

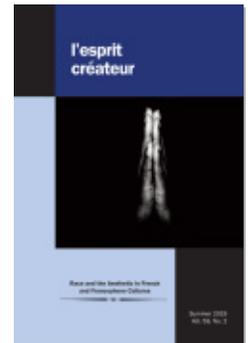


PROJECT MUSE®

The Aesthetics of Migration, Relationality, and the
Sentimography of Globality

Dominic Thomas

L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2019, pp. 165-179 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0023>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/728229>

The Aesthetics of Migration, Relationality, and the Sentimography of Globality

Dominic Thomas

Politics is what separates some populations, whose lives are supported, nurtured, protected, from other populations, who are exposed to death, to persecution, to murder.

—Édouard Louis¹

This collapse leads to a loss of ethics, and when ethics fails, beauty falls.

—Patrick Chamoiseau²

THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION for Migration (IOM) monitors migration flows to Europe in terms of *arrivals* and *fatalities*.³ At the time of this writing, the record of the main nationalities of people disembarking in Italy (from Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Sudan) and crossing the border into Greece (from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq) provides a broad range of indicators pertaining to land and oceanic migratory paths as well as insights into the push factors in the countries of origin. Increasingly though, interpreting this data as a way of evaluating the extent of the *migrant* or *refugee* ‘crisis’ has been further complicated by the concerted efforts made by the European Union to enhance the coordinated management of migration through bilateral agreements and co-development policy initiatives such as the EU Strategy for Security and Development (also known as the Sahel Regional Action Plan). These mechanisms are designed to assist participant countries in improving their handling of development and security issues, most notably in terms of border management and the fight against illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime. However, as Claire Rodier has argued, “In the name of ‘sharing the burden,’ and as a way of making neighboring countries responsible for managing migratory flow, EU member states have long used economic partnerships and cooperation as a way of inciting countries of emigration to maintain their populations and prevent them from coming to Europe.”⁴ The impetus has been to externalize border control infrastructure beyond Fortress Europe and to put in place mechanisms that promote distance rather than proximity, and literally to keep migrants *out of sight and out of mind*.

The EU glossary pertaining to various types of mobility underscores how policy has been shaped in very deliberate ways by the imperative to distin-

guish between different populations: *irregular migration* concerns the “Movement of persons to a new place of residence or transit that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries,” a *refugee* must be able to demonstrate “a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group,” and an *asylum seeker* be “a third-country national or stateless person who has made an application for protection under the Geneva Refugee Convention Protocol.”⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, these definitions need not be augmented or exhaustive, but they do nevertheless serve to highlight the real-life consequences the decision-making process has on individuals and groups. This policy translates into an inventory of conventions and treaties that seek to transfer accountability, obligations, and responsibility away from the organizations that enact it onto those targeted by the ensuing decrees and legislation. Works of art and literature therefore play a key role in challenging the logic of these policies by foregrounding the human experience and reversing the rationale.

Immersive experiences

In 2017, Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu presented a virtual reality installation, *Carne y arena* (Flesh and Sand), subtitled “Virtually present, physically invisible.” Thinking about these questions in a comparative global framework makes sense historically, given that policymakers have worked transnationally in the management of borders and enforcement policies. As Fatima Bhutto has explained, “each visitor must enter and travel through the director’s landscape of the Mexican-American border, by themselves, helpless and undefended. [...] Virtual reality is built somewhere between the borders of the real and imaginary, between the truth and a lie.”⁶ Literature is of course rich in examples of works that seek to achieve analogous goals, and Susan Feagin has argued that

a necessary condition for empathizing with a character in a literary work is that one simulates the relevant mental process of that character [...] it is the structural properties of a process that account for, at least to some extent, the affective or phenomenological ‘feel’ of the experience, and hence for the types and degrees of understanding one may have of a character with respect to the mental process being simulated.⁷

Alejandro González Iñárritu’s installation was conceptualized as an immersive experience aimed to trigger empathic responses. This result is achieved by positioning participants in what amounts to an interregnum, an interval space, one that locates them concurrently at the border of the imaginary and

the real, thereby replicating metaphorically the environmental conditions associated with crossing the physical border between Mexico and the United States. Alejandro González Iñárritu's work therefore heightens and stimulates the senses, exposing the spectator to the harsh conditions of immigrants and compelling them to share the migrant experience.

