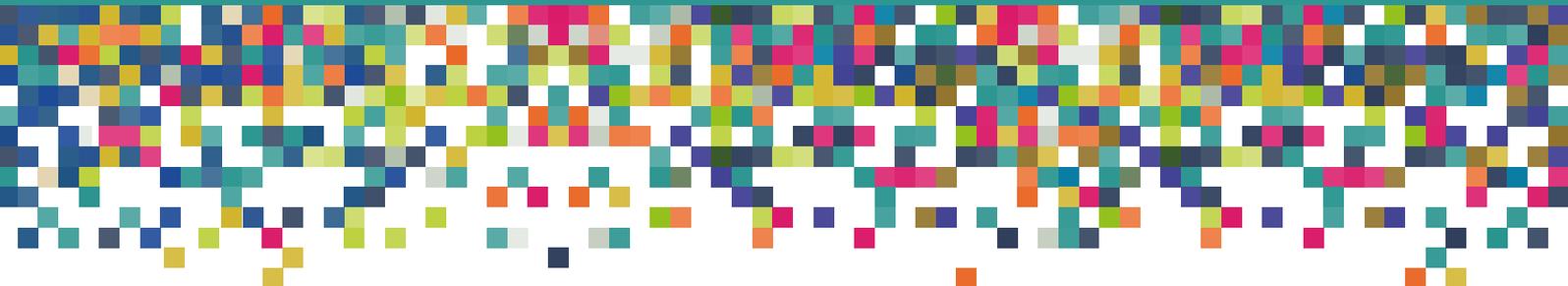




Media and
Communications

Media@LSE Working Paper Series

Editors: Bart Cammaerts, Nick Anstead and Richard Stupart

A decorative horizontal border composed of a dense, multi-colored pixelated pattern in shades of blue, green, yellow, orange, and pink, spanning the width of the page.

Intimacy and Rivalry: Becoming a “Self” in the Virtual Reality of Migration

Tuija Parikka

A decorative horizontal border composed of a sparse, multi-colored pixelated pattern in shades of blue, green, yellow, orange, and pink, spanning the width of the page.

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

Copyright, Tuija Parikka © 2020.

The author has asserted their moral rights.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. In the interests of providing a free flow of debate, views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the compilers or the LSE.

1 INTRODUCTION

Western capacity to render the agony of vulnerable groups intelligible has been critiqued by many humanitarian media and communication scholars who have pointed out underlying hierarchies structuring humanity and its mediation (Bimbisar, 2018; Chouliaraki, 2013, 2015; Fassin, 2010; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Ticktin, 2016). The use of humanitarian discourse (Ticktin, 2016) to render visible the vulnerability of victims of war, women and children in particular, has generally relied on rather narrow emotional constellations: compassion, pity, and benevolence. Technologization of communication, in Lilie Chouliaraki's view (2013; Kan, 2014), has further propelled what she calls a *new emotionality* as a form of narcissistic orientation toward expression of solidarity for the suffering others. Such hegemonic humanitarianism (Bimbisar, 2018) has also been largely reproduced by contemporary virtual reality (VR) documentaries on refugees despite the technology-based promise of VR to elevate immersive engagement to a new level. Although the need to replace pity with politics of injustice, called for by Chouliaraki (2015, cited in Bimbisar 2018), may have yet to be realized in VR productions on migration, digital immersive environments have been suggested to hold the promise of transformation of traditional "Othering" discourses of Western representational worlds.

Digital migration studies has been introduced as a theoretical and empirical domain that seeks to reposition the migrant from the periphery of Western media imagery that "covers" migrants' experiences to the epicenter of self-creation through digital media. In this approach, mediation of migration is not subjected to study through the lens of a so-called minority paradigm (Chin, 2016), which draws the analytical lines according to geographically rooted binarisms, such as superiority/inferiority or exclusion/inclusion. Works aiming at transcending the minority paradigm (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014), rather, attempt to explore the relationship between digital and border technologies, digital media and migrant lives, and digital diasporas and networks beyond national imaginaries; these works call attention to, for example, inequalities, identities, affectivity, and borders as destabilized and transformed by the digital media.

This paper is aligned with the aforementioned emphasis on the role of digital media in identity-making as we (re)imagine ourselves in the digital era. I am exploring this, however, not from the perspective of a migrant in the process of digital self-creation, as such, but, rather, from a relational perspective of VR engagements of migration whereby the modalities of a “migrant” are up for negotiation, and are not necessarily attached to particular bodies in predetermined ways. From this perspective, suffering and the vulnerability of a migrant, even that of a child, may appear relative and destabilized. In this realm, then, how does one turn to another for an intimate experience of what it means to be displaced? To whom is the capacity to transcend the precarious conditions of one’s existence, in becoming a displaced “self,” afforded and how?

