

Representing and Reframing Migration

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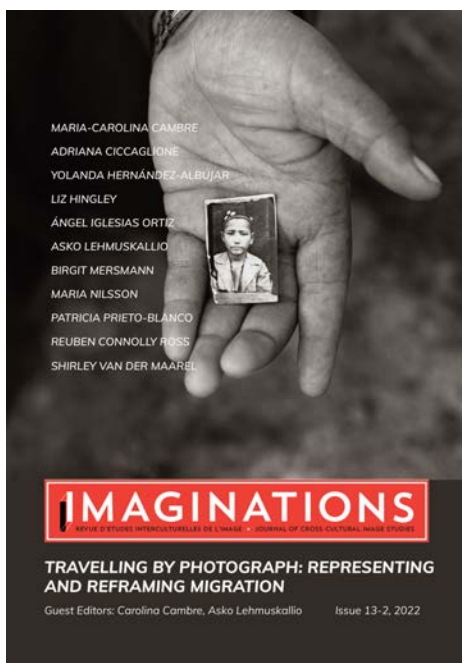
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Cover image: Fazal Sheikh's presentation of a
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refugee village in Ghazi, Northern Pakistan, of a
child killed in Soviet bombardment © Fazal Sheikh

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REPRESENTING AND REFRAMING MIGRATION

MARIA-CAROLINA CAMBRE

ASKO LEHMUSKALLIO

“The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even but a millimeter the way people look at reality, then you can change it” (James Baldwin 1979).

Millions of people find themselves displaced both internally and externally due to conflict, extreme weather events, severe economic and political instability, or a combination of push factors that signal an era of mass migration is underway. The frequency, scale, and magnitude of displacement events, and the consequent rise in migration witness a historical shift globally. Measuring and tracking migration presents significant challenges, but comprehending the implications of an entire era of mass migration is another. On the one hand, despite the efforts of many governments, the complex dynamic of migration “can never be fully measured, understood and regulated” (UN World Migration Report 9) because so much of this dynamic is clandestine, undocumented, and chaotic. On the other, there is no one synthetic image that can generalize the idea of migration or migrants (cf. Knorr Cetina 2009). Yet the phenomenon and the people are often essentialized in the increasingly heated arena of public debate, with migration being explicitly and implicitly misrepresented. Migrants are not a homogenous group, nor are their needs: health vulnerabilities, resilience factors, age, and gender are key dimensions that particularly need to be considered. These factors need to be better understood in order to begin to address both the

challenges and opportunities they may present, and what this special issue provides is a closer look at the complexity, irreducibility, and power of migration images.

THE POLITICS OF MAKING MIGRATION VISIBLE

Learning about the shifting contexts and features of migration is increasingly important, not least in our digital age where novel platforms have and will become a decisive space of representing, misrepresenting, conducting surveillance, and shaping discourses of international migration. Moreover, this is a moment when a politics of divisiveness has simultaneously demonized and weaponized international migration to be used as a political tool, according to the UN World Migration Report, that downplays “the significant benefits and enrichment migration brings, and steadfastly ignor[es] shared migration histories” (7). Unfortunately, politicization of migration and migrants is not new, as John Berger and Jean Mohr (1975) observed nearly half a century ago: “[T]he migrant is not on the margin of modern experience—[s]he is absolutely central to it” (10). The ever-increasing number of border walls bears grim witness to this politicization, with about 15 walls having been erected at the time Berger and Mohr were writing *The Seventh Man* compared to the five that existed just after World War Two. Despite wide international critique, today in 2022 there are now over 70 of these costly walls or fences including the walls by Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Croatia to block a million or more war refugees from the Middle East; Israel’s 436-mile “separation fence” referred to by Palestinians as the “Apartheid Wall”; Saudi Arabia’s 600-mile barrier on the Iraqi border; Norway’s 11-foot-high fence at its Russian border; the “Great Wall of Calais” in Northern France; the 435-mile Kenya-Somalia border wall; and Donald Trump’s “big beautiful wall” expanding an already 700-mile-long barrier between the United States and Mexico, with many more on the drawing table or under construction (Gammage 2018).

