



Mediating the Refugee Crisis

Digital Solidarity, Humanitarian
Technologies and Border Regimes

Sara Marino

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Mediating the Refugee Crisis

“Mediating the ‘refugee crisis’ is a well-researched book that reveals how the border is constituted as a performative and intensely mediated space that regulates transnational mobility but also Europe as a hierarchical political, ethical and communicative project. Marino’s sophisticated account shows how communication technologies become core to migration governance in Europe, but also how vital they are for migrants to contest and resist its repressive power”

—Myria Georgiou, *Professor of Media and Communications, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science*

“Dr. Marino’s pioneering book breaks a new ground in understanding more collective processes and the power dynamics involved in the appropriation of digital technologies in the context of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. It provides important theoretical and empirical insights for interdisciplinary research in refugee studies, social sciences and technology, as well as for policymakers, practitioners, NGOs, refugee advocates, and refugee groups themselves. This book is an entry point to deeper reflections on technological mediations shaping contemporary governance of migration, as well as refugees’ experiences and solidarity networks. A major accomplishment!”

—Amanda Alencar, *Assistant Professor in Media and Migration, Department of Media & Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam*

“In this timely book, Sara Marino offers new crucial insights on the politics of technological mediation in the context of Fortress Europe. The argument draws on original and rich empirical material alongside a wide array of critical theories from across relevant fields. Readers are presented with a lucid, and at times confronting account of how mobile subjects variously face a ‘nervous system of techno-power’ co-shaped by border regimes, humanitarian agencies, the military-industrial complex, as well as migrant activist and solidarity groups. Astutely, Marino offers a corrective to academic discourse by amplifying refugee voices and experiences, alongside tech for good activist perspectives. This is an urgent move because the point of view of institutions remains dominant. The social justice oriented, critical vocabulary proposed by Marino is highly generative. The framework renders intelligible the assemblage of actors and the myriad of invisibilized mechanisms of border-making and contestation. The evocative concepts of ‘technologies-of-exile’, ‘technologies-in-exile’, ‘mindful filtering’, among others, will become important reference points for students and researchers interested in the interdisciplinary research area of digital migration studies. Opening up new

research directions, this monograph is highly recommended to media and migration researchers, cultural geographers and anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists committed to understanding the intricacies of the techno-mediation of bordering, surveillance, humanitarianism and contestation”

—Koen Leurs, *Assistant Professor in Gender and Postcolonial Studies, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University*

“Sara Marino’s book is a must-read in the post-pandemic era, which has abruptly and radically changed border regimes, asylum and migration management. The book offers a fascinating and novel reading of the praxis of solidarity in the form of digital humanitarianism, pertinent in the age of dissensus and polarization following the so-called “refugee and migration crisis” in Europe. Avoiding techno-optimism, the book offers a theoretically robust and empirically comprehensive account of the relationship between technologies, mobilities and borders. Whilst technologies cannot resolve “refugee crises” or erase authoritarian borders, the agency and conscious praxis utilizing digitalities of these technologies produces spaces of resistance and counter-narrations to sovereign, disciplinary and bio-political powers. Moreover, the book paves the way for the vital debates about the world to come, free from racialized boundaries and oppressive border regimes in Europe and beyond”

—Nicos Trimikliniotis, *Professor of Sociology and Director of Centre for Fundamental Rights, University of Nicosia, Cyprus*

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Sara Marino
Media School
London College of Communication
University of the Arts London
London, UK

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To all the survivors out there, may you never walk alone

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In *The Island of the Day Before*, Umberto Eco said ‘To survive, you must tell stories’. As a migrant and as an academic, the stories I have treasured the most are the countless stories of exile I have collected and shared with colleagues and friends over the past few years. Some of these stories have taught me how to deal with my own displacement fatigue, a very peculiar condition of being both at home everywhere and yet never fully settled once and for all. Other stories have made me realise that there is a strength to be found in the unsettling paths of migration, a strength that comes from solidarity, cooperation and dialogue.

It is this solidarity that I now see weakened by the proliferation of borders in Europe and beyond, the subjection of refugees and migrants to stricter forms of control and the negation of hospitality because of fear and anxiety. And yet, as democracy retreats into its own obsessive quest for security, more creative politics of acceptance emerge out of daily practices of resistance among refugees, activists and citizens. This book has been written in an attempt to follow these trajectories of power and resistance within the tortuous geographies of the so-called refugee crisis in Fortress Europe.