I here discuss the Girardian notion of mimetic desire as a mechanism for creating rivalry, which is introduced to the field of intimacy in the context of such VR titles as *The Displaced* and *The Fight for Falluja* [sic] by the *New York Times*. I argue that, while expressing something that cannot really be talked about is specifically enabled by discursive, affective, and corporeal experiences of VR, “the unspoken” at the same time eliminates the possibility of transcendence for various subjects involved in the making of a “reality.”

In the following, I first discuss VR as an experience of virtual intimacy in the context of migration, and then explore the Girardian concept of mimetic desire that, with the embedded notion of rivalry, informs possibilities for intimacy in VR engagements in this area. I then discuss virtual cartography as a methodological tool in bringing together theoretical ideas and the analysis of *The Displaced* and *The Fight for Fallujah*.

2 INTIMACY IN VIRTUAL REALITY

Instead of representations as a way to construct reality, virtual worlds and imaginary “realities” have over the past years become a gateway to endless possibilities of world-making, or “worlding” in David Trend’s (2013) words. As the virtual and the real become ever more intertwined, a subject cannot help but integrally function through the media in imagining the

world (Trend, 2013). Mark Deuze (2012; cited in Peters, 2014) takes this view even further in arguing that not only do we create through digital media, but we are collectively subsumed by it while it empowers us; a subject can no longer function outside of media.

As much as the digital complicates making sense of the external (Simecek, 2017) and challenges internal–external boundaries, to witness something may now be experienced through affect, which can be understood in terms of subjective moods, feelings, and emotions. Affect can grant us access to information that is unrepresentable in language: what escapes linguistic meaning may be captured by affect. For example, subjecting a body to extreme forms of violence, such as torture, results in pain and trauma that is beyond accurate linguistic expression (Simecek, 2017).

The VR response to the need to attest to the veracity of migrants' experience of wartime violence and displacement has recently been to elicit affective involvement through bodily immersion in the realm of another subject. "[W]hat we know about the world is embodied," Frank Biocca argues (1997), and the virtual environment, as a new medium, engages the body and the senses in a new way. Also, in Simone Weil's phenomenology of the body (McCullough, 2012, 196), body movement enables spatial and temporal perception on which language and thought depend; body movement is both intuitive and prelinguistic. If body movement is that which "first constructs the environ accessible to thought," it helps us take possession of the world.

The virtual assigns a pronounced significance to the bodily immersion through movement by not only inviting such movement by aural, textual, and other elements, but also by liberating us from subjecting the physicality of our moving bodies to our own visual registry. In a sense, the body and imagination, or Weil's *body-imagination*, become closely allied (McCullough, 2012, 205) in the virtual, akin to dreamlike experiences of the "real." From this perspective, the willful act of turning toward someone or something for affective relationships, through VR engagements, in order to intimately "feel" something, also becomes integrally preconstitutive of linguistic

meanings. The linguistically imaginative potential of such affects and perceptions arises from radical withdrawal from those of our external environ. The virtual can potentially facilitate a profoundly transformative becoming of a “self” by means of a withdrawal from the “real.”

In Karen Simecek’s view (2017), mere representation cannot fundamentally account for the most painful experiences, which are ultimately felt corporeally; affect causes us to gravitate toward what we need to attend to, which can also be globally and politically significant. This is especially pertinent in the context of challenging the dehumanizing practices of exclusion and indifference that, in Didier Fassin’s view (2010), perpetuate inequalities of lives. Yet predisposing one’s self to awareness of the situated realities of migrants and refugees through the act of turning toward another for affective influence requires inserting the body into the technology-based sociality of VR.

Social interaction emerges out of what we do through various technological platforms and interfaces (Witteborn, 2015). Social interaction is here understood as manifested by our explorations in VR through body movement, inserted into the realm of the virtual imaginary for affective relationship with another, in the quest for virtual intimacy. In Martha Reineke’s (2014) view, drawing upon Julia Kristeva (1984), intimacy is a function and practice of the discourse of corporeality that joins language and sensibility. For intimacy, the linguistic *idea* of something is not sufficient; converging our entire being in totality is necessary. If the cohabitation between affect, reason, and the body produces another logic for a “truth” about ourselves (Kristeva, 1984, 48–51; Reineke, 2014), the idea of a plight of another needs to be joined with affect in ways that come to constitute the “self” in search of virtual intimacy with another.