Walls don’t necessarily prevent people’s movement, but they do materially and symbolically separate those who belong and those who

do not. As geographer Reece Jones notes, “The way that walls do work is as a symbol. The material object of the wall stands in for all of the other complex issues about borders, migration, and trade” (qtd. in Gammage 2018). Thus they are a visible and tangible manifestation of a nation’s desire to block the flow of millions of refugees and migrants fleeing war, environmental disaster, or persecution, rather than investing in the difficult processes of building policies investing in migrants and creating paths to citizenship. These tactics perversely profit nations that rely on migrant workers as a source of labour that can be exploited cheaply because the lack of citizenship protections allows them to be dehumanized: they are often unironically referred to as “stock” (World Migration Report, 33).

In a prescient way, Berger and Mohr (1975) had already observed how various European economies had become dependent on labor from poorer nations, and they created their photo-book to call attention to this and foster an idea of working-class solidarity. At the time of publication, the press ignored their work, and critics dismissed it, despite the book being translated into multiple languages, and being widely read (Berger 2010). The “intimate address” or family photo album visual approach was not taken seriously among the cultural elites, although the black and white word/image series depicted migrant experiences in ways that resonated affectively with migrants themselves. Still today, the moments depicted condense glimpses of shared experiences: dreaming of returning home, the departure, the journey, the arrival, “the deaths far away, the black foreign nights, the proud obstination [sic] of survival” (Berger 2010, 9). As James Baldwin (qtd. in Romano 1979) claims in the epigraph, the “world changes according to the way people see it.” While Baldwin originally was referring to writing, taking the word “seeing” literally we can attest to how images mobilized in mainstream visual representations of migration are marked by certain Euro-Western iconographic conventions that highlight a series of tropes that have become normalized in part due to the dominance of Western news media and the use of frequent repetition. The migrant is depicted as poor, in need, helpless, or used as a token for symbolic self-representations by celebrities and artists alike, as Lilie Chouliaraki (2017: 2019) has shown. If

Berger and Mohr offered a counterpoint to these kinds of reductions, it remains clear that we continue to need ways for seeing and showing differently.

TRAVELLING BY PHOTOGRAPH

This collection offers a set of stylistically diverse and non-reductive pieces to offer counter-narratives, recasting how migration can be seen and thought. These counter-narratives flourish in a minoritarian fashion, from the ground up, and often include practices of documentation by migrants themselves, shared digitally online through collaboration with artists, activists, and scholars. The polyvalent nature of representation contests established iconographic conventions of demonization, or reductive sentimentalization of migrants. This ethico-aesthetic paradigm recognizes an ethical imperative to contest exclusionary visual discursive constructions that seek to build on the commonality of experience. Our aim is to shift the structure of meaning: by grounding images in the social contexts of embodied stories and experiences through a principled politics of witnessing (Cambre 2019), we disempower reductive and misleading visual discourses by focusing on the look as a medium (Lehmuskallio 2019). Because we take the assumed correlation between seeing and knowing seriously, a correlation that suggests that our ways of seeing are tightly interrelated with our ways of knowing (Mitchell 2013), we have positioned the authors in this issue in ways that refract and pivot around this idea to highlight the cracks and fissures that undo this tenuous link. By diversifying the ways in which migration may be “shown” and “seen,” this issue highlights the roles that images have in suggesting how to see.

IMAGES OF MIGRATION

Photography has long been concerned with processes of human movement. With Europe’s ongoing so-called refugee “crisis,” some photographs became the subject of intense, repeated analysis. One example was the striking 2015 photograph of Alan Kurdi, a young Syrian boy who drowned along with family

members and others in a devastating migration journey and was photographed dead on a beach in Turkey. Cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images and gestures are framed and filtered (Cambre 2019) call for a critical eye. In particular, the social *work* images do when they participate in these systems influence both how the images/gestures come to construct meaning and how such meanings accrue importance and stick to an image. Many analyses, often through semiotic approaches, or for illustrative or documentary purposes, overlook the photograph's active role in the production of human knowledge and its *use* in constituting a shared reality itself. We ask what it would mean to engage differently in seeing; to engage in ways that “consider the simultaneous material and social nature of both invisible and visible presentation” (140). Indeed, photography and migration have a long, complex relationship, but a relationship which has been under-theorized in favour of the specific analysis of individual photographs or cases. Today, the hopes, fears, and dreams of migrants are, ubiquitously, transformed into photographic images, which themselves reflect, reassemble, and reconstitute the migrant experience itself.

