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What are the Migrant Arts?

"Art is a migrant - it travels from the vision of the artist to the eye, ear, mind and heart of the listener."
-Shailja Patel, *MigrITUDE*

Thirty years ago, there were fifteen border walls around the world. Now, there are seventy walls and over one billion national and international migrants. International migrants alone may even double in the next forty years due to global warming. It is not surprising that we have also seen the rise of an increasingly powerful global climate-security market designed to profit from and sustain these crises over the past two decades. The construction of walls and fences to block rising sea levels and incoming people has become one of the world's fastest-growing industries, alongside migrant detention and deportation. Economists project it to reach \$742 billion by 2023. This increase in human migration and borders has been a defining feature of the 21st century so far.

However, alongside the spread of global borders and security markets is also an incredible proliferation of "the migrant arts." As I understand them, the migrant arts include art made by migrants or about migration, or both. Migrants have produced works of art on cell phones, on canvas, in stories, or assemblages of objects carried on their journeys. They have documented their journeys in collaboration with others, and many of these artworks have traveled as "migrant artworks" through curatorial networks, the Internet, and museum circuits. Such museums, thus, have operated as relay systems for circulating migrant art around the world.

However, the process of migration is exceptionally uneven and highly ambiguous. This because societies marginalize migrants and exiles to varying degrees along axes of race, class, and gender. The migrant arts have, thus, given birth to great joy, freedom, beauty, novel expression alongside great sadness, trauma, loss, and untimely death. We should not romanticize or exile the migrant arts. Nor should we merely pity those forced to leave their homes or homelands.¹ Their situations are far too complex for either.

No generalizations about "the migrant arts" suffice to capture the extreme and uneven diversity of the situation of migrants' today or in history. Migrants have gone by many names throughout history. They have been called "nomads," "barbarians," "vagabonds," and "proletarians." Today, the United Nations simply calls them "migrants." Whatever their names and motives, migrants have also been great inventors of new artistic and social forms, though they have often suffered terribly.² The explosion of the migrant arts today foregrounds a unique social and aesthetic experience of ambiguity. Creativity and hope mixed with profound sadness and loss.

The migrant arts are the result of a dialectic between political *borders* and aesthetic *orders*. The more social borders there are, the more they tend to leak with new experiences of mobility. It is a common misconception that borders stop movement. Borders are not static barriers, and they cannot stop human movement. Rather, they tend to proliferate it, although in mostly destructive ways. Borders are continually shifting, being skirted around, eroded, burrowed

through and under, and rebuilt. For example, the U.S./Mexico border can funnel people into the middle of the desert, trap them inside the U.S., drive them under it, above it, or through it, and can even kill them. Borders can inspire countless works of art and stories, but can never stop people from moving.

How many times can a false idea like borders stopping movement cause death and destruction before we see what is going on? How many exceptions to the rule of "stopping movement" have to emerge before it's time to find a new rule? I think the migrant arts can help us see what is going on. The more barriers there are, the more differences and aesthetic hybrids multiply under the constraints. The migrant arts can help show us all the ways that one can move and how these ways can be experienced differently. They may not always be liberating or joyful, but at least they show us what migration is about in all its complexity and singularity whereas borders, however, do not.

One can think of how a single leak in a pipe begins to multiply the more duct tape one put's on. At first, the water seems to slow down, but then it begins to drip out several sides of the tape at once. Taping only redirects the flows but does not stop them. Alternatively, think about the dialectic between Internet advertising and ad-blocking software. Each new ad wants to control your movement and direct you to its source, and each new version of ad-removal software intends to let you move as you wish. The more new kinds of ads there are, the more new kinds of ad-evading software there is. The attempt to control your browsing through ads does not reduce differences but multiplies evasion techniques and ad techniques. Similarly, think about how each new law or increased enforcement strategy increases the number of criminals and ways of avoiding detection. The point is the same: attempts to block mobility only diversify it, although often with terrible consequences.

The dialectic between borders and proliferating margins is what is fueling the spread of the migrant arts today. The more widespread and differentiated mo-

bility is, the more new experiences and stories there are to tell. Many of these stories are just as heartbreaking as they are beautiful and poignant. Novel aesthetic orders proliferate under new political borders. More borders then respond to these new orders, in a feedback loop. For example, governments can try to keep migrant artists out by making artist visas harder to get and more expensive. New organizations then emerge to help fund visiting artist visas. Governments can patch the holes in their borders and destroy water and food left for migrants, but it only redirects future movements without stopping them.

The global border crisis is a performative contradiction of murderous proportions. It is part of a more general breakdown of an older static worldview. Now, at the turn of the 21st century, we have crossed a critical threshold in which the old paradigm of stability punctuated by moments of crisis is giving way to a whole new paradigm of ongoing flux punctuated by moments of stability.