Yet, as Viet Thanh Nguyen has maintained, "refugees are people who are just like us until these calamitous situations displace them."⁸ How can aesthetic projects enable association and connection, improve relationality, stimulate empathy, sympathy, understanding, consideration, pity, and compassion? How can artists and writers operate individually or collectively to elicit and nurture identification and provide the impetus for mobilization? In a recent book of essays, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Viet Thanh Nguyen demonstrates how such concerns are intrinsic to the very decision to write, "because a writer needs to know what it feels like to be an other," to "conjure up the lives of others, and only through such acts of memory, imagination, and empathy can we grow our capacity to feel for others."⁹ More precisely, then, the central question that remains to be explored concerns the specific manner in which art and literature *conjure up the lives of others*, and therefore stand to mobilize or provoke emotional reactions from exhibition visitors and readers. As we shall see, a range of mechanisms are employed, aimed at enlisting audiences in a process of conscientization in relation to the cultural, political, and social contradictions of the world we live in.

David Palumbo-Liu's book, *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*, provides some indicators, pointing to how empathy operates, in a broader historical framework, as a mechanism that helps define "the relation between the self and the other," thereby "mobiliz[ing] empathy for others and enhanc[ing] our ethical capabilities," while also revealing how these questions must be anchored in a broader historical context.¹⁰ This understanding of empathy is also helpful in complicating assumptions relating to "commonality" and "communicability" that have the potential to "imply commensurate relations between selves and others, and yet how these relatively simple systems become less and less stable as they interact with, and try to accommodate, a more radical type of otherness produced in contemporary historical contexts" (Palumbo-Liu 1). Naturally though, as he explains, "We cannot be the other, but we can try to imagine what her or his situation would make *us* feel like. [...] What norms, assumptions, presumptions, what notions of mimesis, what norms of 'human behavior' do we intuitively draw on to make sense of our bold statement that 'we feel your pain'?" (Palumbo-Liu 8). David Palumbo-Liu provides an important distinction here (indeed one that informs the analy-

sis in this article), describing an experience that is intrinsic to Alejandro González Iñárritu's aforementioned installation, precisely because of the concern with associating the dual components that are *imagining* and *feeling* triggered by the association of psychological and physical reactions.

These approaches necessarily involve different sequences and levels of intensity, feelings that cover the range of emotional spectrum. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, have underscored how important it is to “take care to be sure what we mean by the term [empathy] when making our own claims and arguments,” and they caution against seeking “to regiment the term into one single meaning.”¹¹ Consensus is hard to achieve given that the terminology is understood very differently by art and literary critics, in philosophy, as well as in other fields such as neuroscience. My concern here is with artists and writers whose work seeks to elicit empathy because, as Graham McFee argues, empathy is “relational in a stronger sense than, say, even sympathy” given that “in empathy, I am seeking to enter into your emotional state, if only in imagination.”¹² There is of course some overlap between sympathy and empathy, but more often than not the two remain distinct, even inconsistent. Martha Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, discusses these processes in terms of an “imaginative reconstruction of another’s experience,” arguing ultimately:

If there is any difference between ‘sympathy’ and ‘compassion’ in contemporary usage, it is perhaps that ‘compassion’ seems more intense and suggests a greater degree of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion. [...] Sympathy, like compassion, includes a judgment that the other person’s distress is bad.¹³

For Hannah Arendt, relationships with others are a pre-condition of existence and necessarily intersect with collective responsibility, to the extent that relationality provides the structural basis for human rights. But these relationships are also by definition perspectival, and Johannes Lang has argued that “it seems problematic to assume that empathy requires identification or a perception of similarity” and that “[t]his form of imagination is quite the opposite of identification; it requires instead an ability to transcend the limitations of one’s own perspective and one’s own self-interest in order to put oneself in the place of another.”¹⁴ This distinction is especially relevant to the circumstances of migrants and refugees today, since as Rebecca Adami elucidates, the “political agency of individuals in terms of claiming or enacting their human rights is today dependent on the recognition of such political demands by states that are willing to realize rights and freedoms for their citizens and

