

**ACTIVISTS' STORIES FACILITATING MIGRANT RESCUE OPERATIONS IN
THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA**

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I begin by acknowledging that I wrote this thesis while residing on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin people. As an uninvited guest on these lands, I recognize that, as a migrant, I was granted permission by the colonial institution known as the "Canadian Ministry of Immigration and Citizenship" to live, work, and study on Turtle Island—without ever receiving consent or permission from the Anishinabek people, the stewards of this territory since time immemorial.

In making this acknowledgment, I want to take a moment to critique the often-performative nature of land acknowledgments in institutions like Saint Paul University, where such statements rarely translate into meaningful anti-colonial action in terms of structure, policy, or practice. However, I choose to offer this acknowledgment sincerely, as an affirmation of my ongoing commitment to learning from and engaging with Indigenous peoples, cultures, and struggles, both locally and globally.

As someone who has paid tuition to both Saint Paul University and the University of Ottawa—colonial institutions that benefit from the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands and peoples—I acknowledge my indirect and non-consensual participation in the harmful outcomes of this system upheld by these universities. This realization strengthens my resolve to actively challenge and resist colonial structures in my work and life.

“Canada” remains today an active and brutal colonial project that continues to oppress Indigenous people across Turtle Island and abroad, dispossessing them of their resources and land, using police and military violence in response to all forms of resistance, and using legislative policies to eradicate Indigenous ways of living along with the destruction of the air, water, animals, and plants we ALL need to survive.

The migrant justice movement is connected to Indigenous sovereignty and the Land Back movement. Through my activism with No One Is Illegal on Turtle Island, I learned that to fully grasp the logic behind immigration and border systems, it is essential to examine the colonial state’s treatment of Indigenous peoples, both historically and in the present. This lens reveals how the Canadian colonial project has not only inflicted violence on Indigenous communities but has also played a key role in displacing people from their ancestral lands and contributing to the creation of refugees worldwide.

While I continue living on these lands as a displaced migrant, I thank the Anishinabek people of the Algonquin Nation for taking care of these lands for generations so I can, alongside countless other migrants and refugees who have been displaced by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, seek refuge. I also commit to continue learning about indigenous history and culture, engaging in relationship building with indigenous people, and standing by their side when invited to fight for their self-determination, freedom, and decolonization.

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the intersection of migrant justice activism, border imperialism, and creative research methodologies, focusing on the Mediterranean border crisis. Through an in-depth and creative analysis of activists' narratives from the Alarm Phone, this research highlights how irregular migration is framed as a form of resistance against colonial and capitalist structures that perpetuate global inequalities. Drawing on Harsha Walia's concept of Border Imperialism, the study critiques Europe's militarized border policies, exposing the complicity of European states in migrant deaths. Using personal narratives and creative documentation, this research amplifies the voices of activists who challenge dehumanizing discourses about migration. Grounded in over a decade of migrant justice activism, this work incorporates artistic elements, presenting its findings through a collaborative exhibition that invites audiences to engage emotionally with the stories of activists from the Alarm Phone.

Keywords: Irregular Migration, Border Imperialism, Mediterranean Sea, Fortress Europe, Alarm Phone, Border Crisis, Migrant Justice, Migrants, Refugees.

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Thank you to all migrant justice activists across the Mediterranean and the world for saving lives. Thank you to all the people on the move, I wish you a safe crossing and I hope to meet you one day.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Research Context and Rationale

On January 14, 2011, the former President of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country following the unpredicted escalation of what began as a protest demanding a change of government and a fair election. This would turn into what is known today as the Arab Spring. Watching the people of Tunisia take a stand against their dictator inspired neighbouring countries, such as Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen (Falk, 2016) to protest their respective dictators and demand change. Although this quest for change was filled with the hope of a better future, it was not without dire consequences. Some civil uprisings turned into civil wars, like in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and others created an unbearably unstable and unsafe political climate, as in Tunisia and Egypt (Falk, 2016). The Arab revolutions and uprisings significantly impacted the state of migration in the Mediterranean region. As a result, we saw a rush of migrants risking their lives to cross the Sea to Europe seeking stability and fleeing wars and civil unrest (Abdelfattah, 2011).

Although the Arab Spring revolutions exacerbated the issue of irregular migration of Africans to Europe, this phenomenon did not start in 2011 (Heller & Lorenzo, 2016). Irregular migration has been steadily increasing since the 1980s and 1990s. As more European migration and border control policies are implemented (Franchino, 2009), the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea has spiked from 10,000 between 2003 and 2005 to 56,000 in 2011, half of whom were Tunisian (Hendow, 2013). The increased migration flow across the Mediterranean has led to a growing death toll and a rise in cases of migrants missing at sea. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Mediterranean is considered the deadliest migration region and border globally (Ghailani,

2017). In fact, between 2013 and 2019, the Mediterranean region had the highest rate of migrant deaths globally; 2016 was the deadliest year, with 5,143 migrant deaths in total (Missing Migrants Project, 2019).

Starting in the late 1970s and more systematically in the 1980s and 1990s, Europe reduced its regular migration avenues for people coming from Africa and the Middle East. As Europe opened its internal borders through the implementation of the Schengen Space (Boswell, 2003), it increased its external border control, which impacted the ability of non-European nationals to enter Europe. Subsequently, irregular migration channels grew and became more organized in the Mediterranean Sea throughout North Africa and Southern Europe (Monzini, 2007).

At this level and before introducing the focus of my research, I want to make a few notes clarifying one of the main terminologies that will be used throughout the research.

Several expressions are used to describe people who enter Europe illegally or who are at risk of expulsion and deportation for breaking their terms of legal residence or immigration. Düvell, et al. (2008) name a few of these terms, often used as adjectives in the European context: irregular, illegal, undocumented, unauthorized, or clandestine. These are paired with the following nouns: migrants, immigrants, aliens, or foreign nationals. There are also other expressions used interchangeably with those mentioned above, like *sans-papiers*, *clandestinos*, and *shadow persons* (Düvell et al. 2008, p.3).

In recent years, the terms *irregular migrants* and *irregular migration* have slowly replaced the designation *illegal migration*. Düvell et al. (2008) define *irregular migration* as a form of migration that is ‘not regular,’ ‘unlawful,’ or not according to the rules (without necessarily being ‘illegal,’ ‘illicit,’ or ‘criminal’ in the legal sense). An ‘irregular migrant’ is therefore a migrant who, at some point in his migration, has contravened the rules of entry or residence.

(Düvell et al., 2008, p.3) Despite this shift in terminology, the European Union refers to individuals who have engaged in unauthorized migration as *illegal migrants*. Sciortino (2004) notes that various scholars have criticized the use of this terminology, arguing that the term *illegal* implies criminal or illicit behaviour, thereby stigmatizing the act of migration (p.17). Human rights advocates and activists also contend that labeling migrants as *illegal* is discriminatory and perpetuates negative stereotypes. (Sciortino, 2004)

This research will focus on highlighting the work of advocates for migrant justice, particularly those working directly with irregular migrants and addressing irregular migration to Europe as a systemic structure established as part of border control. The unprecedented increase of irregular migrants crossing the Sea, mentioned earlier, was the catalyst for bringing activists and community organizers on both sides of the Mediterranean together for a more effective collaboration and quicker mobilization¹. This includes supporting the families of missing migrants and pressuring governments to provide safety and refuge. In effect, these organizers stood as a united transnational front to push back against the gradual increase of border surveillance and restrictions on obtaining visas for Africans to practice their freedom of movement. Le Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux (FTDES), Boats4People, Afrique-Europe Interact, Welcome2Europe, No One Is Illegal, the Alarm Phone, Watch the Med, and Sea Watch, to name a few, are some of the grassroots activist groups and non-profit organizations that make up the broader movement fighting for migrant justice, freedom of movement, abolition of borders, and an end to migrant deaths.

¹ Forum Tunisien des Droits Économiques et Sociaux. (2019, June 14). *(français) morts et disparues en mer; UN Bilan Macabre pour 2016*. FTDES. Retrieved September 19, 2021, from https://ftdes.net/en/1451-2__trashed/

The Transborder Map 2012² offers a visual of these grassroots groups spread across the Mediterranean Sea.

This research aims to examine the different strategies implemented by activists and community organizers involved with both the Alarm Phone and Watch the Med groups, as part of the broader migrant justice movement in Europe. I am especially interested in how they amplify the voices of migrants and challenge the complex web of migration and border policies that endanger the lives of migrants. I used art-based methods to capture activist stories, not only to put forward their perspectives on the so-called “migrant crisis,” but also to highlight their active resistance to border control and policy through their support for migrants crossing the Sea. These insights will allow us to better understand the migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea.

In this creative research, I focused on documenting activists' work and narratives through the Watch the Med and the Alarm Phone initiatives to provide an analysis of the state of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea and its causes. I collected, produced, and presented these narratives and accounts in the format of an exhibition showcasing visual and audio materials. I chose to conduct a research centering activist narrative using creative methods such as photovoice. As Kirby et al. (2017) explain, creative research methods aim to produce knowledge about marginalized issues and create an accessible platform for voices that have been historically and systematically excluded from dominant narratives (Kirby et al. 2017).

² [Transborder Map](#) created in 2012 that maps out different grassroots initiatives carried out at sea and on both sides of the Mediterranean. The map provides support for migrants to cross the sea safely and advocate for their right for freedom of movement against restrictive borders. This map also provides a visual overview of the scope of the spread of European border control extending from European to the African side of the Mediterranean Sea.

2. Positionality of the Researcher

My approach and position in conducting this research aims to be anti-oppressive, adopting an anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist lens. Practicing anti-oppression research means the researcher is committed to the people they work with professionally and personally. Participants are not seen as objects of research, but rather have agency over the research process and the type of knowledge this research produces and why. Potts and Brown (2005) describe anti-oppression research as accessible, natural, and part of “the art of daily life,” writing that “[i]t can be done anywhere by everyone” (p. 258). Choosing to be an anti-oppression researcher will allow me to align my intentions and research with social justice values and adopt an intersectional framework (Cho et al., 2013). Doing so means centering peoples’ lived experiences and creating a space where contributors will have agency over the research process by deciding how they share their stories and how their contributions will be presented and used. The anti-oppression framework helps me question the extractive nature of research and try to limit the possible impact it has when working with a community. Anti-oppression research also allows me to use creative methods of research that make it more accessible for the activists to work with me and co-create the material mounted in the exhibition.

In addition, I have a personal connection to this topic. I was born and raised into a generation of youth who participated in the movement that sparked the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Persistent unemployment, corruption, and a protracted economic crisis shaped our desire to migrate in search of a better life. The drive to cross the borders and reach Europe at any cost in pursuit of dignity is a reality that resonates with many Tunisians, including myself. As I grew up preparing and planning for the moment, I could leave my country and migrate to Europe. I was part of the youth who participated through my student union in the Tunisian Revolution protests and rallies.

I stood amongst the crowd of Tunisians across the country and from all social backgrounds demanding a change of government and the possibility to dream of a future where young people in our country could provide for themselves. Living through the Arab Spring, I witnessed firsthand the power of the masses to impact change and felt the uncertainty of what direction that change would take.

I am motivated to address the irregular migration phenomenon in this research because of its impact on my upbringing, surroundings, family, and community. I got involved in the migrant justice movement in Tunisia during the Arab Spring in 2011, helping to identify reported missing or deceased migrants by collecting their communication information from family members. I also advocated for the end of migrant deaths at sea by putting pressure on governments from both sides of the Mediterranean to rescue migrants in distress at sea and to open their borders and accept asylum seekers. I continued to advocate through various campaigns to welcome immigrants and refugees in countries like Germany, South Africa, and Canada. I immigrated to Canada in 2013, and I worked with settlement agencies to support newcomers and refugees in navigating systems and challenging barriers to settling in a new country. I also actively organize with grassroots groups such as No One Is Illegal and Refugees Welcome in Ottawa where I currently reside. Our actions focus on pressuring the Canadian government to stop the deportation and detention of undocumented migrants and to offer unconditional avenues for migrants to gain documents and practice the freedom to move, stay, and seek a dignified future for themselves and their families.

The activism and advocacy work I do has helped me gain a deeper understanding of not only the immigration system in Canada and Europe but also the motivations behind each new immigration bill and the impact of such policies on immigrants.

3. Statement of Problem

Various intersecting pressures push people to make the hard decision to leave their country of birth and start over in a new one. People often migrate for survival, the possibility of living in security free from persecution, and the hope of providing for themselves and their families. Migrants and refugees who cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe are often portrayed as people who choose to risk their lives (Ibrahim, 2016). Thus, the onus is on them if they drown in the Sea. This obfuscates the European and Western border systems engaged in a systemic practice of restricting the movement of people from countries south of them. The European colonial empire legacy persists today in the context of Africa through past and present exploitation and the theft of resources (Austin, 2018). Most African countries today have economic agreements with Europe that allow European governments and companies to control resources fully or partially from the African continent. Although these trade agreements are framed as an opportunity for African countries in terms of economic growth, they also integrate policies controlling the movement of African people in regard to immigrating to Europe (D'Humieres, 2018).

Expensive and intricate visa programs and a series of barriers reduce the number of people who can immigrate, making it nearly impossible to get to Europe through legal avenues (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). As a result, many are left with no choice but to risk their lives by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, recognized as one of the most perilous migration routes globally with the highest rate of death and disappearance of migrants (Missing Migrants Project, 2019).

For the last decade, both Watch the Med and the Alarm Phone projects played a key role in highlighting the urgency to act to reduce migrants' death at sea and advocating for safe passage for all migrants crossing the sea. The work the Alarm Phone activists are doing is highly conflicting and complex.

They play a vital role in supporting the facilitation of rescue operations for migrants at sea, all while continuously navigating and renegotiating their positions with coastguards and various European governmental authorities. On one hand, they need to collaborate with European authorities to facilitate these rescue operations. On the other hand, they actively denounce the systemic negligence displayed by these same authorities, which they argue contributes to preventable deaths at sea. As part of their strategy to hold European authorities and coastguards accountable, activists have initiated a legal class action lawsuit, describing this negligence as a “left-to-die” policy. This term references the infamous “left-to-die-boat,” one of the earliest and well-documented cases of migrant deaths at sea, where forensic architecture was employed to demonstrate the direct responsibility of European authorities and their coastguards (Heller & Pezzani, 2012, p.10). In addition, the impact of the Alarm Phone’s advocacy strategies extends beyond supporting the facilitation of rescue operations and documenting migrant boats’ journey at sea. These efforts also serve to critically examine and challenge border policies, questioning their underlying purpose, and the role they may play in perpetuating and manufacturing the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe.

I present this research-creation in three central chapters. I begin by establishing the theoretical foundation in the first chapter, using Harsha Walia’s framework *Border Imperialism*. Through this lens, I look into the European migration systems within which the migrant and refugee crisis unfolds. In the second chapter *the Stories of the Voiceless*, I present the narratives of activists from the Alarm Phone network, with whom I collaborated during this research. These narratives, conveyed in the activist’s own words, offer insight into their role in coordinating rescue operations and safeguarding the lives of migrants, while also highlighting the human rights violations occurring at sea as a consequence of European border policies. Finally, the third chapter details my creative process in developing this research and mounting a multimedia exhibition.

I will discuss the methods used in collaboration with activists, the methodology, and the inspirations that informed the creation of the exhibition and creative research. The multimedia exhibition is presented as a central element of this research, showcasing key findings and illustrating the process behind their realization. Rather than serving as a mere supplement to the creative research, the exhibition stands as a focal point, integral to the overall thesis offering a comprehensive understanding of the work I present here.

4. Research question

Through activist and immigrant narratives, stories, and experiences of facilitating the communication between migrants and coastguards during rescue operations, I am interested in exploring how the migrant justice movement is constantly navigating the complexity of border policies and the different strategies they put into making their work sustainable. To guide my prospective work, I have formulated two main research questions, as follows:

- How does the dynamic between activists and coastguards shape the strategies adopted by activists to advocate for migrants in the Sea?
- What impact do these interactions between coastguards and activists have on the activists' positionality within the wider migrant justice movement?

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical foundation

The concept of border imperialism forms the theoretical framework for this creative research. Coined by Canadian scholar and activist Harsha Walia (2013), border imperialism analyses the processes of displacement and migration within the global political economy of capitalism and empire, instead of blaming migrants and reducing the cause of displacement to individual worth and circumstances (p. 38). Walia's work draws on academic research and activist experience, particularly her two decades of involvement with the grassroots migrant justice group (NOII). I found resonance in Walia's approach to knowledge production, where she built her theoretical framework from the practice of activists and organizers on the ground. This approach influenced my methodology and process in this research. I chose to centre the voices and work of activists from Alarm Phone, making them an essential reference for explaining the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe, and the power dynamics governing borders in the Mediterranean Sea.

1.1 Capitalism and Imperialism as the foundation of Border Imperialism

Walia's research and academic work is informed by her activism; she spent over two decades organizing with (NOII) groups in Canada. NOII is a migrant justice movement that mobilizes tangible support for refugees, undocumented migrants, and immigrant workers and prioritizes solidarity with indigenous communities³. NOII groups organize and fight against the system of injustices through popular education and direct action (Walia, 2013, p.13). The movement's work and values are founded in anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, ecological justice,

³ For more information about No One Is Illegal check the NOII-Vancouver website: <https://noii-van.resist.ca/about-us/>

Indigenous self-determination, anti-imperialist, and anti-oppression politics. Border imperialism is a theoretical framework that is informed by the work of activists on the ground organizing and advocating for migrants' justice. The framework takes from grassroots strategies and theorizes their practice and understanding of the struggle against oppressive border policies.

The main system of injustice that is prominent and deeply intertwined with migration shaping the economic, political, and social landscapes from which border imperialism emerges as a framework is capitalism. Fraser (2018) defines capitalism as a multifaceted system that goes beyond organizing the economic life but extends to shape the social and political structure of the society. She speaks of capitalism as an institutionalized social order that, in addition to defining the economic relations, influences various social spheres such as the family, the state, and nature, making capitalism a system that pervades all aspects of society (Fraser, 2018).

Through a critical feminist view of how capitalism dominates the social fabric and structures. Fraser sees capitalism not only as an economic system based on the production and exchange of commodities but also as a social order marked by the interplay of multiple dimensions of inequality, including class, gender, and race. According to Fraser (2013), capitalism entails the commodification of labour, nature, and social life, where everything, including human relationships, are subject to market logic. She argues that the expansion of capitalism relies on the unpaid and underpaid reproductive labour disproportionately performed by women, which sustains the system's profitability (Fraser, 2013). Fraser's definition thus underscores the inseparable connection between capitalism and various forms of oppression and exploitation within society and between countries and states.