I first want to thank the migrants and refugees that allowed me to listen to their stories. Your resilience, endurance and determination often go unnoticed, and I hope these pages will give your voice the justice it deserves. I also thank the humanitarians, activists, entrepreneurs and volunteers who agreed to be interviewed. Your work and enthusiasm were

a source of inspiration and represent a glimpse of hope in the midst of very dark times.

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CONTENTS

1	Mediating the ‘Refugee Crisis’: An Introduction	1
	1.1 <i>Forced Mobilities, Humanitarian Technologies and Digital Solidarity</i>	6
	1.2 <i>Structure of the Book</i>	8
	<i>References</i>	12
2	The Foundations of Fortress Europe	13
	2.1 <i>The Philosophical Foundations</i>	13
	2.2 <i>The Political Foundations</i>	28
	2.3 <i>The Technologically Mediated Foundations</i>	32
	<i>References</i>	37
3	Technologies of Surveillance and Border Regimes	41
	3.1 <i>Borders as Institutions of Power</i>	41
	3.2 <i>Borders as Mechanisms of Identity Formation</i>	54
	3.3 <i>Borders as Performances</i>	59
	<i>References</i>	65
4	Technologies in/of Exile	69
	4.1 <i>Introduction</i>	69
	4.2 <i>A Fragmented Methodology</i>	74
	4.3 <i>Technologies in Exile: Functions and Affordances</i>	80
	4.3.1 <i>Before Departure</i>	81

4.3.2	<i>During the Journey</i>	85
4.3.3	<i>On Arrival</i>	88
4.4	<i>Technologies of Exile: Functions and Affordances</i>	98
4.5	<i>The Limits of Technology Use</i>	106
4.5.1	<i>Surveillance as Act of Monitoring and Profiling</i>	111
4.5.2	<i>Surveillance as Justification for Exclusionary Practices</i>	112
4.6	<i>Conclusions</i>	114
	<i>References</i>	117
5	Technologies of Solidarity	123
5.1	<i>Introduction</i>	123
5.2	<i>Technologies for the Social Good: Key Opportunities</i>	127
5.2.1	<i>Openness and Crowdsourced Creativity at the Service of the Displaced</i>	127
5.2.2	<i>Scalability and Sustainability</i>	131
5.2.3	<i>Empowerment Through Collaboration</i>	134
5.2.4	<i>Problem-Solving Attitude and Impact-Oriented Approach</i>	138
5.2.5	<i>Tech as Enabler</i>	140
5.3	<i>What Is Not So Good About Tech for Good</i>	141
5.3.1	<i>The Commodification of Social Good</i>	142
5.3.2	<i>Data Safety and Privacy</i>	147
5.3.3	<i>Critical Mass of Data, but Good for Whom?</i>	152
5.4	<i>Conclusions</i>	162
	<i>References</i>	167
6	Digital Solidarity, Humanitarian Technologies, Border Regimes Concluding Notes	171
	<i>References</i>	178
Index		179



CHAPTER 1

Mediating the ‘Refugee Crisis’: An Introduction

As I began writing this book in 2017, the number of people forcibly displaced as a result of the Syrian Civil War continued to represent one of the most pressing political issues in the mass-mediated public discourse across and beyond Europe. Unanimously labelled as a ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’ crisis, the predominant narratives circulating offline and online were overflowing with references to the collapse of Europe’s institutions and values, and a fear that life as we knew it was about to end under the push of uninvited strangers. The ‘crisis’ appeared to be

The analysis offered in this book uses the term ‘refugee crisis’ within quotes to indicate how problematic this term is. While the term has been used to predominantly indicate a crisis of migration and a crisis of numbers, the way European governments have responded to such ‘crisis’ suggests instead that what we are witnessing is a crisis of European borders, a crisis of solidarity and a crisis of hospitality. The use of the terms ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ in this context is also problematic. In this chapter, I use both terms as the analysis takes into account the more politicised uses of migrants as illegal migrants and of refugees as asylum seekers. Over the course of this book, I shall mainly use the term ‘refugee’. While I recognise the term’s epistemological and ontological complexity, alternative uses also pose problems. The term migrant, for example, deeply undermines the differences that exist between voluntary and forced migrants. The term asylum seeker, on the other hand, calls into question their view as opportunistic agents claiming benefits.

mainly discussed as an emergency concerning the management of migration along Europe's outer borders and thus mainly requiring military interventions able to contain and suppress a largely unwanted migration. In reality, however, a closer look at the inflections of Europe's global mobility regime (De Genova 2017) suggested that, far from being exceptional measures addressing a situation of emergency, the reintroduction and reinforcement of border controls were in fact calling into question the very concept of Europe as a stable political, social and humanitarian project.

