility. Many thousands, if not millions, of photographs,

have been taken by photojournalists, humanitarian workers, researchers, others. Photo-albums have been produced, exhibitions have been held, and prizes won. It is easy to forget, however, that migrating people themselves produce their own photos all the time, as the smartphone and its technologically advanced camera have been one of the defining objects of contemporary border crossing; a hyper-object, a condensed materiality enabling communication, navigation, memory storage, and circulation (cf. [Hamilakis 2018a](#)). Some pertinent and insightful essays on the contemporary entanglement of migration and photography have already appeared (e.g. essays in [Sheehan 2018](#), and [Carastathis and Tsilimpounidou 2020](#)), adding to the long list of works which includes classics such as John Berger and Jean Mohr's, *A Seventh Man* (1975).

Yet, in the current moment, this entanglement has gained some novel features that demand further reflection and consideration. The obvious technological differences between the analogue mode used by earlier photography, and the contemporary, infinitely easier and cheaper digital process have resulted in exponentially more migration photos being produced and consumed today, compared to previous episodes of migration, and many of them are by migrants themselves. Furthermore, this increase is partly due to the shift in the nature of amateur photography, which from a "middle-brow art" ([Bourdieu 1990](#)) has become an omnipresent, almost routine activity that cuts across class, age, ethnicity or gender, and is linked to the emergence of the citizen-journalist and, more broadly, to the current desire to document, and to multiply photographic memories.

Nevertheless, compared to the plethora of migration photographs being produced today, relatively few of them gain sustained attention through public exhibition in galleries and other physical or digital spaces or through publication, discussion and

commentary in newspapers and magazines. The defining features of these contemporary photographic objects are their constant circulation through digital social media, and the relatively short attention span that most of them afford. These photos are both produced and consumed mostly *on the move*, they are characterised by a photographic kinaesthesia. They index a movement, in both senses of the word, shaped by people on the move, and they are also themselves things constantly in motion. Moreover, they are often perceived through the sensorial perception of moving bodies. Yet at the same time, they may mark a temporary and brief stasis: they may engender a momentary reflection by the busy commuter in the Global North; or, for a migrant from the Global South, they may elicit a longing, nostalgic, and painful or anticipatory and prospective, punctuating the time of waiting, standing in lines for food or hidden in the back of lorries and in claustrophobic cargo holds.

There are, however, some migration photos today that become iconic, and can shape public attitudes and political decisions. I already referred to the well-known photograph of the dead body of the Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a beach in Turkey, which has received wide publicity as well as scholarly analysis, and has become one of the two-three defining photographs of the Syrian exodus, and one which has inspired many other visual works, such as the painting by Shukran (cf. [Papailias 2019](#)).

When I arrived on Lesbos for the first time in April 2016, it did not take me long to realise that the island as a whole had become a stage (cf. [Carastathis and Tsilimpounidou 2020](#)). The actors were many and diverse, besides border crossers themselves: from the border patrol and apprehension forces to many NGOs, some large and global, some founded through local initiative, to many independent individuals from the island, from the rest of Greece, and from around the world, to

hundreds of journalists and photojournalists, to researchers, and more besides. What I encountered on Lesbos is another example of what Andersson has called “Illegality Inc” (2014), alluding to the “industry of migration”. Yet, the motivations, intentions, practices, and impact of these actors were, and are, highly diverse and at times antithetical, ranging from pure, politically inspired solidarity, to genuine humanitarian concerns, to opportunism, exploitation or overt racism and xenophobia. If there is a political economy of migration, then such an economy is defined by contradictions and clashes. At the same time, such an economy is shaped by visibility and materiality, it is also a visual political economy. In this visual political economy of migration, the photograph as a phenomenon is central.

Such a visual material economy is sustained by both surveillance as well as spectacle. Photographic surveillance is primarily the optic of the state and of supra-state organisations such as the European Union and their apparatuses, and it follows the long tradition that connects photography with the panopticism of suppressive power (e.g. Tagg 1988). The spectacular dimension of this economy is defined primarily by the phenomenon which Demos (e.g. 2018) has called “humanitarian visibility” or the “spectacle of victimhood” (Demos 2018, 165). It is meant to elicit compassion and empathy but is debatable whether such a result is indeed achieved (cf. Sontag 2003). Its sinister and rather problematic outcomes are, however, more clear.