In the context of border imperialism and migration Walia's analysis of capitalism is rooted in the work of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz a historian and activist whose work critiques settler colonialism and its relationship with capitalism, and Glen Coulthard, an Indigenous scholar whose work critiques the intersection of colonialism and capitalism, particularly in the context of Indigenous resistance.

Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) sees capitalism as inherently linked to colonialism. In her work, she argues that capitalism, particularly in its historical development, has been driven by the conquest and exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources. She views the accumulation of wealth in capitalist societies as fundamentally rooted in the dispossession and subjugation of Indigenous peoples. She describes capitalism as a system of exploitation, particularly of labour and resources. This exploitation is not limited to economic relations but extends to the cultural and social domination of colonized peoples. In her view, capitalism requires the subjugation of entire populations to maintain its economic structure, often through violence and coercion (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). For Dunbar-Ortiz it is not possible to discuss capitalism without situating it in the context of settler colonialism, where the capitalist mode of production is intertwined with the process of settling and occupying Indigenous lands. She argues that the development of capitalism in settler societies like the United States is inseparable from the history of land theft, genocide, and the imposition of Western economic systems on Indigenous populations. She also provides an analysis of capitalism in a global system where it perpetuates inequality and exploitation on a worldwide scale. She connects the historical processes of colonialism with contemporary global capitalism, emphasizing how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the global economy, particularly in relation to Indigenous peoples and the Global South (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

Coulthard (2010) similarly to Dunbar-Ortiz offers a critical analysis of capitalism centering indigenous resistance. For Coulthard capitalism can only be understood through its intersection with colonialism and state power. Coulthard argues that capitalism in settler colonial societies, like Canada, cannot be separated from the processes of colonialism. He asserts that the accumulation of capital has historically depended on the dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources. This relationship between capitalism and settler colonialism is ongoing, rather than a completed historical event. Coulthard draws on Marx's theory of "primitive accumulation," which Walia (2013) explains as requiring "conquest, enslavement, and the dispossession of communities from the lands on which they subsist" (p.46), to describe how capitalist development initially involved the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands. Coulthard extends this concept, arguing that primitive accumulation is not merely a historical process but continues today through ongoing colonial dispossession and resource extraction in Indigenous territories (Coulthard, 2010)

Building on the analysis of Dunbar-Ortiz and Coulthard, Walia explores the interconnectedness of capitalism, colonialism, and border enforcement as systems of oppression. Walia (2013) argues that capitalism as the dominant global economic system operates on a model of private property, dictating both production and distribution, "it destroys land-based subsistence cultures and concentrates wealth into the hands of a select few" (p. 45). She explains that under capitalism, production is detached from human needs, collective creativity, and the natural world, reducing these vital aspects of life to mere commodities for market exchange. The definition and analysis of capitalism put forward by Fraser, Dunbar Ortiz, Coulthard, and Walia underscores the inseparable connection between capitalism and various forms of oppression and exploitation within society. One prominent form of oppression and exploitation that Walia focuses on is related to the system of migration of the border regime.

To understand the connection between border rules and capitalism, Harvey explains how borders under capitalism serve as mechanisms to regulate the flow of labour, commodities, and capital, often privileging the interests of wealthy nations and corporations while restricting the mobility of people from marginalized regions (Harvey, 2003). Walia (2013) confirms this reflection and argues that borders under capitalism function to control the movement of people, especially from marginalized regions, while facilitating the flow of goods and capital in ways that benefit wealthy nations and corporations “Within border imperialism, the dual processes of displacement and migration are manufactured through the specific trajectories of colonialism and capitalism... the unfreedom for migrants and concurrent freedom of capital across borders is a defining element of the constant warfare of border imperialism” (p. 44). This results in a global division of labour where some regions are exploited for cheap labour and resources, while others benefit from cheap imports and capital investments (Harvey, 2003).

For Harvey and Walia the way borders are upheld is through the overarching influence of capitalism which relies on the movement of people across borders to fulfill labour demands and drive economic growth, through the exploitation of migrants to fill low-wage jobs in various sectors including agriculture, construction, and services. Simultaneously, the treatment of migrants within these economies reflects the inequalities inherent in capitalist systems, with migrants facing multiple barriers to remain in these countries legally, precarious working conditions, and limited access to social services, legal protection, and rights.

Additionally, through immigration policies, capitalist economies in Western countries control and regulate labour flow to align with economic demands, by emphasizing the needs of capital over migrant welfare. This results in a system where migrants are both essential to the

functioning of the economy and marginalized within society. Through the formulation of the concept of border imperialism Walia demonstrate how capitalist economies develop advanced militarized strategies used to control and increase the surveillance of borders, to maintain and expand their power, facilitating the circulation of goods and the extraction of resources, and perpetuating displacement and migration as essential components of capitalist accumulation. Therefore, as Harvey (2003) affirms, capitalism not only shapes the economic landscape but also reinforces hierarchies and injustices through the construction and enforcement of borders (Harvey, 2003). In the context of global capitalism, borders serve not merely as barriers but as mechanisms to regulate the flow of labour and capital. The migration of labour is encouraged to meet economic demands, yet it is also controlled to ensure that migrant workers remain in a precarious position, subject to exploitation and denied full access to rights and services (Harvey, 2003)

Harvey's definition of capitalism underscores the integral role that border formation and migration play in advancing capitalist interests. Dunbar-Ortiz and Coulthard elaborated on the intrinsic connections between capitalism and colonialism, highlighting how the system relies on land theft, enslavement, and resource exploitation. The historical legacy of colonialism has enabled capitalism to embed itself within the economic and social structures of colonized communities. Far from being confined to the past, colonial practices persist today through settler colonialism, where state-sanctioned land and resource theft continue to serve capitalist goals. Borders, in this context, are tools that facilitate the globalization of capitalism, making migration both a consequence and a necessity of this system. Dispossession drives people to migrate for survival, while their labour becomes essential to the economic growth of capitalist nations, as Harvey states in the quote mentioned above. This analysis allows us to understand how border regimes and rules are a mechanism through which capitalism sustains and expands its global influence.

In the final part of this analysis, Walia further explores the foundational elements of the border imperialism framework, emphasizing the inseparable connection between capitalism and imperialism. She draws on Edward Said's critical definition of imperialism, which highlights the cultural and ideological aspects of domination. According to Said (1994), imperialism is not limited to political and economic control; it involves the construction of biased representations and stereotypes of colonized peoples. He argues that Western powers create and perpetuate orientalist discourses to justify their dominance over the East (p.9). Furthermore, Said (1994) defines Imperialism as a complex system of power relations in which the West asserts its superiority and maintains control over colonized territories through cultural hegemony, knowledge production, and the imposition of Western values and norms (p.12).

Walia uses this perspective to illustrate how imperialism operates on multiple levels, reinforcing systems of oppression through both direct control and the shaping of perceptions and ideologies that uphold colonial hierarchies. This analysis provides an understanding of how imperialism is essential to Western states building founded on dispossessing communities and securing land and resources for state and capitalist interests while restricting the inclusion of migrant bodies into these states. (Walia, 2013, p.39)

Walia (2013) argues that analyzing borders and migration within the context of capitalist and imperialist systems is crucial:

“It takes us away from an analysis that blames and punishes migrants, or one that forces migrants to assimilate and establish their individual worth. Instead, ... it reorients the gaze squarely on the processes of displacement and migration within the global political economy of capitalism and colonialism. I argue that circulations of capital and labour stratifications in the global economy, narratives of empire, and

hierarchies of race, class and gender within state building all operate in tandem to lay the foundation for border imperialism” (pp. 38-39).

1.2 Border Imperialism as a Framework

Walia (2013) argues that borders do not represent a national boundary with the simple function of delineation of territories, but rather, they have a function deeply rooted in colonialism, dispossession, displacement, and racism, all which interlock (pp. 5-6). Our understanding of borders is incomplete without a comprehensive analysis of how borders function and the ways that they were instrumentalized to govern, discipline, and oppress people who are traversing colonial fortresses. She proposes the following analysis:

“Border imperialism encapsulates four overlapping and concurrent structuring: first, the mass displacement of impoverished and colonized communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power, and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced; second, the criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline of those deemed “alien” or “illegal”; third, the entrenchment of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state; and fourth, the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labour, akin to conditions of slavery and servitude, by capitalist interests.” (p. 5)

The four overlapping aspects of border imperialism presented here aim to offer a holistic understanding of how borders operate and the reasons for their creation, maintenance, and fortification. It also alludes to the efforts put in place to legitimize the over securitization of borders and restrictions imposed on crossing them. To better understand this framework, I will look closer at each of the structures upholding border imperialism as argued by Walia and present the examples she provides for each one of them.

1.2.1 Mass Displacement and Simultaneous Securitization

Walia's perspective on mass displacement underscores how the enduring repercussions of historical colonialism continue to exert influence on contemporary migration patterns.

“The first defining process within border imperialism is displacement as a result of the coercive extractions of capitalism and colonialism, and the simultaneous fortification of the border – often by those very same Western powers that are complicit in these displacements” (Walia, 2013, p. 41).

For Walia, Western imperialism constitutes a primary catalyst for the phenomenon of mass displacement and migration. Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to clarify the terminology used here and throughout the research. Terms like "the West," "Western countries," and "Global North" refer not only to geographic regions but also to political and economic power. In this research, I follow Walia's (2013) definition, where the West and Global North primarily denote Europe, Australia, and North America. However, when referring to "Western political or economic powers, and dominance" this includes not only these regions but also settler-colonial states like Israel and emerging neoliberal regimes in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (p. 39).

Western and Global North countries, particularly those with colonial legacies, initially colonized and exploited Global South nations for resources, impoverishing their communities and destabilizing their governments. This exploitation initiated and perpetuated mass displacement and migration from the Global South to the Global North, as people sought work and stability. Walia further explains that migrants, upon settling in host countries, are subjected to a hierarchical system of migration based on socio-economic status, which grants differential access to resources and perpetuates inequality. This system keeps migrants in a

state of vulnerability and fear by restricting access to essential services, which are often conditional and vary according to the migrant's immigration status. Furthermore, the concept of "double punishment"⁴ intensifies this fear, as migrants face the threat of losing their immigration status and being deported if they commit offences, in addition to facing the standard legal consequences applicable to residents. These practices and policies not only ensure the compliance of migrants with the economic and social demands of the host nation but also reinforce the power dynamics rooted in colonialism and imperialism (Walia, 2013, p. 39).

For Walia the fortification of borders as a practice to respond to mass displacement serves a multifaceted agenda. First, it seeks to preserve the prevailing socioeconomic order by averting an influx of individuals who might pose challenges to existing power structures, seeking to protect Western interests. One of the examples Walia provides to support this idea is the case of the Afghan refugees received in the United States in 2009. Even though the United States played a direct role in the destruction of Afghanistan and the mass displacement of Afghans amounting to 2.9 million refugees in 2009, only 328 Afghan refugees were granted refuge in the US. For Walia, and in her own words, this is a "*shockingly*" low number considering that the US conducted two invasions and a military occupation making the Afghan people one of the largest displaced communities in the world (Walia, 2013, p.42). This case illustrates how Western powers are not only complicit in manufacturing large-scale displacement but also responsible for creating precarious conditions for the displaced by limiting their access to refuge. According to Walia, this practice is not coincidental but foundational to the structure of border imperialism (Walia, 2013, p. 41).

⁴ To know more about the double punishment practice, check [this link](#) where it defines this concept as it applies to the Canadian context.

Second, it seeks to maintain control over resources and labour markets and ensure the preservation of economic advantages within the privileged class or nation. One of the examples Walia provides validating this argument is the case of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its impact on the Mexican community who were forced into displacement. Within the framework of NAFTA, the Mexican government removed subsidies for corn production in Mexico, while the United States continued to provide subsidies for its corn. This resulted in American corn becoming more affordable to purchase in Mexico than domestically grown Mexican corn. The aftermath of this economic shift resulted in more than 15 million Mexicans being pushed into poverty, causing 1.5 million farmers to lose their farms (Carlsen, 2011), and prompting them to seek employment in the United States, often in low-wage positions. Prior to the implementation of NAFTA, the geographic proximity and the historical ties between the United States and Mexico had already established a strong migration network, supported by various labour programs that recruited Mexican workers for U.S. industries, particularly in agriculture. The devastating economic impact of NAFTA on Mexican workers, combined with the pre-existing migration infrastructure led to an inevitable increase in migration flows toward the US (Elsasser, 2018).

This increased migration of Mexicans into the US was met with fortifications of the US-Mexico border against migrants where the displaced Mexicans encountered an unwelcoming and heavily militarized border. The United States allocated millions of dollars to bolster border patrols along the US-Mexico border, which went into effect the same year as NAFTA, this resulted in a continued rise in the death toll of migrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border as US surveillance and militarization of the border intensified (Walia, 2013, p.43). For Walia, the case of the NAFTA agreement demonstrates how capitalism has

shaped migration patterns in North America, effectively generating immigrants' workers by forced displacement through the destabilization of the local economy. This phenomenon should be understood as a form of coerced and forced migration. In this context global capitalism exerts a structural violence over entire populations making it exceedingly challenging for them to sustain themselves in their countries (Walia, 2013, p. 43). Although the examples of mass displacement provided are specific to North America, they help illuminate the power dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region. Similar mechanisms are enacted through trade agreements, leading to mass displacement and an increase of migration control toward Europe.

Over the last decade the European Union had increasingly integrated migration and border management policies into its trade agreements with African countries. This strategy is part of the EU's broader approach to externalize its border controls, effectively transferring the responsibility of curbing migration to African states in exchange for financial aid, and trade incentives. A key mechanism employed to advance this strategy has been the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa established in 2015 (Tardis, 2018). This fund was created to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in Africa by providing development aid. However, the disbursement of these funds is contingent upon the cooperation of African states with the EU's migration management objectives, which include the implementation of stricter border controls and the establishment of readmission agreements for migrants returning from Europe. Additionally, the EU's trade agreements with North African countries, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, include clauses related to migration management. For instance, Tunisia's recent partnership with the EU, which included a substantial financial aid package, explicitly linked economic assistance to enhanced efforts by Tunisia to control irregular migration along its borders (Pinto, 2024).

These arrangements are not without controversy, as they frequently prioritize European interests in reducing migration over the development needs of African countries, leading to tensions and criticisms from African leaders and civil society groups who argue that these policies undermine Pan-African efforts to promote free movement and economic integration within the continent (Hoekman, 2018).

Returning to Walia's arguments, the examples she provides highlight how Global North countries like the United States contribute to mass displacement through warfare and capitalism. These displaced populations are then confronted with highly securitized borders, denying them refuge and prosperity in the very nations responsible for their displacement and economic hardship. Additionally, the reinforcement of borders is often driven by fears of cultural change that could challenge the dominant group's sense of identity and entitlement, laying the groundwork for the concept of "Racialized Hierarchies" as a key element of border imperialism (Walia, 2013, p. 53)

1.2.2 Racialized Hierarchies

The establishment of racialized hierarchies within Western imperial nations, primarily Europe, North America and Australia, influences how citizenship and belonging are perceived within both the nation-state and the broader global empire. Walia explains that racialization encompasses various social, political, economic, and historical processes that employ essentialist racial markers to create distinct communities of colour. The existence of racialized hierarchies facilitates the establishment of a sanctioned system of segregation, creating a divide between white people, white culture, and everyone else within the confines of Western borders. Essentially our social structures and political laws are rooted culturally in the concept and process of racialization. This process centers whiteness as a dominant and

fixed identity, allowing it to escape the racial markers while determining those applied to other racial groups (Walia, 2013, p. 61).

This division reinforced the narrative of border security. For example, post-9/11 racial profiling must be understood within the broader context of white supremacy and racialization that underpin border imperialism. Walia illustrates this by showing how post-9/11 Islamophobia relies on portraying dual citizens, such as Arab-Canadians or Arab-Americans, as potential terrorist threats, effectively positioning Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians as perpetual outsiders to the nation-state (Walia, 2013, pp. 62-63). This becomes evident when one compares the treatment of these groups with the treatment of white Americans who committed acts of violence. Walia explains how this process of "othering" labels Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians as threats to national security solely based on their ethnicity. In contrast, acts of violence committed by White Americans, such as mass shootings, are not framed as national security threats or terrorist attacks. She cites the example of Wade Michael Page's 2012 attack on the Oak Creek gurdwara in Wisconsin, noting that such acts are often portrayed as isolated incidents involving "lone" white men, rather than as reflections of whiteness, white supremacy, or right-wing libertarian culture (Walia, 2013, p. 63). Drawing on Sherene Razack's work, Walia (2013) argues that race thinking not only portrays racialized people as deserving of different treatment but also constructs them as fundamentally different types of humanity (p. 63). She notes that this exclusion within the nation-state is neither new nor unique, citing historical examples such as the segregation of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans, the War on Drugs targeting Black communities, and the reserve system for Indigenous peoples. Walia (2013) explains that these experiences of otherness are shaped by societal perceptions of who is entitled to protection from the nation-state, based on their

representation of national identity, and who is subjected to state violence because their bodies are considered not to belong (p. 63).

The logic of "racialized hierarchies" extends beyond merely regulating and restricting Western borders to exclude those who do not fit the desired criteria of whiteness. It also serves as a rationale for the political and economic dominance of Western countries over Global South nations. This logic legitimizes Western nations' engagement in wars against these countries, often under the guise of liberation or counterterrorism, reinforcing Western power, supremacy, and dominance both abroad and over racialized individuals within Western borders. For Walia (2013), "racism is increasingly justified through the rhetoric of rights, freedoms, and protections" (p. 64), as seen in historical and contemporary narratives like the "yellow peril" myth and the occupation of Afghanistan framed as a mission to liberate Muslim women (p. 64).

Following 9/11, the United States and its allies launched the "War on Terror," primarily targeting Muslim and Arab countries and communities. Sherene Razack, as cited by Walia (2013), identifies three key outcomes of this war: the construction of the "dangerous Muslim man," the "imperiled Muslim woman," and the "civilized European" (p. 64). This narrative, perpetuated by mainstream media, depicts Muslim men as threats to Muslim women, who are portrayed as lacking agency and in need of rescue by a progressive, white civilization. Walia (2013) references Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase, "white men saving brown women from brown men," (p. 64) to describe this construction simply. These representations are crafted by Western white supremacist culture to normalize racialization and justify its impact on racialized bodies both within Western borders and abroad. In that sense, Western nations create a convincing narrative for their citizens, suggesting that anything or anyone diverging

from Western culture and whiteness poses a potential threat. This narrative, as affirmed by Walia, serves to garner public support for the allocation of tax funds toward wars abroad and the enhancement of domestic border control and security measures.

