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## What Moves You?: Georges Didi-Huberman's Arts of Passage and Pittsburgh Stories of Migration

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# What Moves You?

## Georges Didi-Huberman's Arts of Passage and Pittsburgh Stories of Migration

Alexandra Irimia

“What moves as a body, returns as the movement of thought.”

Erin Manning, *Relationscapes*

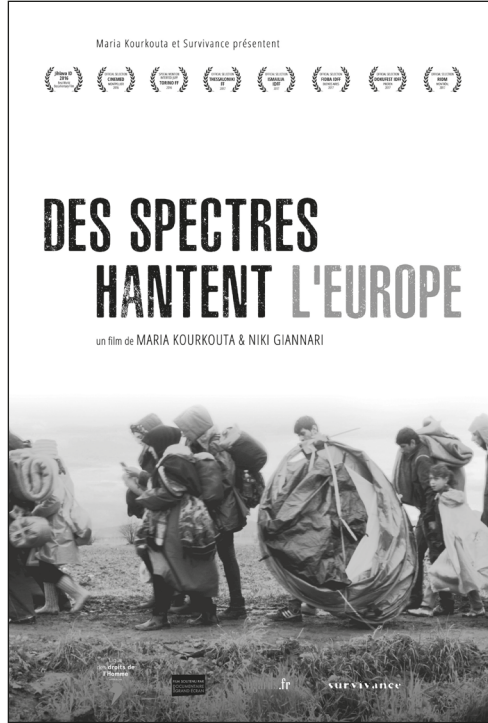
I migrated from Europe to North America for my studies in 2017. This voluntary relocation has not only “moved” my body and belongings across a continent and an ocean but has also increased my awareness of matters associated with human displacement and the multiple perspectives from which it can be acknowledged. This chapter will focus on two works that have contributed to this awareness and that, although dissimilar in form and content, are connected by a common thread that engages with the coordinates of this volume: photography, migration, and the United States. The following pages bring together and set in productive dialogue a photography exhibition about migration and a book about a documentary on the same topic. Both have caught my eye, in a quite literal sense, in the same year I became a migrant myself—and perhaps for that very reason.

The exhibition was called *Out of Many: Stories of Migration* and was on display between April 5 and April 27, 2018. It was part of a joint curatorial initiative of the Carnegie Nexus Museums in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, titled *Becoming Migrant... What Moves You?* Within the framework of this larger project, the exhibition consisted of a selection of works signed by five Pittsburgh-based photographers. In 2017 they undertook a common project to photograph a variety of stories linked to the experiences of migrants that have settled or are in the process of settling in the city of Pittsburgh. Shot from different physical and symbolic angles, the photographs in this exhibition function as local illustrations of the more general landscape of contemporary migration to the United States, a particularly controversial subject after the 2016 presidential election.

Figure 1: Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari, *Des spectres hantent l'Europe*, film poster, 2016. © Survivance. Courtesy of Survivance.

The other pole of my discussion is the volume *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte* (2017) written by the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. This book-length essay is largely the author's response to a documentary film titled *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* and directed by the Greek poet Niki Giannari in 2016 (Fig. 1). The film focuses on the arrested passage of migrants in the camp of Idomeni, Greece (near the border with North Macedonia) during the Mediterranean refugee crisis that started that year.

In drawing a connection between these two works, my argument begins from the rather obvious observation that the book was published in the same year the Pittsburgh photographic project was shot. Far from implying an intended influence or a causal determination at work in this case, I consider this simultaneity to be symptomatic of a broader, ongoing global discussion. In addition, it is evidence of a revived artistic and critical interest in migration as a major subject brought to the ethical, political, and aesthetic scrutiny of both American and European public eye. Discussing the two works in parallel is therefore prone to create a conceptual contact zone where these works illuminate one another, unwillingly and unknowingly, in their invitation to visually engage with several veins of contemporary reflection on migration.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, their circumstantial juxtaposition is likely to become a ferment for new reflections on photography as a medium, emphasizing its ability to accommodate polymorphous discourses and perspectives on this particular type of cultural encounters. The rather implausible encounter of the documentary work of a group of Pittsburgh photographers with Georges Didi-Huberman's image theory articulates and at the same time performs new strategies for the visual production of meaning. Confirming James Clifford's insights from his "Museums as Contact Zones," these new strategies imply that the



photograph is no longer conceived as a static, self-contained unit, but it is instead understood as the expression of a relation, of an asymmetrical and “power-charged set of exchanges,” unavoidably accompanied by historical, political, and ethical implications.<sup>2</sup> Erin Manning’s concept of “relationscape,” cited at the beginning of the chapter, which I will explain later into more detail, resonates strongly with this idea. It must be pointed out that the mediation and exchange facilitated by my comparison as a zone of conceptual contact turn the very images it discusses into migrants. The images assembled in each of the two works, one European and one American, enter an intercontinental dialogue and thus migrate toward new audiences, both ways across the Atlantic. The discussion that follows will only add more mileage to this journey.

In this light, the Pittsburgh photographic project and Didi-Huberman’s book may be credited with having set the ground for a comparison of contemporary regimes of photographic visibility, looking at multifaceted experiences of migration. The comparison is motivated by a belief that specificities of American migration stories may transpire with clearer outlines when discussed in contrast with counterparts from a different geopolitical context—in this case, from Europe. For coherence and consistency, the methodology of this study concerned with the imagery of migration adopts, in its turn, a transnational dimension. This essay also compares and contrasts the visual strategies at work in these cultural artifacts, from the perspective of their shared choice to explore the potentialities of a medium that, as Aby Warburg suggested, is one that migrates too.