This book deals with the technological mediations of Europe's political and humanitarian response to the ongoing 'crisis' that has currently entered its tenth year since the start of the conflict. The reasons for focusing on technologies as key conceptual framework are threefold. Firstly, my interest in the role that technologies have played in mediating the 'refugee crisis' originates from the fact that mediated practices and discourses have been central to the way European governments have elaborated, communicated and intervened on the ongoing influx of migrants and refugees. Second, technologies have been instrumental in the way migrants and refugees have connected, more or less successfully, with Europe's mobility infrastructures and services. Third, information and communication technologies have fundamentally shaped the way humanitarian organisations, activists and citizens have responded to the political and moral absenteeism of the Union's member states in an attempt to promote the legal and moral duty to safeguard human life. In considering these aspects, the book recognises the European border space as a communicative entity shaped by a performative network of technologies used to exercise, resist and contest sovereign power in both material and symbolic ways.

Theoretically, the analysis presented in this book engages with three lines of enquiry that are strongly interrelated. The first strand of scholarship discusses the tension between humanitarianism and securitisation that has characterised the governance of forced migration and border policing since the 'crisis' in 2015 became a cause of concern in the European political and public space. The first indications that a 'tragedy of epic proportions'¹ was unfolding at Europe's outer borders occurred in the aftermath of what was classified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as the deadliest shipwreck ever recorded in the Mediterranean Sea.² In April 2015, an overcrowded vessel capsized in Libyan waters south of the Italian island of Lampedusa killing more

than eight hundred migrants and refugees. Only twenty-eight survivors were rescued and brought to Italy, where the scale and horror came into even sharper focus in the immediate days following the tragedy. Rage spread across Italy and the then Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, encouraged member states to collectively share the responsibility for a crisis concerning the Union in its entirety. When interviewed on possible courses of action, Renzi suggested that human traffickers—'whom he repeatedly compared to slave traders'³ (*The Guardian* 2015)—had come to represent the key target of Europe's migration response.

From this point onwards, and in response to the increasing number of migrants and refugees fleeing war in 2015 and 2016, the governance of migration seemed to oscillate between two main reactions. One was to strengthen the EU internal and external borders in order 'to manage migration more effectively and protect the internal freedom of movement within the Schengen area'.⁴ A second approach was designed to protect the lives of refugees and migrants by identifying and eradicating the activities of people traffickers. Within this scenario, while the UNHCR encouraged the Union to move beyond border enforcement to consider instead longer-term solutions such as more robust search and rescue operations, resettlement schemes and the provision of legal and safer alternatives to prevent migrants from resorting to smugglers,⁵ the European Commission proceeded quite differently.

In defining Europe's external borders as a shared responsibility, European Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans identified the creation of an integrated system of border management as a strategic resource for the identification of weaknesses and for the delivery of more efficient solutions to the geopolitical pressures exercised by the 'refugee crisis'. In reiterating this position, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, discussed the need for a new 'Border Package' as a response to citizens' demands for more security and the need for higher standards of border management.⁶ Both positions made very clear that the united front against migration mainly consisted of a 'politics of containment' (Garelli and Tazzioli 2019). The paradox that Aas and Gundhus (2015) identify as the incongruity between care, the protection of migrants from smugglers and citizens' safety, and control, the fortification of policies that make migrating even more precarious (De Genova 2017), is well reflected in

the transformation of borders into a sophisticated techno-mediated architecture of territorial sovereign power. This represents one of the key arguments of this book.