A more recent example that illustrates the application of racialized hierarchies in the European context is evident in the treatment of Ukrainian refugees following the escalation of conflict in Ukraine in 2022. European nations rapidly responded by opening their borders and extending support to millions of Ukrainian refugees (Düvell & Lapshyna, 2022). This welcoming stance stands in stark contrast to the simultaneous treatment of African, Arab, and Afghan refugees, who have consistently faced stringent border controls, detention, and pushbacks in their efforts to seek asylum in Europe. The stark disparity in treatment reveals an underlying racial bias, where Ukrainian refugees, predominantly white and culturally aligned with the majority populations in Europe, are deemed more deserving of protection (Anadza et al., 2023). In contrast, African, Arab and Afghan refugees, racialized as "other" due to their different cultural and religious backgrounds, are subjected to exclusionary practices that effectively deny them equivalent refuge. This differential treatment underscores the concept of racialized hierarchies in migration, as articulated by Walia, where borders are not neutral but are instead shaped by enduring racial and colonial legacies. The preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees highlights how European border regimes continue to prioritize certain racial and ethnic groups over others, thereby perpetuating a system of border imperialism that reinforces global racial inequalities.

The underlying logic of racism and notions of inferiority that propel Western imperial wars are intricately intertwined with the same logic of racism and exclusion prevalent within Western societies. Thus, the process of racialization that forms the basis of national identity

and state-building comes full circle when considering the broader analysis of global racialized empire and border imperialism. With this analysis Walia shows how these internal and external forms of racism reinforce each other, influencing migration policies and maintaining a global system of racial inequality that supports Western dominance.

1.2.3 Criminalization of Migration

The third overlapping aspect of border imperialism is the systematic process of labelling and treating migrants as criminals, threats, or second-class citizens, rather than individuals seeking refuge for safety and survival.

In contrast, to their celebrations of multiculturalism, governments in Canada, the US, and Europe selectively embrace a particular category of migrants, namely professional elites, highly educated individuals, and investors. These immigrants are lauded for their role in fostering multiculturalism in the western world, while refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers, particularly those who cross borders irregularly, are subjected to punitive measures, including incarceration and deportation. For the state to justify the detention of irregular migrants, it needs to prove that migrants are guilty of some form of criminal or unlawful conduct. When its borders are crossed irregularly, the state is portrayed as the victim of a criminal transgression, with the alleged offence harming the sanctity of its borders. “The state here becomes a tangible entity,” writes Walia (2013) “with its own personhood and boundaries that must not be violated... By invoking the state *itself* as a victim, migrants *themselves* are cast as illegal and criminals who are committing an act of assault on the state” (p. 54). Consequently, migrants are dehumanized and are perceived as a problem to be prevented, deterred, and contained.

This discourse forms the basis upon which the media, politicians, and public perception constructs stereotypes of migrants, depicting them as “floods of people from “over there” who are “disease ridden,” “fraudulent,” or “security threats”” (Walia, 2013, p. 54). Such narratives bolster moral panics concerning the imperative of securing and safeguarding borders against poor and racialized migrants and offer an opportunity for certain politicians to use anti-immigrant rhetoric as a tool to gain support, reinforcing negative stereotypes that in turn fuel xenophobia and discrimination against migrants and other racialized peoples.

The criminalization of migrants serves as a key component of Western state building and the assertion of border controls, while also being a lucrative business. Walia articulates two primary arguments to explain how the criminalization of migrants generates economic gains. Firstly, by depicting migrants as threats to job security and social services in the mainstream media effectively maintain a divided and compliant labour force. Migrants frequently find themselves in precarious employment situations, with limited rights and heightened vulnerability to exploitation. The inherent instability of such labour conditions facilitates increased profitability.

Walia (2021) provides an example of the use of what she calls “commodified inclusion” (p. 85) which deliberately involves integrating migrants and refugees as undocumented or temporary workers in countries like Canada and the US. This practice is designed to weaken labour power and ensure capital accumulation. The constant threat of deportation—whether or not it is actually carried out—serves to increase social and labour exploitation. She highlights that 52% of companies in the US have threatened to call immigration authorities on workers during union drives (p. 85). Walia (2021) cites a specific example from 2019, when one of the largest immigration raids in recent US history took place in Mississippi,

resulting in the arrest of 680 workers at Peco and Koch processing plants (p. 85). Koch Foods was a key site of Latinx worker organizing after a unionization drive in 2005. The company had faced a seven-year lawsuit for discrimination and sexual harassment, which was settled for \$3.75 million in favor of the workers just before the 2019 ICE raids, raising questions about the timing and motivations behind the enforcement action (Walia, 2021, p. 85).

Secondly, the practice of prolonged or indefinite detention and incarceration of irregular migrants on ambiguous administrative grounds, coupled with their subsequent expulsion, further contributes to this dynamic. In this scenario, irregular migrants encounter significant legal uncertainties, restricted access to the outside world, and limited opportunities to challenge their detention through legal channels. The detention of migrants has evolved into a lucrative industry, with detention centers becoming integral to the expansion of the prison system (Walia, 2013, p. 55).

Walia (2013) points to the substantial increase in corporate profits post-9/11, a direct result of migrant detention, local and offshore prison expansion, and the hyper-globalized surveillance of racialized communities. In the context of the US, these developments were facilitated by legislation ostensibly aimed at combating terrorism (p. 57). In the weeks following 9/11, Steve Logan, CEO of the now GEO Group, told stock analysts, "It's clear that since September 11th there's a heightened focus on detention, both on the borders and in the U.S. . . . What we are seeing is an increased scrutiny of tightening up the borders... More people are going to get caught. So, I would say that's positive" (Walia, 2013, p. 57).

In the decade following 9/11, private prisons and immigration detention in the US generated substantial profits, exceeding five billion dollars annually (Walia, 2013, p. 57). Drawing on

data from the Detention Watch Network⁵ Walia states that five major prison corporations holding contracts with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) invested approximately twenty million dollars in lobbying activities aimed at influencing immigration policy (Walia, 2013, p. 57). These efforts directly contributed to the formulation of policies that sanctioned racial profiling, particularly targeting individuals suspected of being undocumented immigrants. The development of these policies was conducted in close collaboration with state legislators and the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest private prison company in the US (Walia, 2013, p. 57). The financial investments by these corporations into lobbying were instrumental in shaping policies that legitimized racial profiling as a tool for immigration enforcement, effectively institutionalizing discrimination within the framework of U.S. Immigration law.

The so-called War on Terror extends beyond Western borders, affecting countries across the Global South. These regions remain caught in perpetual cycles of political and economic instability. Elbit Systems, a major defence electronics manufacturer and Israel's largest weapons producer, has played a significant role in providing advanced security technologies to Western countries like the US and Europe (Walia, 2013, p. 58). These technologies, tested and refined on Palestinians living under an illegal apartheid system, are now used to heavily survey border regions, including the Mediterranean, intercepting migrant boats, and pushing them back to their countries of origin. In 2021, the EU's border agency Frontex awarded a 100-million-euro contract to Airbus, Elbit, and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) to provide and operate unmanned drones to monitor refugees and migrants attempting to cross the

⁵ Detention Watch Network, The influence of the private Prison Industry in Immigration Detention, <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/privateprisons>

Mediterranean⁶. The fortification of state borders and the financial gains derived from detaining migrants represent characteristic practices of imperial democracies. This alignment is articulated by postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who characterizes such practices as being upheld by "overly militarized, securitized nation-states," where "the militarization of cultures is deeply linked to neoliberal capitalist values" (Mohanty, 2011).

In conclusion, criminalization of migrants plays a pivotal role in the context of border imperialism. This practice serves a dual purpose for Western nations by providing justification for heightened border security measures, increased rates of incarceration, and the expansion of prison facilities all which increase corporate profit in the sector of securitization and surveillance and enforce the logic needing to protect the Western fortress from outsiders who are constructed as illegals. Walia (2013) quote Angela Davis "Regardless of who has or not committed crimes, punishment, in brief, can be seen more as a consequence of racialized surveillance" (p. 60) to confirm that the term "illegals" is not merely a neutral categorization based on legal status but is entwined with racialized perceptions.

1.2.4 Labour Precarity

The fourth and final dimension of border imperialism revolves around the sanctioned, state-mediated exploitation of migrant labour in the interest of capitalism. While racialized people living within Western countries generally face issues like underemployment, low wages, and long working hours, those lacking legal citizenship represent a distinct labour category concerning border imperialism (Walia, 2013, p. 67). Chacón (2006) describes this

⁶ The European border agency Frontex deploy surveillance equipment to monitor migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean provided and tested by Israeli military company on Palestinians <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/frontexs-contracted-companies-reportedly-operating-surveillance-equipment-to-monitor-migrants--refugees-crossing-the-mediterranean-utilized-by-the-israeli-military-in-its-assaults-on-gaza-incl-co-responses/>

category as involving "displacement accompanied by disenfranchisement and often internal segregation in host countries" (p. 90). Workers without legal citizenship encompass undocumented or non-status workers, along with guest or temporary migrant workers. Walia (2013) specifically delves into the experiences of undocumented migrants and migrant workers, aiming to highlight the interconnected dynamics of neoliberal globalized capitalism, racialized citizenship hierarchies, and state-building within the framework of border imperialism (p. 67).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021), international migrant workers represented 4.9% of the global labour force in 2019 (p. 11). The global migrant workforce totaled 169 million, with a significant majority employed in the services sector, accounting for 66.2% of this population. The industrial sector, encompassing key industries such as oil and construction, employs 26.7% of migrant workers, while the agricultural sector accounts for 7.1% (p. 13). These workers are primarily concentrated in high-income countries, with the highest proportions found in Europe and Central Asia (37.7%), followed by the Americas (25.6%), and the Arab states (14.3%) (p. 14). Walia (2013) argues that despite decades of residency in their host countries, these migrant workers are rarely granted citizenship, leaving them in a precarious position where they are compelled to work for minimal wages with limited or no benefits. This condition perpetuates a cycle of survival, trapping workers in vulnerable situations. Moreover, they are often relegated to living in labour camps and are subjected to routine abuse, further exacerbating their marginalization and exploitation (p. 69).

Various migration legislation programs have been formulated to exploit migrant workers, such as the Temporary Foreign Workers Program in Canada and the US (Walia, 2013, p. 68).

In these countries, programs like the US Bracero initiatives (1940s to 1960s), the US H-2A visa program, and Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) rely on migrant labour for agribusiness profits, significantly subsidizing the American and Canadian economies. These programs recruit temporary migrant workers through state visas for short-term employment with specific employers. Workers are contractually bound to these employers, a situation that many describe as “modern day slavery” (Cohen, 2019), (McCausland, 2020).

Canada’s SAWP pays migrant workers less than the minimum wage and excludes overtime compensation. These workers endure long hours in precarious conditions and often face family separation. Employers or contractors routinely exert control over them, including confiscating identification documents (Hannan et al., 2015). Criticisms of the SAWP, particularly regarding the heightened vulnerability of migrant workers, have been articulated by the North-South Policy Institute (Walia, 2013, p. 69) which has been supported by various migrant justice organizations, such as the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change⁷. These critiques underscore ongoing concerns about the exploitation inherent in the program.

In contrast to migrant workers who enter the country through state-sponsored visas influenced by employer advocacy, undocumented workers lack legal authorization for residence or employment (Walia, 2013, p. 69). Consequently, they lack theoretical legal recourse when faced with instances of violence and exploitation. Migrants, including their children, exemplified by the Dreamer students in the US for example, acquire undocumented status either through irregular border crossings, unsuccessful asylum claims, or the expiration of visas (Gonzales et al, 2014). The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

⁷ The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change is an organization that support migrants stand up against injustices and violation they face at their workplace and from their employer and they help build migrant power by bringing together workers on farms, in factories and in communities to create the change they want: <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/about/>

program⁸ under which the Dreamer reference emerged, was established to address the legal challenges faced by these young immigrants (Singer & Svajlenka, 2013). DACA offers temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who arrived in the US as children. The program allows these individuals to live and work legally in the U.S. for renewable two-year periods, though it does not provide a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship (Pope, 2016).

Walia (2013) contends that the absence of a pathway to permanent legal status renders the lives of migrant and undocumented individuals fraught with insecurity and precarity. These individuals often experience isolation and have limited access to essential social services, in spite of paying for these services through taxes (p. 69). It is estimated that more than half a million undocumented individuals are currently in Canada according to the government of Canada⁹, and about eleven million in the United States¹⁰. A considerable proportion of undocumented individuals have actively contributed through labour, education, residency, and community development in both Canada and the US over successive generations (pp.69-70)

Despite variations in the two legal frameworks of the temporary foreign migrant worker and the undocumented migrant, Walia (2013) states that a fundamental commonality exists between them—the absence of comprehensive and permanent legal status which result in

⁸ An overview of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA)
https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/deferred_action_for_childhood_arrivals_daca_an_overview_0.pdf

⁹ Undocumented Migrants in Canada – November 2022
<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-nov-18-2022/undocumented-migrants.html>

¹⁰ What we know about unauthorized immigrants living in the US -
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/22/what-we-know-about-unauthorized-immigrants-living-in-the-us/>

increased exposure to exploitation by employers, as any effort to assert their labour rights may result in state-initiated deportation. The state's withholding of legal citizenship from these migrants establishes legal dominion over the disposability of their labour, thereby perpetuating the exploitative nature inherent in their work (p.70)

Activist and academic David McNally (2006), emphasize that global businesses want immigrant labour, but on their own terms —meaning, “they prefer a workforce that is frightened, oppressed, and vulnerable” (p. 137). As a result, the violence faced by those displaced due to imperialist and capitalist foreign policies is perpetuated by categorizing migrant and undocumented workers as continuously disposable through colonial and capitalist immigration and labour policies like those regulating Canada’s Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). Canada engages in various labour export agreements with countries in the Global South, amongst them the Philippines. The LCP predominantly recruits Filipina migrants' workers to allow them to enter Canada as domestic workers (Walia, 2013, p. 71). These workers must complete 24 months of employment within a four-year period to qualify for permanent residency. During this time, they are required to work exclusively in the home of the employer specified on their work permit. Although the program sets a maximum number of hours worked per week, the live-in nature of these jobs allows employers to summon caregivers at any time. This arrangement exposes workers to numerous labour violations, including unpaid or excessive work hours, additional job responsibilities, confiscation of travel documents, invasion of privacy, and sexual assault (Walia, 2013, pp. 71-72). Walia (2013) argues that within the framework of border imperialism, migrants and undocumented workers are intentionally incorporated into the nation-state in a restricted manner, thereby establishing a two-tier hierarchy of citizenship. The labeling of migrant workers as foreign, illegal, or temporary inherently denotes their non-belonging (p.72).

The state's practice of illegalizing these workers by denying them full legal status and keeping them in a state of constant uncertainty essentially legalizes the trade in their bodies and labour for domestic capital. Referring to Harold Troper reflection, Walia (2013) notes that “the denial of legal citizenship to temporary migrant and undocumented workers allows states to accumulate domestic capital via the “In-gathering of off-shore labour” in order to compete in the global market” (p. 70). This reinforces the idea that the state is adapting its structures to always safeguard neoliberal transnational capitalism first and at all costs.

The conceptual framework of border imperialism offers a distinctive perspective on the establishment and perpetuation of borders. This framework elucidates how borders are delineated through global processes that prioritize the control of commodities deemed valuable. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the interlinked power structures and entities that have historically and presently governed borders, portraying empires as impregnable fortresses.

To conclude this section, Walia's analysis of the four structures of border imperialism highlights the complex interplay of the criminalization of migrants and the exploitation of their labour. She emphasizes how these processes are deeply intertwined with racialized categorizations, which together reinforce the broader framework of border imperialism. This analysis highlights the systemic nature of these practices within global capitalist systems. By examining these interconnections, Walia demonstrates how border imperialism is sustained and legitimized through the intersecting mechanisms of legal exclusion, economic exploitation, and racial discrimination, ultimately contributing to the perpetuation of global inequalities.

1.3 Fortress Building: Fortress Europe

“A fortress is, on the one hand, a particularly important position which, in order to be impregnable, is protected by various defensive and offensive deterrent devices. On the other hand, a fortress is one of the components of a sphere of influence, which it helps to control and reinforce by various means, including its ability to project forces beyond that zone. Fortification is not therefore an aim in itself but rather a tool that facilitates a wider operation.”
(Cornu, 2001, p. 51).

The fortification of Europe’s borders for migration management began in the late 1970s with the proposal of the Schengen Agreement¹¹, which enabled systematic control of migration within the Schengen area for all member states. Over the past decade, Europe’s border fortification efforts have shifted from managing migration to intercepting migrants before they enter European territory. This transition was formalized in 2015 when the European Union decided to replace humanitarian patrols in the Mediterranean Sea with military ones. This policy allowed European border patrols, in cooperation with patrols by countries such as Libya and Türkiye, to intercept and destroy migrant boats, referring to them as “smuggler boats” in order to justify the military response to this humanitarian crisis the EU deployed (Bialasiewicz, 2012), (Kotoulas & Pusztai, 2020).

Border securitization as a practice, has become increasingly sophisticated and militarized. Through this practice, which Walia (2021) defines as a process where nation-states extend their borders beyond their physical territory. This typically involves outsourcing border control and migration management to other countries or regions with the goal is to prevent

¹¹ To read more the agreement check this link:
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/schengen-agreement-and-convention.html>

unwanted migrants from reaching the actual borders of the nation-state (p. 87). In this context European migration control extends to countries where migrants depart from, preventing attempts to enter "Fortress Europe" (Albrecht, 2002).

Cornu (2001) argues that the concept of a fortress implies a strategically significant position needing protection (p. 51). In Europe's case, this pertains to its economic, political, and cultural importance on the global stage. Europe has adopted both defensive and offensive strategies to secure its borders and deter migrants, who in this logic represent a threat to Europe's social, economic, and cultural fabric. In recent decades, defensive measures have included the practice of externalization of EU border control to countries where migrants come or transit through and deploying military drones to patrol the Mediterranean Sea. These drones aim to intercept migrant boats before they enter international and European waters. Alarm Phone Activists explained that intercepting boats in advance allows the European coastguard to legally refuse rescue operations (Heller et al., 2017). Instead, they notify the coastguards of countries such as Türkiye and Libya to return the boats to their point of departure. This tactic, known as the pushback strategy¹², is a defensive measure used by the European coastguards. The Alarm Phone project identifies some of the offensive tactics used by European coastguards, including the systematic delaying of intervention which leads the situation of migrant boats, already in distress, to quickly become fatal. This strategy has been named by activists the "left-to-die policy" of the EU (Heller & Lorenzo, 2012).