for people living under their jurisdiction, where political space of citizens and non-citizens is limited within legal borders of democracies.”¹⁵ We are certainly not going to resolve all of these issues here, because such a wide range of philosophical traditions govern the application of emotions in moral philosophy. Instead of adhering to a monolithic framework with which to explore these multiple usages, the particularities of the work of each artist and writer considered in the following pages will provide the coordinates with which to delineate the contours of the interpretive grid upon which analysis and critical insights can be situated. “Artworks are,” as Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie demonstrate, “like actions, the product of, and expressive of, people’s feelings and intentions. [...] Not only are these characters the intentional products of the artist; they also have a life of their own, so to speak, which is in many respects just like ours, and which is there to be understood, and, perhaps, empathized with” (Coplan and Goldie xxxvii).

Securing empathy

At the heart of discussions on the subject of migration, one finds a glaring discrepancy between concerns for human rights and justifications for vigilance and enhanced repressive systems. As Achille Mbembe has argued,

worldwide, the combination of fast capitalism and the saturation of the everyday by digital and computational technologies have led to the acceleration of speed and the intensification of connections. Ours is, in this regard, an era of planetary entanglement. Yet, wherever we look, the drive is decisively towards enclosure. [...] It is characterized by the externalization, militarization and miniaturization of borders, an endless segmentation and contraction of rights and an extension of tracking and surveillance as the privileged mode of mitigating risks. Its key function is to enhance mobility for some while impeding it or denying it to others.¹⁶

Terms such as cohesion and security now find themselves at the forefront. Political leaders and parties have extensive recourse to them, nurturing suspicion and fear of displaced populations. The consequence of this situation is necessarily to discourage empathy. Instead of seeking to imagine oneself in the shoes of others, the tendency is to dissociate and disidentify with their circumstances, embracing protective actions instead as the path to safeguarding a way of life that is deemed under threat. Thus, while this article concentrates on artistic and literary attempts to shift this narrative, ample evidence confirms how diametrically opposed arguments have gained ground in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Austria, France, Sweden, Hungary, and elsewhere. The result is a coexistence of insular and

open thinking, complex and simplistic reasoning, and humanizing and dehumanizing positions on migratory questions. As mentioned earlier, the eagerness to categorize, distinguish, and hierarchize various migratory populations has not always, as Reyna Grande illustrates, “encourage[d] compassion in the receiving country, either socially or politically.”¹⁷

Returning briefly to Claire Rodier’s research, we should keep the question of perspective in mind because

the European Union, despite what official communications may have us believe, is not the party that is primarily affected. The crisis first and foremost affects the hundreds of thousands of people who have been forced to flee their countries due to war, mistreatment, and living conditions that threaten their survival. (Rodier 379)

In French, the same word—‘immigration’—is assigned to the physical process of ‘migrating’ from point A to point B and to address the ‘post-migratory’ context. In other words, both facets and sides of the question are handled respectively by ministries of *foreign affairs* and the *interior*. In fact, a disconnect often exists between the policies and regulations agreed upon in intergovernmental or supranational decision-making bodies and the national electorates to whom these same leaders are in due course answerable. Containing migrants has become a priority, and some political leaders have not hesitated to ‘weaponize’ heightened concern as a component of their negotiating arsenal, threatening to *weaken*—or in some instances *open*—their borders and allow migrants to enter neighboring countries.

There are several concrete examples of these political methods or practices designed to prevent the emergence of empathy with migrants. During the Brexit campaign in 2016, the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) published an anti-immigration poster, “Breaking point: the EU has failed us all,” featuring a long queue of migrants. The poster was designed to instill fear by focusing attention on the refugee ‘crisis’ in mainland Europe and implying a threat to the UK population. Inciting racial hatred and migrant phobia proved effective, since immigration was a crucial issue in the June 2016 referendum vote; in fact, it was *the* single most decisive factor for those who voted affirmatively in response to the referendum question “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” Since then, the Hungarian government has recycled the image to similar ends, and in the United States, President Donald Trump has not hesitated to have recourse to analogous tactics and terminology in order to describe the potential threat of unauthorized immigration: terrorism (the travel ban on Muslim-majority countries), criminality (“bad hombres” from Mexico), undesirability