### ***Out of Many: five photo-narratives of migration in Pittsburgh***

As outlined in my introduction, the argument of this essay is set in motion by a collection of images that moved in 2017 from the streets, homes, and courthouses of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to settle on photographic paper and later on gallery walls. The result of this immaterial displacement is an itinerant exhibition that is also readily available online thanks to the generosity of its authors, a group of five Pittsburgh-based photographers working together under the label The Documentary Works.<sup>3</sup>

As I encountered it, the showing of this photographic corpus was part of a joint initiative taken by four museums in Pittsburgh, namely the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Carnegie Science Center, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and the Andy Warhol Museum. This large-scale curatorial event unfolded throughout April 2018 and focused on the visual dimension of migration, on the nomadic character of various objects, and on their ability to capture contemporary, human, or nonhuman experiences of displacement. What caught my attention as a visitor was

the fact that the entire project, *Becoming Migrant... What Moves you? Nine Compelling Events Traversing the Art and Science of Passage*,<sup>4</sup> problematizes the ways of seeing through which photography is instrumentalized as an appropriate medium for documenting transnational movements. Simultaneously, it foregrounds photography's literal mobility, in the sense of its capacity to be carried across a variety of real and symbolic borders. Last but not least, the project renders explicit the ways in which photography can trigger, portray, summarize, or conclude a wide range of displacements that are not only physical and geographical but also related to human affects. In other words, what is highlighted in the *Becoming Migrant* exhibition is, among other things, photography's ability to "move" its authors, its subjects, and its viewers.

The four museums participating in this initiative had selected from their collections only one object each, to illustrate an aspect of migration in its materiality. The choices they made are rather unusual. The audience is presented with new perspectives on migration in America. The four selected conversation starters were a migratory bird, the naturalization certificate of Andy Warhol's mother after her arrival to the United States, a meteorite fragment that had landed on the American continent, and a Romantic painting of a shipwreck. Their seemingly incongruous juxtaposition extends the understanding of "migration" beyond the human realm and overtly challenges ready-made stereotypes about migration. The simple association of these objects kindles surprise due to their unexpected conceptual proximity, which enables the creation of new contact zones for the discourses that study and interpret them: biology, anthropology, history and art history, and astrophysics. As such, the *Becoming Migrant* series is remarkable for having proposed an original, non-anthropocentric approach to migration. The initiative of these Pittsburgh museums has not only established contacts across the borders of species and even across the organic-inorganic divide; it has also transgressed disciplines and brought together academics, artists, and performers in an intermedial and transdisciplinary journey through the intricate aspects of migration in America. This shows that migration is, in itself, a dynamic concept, requiring its imagery to do some migrating of its own among the rarely overlapping territories of scientific photography, administrative documents, and fine arts.

The space of this chapter does not allow me to discuss all nine events concerned with migration in America that punctuated the audience's itinerary in the larger *Becoming Migrant* exhibit. Instead, my study focuses on a single exhibition, which enters most tellingly in relation with a subsequent discussion of Didi-Huberman's *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte*. This particular collection of photographs (which happens to be itinerant and therefore migrant in itself) gathers a corpus of seventy-two documentary images under the title *Out of Many: Stories of Migration*.<sup>5</sup> The project has been carried out through the collaboration of a group of five Pittsburgh-based photographers: Brian Cohen, Lynn Johnson, Annie O'Neill, Scott Goldsmith, and





Figure 2: Brian Cohen, *Polish Club Connellsville*, 2017 (Plate 21, p. 347). © Brian Cohen/The Documentary Works, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

Nate Guidry. They captured migration stories in their city roughly at the same time, as part of a yearlong documentation effort. The result of their work is entirely available on the project's website, but it is also open to travel to other American museums and galleries. As the exhibition journeys on, it constantly enriches its corpus by integrating local stories of migration encountered along the way. I will briefly describe the exhibition in the form I encountered it as a visitor in 2018.

Brian Cohen's series of twenty-three photographs documents architectural traces of past waves of migration in contemporary Pittsburgh. The photographer, who is also the coordinator of the project, is interested in capturing the ways in which transnational displacement is figured in contemporary urban spaces. Cohen's visual argument seems to imply that American cities can be read as palimpsests in which one can decipher layers of metonymic imagery of migration from a variety

of countries, including Italy, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Croatia, Ireland, and Vietnam, to the United States (Fig. 2).

Cohen's series captures images of migration without making any explicit reference to the migrants themselves. Instead, he chooses to bring to the fore the site-specific traces of the migrants' presence in the urban tissue of an American community. Photos of ethnic restaurants, community centers, national clubs, ceremony halls, and religious landmarks sketch a network of colorful diasporic nuclei superimposed on the map of contemporary Pittsburgh and its surroundings. The photographs show that immigrants do not travel alone, but are rather accompanied by an architectural vision and a sense of spatial organization shaped by their culture of origin and their previous experiences. The buildings that translate these features into material forms point to the migrants' more or less explicit longing and desire to create a home away from home. Sometimes, as the photographer shows, the actualization of this longing can be achieved by "transplanting" fragments of familiar landscape or urban texture into the spatial configurations of the adoptive environment. This movement of figurative translation may also function as a reminder that, just like the buildings in question, the photographic image itself "comes into being only as a consequence of reproduction, displacement, and itinerancy."<sup>6</sup> Pronounced architectural and period differences mark these edifices and speak of their heterogeneity, as if trying to visually destabilize the illusion that migration is a single, unified phenomenon which can be essentialized, regardless of social, historical, and cultural circumstances. Given the diversity of the buildings portrayed and brought together in this series, Brian Cohen's photographs produce a contact zone effect not only through the encounter of the American space with foreignized buildings but also through the encounter of migrant communities with one another. This effect is comparable to what Didi-Huberman does when he creates a symbolic space where visual details of past migrations connect with contemporary visual micro-phenomena.

Lynn Johnson, another member of The Documentary Works and contributor to *Out of Many: Stories of Migration*, chooses a different approach. Her photographs capture scenes from Pittsburgh courthouses, documenting the legal, bureaucratic, and almost sacramental aspects of migration that mark the formal end of the migrants' journey. In her series framing real naturalization ceremonies that took place in these courts throughout 2017, Johnson crowds the photographic space with figures of migrants, focusing on their facial expressions and on the way in which they carry the entire emotional charge of a milestone moment in their passage from immigrant status to American citizenship (Fig. 3).