Whether through the externalization of border control, pushback, or the left-to-die policy, these measures underscore Europe's commitment to securing itself against external threats or unwanted influences, including people. Europe actively shapes and controls its surrounding

¹² Alarm Phone. (2016): Interceptions, Push-Backs, and drownings: Another summer in the Mediterranean Sea - *Alarm phone*. (June 27th - August 28th, 2016). https://alarmphone.org/en/2016/08/28/weekly-reports-interceptions-push-backs-and-drownings-another-summer-in-the-mediterranean-sea/?post_type_release_type=post

regions, while establishing its sphere of influence, much like a fortress. This extends beyond physical borders to include projecting influence through economic and military agreements, which ensures the political dependence of migrant-origin countries on the EU. Consequently, the EU successfully extends its control of migration beyond the continent.

Cornu's (2001) understanding of Fortress Europe emphasizes that fortification is not the goal, but a means to achieving broader strategic objectives (p. 51). For example, this translates to Europe being able to heavily control its borders and restricting entry to "undesirable migrants," while still influencing not only the political and economic policies of other countries historically colonized by Europe, but also the possibility of a safer and more stable life for its residents (p. 51).

According to Walia (2021), the fortification of European borders that began in the 1970s has consistently aimed to systematically deter migrants (p. 108). She highlights that the European Union allocates substantial funds, amounting to billions of euros, for surveillance, patrols, and the construction of over one thousand kilometres of walls _ equivalent to six Berlin Walls, stretching from Spain to Latvia across 28 EU member states, the majority of which were constructed during the 2015 "migration panic" (Benedicto & Brunet, 2018). To provide context, Europe had only two border walls in the 1990s; by 2017, this number had increased to 15 walls, with seven of these walls built during the 2015 migration crisis (Hess & Kasperek, 2019).

In tandem with these physical barriers, the EU employs smart border technology to track and gather fingerprints and biometric information from migrants upon entry into Europe. The collected data is harmonized across Europe, enabling all member states to access and enforce immigration regulations uniformly. The Schengen agreement further fortifies European borders by keeping internal borders open while strengthening security at external borders.

Walia (2021) argues that this harmonization of border control and visa policies within the Schengen area contributes to a “vast machine of illegalization,”¹³ restricting legal and safe routes for non-EU nationals (p.108). The Dublin Regulation,¹⁴ which requires refugees to seek asylum in their first country of entry, is a prominent example. The Regulation is enforced through the Eurodac fingerprint database and biometric systems also known as the “European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice”.¹⁵ Migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Africa, or the Middle East frequently arrive in southern European countries like Italy, Spain, or Greece. However, these are not usually their intended destinations, as they may lack family, support networks, or language proficiency in these countries, making it challenging to integrate and find employment. For instance, migrants from former French or Belgium colonies in Africa aim to reach France or Belgium, where they may have linguistic familiarity and established family members from earlier migration waves. Similarly, migrants from Commonwealth countries or former British Colonies tend to prefer the United Kingdom or other English-speaking countries, where existing migrant communities can facilitate their settlement process (Castles, 2013). The Dublin Regulation systematically renders these migrants illegal and limits their opportunities to seek asylum in their preferred EU countries (Walia, 2021, p. 108).

¹³ Walia use this word coined by Stephen Scheel in this following chapter “‘The Secret Is to Look Good on Paper’: Appropriating Mobility Within and against a Machine of Illegalization,” in *The Borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, Nicholas De Genova, ed, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 43. Where he criticized the visa regime established by the Schengen agreement within the EU as one of the vast machines of illegalization.

¹⁴ For more information on the Dublin Regulation https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/country-responsible-asylum-application-dublin-regulation_en

¹⁵ For more details information about the EURODAC I included this official website of the European Union providing an elaboration on European Union law <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/eurodac-european-system-for-the-comparison-of-fingerprints-of-asylum-applicants.html>

Furthermore, Europe employs a strategy of border externalization and upstream securitization, a practice involving extraterritorial technologies and agreements to prevent migrants and refugees from reaching European borders. Walia (2021) defines border externalization as a key governance strategy within the broader framework of territorial diffusion (p. 84). Territorial diffusion entails the expansion of state authority beyond traditional borders into regions previously considered peripheral to direct state control. This extension is not confined to the physical demarcation of borders but also encompasses the imposition of legal and economic frameworks that regulate migration and labour. The primary objective of this process is to manage and control migrant populations, effectively preventing their entry into a state's legal jurisdiction (p. 87). In this context, border externalization extends border management far beyond a nation's physical boundaries, shifting the focus to where the migrant is located rather than the territorial limits of the state. As Walia (2021) notes, "the definition of border ceases to refer to the territorial limit of the state but to the management practices directed at where 'the migrant is'" (p. 87).

To understand how the practice of border externalization is enacted, one can look at the principle of "non-refoulement,"¹⁶ which is "the international legal obligation ensuring that no state forcibly returns refugees back to a country where they face persecution" (Walia, 2021, p.87). While countries that are signatories to the Refugee Convention¹⁷ are obligated to process asylum claims and uphold the principle of non-refoulement, many Western nations seek to encourage migrants to remain in their country of origin or to seek asylum in neighbouring countries. Border externalization reflects this consensus through what it called

¹⁶ For more information about the Principle of Non-Refoulement <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>

¹⁷ The Refugee convention of 1951 established the foundation work of the UN high commission for the protection of refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>

readmission agreements¹⁸ Europe makes transit with countries like Libya, Tunisia, Türkiye, and Morocco, that aim to stop migrants at their transit location. These agreements¹⁹ are established under the Migration Partnership Framework²⁰, a European initiative introduced to address migration challenges by fostering cooperation between the European Union (EU) and third countries, including those of origin and transit. The framework aims to manage migration flows and reduce irregular migration to Europe through strategic partnerships that offer incentives such as development aid, investment, and diplomatic support. Any trade, aid, or development agreement between a European country and a migrant transit or origin country can incorporate the EU's migration policies. Thus, through these agreements, the EU can allocate portions of financial aid towards funding military training for the coastguards of transit countries and supporting the implementation of stringent border control measures, with the primary objective of preventing migrants from reaching Europe. Some of these agreements can include the obligation to readmit migrants to the country of departure or origin, which means that non-EU countries like Türkiye and Morocco are obligated to proactively control migration and readmit all deported individuals sent to them (Walia, 2021, p.109).

Finally, in addition to the practice of externalization of borders, Europe harmonizes their external border surveillance where it is managed by one agency known as Frontex or the

¹⁸Readmission agreement

https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_17/SR_Readmission-cooperation_EN.pdf

¹⁹ This article elaborate more on the different condition of readmission agreement and how it is a tool Europe use to reduce the number of migrants coming their way by getting a third country usually a transit country to accept these migrants through readmission or deportation – Philipp Stutzl, *Political opportunities, not migration flows: why the EU cooperates more broadly on migration with some neighbouring states*, JOURNAL OF ETHNIC AND MIGRATION STUDIES, 2023, VOL. 49, NO. 12, 3101–3120

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193716?needAccess=true>

²⁰ The Migration Partnership Framework

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_ec_format_migration_partnership_framework_update_2.pdf

European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Established in 2004, Frontex²¹ is officially tasked with enhancing border security and managing migration flows through coordination, surveillance, and operational support for EU member states.

Walia argues that increasingly the measures implemented to control and survey European borders by Frontex are militarized. In the central Mediterranean area, Frontex has two military operations that deploy naval warships into the central migration route between Libya and Italy. The mandate of these operations is not only to intercept but to destroy migrant boats. Within one year, 258 boats were destroyed, and European politicians increasingly framed this war's cape in this region as “destroying criminal smuggling and trafficking networks” (Walia, 2021, p. 117). Similar practices coordinated by Frontex are observed in the Western Mediterranean Sea region between Türkiye and Greece. Greece is known for being “the Shield” of Europe where hundreds of millions of euros are funneled into border security and militarization (Walia, 2021, p. 115). The 2016 EU-Turkey deal pushed Türkiye to accept all deported refugees who crossed irregularly into Greece and for their coastguard to work closely with Greece in patrolling the Aegean Sea and intercepting migrants' boats. In addition, NATO deployed fully militarized warships as part of the interdiction efforts to support this partnership in the region (Walia, 2021, p. 114).

Through the militarization of the EU border, Frontex exacerbates the marginalization and vulnerability of migrants. The agency's primary goal is to prevent unauthorized crossings and strengthen border control, a practice that contributes to the deterrence and externalization of migration, undermining the principles of human rights and asylum protection that Frontex claims to uphold. Frontex also focuses on enhancing border security and cooperation with non-EU countries, which involves supporting and facilitating stringent border control measures, resulting in the suppression of safe and legal migration routes and the increased

²¹ Frontex website <https://www.frontex.europa.eu>

risk of human rights abuses. Activists from the Alarm Phone argue that the emphasis on securitization and surveillance put forward by Frontex prioritizes state security over individual migrant rights (Alarm Phone, 2017), raising concerns about the adequacy of protection mechanisms for those seeking asylum.

This perspective asserts that Europe's borders take on the characteristics of a fortress, shaped by a logic that prioritizes deciding "who ought to matter versus who ought not" (Gahman & Hjalmarson, 2019, p. 108). This logic determines who has the privilege to freely access and move across colonial and settler colonial fortresses and who is excluded from such opportunities. This selection process is perpetuated by immigration systems and strategies deeply rooted in racist practices and enforced through heavily militarized surveillance and interception techniques.

In the next chapter, I present the narratives of activists providing insights on what Fortress Europe represents to them in the context of their work with migrants crossing the sea. They also explain the different power dynamics they challenge on the ground when engaging with migrants' boats.

CHAPTER 2

Stories of the Voiceless

For this creative research, I worked with seven participants who are active activists with the Alarm Phone. I used two different methods to collect the stories they shared with me: semi-structured interviews (Butina, 2015) and photovoice workshops (Wang, 1999). To protect their anonymity, I have given them chosen names. The participants in the photovoice workshops are Yafa, Bissan, and Khalil, while Haifa, Jenin, Kuds, and Jericho shared their stories through interviews.

When I began this creative research, I wanted to tell stories of people resisting and fighting against border violence, as their voices are silenced, and their work is overlooked or made invisible. I wanted to bring these stories to the academic context, creating a space where these narratives inform the conversation on migrant justice and the border crisis. In this chapter, I share the voice of activists I worked with, as they describe in their own words the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, share their perspectives of the European border policies and the power dynamics at play in the region, and offer insights into the role they play to help migrants cross the sea safely, while also advocating to put an end to borders and border control.

It is important to note to the reader at this point that this chapter represents only the first part of the narrative and material collected and created throughout the research that I present in *The Stories of the Voiceless*. To fully grasp it and understand this research, you will need to see the stories presented at the exhibition. The exhibition is integral to both the research and to this chapter.

2.1 Activists' Stories – The Alarm Phone

Through the interviews and the workshops activists discussed with me their motivations and reasons for working with the Alarm Phone, their commitment to migrant justice, and their efforts to amplify migrants' voices. Every activist I interviewed had a personal connection to the topic of migration, either through their own experiences as migrants or through close relationships with migrants. Most of the activists in this research identify as migrants living in Europe with precarious immigration status. They have had to navigate complex migration policies, border legislation, and have faced discrimination and precarity throughout their immigration journeys. Their motivation and commitment to migrant justice are deeply rooted in their firsthand experiences.

These activists shared that many of them were driven early on in their life by a desire to leave their home countries in search of freedom, safety, and opportunities, including the chance to pursue higher education, and reunite with family members. As they navigate the European immigration and visa system, they are left feeling diminished and stripped of their dignity. This feeling is best expressed by Haifa who said:

"We grew up internalizing the belief that anything European is superior, leading us to perceive Europeans as superior and aspire to be like them. When thinking about that now, we see how these feelings have been ingrained in us over generations through colonization and are instrumental for the European Empire to maintain its dominance and justify the discrimination and exploitation we experience" (Haifa, Personal Interview, January 2022)

The feeling of injustice is shared amongst the majority of participants, and play an essential role in motivating them to provide support to migrants and to amplify their voices while

crossing the Sea, “this issue is deeply personal, and acting on it is a duty not a choice” says Yafa “as long as Europe continue to fortify their borders and restrict access to refugees and migrants, leaving them to drown in the sea, there isn’t a question of what motivate us to do this work it is a duty, we have to do this work” (Yafa, Personal Interview, February 2022).

2.1.1 How Activists Perceive Europe and the Migrant Crisis

Activists highlight what Jenin termed “the hypocrisy and contradiction of Europe” (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022), as an injustice motivating them to act. They explained that European countries, after colonizing and systematically destroying the economies of Global South nations, attract migrant workers from these same countries to contribute to the European economy by working for low wages. Simultaneously, they implement intricate and restrictive migration policies that limit legal entry to Europe, thereby increasing the prevalence of irregular and dangerous migration routes. The so-called “migrant crisis” is then attributed mainly to a “European border systems crisis” (Khalil, Personal Interview, February 2022) as Khalil called it, where various policies and institutions actively and intentionally place people in precarious situations.

Building on Khalil's conceptualisation, Yafa shares their views on the crisis in Europe, arguing that the responsibility should not be placed on the choices made by migrants:

“What we are experiencing in Europe is a crisis of European laws, our border structure put people in crisis, all the restrictions put in place to make it impossible for people to get to Europe or travel anywhere contributed to the crisis we see unfold today. The strong desire to assimilate migrants to European identity and values is what created a crisis of divisiveness and promoted dehumanizing narratives amongst European nationals and media targeting migrants. How you look like and where you

come from determine what kind of treatment you will get in Europe, and what kind of opportunities you will have access to survive; the more you conform to white European values and looks, the better you are treated.” (Yafa, Personal Interview, February 2022)

Jericho offers a similar perspective, stating, “displaced people do not manufacture a crisis they are fleeing a crisis that was inflicted on them. We can’t possibly call it a migrant crisis” (Jericho, Personal Interview, July 2022) [Listen HERE to the audio clip provided by Jericho.](#)²²

Adding to this discussion, Jenin weighs in with a note of sarcasm, reiterating the sentiments of the others above:

“It’s very funny to call what’s happening in Europe a migrant crisis, what also the mainstream media calls migrants are usually people of colour, and Muslims. In general, people of colour constitute the migration crisis, and European politicians usually say: oh my God, we cannot take this many people! We cannot do this! ...Which was not the case for the Ukrainians, for example, no one spoke about a migrant crisis. No one spoke about a refugee crisis. No one said, oh my God, we cannot take people in Europe. Everyone was super welcoming. So, I don’t believe that there is a migrant crisis” (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022)

Another significant argument shared by activists focuses on the historical and ongoing structures that underpin Europe and maintain its hegemony over its former colonies have created a disparity between Global South countries and Europe, compelling individuals from

²² The audio clips presented in this document are for the use of the advisory thesis committee only. Once this thesis goes to the library, I will adopt a different archival strategy adequate to the requirement of the library.

the Global South to migrate for survival. This structure generates a demand for cheap labour in Europe, predominantly fulfilled by migrants. According to activists, migrant labour is essential to the European economy, particularly precarious migrant labour, which contributes significantly to the nation's economic growth, while migrants receive minimal compensation and protections. They emphasize that in addition to Europe's reliance on this labour force without providing adequate compensation or benefits, those who challenge these conditions by demanding fair treatment face deportation or the threat of it. This dynamic perpetuates the power imbalance over individuals with precarious status within Europe. To further assert this idea, Jenin expresses the following:

“I think it is all connected because if we speak about people without papers in Europe, we also speak about cheap labour, so it's also economical, and if we speak about cheap labour, we speak about capitalism. So, Europe is racist. Yes. Their policies are racist. Yes. But there is also an economical system and perspective we cannot ignore. Europe wants cheap labour, people try to come to Europe to work in these jobs then they are the one to blame for taking jobs that Europeans didn't accept, it's a cycle. People who have papers or have European nationalities will ask for a lot of money for these jobs, so they turn to migrants without papers or with precarious status. The reality is that migrants and people of colour will always come to Europe. And Europe will continue to need cheap labour in this capitalist system that only migrants are filling right now, then Europe will continue to militarize their borders and make it harder for migrants to come, Europe is in contradiction with how they manage their economic needs and makes this situation very complex. It's not just racism, or colonialism or capitalism, but it's all together” (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022).

2.1.2 Exploring The Dynamic Between the Alarm Phone Activists and The European Coastguards

The Alarm Phone has brought significant attention to the crisis faced by migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, with a primary objective of highlighting the profound impact of border fortification and militarization on human lives. The Watch the Med project was initiated first, to document incidents in the Mediterranean Sea, aiming to collect evidence that could hold European countries accountable for human rights violations at Sea. The Alarm Phone serves as the advocacy arm of Watch the Med, amplifying the voices of migrants, documenting rescue operations or their failures, and exposing the violence experienced by refugees struggling for survival against various border enforcement entities. Kuds, one of the activists interviewed emphasized how:

“The role of the Alarm Phone evolved over the years in response to the increasing challenges faced by migrants on one hand, and the growing resistance to our work from European governments and political leaders on the other hand... Beyond managing the crisis phone line for migrants during the shift work, I’m part of the media team, we write case reports for each boat we receive a call from, we issue press releases to solicit assistance, and garner support from the network of migrant justice groups... with the media press releases and through critical journalism we also educate the public on what is happening in the Sea and try to put pressure on the European governments responsible for harmful laws and policies affecting migrants... The Alarm Phone also publishes annual reports that provide comprehensive analysis and report on the state of migration and border control in the Mediterranean Sea, our goal is to offer a summary of our work, of the context in which we work and the evolving dynamic between us and the different coastguards” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022).

Kuds also noted that the Alarm Phone has developed handbooks for each region of the Mediterranean, providing activists on duty with detailed information about the responsiveness of European coastguards across the Mediterranean Sea (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022). The Mediterranean migration routes can be divided into three main sections: the Aegean Sea border region between Greece and Türkiye, the Central Mediterranean border region between Libya, Tunisia, and Italy, and the Western Mediterranean border region between Morocco and Spain. Although all European coastguards operate under the European border control agency Frontex and adhere to similar protocols, practices can vary from one European country to another depending on the authority governing them.