(people originating from so-called “shithole countries”), and more recently the national security threat posed by a caravan of Central American migrants headed for the Mexico-United States border. Ample evidence of compassionless actions and policies are to be found elsewhere. In France, ‘*délit de solidarité*’ (crime of solidarity) regulations have intimidated and sanctioned migrants’ rights activists, and in Italy, the Minister of the Interior has prevented humanitarian rescue boats from disembarking. Together, these examples provide a counterpoint to the following discussion of artists’ and writers’ attempts at undoing the ‘anaesthetization’ of empathy. Human rights have been sidelined in response to nativist and protectionist agendas whose emotional power has helped galvanize support for political parties, as underscored in all recent European elections.

Humanitarianism itself is not without its own intricacies. Debarati Sanyal, in her discussion of refugees in Calais (France), complicates the notion of empathy, pointing to the tenuous “imbrication of repression and compassion in Europe” that is the logical outcome of the interplay of humanitarian actions and security-based repression exemplified in the actions and taken by various EU agencies.¹⁸ Referencing the work of French anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin, Debarati Sanyal traces the way in which “in recent decades the political right to protection enshrined by asylum has been replaced by an appeal to moral sentiments such as compassion and empathy. Humanitarian governmentality, it follows, relies on the asymmetries of compassion rather than the reciprocities of justice and equal rights” (Sanyal 4). In this context, one may argue that

aesthetic forms open supple and reflexive frames for envisioning modes of capture and flight both past and present. Representations of borderscapes offer heuristic figures that remain on the move, thus conveying the lived itineraries and symbolic resources of those in flight. These figures give visible and audible form to the singularities of refugees’ experience, sometimes by challenging normative conceptions of what it means to appear and to have a voice in traditional conceptions of the polis. In other words, experimental visual forms can reconfigure our understanding of what it means to see and be seen beyond the regime of visibility, recognition, and control we witness in borderscapes. (Sanyal 6)

The affective emotional element is therefore central to the process of representation and relationality. For meaningful relationality and therefore symmetry to be attained, of the kind that does not simultaneously reify inequities, relationality needs to be multidirectional, taking into account the range of ways in which the “articulation” of “other histories of victimization” may take place, but also greater interconnection and reciprocity.¹⁹ This is something to which special attention must be accorded, given that these processes are invariably racial-

ized, especially in discussions pertaining to African migration, precisely because, as Achille Mbembe has shown, “Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies” and as such “have constituted the (unacknowledged and often denied) foundation, what we might call the nuclear power plant, from which the modern project of knowledge—and of governance—has been deployed.”²⁰ The first step must therefore consist in moving away from essences—including race, class, and national origin—before any kind of relationality can become genuinely human. To this end, attributing blame to migrants for society’s ills has become commonplace, instead of questioning the xenophobia and racism within societies. In most instances, categories and labels such as undocumented, irregular, clandestine, illegal alien, migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and so on end up being used interchangeably, thereby further emphasizing the ‘criminality’ and ‘illegality’ of the individuals and groups concerned. The consequence is to draw attention to these terms, thereby giving credence to the conclusions and findings of Juliet Stumpf concerning the emergence of what she describes as “crimmigration.”²¹ The grievances of politicians and leaders thus become all the bolder, with their recourse to increasingly nativistic, nationalistic, and protective rhetoric.

Journeys and post-journeys

Viet Thanh Nguyen has asked readers to consider the challenges facing refugees as they undertake the demanding endeavor of remembering and of recovering memory. In many instances, this process entails *imagining* a narrative that is not anchored in specific memories, but instead composed of disparate elements, scattered in a constellation of memorial undertakings: “I do not remember many things, and for all those things I do not remember, I am grateful, because the things I do remember hurt me enough. [...] I have to remember, *or sometimes imagine*, not just what happened, *but what I felt*” (Nguyen 2-13). The question of experience is key to memory, but in fact, individuals end up confronting the harsh reality of displacement and the accompanying erasure that accompanies mobility, which compels them to imagine the contours of memory. A number of these memories are unique, precisely because they are anchored in the experiential. However, they do not stand alone, necessarily composed as they are by *other* memories that are not constructed only by experience. These memories are paramount to the process of relationality, indispensable to inspiring bystanders—who more often than not share neither the *experience* nor the *memory*—to reflect nevertheless on the extent to which similar imaginative steps could bring them closer. In an important essay on the subject of migration, Frances Stonor Saunders argues that

