Violent Compassions: Humanitarian Design and the Politics of Borders

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Through the past five years, and specifically since the spring and summer of 2015 referred to by the Western media as "the refugee crisis," a flood of new humanitarian design competitions, projects, think tanks, exhibitions, panels, and conferences have addressed "refugeehood" as a timely subject for design. From Silicon Valley start-ups and other entrepreneurial efforts to academic initiatives, designers and design researchers have mobilized their skills, knowledge, and creativity to address the urgent issue of displaced individuals and communities. Some of these projects, such as product and interaction design solutions, adopt a technocratic, universal approach; meanwhile, others involve social design initiatives that purport to take a more collaborative and long-term approach. Both of these types of projects, although different in method and outcomes tend to be understood as caring for the other under the banner of "making a difference" and "turning crisis into an opportunity." As a result, they are frequently acknowledged by professionals, entrepreneurs, citizens, and academics to be possible interventions when political projects fail or are simply ignored. Most of these initiatives come from a sense of emergency—a sense of crisis that "something must be done" to address the suffering of human beings on the move. They also are derived from a sense of compassion for "the other" in the name of universal humanity—a sense of caring for someone who is in a relatively (more) vulnerable condition.

Based on the two notions of "crisis" and "compassion," this article outlines and problematizes the humanitarian perspective in design. By contextualizing different historical and contemporary humanitarian design examples in an analysis of current European border politics, the article warns against the pitfalls of this increasing engagement of design practices with refugees and vulnerable communities on the move. I critique how designing, in the aftermath of the spring and summer of 2015, has been mobilized without due consideration of the types of politics it produces and the types of politics it eventually ignores. In doing so, this article does

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not call for a better humanitarian design practice; rather, it questions humanitarian design practice as a whole and challenges the foundations, logics, and politics upon which humanitarian design appears and expands. Although I do not offer guidelines for a design practice in this article, I nonetheless call for greater sensitivity from designers and design researchers in the Global North. Those who want to address issues related to migrants and refugees need to develop a better understanding of the politics of the current border regime that produces and regulates refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants worldwide. It further demands that instead of using their epistemic skill of "problem-solving," designers should align with the politics of justice demanded by refugees and rethink their practice in solidarity with such politics.

Unsettling Crisis

One reason that so many in the field of design have given attention to refugees could be the scale of migratory movements and their deadly consequences, communicated through the term "crisis." The urgency of a growing population of displaced and criminalized individuals—categorized varyingly as refugees in UNHCR camps, asylum seekers in migration office queues or other waiting zones, or undocumented migrants living with the constant fear of detention and deportation—is further heightened by the rise of neo-Nazi and fascist political parties, with either explicit or implicit xenophobic and racist policies. This current situation cannot be denied; however, differentiating between urgency and emergency is important.

In policies and media narratives concerning migration, refugees, and the asylum system, emergency is a desirable word; the term is used liberally to frame the ways we are told to think about the growing numbers of nationally and internationally displaced individuals and communities. The constant use of the term "crisis" in the context of migration represents an abstraction of particular events by a generic logic, making crisis a term that seems self-explanatory.[1] However, "crisis" is not simply explanatory or descriptive; the term itself constructs that particular condition.

Crisis makes the event described an exception to an otherwise peaceful order. For instance, the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea in summer 2015 frequently has been called the "Mediterranean Crisis." According to statistics, however, the first deaths of a similar kind in the Mediterranean were reported in 1991 in Gibraltar—a few months after the Schengen agreement was completed with a convention toward a common visa policy.[2] The European Union (EU), as a strategic project, redesigned Europe

1 Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

2 From January 1, 1993, to May 5, 2018, the network United Against Racism has documented 34,361 deaths that occurred as a result of European border politics. These deaths have happened both inside and at the shores of Europe or as a consequence of deportation. For the full list of names, causes of death, and dates, see Death By Policy: http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ListofDeathsActual.pdf" (accessed August 30, 2018).