All activists described the Spanish coast guard as somewhat more independent and humanitarian, showing greater responsiveness to Alarm Phone members.

“The rescue team in Spain is an independent rescue organization, they have a humanitarian approach, they are governed under “La Guardia Civile” which is a civil intervention rather than military. They are the authority most responsive to us and conduct rescue operations. Of course, we can still criticize them for being a border regime who collaborate with the Moroccan regime and often decide to share information with them about the migrants’ boat and get Morocco to intercept the boat before arriving to the Spanish border, but in most cases, they do intervene and mobilise rescue for migrants. For example rescuing a migrant boat along the routes of the Canary Islands can be incredibly tricky as it is a very vast maritime space, and locating a boat can be very difficult, so in this case the Spanish coast guard after they take our call, they start the coordination of the rescue and collaborate with different

authorities in the region to locate the boat and bring them to safety... So, I would say working with the Spanish coastguard is a fairly working relationship compared to others” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022).

In addition, Jericho indicates that the responsiveness of the coastguard to the Alarm Phone calls and requests to rescue migrants can depend on who is in office and representing the government.

“Sometimes we have a very nice interaction with the coastguard who were friendly and responsive and sometimes we get a very mean response, asking us to not call again or they don’t allow us to ask questions. The example I can give is with Spain, in the past, the coastguard was responsive and professional when responding to our calls, but when the far right party broke the coalition the country had to manage migration and got a hold of south Spain, the tone of the coastguard agents changed toward us ... they weren’t disrespectful and still took our call but they became very rigid, uncooperative, they took the information we gave them about the stranded boat but they don’t answer our questions. This is a big shift for us because one of our techniques to put pressure on the coastguard is to ask them about the development of the rescue operation and make follow up calls while the operation is ongoing. We ask questions like: Did you send people out to the boat? If not, when are you going to send them? What happened in this case? ...etc., this is how we build pressure without telling them to go and help, it’s an indirect form of pressure. We interact with a lot of coastguard agents who want to fulfill their promise in protecting everyone at Sea, I mean, they are forced to do it, but we also interact with other coastguards who are happy not doing anything about the call” (Jericho, Personal Interview, July 2022).

Shifting focus to the Eastern side, and examining the Greek coastguard in the Aegean Sea, Alarm Phone activists agree that this coastguard is notorious for mistreating migrants and frequently engage in forced pushbacks, actively returning migrant boats to Turkish waters.

“At the beginning when there was greater movement in the Aegean Sea and lots of boats coming in 2015, we saw a lot of help coming from the Greek coastguard, but civil unrest grew very quickly as more people arrived to Greece, and I think there was a wave of far right groups who were spreading anti-immigrant narrative and attacking immigrants and were calling to close their borders and to militarize them. During this period, we saw a shift in the way the Greek coastguard answered our calls, you can tell that many agents were anti-immigrants and anti-left ideology, at least that is the perception we got when hearing how they answered us... And so, we know, I'm pretty sure we spoke to people on the phone from the coastguard, who told us that they are going to go and help people on the boat, but they go, and they beat them up and send them back to Türkiye... And it's the same situation in Türkiye too, where you have the Turkish coastguard who can be very aggressive with us on the phone, and even impolite, and say “fuck you and never call here” ... But sometimes they can be helpful and that usually depends on the relationship between Europe and Türkiye. When there is a political deal between Türkiye and Europe the coastguard is helpful, they go and rescue people and bring them back to Türkiye, and when there is no deal, there's no money coming from the EU, they don't cooperate, and they want Greece to take the migrants” (Jericho, Personal Interview, July 2022).

Building on Jericho's remarks, Kuds explains that push-back have become a widespread practice, especially with Greek coastguards, to avoid taking in migrants:

“The Greek coastguard, for a while they did decrease their push-back of migrants' boats toward the Turkish border, when the leftist party was in government but then it did pick up and has now become a systematic response. So basically, some coastguards do rescue people in distress and other ones they reinforce the distress often by abandoning the boats of migrants at sea, taking engine parts and leaving them behind, and pushing them back to the country they left from. This, of course, presents us with a very significant dilemma which is, on one hand, we are depending on the Greek coastguard because it's the only rescue assets that is present for the region, and on the other hand, calling them can worsen and endanger the migrants instead of rescuing them. In this context it's a huge dilemma for activists because there is a slim chance for the migrants' boat to be rescued on the European side” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022).

Finally, for the central Mediterranean route activists state that the Italian coastguard, initially following similar patterns as the other coastguards mentioned, showed greater responsiveness to activists and migrants in the early years of Alarm Phone operations but later became less responsive. Kuds explains that:

“The response of the Italian coastguard changed over the years, they started by being responsive and now they are less responsive and won't take our calls... The shocking part, when thinking of the Italian coastguard is the fact that they have a rescue coordination centre, the MRCC (the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre) who is supposed to take the calls and dispatch the rescue team, but when they receive our calls, the minute they know it's us they hang up on us... so, the so-called rescue coordination centre is not coordinating anything. With them we have so many bad experiences, they engaged in many push-back that led to the loss of a lot of lives so

engaging with them is difficult to say the least, but unfortunately we still have to engage with them because they are the only authority that is supposed to do the rescue in the central Mediterranean region” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022)

Similarly to Italy, the Maltese coastguard is also known for not being responsive to the Alarm Phone activists. Jenin affirms that:

“The Maltese coastguards don’t pick up the phone anymore, before we used to get the automatic voice messaging that direct us to, at least some nice waiting music, but now they don’t even have that, so we just call, call, call in vain, they rarely pick up the phone. For Italy though they usually pick up the phone, get the information from us about the boat, but will refuse to give us any information, which is super frustrating because you also need to know what happened to the people on the boat. We try to call the migrants’ boat, as much as possible but we also know that they may not have enough battery on the phone so we wait, we may wait hours and we don’t hear anything from them, so all we can do is to keep on trying and call the coastguard, call the people on the boat every 20, 30 minutes, keep on trying, keep on trying but they don’t answer. Often, we fear the worst because we already know that the situation is super bad on the boat” (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022)

Exploring further the evolving dynamics between the coastguards and the Alarm Phone activists, I learn that activists do interact sometimes with coastguards from the North African side. I was interested to know in what context they interact with those coastguards considering they represent border control troops of the countries from which migrants left.

Kuds mentions that “our main goal is the protection of migrants and supporting their access to a successful rescue to the best of our ability. For us, the North African

coastguard in particular Libya does not engage in rescue, but rather deception, through the interception of the migrants on the boat and put them in torture camps, shooting at them, and drowning the boat. When we work with the migrant boat, we are working with severely traumatised people who often time they tell us they would rather die than returning to Libya or the country they came from, then seeing how the Libyan coastguard had acted in the past, it's a high possibility that they do the same and further endanger the migrants if we were to contact them. We have to consider what the risks are and to call the place that does not further endanger the lives of migrants, our mission is to call the authorities who can bring them to safety. When the boat is in international waters it does not mean that other actors will intervene automatically from the European side, Libya can still be called and intercept the boat often by the European coastguards. Our goal is to put pressure on the European coastguard to bring the boat to safety. We want people to survive and live in a place where they can have dignity and peace” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022).

Jericho also shares their experience working with North African coastguards, presenting criticism of their actions:

“When it comes to the coastguards from the North African side, I find them not professional at all, I mean, I don't know if we can call them coastguard in the first place, especially Libya, it is a militia that is manning the phone, and they don't speak English, so I don't know how they help people in the Sea. The fact that they have nobody who speaks English, is a bit shocking, because outside of the rescue operation a coastguard is also supposed to coordinate traffic in the Sea so I wonder how they can help commercial ships for example when they need support. The language barrier is a big factor in not being able to communicate with the Libyan coastguard on top of

the fact that they are not professional nor respectful. We do however have a relationship with the Morocco coastguard, they are more established than other coastguards in the region but it's the navy so when interacting with them we are interacting with the military which is not pleasant at all, they give us order when we call them and our goal is really to facilitate the rescue of people in distress and get them help. So sometimes they are helpful and sometimes they are not responsive, they don't respond to emails, they don't respond to calls, you call multiple times, they never respond, and I'm pretty sure they have a way to know which number is calling them and that's how they decided not to answer" (Jericho, Personal Interview, July 2022).

Turning the attention to Tunisia, Jenin shared that their coastguard operates "a bit different because, I think it is very bureaucratic. Before 2019 we didn't have a lot of cases where we had to involve the Tunisian coastguard, but for the ones we had, we had to communicate with the coast guard via Fax which doesn't make sense at all when you have an urgent situation, but then suddenly, and not innocently after 2019 they started having an operational number and someone who speak English answering our calls and they answer the emails, they are super active when it comes to intercepting/rescuing boats, they are getting more and more professional in doing this, but it's not innocent because we know that there is a deal between Tunisia and Europe where Tunisian coast guard were trained and funded to intercept the boats and take all the push-back from Italy and making sure migrants do not reach Europe" (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022).

Based on what the Alarm Phone activists shared, the goal is not to call the North African or Turkish coastguards first for rescue, as these coastguards are not viewed as reliable rescue authorities. However, Jericho explains that:

“In the event the European coast guard refuses to rescue people and we try all we can to put pressure but still no sign of rescue is arriving to the migrants’ boat, that’s when we will call the coastguard from the North African or Turkish side, but we will ask the migrants first before doing that. The North African and Turkish coast guard will intervene and potentially rescue people, but we know that there is a high risk of the migrants being endangered or being incarcerated and deported once returned to the country they left from. I remember I worked with several boats coming from Türkiye, at the beginning we never called the Turkish coast guard, but since the Greek ones became so unresponsive, we started calling the Turkish one, usually when it’s a really, really dire situation. We had cases where people started their journey on the boat when the water was calm but suddenly the sea currents picked up and got very strong, and they ended up on the shore very shortly after departure. In some cases, we had boats that end up on a shore where they cannot really land because it’s a rocky place. When we receive the call, the people on the boat are in disarray, and they don’t know what to do, so they will ask us to call the Turkish coast guard to come rescue them if it’s the only option for survival ... this situation are really volatile so we do what we can to help save people from drowning”. (Jericho, Personal Interview, July 2022).

After two shipwrecks in 2015 that killed 1,200 people, Non-Government Organizations (NGO) began to play a key role in search and rescue operations along the Italian coast. Groups like the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, Sea Watch, and Médecins sans Frontières were among the main NGOs involved. Commercial vessels, required by international law to help distressed boats, had always been major contributors as well. Under the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC), the number of NGO grew until 2017, rescuing 111,478 people between 2014 and 2017 (Neuman, 2023).

During the interviews, activists referred to NGO-led sea rescues as "the civil fleet" and emphasized how these organizations have played a crucial role in directly saving the lives of migrants. Kuds expand on this statement:

“These NGOs are responding to a lack of state provided assistance...There were many discussions how different NGOs locate themselves politically within the broader movement for migrant justice, some have a humanitarian approach and their goals is to not let people die in the sea and others go further to focus on advocacy work so that the migrants don't get deported after getting rescued... over the last few years around 2019, there was a campaign targeting these NGOs missions and criminalizing their work of saving lives at sea, since then, this pressure led to the termination of many of these NGOs missions. In my opinion the presence of these NGOs is important, even though they may replace the state funded operation that is not existent at the moment, their presence is saving people and reducing the number of migrants drowning in the sea” (Kuds, Personal Interview, January 2022).

[Listen HERE to the audio clip from Jenin](#) provided in May 2022 ²³

The dynamic between the Alarm Phone activists and the EU coastguard as described with these narratives fluctuate and is impacted by the political climate across Europe and the response each country has toward accepting refugees. Activists from the Alarm Phone play a crucial role in advocating for the lives of migrants and must navigate a complex relationship of push and pull with the coastguard as they remain one of the main authorities with the resources needed to conduct an effective rescue at sea.

²³ The audio clips presented in this document are for the use of the advisory thesis committee only. Once this thesis goes to the library, I will adopt a different archival strategy adequate to the requirement of the library.

2.1.3 A Migrant or A Refugee? A Story of Humanization

Another narrative I explored involved activists' understanding of the distinctions between the terminology's migrant, immigrant, and refugee. These terminologies are used variably across political, media, and activist contexts, with their separation being crucial to the European and Western border regimes and imperial fortification. I want to understand how activists comprehend and employ these concepts in their work. Notably, all the activists I interviewed were non-native English speakers and operated within the European media discourse and context. I observed that the term "immigrant" was seldom used in the migrant justice movement they were part of, with a greater emphasis placed on "migrants" and "refugees." These terms were often used interchangeably, despite activists acknowledging that the distinctions arise from media and political discourse rather than from the movement itself.

For most activists I interviewed, both migrants and refugees are terms that refer to people on the move. One activist elucidated that refugee carries connotations of greater acceptance and legitimacy for the individuals described as such. Media usage of refugees often occurs in contexts that validate the movement of these individuals. Conversely, migrant is a more common term, which can carry different political implications depending on the user. In government discourse, migrant often refers to individuals with precarious status facing illegalization. In contrast, activists use migrant to describe people on the move, all of whom they consider refugees, irrespective of governmental or international recognition. This terminological choice is also a political statement for the movement, as Bissan explains, countering the government's usage and focusing on the problematic policies, laws, and practices that give rise to the categories of migrants, immigrants, and refugees. Bissan noted, "if not for borders, we would not be having this question, and migrants, immigrants, and refugees may not exist" (Bissan, Personal Interview, March 2022).

For the Alarm Phone activists there is no Europe in crisis or experiencing a migrant's crisis, but more “Europe is the crisis and producing the crisis that migrants are experiencing” affirms Jenin.

“I see our role as fighting the whole system...We are fighting borders. For me, from my perspective, everyone is migrating using different ways. For some people getting a visa and then overstaying it and for others they may not have that option and the only way to migrate is a very dangerous way to reach Europe, there are so many different ways of leaving the country. It’s also part of our daily life because we all know people who did it, even since our little age. I was born in the 90’s, that’s when the visa regime got harder and harder. My father was working in France, and I was only able to visit him once in my life, it was unfair, I always see it as unfair that French people could just come very easily to my country while for me to visit my father I could only do it once in my life because the visa was complicated to get. This is why I got involved with the Alarm Phone. It’s a reality for me. It's something that is part of my life, and it's a huge struggle, fortunately, I've never had to take the boat but, I always imagine if the political situation in Tunisia gets worse and if the political tensions that are already existing turn into armed conflicts, what will happen? What will I do? it's always an option, you know, and may be the only option that you have when everything around you is just not functioning anymore” (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022).

2.2 Key Learnings

Engaging with activists' narratives has been crucial for understanding their work and the different power dynamics and influences governing the Mediterranean Sea. Their stories reveal a persistent resistance as they counter dehumanizing narratives about migrants while

challenging Europe's longstanding imperial influence over the Global South. Since the 1990s, Europe's border fortification has coincided with the expansion of its influence over formerly colonized countries, many of which are the origin of migrants. This reflects a broader trend of globalized economies controlled by Western powers shaping the economies and livelihoods of Global South countries. Activists strive not only to preserve the lives of migrants but also to persuade the European public that every person deserves life, respect, and dignity.

One of the key insights I gained from the stories shared by Alarm Phone activists is the multidimensional nature of their struggle and advocacy. While their primary objective is to save and protect migrants' lives at sea, their strategies extend beyond this goal. They employ a range of tactics, including media campaigns, public education, and documentation of coastguard actions, adapting to shifts in coastguard practices. Additionally, some of them engage in civil fleet operations and civil rescue missions, which not only save lives but also challenge the established border system. These operations transgress the border controls as they are conducted by European civil society members, thereby bypassing the restrictions imposed by state authorities.

Alarm Phone activists actively reclaim terminology, such as the term "migrant," reshaping narratives that have been co-opted by government entities and mainstream media. Their documentation of coastguard practices—highlighting acts of violence and endangerment of migrants—serves as a form of resistance against the European border regime. They reject the notion of a "migrant crisis," instead framing the situation as a border crisis, thereby challenging the dominant discourse.

CHAPTER 3

Creative Process and Exhibition

3.1 Research design

I chose to employ a Creative Research Methodology and approach, to understand borders and migration policies through the lived experiences and narratives of migrant justice activists and organizers. This approach facilitates collaboration with participants at every stage of the research process.

Creative research methodologies are situated within critical qualitative approaches, with the primary objective of creating a collaborative framework that engages participants in efforts to enact change (Pain & Francis, 2003). Throughout this research, I have prioritized the insights of migrant justice activists and community organizers, emphasizing their experiences engaging in rescue operations of migrants at sea and interacting with border policies and the gatekeepers of these policies.

Given that research on irregular migration and border imperialism is often marginalized (MacDonald, 2012, p. 38), creative research methodologies address this challenge and is aligned with anti-oppression research values, fostering a more equitable relationship between the researcher and participants and enable the co-creation of knowledge throughout the research process.

I incorporated a multimedia art exhibition as part of this research to display the contributions of activists I worked with through interviews (Butina, 2015), and photovoice workshops (Wang, 1999), representing the research findings. Employing a creative research methodology enabled the integration of visual and digital art within this research.

Using creative and collaborative methods, drawing out the emotional and symbolic elements from activists' narratives, it allowed me to capture their imagery of the migrant crisis, how they make sense of it and how they analyse it. Consequently, creative research promoted a form of understanding that is evoked through empathic experience and provided a deep insight into what activists and migrants impacted by irregular migration in this context may be experiencing (Eisner, 2008, p.7).

3.2 Methods

Creative research approaches form the foundation of this research where the creative process adopted is evident in each step of its development. From the outset, I reflected on my methods as I decided to create audio-visual material capturing the narratives shared by activists engaged in this work. This decision guided the construction of the interview questions and the protocol for the photovoice workshops (Tsang, 2020).

3.2.1 The Interview Protocol

Four activists Haifa, Jenin, Kuds, and Jericho, chose to share their story through interviews. I started by sharing the interview questions and research information sheet with them, and offered to meet for a pre-interview introduction to review the information I shared and answer any question they may have. This pre-interview meeting also allowed me to build trust and provided time to activists to prepare for the interview if needed. The total time commitment for the interview is ninety minutes, and it included six main semi-structured questions (Butina, 2015), with one of them being part of a closing statement inviting for open reflection.