all borders—the lines and symbols on a map, the fretwork of walls and fences on the ground, and the often complex enmeshments by which we organize our lives—are explanations of identity. We construct borders, literally and figuratively, to fortify our sense of who we are; and we cross them in search of who we might become.²²

When it comes to the representation of migrants, images of boats sinking in the Mediterranean or of Central American ‘caravans,’ are now regular occurrences. These have been observed, filmed, recorded, and documented, which provides crucial evidence. This evidentiary mode is of paramount importance, but the problem resides in the reality that the experiences captured are those of populations whose individual stories are for the most part rendered indistinguishable. Artists and writers can therefore complement this uniformization through individualized narratives in a productive dynamic that stands to yield a more encompassing, and therefore accurate, picture of the socio-political issues at work.

Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei has designated the dual facets of migration as the “journey” and the “post-journey.” Ai Weiwei has argued that

establishing the understanding that we all belong to one humanity is the most essential step for how we might continue to coexist on this sphere we call Earth. I know what it feels like to be a refugee and to experience the dehumanization that comes with displacement from home and country. There are many borders to dismantle, but the most important are the ones within our own hearts and minds—these are the borders that are dividing humanity from itself.²³

Ai Weiwei has produced a number of important works on the global migrant crisis, including the documentary film *Human Flow*, the exhibition “The Law of the Journey” at the Prague National Gallery (March 2017 to January 2018), and an installation at the Tang Contemporary Art Gallery in Hong Kong that featured new work such as “*Cast of a dinghy*” (March 26 to April 24, 2018). An outgrowth of this project was later exhibited in Los Angeles at the Marciano Art Foundation (September 28, 2018–March 3, 2019), namely *Life Cycle*, which consisted of a 60-foot inflatable raft made of bamboo and silk that was also a sculptural response to the global refugee crisis. When he introduced “The Law of the Journey” exhibition in Prague, Ai Weiwei stated that “there is no migrants crisis, only a human crisis.” The main installation, reminding us of real-life watercrafts, consisted of a 131-foot inflatable black PVC rubber dinghy watercraft, suspended from the ceiling, and overcrowded with 302 indistinguishable black plasticized human figures. Ai Weiwei finds inspiration in questioning the role of artistic practice: “As artists [...] we are always working in a dangerous area and questioning existing judgments,

[whether] moral, philosophical or aesthetic. [...] Art has to be relevant. Relevant means making the people whose life and moral judgments are so fake at least feel uncomfortable about it.”²⁴ Ai Weiwei’s dramatic engagement with human vulnerability deliberately targeted exhibition visitors, compelling them to reckon with the arbitrary and perilous nature of human existence and to unsettle their consciousness in the process. This response is achieved through the choice of materials used for the installation, the stitching and rubber reinforcing the sense of fragility and imminent tearing of the fabric. Onlookers are thus confronted with an oversized raft, afloat, precariously suspended from the ceiling as if riding the crest of a massive wave. Signs throughout the exhibit warn visitors not to walk under the installation lest it should collapse, as those aboard reach out, hands extended to onlookers, hoping someone will grab them and steer them to safety.²⁵ This process of enhancing compassion is what Martha Nussbaum so persuasively elucidated in *Poetic Justice: Literary Imagination and Public Life*, since “the very form constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the sufferings and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves.”²⁶

Whereas Alejandro González Iñárritu’s installation sought an affective response by attempting to simulate the physical experience of a migrant, Ai Weiwei instead stages the dramatic nature of the precariousness and vulnerability of those migrants who risk their lives on ocean-bound vessels. Both are aesthetic projects, and both are aimed at fostering identification and encouraging audiences to imagine how they too might have recourse to such desperate and extreme measures as a way of safeguarding themselves and family members. As Gregory Currie has shown, one must note how “these processes provide information which is accessed by the visual system, and which contributes to a visual experience in which various properties of the work, or of that which is represented in it, are made manifest” (Currie 90). “There are ranges of (bodily) simulation-based activities which are directed towards works of art or aesthetic objects more generally and which may contribute to aesthetic engagement with those objects” (Currie 88).²⁷