The second strand of literature that this book engages with builds upon the link that is being made between the securitisation, humanitarianisation and militarisation of borders to emphasise the extent to which top-down governmental bordering strategies adopted by state authorities increasingly rely on digital technologies. The contemporary European migration regime is datafied and digitalised (Leurs and Smets 2018). Europe's techno-mediated infrastructure and architecture of power increasingly rely on an 'assemblage' (Madianou 2019) consisting of biometric registrations, artificially intelligent border systems, predictive analytics of social media activity, surveillance cameras and unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) designed to identify, monitor and control migratory routes and individuals.

In this respect, the transformation of Europe into a cyber Fortress (Guild et al. 2008) has proceeded gradually but steadily. Since 2016, when Frontex—the European Border and Coast Guard Agency—was established,⁷ the protection of the EU's external borders has continuously justified major increases in funding. A new integrated border management fund was identified as a priority for the EU 2021–2027 budget, where the funding for migration and border management was almost tripled.⁸ The new fund, which is designed to support the deployment of state-of-the-art IT equipment for the identification of smugglers and for the delivery of search and rescue operations, justifies once again the need for more border guards to be 'activated' in emergency situations.

Within this scenario, the delivery of search and rescue operations should be contextualised within the hyper-militarisation and technologisation of borders. This became painfully clear in 2014 when Operation Mare Nostrum, the search and rescue project led by the Italian Coast Guard, was replaced by the Frontex-led Operation Triton. The decision was met with mixed reactions over concerns that the more limited Frontex mission would have prioritised discouraging migrants from crossing the sea rather than supporting rescue operations (Andersson 2017). Both examples, however, speak of the convergence of two trends: on the one hand, the interplay of military and humanitarian ideologies as a justification for the adoption of force against the bodies of migrants; and, on the other hand, the militarisation of search and rescue operations signals the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance as facilitating the illegal arrival

of refugees and migrants. Quite exemplary is the case of the search and rescue ship *Aquarius* which in 2018 became the object of an international dispute between Italy and Malta over who was responsible for allowing the ship to dock at their ports. The ship carrying 629 migrants was stranded off the coast of Libya and was left in a political impasse when both Malta and Italy refused to let the ship disembark on their shores. Under the hashtag #chiudiamoporti (we are shutting the ports), Italy's then deputy prime minister and leader of the right-wing Lega party, Matteo Salvini, celebrated Italy's victory over its 'no' to human trafficking and illegal immigration. Using this event as a symbol of Italy's renewed territorial sovereignty over Europe's disregard for the pressure faced by the country, Salvini continued his march against humanitarian organisations. In this respect, his proposal to fine non-governmental organisations rescue boats for each migrant they disembark in Italy represented a further sign that the protection and rescue of human lives was indeed at the bottom of the government's priorities.⁹

The techno-militarisation of borders points to the convergence of multiple forces that will be discussed in this volume. First, is the interconnectivity of different actors from political and border authorities to nonstate actors, private enterprises and humanitarian agencies, all capitalising on the power of technologies to deliver faster and more efficient responses to human displacement. Second, is the expansion of a system of global surveillance that further exacerbates the transformation of Europe into a geopolitical space where a few centimetres can make the difference between the exercise of a flexible and economically productive citizenship and the negation of identity as illegitimate, illegal and unworthy. Third, is the transformation of refugee and migrant identities into 'data subjects' where only those who are 'biometrically' readable and 'digitally' acceptable can be acknowledged as potential citizens in a very volatile and highly ambiguous political space.

The third and final strand of literature expands on the identification of borders as technologies of surveillance to highlight different uses of technologies from the bottom-up perspective of everyday experiences of forced migrants and from the grassroots fringes of society that I identify in this book as pertaining to the tech for social good community. This aspect is what confers originality to the study presented in this book. More often than not, critical approaches to the 'refugee crisis' have focused their attention on the ethical, cultural and political challenges offered by technology use in contexts of surveillance and humanitarianism. More

recently however, alternative accounts of migration and digital media have created a space where more productive understandings of mobility merge with the observation of what happens at the border, along the route from one border to another, and in-between these liminal spaces. Following this line of thought, I argue that the observation of technology use can offer a less theorised but indeed more productive lens with which we can look at how power can be contested and resisted.