However, what she seems most interested in is not so much the individual affect, but the black-and-white (mimicking institutional neutral sobriety) recording of the ritualized stages of the naturalization ceremonies as they happened, in the age





Figure 3: Lynn Johnson, *11/17/17 Federal Courthouse*, Pittsburgh, 2017. © Lynn Johnson/The Documentary Works, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

of Donald Trump's highly disputed migration policies. In one of the photos, the viewer can see the presidential figure in the welcoming video that the candidates are required to watch prior to officially becoming citizens of the United States. In his prerecorded speech, the president addresses the luckiest of American migrants and speaks about America as a land of love, opportunity, and hope (Fig. 4). The informed viewer will not miss the bitter irony at work in this image.

In another photograph, the viewer is presented with the frowning facial expression of a young, newly proclaimed American citizen, contrasted with the sincerely content smile of her mother (Fig. 5). This contrast probably hints at deeper and more cruel implications of the presidential rhetoric, especially regarding the treatment of immigrants' children. With the United States steadily moving toward the model of a "walled democracy," to use a term coined a decade ago by political scientist Wendy Brown,<sup>7</sup> the immigration courts of the United States have become, after 2016, an interesting setting to observe the relief experienced by the immigrants that find themselves at the fortunate end of a both physical and bureaucratic journey marked by uncertainty, frequent setbacks, and merciless biopolitics. The portraits shot here (in black and white, indicating that justice is, at times, if not completely blind, at least colorblind) eerily arrest both the subject of the photograph and its viewer in a silent exchange shaped by the intense affective charge of the ceremony.



Figure 4: Lynn Johnson, Naturalization Ceremony at the Monroeville Office, 2017. © Lynn Johnson/ The Documentary Works, 2017. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 5: Lynn Johnson, Naturalization Ceremony at the Monroeville Office, 2017. © Lynn Johnson/ The Documentary Works, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

The choice of colors (or the lack thereof) and the use of achromatic contrasts in the depiction of a threshold moment in the passage from noncitizen status to citizenship may be an indication of the ways in which the two legal identities define, imply, and shape one another. In Tim Cresswell's words, "the definition of citizen carries around the noncitizen or the shadow citizen as part of its constitution."<sup>8</sup> A British geographer, Cresswell reflects (not unlike Johnson in her series) on the ways in which "mobilities are produced in the courtroom,"<sup>9</sup> through the workings of laws that regulate the attribution of rights and citizenship. In addition, he notes that mobility, a right associated with citizenship, is a good "indicator for freedom" and a concrete example of how legal systems throughout the world act "on the basis of presumed geographies and produce geographies in the process," including "geographies of mobility."<sup>10</sup> Johnson's crowds are racially and ethnically heterogeneous, and this diversity speaks of unequal limitations of mobility, according to the country of origin (Fig. 3). The different national and ethnic profiles of the immigrants in her photos imply a broad spectrum of legally enforced mobilities, unevenly distributed all over the globe. The interactions between the law and its territorial jurisdiction are, as a result, reciprocal (when they are not downright circular):

The law [...] is an influential site for the production of meanings for mobility, as well as the practices of mobility that such meanings authorize or prohibit. Legal documents, legislation, and courts of law themselves are all entangled in the production of mobilities. Mobilities are produced both in the sense that meanings are ascribed to mobility through the construction of categories, such as *citizen* or *fugitive*, and in the sense that the actual ability to move is legislated and backed up by the threat of force.<sup>11</sup>

Didi-Huberman's remarks, detailed in *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte* and in the documentary images they refer to, likewise bring up the subject of the law in relation to the Idomeni migrants. They had been denied the right to an accessible application for asylum and, at the same time, the right to move to another country to avoid lingering in territories where their stay is deemed illegal. As Didi-Huberman rightfully notices, the fact that they are not allowed to cross the border, for legal reasons, makes them violate another set of laws, which forbid their staying.<sup>12</sup> In a sense, this legal double bind forces the migrants to become outlaws and to have their mobility reduced to the impossibility of either advancement or return. Regardless of whether they have been forced or have chosen to move, these people find themselves prisoners caught in a juridical and civic limbo as marginal others, who are denied access to fundamental rights granted by international law because of their unlawful status.<sup>13</sup> While strongly attached to the legal dimension of migration in the United States, Johnson's photography does not capture this juridical conundrum.

She focuses exclusively on the best possible outcome of a migrant's confrontation with the immigration laws of the destination country, namely their becoming citizens with full rights (Fig. 3).

Another approach to American experiences of migration through the lens of a Pittsburgh-based photographer is the one adopted by Annie O'Neill in her biographical portraiture project. Her series consists of a set of large-scale double portraits and combines text and image to identify and showcase resemblances and differences across a constellation of personal experiences of migration to the United States. O'Neill pairs in each photograph a long-standing immigrant with one who has recently arrived in Pittsburgh. The texts on display below the pictures preserve the same structure throughout the series. The viewer of each double portrait is first invited to read a brief profile of each of the two migrant figures, including their name, age, profession, and date of arrival in the United States. This is followed by biographical details for each of the migrants and a direct quotation from their testimonies on how they personally experienced migration. The double portraits are shot against a white, neutral background, with great clarity and sharpness. The neatly arranged photographic surface becomes in this way a neutral contact zone for the two individuals who came to the United States from different cultures, at different times in history, and often for different reasons. Their previously separated biographical narratives enter into dialogue, while the diversity of the faces, bodies, and individual stories challenges the essentialized illusion of a uniform portrait of "the immigrant," all too often portrayed in political speeches and domestic media. The subjects are either smiling or striking a professional pose, which also contributes to creating a lighter, more optimistic visual rhetoric for the entire series. This nondramatic tone acts as a counterweight to the sometimes overwhelmingly difficult migration stories that are transparent in Johnson's shots, or implied in Cohen's. The documentary photographer has found a way to balance with optimism, light, and clarity, the "compassion fatigue" frequently experienced by the general audience when confronted with visual or textual reports on the hardships of migration.<sup>14</sup> In addition, by connecting recent stories of migration to past ones, the series highlights yet another set of variables, this time historical ones, traversing O'Neill's photographic contact zones. The interpersonal, transcultural, and transhistorical exchange takes place straightforwardly on the photographic surface, between the two portraits in each shot and also at the points of productive semiotic contact established between the columns of text and the image. This technique of montage is successful in alluding to the multiple reiterations of such experiences in the history of America, while also testifying to the importance of community involvement in accommodating the newcomers.