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into a continent without internal borders. This redesigning could not be accomplished without installing and developing a more extensive and technologically complex border apparatus around and outside of Europe.[3] Since the 1990s, Frontex, the European border management agency, has grown by a massive scale, both administratively and technologically; it has incorporated drones and high tech surveillance systems, and sound and smell detectors as part of a smart border initiative are imminently looming on the horizon.

In addition, on a larger scale—and as part of a long process of neo-colonization, which has formed the economic basis of the EU project[4]—many African countries have signed agreements with the EU to facilitate deportation, detention, and harsher border control. In exchange, they receive aid, which is often used to pay off debt to European banks and the International Monetary Fund.[5] Contextualizing the tragic deaths in the sea in the border politics of the past 30 years, these more recent events do not look so exceptional. Instead, they are part of a long process of constructing Europe into a fortress by externalizing its borders, redrawing its map, and re-graphing its geopolitics in a way that crossing borders for the global poor has become dangerous, deadly, and almost impossible. Calling the movement of those who seek asylum and refuge a crisis—because European borders have historically stopped, regulated, or slowed down these crossings—is not only an ahistoric perspective; it also has led to criminalization of those who claim the right to mobility and asylum, exercising their autonomy, if nothing else.

Furthermore, by calling these tragedies an emergency and rendering them exceptional, we deny the long-standing process of designing hostilities and violence against the global poor and position design as a bystander. Many scholars have shown that material practices, such as designing and technological configurations, have played vital roles in the production of immobility and have displaced populations historically. This involvement is both direct and indirect. These material practices directly shape mechanisms for the exclusion of certain populations by maintaining passport and visa regimes, technologizing and securitizing borders, and infrastructuring deportation and detention.[6] They indirectly shape global displacement by producing a world damaged by over-consumption, cheap labor, climate change, and war.[7]

When the historical and material violence of European border politics is masked and ignored through the discourse of crisis, the condition is then presented as a result of technical deficiencies in the system, which calls for more creative and innovative solutions or engagements of designers.[8] Vinnova, a Swedish funding agency that supports "innovative" and "technical" projects for

3 Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Borderwork Beyond Inside/Outside? Frontex, the Citizen–Detective, and the War on Terror," *Space and Polity* 12, no. 1 (2008): 63–79.

4 Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

5 Aino Korvensyrj, "The Valletta Process and the Westphalian Imaginary of Migration Research," *Movement Journal* 3, no 1 (2017): 191–204.

6 See, respectively, Mahmoud Keshavarz, *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility and Dissent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Stéphane Rosière and Reece Jones, "Teichopolitics: Re-Considering Globalisation Through the Role of Walls and Fences," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 1 (2012): 217–34 and Ruben Andersson, "Hardwiring the Frontier? The Politics of Security Technology in Europe's 'Fight Against Illegal Migration,'" *Security Dialogue* 47, no.1 (2016): 22–39; Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and William Walters, "Aviation as Deportation Infrastructure: Airports, Planes, and Expulsion," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2017): 1–22.

7 Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press, 1999); and Felicity D. Scot, *Outlaw Territories: Environments of Insecurity/Architectures of Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

8 Tom Scott-Smith, "Humanitarian Neophilia: The 'Innovation Turn' and Its Implications," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (2016): 2229–51.

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a sustainable society released a call for grants in September 2015. Titled "Innovation for a more secure migration and integration of the new comers," the agency supported 16 different projects with grants, allocating 10 million Swedish Kronor. Similar funding opportunities have been announced in other European countries. In the same month, SAS Scandinavian Airlines announced a plan to increase its baggage allowance to help refugees. Travelers to the Mediterranean—the majority of whom were tourists at that time—could check in more baggage if they were taking "clothes, shoes and toiletries" for refugees.[9] As European passengers enjoyed their freedom of movement, they also were granted a sense of moral achievement by taking gifts to those whose passages were blocked by European countries, including Sweden. The airline exploited the vulnerability of refugees to attract more customers through its free baggage allowance. The hypocrisy in compassionate initiatives such as this one addressing emergency situations reveals itself in the practices of these companies outside the "emergency" context. For example, SAS has long been criticized by anti-deportation activists in Sweden for its collaboration with migration authorities in deportation of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers whose applications were rejected.