Previously, the discussion insisted on the importance of multi-directional modes of relationality. The work of Franco-Djiboutian author Abdourahman Waberi provides examples of this complicated interaction. In his novel, *In the United States of Africa*, Europeans land on the shores of the African continent rather than the other way round, thereby calling upon readers to rethink and reimagine affiliation, to experiment with relationality and mediation, and to follow the example of protagonists who manage, as Waberi indicates, to

learn to identify with characters from beyond their borders [and engage in] identification, projection, and compassion. That's the solution. And it is exactly the opposite of the worried—and worrying—identity so widely cultivated. Instead of the “we” so proudly trumpeted, the “we” flexing its muscles, puffing up its pectorals, it is another “we,” diffracted, interactive, translated, a waiting, listening “we”—in short a dialoguing “we” will be born. (Waberi 106)

This “technique of reversal,” as Jacqueline Dutton has argued, “has a double relevance and reference in Waberi’s utopian novel that depicts a futuristic world in which Africa is the center of enlightenment and North America and Europe are wastelands of primitivism, misery, war and suffering.”²⁸

Defensive identities and the sentimography of globality

In the face of the incontrovertible challenges of twenty-first-century migration, both *within* and *between* continents, artists, filmmakers, and writers are increasingly responding by rethinking humanity from an expanded global framework, one that contains the potential to spawn what Patrick Chamoiseau describes as a “relational ecosystem” (Chamoiseau 69). This concluding section therefore proposes to gauge what is at stake in such a reconceptualization of the question. Italian filmmaker Andrea Segre is active in the organization ZaLab, an association whose “aim is the production, distribution and promotion of social documentaries and cultural projects” for individuals and groups that “otherwise wouldn’t have the means to express themselves, [and who] through our laboratories become authors of their own stories.”²⁹ ZaLab offers an invaluable example of how relationality, through the democratization of perspective, can be achieved. These initiatives broaden the scope of reference by showing “how easy it is to become a migrant [...], an asylum seeker or a refugee [...]. Thinking backwards is necessary to be able to feel at the center of your actual history” (ZaLab). Numerous films have come out of these fruitful partnerships, notably *South of Lampedusa* (A sud di Lampedusa, 2006, 31 min.) in which attention is given to perilous desert journeys, *Closed Sea* (Mare chiuso, 2012, 60 min.) on the Libyan conflict and how this triggered large-scale migration, and *The Order of Things* (L’ordine delle cose, 2017, 112 min.) on the EU response to migration.

Likewise, a significant number of leading international writers have turned their attention to the issue of global migration, drawing attention to one of the central political and social issues of our globalized twenty-first-century societies. In some cases, groups of writers have articulated collective responses, such as in *Osons la fraternité! Les écrivains aux côtés des migrants*.³⁰ The goal of course, as Achille Mbembe has shown, is nothing less

than “reaffirm[ing] the innate dignity of every human being and of the very idea of a human community, a same community, an essential human resemblance and proximity” (Mbembe, *Critique* 173), and delineating in the process new forms of co-existence and relationality. Erri De Luca has juxtaposed the African continent with mainland Europe in several of his works, asking somewhat provocatively:

A raft or two lost at sea, the arrest of a random dinghy, just to pretend that treaties are being honored. Do the treaties make allowances for shipwrecks? Who would dare say such things? The treaties do admit collateral damage: the fault lies in unyielding masses that, force majeure, insist on making the journey.³¹