The other two photographers active in *The Documentary Works*, Scott Goldsmith and Nate Guidry, similarly depict immigrants in their new American

homes, with a special focus on the adaptation process through which the newly arrived begin to domesticate surroundings foreign to them. The point of view in Goldsmith's and Guidry's photographs shifts from the one used by Brian Cohen in his project, which showed attempts to foreignize, with architectural inserts, the landscape of American urban domesticity. Goldsmith's photographs document the arrival and the first days in the United States, as experienced by a family of Bhutanese refugees landed in Pittsburgh. The images capture the cultural shock lived by the family members when exposed to the novelty of their environment. The new house, the television set, and the trips with local public transport show that all kinds of everyday places, objects, and routines can acquire a different aura when seen through the eyes of the newly landed immigrants. This shift in the apprehension of familiar, everyday objects and surroundings has, in a bizarre ricochet, the potential to transfer some of the effect of surprise and novelty on the local viewers as well. It also questions the locals' relationships to the utilities and facilities that shape their lifestyle and which cannot be taken for granted in other places in the world.

Nate Guidry, on the other hand, portrays the daily life of an already adjusted family of Mexican immigrants, composed of José Luis Ibarra and his two young daughters, Emma and Brianna. The family of three is shown cooking, vacuuming, playing in the backyard, eating cheesecake for birthdays, and chatting on the living-room couch, in apparently relaxed poses that show them fully adjusted to the American lifestyle. However, somewhere in the background of the happy family snapshots, lurks the grim possibility of their lives being radically impacted by the tough policies against Mexican immigrants that had already been announced at the beginning of Donald Trump's term.

Guidry and Goldsmith play with the dynamic relations between the domestic and the foreign, the familiar and the utterly new. On a similar note, Didi-Huberman recalls an observation initially formulated by Gérard Bensussan in his article *Difficile hospitalité* [Difficult Hospitality]. According to Bensussan, in Hebrew, "I inhabit" (*ani gar*) is written in the exact same way as "I am foreign" (*ani guer*).<sup>15</sup> Two vowels make the difference between homeliness and estrangement, and even that minor difference may be easily elided in writing, as Hebrew script notes only the consonants. The distinction that separates feeling at home from feeling like a stranger is, in some cases, so fragile that it can be completely silenced by writing. Photography, too, has this power, as Guidry and Goldsmith demonstrate in their shots. This observation confirms Paolo Bocconi's intuitions about the elusive and unstable nature of what seems to be a familiar notion: the home. The author of *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives*<sup>16</sup> shows that, in fact, home is not so much a space as it is a process determined by a meaningful (and moveable) relationship with place:



Home, in the eyes of recently settled migrants and asylum seekers, is often conspicuous by its absence. International migration is tantamount to an extended detachment from what used to be home. In practice, it denaturalizes it, as it reveals that the sense of obviousness and familiarity attached to the previous domestic place was ultimately artificial and reversible. Migrants' everyday life, therefore, is a privileged terrain to make sense of home by default. It brings to the fore a range of emotions, practices and living arrangements that mirror the need to recreate home anew, dynamically, rather than a static and a full-fledged identification with one particular dwelling place. This is a still more critical and ambiguous effort for asylum seekers and refugees. At the same time, migrants' life experience can be investigated to assess how far the home experience relies on a specific place, is potentially transferrable elsewhere, and draws on interpersonal relationships as much as material settings.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, "home" can be conceived as "a situated and interactive endeavour, rather than a physical structure."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this endeavor is experienced and negotiated differently by social actors and, despite the apparent site-specificity of the concept, what we usually call home can be "transferred and reproduced in multiple settings over time."<sup>19</sup> A redefinition of their home space is what José and his daughters managed to acquire in their Pittsburgh household, and what the Bhutanese family is beginning to acquire as well. On the other side of the spectrum of migration experiences, the prospects of familiarity, security, and control that determine a sense of homeliness are still beyond reach for the migrants sleeping in tents in the Idomeni camp under the heavy rain. Their drenched silhouettes can be seen in the screenshots from *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* that Didi-Huberman comments upon. In looking at these photographs and film stills, the viewer is once again persuaded of the migrants' ability to mediate the infinite diversity of migration experiences and obstacles encountered on the way.

### **The still that moves: photography as Warburgian migrant**

Photography related to migration often exerts a peculiar fascination kindled by the way in which it transgresses the static character of the medium, through its depiction of a subject matter inextricably linked to movement and displacement. This transgressive quality enhances the potential use of photographs as powerful tools for raising social and aesthetic awareness, but also for articulating social and aesthetic critique: "photographs are objects made to have social biographies. Their efficacy is premised specifically on their shifting roles and meanings as they are projected into different spaces to do different things."<sup>20</sup> For example, the efficacy of



Annie O'Neill's set of double portraits is highly dependent on the accompanying textual content, which is in fact the only visible proof of the connection between the images on display and the theme of migration in America. Except for some rather inconclusive cultural, racial, and ethnic traits, her images contain no visual stories of migration; the photographic narrative is inseparable from its textual complement. In the works of the other four photographers, in which visible cues figuring a story of displacement are present with higher intensity, photography lends itself to the exploration of the active interaction between sensation and thought that characterizes what Erin Manning has termed "relationscape"—namely, the spatial arrangement of the relations that occur between individual or collective human and nonhuman entities.<sup>21</sup> All five contributors to *Out of Many: Stories of Migration* frame singular, intriguing relationscapes that have very little in common, aside from their shared location in Pittsburgh and their relevance to the analysis of contemporary aspects of American migration.