3.2.2 The Photovoice Protocol

Three activists Khalil, Yafa, and Bissan chose to share their stories through the photovoice workshops and visuals. Like the protocol I followed for the interviews, I began by providing the research information and the photovoice procedure to the activists. The photovoice process involved two meetings with each activist, structured as workshops, each lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. In the first workshop, we held an open discussion guided by the interview questions, encouraging activists to reflect on their experiences and conceptualize abstract ideas such as maritime borders, border crisis, and border imperialism through images and emotions. Following the first workshop, each activist took time on their own to reflect on our conversation and then presented two or more photographs or visuals that conveyed their story and their understanding of the border crisis and its impact on migrants. In the second meeting, activists presented the photographs they created and shared the stories of each visual, which I recorded.

3.3 The exhibition

My approach to mounting an exhibition builds on multiple sources of inspiration and practice. In 2022, I curated a visual art exhibition titled *Documenting the Undocumented* with a colleague from No One Is Illegal, highlighting the challenges experienced by undocumented migrants in Canada. In that project, we worked with four artists and seven community members, leading and co-facilitating the creation of four visual art pieces that highlighted the experiences of undocumented migrants across the country. The process included organizing roundtable discussions and workshops with artists, activists, and individuals with lived experiences of being undocumented in Canada. These collaborative efforts culminated in *Documenting the Undocumented*.

When working on mounting this exhibition I adopted a similar collaborative approach through the Alarm Phone photovoice workshops and interviews. I lead discussions designed to engage participants in thinking about abstract concepts, such as irregular migration, and border crises through the medium of images. The use of visual storytelling to depict struggles is a potent and accessible method for raising awareness and fostering a greater impact on viewers. By leveraging these methodologies and approaches, I aimed not only to document but also to amplify the voices of those at the forefront of migrant justice activism, creating a platform where their stories could resonate with a broader audience and inspire collective action against systemic injustices in border regimes.

3.4 Creative Process

Throughout this process I took on an active role of co-creation with activists. My contribution to the storytelling is particularly evident in one of the photovoice pieces. During my meeting with activist Khalil for the first photovoice workshop, the participant and I discussed at length the motivation for our work around migrant justice and the importance of sharing the voices of those who can no longer share their own stories. This discussion guided my reflection on how to incorporate the voices of migrants who have experienced crossing the sea and did not survive into this research and the exhibition. As I describe below, this led me to reach out to poet and novelist M. NourbeSe Philip and request to use a segment of her 2008 book-length poem *Zong!* Working with Khalil allowed me to take on the role of artist and storyteller.

My work and creative process included assembling and displaying photographs provided by participants during the photovoice workshops, editing sound clips of the interviews conducted, recording, and mixing the poems *Zong #15* and *Zong #16* performed by Philip,

and directed a short film. I mounted an exhibition to present the material in a way that immersed viewers in the activists' world through visual and auditory effects. Like my process with activists, I aimed to create a space where viewers could emotionally experience narratives about maritime borders and border control. Through creative research I assumed the role of the artist in addition to that of the researcher.

The exhibition centers on two primary themes. First, it examines activists' perceptions of the European border system governing the Mediterranean maritime space, including their views on the operations of the European coastguards, and the role these forces play in upholding and embodying the concept of “Fortress Europe.” Second, it addresses the impact of border violence on affected communities, highlighting the experiences of collective grief and loss.

Furthermore, the exhibition was constructed as a space where the audience in Ottawa could interact with activist narratives. I guided them through the exhibition, sharing aspects of the process of conducting this research and my experiences working with activists, witnessing, and conveying their stories and creative processes.

3.4.1 The Photovoice Story Series

My primary concern when working with activists was to create a supportive environment where they felt comfortable and inspired to share their narratives in ways that elicited visual and emotional descriptions, stimulating their imagination and creativity. In this phase, my technical role involved developing and conducting the workshops during our meetings. After these sessions, I edited and summarized the stories and interpretations provided by each activist regarding the visuals they presented. Finally, I arranged these narratives for presentation in the exhibition.

Prior to starting the photovoice workshops, I met with activists to introduce myself and outline the work we would be undertaking together. Some of these meetings were held in person, while others were conducted virtually. I had a closer relationship with some activists due to previous activism we had done together, which helped establish familiarity and comfort during the photovoice workshop sessions.

My goal was to ensure fluid conversations during the workshops, using the questions as a guide while fostering an open and continuous dialogue. This approach allowed both the activist and me to think about the images and take the time to describe the feelings and memories they evoked. It also facilitated connections between various aspects and layers of activists' work. I followed a consistent protocol for all activists, while adapting my approach to their needs.

A. Photovoice Series #1 (Presented as an audio-visual installation at the Exhibition)

One of the three final pieces from the photovoice series is crucial to understanding my creative process in this research. Khalil, the activist I worked with for this piece, initially provided a series of eleven photographs summarizing their take on the “migrant crisis” in Europe. These photographs, taken from locations on both sides of the Mediterranean and from the Mediterranean Sea itself, depict shipwrecks of migrant boats, remnants of passengers' belongings washed ashore, migrant boats during rescue operations, and images of the Sea as an open space. During the first photovoice workshop, Khalil described their work with the Alarm Phone and the various actions they were involved in. Building on that conversation, their intention was to create a photo essay that testified to their experiences supporting migrants at sea, their perspective on the migrant crisis, and the voices of migrants

rendered invisible in this crisis. Khalil's collage incorporated their own photographs taken from different places and actions they were a part of, and they also used images taken from the Alarm Phone five-year report titled *From the Sea to the City – 5 years of Alarm Phone*.

I spent some time with this piece and the photograph series, reflecting on how I will present it, where I will situate it in the exhibition space, and how I will center the story Khalil hoped to tell while remaining visually coherent with the exhibition flow. After consulting with them, I saw an opportunity to collaborate on this piece by adding a sound element to bring forth the unheard voices and experiences of migrants.

At first glance, the photographs had a coherent general theme. They included elements referring to migrant distress, border restrictions, and the tragic impact on migrant movement and survival. My initial step was to look at these photographs and establish the order in which they will be presented in the essay. While reflecting on the images, I recalled the incident that led to the creation of the Alarm Phone refugee crisis line, a story best told by scholar, and cultural theorist Christina Sharpe known for her work in Black studies, and visual culture.

Sharpe (2016) recounts the incident of the *Left-to-die boat*, a migrant boat that set sail on March 26, 2011, from Tripoli, Libya heading to Lampedusa, Italy. On board, 72 African women, men, and children were crammed atop one another. Four hours after it set sail, the boat sent a distress signal that was spotted by multiple parties, including nearby military and commercial ships, but the instruction from European coastguards was not to rescue this ship and instead let it drift for over two weeks until only nine of the passengers remained alive (p. 58). Sharpe (2016) explains how the Mediterranean has a long history in relation to slavery (p. 58). What is experienced today in terms of the migrant and refugee crisis “is a new

declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project and modernity itself” (p.58).

The photographs presented in the photovoice series resonate with the Left-To-Die Boat incident and even more so with the connection Christina Sharpe makes between *The Black Mediterranean* and the transatlantic slave trade. These narratives reflect the longstanding history of European systems, policies, and structure implemented to devalue, ignore, and dispose of the humanity of Africans. Christina Sharpe's recount of this incident inspired my approach to this piece. When reflecting on the photographs and their associated stories, I sought an opportunity to present them not as mere depictions of trauma and dehumanization, but as a means to honour the migrants and refugees lost at sea. My aim was to mourn the victims as individuals with names, families, and roots, deserving to be remembered beyond their reduction to numbers.

I then recalled *Zong!* a poem written by M. NourbeSe Philip (2008) as an attempt to retell the story of the massacre of 150 Africans aboard a 1781 slave cargo ship named The Zong that set sail for Jamaica from the West Coast of Africa. Philip wrote *Zong!* to bring the erased voices of the murdered Black African to life, to mourn them and honour them (p. 203). *Zong!* explicitly focuses on the stories of the souls lost at sea, whose identities an English court tried to conceal by keeping them nameless and reducing them to cargo goods to be compensated by the insurance company (p. 189). I have no intention of simply comparing the horrors of over 400 years of slavery to the current migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, and I see *Zong!* offering an avenue to bring forth the voices and stories of migrants lost at sea, to grieve and to honour them. I contacted Philip and requested her permission to use her

recorded reading of a segment of the poem as the sound story for the photovoice series presented by Khalil in the forthcoming exhibition.

Philip agreed and asked that we meet virtually to conduct a ceremony, drawing on our own respective cultural traditions, through which we could honour the lives lost at sea and request their permission to tell the stories they could not tell themselves. For Philip, this coming together to share our intentions and commitment was more important than asking her permission. In fact, Philip told me that I did not need to seek *her* permission, but rather the permission of *the ancestors*. Humbled by this tremendous challenge, I was sent on a quest into my own spiritual background to figure out how to engage in this work in a way that centers the voices of those at the heart of my work—the voice of the migrant whose life was lost to border violence. Reflecting on how to request permission from souls who are not here to give it was certainly a pinnacle moment in my research and creative process. Philip reminded me with her request that the stories we are telling belong to people who will never be able to tell them. It becomes imperative to follow an intentional ethic and find meaningful ways to honour the stories and the souls they belong to. This point further resonated with Khalil's approach to the photo essay, which tries to bring forth the voices of migrants in the Mediterranean by depicting their experiences of crossing the sea through these images. Additionally, some of these experiences and stories, shared with Khalil over the phone during their volunteer shifts with Alarm Phone, were intended to aid in the rescue of migrant boats. Khalil, along with other Alarm Phone activists, reported on each migrant boat and call received, and persistently advocated for migrants' right to life. Their goal was to ensure that, even when rescue efforts failed, that migrants would be remembered and their voices heard.

Philip's proposed methodology forced me to deepen my creative approach, incorporating my own spiritual traditions to imagine the lives at the heart of my work and connect with my own community in North Africa who continue to grieve the losses of their loved ones to border violence.

Our meeting was virtual and recorded. Philip opened and led the first half of the ceremony by reading a prayer to the deities of water that originate in different West African and African diasporic beliefs. Philip chose to pray to and honour Olokun, a deity considered ruler of the deep water and the oceans, where many of the victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Mediterranean border crossing remain today. She then read and performed two poems from *Zong! Zong* #15 and #16. In the second half of the ceremony, it was my turn to pay respect to the lost souls, honour them, and ask for permission to tell their stories. I chose to draw on spiritual and cultural traditions from my home of Djerba, a small Mediterranean island in the south of Tunisia where we continue to practice old Amazigh traditions in addition to Islam. I started by lighting a candle. I took some olive oil and powdered *bsissa*, a sweet dish we make on the island for breakfast and spread them at the bottom of the pot of a young olive tree I had been growing. I recited *Al Fatiha*, an Islamic prayer read to remember and honour the dead, then I read a prepared text requesting formal permission and restating my commitment to migrant justice and the fight against borders.

At the request of Philip to reflect on ways we can use to ask for permission of the ancestors, my choices for the ceremony stemmed from my upbringing in an Amazigh, Arab, African, and Mediterranean culture that practices Islam as a religion. My paternal grandfather was of Amazigh ancestry but died before I was born while on pilgrimage to Mecca. His body was buried with other pilgrims who died during Hajj in Saudi Arabia, so we could not bury him in

the family cemetery. Since we did not have a physical tomb to visit, whenever we wanted to remember and pray for him, we instead would visit the oldest olive tree in our village. At the roots of the tree, we would pour olive oil, bsissa powder, and light a candle. Then, we would pray by reciting Al-Fatiha and proceed to talk to and think of him. In the Amazigh Mediterranean culture, the olive tree is sacred, and it is where the memories and stories of our ancestors live. The olive tree is unique in that it can live for thousands of years and is thus believed to hold the stories of several generations, our past and origin stories, and carry them into the future.

Taking part in this ceremony with Philip became a significant part of my research methodology and added unexpected depth to my creative process, forcing me to recognize and incorporate the responsibility that comes with telling the stories of peoples who have lost their lives at sea.

When I began working on this piece with Khalil, we discussed the significant loss of life in the Mediterranean and the importance of bringing their stories to the forefront of the struggle for justice. Alarm Phone activists, upon receiving distress calls from migrant boats, focus on amplifying the voices of their passengers in hopes of saving their lives. They do this knowing that not every call will lead to a successful rescue. Khalil conveyed this in their photo essay through images of migrant boats waiting for rescue and at various stages of their journey. Loss and grief are central themes in the photo essay, as they navigate the moments between distress and loss. As an outsider, I concentrated on the moment of loss when engaging in the ceremony with Philip, emphasizing the voices of those lost at sea. This distinction is important in understanding the difference between my creative approach and that of Khalil and the other activists when engaging with this research.

Borders are violent, stripping people of their lives and inflicting unimaginable and perpetual grief on families and communities. Migrant justice work often focuses on oppressive border systems, amplifying migrant stories to raise awareness and compel support, but avoiding making these stories the sole focus to prevent their misuse. My experience with Philip pushed me to reflect on the importance of approaching migrant stories with care, so we can collectively start to heal from the violence borders have inflicted on us and allow the stories of migrants lost at sea to live through time.

B. Photovoice Series #2





In the photovoice series presented above, Yafa the activist provided two photographs showing aerial views of the Mediterranean Sea. They appear identical at first, though a deeper glance reveals that Yafa has drawn small red circles in the water on the second photograph.

Looking at these photographs initially, I was vividly reminded of the deep blue turquoise of the Mediterranean. On frequent trips back to Tunisia, this is the sight I look down on from the airplane window before landing, signaling to me that I am nearly home. As I was processing the positive feelings that surfaced from the first photograph, I turned to the second and noticed the dotted red circles on the surface of the deep, turquoise blue sea. It took me a second to realize what it was; when I did, I felt my heart sinking into my stomach, and I gasped. Turning to Yafa through my computer camera I asked apprehensively, “are these dots supposed to be migrant boats?” Yafa confirmed and just like that, the warm safe feeling of home was replaced by a heavy weight.

Yafa and I stared at the photographs in silence for a few minutes. As I looked deeper into the images, my imagination took over until I was no longer able to see the turquoise blue, but rather, a dark fluid colour with shiny spots of light reflecting the surface. I imagined how the sea looked at night in the faded reflection of the moon: dark, obscure, and unpredictable. Yafa's images, together with the knowledge that migrant boats will usually leave the African coast in the middle of the night to avoid interception, triggered me to see beyond what was displayed.

These photographs were meaningful and symbolic, having an instant impact and conveying the activist's message. The migrant boats represented by red dots were subtle but vivid before Yafa even explained their process and story. Without conveying graphic violence or trauma, the simple red circles invite viewers to imagine the risk that migrants take to stay alive and seek safety. The simple glance I took at them evoked in me a visceral sadness for those drowned at sea and anger at how easily these lives could have been saved if not for borders and the dehumanization of migrants.

I was eager to see how viewers would interact with the images in the exhibition, considering the emotions I experienced in just a few minutes. I started reflecting on how this piece would impact viewers who might not be familiar with migrant border crossings. My familiarity with the topic, having heard countless migration stories over the years, had left a lasting impression on me, and several vivid images were triggered when I looked at the photographs. I wondered how people with no prior exposure to this subject would perceive the piece. This reflection gradually shaped my approach to mounting and presenting the work.

Yafa prepared their story before our second meeting and requested that I record it exactly as is, without any edits. It was crucial to present the photography series with the accompanying sound clip to provide context for viewers unfamiliar with this work and to stay true to the activist's wishes. Yafa and I recognized how triggering this piece could be, knowing that each viewer would experience it differently based on their own experiences. It was important for Yafa to narrate their story to offer guidance and insight for the viewer. The sound component aimed to immerse the viewer emotionally in the story and the activist's experience with the Alarm Phone project.

During the exhibition, the two images were mounted alongside the audio of the participant's narration. It was important to me that the viewer would be able to interact with both the images and the audio simultaneously. I provided headphones so that the audience could disconnect from background noise and engage intimately with the piece. This work was placed centrally on the photovoice series wall. As the first of the five pieces to introduce an audio component, it played a crucial role in the exhibition's structure. I wanted to create a flow that guided viewers through the pieces through an increasingly immersive experience, with each piece engaging additional senses.

C. Photovoice Series #3



For the photo series shown above, the activist Bissan presented three photographs: a diptych and a single overlain image. I worked on this piece with Bissan in the editing phase of the story they shared to accompany the photographs. During our second workshop Bissan explained to me their rationale behind using these images and provided their story. They wanted the photographs to be presented with the story in written form as they wished to remain completely anonymous and did not feel comfortable having their voice played alongside the images.

When I first viewed this photography series, I noticed rich symbolism in both the images and the story. The initial set of photographs, depicting the fluid and open sea along a shared horizon line made me reflect on the concept of maritime borders. Looking at the sea, I realized the impossibility of identifying borderlines and determining where international waters begin and end, and subsequently, where migrant rights will be protected or violated. Maritime borders follow arbitrary and imaginary delineations without concrete foundations. I began to ask: How can we set borders at sea? How can these invisible lines determine people's fates? Can borders exist on a constantly moving body of water? These reflections resonate with author and activist Harsha Walia's theory that borders are not physical delineations but political and economic constructions (Walia, 2013, pp. 39-40). As I continued looking at these photographs, I felt unsettled by how society has accepted a system of regulations governing a space that cannot be contained and is constantly shifting. The feeling was prompted by the way the first set of photographs were presented together. The first image emphasized the vast, open, and dynamic sea, while the second introduced a line on the horizon, symbolizing the persistent presence of borders, even in spaces where they seem unexpected or illogical. These images made me reflect on our collective responsibility

in legitimizing a structure that attempts to regulate borders that cannot be physically enforced.

The third photograph is lighter and more open, with rainbow colours visible in the sky and a bright sun reflecting on the surface of the sea. Listening to Bissan's associated recording, I also noticed a change in the tone they had when sharing their story; it was a little cheerier. A diamond shaped image, perhaps a land mass, is overlain over the initial photograph. To Bissan, the image represents the solidarity work that activists do with migrants. The activist reimagined the sea as a space where islands can be added on demand to create a land path across the sea that migrants can follow to reach their destination safely. The islands symbolize the solidarity work that activists across the Alarm Phone network and other migrant justice networks do to support refugees.