For a start, there is the danger of aestheticization, which, in this case, is expressed as the consumption of images as beautiful if tragic artistic works, often tapping into popular cinematic or artistic memory, evoking iconic films such as “Apocalypse Now” or paintings such as Géricault’s 19th century work, *The Raft of the Medusa* (cf. Giannakopoulos 2016). In addition, they often depict people on the move inherently as victims, as helpless

beings with no agency, in need of our compassion and humanitarian assistance. Demos (2018) has outlined another effect of this humanitarian visibility, especially the one which centres on photographing persons, on producing portraits: it reifies the figure of a person on the move as “the migrant”, or the “refugee”, as a stand-in for these generic categories, as if the migrant state is her innate and permanent trait, as if this moment in that person’s life effaces their whole biographies, their hopes and plans for the future, their complex affective presences.

Furthermore, the focus on the portrait of a person in a camp or at the border obscures or even erases the material, social and political conditions, the deep histories that have encouraged or compelled that person to move, to cross borders, to seek a life in the former imperial and colonial metropolises. As Demos put it (2018, 169): “In fact, we can transparently see ‘refugees’ only when we are blocked from seeing the material histories, socio-political and economic relations and structural conditions that pressure or force people to migrate.”

These thoughts resonate with work by Ariella Azoulay (cf. 2008; 2019) who has attempted to extract the photographic from the domain of technology and aesthetics (aesthetics as conventionally understood, in the Kantian, contemporary “common-sense” meaning) and situate them in the terrain of the political. Instead of focusing on the afterimages, she prefers to focus on the photographic moment and the photographic encounter which may or may not produce afterimages. Such afterimages are still important, however, sometimes more for the things that do not show, for what they leave out of the frame, for the things, situations and processes they deliberately obscure and hide. In a similar vein, Tina Campt (2017) has asked us to not only look at images, however intensely and closely, but also listen to them; many images are not silent, they are rather quiet, she notes

(2017, 6). They require a finely attuned, aural attention, a sensorial training to hear what they have to tell us. But their sonority is of a distinctive frequency. They partake of a synaesthetic, affective, tactile aurality; their sound waves are mostly felt through tactility rather than heard through our ears and via the supposedly autonomous sense of hearing (cf. Hamilakis 2013). The sounds of such photographic moments often originate from outside the photographic frame.

Building on some of the insights above, as well as other work, I suggest that photography can be seen as a sensorial assemblage (in the Deleuzian sense); as the meeting, the co-presence and the encounter of heterogeneous components, some technological, some sentient, some atmospheric, some mnemonic and affective (cf. Hamilakis 2017). This is a deeply political assemblage which has the potential to give rise to new emergences, with often drastic or even dramatic consequences; think of the Alan Kurdi photo mentioned above. At the same time, such an assemblage operates within a broader, relational field, the sensorial field of photography, a field that links, spatially and temporally, diverse locales. The resonances, the affective, sensorial web of relationships of the photographic field can be felt (even if not depicted and seen) in the photos or in the photographic instance, or rather the photographic sensorial assemblage which may or may not include afterimages (cf. Hamilakis 2021 on the concept of the sensorial field). This shift from the person/portrait, or even the photograph itself to the assemblage helps us to avoid aestheticization but it also allows us to attend to, tune into the multiple components of the assemblage, the presences of the political, the historical, and the mnemonic, often located outside the frame.

But photographs are also about what Rancière has called, *the distribution of the sensible*: they are about apportioning the sensorial experience, they are about rights,

entitlements, as well concealments and prohibitions (cf. Rancière 2004; 2009; 2010). They materialise the sensorial and they attempt to regulate the sensorial field. As all aesthetic-material forms, they are inherently political, in the sense that the aesthetic-sensorial and the political are shaped by the same principle of distributing and apportioning. Aesthetics-sensoriality and politics partake of this process of the distribution of the sensible, they are both about who has the right, who gets to speak (and be heard), who gets to see and to show, what is sensed and by whom. They can both produce consensual sensorial effects, or they can lead to *dissensual* and perhaps politically and socially efficacious interventions. Dissensus, Rancière reminds us, is the essence of politics, “*a demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself*” (2010, 64).

Moreover, and by implication, photographs can be also about the redistribution of the sensible. They can reallocate the sensorial, they can reshape the relational sensorial field, they can produce a new sensorial commons. They can shape and bring into existence new communities of sense, they can contribute to the emergence of new politics. Politics that “[...] consist in the reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals” (Rancière 2009, 25).