Yet this somewhat romantic potentiality of the virtual can be delimited by acts mobilized by what is desired through one’s becoming in this realm. For René Girard (2005; Reineke, 2014), desire is fundamentally a question of a desire to be Another. It therefore carries a seed of violent rivalry, as one is “looking to another to inform it of what it should desire in order to be,” and, further, desires it because his or her rival desires it; thus desire is mimetic in that it is directed to

an object desired by another. Desire is also violence triumphant as the same object is desired by another, except that desire is harnessed by cultural order preventing such “irresistible” forces (Girard, 2005, 151). Here, desire is the mechanism that invokes what is political, and more or less subtly violent, about becoming. The infinite possibilities for body movement in the virtual realm of a subject in becoming a “self” are here constrained by mimetic knowledge of what is desirable in terms of becoming in the first place. Therefore, two questions are relevant: First, how is the viewing “self” dispositioned, through body movement, in his or her quest for virtual intimacy? Second, how does rivalry over what is constructed as desirable in becoming a “self” constrain virtual intimacy?

In the following, I introduce the empirical data and the virtual cartography method to analyze the two VR documentaries mentioned earlier, in light of questions asked here.

3 EMPIRICAL DATA AND VIRTUAL CARTOGRAPHY

The *New York Times Magazine* launched its first experiment in VR technology in 2015 when it published the VR documentary *The Displaced*, directed by Imraan Ismail and Ben C. Solomon and featuring the stories of three displaced children from Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan. Cardboard goggles were sent out to the *New York Times* subscribers for initial exposure. Subsequently, *The Displaced* received numerous international awards, including for creativity, storytelling innovation, and use of mobile phone apps, and was soon followed by other films, including *The Fight for Fallujah* by Ben Solomon in 2016, also by the *New York Times*. *The Fight for Fallujah*, which is also analyzed in this paper, is a story about military action against ISIS in Fallujah. Although the VRs examined here are not the only VR engagements with migration internationally, both are empirical samples at the threshold of making immersive experiences widely available to the public, supported by promotion of easy and cheap accessibility by the *New York Times*.

Although VR technologies have yet to saturate the media markets, and as such remain little researched, the case constitutes a theoretically, methodologically, and empirically rich domain

when situated within the context of the emerging field of digital migration studies. Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets (2018) call for new research that seeks to identify the human and the political in digital migration studies, among other questions. In this study, the “human” is approached through embodiment of virtual intimacy in digital experiences, and as such, is situated in the nexus of a physical and phenomenological body experiencing virtual intimacy in the context of migration. Possibilities for generalization of an experience initiated by intuitive or cued body movement in the depths of VR are, of course, limited. The infinite possibilities for body movement in this realm cannot be reduced to a strict analytical matrix accounting for all potential variations of such an experience, and yet movement in this realm is a precondition for coming into contact with another for virtual intimacy. The primary purpose of “mapping” such technology-based social interactions, however, stems from the political.

A “migrant” is a constructed figure (Leurs & Smets, 2018) who is subjected to politicization with grave material repercussions in and beyond Europe. Thus any effort to critically understand the ethical and political aspects of VR in challenging the traditional realms of representation must first explicate the “political.” The political here is the outcome of the regulative role of rivalry that delimits the seemingly endless possibilities of becoming within the depths of the virtual realm; mimetic desire, and the embedded seed of rivalry, introduces the political into borderless spaces. The political manifests in such spaces often in unpredictable and transformable ways.

Inserting the body through movement into the virtual realm requires methodology that enables recognition of spatial and linguistic expressions. Cartography consists of a plethora of investigative possibilities in the examination of spatial narratives, and extends from geographical maps to story and digital grid maps to emotional mapping (Castro, 2009; Caquard, 2011); it also informs methodological choices made in this context. For example, mapping emotions has been in the epicenter of exploring possibilities of belonging in communities and having control over the inhabited place (Caquard, 2011). Here, cartography is understood through the lens of spatial body movement of a viewing “self” in relation to another based on:

1. *language and movement* to project trajectories for social interaction and *affective* constitution of the “self” in the quest for virtual intimacy
2. *rivalry* between a desiring “self” and another in becoming

Language and movement are investigated through the susceptibility of a viewing “self” to textual cues within VR that seeks to attract the attention of the viewing “self”; by inserting himself or herself into the virtual realm, the viewing “self” is encouraged to physically “move around” in this reality. Although such encouragement does not determine body movement, which always already exceeds the cues, the embodied “self” inserted into VR through body movement is shaped by affect (moods, feelings, and emotions) prior to rendering the experience intelligible in language. Language is incorporated into VR here via narration, subtitles, music, and setting. Rivalry, on the other hand, is examined here through the virtual relationship between becoming a desiring “self” and another, namely through character involvement, relationships, and mobilization.

Such virtual cartography attempts to explore the paradoxes of understanding virtual intimacy: how it is both vigorously enabled and simultaneously compromised in the making of a “self,” thus setting politically significant possibilities for becoming, struggled over by rivalry in imaginary worlds. As it is, digital virtual experiences are not purely external to the viewing “self,” in a traditional sense of a representational world of moving images, for example, but external within an already enclosed space of the virtual akin to the primacy of the senses. It is perhaps for this reason that both *The Displaced* and *The Fight for Fallujah* avoid graphic or deeply harrowing imagery of violence, which is otherwise ubiquitous in the global media, especially in the area of war, forced migration, and terrorism.