1.1 FORCED MOBILITIES, HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES AND DIGITAL SOLIDARITY

As mentioned, the book observes technology use as a productive entry point to investigate not just the relationship between borders and power but also the circulation of solidarity at the border and the experiences of digital connectivity in the lives of forced migrants through personal interviews and ethnographic work. In doing this, it rejects the identification of technologies as purely material objects and as mere extensions of human beings and, instead, emphasises their material, symbolic and highly performative roles. The relationship between mobilities and media has received considerable attention in the literature over the years. In particular, the new mobility paradigm developed by scholars John Urry and Mimi Sheller (2006) importantly recognises how present configurations of mobility are indeed characterised by the convergence of physical travel and modes of communication that require the observation of the political, social, cultural and economic forces allowing or impeding movement. This was reiterated by media and communication scholar David Morley (2017) who expanded the original premises of the new mobility paradigm to include the material and symbolic infrastructures that either facilitate or contain movement, including their geopolitical dynamics and digital configurations. The need to consider how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have shaped the way migrants take control of their mobility and acquire a sense of agency has taken on a renewed interest in recent years. The emergence of the digital migration field of research introduced important contributions concerning the role played by (ICTs) within diasporic communities (Leurs and Smets 2018). However, many have recognised the lack of research on the role played by ICTs in the lives of forced migrants in Europe or on their way to Europe (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018), with the exception of important contributions that will be amply discussed in Chapter 4.

To these studies, the analysis offered in this book adds two more dimensions that I believe deserve further attention in the study of forced mobilities. First, the interplay between the notion of exile and the different performative uses that technologies embody at different stages of the journey to Europe. Second, the impact that refugees' mediated practices of witnessing have on more mainstream representations of refugees. The analysis is prompted by a crucial question. Can technologies offer refugees a platform where power can be contested and where more inclusive spheres of representations can be envisaged? A final form of mediatisation is embodied by more humanitarian uses of technologies at the border, which represents an additional original focus that this book puts forward. The incorporation of such a focus meets the need to offer a more comprehensive and complex overview of the different technological mediations unfolding within the European space, above and beyond surveillance. Over the past few years, the structural, political and cultural shifts affecting nation states across the globe have caused an important change in the distribution of power relations among states and citizens. More specifically, opportunities for political and public participation are said to have increased with the advent of technologies used to connect, express, act and create alliances.

There are two trends that this book considers as central to the adoption of technologies for the delivery of social good, which represents the key argument of Chapter 5. The first trend is the renewed interest in doing good that Kaarina Nikunen (2019) contextualises as ingrained in the evolution of modernity as reinforcing individualism on the one hand, and as encouraging self-determination as a political and humanitarian project on the other. As responsibilities have shifted from social and political institutions to the individual, more personalised forms of participation have emerged. The second trend is the rise of social entrepreneurs, social corporate responsibilities industries, and the private and the not-for-profit networks all willing to support remote acts of cooperation and volunteering, either independently or in collaboration with more institutionalised organisations. In the context here observed, these two trends have converged in what I call the tech for social good community, a diverse and highly heterogeneous network made of volunteers, CEOs, software developers, digital humanitarians, entrepreneurs and techies at large, all placing faith in the power of technologies to deliver solidarity and bring social change. In recognising the increasing popularity of digital social innovation and digital solidarity for the displaced, my analysis, in a

way not before considered, asks in what ways these circuits of mediated solidarity can challenge Fortress Europe's techno-military infrastructure of power. Ultimately, the book proposes an alternative framework, a techno-mediated framework where the possibility of a counter-hegemonic project around a new idea of social justice for refugees can potentially be imagined.

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into six chapters and outlines three different applications of technology as strategies of political intervention, as tactics of resistance, and as techniques of political contestation.

The volume, in an original way, approaches the complexity of bordering practices through an historical analysis of what borders represent from a political and philosophical point of view. This excursus, which is addressed in Chapter 2, introduces the reader to some of the key ideas that form the backbone of my analysis: the historical interplay between identity and alterity; the construction of otherness; the us versus them rhetoric; and the scapegoating of specific categories of unwanted individuals as a constant in the evolution of humanity. In discussing the philosophical, political and technologically mediated foundations of Fortress Europe, this chapter advances a more holistic understanding of migration as an object of securitisation and provides the necessary contextual framework where today's architecture of security can be more comprehensively discussed.