During the same period, a mobile phone app was produced that claimed it could help to pinpoint the location of boats in distress at sea. It won a humanitarian award but proved to be a fake and non-functioning app.[10] In 2013, in the aftermath of the tragic deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea—they drifted in the sea for several days and their call for rescue was ignored by the Italian coast guards—an architectural firm designed a solution that proposed a line of saving buoys to be installed in the Mediterranean without paying attention to the histories of the migrant struggle at the sea.[11]

These initiatives ignore the fact that a serious engagement in the act of "saving" would require a great transnational mobilization of labor, forces, and time—not simply creating an app or a product. For example, AlarmPhone is a labor intensive initiative consisting of transnational activist networks across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. It mobilizes satellite information, open source data on sea traffics, and local solidarity networks to watch the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea 24 hours a day, assisting refugee boats in distress by sending their location to nearby ships for eventual saving. The activists not only engage in the practical act of saving but also work extensively on political campaigning efforts to promote freedom of movement and publish monthly reports on the abuse and violation of the rights of refugees and migrants by coastal guards of European and North African countries.[12]

9 Radio Sweden, "Airlines increase baggage allowance to help refugees," September 5, 2015); https://sveriges-radio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6248656 (accessed August 15, 2018).

10 Alex Hern, "Refugee Rescue App Pulled from App Store After It Is Outed as Fake" Guardian, June 21, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jun/21/refugee-rescue-i-sea-app-pulled-app-store-outed-as-fake (accessed August 15, 2018).

11 I have elsewhere discussed this project in length and the problems with the way design practice conceals the violence of European border politics in its speculation about saving refugees. See Mahmoud Keshavarz, "The Violence of Humanitarian Design" in *Design Philosophy Reader,* ed. Anne Marie Willis (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 120–26.

12 For more information, see http://watchthemed.net and https://alarmphone.org (both accessed on August 15, 2018).

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Describing the im/mobility of certain populations using the term "crisis" conceals the discursive and material politics that actually produce these events and paves the way for "humanitarian design," which aims to "restore" the situation—often into the one preferred by those who produce the sense of crisis.

Humanitarian Design: Exception or the Norm?

As an established and well-promoted approach, humanitarian design had a precedent long before the spring and summer of 2015. It has been advocated as a way to craft technical solutions to problems primarily in the Global South, such as water access, emergency shelter, affordable housing, education, and health, by engaging a wide range of actors including professional design firms, development companies, philanthro-capitalists, universities, charities, NGOs, and residents of communities who are recipients of international aid.[13]

Humanitarian design often is moralized as a decision to save lives and "empower" individuals instead of giving services to the Global North[14] and often is uncritically assessed as "empathetic." Discussion of humanitarian design usually occurs within the context of development programs, empowerment, aid, and missionary projects.[15] However, critics have accused humanitarian design of being a practice of "new imperialism."[16] As such, Cedric Johnson argues that humanitarian designers seek to propose technical solutions to problems rooted in imperial and colonial histories, structural inequalities, labor exploitation, and the neoliberal restructuring of societies worldwide. In pursuing technical solutions, they neglect the politics and history of the conditions in which they intervene. Consequently, the global poor—as the main consumers of humanitarian goods—are constructed as design opportunities for the generosity of the elite, rather than as historical subjects with their own worldviews, skills, and political sensibilities.[17]

Humanitarian interventions have always been justified as a temporary way of addressing an "immediate" situation—as an emergency approach to saving lives and promoting the universal concept of humanity. However, anthropological studies of humanitarianism, particularly in relation to refugee camps, tell a different story: The majority of humanitarian practices become the norm and prolong the condition of precariousness and misery.[18] Although the turn from temporary to permanent is something that humanitarian and aid workers are reluctant to accept, in humanitarian design, the notion of permanence forms the basis of the practice.[19] Consequently, a situation characterized as emergency and temporary turns into a permanent site for the consumption of aid products specifically designed for the "humanitarian market."