Allowing oneself to become intimately affected but not traumatized by wartime experiences of violence and human displacement requires a delicate balance between acts of turning to and away from one another by means of body movement. VR can effectively destabilize

predetermined trajectories of becoming a “self,” and at the same time, it must articulate ways of transcending an intimate experience of becoming a displaced “self” in order for that “self” to avoid becoming fully disintegrated by such becoming. How intimacy comes to be realized in the context of *The Displaced* is, in the following, thematically discussed through the unfolding of a relationship between the viewing “self” and a displaced child while the modalities of a child, such as innocence, are available for rivalry and (re)attachment to other bodies. In the *Fight for Fallujah*, intimacy is discussed through the exposure of the viewing “self” to the loss of meaning from which possibilities of mobility—subject to subtle rivalry—can uplift. In both VR environments, one’s capacity to intuitively “feel” can be fully realized “in harmony” with the means to transcend this realm as the violence triumphant.

To mobilize theoretical and methodological ideas discussed previously, I experienced both *The Displaced* and *The Fight for Fallujah* several times as a whole, without interruption, and then broke them down into segments that were determined by textual cues, which I also transcribed. In the following, I first describe each VR experience, and then subject them to closer analysis.

The Displaced

The Displaced is a portrait of three children, eleven-year-old Oleg from Ukraine, twelve-year-old Hana from Syria, and nine-year-old Chuol from South Sudan; all were displaced by wars and persecution. Currently, almost thirty-one million boys and girls are displaced by the same or similar circumstances (Silverstein, 2015; UNICEF 2018). Rather than presenting a narrative or a story, *The Displaced* alternates between images and voices of the children, and ends with each of the children looking directly at the viewing “self” and stating their name, age, and country of origin until finally, Hana, the last child, turns and walks away from the viewing “self” across the fields into the distance, as the credits begin to fill the VR space.

Over the course of the eleven-minute encounter with the children, each child is represented as referring to war as the reason for displacement, and shares a memory from their past lives of

the kind of children they no longer are, yet long to become again; they also address their loss through the lost lives of their close relatives. Part of the dramaturgy of the VR experience is the positioning of the children at the threshold of lost and retained childhood innocence through references to the past “selves,” interrupted by war, and on the other hand, through their childlike use of metaphors, such as using animals to explain themselves: “If I could, I would turn into a lion, finish off my enemies and turn back to a child,” Chuol, nine, explains.

Inserting an embodied “self” into the virtual realm of the three children is supported by the interplay between a possibility to engage with and detach oneself from this realm through textual, aural, spatial, mobile, and linguistic cues. Typically, text may appear against black background, immobilizing the viewing “self,” or may appear in front of a child, as if being introduced to a viewing “self” as an avatar, first to be observed, then followed. Text also relies on a preconceived idea of text as self-evidently important, which, because it is strategically placed, commands attention and turns the viewer toward something or away from something else. The viewer cannot fail to know what this VR is about when white text appears against a black background: “Nearly 60 million people around the world have been driven from their homes by war and persecution—more than at any time since World War II. Half are children. This is the story of three of them.” In another example, we learn about Chuol’s family by turning toward sentences that appear on the sides of Chuol’s boat as he rows; while we learn the information presented by the text, the viewing “self” is taken to observe the landscape of the swamp, now Chuol’s home.

Aurally, the most obvious cue is the flow of melancholic music, which is either interrupted by or mixed with environmental sounds, such as the sound of chalk in the devastated classroom, swamp insects, birds, a rooster, the sound of paddles and walking in the swamp water, an airplane overhead, thumps, and engines. Some sounds, especially when combined with spatial and mobile cues, encourage movement more than others. For example, an invitation to follow a moving child is accentuated by the pronounced sound of the footsteps approaching from one

direction and then receding in the other. The piercing sound of an airplane mixed with the thumps of a food sack dropping to earth, combined with people running toward the viewing “self” cannot be avoided. Spatial cues indicating distance are used to encourage exploration, as opposed to drawing one close to a child, for example.