In the audio editing phase, I followed a fluid but flexible rhythm, seeing the need to simplify the story for this piece. I transcribed the recording and listened to it again with the accompanying transcription and photographs. I looked for elements that stood out in the story, the rhythm and flow, how different key elements of the visuals were explained, the relationship and connection the activist created between each element, and the rationale behind it. This strategy helped me identify how Bissan made sense of the situation they described and brought to surface the emotions these visuals triggered for them. Bissan shared their reflection during the workshop that I included in the photograph story presented in the wall text in the exhibition segmented as follow:

Photograph 1

*“This image ... represents the open sea, it can be everywhere, and it is nowhere
There is some sort of “placelessness”*

When we look at it, we don't know where things are happening exactly, which allows for absence of responsibility.

Who is responsible for rescuing people in distress in the open sea?

In this image the sea is not calm, the sea is unruly, there is tension and anger

On the right side the image refers to the act of observation: Who is observing who?"?" (Bissan, Personal Interview, March 2022).

Photograph 2

"I always imagined if we were able to build islands everywhere to create a network of solidarity islands.

If you think about it, islands are soil coming out of the sea and create spaces for people to rest on and live in.

Islands can offer a safe landing, islands are connected under water, and they show up in the middle of the sea, they show up in support of whoever is around them.

The crystal image represents the utopia of the process of creating islands to support refugees making it through the sea." (Bissan, Personal Interview, March 2022).

Bissan's storytelling style can be described as fragmented. Initially, I could not identify the connection between the three images, or whether there was one. However, as they continued the description of their process and the reason behind their visual choices, a connection and story began to emerge. It was important to reflect on the discontinuity between ideas in the activist's narrative; the storytelling style of Bissan holds meaning and is reflective of how they made sense of the situation migrants face at sea waiting for rescue operations—a situation that can be described as chaotic, unpredictable, fragmented, and disorganized.

The editing process allowed me to bring forward these emotions alongside the story itself. This piece was busy with meaning, concepts, and images. According to Bissan, the first image shows the trail of water behind a moving boat, referring to departure and loss. The second image shows a person staring at a line traced on the Sea, referring to the act of delineating borders, The final image depicts islands, with the reflection of an imagined island, referring to the notion of respite and hope. When choosing how to place this piece in the exhibition space I wanted to allow the viewer to engage with the meaning, while allowing them space to experience the piece emotionally and on their own terms. On the wall text shared with the photographs in the exhibition, I reflected the emergent concepts that stood out to me the most: the paradox of maritime borders as being both fluid and rigid at the same time; the grief that borders inflict on people and community and the act of departing embodied in the first image; and the discontinuity that mimics the journey of the migrant at sea and the experience of the activist engaging with coastguards to support rescue operations.

The three photovoice series created for this research collectively address themes of grief and loss, highlight the absurdity of maritime borders and their regulation, and emphasize the importance of bringing migrant voices to the forefront. Although I applied the same protocol across all the series, each required a distinct creative process to allow viewers to experience, interpret, and engage with the material. These perspectives align with Walia's (2013) assessment that understanding borders requires examining them through the framework of border imperialism and defining them as complex systems of rules and regulations that serve political and economic agendas rooted in colonialism, rather than simple geographic delineations (p. 38).

3.4.2 BUT THEY DON'T ACT, 2023, 7:00 minutes

The exhibition featured a short 7-minute film that combined segments of two interviews conducted with activists Haifa and Jericho. The initial idea for the film was to simply record an interview with one of the Alarm Phone activists. The interview was filmed in Tunisia on one of the beaches on the northern coast, east of the capital city of Tunis. The original goal was to provide a visual context that could anchor the story shared by the activist. This beach as a location referred to the point of departure for migrants on their journey to reach Europe.

Choosing to film this interview on a beach was important to me because I wanted to encourage the interviewee, as well as the cameraman and myself as interviewer, to think about migrants and feel their presence while trying to tell their story. Standing on a beach where migrants have departed from, allowed me to reflect on the moment that countless migrants have stood in the same spot before boarding a cramped boat and embarking on one of the most dangerous journeys of their lives. I wondered about their fears, if they were alone or had friends or family to hold on to. I tried to imagine what conditions bring people to take the risk of crossing the Mediterranean, and I thought how impossible it must have felt and was for them to make that decision. I ended up filming the interview with one of the activists, Haifa, on the beach which allowed me to seek an intentional and meaningful connection with the activist, their story, and the migrant story told through them.

I experienced several technical difficulties while filming the interview, some of which related to the pandemic. I decided to film footage of the Sea following the interview. Some footage was filmed on a fishing boat in the Sea, and others on different shores along the Tunisian coast. I wanted to capture the sound and movement of the waves. My vision was to capture glimpses of the experience of being at sea and to use it in the editing phase to create a more

immersive visual and auditory experience for the viewer. One of the videographers I worked with in Tunisia has been documenting the journey of migrants crossing the Sea for years. We have known each other for decades as he was among the activists I worked with prior to moving to Canada when I was involved in migrant justice work in Tunisia. After filming with him, he invited me to look at some of his recent work in relation to migrants crossing the Sea. He had a rich bank of footage of the Sea. Seeing that his documentary style was immersive and the work behind the videography fitted well with the focus of my research, I asked him to collaborate by letting me use some of his prior footage in addition to what we filmed together. The footage we selected from his archive were filmed underwater and in the deep sea. This created diversity in the collected images that would allow the film to mimic the experience of being at sea. I wanted to select visuals and sounds that capture more of the migration journey in the sea, and not just the beginning of it while at shore.

Collaborating with the videographer and incorporating more diverse material made this experience more interactive. It was important to involve more activists and artists in the creating and decision-making process, as each brought a unique perspective based on their own interactions with borders. This collaboration also inspired me artistically as I gradually developed the creative process that would guide me through the exhibition. I primarily worked with and met people who assist migrants in the Mediterranean, which was essential, as I could not directly interview individuals with lived experiences of crossing the sea due to ethics requirements, I expected that I may not be able to fulfil within the bounds of this research. This approach ensured that migrant voices remained present and were considered in each piece we created, and each story shared.

When I returned to Ottawa, I began transcribing the interviews and identifying themes around which I would center the film. I started noticing the connection between two activists' ideas and narratives in particular, and decided that I wanted the video to include segments of those two interviews: Haifa is the activist I interviewed in Tunisia and Jericho in the one I interviewed virtually, both who are immigrants themselves, based in Europe, and whose focus has been on communications with the coastguard during their Alarm Phone shifts. Both activists spoke multiple languages and as a result are often the ones communicating with various coastguards from both sides of the Mediterranean. The stories were complementary and highlighted the dynamic they engaged in when communicating with migrant boats and the coastguard. Their role was to take the call from migrants aboard a boat, assess the situation, and communicate all information they received to the closest coast guard they could reach. At the same time, they work to respect and affirm the agency of migrants and their right to choose their fate, in terms of which coastguard will be contacted and may potentially rescue them. Both also spoke about their experience calling different coastguards and how over the years they developed a good understanding of how various coastguards operate and which ones are more helpful. They also both mentioned that the coastguard's willingness to cooperate with them and support the migrant boat was highly dependent on the political climate of the country they represent and the political rhetoric about migrants at that time.

The production of this film highlighting the story of both Haifa and Jericho involved multiple stages, with editing being a crucial phase. Alongside my own work editing the footage and interviews I did and filmed, I collaborated with Rana Nazzal Hamadeh, a Palestinian-Canadian artist whose practice in photography, film, and installation is rooted in decolonial perspectives. Her approach, informed by grassroots movements in Palestine and Turtle Island, resonated with the storytelling approach I wanted to follow. Rana played an

integral role in crafting the visual storytelling of the film through careful selection of footage and a focus on the migrants' journey, which created a powerful image representing the movement across the sea, which accompanied the voices of both activists in this film.

My collaboration with Rana led me to also make the decision to not use the video section of the interview filmed in Tunisia that identified the activist. All activists participating in this research were promised anonymity if they wished and most accepted this offer, while others were open to being identified. However, as I interacted with the research material, a prominent theme that emerged across all the interviews is the criminalization of activists who support migrants to cross the Sea. In the past decade, activists reported an increase in European policies and legislations that aim to punish activists who help migrants at sea (Stierl, 2018). Groups like the Alarm Phone became a target (Stierl, 2015), and as a result, activists became more careful about being visible. There is a parallel between the forced erasure of migrants by European media and politics and the erasure of the work of activists that support migrants. Forcing activists into invisibility mirrors the invisibility of reporting on or rescuing migrants at sea and by extension erasing the migrants' voice itself, leading to their dehumanization and the impossibility of seeking justice.

Activists in this context find strategies that allow them to establish a balance between being visible and invisible while managing the risks they may face. Projects like the Alarm Phone need to be visible so they can amplify the voice of migrants who are seeking support and to shed light on the human rights violations happening at sea. Navigating visibility and invisibility (Port, 2012) of social movements can be tricky. Visibility allows you to expose the reality of the issue at hand and to advocate, but with visibility comes the risk of criminalization and further marginalization of the issue and its advocates.

This reflection highlights the contradictions activists and migrants face and is reflected in the exhibition as a guiding theme in the installation of the audio-visual pieces as well as in the creative process of the film. I chose to use only the voices of activists throughout all the material mounted in the exhibition, creating a coherent flow, and providing opportunity for a more immersive and emotive experience for the viewer.

3.4.3 The Exhibition: Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea

Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea featured the stories and contributions of five activists from the Alarm phone, all presented in six visual pieces. The production team included five Alarm phone activists, three videographers, the poet and writer of Zong! and me as researcher and director of the project. The exhibition premiered at SAW Gallery for its inauguration event, a local Ottawa based Gallery on April 6th, 2023, and was presented in the format of a one-day community gathering event that I hosted. It will also be presented again at the University of Saint Paul during the fall session of 2024. This final show will conclude the creative process for this research.

The idea of showcasing the stories of activists supporting migrants crossing the sea through a public exhibition came to mind early in the process of working on this creative research. My focus was to capture activist perspectives and experiences in their own words, describing their involvement in the struggle for migrant justice and resistance against border surveillance in the Mediterranean region. My intention was to create an immersive space that would invite viewers to engage deeply with these narratives.

A. Grief as a central theme

During the construction of *Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea*, I travelled to Tunisia and visited a poignant site: a cemetery called *Le Jardin d’Afrique*²⁴ *The garden of Africa*. Created by Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi, who resides and works in Tunisia, the cemetery is a tribute to the men, women, children, and babies who lost their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. Their bodies, washed ashore on Tunisia's southern coast, were laid to rest by Koraichi in a cemetery locally known in Tunisian Arabic as *Jabbanet el Ghorabee*, meaning *cemetery of the strangers*. This name reflects the reality that the bodies remain unidentified and unclaimed, most of them refugees from Sub-Saharan African countries who were transiting through Tunisia or Libya. Despite not knowing their identities, Koraichi ensured that each grave was given a stone with a detailed description of the body and the date and location where it was found. He also kept DNA records to help identify them in the future²⁵. For Koraichi²⁶ The cemetery is a sanctuary where the souls of the departed can rest, with the hope that one day their loved ones may find them.

Visiting the *Jardin d’Afrique* was a deeply moving experience. The cemetery is beautifully arranged, with rows of graves interspersed with local flowering trees and climber plants. There is a shaded seating area under olive trees where visitors can sit and keep the souls company. As I walked among the graves, reading the stones that described the location, date, and details of the deceased, I felt an overwhelming and visceral anger and sorrow. These individuals had names, stories, families, and homelands that we may never know. They are

²⁴ Le Jardin D’afrique website : <https://www.factum-arte.com/pag/1692/le-jardin-dafrique>

²⁵ Interview explaining the motivation leading Koriachi to do this work
<https://themarkaz.org/garden-of-africa-interview-with-rachid-koraichi/>

²⁶ Jardin D’Afrique: A moving memorial to forgotten migrants
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/jardin-dafrique-moving-memorial-forgotten-migrants>

not merely statistics, but victims of an unforgiving border regime. I was reminded of when I started organizing with the migrant justice movement for the first time, in 2011 in Tunisia. I travelled the Tunisian coast with fellow activists from No One Is Illegal and other local groups, gathering information from families of those who disappeared crossing the Sea. We would compare this data with that collected by activists in Lampedusa, Italy to identify survivors and gather details about the missing. This early work would lead to the creation of the Alarm Phone project.

Reflecting on this memory, I realized that grief and loss are the central themes of my work and creative process. In my journey as an activist, interacting with stories of loss and injustice have fueled my commitment to action. However, I acknowledge that there is often little time to process the grief we encounter. The immersive experience of sitting in the *Jardin d'Afrique*, surrounded by the souls for whom we strive to secure justice, allowed me to slow down and confront the emotional weight of these tragedies. This immersive experience deeply influenced my approach to constructing the exhibition. Upon beginning work on *Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea*, I aimed to create a space where viewers in Canada could engage with the narratives of activists and migrants in a meaningful way. I also wanted to weave in elements from different stages of my own journey within the migrant justice movement over the past decade and from Tunisia to Canada. Reflecting on my personal experiences and the collective struggles of migrants and activists, I wanted *Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea* to highlight the ongoing challenges and relentless fight for justice that binds our efforts across diverse regions.

B. “Mise en Espace”

- **Inspiration**

Tania El Khoury's *Garden Speaks*²⁷ significantly influenced my approach to setting exhibition space. I encountered her work while conceptualizing the spatial layout and installation of the visual pieces contributed by activists in the exhibition.

Garden Speaks is an immersive sound installation that narrates the stories of ten Syrians buried in public gardens. Each narrative is meticulously constructed with input from the deceased's friends and family. Using found audio to document their last moments, the installation highlights the clandestine burial of activists during the early days of the Syrian uprising. These burials create an ongoing dialogue between the living and the dead, where the dead shield the living, and the living honour the dead by preserving their identities and stories²⁸. The theme in *Garden Speaks* resonates deeply with me. The way El Khoury collaborates with the families to maintain the authenticity of each narrative and her method of storytelling, which brings the voices of the deceased to life, inspired my creative research process when working with activists and integrating art like the poem *Zong!* into the photovoice series. In El Khoury's work, the collaboration between the living and the dead ensures that the dead continue to protect the living by keeping their secrets and struggles alive. Although it is not similar, this statement echoes the work of activists from Alarm Phone who act as intermediaries and advocates, striving to make migrant crossings safer and telling their stories when they cannot. They ensure that these deaths do not become another statistic ignored by desensitized regimes.

²⁷ Tania El Khoury website: <https://taniaelkhoury.com>

²⁸ “Gardens Speak” by Tania El Khoury
<https://taniaelkhoury.com/portfolio/gardens-speak/>

In the exhibition space of *Garden Speaks*, a limited number of visitors can access the space at a given time, they are guided through an intimate experience where they remove their shoes, use flashlights, and closely engage with each tomb. In a documentation video, we see exhibition attendees brushing the dirt, trying to hear the sound coming from the ground. Some viewers are seen lying over the tomb, their ears pressed to the ground, listening to the story of the deceased. This multi-sensory engagement is what inspired me to develop an immersive experience in my exhibition.

The visitors of *Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea* engage with photographs and audio clips, in which activists narrate their own stories. They are also introduced to a poem recorded during a ceremony honouring the souls lost at sea and to artifacts used during this ceremony, such as the olive tree, incense, olive oil, and the bsissa powder. I mounted the narratives of activists in the gallery space so that visitors could experience individually and collectively the stories and struggles of migration and borders. They are immersed in the Mediterranean maritime border through images of the deep open sea, the seashores, sea vessels, boat wreckages and wakes, and the sound of the waves perpetually moving and crashing on the coastal shores.

- **Exhibition Opening at SAW Gallery**

I chose to work with Ottawa-based artist-run centre SAW and booked the Club SAW space for a one-day public event. As a local hub known for supporting politically engaged art, the space was apt for my exhibition.

The visual and audio material were put in the space in a way that guided the viewer organically through the pieces. The work was set up in a U-shape, beginning with the photovoice piece of Bissan with the written wall story, then moving to Yafa's piece that incorporated an audio clip, and arriving at Khalil's photo essay featuring the poem *Zong!* Khalil's photo essay was mounted in two pieces: First, a table holding the screen to play the photo essay video with the poem, and second, a table where I displayed the olive tree, and all the elements we used to conduct the ceremony into an installation piece. Finally, the exhibition closes with the film. The goal was to create a gradual sensory experience and encourage the viewer to interact with each piece.

The exhibition space included a bar and seating area, which I used to create a greeting space for guests as they enter. Exhibition booklets and guest books were placed at the door, so as to be seen as people enter and before they leave. The guestbook was later shared with the activists who participated in this research. I also provided refreshments in the greeting space, and offered olive oil, bsissa, dates, and olives for attendees to try—foods that are customary to offer guests in Tunisia. The olive oil and bsissa are also the same products I used in the ceremony with M. NourbeSe Philip that led to the inclusion of *Zong!* in my exhibition. I wanted guests to taste some of the items I used during the ceremony with the intention of engaging their senses and immersing them further in the environment in which the stories were created.

As guests proceed from the greeting space into the exhibition space, the light becomes dimmer and more oriented toward the artwork. The mood was more somber. As host, I wore a bright red blouse shaped like a cape, attracting the attention of guests as they arrive. Through the exhibition, I shared stories of struggle alongside the resistance and resilience of

organizers and migrants alike. I wanted to reflect these dual emotions of grief and celebration in the set-up of the space, including in how I presented myself.

Setting up this space for the exhibition opening was also inspired by the way we host funerals in my culture. Funerals in Amazigh and Mediterranean culture are spaces known to hold the duality of grief and celebration. They are spaces for community gathering, sharing stories and food, remembering the people we lost, grieving them, and celebrating their lives and ours with them and with each other. Funerals are also communal and collective spaces where we come together to provide support to the family of the ones we lost, and we also come together to connect with each other. I wanted to create a space where we can feel as a community the grief that is inflicted on us by border violence, remember the people we lost due to this violence, and to also experience the joy we feel when we connect with one another.

I conclude the description and analysis of my creative research process by leaving you with the exhibition opening photographs. In the last section of my research, I present my reflection on the learnings and connections I was able to make between the theory and the practice I engaged and interacted with to realise this work.