The other work that inspired this chapter comments upon photographic images in the form of film stills that accommodate relationscapes. The result of Georges Didi-Huberman's collaboration with the Greek poet and director Niki Giannari, the book is a collective work whose authorship is in itself relational. Its text and illustration create a zone of contact at the convergence of a plurality of discourses (art history and art criticism, poetry, history, sociology), but also a space for the productive encounter of two different sensibilities and subjectivities: Didi-Huberman and Giannari, the art historian and the poet-documentarist. My tentative English translation of the title of this book, *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte*, would be something along the lines of "Making it across, no matter what" or, more literally, "To pass at all costs."<sup>22</sup> The short volume delves poetically and critically into the visual dynamics of passages, passengers, and passageways, against the background of contemporary migration flows; more precisely, in the context of the 2016 migration crisis in the Mediterranean region. On a literal level, Georges Didi-Huberman sketches an iconological commentary on several frames captured from Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari's 2016 documentary *Spectres Are Haunting Europe*. The film is a visual record of the blocked passage of refugees in Idomeni, an improvised camp at the border between Greece and Macedonia. This chapter is not the place to discuss the political and social circumstances of this particular migration crisis. What will be discussed instead are some of the ideas that Didi-Huberman develops from these film stills, which he places alongside a poem by Paul Celan (himself a poet who lived in exile) and Niki Giannari's poem "Spectres Are Haunting Europe (Letter from Idomeni)" read as a voice-over in the film.<sup>23</sup>

Under the easily identifiable influence of Aby Warburg's thought on the "survival" of images, Georges Didi-Huberman sees pictures (be them still, in photography, or moving, in film) not as static objects, but rather as movements, passages,

and gestures of memory and/or desire.<sup>24</sup> Contesting the static nature of images is a counterintuitive proposal. As I understand it, this theory stems from the idea that photography captures a sort of affective displacement, something that moves the photographer and, in turn, is equally able to move the viewer. One could therefore read photography as a symbolic space that allows for the migration and the encounter of affects. Moreover, despite its seemingly static character, photography is a highly flexible and easily reproducible medium, hence one that is able to circulate through both space and time. This idea is not new and, as hinted earlier, retracing its genealogy implies a return to Warburg and to his concept of *Nachleben* (“afterlife”). In the Warburgian vocabulary, the term *afterlife* refers to the transhistorical continuity and metamorphosis of visual forms, which are likely to survive, under different guises, the historical event of their apparent extinction. In Warburg’s view, images have the capacity to outlive their material determinations and to navigate through discontinuous temporalities from one representation to another, resurging every now and then in larger, overarching structures, such as the collective memory of a community. This principle of transhistorical circulation of images grounds Warburg’s essays on Antiquity’s legacy in Renaissance art, as well as his famous 1923 lecture on the snake ritual in the Hopi tribe culture in Arizona and, perhaps most famously, his *Mnemosyne Atlas*.<sup>25</sup> Didi-Huberman described the latter as “a tool for sampling, by means of juxtaposed images, the chaos of history” and “finding new ways of thinking about social and cultural temporality.”<sup>26</sup> When understood in terms of palimpsests, in which layers of various temporalities and geographies are inscribed onto recurrent visual forms, Cohen’s photographic series on urban traces of migration in America more transparently becomes an effort to document migrant-made contact zones embedded in the American urban texture (Fig. 6). Finally, in light of Warburg’s image theory, the visual form that survives its demise through cycles of transformation and resurgence can be said to function simultaneously as both a “symptom” and a “phantom” of the past, leaving indelible marks in collective memory and imagery:

For Warburg, *Nachleben* meant making historical time more complex, recognising specific, non-natural temporalities in the cultural world. Basing a history of art on “natural selection” – through the successive elimination of the weakest styles, thus providing evolution with its perfectibility and history with its teleology – is in opposition to his fundamental project and his temporal models. For Warburg, the surviving form does not triumphantly outlive the death of its competitors. On the contrary, it symptomatically and phantomatically survives its own death: disappearing from a point in history, reappearing much later at a moment when it is perhaps no longer expected, and consequently having survived in the still poorly defined reaches of a “collective memory.”<sup>27</sup>



Figure 6: Brian Cohen, *Ukrainian Home*, Pittsburgh, 2017 (Plate 22, p. 348). © Brian Cohen/The Documentary Works, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

As the French art historian rightfully notices, Warburg is the first to formulate the intimate ties between artistic composition and dislocation. In doing so, he inaugurates the conceptual contact zone that frames our discussion of photography and migration. Articulating the relation between representation and displacement has led to a necessary encounter of the two, a contact able “to make a transverse- or cross-section in chaos, which is to say, using Warburg’s own term – a *thought-space* (*Denkraum*).”<sup>28</sup> Like other visual arts, photography creates this “space for thought” through a tense relation with a world in crisis:

The dislocation of the world: that is the subject of art. It is impossible to affirm that, without disorder, there would be no art, nor that there could be one: we know of no world that is not disorder. No matter what the universities whisper

to us regarding Greek harmony, the world of Aeschylus was full of combat and terror, and so were those of Shakespeare and of Homer, of Dante and of Cervantes, of Voltaire and of Goethe. However pacifistic [art] has been said to be, it speaks of wars, and whenever art makes [a peace treaty] with the world, it is always signed with a world at war.<sup>29</sup>

In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler argues that, if photography is to be conceived as a field marked by conflicting forces, it is prone to generate a pathos that sets in motion not only affects, but interpretations as well: “It is not only or exclusively at an affective register that the photograph operates, but through instituting a certain mode of acknowledgment. It ‘argues’ for the grievability of life: its pathos is at once affective and interpretive.”<sup>30</sup> Johnson tries to purge this pathos in her photographs by adopting the neutrality of the institutional gaze, yet every time her focus lands on a human figure, the cold, impersonal gaze is shattered by a powerful, albeit quiet, explosion of affects (Fig. 5).