13 Cynthia E. Smith, *Design for the Other 90%* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum 2007); Bryan Bell et al., *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008); and Emily Pilloton, *Design Revolution: 100 Products that Empower People* (London: Thames and Hudson. 2009).

14 Pilloton, *Design Revolution.*

15 "Humanitarian Design vs. Design Imperialism: Debate Summary," Change Observer, July 16, 2010; http://designobserver.com/feature/humanitarian-design-vs-design-imperialism-debate-summary/14498/ (accessed May 12, 2015).

16 Bruce Nussbaum, "Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?" *Fast Company,* June 7, 2010; www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian design-the-newimperialism (accessed January 17, 2015).

17 Cedric G. Johnson "The Urban Precariat, Neoliberalization, and the Soft Power of Humanitarian Design," *Journal of Developing Societies* 27, no. 3–4 (2011): 445–75.

18 Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3, (1996): 377–404; Michel Agier, "Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps," *Ethnography* 3, no. 3 (2002): 317–41; Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008); Miriam Ticktin, "Transnational Humanitarianism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 273–89.

19 One of the most recent celebrated humanitarian design products is Better Shelter, designed by five Swedish designers in Stockholm and supported and distributed by IKEA. The product is advertised as the most durable emergency shelter; lasting for three years, it can be used longer than any other model previously available on the humanitarian aid market. See www.bettershelter.org (accessed August 15, 2018).

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Gender studies has shown that social norms are the effects of repetition: Through repetition, worlds materialize and "boundary, fixity and surface" are produced.[20] Similarly, the design and production of humanitarian solutions to emergency situations on a global scale repeatedly produce specific relations to be performed by refugees and others involved in the humanitarian market. In such normalized "emergency," refugees become dependent on humanitarian design to survive. Consequently, these design interventions reconfigure refugees as victims without agency whose identity is constructed as receivers of ingenious and benevolent design. The historical example of "emergency shelter" by Shigeru Ban, one of the most celebrated humanitarian architects, is illuminating in this sense. In 1998, UNHCR provided refugees arriving to Gihembe refugee camp in Rwanda with plastic sheets and aluminum pipes to use for shelter. Instead, the refugees would cut down the trees in the area to use as the support structure for the plastic sheets and sell the iron pipes in nearby markets. The UNHCR argued that this "problem" led to deforestation in the area, despite the fact that the establishment of the camp actually had begun the deforestation process. In response, Shigeru Ban created a modular shelter with recycled cardboard tubes, with no financial value. His solution was celebrated by the design community as an efficient, cheap mode of shelter, but in practice, it was a way to deprive refugees of the small degree of financial independence they had carved out—and to re-establish the UNHCR monopoly over the deforestation process.[21] The architect's humanitarian solution in fact replaced the refugees' design intervention. Ban's shelter imposed further vulnerability upon the refugees through a new design. Ban's prototype is now used worldwide as the model for UNHCR emergency shelters.

Because they are designed according to real or imagined failures of governments to provide the necessary infrastructure for living, humanitarian design products circumvent vital infrastructures, such as health care systems, transportation, education, and sanitation, for the sake of efficiency. They are designed to ensure that they do not need any specific infrastructure to function. Being independent from such systems, they tend to prolong dependency and to suppress demand from refugees for more just infrastructures.

Design and innovation's engagement with refugees is not confined to technical products but extends to entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives. IKEA Foundation is the financial sponsor and distributor of Better Shelter, a newly designed modular container that functions as a housing shelter, as well as a school and a hospital unit in refugee camps. Foundation executives recently announced that they intend to launch a production line in

20 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993): 9.

21 Andrew Herscher, "Cardboard for Humanity," e-flux, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68638/cardboard-for-humanity/ (August 15, 2018).