Patrick Chamoiseau, in *Migrant Brothers*, inscribes the current question of global migration in a much longer history of displacement. This connection makes it possible to establish a conjunction between slavery and migration and integrates oceans—Atlantic, Mediterranean, and so on—in symbolic ways that allow for dialogue with works such as Jason deCaires Taylor’s underwater installation. As Susan Smillie wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper, “On the seabed off the coast of Lanzarote, British artist [sculptor] Jason deCaires Taylor [created] an extraordinary series of underwater artworks, concrete figures representing desperate refugees and selfie-taking tourists that are transformed as they become slowly colonized by marine life.”³² Inspired by Géricault’s nineteenth-century “The Raft of the Medusa,” “The Raft of Lampedusa” conjures Italy’s southernmost island, the main entry point to the EU for migrants coming from the African continent. For Patrick Chamoiseau, identification, symbiosis, and imbrication are defining concepts precisely because “the suffering-over-there is in the radiant here, the suffering-far-away is near” (Chamoiseau 30–31). As such, for him, the term globality (*mondialité*)

is what tilts our ideas of what is human toward the horizontal fullness of what lives on this earth. [...] It unleashes a constellation of intuitions similar to a flight of images, light, somber, green, blue, swirling among themselves, bearing feelings that awaken us, feelings that create, participative feelings and fulgurant ideas that attract one another, repel one another, pass through one another mutually and thus galvanize one another (Chamoiseau 38)

This process of awakening feelings yields a topography, a landscape upon which one can map a “*sentimography* of globality,” thus paving the way for a space in which “To be moved by our reflection in the miseries of the Other and to found our compassion thereon, as is often done in the unexamined impulse of welcoming, is a bit like helping ourselves” (Chamoiseau 70). Collectively, the potential is for a migration toward the other, a “relational

energy” (Chamoiseau 51), one that would establish a gateway to “relational imaginary” and for a

dynamic that goes from ourselves to the Other, from the Other toward ourselves, and the notion of the Other is opened up beyond the mere presence of humans. [...] the imaginary moved by globality nourishes those of mutual aid, of solidarity, of complementarity, of respect for the Other, of care for a horizontal and radiant fullness of life. (Chamoiseau 55)

More pertinently, as the chapter headed “Aestheticizing the Way” underscores, “This is the force of aesthetic fact. [...]. The alas unpredictable brilliance of beauty” (Chamoiseau, 91), one that might remedy an empathy deficit at a historical moment when leaders often appeal to the very opposite.

Other writers have devoted works to the question. Points of commonality are to be found in Nathacha Appanah’s novel *Tropique de la violence*, a work that transports the reader to the northern Mozambique channel in the Indian Ocean in order to tell the story of migrants arriving in French Mayotte aboard the precarious *kwassa-kwassa* fishing boats that French President Emmanuel Macron famously derided.³³ Elsewhere, in *Silence du cœur*, Senegalese novelist Mohamed Mbougar Sarr interweaves the novel with the stories of individual migrants, physically set apart from the rest of the text in the form of grey pages.³⁴ Immigration introduces difference, but in this work each encounter compels individuals to rethink their positions. The “Ragazzi [the name used for the migrants] and the Sicilians were not the same,” Mohamed Mbougar Sarr initially writes, and “At first, only the differences were apparent. Differences between bodies and what they communicated, differences between faces and what they expressed, between expectations and what they concealed, of the past and what it encompassed” (Sarr 55). But then he takes the line of questioning further, adding, “What did they have in common? A shared space, a sense of unsettling strangeness, the prospect of a shared future, whatever form it might well take. They were all men with a desire to live” (Sarr 55).

The government of human mobility

These questions are not to be downplayed, and the evidence would seem to concur with Achille Mbembe’s statement that “The government of human mobility might well be the most important problem to confront the world during the first half of the 21st century” (Mbembe, “Scrap the borders”). Globalization suggests planetary interdependence, whereas circulation and mobility imply borders and “defensive identities.” “If this trend persists, tomorrow’s world will increasingly be a gated world, with myriad enclaves, culs-de-sac and shifting, mobile and diffuse borders” (Mbembe, “Scrap the

borders”). Ai Weiwei has found inspiration in this state of affairs, advocating for the role and pertinence of artistic practice. Art and literature have an important role to play in critical thinking, in deploying a creative apparatus that can confront shifting political realities, raise consciousness, and endeavor to foster modes of identification. This goal is all the more essential at a time when a criminalizing, debasing, and often dehumanizing logic dominates, one that is fueled by the disquieting narcissistic nationalism associated with governments, politicians, and policymakers and that encourages disidentification and a lack of empathy.