In his own interpretation of the still frames that document the halted passage of refugees during the Mediterranean migration crisis, Didi-Huberman reactualizes Warburg’s view on artistic forms that arise more frequently and more intensely in a world in conflict. The French art historian aims to demonstrate the subtle migration of certain visual motifs able to travel across geographical spaces and historical chronology. As an example, he likens the filmed images of endless lines of migrants waiting next to a railway and a barbed wire fence at Idomeni with photographs taken during the Holocaust. Controversial as it may be, the comparison is not implausible in strictly visual terms. Among the photographs taken during the Holocaust, there are some that articulate the same motifs—crowds in a precarious state, the camps, rail tracks, barbed wire, human faces against a grim, hostile landscape—even though they do so in a significantly different historical context generating massive human displacements. While keeping in mind the important distinctions that separate the forced displacement of the Jewish European population in the 1940s from the migrant waves of 2016, Didi-Huberman maintains that these images share, to a certain degree, a figural content that has returned to haunt contemporary imagery. By crossing temporal and spatial limitations and by transgressing their particular circumstances, the return of these visual configurations is meaningful in its ability to reflect and shape resemblances and differences between two historical repositories of grim images that haunt European collective memory. This movement of figural return strengthens the affective force of the surviving images:

D’où vient cette force des images? De là même, peut-être, d’où les « damnés de la terre » tirent la leur : de leur puissance à passer malgré tout. Les images

sont fatales, certes, en ce sens qu'elles portent une mémoire tenace. Du moindre souffle elles font un fossile en mouvement. Aby Warburg, on le sait, comprenait l'histoire des images comme une « histoire de fantômes pour grandes personnes » : une histoire où les images se montrent capables de « revenir » depuis des temps tout à fait hétérogènes, de traverser les murs de la périodisation historique, de flotter antiques dans les espaces mêmes de notre modernité. Et cette puissance-là, Warburg avait choisi de la nommer survivance : un « après-vivre » ou la capacité, extraordinaire si l'on y pense, de traverser les temps, de signifier dans plusieurs temps hétérogènes à la fois, de passer à travers temps. [...] elles sont aussi spectrales, donc mobiles, nomades : on persiste mieux quand on sait changer de place. À la survivance des images, qui désignait leur capacité à passer au travers de temps différents, Warburg ajouta donc la migration, qui nommait précisément, selon lui, leur capacité fondamentale à passer au travers d'espaces distincts, voire très éloignés les uns des autres.<sup>31</sup>

This “repetition of the different” is of particular instrumental value in defining categories such as self and other, us and them, domestic and foreign, by stimulating the community to question and problematize binary sets of identities. Photography becomes, in this way, intimately linked to the creation of alterity. In other words, photographing is a witnessing *of* the other, *for* the use of others: “l'image témoigne depuis un lointain, et c'est pourquoi nous voyons Idomeni à travers les images-témoins, grises et quelquefois tremblantes.”<sup>32</sup> The image becomes in itself a witness and, in this newly discovered condition, it frames and confides this framing to the eyes of the other, who is absent from the scene. Photography contributes to a new ethical regime that rules over one's relations and contacts with alterity. This argument explains why looking at the photographs shot by Goldsmith and Guidry for the *Out of Many* exhibition is, in a way, an act of voyeurism that intrudes into the domesticated—yet still to some degree, foreign—homeliness of the migrant families that have recently arrived in America. In addition, applying Didi-Huberman's insight to Johnson's courtroom scenes, it becomes apparent how her choice of location enhances the weight and the responsibility of “witnessing” that is subtly imposed upon the viewer. Faced with Johnson's photographs, viewers suddenly find themselves taking part in the naturalization ceremony, together with the eclectic gathering of migrants.

As Mette Sandbye puts it in her study of migration, war, and cultural differences in contemporary art-documentary photography, “the whole spectrum of agency and emotion related to various photographic forms and materialities” can be perceived as an “ethical investment of responsiveness.”<sup>33</sup> Even in the absence of human figures, as is the case in Cohen's urbanscapes, one feels compelled to engage with, or at least acknowledge the presence of local migrant communities. The latter

are portrayed, even though *in absentia*, as actively asserting their identities by means of the visual insignia they inscribe in various corners of Pittsburgh and, by force of metonymy, in all of North America. Cohen's photographs and Niki Giannari's film both demonstrate the way in which photography refers to itself as a placemaking activity, able to reconfigure the geographical landmarks of America and Europe in light of the ever-new migratory fluxes (Figs. 2 & 6). Like the previously anonymous Idomeni, the photographed locations gain in symbolic charge and significance, particularly through the contrast between the imposed stillness of the migrants and the ease with which the documentarists, their cameras, and the images they produce circulate. This striking contrast in the mobility of the photographic subject and that of the photographic object has been noted, among others, by Tanya Sheehan in her introduction to *Photography and Migration*.<sup>34</sup> She notes that images "are never simply local" and their circulation is embedded in their deceptively static materiality. Similarly, for the French "historian of passing images," as Didi-Huberman has been called,

all images are migrants. Images are migrations. Migrations in space and in time. Migrations in time through their survival, as postulated by Warburg, and in space – Warburg used this very word, migration – *Bilderwanderung* – in the sense that [...] the images are never simply local. Never.<sup>35</sup>

Elizabeth Edwards expands on the same idea in her study of photography as an object marked by an affect that operates beyond the level of pure imagery. According to her, photographs lend themselves to material translations within processes of remediation and repurposing, which situates them in a "constant state of flux" that endows them with active "social biographies."<sup>36</sup>

The observation strongly echoes the short biographical notes added by Annie O'Neill to her double portraits that thematize (across media, with both image and text) the resemblances and differences between two waves of migration to America. It is important to mention that the two waves vary with each photograph: there is always one older and one more recent, but the actual arrival dates differ as one moves from one photo to the next. The relatively long columns of text below the double portraits seem to drip from the photographs they complement, as if the narrative of these social biographies flows uninterruptedly from the images, as they become verbalized. The placing of these photographs is not inconsequential either:

They are reframed, replaced, rearranged; negatives become prints, prints become lantern slides or postcards, ID photographs become family treasures, private photographs become archives, analog objects become electronic digital code, private images become public property, and photographs of scientific



production are reclaimed as cultural heritage. [...] The placing of photographs as objects in an assemblage of other objects and spaces is integral to the work asked of photographs and human relations with them. Placing is defined as a sense of appropriateness of particular material forms to particular sets of social expectation and desire within space and time.<sup>37</sup>

The main difference between the paradigm advanced by Didi-Huberman and the one shared by the five Pittsburgh-based documentarists can arguably be reduced to the difference between images of migrants on the move (at the Greek-Macedonian border, for example) and images of settled migrants (in their various stages of settlement, integration, and adjustment in Pennsylvania, in particular, and the United States, in general). This distinction could then be rephrased in terms of arts of passage and arts of resettlement. Unavoidably, the difference is maintained in the visual documentation of the two experiences of migration, and in the rhetoric deployed in creating these images.