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refugee camps in Jordan, turning refugees into IKEA workers. This move has been celebrated as a successful strategy by which social entrepreneurship can thrive under challenging conditions.[22] It is part of a bigger plan that advocates harnessing "the remarkable opportunities of globalization" by establishing special economic zones (SEZ) in the less wealthy countries that host the majority of refugees worldwide. The main idea is that these countries can host companies from rich countries, offering them tax breaks and reduced regulation for hiring refugees as workers. Critics have already suggested that this idea, already deployed in Jordan and Lebanon, ignores refugees' rights and circumvents international obligations in order to keep refugees out of rich countries by any means possible.[23] The jobs that SEZs offer typically are low- or semi-skilled job with long hours and repetitive tasks, with no clear labor rights protections, to the degree that some have called SEZs "special exploitation zones."[24] The focus is on merely giving refugees a job of any kind, and it ignores the diversity of skills that refugees have, the work conditions, labor protections, and other support structures, such as security, health care, child care, and public transport.

The global consumption of humanitarian design reconfigures and consequently normalizes emergency situations, converting them into a permanent condition of displacement. In doing so, these designs avoid engaging with the historical and political issues that created the need (or "market") for humanitarian design. In contrast to the technocentric narrative at the heart of humanitarian and development programs, problems created by the modernization of the world and its forces, such as colonialism and capitalism, do not necessarily have "modern solutions."[25] Thus, the temporal politics of humanitarian design—in which the time and place of the emergency turn into permanency—not only ignore the histories of displacement, but also determine specific futures for refugees. Humanitarian design thus renders the bodies (of refugees) as subjects of biological help, but not political support.

The Violence of Compassion

The deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean or the harsh conditions of refugee camps evoke compassion above all else, once the history and politics of border control and regulation of displaced communities become actively concealed. The primary issue stays in the realm of feeling, rather than the realm of justice. When refugees become characterized as people who need "our" generous help and protection, questions of rights and justice disappear. Consequently, refugees are removed from a political space in which they can exercise their right to freedom of movement and are placed in a technical space concerned with improving conditions of survival.

22 Eleanor Gibson, "Humanitarian Experts Propose Turning Refugee Camps into Enterprise Zones Called 'Refugee Cities,'" *Dezeen,* December 9, 2016, https://www.dezeen.com/2016/12/09/refugee-cities-turn-camps-into-enterprise-zones/ (accessed June 6, 2017).

23 See Benjamin Thomas White, "Refuge and History: A Critical Reading of a Polemic," *Migration and Society* 2, no. 1 (2019): 107–18.

24 Heaven Crawley, "Migration: Refugee Economics," *Nature* 544 (2017): 26–27.

25 Arturo Escobar, "Development, Violence and the New Imperial Order," *Development* 47, no.1 (2004): 15–21.

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Postcolonial feminist Sara Ahmed notes that compassion plays a central role in othering by transforming others into objects of emotion.[26] As a specific performative endeavor, compassion often mobilizes emotions through a strong binary relationship. By showing compassion to someone, the sympathizer enters into a relationship in which the recipient of the compassion has little or no control. Being sympathetic or compassionate about another's suffering sets emotions in operation. "In operation, compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is over there. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering."[27]

Once the "compassionate" think of themselves as having resources to offer the other, then the refugee becomes an abstract figure who can be emancipated using different design approaches, including humanitarian design. The effects of such approaches are not evaluated according to the political call for justice and equality, raised by refugees who move despite walls, fences, and borders. The "success" of these projects instead relies on their ability to first generate an academic or commercial narrative about the helpless and abstract figure of the refugee and then win acclaim by providing both assistance and empowering strategies. Furthermore, humanitarian design interventions help the public and the design community to imagine themselves and their practice as essentially good, positive, and sympathetic; thereby disguising the privileges and inherent historical violence embedded in designing—specifically in relation to conditions of displacement. It is the vulnerability of the "other" from the perspective of the designers that makes them "able to help." Thus, humanitarian design, despite its intentions, seems to be more about creating opportunities for the privileged to offer their skills, knowledge, and creativity—rather than to support the vulnerable. Anthropologist Liisa H. Malkki argues that the need to help someone somewhere else who is "out in the world" is more often about helping oneself to overcome issues or problems at "home."[28] Thus, in practice, acts of compassion might be concerned with the helper more than the helped. This view repositions the helper and the helped and allows us to reconsider who the true subject of compassion is.