Many scholars have stressed the crucial importance of research that centres visual images for the purposes of witnessing and intervening in the public imaginary (Sliwinski 2011; Sontag 2003; Zelizer 2010; Campbell 2007; Cambre 2019; Nikielska-Sekula and Desille 2021). Some show the limited effectiveness of providing photographic testimony of distant suffering (Moeller 1999; Sontag 1978), as well as the invisibilities that can be created (Campbell 2004, Grønstad and Øyvind 2019), and the limits of representation when it comes to human suffering (Didi-Huberman 2012), its instrumentalization (Keenan 2004), or aestheticization (Baudrillard 2006). Following sociologist Fuyuki Kurasawa (2011, 2015), in attending to how material and/or symbolic value can accrue or dissipate through ways in which “mediated representations [are] inserted into public discourses and given meaning via interpretive practices” (5, 2015), we situate these essays with an awareness of their participation in a visual ecology that draws on technical, institutional, and social infrastructures to organize the “socio-visual field” (2015). The images that migration it-

self evokes contribute to the formation of communities of interpretation that can be mobilized in different ways to enable *other* ways of seeing migrants, movements, and the ways in which images and information themselves travel, shift, or mutate and produce logics of legitimization or delegitimization. We consider an image not just a photograph taken, nor a camera just a photographic device; rather we complicate the situation by understanding them as fluid and discursively constructed in various ways: cameras are sites of decision making, and particular images a means to facilitate specific decisions instead of others (cf. Lehmuskallio 2020). Both of them play a part in how we perceive, relate to, and make decisions on matters of migration and movement.

MIGRATING IMAGES

When considering images of migration, besides reflecting upon the roles that humans on the move have for our understanding of the present condition, we also need to reflect on the ways in which images are made to move, flow, flood, and migrate, and how these and similar metaphors themselves are used not only regarding migration, but also for thinking about images and human beings (Henning 2018).

Increasingly since the 1980s and 1990s, the manifold ways in which images move have gained dedicated attention. Arjun Appadurai's (1996) work on the cultural dimensions of globalization gave the image centre stage in conceptualizing modernity at large, especially with regard to ways in which images and the imaginary play key roles in forming imagination as a social practice. Diasporic communities, living far apart from their country of origin, could continue to share cultural points of reference with their friends and relatives by following the same newspapers and television shows from afar, for example by subscribing to cable television and buying internationally sold newspaper prints. Since the 2000s, with increasing digitization of both the news as well as the entertainment industry, access to local media content has become easier, such that today migration from one part of the world to another does not necessarily

mean a cut in the media one consumes. The mediated images one has learned to rely on continue to be accessible, although they usually need to be complemented with other forms of mediated information that are used to help navigate the everyday within the diaspora. Media anthropological work (e.g. Ginsburg et al. 2002; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005) clearly shows the importance of spatiotemporally connected, accessible media content to people living in very different kinds of circumstances.

The role of the image in this constellation is more complex than might initially seem to be the case, as images play different kinds of roles for different kinds of audiences and citizens. A key notion of the image is that it is seen with what W.J.T. Mitchell calls a paradoxical trick of consciousness, “an ability to see something as ‘there’ and ‘not there’ at the same time” (1986, 17). We have learned to see images in a particular way, so that we understand that we are facing an image, and that this image needs to be apprehended in specific ways in order to be understood. The dialectic between “there” and “not there” is in itself based on our ability to move our attention between what is depicted and how it is shown. Images, from this perspective, need to be apprehended through the movement of our capabilities for attention, too.

This paradoxical trick of consciousness most likely does not rely on a simple mechanistic switch of attention, but importantly, the ways in which we attend to particular kinds of images plays a role in what we actually get to see. Photographs, famously, allow us to meander on the visual surface of a print, to pay attention to the aspects of the image that we find particularly fascinating or disturbing. We move our eyes in order to direct our foveal gaze on the surface of a print, so that we actually may attend to an image that emerges in our interactions with the depicted surface. Depending on our motivations, interests, and the context of seeing, we may see different images from each other, even though looking at the same print.

Highlighting the importance of the role of movement in attending to images provides us, in the context of discussing images of migration, with the possibility of seeing and attending to them differently.