What will the next moment of stability be? The migrant arts, by their existence, prompt this question.

The Art of Transformation

The first of two points I want to make about the nature of the migrant arts is that they incite and prompt a transformation of the existing (b)orders. Today, it is crucial for citizens of all countries to support the migrant arts. What does this mean? It means that we all, as we can, should pay attention to the migrant arts to hear what is going on and feel the singularity of the process.

The current interest in the migrant arts is a burgeoning academic and cultural phenomenon. It is now difficult to keep up with all conferences and exhibitions on migration, exile, and the arts. If forced migration ended tomorrow, though, what would curators share and academics study? Is the migrant arts' aim to abolish itself or perpetuate the conditions that created it, or something else? This is yet another ambiguity that makes the migrant arts so powerful and dynamic. They ask the world to change

the conditions that produced the art.

This is part of the profound aesthetic *and* political ambiguity at the heart of the migrant arts. How are we to make sense of this tension? As a philosopher trying to understand migration in contemporary art and politics, I would like to offer a few thoughts regarding the migrant arts.

My first thought is that supporting the migrant arts should not be about assimilation or fetishization but *transformation*. The migrant arts' primary political and aesthetic aim is the transformation of the most fundamental of political categories: the "we." Works of art produced by migrants and shared with the world are not representations *of* something, but real material transformations of the world and the viewer. It is not just that the migrant artwork shows the viewer a globally divided world. Rather, the work of art prompts social and aesthetic change by highlighting the *process of movement* that made the work possible.

For example, a Syrian migrant artist may do abstract art in Oslo that is not about or tied to their migration "story" at all. Still, the fact that they are in Oslo is a geographical feature of the work of art that cannot be bracketed out. The migrant's real movement was part of the material conditions for creating the artwork. The journey is immanent to the artwork even if the artwork does not represent that experience or does not address it directly.

Art can never be located its historical and geographical conditions. The migrant arts, thus, have as their constitutive condition their lived mobility. The migrant arts are not necessarily representations of migrant experience but create art explicitly in dialogue with the broader geopolitical and aesthetic world. Of course, even in a single work by a single artist, the processes that went into the artwork remain various and multiple. However, because they are also entangled in the performance of migration, the migrant arts prompt the viewer to transform themselves and the world.

A political parallel here is the role that migrants and their labor have played in creating and reproducing almost every social form throughout human history.

Migrant artists transform sensation and experience, just as migrant laborers transform economies. This is true even when art or economy do not explicitly reflect the contribution of migrants as "migrants."

In this way, there is a unique political aesthetics of the migrant arts. Aesthetically, viewers may have seen more migrant art recently that appears to be the exception to the rule of national art and artists. However, migrants and migration have always been constitutive aspects of art and art worlds, although they may not have been thematized as such. In other words, what is happening now is that artists and museums are rendering visible the previously invisible labor and experiences of what was previously invisible, or at least less visible.

A similar shift is happening in contemporary politics. Migrants are calling for an explicit recognition of their constitutive importance *as migrants*. Activist groups such as 'No One is Illegal' are demanding rights *for migrants* and not just the right of migrants as potential citizens.³ Migrant artists are transforming the art world, just as migrant laborers are transforming economies.

Migrant Art in Motion

The United Nations defines a migrant as someone who moves from country A to country B - from one fixed social point to another. This definition presupposes social stability as primary and defines the migrant as the one who temporarily or permanently lacks this stability or social membership. This definition has political and aesthetic consequences.

This definition represents movement along the line AB, but since this line is nothing but a series of spatially immobile points, real movement is ultimately unrepresented. Similarly, states do not represent or value the moving political figure of the migrant in the social system.

In this geometrical definition, points are primary, but in reality, movement makes the points, just as nation-states are made and reproduced by migrants. Migration and migrant writing, for example, is the unwritten movement that

makes writing possible. Just as the hand, arm, and body movement remain unrecorded in writing, human migration is often rendered invisible in what is written.

I am arguing here that migrant art does not just exist between fixed points of legible national traditions and texts. Migration is the material historical condition of all social writing. Migration is part of the immanent performance of writing or art-making itself. Therefore, the migrant arts are at the very limit of the arts because they are so challenging to exhibit or archive.

This does not mean that there are no migrant arts but rather that migrant bodies, labor, and culture are constitutive elements of reproducing other people's artistic social orders. Artists wrote the Western literary canon on backs of migrants, including slaves, displaced Indigenous peoples, and the colonized. In this context, the challenge of the migrant arts is twofold. First, they challenge one to see that artistic inscription (in any medium) is a constitutive and material *act* or *motion*. Second, they prompt one to transform the definition of writing to include both oral and performative cultural productions. Speech and writing share a common migrant, performative, and mobile core.