Chapter 3 looks more closely at the evolution of borders as institutions of sovereign power, as mechanisms of identity formation and as performances of denial. This distinction is considered central again to a more holistic understanding of the productive nature of borders and the materiality of their regimes. The chapter shows that European borders should be interrogated as sociopolitical constructions that are meant to divide a population of legalised citizens and privileged travellers from undeserving and unwelcome slices of humanity whose identity needs to be verified and authenticated before being accepted. As inherently performative, borders represent a fertile territory where performances of power and counter-performances of resistance coexist in often chaotic and unpredictable ways. The deployment of counter-performances of resistance is central to Chapter 4's considerations of technologies *of* and *in* exile. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees living in London,

this chapter questions whether refugees’ digitally mediated practices can be observed as acts of resistance against the predominant narratives that monothematically place refugees as criminals or as victims within Fortress Europe. The discussion is broken down into two key macro-themes of research. Firstly, digital connectivity is analysed in the light of its material conditions and affordances (technologies *in* exile) pre-departure, during the journey and upon arrival in Europe. Secondly, the analysis moves onto observing the performative and symbolic dimensions of refugee connectivity (technologies *of* exile) to explore whether refugees’ tactics of mediatised witnessing can open up spaces for more inclusive practices of visibility and engagement.

Chapter 5 expands on the limitations of refugees’ mediated practices of self-determination to look more closely at those grassroots initiatives that since 2015 have taken place within the tech community to support refugees and displaced communities. This chapter addresses the opportunities and challenges brought about by digital social innovation in an attempt to reflect on how impactful mediated solidarity can be in a situation where technologies are mainly used to subjectify, monitor and reduce refugees to repositories of data for surveillance and securitisation purposes. Drawing from interviews with tech and social entrepreneurs, volunteers and CEOs, I outline a new theoretical concept, ‘mindful filtering’, to critically examine the role of digital innovation and data in humanitarian practice. With this concept, I intend to contribute to an open debate that is still in its embryonic stages of critical thinking but one that nevertheless represents a useful entry point to begin to reconcile the ethics of data collection—one of the most problematic aspects of technologies for refugees—with the politics of solidarity.

The final chapter discusses the complexities of what I call ‘reactive networked activism’ in relation to the alleged crisis of solidarity today and reflects on what we may learn from prioritising dialogue over the more rigid forms of protection of the space of Europe. Dialogue however, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, is a long process that demands empathy (not compassion) and requires affective citizenship: a practice of social responsibility where identities are seen as mobile and hybrid; where the ability to act differently is recognised as a value and not as a threat to political consensus; and where political membership is built and rebuilt in negotiation with each other, never defined once and for all.

In emphasising the crucial role of solidarity as a form of resistance, this book puts forward some suggestions that the reader might find relevant within the political and economic climate originated in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global health emergency. As the book entered its final stages of revision, the rapid spread of coronavirus symptoms across borders announced a different kind of *crisis* demanding international coordination and support. Faced with the task of fighting an invisible virus, European and non-European governments turned to innovative tracing platforms and sophisticated surveillance tools to track movement, to identify and to isolate threats. These latest developments in health management raise substantial ethical dilemmas that we have yet to see fully accounted for, including the opaque uses of such technologies to monitor the movement of migrant populations and the risk of further exacerbating their vulnerability by propagating surveillance within already inadequate migration reception systems.

How can the analysis offered in these pages help the reader navigate the complex and still blurred post-pandemic scenario? In examining the roots of political power, a set of analytical tools is offered in an attempt to deconstruct the relationship between policing and surveillance above and beyond the so-called *refugee crisis*. In scrutinising the mechanisms behind the identification of migrants as threats, the analysis helps us understand how matters of public health can serve as justification for the introduction of tighter border controls. In looking at ways in which the refugee body is datafied for security purposes, the book encourages us to remain vigilant to the intended and unintended consequences of bio-surveillance. Ultimately, as the world seems to retreat into a new and frightening pseudo-normality, this book invites us to remain open to more creative episodes of tolerance and acceptance. It is in its darkest moments that humanity always finds the courage to create more welcoming pathways and circuits of solidarity for all groups, communities and individuals. These pages suggest alternative ways we can reconstruct and remap traditional geographies of oppression while respecting, caring for and protecting every single voice.

NOTES

1. Joint Statement on Mediterranean Crossings of UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, Special Representative of the