In more abstract terms, the photographs and film stills that attempt to capture, document, interpret, and disseminate these consecutive, yet distinct realities of migration are part of a split “metaphysics of fixity and flow.”<sup>38</sup> The anthropology scholar Liisa Malkki coined the term “sedentarist metaphysics,” which valorizes rootedness and belonging and is haunted by threats of mobility, in opposition to what Creswell called a “nomadic metaphysics,” which obviously valorizes mobility.<sup>39</sup> While Didi-Huberman and Giannari write and frame the desire for obstacle-free itinerance and easy mobility for global migratory flows, the *Out of Many* project is a kaleidoscopic photo-narrative of a sedentarist metaphysics, applied to migrant individuals or communities. A sedentarist logic accounts for the existence of “walled democracies,” as well as for the arrested movement of immigrants, which turns them into outlaws:

Thinking of the world as rooted and bounded is reflected in language and social practice. Such thoughts actively territorialize identities in property, in region, in nation – in place. They simultaneously produce discourse and practice that treats mobility and displacement as pathological.<sup>40</sup>

This complex assemblage of power relations is materialized not only at the level of discourse but also in practices of unaccountable repression, and it contributes to the highly arbitrary and sometimes inhuman treatment of the displaced. It should be mentioned, however, that migrants are not fully inscribed within the nomadic model either. The radical valorization of mobility renders impossible the dream of settling down (which the migrants obviously hold) and the very idea of destination, which gives a purpose to the migrants’ journey, often by being idealized. The

nomadic subject is the radical figure of a migrant always on the move, one that, much like Odysseus, is driven only by the fascination of perpetual journey and its lines of flight, rather than by the dream of settling at the destination, no matter how idealized that destination may be:

The nomad is never reterritorialized, unlike the migrant who slips back into the ordered space of arrival. [...] The state, on the other hand, is the metaphorical enemy of the nomad, attempting to take the tactile space and enclose and bound it. It is not that the state opposes mobility, but that it wishes to control flows – to make them run through conduits. It wants to create fixed and well-directed paths for movement to flow through.<sup>41</sup>

With this in mind, it becomes clearer why the visual representation of a nomadic subject on a still surface is not as innocent as it may seem. Cresswell is mindful of the intricacies at work in this paradox when he notes that “often, mobility is said to be nonrepresentational or even against representation.”<sup>42</sup> The pervasive blur in the images showing endless queues of silhouettes in raincoats at Idomeni is part of this visual rhetoric of resistance to representation. Like the makers of the documentary film, Didi-Huberman understands that, for reasons of accuracy, photography cannot stabilize the contours of a community held together precisely by its being in motion (Fig. 1). Optical precision, it seems, is a luxury that only those who stand still can afford. However, since the migrants on the move are neither entirely nomadic, nor is their flow of movement uninterrupted, an approximate representation of their mobility is, after all, possible. By this token, it is not incidental that Giannari’s film is entitled *Spectres Are Haunting Europe*. Didi-Huberman elaborates at length on the spectral quality of the migrants’ silhouettes, which remain anonymous and outside the law. It is also significant to recall Warburg’s reference to images as “ghost stories for grown ups” to infer that photographs of migration are marked by some degree of spectrality. For the refugees, as well as for the images depicting them, circulation is a matter of survival.<sup>43</sup> Having fled their homelands, these figures are already situated in some kind of “afterlife” (Warburg’s *Nachleben*), in the civil and juridical limbo that, up to a point, effaces all sense of certainty regarding their future.

Unlike the *Out of Many* photographs, the contours in the film stills are fuzzy and destabilized. On a literal level, certainly, it is only due to the torrential rain falling over the unsheltered and to the loose, translucent raincoats the migrants are wearing. On a deeper hermeneutic level, though, the blur testifies to these people’s spectral consistency, halfway between the solidity of a legal subject and the abstractness of a pure line of flight. This lack of visual clarity and precision is also a figural marking of the distance that separates the photographer from the

subject—a distance that is, nevertheless, essential to photography’s existence and functioning as a testifying witness. In Cohen’s photographs, the migrants are not even present in the frame, but their presence is implied in and around the buildings that speak of their displacement. In Goldsmith’s series, the newly attained feeling of stability and certainty associated with a new home slowly adds more solidity to the profiles of migrants. On the contrary, José’s problematic immigrant status in Nate Guidry’s series generates a specter of uncertainty that threatens the tranquility of family moments. Johnson’s courthouse shots capture the very moments in which instability and uncertainty are replaced by a solid legal status that grants freedom, rights, and a new level of mobility to the newly declared citizens.

## Conclusion

To sum up, my argument begins with a collection of recent photographs related to migration in Pittsburgh as a case study for the more general topic of migration in America. The five photographic series that constitute the *Out of Many* project adopt five different angles in approaching this vast theme: the urban, the legal, the biographical, the familial, and the domestic. All of them allow and even encourage the discussion of visual representations of migration in America in terms of contact zones, or sites in which a variety of asymmetrical power relations are revealed in the process of negotiating the terms of their encounter. When dissected in detail, these photographs cease to be isolated and self-contained objects and reveal themselves as spaces of relationality, with profound, intricate ethical and political implications. They become even more significant when discussed in light of Didi-Huberman’s critical insights from *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte*, his commentary on a filmed documentary presenting contemporary migration crisis Europe. These works illuminate one another, while simultaneously echoing Warburg’s reflections on the migrant qualities of the image. With his writing about the fundamental role of displacement in the production of images, Warburg has informed Didi-Huberman’s thought to the extent that, for the French art historian, photography, just like the migrant, “nous regarde et nous traverse.”<sup>44</sup> The ambiguities hidden in this concise French sentence point to the fact that photographs and migrants alike concern us and return our gaze, moved by a desire to pass into, or at least through the space of our awareness. This desire shapes spectral trajectories and keeps the silhouettes of migrants moving across historical epochs, walls, fences, and borders.