- **The Exhibition Opening of Stories of Resistance and Migrant Solidarity at the Mediterranean Sea**









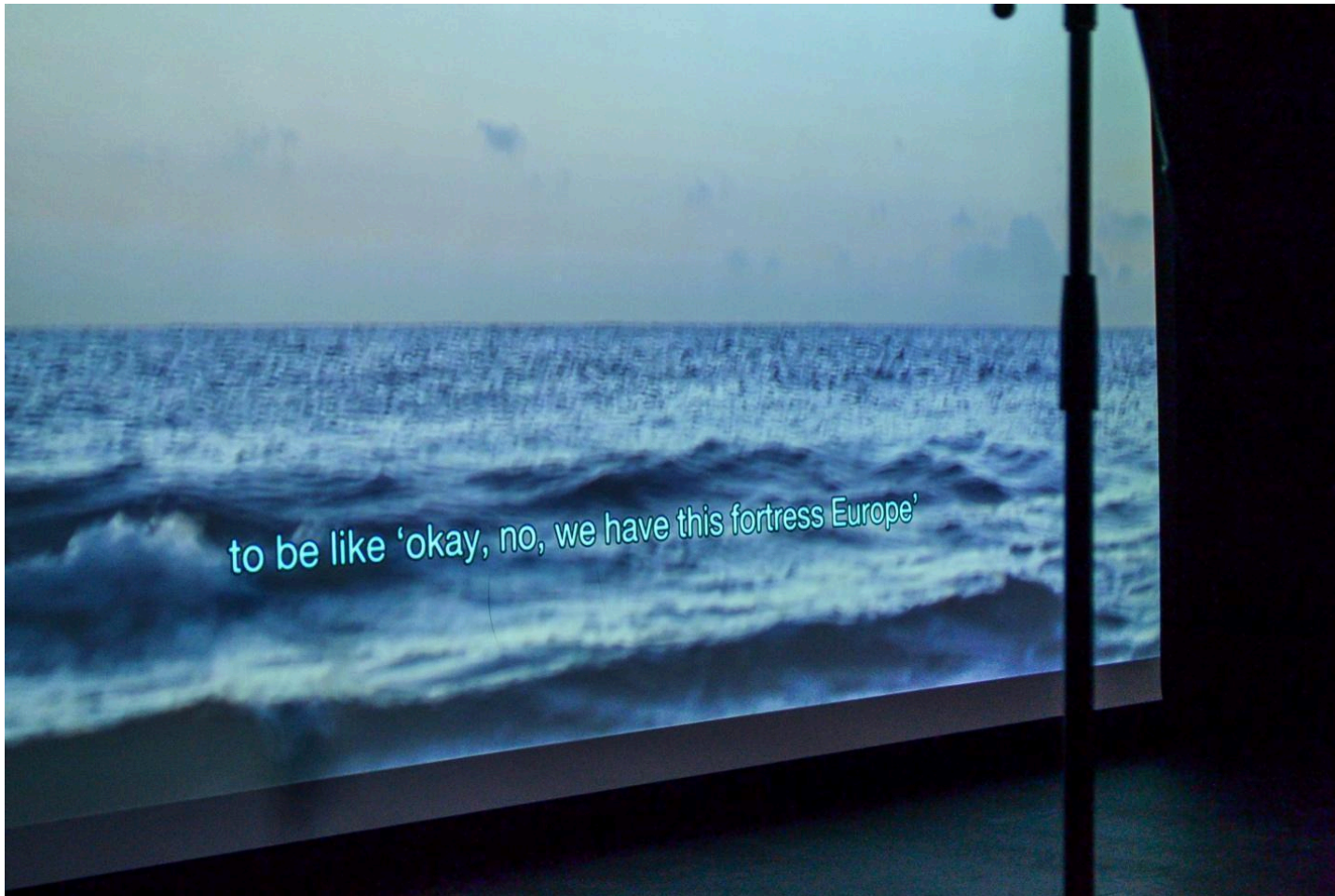
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CHAPTER 4

Analysis & Conclusion

4.1 A framework echoed in the work of the Alarm Phone

Walia (2013) argues that instead of imposing abstract principles onto social movements, it is essential to generate principles from the movements themselves, allowing for a more grounded and relevant analysis (p. 18). This approach informs the analysis of the work of Alarm Phone and Watch the Med in my creative research, which highlights the intersection of border politics, activism, and the struggle for human rights in the Mediterranean Sea. For Alarm Phone activists border policies and bordering practices do not regulate migration but rather actively produce crises that endanger migrants' lives. Therefore, the role they play in this context extends beyond mere assistance with rescue operations to save migrants' lives, to challenging the oppressive systems that create the need for such rescue advocacy in the first place.

The work of Alarm Phone and Watch the Med is essential in challenging restrictive border policies, advocating for migrants' rights, and amplifying their voices by documenting migrant experiences during distress at sea. This documentation exposes the failures of European states in addressing border crises, aiming to raise awareness of the human toll these policies exact and to hold institutions accountable for the resulting deaths. By highlighting the contradictions of European border regimes—which rely on migrant labour while simultaneously criminalizing and excluding migrants—this advocacy work not only critiques these policies but also serves as a form of resistance against Europe's bordering practices.

The framework of border imperialism is key to understanding the work of Alarm Phone as a form of resistance. Walia's approach emphasizes the importance of grounding theory in

activism, drawing from the experiences of those living and organizing in precarious conditions, particularly migrants and Indigenous peoples. Her framework underscores the value of elevating the voices and stories of those directly impacted by border policies, ensuring that theoretical discussions are informed by lived experiences rather than imposed from above. This bottom-up approach aligns with a critical perspective that seeks to validate and amplify the realities of those affected by border regimes while offering insights into broader global forces at play.

Building on this rationale, I have chosen Border Imperialism as the theoretical framework for this research to analyse the strategies employed by activists and community organizers in response to European coastguard inaction. This framework provides a critical lens for examining the systemic and historical structures underlying global migration crises. It connects displacement and migration to the global political economy of capitalism and empire, highlighting that migrants crossing the Mediterranean are not passive victims but are displaced by colonial and capitalist systems that continue to benefit Western powers.

Alarm Phone activists embody this understanding, challenging the narratives that blame migrants for their precarious conditions. Instead, they assert that these conditions are manufactured by European states through militarized borders, colonial legacies, and exploitative capitalist structures. Alarm Phone activists confirm this analysis in their testimonies, as they point out how migrant labour is essential to the European economy, particularly in sectors like agriculture and construction, where low-wage, precarious labour is in high demand. Under a system of globalized capitalism shaped by colonial legacy, Walia (2013) argues that borders serve to regulate the flow of labour and capital, privileging wealthy nations while restricting the movement of people from marginalized regions (P. 44).

Another key aspect of border imperialism that Alarm Phone activists exemplify is the intersection of racialized hierarchies and the criminalization of migration in shaping border policies. Haifa's reflection on her internalized belief in European superiority (Haifa, Personal Interview, January 2022), alongside Yafa's critique of European laws that perpetuate migrant precarity within Europe, illustrates how imperialism functions not only through physical borders but also through racial ideologies that justify the exclusion and exploitation of non-Europeans (Yafa, Personal Interview, March 2022). This aligns with Walia's (2013) argument that the racialization of migrants is central to maintaining global inequalities, as migrants are constructed as inferior and undeserving of rights or humanity (p. 63).

These dehumanizing narratives, which frame migrants as "illegals" or threats to European identity, are countered by activists who redefine the "migrant crisis" as a border crisis. This reframing is essential as it challenges the notion that migrants are responsible for their conditions and instead exposes the role of European states in sustaining these crises through restrictive, racialized border policies that violate human rights. The criminalization of migration is a key tool in this process. Activists like Jenin highlight how Europe's reliance on cheap migrant labour, while simultaneously criminalizing migrants, reveals the inherent contradictions in capitalist border policies (Jenin, Personal Interview, May 2022). This creates a cycle where migrants are both economically essential and socially vilified. The criminalization of migration serves to justify their exploitation, as their precarious status makes them vulnerable to labour exploitation. By exposing and challenging this system, activists underscore the connections between capitalism, racism, and border control, illustrating how these structures work together to uphold global inequalities. I see this idea

affirmed by Walia (2021) in reference to the Mediterranean Sea border, best described in in her own words:

“Scenes of border death maintain structures of racial violence and, as statistics of deaths pile up, we cannot evade an interrogation of the *source* of this violence shaped through imperial, racialized, and spatialized control” (p. 108).

A further crucial point of convergence between Walia’s analysis of border imperialism and Alarm Phone activist’s reflection, is in regard to the militarization and heavy securitization of borders, which serves as a tool for constructing "Fortress Europe." Walia (2021) argue that militarization is a manifestation of border imperialism and operates on multiple levels (p. 78). By fortifying its borders and externalizing migration control, Europe constructs a selective admission system, where entry is often determined by race and economic utility. The European border security agency, known as Frontex, plays a critical role in maintaining this fortress, with their operations focused on preventing unauthorized crossings and enhancing border security—key features of the militarized logic of border imperialism. Additionally, Europe’s outsourcing of border control to non-EU countries and its funding of coastguard operations in states such as Tunisia, Libya, and Türkiye represent a deliberate strategy of externalizing migration control.

Alarm Phone activists critique this practice, arguing that it enables Europe to maintain a facade of humanitarianism while contributing to human rights violations through its training and funding of non-EU coastguards. By shifting the burden of enforcement to these countries, Europe avoids direct accountability while undermining the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, prioritizing state security over human rights.

Alarm Phone activists' work focus on documenting the violence and human rights abuses resulting from these policies, particularly when migrants are forcibly pushed back and deported to countries of departure or of origin. Their work exposes the direct complicity of European states in these violations, highlighting the contradictions between Europe's rhetorical commitment to human rights and the reality of its border enforcement. By revealing the systemic violations of migrants' rights, activists point out how the militarization of borders and externalization of migration control under border imperialism perpetuates global inequalities and racialized exclusion.

4.2 Irregular migration as a form of resistance

At the outset of this creative research, my primary aim was to explore how activists perceive irregular migration and their views on the migrant crisis in Europe. What began as an inquiry into their perspectives evolved into a profound understanding of irregular migration as a form of resistance. Through the narratives shared by these activists, I have come to see that migrants crossing borders without authorization do more than just challenge their exclusion — they actively resist the legitimacy of border regimes. These regimes, while presented as natural or inevitable, are political constructs designed to control movement, enforce state sovereignty, and sustain global inequalities (Walia, 2021, p. 78). By transgressing these borders, migrants expose the artificiality of these divisions, highlighting the violence of border enforcement and its role in maintaining global hierarchies.

Migrants' acts of border-crossing thus become a form of defiance. Scholars like Walia (2013) and De Genova (2017) emphasize that borders are tools of "border imperialism," which consolidates racialized hierarchies and upholds the privileges of the Global North. De Genova (2017) argues that the "border spectacle" criminalizes migrants while reinforcing the

legitimacy of the nation-state's authority over mobility. However, by engaging in irregular migration, migrants reveal the fragility of these borders and the political decisions that underpin them. Their movement becomes a form of resistance against systems of control that seek to dehumanize them and restrict their right to mobility.

Moreover, the activists who document and support these border crossings, often under threatening circumstances, play an essential role in this broader resistance. Their work is not limited to humanitarian efforts but extends into political advocacy, challenging the structures that force people into these dangerous migrations. The surveillance and control of migrants serve to criminalize those who are already marginalized, reinforcing a racialized global order (Walia, 2021). Activists' involvement in these crossings symbolizes a refusal to comply with unjust systems, aligning them with movements that contest border violence and racialized exclusions.

The selective criminalization of migrants based on race and ethnicity further reveals the global racial hierarchy, in which Western regimes maintain dominance through economic and military power. Mbembe (2019) argues that contemporary border regimes are rooted in the colonial histories of Western nations, which used borders to protect the economic and territorial spoils of colonization. The criminalization of non-European migrants today reflects this ongoing colonial dynamic. Migrants, often from the Global South, are racialized as threats to the stability of the West, while Western borders remain open to capital and resource extraction.

In crossing these borders, migrants disrupt the colonial boundaries historically drawn to benefit Western nations. Migration becomes an act of reclaiming what was taken—whether

through the violent extraction of resources, labour, or land—during colonialism. This aligns with arguments of theorists like Fanon (1963) who provide an understanding of decolonization as involving reclaiming stolen resources and dignity. In this sense, irregular migration becomes not just a means of survival but a political act of reclamation, where migrants assert their right to access resources taken from their homelands.

My own experiences as an activist working with migrants in Europe and Tunisia further shape this reflection. Many migrants I encountered described their presence in Europe as a way of reclaiming what was taken from them through colonial practices of exploitation and resource depletion. Migration, in their eyes, is not only about finding a better life or escaping precarious conditions but also about reclaiming access to opportunities that were historically denied to them by colonial powers. As they cross into Europe, these migrants assert their right to partake in the wealth and resources that were extracted from their countries. This perspective transforms migration from a reactive measure into a form of resistance—a declaration of their right to mobility and access to resources, and a rejection of the historical and contemporary violence of colonialism.

Through these experiences and the theoretical grounding of border imperialism, I have come to understand that irregular migration is not merely an act of survival in the face of overwhelming odds. Instead, it represents a profound political challenge to the structures of global power, which are built on centuries of exploitation and racial inequality. Activists who support these movements are similarly engaged in resistance, as they fight to protect the rights and dignity of those whom the global order seeks to marginalize and exclude.

4.3 Stories of the Witness at the Forefront

The key learnings from activists' narratives shared in this research reflect the work of Alarm Phone activists as complex and multidimensional engagement with border resistance, migrant advocacy, and critiques of European border policies. Through their personal stories, these activists reveal the ways in which irregular migration is a form of resistance against oppressive border regimes. Many of them have firsthand experiences as migrants or are deeply connected to migrant communities. Their commitment to migrant justice stems from their own struggles with precarious immigration statuses, experiences of discrimination, and the complexities of navigating European migration policies. This personal connection strengthens their sense of duty in supporting migrants and advocating for their rights. For them, this work is not a choice but a necessity, as they witness firsthand the dehumanizing treatment that migrants endure.

Alarm Phone activists also engage actively in reshaping the discourse around migration. In doing so, they seek to humanize the plight of migrants and restore their dignity, while countering the dehumanizing narratives promoted in Europe. For these activists, it is not the migrants who are the crisis but the border systems that manufacture the crises they endure through exclusionary policies and practices.

As I listened to activists' stories, I became acutely aware of the inaction and complicity of European coastguards in failing to rescue migrants at sea, often with tragic consequences. I noticed how much their work demands constant adaptation of strategies and tactics to advocate for migrants and to pressure coastguards into doing their work of rescuing people in distress, as the political climate heavily influences how these authorities respond to distress calls. Activists describe operating in an environment that is fast-paced and increasingly

hostile to migrants, with practices like push backs and refusals to rescue boats becoming more common. These actions exacerbate the life-threatening situations migrants face. This dynamic, as I observed through their narratives, exposes the inconsistent and harmful practices of European border authorities, and underscores the urgent need for a more humane and coordinated response to saving migrants' lives.

Finally, I learned how, in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil rescue operations, activists actively resist state-imposed border restrictions. Through civil-led rescue efforts, often referred to as the "civil fleet," activists engage in a form of resistance rooted in civil disobedience. These civil rescue operations, which operate in defiance of state policies and militarized border controls, take on the critical role of rescuing migrants in perilous conditions. In doing so, activists shift from being mere advocates to becoming direct rescuers, responding to the state's deliberate inaction and refusal to uphold international obligations to rescue migrants in distress. I see this shift from advocacy to rescue reflects the broader strategy of non-compliance with unjust border regimes and directly challenges state-sanctioned violence against migrants. Civil society actors who take on these roles expose the limitations and failures of the state, particularly its reliance on border militarization to enforce exclusionary policies. By physically intervening in rescue operations, these activists disrupt the militarized borders that prioritize security over human lives.

I can see how these activists are not only advocating for the safe passage of migrants but are also working to dismantle the very systems that perpetuate border imperialism, racism, and the exploitation of migrant labour. Their work transcends immediate rescue efforts; it involves challenging the deeper colonial and capitalist structures that underpin global

migration patterns. By amplifying the voices of migrants and pushing for systemic change, they are engaging in a broader struggle for justice, dignity, and human rights for all migrants.

4.4 To Bridging Activism, Art and Academia

I present this creative research that is motivated by over a decade of my own migrant justice activism in Tunisia, Europe, and Canada, and shaped by my engagement with grassroots groups like No One Is Illegal. Drawing from Walia's approach, I have grounded this research in the lived experiences of activists confronting the Mediterranean border crisis. I wanted to create a space where I learn about the border crisis ongoing in the mediterranean region through stories of people working on the frontline. These narratives contribute to critical discourses on migration and border violence. I adopted a creative approach that allowed me to not only integrate their voices but to ensure that their lived realities take center stage in the conversation.

The key innovation of my research lies in the decision to present these narratives through an art exhibition. By combining images, sounds, and physical artifacts, I created an interactive and immersive space that allows viewers to engage deeply with the stories of activists and migrants. This decision aligns with my broader goal of making the emotional impact of migrant justice visible and palpable, inviting viewers to reflect on the complexities of migration. I wanted the stories of activists to not only be heard but deeply felt by those who engage with this work.

I adopted a collaborative approach to curating the exhibition, ensuring that the perspectives of activists I worked with were represented and seeking opportunities to collaborate with other artists. This decision is particularly relevant because it mirrors the ethos of the migrant justice

movement, which is rooted in community collaboration and shared resistance. The exhibition becomes a space not just for storytelling, but for reflection and building connection with members of this community.

I shaped the artistic dimension of this creative research by collaborating with NourbeSe Philip and found inspiration in the powerful works of Koraichi in *Garden of Africa* and El Khoury in *Gardens Speak*. These artistic references resonated with me, introducing elements of grief, memory, and resistance that feel central to my journey. The thematic focus on grief, especially after my visit to the *Garden of Africa* cemetery in Tunisia, accentuated the emotional weight of this work, reminding me of the collective sorrow that so often accompanies migrant justice activism. By integrating these artistic influences, I strive to bring a depth to the exhibition that reflects the emotional resonance I feel and hope to share.

Using Border Imperialism as my theoretical framework has been essential in drawing connections between the Mediterranean border crisis and the enduring legacies of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. This framework has provided me with a critical lens through which to understand the crisis and it has also illuminated how these systems of power are deeply entangled in shaping migration patterns and border enforcement. My personal activism, both in Canada and across the Mediterranean, as well the relationship I was able to build with activists from the Alarm Phone offered me firsthand insight into how these oppressive structures reinforce one another, perpetuating the violence and exploitation faced by migrants.

By mounting an exhibition to share the stories of resistance from activists and migrants, I have been able to further deepen my understanding of the Mediterranean border crisis. This

creative process has allowed me to explore the emotional and human dimensions of the crisis in a way that academic analysis alone cannot fully capture. I see the exhibition becoming a medium for not only communicating these stories but also for fostering a broader conversation about ways in which we can engage with the work of migrant justice in our local context while connecting with the global struggle against border violence.

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