Scopic variation is not only a matter of having a wider or different set of pictures available, but also a question of how we pay attention to images—that is, how we see. For cultivating particular modes of seeing, Tim Ingold has underscored the importance of the point and the edge for optical visibility, maintaining that “we have inherited from Greek Antiquity the comparison of the act of looking to the bowman’s shooting an arrow towards its target; and from Renaissance theorists of perspective the notion of the line of sight as a taut thread that cuts orthogonally through the plane of projection” (2017, 101). In short, a prevalent model for optical vision is based on the idea of vision as a cut, which is less interested in surface characteristics of the picture plane, than in the ability to produce forms of vision that can be formalized, mechanized, and automated. Ingold’s notion of optical vision describes the widely applied concept of immutable mobiles, which interestingly enough was developed based on studies of images, visual technologies, and visual cultures (Latour 1986). Bruno Latour specifically takes up perspectival projection and the Dutch “distance point” method for drawing pictures in order to explain how optical consistency can be maintained across a range of drawn images created in a variety of situations. These kinds of images, working as immutable mobiles, provide an answer to the problem of mobilization by allowing one to carry inscriptions of that which is absent, while doing so in a way that maintains a two-way relation between those doing the inscriptions (e.g. draftsmen, painters, and later photographers) and that what is inscribed (parchment, paper, film). Ingold’s optical visibility and Latour’s immutable mobile thus refer to a specific “paradoxical trick of consciousness,” for which that which is seen is flattened out, provided with a scale that can be changed at will, and can be reproduced and spread at little cost. It is this kind of visibility, and these kinds of images, which have become paradigmatic for today’s visual cultures that rely ever more on the ability to circulate images. These kinds of images are increasingly set in motion by prescribed cultural techniques (e.g. perspectival projection and the Dutch “distance point” method for drawing pictures); iconographic conventions; as well as by machines, be it a camera device, a social media platform, or an automated facial

recognition booth at a gas station. Importantly, these kinds of images are the ones which most easily become stereotypes, not least because they need to fit particular kinds of technical instruments and technological infrastructures.

While Latour is fascinated by the work that immutable mobiles, based on optical visibility, are able to accomplish—consider the centralization of resources, the accumulation of wealth, the production of value—Tim Ingold argues for *haptic vision* as a counterpoint to the flattening prevalent in this rendering of optical vision. The main fallacy that theories based on optical vision fall into, is to disregard the importance of surfaces for our understanding of the world. As Ingold succinctly puts it: “What if surfaces are the real sites for the generation of meaning?” (2017, 100). By seeking intensively for deeper layers beneath surface appearances, we tend to disregard and destroy precisely the complexities that lie before us.

Haptic vision, in this understanding, stays with surfaces, dwelling with them, seeking out texture and composition of that which is apprehended. It follows folds and creases as characteristics of surfaces, without projecting a straight line between two points on the surface, and hence focuses attention on how the texture of a surface unfolds, allowing one to make inferences about the composition of that which is apprehended. If optical vision focuses on a face in order to detect marker points that are used to model the specifics of a face, for example for purposes of facial recognition in border control, haptic vision stays with the surface of the skin, being interested in the materiality, plasticity, and specificity of the face itself. When considering migrating images, this shift in perception from the optical to the haptic is a shift in movement, too. Immutable mobiles, based on optical vision, are created with the purpose of collecting, centralizing, and standardizing practices of collection, archiving, and analysis. As Latour has expressed, immutable mobiles are created in order to master the problem of mobilization, but we suggest that they are never fully successful in doing so. While experiences are gathered during movement, immutable mobiles seek to stop and freeze this movement in order to contain it and scale this containment across space and time (be it for the purposes of colonial explorers, ethnographers,

botanists, or technically automated sensor networks forming “smart cities” or border control systems). In contrast, haptic vision is interested in a different form of movement; it “seeks not to freeze the surface corrugations in some momentary form, so that they may be modelled [...] but to join with the currents and with the wind. It is to feel the waves, the ripples and the swish of the field as *movements*.” (Ingold 2017, 103, original emphasis).

These kinds of movements that become of interest for haptic vision mark surfaces over time; they affect how surfaces become. Faces and hands, exposed during a lifetime to their immediate environments, show wear and tear; in some cases due to exposure to wind and weather, ropes and ploughs; in others due to their constant exposure to paper, pens, or digital screens. The movement of our bodies within specific environments impacts surface characteristics, and in doing so the ways in which we attach to the world. Haptic vision, thus, in its interest in movement along and within surfaces, is kin to other movements that surfaces are prone to experience: the wiping of the face, the washing of hands, the bruising of the body; but also forms of caressing and beholding or stopping and pushing.