Instead of an opposition between the archive and the repertoire, we can look to the material, historical, and kinetic performance of the archival process itself as a material condition of such a division. This is what migrant writing can reveal.

The Art of the Dispossessed

Migrants, however, have always been "constitutively excluded" from history. That is, they have been included but *included* aterritorially, politically, legally, and economically deprived peoples. They have been occupied, enslaved, militarized, criminalized, and economically exploited in the name of progress and civilization. In the Neolithic world, they were dispossessed from the land by agricultural fencing. In the ancient world, they lost their right to free movement and inclusion with the development of walls to keep out foreigners. In the European Middle Ages,

they were criminalized using legal techniques and incarcerated in the first prisons that led to the rise of the early modern state's. In the modern era, capitalism has economically exploited them.

Civilization has always expanded by expelling a portion of its migratory population. I call this "expansion by expulsion." When we look around today, we see all these devastating dispossession techniques at work in various combinations.

This will be the century of the migrant because the return of these historical methods of social "expansion by expulsion" can reveal, if we look carefully, that the migrant and the migrant arts have always been constitutive of political aesthetics. In other words, migrants are neither marginal nor exceptional figures, but rather essential groups through which all hitherto existing societies have sustained and expanded their social and aesthetic forms. A list of great migrant artists, scientists, and philosophers would be so long that I will not even attempt to present one here.

I want to stress, though, that it has been a structural feature of all hitherto existing states and economies to expand and reproduce themselves by expelling migrants.⁴ The recent explosion of migration and mobility today demands that we all rethink the "we" of political history from the perspective of the migrants who produced and continue to reproduce it.

Unfortunately, the dominant framework for thinking about the migration crisis and the related climate crisis is entirely upside down because it starts from stasis. It assumes that the earth and human society are separable and static, or at least stable structures. It believes that the future should continue to be stable as well and that, if there is no stability, then there is a "crisis." However, mobility is a crisis only if we assume that there was or should be stasis in the first place.

From a more movement-oriented perspective, we can see that the opposite is true. Humans were first migratory in nature, and only later settled into more metastable patterns of social-circulation. These patterns were made historically possible by the social expulsion and dispossession of migrants. Migrants are not

outside society but have played a productive and reproductive role throughout history. Migrant movements are constitutive and even transformative elements of society, rather than exceptional or marginal phenomena.

The real question is how we ever came to act and think as if societies were not processes of circulation that relied on migration as their conditions of reproduction. In addition, the earth itself, was first also migratory in nature, and only later did it settle into metastable patterns of geological and atmospheric circulation (e.g., the Holocene). Why did we ever think of the earth as a stable surface, immune from human activity in the first place?

The problem with the prevailing interpretation of climate change and migration is that the flawed paradigm that has defined the "crisis," the notion of stasis, is also proposed as the solution, "Let's just get things back to normal stability again." In short, I think we need a new paradigm that does not use the same tools that generated the "crisis" to solve it - i.e., capitalism, colonialism, and the nation-state.

Today's migrant "crisis" is a product of the paradox at the heart of the capitalist, territorial nation-state form, just as the climate crisis is an expression of the anthropocentrism at the heart of these forms. Therefore, the solutions will not come from the forms in crisis but only from the birth of new forms-in-motion. These new forms begin instead with the theoretical importance of the figure of mobility that is dissolving the old forms.

Unfortunately, many of the same historical techniques of expulsion are still in effect today. Many migrants in the US and Europe, both documented and undocumented, sustain whole sectors of economic and social life that would collapse without them. Even when migrants are not directly producing art, they are continually reproducing the material and social conditions of the arts and artists.

Simultaneously, these migrants remain largely depoliticized and denied status compared with the citizens their labor sustains. Just as Greeks and Romans were capable of incredible military,

political, and aesthetic expansion only on the condition of the political expulsion of cheap or free migrant labor, so it is with Europeans and Americans today.

Dangerous Waters

The migrant arts can also help develop a better image and language of migration compared to most media and xenophobic portrayals. Consider how the media tends to describe migrants. In the United States, people such as Samuel Huntington and Patrick Buchanan have worried about a "Mexican immigrant invasion" of "American civilization." In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* published an editorial on Europe's crisis that ended by describing refugees as the "fearful dispossessed" who are "rattling Europe's gates" - a direct historical reference to the barbarian invasion of Rome.