Yet it is the establishment of the relationship between a mobile child in his or her linguistic realm and the viewing “self” that constitutes the primary domain for experiencing virtual intimacy and for the affective shaping of a “self.” The viewing “self” hears a child as if thinking to the “self” in a serious tone as the child comes to “you” and takes “you” to the child’s world as a confidante, until the child lets go to attend to his or her own interactions in spaces of significance where children cheerfully speak among themselves in their own language, which is not translated for the viewing “self.” It is these disjunctures between the tone of voice (serious versus cheerful) and choice of language (English versus native) that both distance and mobilize the interaction between the child and a viewing “self” that serves as a controlling principle of affect. For example, Oleg is joyously chattering with friends as they speed on bikes. Then the scene shifts to Oleg and his friends sorting through the rubble of their school and the viewer hears him think, “Before, we used to say wouldn’t it be cool if the school blew up? I would never say that anymore.”

The viewing “self” is taken to the children’s inner, psychosocial world for affective constitution of that “self” based on the disjuncture between the inner world and actions and sounds voiced in the children’s own language. When the children look directly at the viewer, and we hear their thoughts, the interaction is gentle, fragile, trusting; in a fleeting moment of intimacy they describe their trauma. The viewer can only listen and observe until the end of the encounter, when the children are returned to their primary spaces where the encounter with the viewing “self” began and where they now leave us. In another encounter, Chuol, for example, rows the boat in the swamp with a viewer onboard who is looking at his back; we hear Chuol’s voice:

When they attacked, we fled into the swamps. We could see crocodiles. What I know is that if I am eaten by a crocodile, it may be a slow death, but it is better than being killed by the fighters.

Here the viewing “self” sits back as Chuol provides a scenic tour of the swamp, and later takes us to watch food relief air drops. Virtual intimacy is here enabled by the accessibility of the children’s inner psychosocial world for the affective constitution of a viewing “self” who can “feel” the depths and intensity of the children’s thoughts while also remaining elsewhere.

Yet the intimacy is compromised by saving the viewing “self” from ultimately having access to the unrepresentable knowledge of what the children know about a preference for a slow death and blowing up a school. The desired object here is the gift of reversing the trauma. The viewing “self” beholds the gift of non-trauma, as the children return to their initial spaces of existence without the possibility of transcendence of the conditions of their psychosocial existence. How does this serve to regulate the children’s desire to be(come)? The children are constructed as incessantly mobile in their efforts to *undo* war trauma and devastation *corporeally*: Oleg and his friends drop rocks from the roof of a war-torn building as any ordinary child might. Yet Oleg is also shown writing on the chalk board of a destructed classroom in a school that no longer exists as social practice or as the discursive *idea* of a school. Chuol paddles through the swamp as if truly not caring if crocodiles might eat him. Hana is visualized on a fast-moving truck with other children thinking about toys they no longer have and how they have only each other. Children are visualized running around a refugee camp playing tag, making it their backyard. The viewing “self’s” gift of non-trauma is secured by the inexperience of what it means not to have food; when the food sacks are being dropped in Sudan, the viewing “self” is already present where the food is being dropped, toward which the others are merely racing.

The children *corporeally labor to create normalcy* to undo war trauma and devastation, which remains unsupported by any possibility for transcendence of their realms because of the inarticulation of a tenable idea of attaining “normalcy” beyond playing it out corporeally. The viewing “self,” on the other hand, retains the desired object of “inexperience,” with a capacity for transcendence.

How the viewing “self” emerges as the violence triumphant here primarily pertains to the infinitude of possibilities for transcendence; at times, the viewing “self” is situated in gorgeous settings, in soothing fields, behind the others’ protective backs on the truck ride. The possibility of inserting the “self” into the virtual through gestures and mobility is released from the normativity of morals in support of “our” innocence. The viewing “self,” in other words, *cannot be immoral*. This infinitude of possibilities of relating a self to the affective realm beyond morals comes to constitute the political because it protects the viewer from knowing what the other knows, which serves to retain the inexperience as desirable.

If the viewing “self’s” affective formation is enabled by internalizing the psychosocial realm of the migrant children of *The Displaced*, the opposite is played out in *The Fight for Fallujah*, in which the affective formation of a “self” is played out through externalizing and adopting the refugees’ desired object, namely the capacity for *mobility* in order to be(come). This is explored next.

The Fight for Fallujah

In *The Fight for Fallujah*, an American reporter follows Iraqi soldiers as they fight ISIS in a deserted town of Fallujah; the soldiers are trying to push ISIS out of the city, which they have been occupying for the past two years. The VR experience is divided into two parts. The first is titled “Taking the City,” and features frontline action as the Iraqis try to fill their mission of killing ISIS fighters and taking back the city. This is juxtaposed against the reporter’s experience of observing and spending time with the soldiers, while at times wondering about Iraqi

practices of warring with little organization and lack of matching uniforms, or spending their downtime simply waiting for action to take place. The segment ends with Iraqi fighters posing for the local media with a captured ISIS flag.