The work of the five Pittsburgh-based photographers, Georges Didi-Huberman’s book, and the documentary film it comments upon are three different mediations of the theme of contemporary migration that combine several types of discourse, ranging from photography to poetry, art history, and documentary

cinema. In themselves, these works are semiotic spaces defined by intermediality, dialogue, and flow. Building on their discursive and formal relationality, this chapter has been my attempt to open a conceptual space in which they resonate or are in tension with one another, by force of a comparison that travels back and forth across the Atlantic, between Europe and America. This comparative, transcontinental approach can also be read as a homecoming for the idea of a “migrating image,” formulated by Aby Warburg during a visit to America occasioned by his research on indigenous visual culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Reflecting on the intrinsically nomadic character of images in general, and of photography in particular, the Warburgian tradition informing Didi-Huberman’s thought proved particularly useful in deconstructing the visual rhetoric of five contemporary photographic representations of migration in America.

## Notes

1. In the sense described by Justin Carville and Sigrid Lien in their Introduction to this volume.
2. James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192.
3. The Documentary Works, <http://www.thedocumentaryworks.org/read-me>.
4. Carnegie Nexus, “Becoming Migrant... What Moves You? Nine Compelling Events Traversing the Art and Science of Passage,” <https://nexus.carnegiemuseums.org/event/migration/>.
5. The Documentary Works, “Out of Many: Stories of Migration,” <http://www.thedocumentaryworks.org/future-work/>.
6. Publisher’s description of the exhibition catalog, Eduardo Cadava and Gabriela Nouzeilles (eds.), *The Itinerant Languages of Photography* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2013), <https://english.princeton.edu/research/itinerant-languages-photography>.
7. Wendy Brown, “Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy,” lecture delivered at the Walter Chaplin Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington. April 22, 2008, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/porous-sovereignty-walled-democracy>.
8. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 161.
9. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 147.
10. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 151, 158.
11. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 150–151, original emphasis.
12. Didi-Huberman, *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), 45–46.

13. Celeste Ianniciello, *Migration, Arts, and Postcoloniality in the Mediterranean* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 8.
14. Mette Sandbye, "New Mixtures: Migration, War, and Cultural Differences in Contemporary Art-Documentary Photography," *Photographies* 11, no. 203 (2018), 280.
15. Gérard Bensussan, "Difficile hospitalité. Entre éthique, droit et politique," *Cités* 68, no. 4 (2016), 18.
16. Paolo Boccagni, *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
17. Boccagni, *Migration*, 2.
18. Boccagni, *Migration*, 2.
19. Boccagni, *Migration*, 5.
20. Elizabeth Edwards, "Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012), 222.
21. Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).
22. As of March 2021, an English translation has not yet been published.
23. Niki Giannari, "Des spectres hantent l'Europe (Lettre de Idomeni)" in *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte*, 10-21, originally in French and Greek. The English title is my translation.
24. Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).
25. Aby Warburg, *Essais florentins* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2015); Aby Warburg and W. F. Mainland, "A Lecture on Serpent Ritual," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, no. 4 (1939), 277–292, doi:10.2307/750040; Aby Warburg, *L'Atlas Mnémosyne*, trans. Sacha Zilberfarb (Paris: L'Ecarquillé, 2013).
26. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Warburg's Haunted House," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 1 (2018), 50.
27. Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology," *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002), 68.
28. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Warburg's Haunted House," 55, original emphasis.
29. Aby Warburg quoted Didi-Huberman, "Warburg's Haunted House," 55.
30. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York/London: Verso, 2010), 98.
31. "Where does this force of the images spring from? Perhaps from the very source from which 'the wretched of the Earth' draw their own force: from their ability to pass, no matter what. The images are fatal, of course, in the sense that they are the bearers of a tenacious memory. They turn the faintest breath into a moving fossil. Aby Warburg, as we know, understood the history of images as a 'ghost story for adults': a narrative in which the images show themselves capable of 'returning' from heterogenous temporalities, of passing through the walls of our historical periodizations, of making antiquities

- float in the very spaces of our modernity. It is this power that Warburg chose to name ‘survival’: an ‘after-life’ or the capacity – extraordinary, if we think of it – to run across historical ages, to be significant in multiple temporalities at a time, to pass through time. [...] they are also spectral, and therefore mobile, nomadic: the one who knows how to move has better chances of survival. To the survival of the images, which designated their capacity to pass through different temporalities, Warburg adds thus their migration, which names precisely, according to him, their fundamental capacity to pass through different spaces, at times very remote from one another.” Didi-Huberman, *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte*, 60–61, my translation.
32. Didi-Huberman, *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte*, 58.
  33. Mette Sandbye, “New Mixtures: Migration, War, and Cultural Differences in Contemporary Art-Documentary Photography,” *Photographies* 11, no. 203 (2018), 269, 283.
  34. Tanya Sheehan (ed.), *Photography and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.
  35. Georges Didi-Huberman. Interview by Frédéric Worms. “Sous nos yeux ils demandent à passer,” *Matières à penser avec Frédéric Worms*, France Culture. November 13, 2017, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/matieres-a-penser-avec-frederic-worms/sous-nos-yeux-ils-demandent-a-passer>.
  36. Edwards, “Objects of Affect”, 225, 222.
  37. Edwards, “Objects of Affect,” 225–226.
  38. Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992), 31; Cresswell, *On the Move*, 25.
  39. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 26; Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” 31.
  40. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 27.
  41. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), 50–51.
  42. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 47.
  43. Didi-Huberman, *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte*, 67–84.
  44. Didi-Huberman, *Passer, quoi qu’il en coûte*, 67.