The contemporary militarized border regime is not only about producing violence toward the bodies that transgress them as stated in the beginning of this essay. It does more than that. While it generates the maximum violence required to stop or slow down refugees and migrants, it is designed to hide this violence and instead promote a sense of pity and compassion for "some" of those bodies.[29] Therefore it is imperative that borders are not only destructive but also productive. They destroy, demarcate, and limit political subjectivities of certain groups but enable other groups to observe a select few instances of the crisis, feel pity, and extend

26 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

27 Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

28 Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

29 Humanitarian discourse is itself a by-product of the securitization process, and the former ends up strengthening and reinforcing the latter. This "military and humanitarian government" can be understood by tracing how humanitarian technologies are being implemented in conjunction with military force and vice versa. See Didier Bigo "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no.1 (2002): 79; Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency: the Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); and Nils Gilman, "Preface: Militarism and Humanitarianism," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3, no. 2 (2012): 173–78.

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their compassion. This is why borders are one of the main sites where inequality can be witnessed most starkly. Humanitarian design projects engaged with migrants and refugees ignore the violence of border politics and focus only on the compassion produced by the same politics of borders. These designs derive from a "politics of pity" rather than a "politics of justice," to borrow Hannah Arendt's terminology.[30] Such politics, based on a binary distinction between those who suffer and those who do not, is determined by *observation* rather than *action.* It is a spectacle of vulnerability that causes humanitarian design to intervene.[31] However this spectacle is not neutral or inevitable; instead, it is the work of a collective imagination based on racialized and gendered ideas about who is a worthy subject of compassion.[32]

The spectacle of vulnerability ignores what has made the subjects vulnerable in the first place and ignores the demands voiced by migrants themselves. Rather than being recognized as subjects who are resisting and exposing a historically racist and colonial mobility regime—one that secures an exclusionary wealth for already wealthy Europeans—the refugees are understood as objects of Western compassion and humanism. This view "replaces questions of responsibility, restitution, repentance, and structural reform with matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality—a move that transforms the responsible colonial agent into an innocent bystander, confirming its status as 'ethical,' 'good,' and 'humane.'"[33]

The European politics of compassion toward refugees, facilitated through design initiatives might seem contradictory while Europe establishes harsher border controls, criminalizes those who help migrants to cross borders,[34] and makes it almost impossible for migrants to seek asylum. However, this seemingly paradoxical politics has been an inevitable part of the colonial project based on a will to forget, to not know, or to not want to know about the structural border violence that makes the need for compassion possible in the first place.[35] As a result, ongoing acts of humanitarianism sustain inequality by forcing the complex social and political struggles mobilized by refugees into just two categories: "those who have the power to protect and those who need protection."[36]

The temporal politics and compassionate power of humanitarian design, when mobilized by technological innovations and a spectacle of vulnerability, generates a category of human beings who are understood to exist merely to be helped.

Which Human in Humanitarian Design?

Questioning humanitarian design is not an easy task. Who would argue with wanting vulnerable people to suffer a bit less, survive a bit longer, or be better taken care of? However, addressing these

30 In her book, *On Revolution,* Arendt distinguishes between two types of politics: one that derives from compassion toward the suffering of the other and the one that acts in relation to inequality. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963).

31 During 2015 and 2016, images of bodies being washed to the shores and of cramped, non-white bodies on the boats circulated extensively in the media. See Mahmoud Keshavarz and Eric Snodgrass "Orientations of Europe: Boats, the Mediterranean Sea and the Materialities of Contemporary Mobility Regime," *Borderlands e-journal* 17, no. 2 (2019); and Nicola Perugini and Francesco Zucconi, "Enjoy Poverty: Humanitarianism and the Testimonial Function of Images," *Visual Studies* 32, no. 1 (2017): 24–32.