The visualities that these two modes of vision, optical and haptic, advance are of different kinds. Optical vision, in its focus on reflections, appearances, and a quest for truth beyond the surface, is interested in imagery that can be modelled, reproduced, and distributed via the marvels of our technological systems, whereas haptic vision calls for a kind of movement that stays with the surfaces it encounters, without advancing quickly beyond them. Both forms may overlap and exist together, but what we would like to point at with this distinction is a need to pay attention to particular ways in which specific pictures are made, as well as to the ways in which we attend to them, depending on our specific motivations and tasks at hand.

For considering migrating images, it is helpful to bear these modes of encounter in mind, when considering how we might envision and develop modes and metaphors of migration which are not stereotypical, dismissive, or belittling. For example, the “flood” of migrants, their constant “flow” are problematic metaphors that make us think

about the movement of people across borders along notions of optical visibility, advocating stereotypical, easily reproducible and circulatable images. In contrast, a focus on specific encounters and the complexities inherent in these, the attention to wear and tear of the bodies involved, opens up other kinds of images and imageries that allow different kinds of encounters to emerge.

If imagination indeed is a social practice, images are central in directing social imaginaries. When considering images in and of migration, we need to pay attention not only to what is represented, but how, and with which modes of attention it is apprehended. A focus on edges, lines, and points generates other kinds of images than does a dwelling on creases, folds, and hollows. It is these tensions which the papers in this issue address from their respective perspectives.

THE PAPERS IN THIS ISSUE

We begin with reflections by Reuben Ross on his interview with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, who is well known for his long career documenting the plight of the displaced and dispossessed and as a long-time collaborator with John Berger. With Berger, he published *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*, exploring migrant labour in 1970s Europe. Later, with Edward Said, he published *After the Last Sky*, which melded text and image to create a narrative about Palestinian life. In conversation with Mohr, Ross takes readers on a journey through the development of Mohr's unique approach to photography and the construction of visual narratives. In particular, he offers insights for visual researchers, particularly those engaged in studying processes of migration or zones of conflict, ways of constructing more effective, more engaged, and more experiential accounts of complex social realities, noteworthy for their creative experimentation with the construction of visual narratives.

Next, Birgit Mersmann takes a close look at specific photodocumentaries to demonstrate how photo portraits represent a central genre therein, strongly coupled with the photobook format. Mersmann notes how humanistic and humanitarian photography has often fo-

cused on the portrait, and takes a deep look at how these already established conventions inform documentary images dealing with human migration. This paper explores two major ways portraits appear interwoven in photobooks, and in particular those produced by Fazal Sheikh through long-term engagement and “slow storytelling.” This analysis helps Mersmann address the questions of how real-life migration experiences as survival stories and personal biographies become inscribed in the portraits of refugees and migrants, and which practices and form(at)s of portraits are chosen to document migrant lives.

Moving more intimately towards the migrant experience, Yolanda Hernandez and Adriana Ciccaglione stage an encounter between two researchers in the form of a reflexive case study to examine the possibilities of using photovoice as a form of resistance against narratives of hate through a feminist theoretical frame. They ask how researchers seeing and being seen is implicated in the construction of knowledge, and how it is legitimized: does it succeed in promoting visibility and social transformation? Hernandez and Ciccaglione explore the potentials offered for visual activism by springboarding from Diane Arbus’ unique photography and a photovoice project on being a migrant woman in Spain. The authors find images enable doing work at the margins, from the margins, and for the margins in order to create alternative spaces that nourish the development of different subjectivities and understandings of the self and society.

In a visual essay, Liz Hingley’s research shows how mobile devices mediating her work with migrants arriving in Coventry, United Kingdom can contribute to redefining narratives around migration in galleries and museums. The text, separately followed by images as a standalone gallery, draws on digital migration studies to examine processes and contexts of the significance of SIM cards in forging a sense of security, identity, and belonging, and explores how they act as digital passports for individuals. Telling the story through the words and photographs of these Syrian refugees is refracted through their reception of miniature SIM sculptures, intricately inscribed with their own words and messages, and then exhibited and later transformed into pendants for participants. These usually hid-

den mobile phone components take on the status of contemporary cultural artifacts and highlight the resettlement experiences of recently arrived refugees, and their aspirations for the future. Hingley works to “open up” the smart phone to reveal the urgent need for deeper appreciation of the meaning and materiality of personal digital ecosystems (Blanke and Pybus 2020) for refugees negotiating a sense of home.