In France, Marine Le Pen said at a rally in 2015 that "this migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the fourth century, and the consequences will be the same." Even the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has described refugees with the same "dangerous waters" and military metaphors used by Romans to depoliticize barbarians. Tusk says that refugees are a "great tide" that has "flooded into Europe," producing "chaos" that needs to be "stemmed and managed." "We are slowly becoming witnesses to the birth of a new form of political pressure," Tusk claimed, "and some even call it a kind of a new hybrid war, in which migratory waves have become a tool, a weapon against neighbors."⁵

This rhetorical description of immigrants as dangerous criminals is a malicious repudiation of migrants' real material, social, and aesthetic contributions. The migrant arts are under attack by anti-immigrant representations and rhetoric and this rhetoric often has the pernicious effect of criminalizing migrants.

In particular, the media depiction of the recent South American migrant caravan as a form of military "invasion" of the United States had disastrous consequences. President Donald Trump called the caravan an "invasion" and "an as-

sault on our country." The Associated Press called it an "army of migrants" and used social media to describe "a ragtag army of the poor."⁶ Robert Bowers then murdered eleven people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh because a Jewish group was supporting the migrant caravan. President Trump even told border patrol agents to shoot migrants with live rounds if they threw stones near the border.

This rhetorical criminalization of migrants, alongside the rise of online racist hate groups, helped mobilize anti-immigrant militia groups and helped turn public opinion *against* refugees. Now refugees are being deported from the US and detained in cages, *as if* they were criminals. The explicit media framing of migrants as a violent, criminal, and military invasion is an old historical tactic with a massive popular resurgence in the US and Europe. All this rhetoric seeks to undermine migrants' ability to make the art that exposes the real constitutive political and aesthetic order at the heart of post-colonial Western countries. Xenophobic rhetoric is a response to the migrant arts that propose a transformation of the global "we."⁷

Just as the migrant arts are not merely symbolic, neither are the anti-immigrant rhetorical strategies that disavow them. Public commentary about migration is not neutral but can have real effects for migrants by maintaining a culture of racism. These consequences demonstrate my point that speech and writing are more than *what* they say. The act of speaking or writing is also a material act with material affects and practical consequences. "Free speech," is neither free nor merely speech.

We should think about borders not just as dividing lines between countries but as cultural and aesthetic structures that also affect legal policy, law enforcement, electoral politics, the arts, and the lives and deaths of migrants. This is why we need to refuse the rhetorical criminalization of migrants. It is also why we need the migrant arts to help shape a language, vision, and way of thinking that is not xenophobic or nationalistic. Migrant voices should be more directly part of public

discussion. Art museums are one way of doing this. While anti-immigration rhetoric uses a rigid and closed definition of a national "we," the migrant arts invite people to feel, see, and understand others so that the "we" itself opens up and changes.

A Right to the Arts

The mixed feelings and thoughts that accompany exile and arrival - including imagination, creativity, hope for a new home, and the commitment to making a new world - tend to travel alongside the migrant arts as the potential for political and aesthetic transformation. They open the possibility for everyone to make a new home and a new world; one that is not closed off to others. The migrant arts are not about mere bodies endowed with human rights but are singular demands for the right to have the right to make art.

In this way, there are at least two barriers to receiving the migrant arts. The first is the nationalist refusal to change the social and aesthetic "we" who receive the art. The second is the humanist tolerance of difference that also refuses to change the "we" who tolerate and assimilate art. Both, in their way, deny the transformative power of the migrant arts.

The migrant arts ask for a political commitment to the project of migrant justice and solidarity. It is not enough to receive the migrant arts against their nationalist disavowal. The migrant arts are inseparable from the political project of a collective social transformation of the "we" who receive and experience these arts. "We" must make a world in which many worlds fit.

Just as activists speak of a "right to the city," might we also imagine "a right to the arts," that includes everything needed to make and experience art. Solidarity cities that provide protection, social support, and services are not enough if migrants do not have a place to share their voices and stories. Art is part of how the social "we" changes and widens. Sanctuary without art is only humanism. Solidarity, therefore, is a necessary but insufficient policy without the aesthetic transformation of national, cultural, and personal identities.

This will be the century of the migrant not just because of the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon, but because the asymmetry between citizens and migrants has reached a historical breaking point. We cannot move forward at this point without massive violence until the “we” itself is different than it presently is.

The prospects for any structural improvements in this situation are hard to imagine, especially amidst a global pandemic. The alternatives, though, are not without historical precedent. However, before applying any specific solutions, I think societies have to start with one significant move. People need to transform the political decision-making process such that everyone affected by any proposed changes, regardless of their status, can participate.

We cannot begin to answer, much less solve, the so-called “migration crisis” until “we” effectively transform “ourselves” to include *everyone*. This is not just a question of adding or integrating “others” into the same social or political processes. It requires a transformation of society as a whole, something the migrant arts and politics can help everyone achieve.

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