What does this mean with regards to the photography of/on border-crossing and migration? It will mean refusing to take photographs that partake in “humanitarian visuality”, opting instead for photographs that simultaneously evoke the war against migrants, the effects of detention and deportation, *and* the resilience, inventiveness, and agency of people on the move. Photographs that make material the will to resist the detention and deportation regimes, to

make new places, to shape the new localities that migrating people encounter, the will to continue the journey; to make visible, audible, and tangible the contours, the textures, and the sonorities of migrant lives in their multiplicity, complexity, and ambivalence. I have in mind photographs that depict border crossers and migrating people building their

shelters, their cooking hearths and ovens, their schools, and libraries and art studios, in the most squalid of conditions; photographs which show them fighting back, demonstrating against the securitisation regimes, constructing networks of solidarity and engaging in communal work.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

One of the early, defining moments in my project occurred on the 10th of April 2016, in one of my first visits to Moria. I was walking outside the camp, and suddenly I saw, inside the fence, a group of men who were sitting on the ground together, stand up and pose with fists clenched, some making the victory sign. I learnt later that they were staging a protest, possibly a hunger strike. Not far from me, outside the fence, I saw a man with a large, professional camera, most probably a photojournalist. I had no camera with me,

apart from the one on my cell phone. The protesters noticed the man with the camera or possibly both of us, and staged a photographic moment, inviting us to enter into a civil contract (cf. [Azoulay 2008](#)): they were giving us permission or even inviting us to photograph them but they wanted to be seen standing up and with their fists clenched, as fighting political beings. At the same time, they expected us to disseminate such a photo, to make their protest known.

A photograph of a migrating person as an active political agent is the most threatening image in contemporary migration photography, threatening to the regimes of deportation and detention, to national imagination, to the logic of Fortress Europe. It is threatening because it makes visible and audible the political subjectivities which were not meant to exist. These people were meant to be seen and heard either as the illegal aliens who threaten the national and racial order of the Global North, or as the unfortunate victims of war, poverty, and xenophobia, in need of humanitarian assistance. A migrating person who crossed a border only a few days or weeks ago and who is now demonstrating in a camp or in the streets of a border town is perceived by many as the ungrateful recipient of hospitality (even if that means living in an over-crowded migrant camp), a bare life who has the audacity to claim the right to have a social and political *bios* (Agamben 1998). And yet, such images and sounds redraw the

boundaries of the sensorial field of politics, reshape the political community, enable the sights and sounds of political protest to occupy certain stage.

The redistribution of the sensible in migration photography will also mean occasionally shifting the focus from the migrating people themselves, and their material lives to the materiality of border regimes, detention, and deportation; a materiality that is often invisible, either because its visual economy is tightly patrolled and regulated or because such photographs are seen as less newsworthy. And yet, such photographic materiality is crucial, not only as a process of counter-surveillance and documentation of the border security apparatus, but also as a way of drawing connections and similarities between the materiality of border regimes and the materiality of detention and securitisation applied upon the bodies of all, citizens and non-citizens alike, all “internal enemies” at home, upon all dissent.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

This act of redistribution will also mean decentring photographs or even moving beyond photographs themselves, to foreground photographic events, relationships and situations, bringing about sensorial-photographic assemblages which may or may not produce photographs. Assemblages which will make visible, audible, tangible and olfactorily present the multiple sentient and non-sentient, material and immaterial social actors who have come or brought together, relationally, in the sensorial field of migration. It will mean bringing to the fore the objects, actors, and processes that are usually left out of frame.

As for the handling and the consumption of photographs themselves, this redistribution of the sensible will entail “excavating” photographs to unearth the material and social realities that shape the current nomadic

age (cf. [Hamilakis 2018b](#)), attending to the multi-temporality of photographic objects, the histories embedded in them. It will mean valorizing the photographic work and other aesthetic-artistic-political interventions of migrating and border crossing people themselves, and bringing them into dialogue with other attempts by scholars, solidarity workers, or even journalists. It will mean creating the conditions for these fast moving, fast appearing, and equally fast disappearing photographs to occupy a physical space, to produce a locality which will force us to pause and reflect, and perhaps even create an assembly for debating, organizing, acting (cf. [Butler 2015](#)).

These are some of the thoughts that drove the making of the exhibition “Transient Matter: Assemblages of Migration in the Mediterranean”, which opened at the



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, on the 20th of February 2020 (<https://blogs.brown.edu/transientmatter/>) curated by Darcy Hackley, Sherena Razek, Ayşe Sanli, and myself. While this exhibition included many objects and artefacts selectively collected as part of the archaeological ethnography work on Lesbos, photographs were a major part of it. These were photographs taken by myself, but also photographs taken by border crossers who currently live on Lesbos and who are trained in photography and filming by the small NGO, *Refocus Media Labs*. My photos and videos were of the boats used for the crossing, of the apparatuses of security such the detention camps, of the squalid conditions in the camps, but also of the

ingenuity and inventiveness of people attempting to take control of their lives, of their sustenance, of their education and their daily routines. They were aimed at documenting the materiality of contemporary migration and, more importantly, at evoking the sensorial and affective atmosphere at the border, its brutality as well as its infectious energy, hope and courage. To what extent these photographs were successful and had achieved these aims is still a matter of reflection and debate. Some found them successful, touching and powerful, whereas others thought that they did not expose the structural causes of contemporary migration, and they were also too large and overpowering for the specific exhibition space.