Part two is titled “The Aftermath,” and features the crumbled city, jail cells, and materials left behind by ISIS, as well as a beheaded soldier who had been dragged by his feet and is now photographed with Iraqi soldiers. The focus shifts from the fighters to the civilians in the refugee camp outside of Fallujah, and two families are introduced to demonstrate what it’s like to live in the camp. The VR engagement with the fight for Fallujah ends with a note on the role of Iraqis in the victory over ISIS in Fallujah, as well as the future of its people amid ubiquitous violence and devastation.

Fallujah at first sight is constituted by a borderless universe of a “hot and vast desert”; the ghost town of rubble requires “texturing” for the possibility of affective formation of a viewing “self,” inserted into its “reality.” The viewing “self’s” movement is primarily cued by a demonstrative approach to objects and places, as well as spatial coordinates, in addition to text, music, and other sounds, such as the sound of gunfire. Predominantly, references to *this*, *there*, *then*, and *now* come to constitute the texture of Fallujah: dialogue like “*This* is Fallujah, Iraq”; “[*H*ere in this vast and hot desert *they* are an army and *these* are the men. . . .,” and “*These* are the cells. . . .,” for example, sets the verbal rhythm for the affective. The viewing “self” must be verbally eased into the loss of meaning characterizing the “quiet and eerie” city where “[t]he only signs of life are a few Iraqi soldiers roaming the streets investigating what the enemy left behind.” This evokes a wish to tolerate inertia and loss of meaning embedded in “this” textureless environment where the urge to move is met with having nowhere to go, nothing to do. The viewing “self” escapes the torturous immobility by the possibility of identifying with the reporter’s mimicked gestures of *trying* the door of a cell, and having “us” sit inside it to feel like a war prisoner:

Small cages like this one are about the same size as a dog crate. The taller ones are high enough that you can stand, but too narrow to lie down. There is a thick smell hanging in the air. On the floor, bits of meat for the prisoners were still left out.

In another context, the reporter tries to explain what hot sand feels like:

It is nearly 120 degrees each day. There aren't enough tents or containers, so many families must live outside. The wind blows hot sand all around. I've filmed in dozens of refugee camps all over the world and this was by far the harshest and most unforgiving. These people had lived under a brutal regime for two years.

The viewing “self” becomes liberated from the affects generated by intolerable feelings of meaninglessness primarily by gestures and markers that come to constitute means for the protection of the viewing “self:”

This city is just one of many broken pieces in this fractured land.

The land is fractured by the loss of meaning and broken pieces that do not form a sentence or an idea of life for transcendence, only a desire to tolerate inertia. The dynamic required for life, and the “city” as the metaphor for life (Aiello, Tarrantino, & Oakley, 2017), is now crumbled into *the land*, which is *sand*, *wind*, and *hot sun*, and gives rise to the absence of morals. Brutality is witnessed and accepted, as in callous references to beheaded fighters, as beautiful palm trees and whatever remains of the architectural details can be explored. As city textures mark the qualities of a space (Aiello, Tarrantino, & Oakley, 2017) or an infrastructure (Meng & Rantanen, 2015), and are equated with life and culture, what remains in this space has no center, no

margins; it has lost the city syntax, which would connect atomized, war-torn objects into the creation of an idea of what it means to exist in a community.

The viewing “self” is not, however, dropped into the abyss of melancholia but rather is liberated to mobility and the search for meanings, and moves on, around, and against all things and people who are stable. The viewers’ existence is made bearable in search for signs of life through passing streets and landscapes, now reduced to fractured land. “Our” mobility, demonstrated by scenes of driving through endless roads in borderless spaces to undetermined destinations for the possibility to be *on the move*, is in stark contrast with the refugees who remain behind, still. They may articulate the desired object, that of moving from one place to another: “I want to find a place elsewhere, anyplace,” Abu Aqilⁱ states. The narrator explains, “For this woman, called Um Madhira, and her family of eight, *they* hope to return to Fallujah when it’s safe.” Now they remain absolutely still and lend their mobility to the viewing “self” who can “be” on the move, which is the capacity extracted from the refugees’ desires left sitting in their tents. Such a dynamic enforces the viewing “self’s” capacity for transcendence and beholding of a treasured object of mobility in physically and psychologically unbearable circumstances as a violence triumphant.

The viewing “self’s” quest for intimacy is enabled by turning toward wartime silence and a lack of meaning while protecting oneself from losing the self in this affective realm by actively texturing a “lifeless” space through the capacity to be mobile, accentuated against all others confined to sitting in the small spaces of tents. The refugees cannot do what they most want to do, whereas this, in principle, is the survival mechanism of the viewing self’s be(coming). In this sense, the intimacy is mimicked and controlled by evading the possibility of *concomitant* mobility and life-creation, city-making beyond rivalry. As it is, the refugees are corporeally lifted out from the meaning making of the land of their own and returned to their existence primarily through the spiritual:

Reporter: These people had lived under a brutal regime for two years. For the last month of it, they were shelled and bombed regularly. Now, even though the conditions were extreme here, most of them were grateful to be alive.