32 Miriam Ticktin, "Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no.2 (2016): 255–71.

33 Ida Danewid, "White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 7 (2017): 1684.

34 "Watch the Med Alarm Phone Weekly Report: Solidarity at Sea is not a Crime!" May 1, 2017–June 11, 2017, https://alarmphone.org/en/2017/06/14/solidarity-at-sea-is-not-a-crime/ (accessed August 15, 2018); and Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, "Blaming the Rescuers: Criminalizing Solidarity, Re-Inforcing Deterrence (June 14, 2017), https://blamingtherescuers.org/report/ (accessed August 15, 2018).

35 Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007); Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

36 Ticktin, "Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders," 265.

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concerns does not mean that the politics that necessitate and generate humanitarian design should go unnoticed. Most importantly, we must ask: What politics do humanitarian design interventions produce? What type of person is imagined to be the recipient of compassion? Who is being saved or empowered by these design initiatives? Does the need for empowerment via design interventions exist, or is it simply imagined by design epistemologies? Is this need constructed by designers' social and historical positions and by the dominant Western scholarship on social and humanitarian design? Malkki has suggested that the figure of the refugee is often abstracted by those who are interested in producing knowledge about refugees. The refugee becomes "an epistemic object in construction"—a product conceived by different power practices, including design and humanitarian aid.

This abstraction is most evident in the design interventions for refugee camps across the world, as discussed earlier. Encamped refugees are managed and domesticated according to a particular border politics that, despite the promise of globalization, has become harsher toward asylum seekers and refugees since 1990. In this prolonged encampment, humanitarian design continuously redesigns the condition of vulnerability into a permanent site of control and modification and destroys refugees' possibilities for acting politically. The contemporary violence of borders not only deprives migrants on the move of their right to freedom of movement, but also—and more importantly—deprives them of the possibility of acting to claim that right. Under such conditions, humanitarian products, services, and innovations blur the line between the practices conceived to manage humanitarian needs and practices that manage life; a fine line emerges between care and control. It is important to ask: Through what "modes of power [are] vulnerable populations formed as such?"[37] Humanitarian design practices construct a need for protection and empowerment for vulnerable populations that is materialized through products, services, and architectural forms. This not only negates the capacity of those declared to be vulnerable to act politically, but also expands biopolitical forms of regulation and control through new scales, sites, and imaginations. Through moralized goods, such as Better Shelter or Life Buoys, humanitarian design practices imagines a human being that is produced at the intersection of technologies of population governance and the production of differentiated values of human lives. The production of this imaginary human being in return calls for another sort of political economy, concerned mainly with morality over political demands or legal obligations at the intersection of the neoliberal market and supra-state control.[38]

37 Judith Butler et al., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

38 Peter Redfield, "Bioexpectations: Life Technologies as Humanitarian Goods," *Public Culture* 24, no. 1 (2012): 157–84.

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Michel Aiger argues that we need to break the link between urgent medical aid and the designerly reconfiguration of sites of emergency through various products and prototypes.[39] Building on his argument, Eyal Weizman writes:

> Aid without a camp is aid that does not seek to manage, house, develop, and perform migration control. Refugees, like all people escaping war and famine throughout history, make their way across borders into cities, or settle and construct new ones. Aid, if necessary, should follow them into these spaces rather than construct environments of total control to facilitate its delivery.[40]

Humanitarian design shows that humanitarianism is not simply about an efficient response to crisis but about designing certain conditions of life. It enters and legitimizes itself as a crisis response but nonetheless establishes certain conditions and thus a certain politics of life. Interestingly, humanitarian design reveals that the general claim humanitarianism makes—of saving only in the here-and-now—is incorrect. Humanitarianism always stems from certain politics and histories, and it establishes specific politics and futures. When it turns into a design practice with durable solutions, systems, and infrastructures of aid, it confines and regulates the space in which refugees can act politically.