University of California, Los Angeles

This article has benefited enormously from the generous and insightful comments made by anonymous peer reviewers, as well as from suggestions made by the special volume editors.

Notes

1. Édouard Louis, *Who Killed My Father*, Lorin Stein, trans. (New York: New Directions, 2019), 14.
2. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Migrant Brothers: A Poet's Declaration of Human Dignity*, Matthew Amos and Fredrik Rönnbäck, trans. (New Haven: Yale U P, 2018), 8.
3. “Mediterranean Update, Migration Flows Europe: Arrivals and Fatalities,” <https://z.umn.edu/44c5>.
4. Claire Rodier, “Closing Borders Against Fear: Europe’s Response to the 2015 ‘Migration Crisis,’” *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid*, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, eds. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 2017), 382.
5. European Migration Network Glossary, <https://z.umn.edu/47i2>.
6. Fatima Bhutto, “Flesh and Sand,” *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Viet Thanh Nguyen, ed. (New York: Abrams Press, 2018), 43.
7. Susan Feagin, “Empathizing as Simulating,” *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds. (New York: Oxford U P, 2014), 150–51.
8. “The Displaced: Refugee Writers Ariel Dorfman and Viet Thanh Nguyen on Migration, US Wars & Resistance,” *Democracy Now!*, <https://z.umn.edu/44c6>.
9. Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Introduction,” *The Displaced*, 17.
10. David Palimbo-Liu, *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke U P, 2012), 2.
11. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy*, xxxii and xxxi.
12. Graham McFee, “Empathy: Interpersonal vs Artistic,” in *Empathy*, 192.
13. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2001), 302.
14. Johannes Lang, “Explaining Genocide: Hannah Arendt and the Social-Scientific Concept of Dehumanization,” *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh, eds. (New York: Anthem Press, 2017), 187, 188.
15. Rebecca Adami, “Human rights for more than one voice: rethinking political space beyond the global/local divide,” *Ethics & Global Politics* 7:4 (2014): 168.
16. Achille Mbembe, “Scrap the borders that divide Africans,” *Mail & Guardian*, March 17, 2017.

17. Reyna Grande, "The Parent Who Stays," *The Displaced*, 74.
18. Debarati Sanyal, "Calais's 'Jungle': Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance," *Representations*, 139:1 (Summer 2017): 2.
19. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2009), 6.
20. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Laurent Dubois, trans. (Durham: Duke U P, 2017), 1, 2.
21. Juliet Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis: Immigrants, Crime, and Sovereign Power," *American Law Review* 56:2 (2006): 367–419.
22. Frances Stonor Saunders, "Where on Earth are you," *London Review of Books*, 38:5 (March 3, 2016): 7–12.
23. Ai Weiwei, "The refugee crisis isn't about refugees. It's about us," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018.
24. Aimee Dawson, Interview with Ai Weiwei, *The Art Newspaper*, March 27, 2018.
25. I presented and discussed these and related arguments at the *Ateliers de la pensée* in Dakar, Senegal, in October 2017, and subsequently in "Migrations, Narrations, et la Condition Réfugiée," *Condition planétaire et politique du vivant*, Felwine Sarr and Achille Mbembe, eds. (forthcoming).
26. Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon P, 1995), 66.
27. Gregory Currie, "Empathizing as Simulating," *Empathy*, 90, 88.
28. Jacqueline Dutton, "Flipping the Script on Africa's Future *In the United States of Africa* by Abdourahman A. Waberi," *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, 2:1 (2012): 47.
29. <http://www.zalab.org/en/>.
30. Patrick Chamoiseau and Michel Le Bris, eds., *Osons la fraternité! Les écrivains aux côtés des migrants* (Paris: Éditions Philippe Rey, 2018).
31. Erri De Luca, "Saving Lives at Sea: Onboard a Migrant Rescue Ship in the Mediterranean," <https://z.umn.edu/44c8>.
32. Susan Smillie, "Drowned world: welcome to Europe's first undersea sculpture museum," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2016.
33. Nathacha Appanah, *Tropique de la violence* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).
34. Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *Silence du cœur* (Paris: Présence africaine, 2017).