Um Madhira: This is heaven, there is food [and] we have been well fed, the dust doesn't bother us, we have lived under the bombs and airplanes. . . . God is gracious.

As the realm of a city is no longer merely tied to its location but is increasingly technologically communicated (Aielle, Tarrantino, & Oakley, 2017), the modalities of a “migrant” in the city of Fallujah are spatially produced in its virtual form; the viewing “self” textures the qualities of life in this city through his or her “migrant” mobility, acting out that which is desired by the refugees who nevertheless remain immobilized and stagnant in their city-making, or texturing, as some find contentment in the spiritual realm instead.

4 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to examine possibilities for virtual intimacy in the context of the VR of migration. In the two VR experiences discussed, the relationship between a physical and phenomenological body is up for negotiation in terms of a subtle avoidance of preconceived ideas of who constitutes a “migrant” in association with “naturally” assumed modalities. To further explore this, I drew upon the Girardian notion of mimetic desire, with the embedded notion of rivalry, as informing possibilities for virtual intimacy in this area, first, by investigating how the viewing “self” is dispositioned in his or her quest for virtual intimacy, and second, by examining how rivalry over what is constructed as desirable in becoming a “self” constrains virtual intimacy.

Virtual intimacy poses a paradox here: it is effectively enabled through employing affect and corporeality in order to turn to another; yet it is also effectively evaded by the absence of an idea for mutual transcendence. Search for virtual intimacy with another in the affective realm

tends to be cut short by the absence of an idea required to fully turn oneself to the plight of another.

Compromising ourselves, and others, materializes through the workings of desire for mobility, which, in the Girardian world, carries a seed of rivalry with it. From this perspective, the identity of a “migrant” is subjected to underlying rivalry over what is desired and sought after in this realm, namely mobility and the capacity to undo the effect of the most painful experiences. In the end, it is the viewing “self” who is afforded the capacity for mobility in *The Fight for Fallujah* where texturing a “lifeless” space through the capacity to be mobile is accentuated against all others who are confined to sitting in small spaces. In *The Displaced*, the idea of non-trauma is beheld by the viewing “self” while the children corporeally labor to create normalcy in an effort to undo the gap between the idea of a school and a devastated physical reality of it, or the idea of non-trauma and the psychosocial knowledge of violence. This situates the viewing “self” at the threshold of affect and linguistic reality beyond morals, claims, or normativity. The digital comes to transform the relationship between the viewing “self” and the other by subjecting socially defining factors, such as the presupposed innocence of a child, to temporary reattachment to other bodies in undetermined ways, without the requirement of moral reflection or accountability.

From this perspective, both *The Displaced* and *The Fight for Fallujah* speak to the core of some of the most foundational corporeal experiences, those of pleasure, the urge to move (Durham, 2011; Kristeva, 1984), and pain, which the viewing “self” ultimately escapes. The pleasure of mobility and the capacity to avoid the pain of displacement and violence informing the viewing “self” only sets forth a mechanism for not having to fully turn to another corporeally, affectively, and linguistically. Ethically and politically relevant questions do not perhaps disappear so much as become displaced: the children of *The Displaced* resolve their quest for normalcy corporeally, and the refugees in *The Fight for Fallujah* resolve their quest for movement either spiritually or not at all.

The linguistically articulable, politically relevant idea of concomitant mobility and nonviolence would, however, be essential for the meaningful creation of virtual intimacy with another in its fullest sense. The mutual articulation of a politically relevant idea, in the context of “worlding” through virtual environments, could perhaps enable the combination of social criticism with the imaginative becoming of a “self” beyond the mere pleasure of virtually visiting the world of another. As it is, virtual intimacy perhaps remains mimicked in favor of the infinite possibilities of becoming beyond morals or normativity in a setting that both recognizes the fact that we exist among others (Reineke, 2014), yet also lets go of that idea. What holds off violent collisions in the conditions of embedded rivalry pertains less to moral commitments and perhaps more to the fact that the refugees and the displaced children are asking very little of the viewing “self.” Social relations suggested by virtual intimacy can easily be formed as well as denounced by an uncommitted, yet affectively and corporeally immensely involved, viewing “self.” As it is, how to join affect with an articulation of what is desirable beyond rivalry remains an oxymoron in contemporary quests for virtual intimacy.