Breaking the Cycle of Border Violence

My critique on contemporary design's engagement with issues related to "the other" is not new. After reading *Design for the Real World,* Gui Bonsiepe engaged in a series of harsh exchanges with the author, Victor Papanek, in 1974. Bonsiepe accused Papanek of being naïve, of lacking a complex political understanding of power relations, and of promoting a poisonous new brand of neo-colonialism. Referring to Papanek's famous tin-can radio, Bonsiepe criticized it as a "paternalistic design—covered by humanitarian coating… doused in the ideology of the noble savage," as well as an instrument of ideological penetration and control in line with the U.S. army's policy in the Cold War.[41] Papanek rejected these accusations.[42] Whether one accepts Papanek's or Bonsiepe's arguments, what is missing from the conversation entirely is how "the other"—his or her body, life, and future—becomes the object of Western designers' consciousness.

The circulation of mass imagery of illegalized migration and of refugees taking lethal routes to Europe simultaneously leads to a ubiquitous humanitarian discourse and a xenophobic, racist, and nationalist one that empowers the politics of fascist parties all around the world. The simultaneity is not a coincidence.

39 Michel Agier, "Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 1, no.1 (2010): 29.

40 Eyal Weizman, *Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011): 61.

41 Gui Bonsiepe, "Design and Underdevelopment," Casabella 385, January (1974): 43

42 Alison J. Clarke, "Design for Development, ICSID and UNIDO: The Anthropological Turn in 1970s Design," *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 1 (2015): 43–57.

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Design's engagement with refugees—in camps outside of Europe, along its deadly borders, or in reception centers inside Europe—has been framed as a counter-response to a growing xenophobic right wing that sees migrants as threats, as bogus, and as parasites. However, it ultimately reproduces the same logic it aims to resist.[43] The logic of many of these humanitarian initiatives is based on a universal figure who is essentialized, imagined, and produced through narratives of help, projects of protection, and initiatives of empowerment. This abstract figure is imagined to be at worst a consumer of a welfare and at best a collaborator of humanitarian design, either somewhere else "out in the world" or at "home." In both cases, a specific politics of borders is adhered to, and a certain inclusion by exclusion happens. In both cases, "the other" is understood as either a non-productive or a productive economic force.

Against the background of a prevailing critical discourse—one that presents design as an agent of social, political, and environmental change, it is important to remember that it is *not* enough to design "for" or even "with" the other. Designers and design researchers in the Global North must also recognize *how* and *why* they carry their acts of designing from the positions they occupy. In promoting the conceptualization of design as a change agent for political and social problems without considering the politics of designing, we risk depoliticizing the context in which the design interventions take place. bell hooks eloquently critiques the engagement of leftist liberal scholars with "the other," the "subaltern" and poor:

> It is not just important what we speak about but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the "other" is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences […] Often this speech about the "other" annihilates, erases.[44]

When addressing these issues, designers must question what and whose political agendas are being driven, as well as what other politics are being pushed to the margin or being erased, masked, and ultimately oppressed. As long as designers uphold western epistemological frameworks that understand complexities of the world to be "problems" in need of solving by their generosity, compassion, technical skills, and social capital, then their interventions run the risk of being oppressive. Ignoring the politics of borders that have created vulnerable populations, who are rendered in need of compassion and humanitarian design, runs the risk of supporting the side of the oppressor, despite humanitarian designers' good intentions. The call to acknowledge this complicity might not constitute a guideline for design practice, but considering it is nonetheless vital for those who wish to engage in a

43 Danewid, "White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean."

44 bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Fergusen and Trinh T. Minh-ha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 343.

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collective struggle for justice. The cynicism and defeatism toward which discourses of emergency and humanitarian design force us must be resisted. Instead, let us begin to imagine and develop practices that engage in a non-essential, non-crisis terms which prioritize the struggles of refugees in transgressing national borders; works that expand the prevailing exclusionary notion of citizenship by redistributing wealth and resources globally rather than nationally; and makings that generate a politics of justice through various networks of solidarity that guarantee political subjectivity. These shifts are already happening within different refugee movements, and the first step is to notice and recognize them. Taking this first step might help us to break the cycle of violence that contemporary border politics produces, which mobilizes selective compassion toward refugees while immobilizing them.

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