Next, Patricia Prieto-Blanco takes a triple-layered approach with eleven Irish-Spanish families through observation of photographic practices using different styles of photo-elicitation and narrative interviews, semi-structured interviews, and three follow-up interviews. Participants in this in-depth process were able to co-produce interpretations of their own using abstract symbolic representational techniques to generate insights into their perceptions of how their own images move and migrate across media, platforms, and contexts that thicken their affective weight. Their stories are presented with attention to how knowledge is developed and shared around photographs, which in turn become carriers with performative potential.

Angel Iglesias Ortiz presents a pictorial journey reflecting on the borderscape of the Mexico-United States border marked by the dividing wall/fence. In this piece, Iglesias Ortiz works on multiple levels to unpack the static-fluid binary set up by ideas of border walls and their material and metaphorical affordances. The visualization of the fence is used to guide personal reflections of the everyday and the politics of exclusion and inclusion. It thus provides the author’s perspective as someone who follows the lines of the wall and allows them to provoke some divergent lines of thinking, seeing, and responding using the ethnographic descriptions afforded by the images taken on the move, perhaps fleeting or furtive, in a landscape devoid of human subjects that nevertheless reveals their presence.

Critiquing the traditional and established practices of photojournalism writ large, Maria Nilsson’s “Spaces of Empathy: Visual Strategies in Photojournalistic Imagery of Migration” explores a Swedish case of images of migration and the shifts and movements that happened representationally as the nation’s immigration policy became

stricter. By taking different positions around a particular photograph being analyzed in one case and a set of photographs of one family over a span of four years as a narrative of lived experiences of forced migration, Nilsson argues for a broader, more interdisciplinary sensitivity in photojournalism that opens the field to a more explicit acknowledgement of the ethics of witnessing, and by extension an empathetic lens that expands rather than constricts viewers' understandings of the human experiences of forced migration.

Shirley Van der Maarel's visual essay presents an alternative way of representing refugees' experiences in rapidly depopulating areas of rural Italy through a cartographic visual narrative. To represent how migrants arriving in Italy live in an alternate geography that doesn't map onto the world of Italian nationals at home, Van der Maarel creates a visual essay that works as tour guide for the reader into a heterotopia. Drawing on phenomenological metaphors and images, she evokes and mediates connections that refuse to impose structures on experience and endeavor to remain open-ended conversation. Her process entails a triple movement that begins with creating the guide collaboratively during ethnographic fieldwork. Using images, sound, film, and text, this hyperlinked visual essay maps a world-in-movement that makes readers also move, back and forth between sites, pages, image, and text. Here images travel across borders—not the geographical ones between countries, but the invisible ones between people.

This special issue explores the politics and poetics of photography as historically and fundamentally intertwined with the experience of migration by contesting simplistic, stereotypical accounts of the migrant, often produced with means of optical vision. Like the migrant, photographs travel, move, and multiply; divorce from context; and inhabit a shifting mobile space as they oscillate between the limelight and liminality. Using diverse and context-specific means, the following papers explore the conceptual and phenomenological relationship between the photograph and the migrant experience, and the migrant nature of photographs themselves, not just in and out of context but as moving through diverse and ephemeral media. As such, this collection, through the thematic of migration, joins togeth-

er papers that would otherwise be scattered across disciplines and publications adhering to specific forms for presenting research in line with traditions associated with the arts or social sciences. Instead, disciplinary boundaries are crossed and innovating forms of representation used in order to transgress limits of what to say and how to express it. Similar to the notion of haptic vision, here specific approaches are not ironed out in order to fit a specific technical mould, but are allowed to retain surface characteristics in the hope that these open up avenues for novel kinds of interrelations. We believe this is a generative approach for critical insights into the specific cases being explored, as well as to the broader topic of migration and photography, too. We hope the reader will be able to move across these papers and through them as if they were a sort of palimpsest in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's Arcades project. Benjamin as flâneur strolling through the city helps him engage a kind of montage between seeing and thinking. This dimensional seeing, a kind of phenomenological "layered now-being" whereby "the commonplace aspect of the commonplace is penetrated and dispelled" is what we hope this collection will create openings for, so that readers can sense "a kind of fluid, 'running' palimpsest, a sustained and even kaleidoscopic dissolve" (Eiland 2016). We hope to provide avenues for readings that can garner insights through and between the layers of these pieces in open and non-reductive ways. The images, created both with text and optical media, hopefully resonate haptically, too, allowing us to oscillate between optic and haptic visuality, and hence to consider novel forms of becoming.

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