I have here argued that while “the unspoken”—that which comes about beyond linguistic expression—renders affect tangible, at the same time it halts the possibility of transcendence unequally for various subjects involved in this “reality.” This is especially the case when an ethically or politically relevant idea for transcendence becomes compromised, calling for attention to several important facets of the “political” in this context. For example, inequalities thus produced do not, in themselves, constitute an injustice in the virtual realm; they are coming about beyond moral normativity, which is, in fact, rendered impossible. Our imaginative undertakings in virtual worlds take priority over mores that are rather associated with the fabric of “actual” realities. Furthermore, experiences of suffering, vulnerability, or pain are always already up for (re)attachment to any and all bodies, and thus are profoundly temporary and relative. To the extent that the hegemonic humanitarian discourse draws us close to the suffering of the distant other by shared humanity (Ticktin, 2016), the virtual, in this context, grants little significance to a collectively shared “reality.” Finally, it is not

dehumanization or indifference that becomes normalized (quite the contrary) but, rather, *rivalry* over how to attain and behold the desirable that becomes normalized. Subsequently, the realities of migrants are tied together with those of any potential others dispositioned for political struggles regardless of their status as migrants or non-migrants.

VR is often celebrated as a resourceful environment from the standpoint of empathy that closely intersects with aforementioned notions; empathy is less aligned with migrant–non-migrant binarisms, or the political, but, rather, parallels with one’s personal capacity to recognize the cost of corporeally bearing the burden of immutable circumstances in someone’s life. VR titles on migration, no doubt, should attract scholarly and wider public attention to body movement, or body-imagination, in imagining the embodied “human,” not just as a utopic “human,” but as the one who is critically tracking the transformability of the conditions of one’s existence with another.

REFERENCES

- Aiello, G., Tarrantino, M., & Oakley, K. (2017). *Communicating the city. Meanings, practices and interactions*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bimbisar, I. (2018). "Virtual reality and the Syrian refugee camps: Humanitarian communication and the politics of empathy." *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 4269–4291.
- Biocca, F. (1997). "The cyborg's dilemma: Progressive embodiment in virtual environments." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(2), 2.
- Caquard, S. (2011). "Cartography I: Mapping narrative cartography." *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(1), 135–144.
- Castro, T. (2009). "Cinema's mapping impulse: Questioning visual culture." *The Cartographic Journal*, 46(1), 9–15.
- Chin, E. (2016). *Migration, media, and global-local spaces*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2013). *Ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2015). "Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism." In S. Cottle & G. Cooper (Eds.), *Humanitarianism, communication, and change* (pp. 133–149). New York: Peter Lang.
- Deuze, M. (2012). "The unseen disappearance of invisible media: A response to Sebastian Kubitschko and Daniel Knapp." *Media, Culture & Society*, 34(3), 365–368.
- Durham, G. (2011). "Body matters: Resuscitating the corporeal in a new media environment." *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 53–60.
- Fassin, D. (2010). "Inequalities of lives, hierarchies of humanity: Moral commitments and ethical dilemmas of humanitarianism." In I. Feldman, M. Ticktin, & A. Ticktin (Eds.). *In the name of humanity. The government of threat and care*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Girard, R. (2005). *Violence and the sacred*. London: Continuum.
- Kan, K. H.-Y. (2014). "The ironic spectator: solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism." *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 9(4), 367–371.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in poetic language*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leurs, K., & Smets, K. (2018). "Five questions for digital migration studies: Learning from digital connectivity and forced migration in(to) Europe." *Social Media + Society*, 4(1).

- McCullough, L. (2012). "Simone Weil's phenomenology of the body." *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 4(2), 195–218.
- Meng, B., & Rantanen, T. (2015). "The worlding of St. Petersburg and Shanghai: Comparing cultures of communication in two cities before and after revolution." *Communication, Culture, and Critique*, 9, 323–340.
- Orgad, S., & Seu, B. I. (2014). "'Intimacy at a distance' in humanitarian communication." *Media, Culture, and Society*, 36(7), 916–934.
- Peters, C. (2014). "Worlding: Identity, media and imagination in a digital age." *Digital Journalism*, 1(1), 1–3.
- Ponzanesi, S., & Leurs, K. (2014). "On digital crossings in Europe." *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 5(1), 3–22.
- Reineke, M. J. (2014). *Intimate domain: Desire, trauma, and mimetic theory*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Silverstein, J. (2015, Nov 5). "The displaced: Introduction," *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-introduction.html>
- Simecek, K. (2017). "Affect theory." *The year's work in critical and cultural theory*, 25(1), 418–435.
- Ticktin, M. (2016). "Thinking beyond humanitarian borders." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 83(2), 2155–2271.
- Trend, D. (2013). *Worlding: Identity, media, and imagination in a digital age*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Witteborn, S. (2015). "Becoming (im)perceptible: Forced migrants and virtual practice." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 28(3), 350–367.
- UNICEF (2018). "Child displacement. Refugees and internally displaced persons." Retrieved from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>

¹ Spelling for the two names, *Abu Aqil* and *Um Madhira*, remain unconfirmed.