Right across from these large photos, there is an installation of 37 framed, mini polaroid photos, taken by migrants. The summer before the opening of the exhibition, I had given the students of the *Refocus Media Labs*, men and women in their late teens and early twenties living in Moria and coming mostly from Afghanistan, the purple polaroid

camera now exhibited next to the photos, a camera that passed from hand to hand over the following months. The remit was to answer photographically the question, “what is Moria for you?”. The photographers were encouraged to focus on things, situations, places and materials, and not on portraits.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

The polaroid format was chosen because of its immediate and directly material nature, and because it forces one to pause, think, and carefully select the subject to be photographed, given that each print cost one euro at the time. The photographers were asked to produce a set of material artefacts, the mini prints, which would index their material realities and worlds in the camp but also stand on their own as cultural-artistic production. An analysis of these works will be the subject of another paper, but it is worth noting briefly that these photographs

were strikingly different from mine. Without wishing to impose a binary scheme between outsider/insider or ethnographer/interlocutor, it should not be forgotten that these photographic takes were produced by people living, for months or even years, inside the Moria compound which structured their material world and their daily experience. The photographers chose to turn the camera downwards and sideways, taking in the claustrophobia of daily life inside the camp, the dignity and inventiveness needed to survive there, and the courage to dream



Photo: anonymous (known to the author).

of the future. Amongst the photographed objects were a make-shift shoe rack, commenting on the struggle to make the most of and organize the minimal space available to them; a hand-painted map of Europe above the camp bed, visualizing the dream of the continuing journey; and an a/c unit embellished and decorated with pink and brown cuddly toys, cosmetics, and dream catchers, evoking the concern and desire for body care and the gendered experiences of the camp, an affective materiality so far removed from the razor wire and the other insignia of the militarized apparatus.

These photos, due to their size and detail in subject matter, require sustained looking but also a slowing down on the part of the viewer. They elicit a mode of attention sensorially and temporarily different from the one required for the large, overview photos displayed opposite. If migration photography is produced and consumed mostly on the move and in transience, such opportunities for slow and sustained interaction are crucial. All photographs release us from the passage of time, they stem its flow, “they act as barriers or weirs”, as the literary author W. G. Sebald has noted (Schwartz 2007, 42). If the modernist, racialized colonial regimes of rule, time, place and perception, are about displacement, temporal as well as spatial, then such photos force us to accept a homo-chronic connection: migrating people may be detained in “prison islands” and border camps far “away” from us but they occupy the same temporal space as us, the viewers inside a university gallery thousands of miles away, or the online surfers. Cuddly teddy bears, dream catchers, or lipstick are to be found in any contemporary teenager’s room, be it in Kabul, Kinshasa, or Boston.

More importantly, both sets of photos, each the product of individual sensorial

assemblages, have the potential, in this gallery space and in its digital reincarnations, to produce both a new sensorial assemblage and a new assembly, with all their political connotations and effects. An assemblage/assembly leading to a new community of sense which includes the photos, the life vests and the other objects exhibited in the same space, the viewers, the museum visitors and staff, the memories that such objects elicit, and more besides. Such an assembly, such a community of sense can conjure up the affective, material presences of a migrant detention and processing camp but can also engender debates on the historicity and structural and political dynamics of colonial-racialized capitalist modernity and of national borders, and even foment actions towards a post-national, decolonial future.

I wish to finish with the photograph on next page, taken inside the Haffenreffer Museum gallery, only a day before the museum had to close due to the COVID-19 crisis. It shows the life vests from Lesvos which were installed as part of the *Transient Matter* exhibition seen through a glass case filled with archaeological artefacts from Mesoamerican contexts. Our sensorial assemblage here includes these Mesoamerican objects and brings into the fore their own itineraries, their own histories of border crossing. At present, most migrants into the USA come from Mesoamerican countries. Migrations of people and migrations of objects need to be thought of together, not as novel contemporary phenomena but as the latest episodes in the long and on-going histories of colonisation. Photographs as multi-temporal objects should conjure up these unfinished histories. They should haunt us all, for it is only through an ontology of haunting (cf. Derrida 1994; Papailias 2019) that we can continue living.



Photo: Yannis Hamilakis.

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