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## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1nz6x651>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 4(1)

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### Publication Date

2021

### DOI

10.5070/R74155775

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**Visualizing Precarity and Security: Mona Hatoum's  
*Drowning Sorrows* and Guadalupe Maravilla's *Walk on  
Water***

Catherine S. Ramírez

Precarity is an overwhelming and persistent condition of unpredictability, instability, and insecurity, especially as related to employment, housing, health care, and migration status. While spread unevenly, it is a hallmark of our contemporary world. At UC Santa Cruz, a federally designated [Hispanic-Serving Institution](#) where [more than one-third](#) of the undergraduates are first-generation college students and [more than half](#) receive need-based financial aid, many of my students are of the [precariat](#), the people for whom precarity is a driving force. For example, many of my students struggle to find stable housing in Santa Cruz County, one of [the least affordable metropolitan areas in the world](#). Some are the US-citizen children of undocumented migrants, and some are undocumented themselves. And many more confront or will confront upon their graduation economic uncertainty in the form of involuntary part-time or short-term work, falling wages, mounting, chronic debt, and [“declining prospects of upward mobility.”](#)

Like [intersectionality](#) and [heteronormativity](#), *precarity* allows us to name, to better understand, and then to change the conditions that shape our world. And like intersectionality and heteronormativity, it is an abstruse concept. To help my students identify and comprehend precarity, I have found that it is useful to visualize it. To do so, I turn to art, specifically to [Mona Hatoum's \*Drowning Sorrows\*](#) (2001–2) and [Guadalupe Maravilla's \*Walk on Water\*](#) (2018).

I teach courses on migration, and both Hatoum and Maravilla are migrants, a point I return to below. Before I discuss their works and biographies, I want to

acknowledge how the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the precarity with which so many migrants are forced to live. International migrants quarantined in cramped dormitories in [Singapore](#) and the [Gulf countries](#), for example, have seen higher infection rates, while the Indian government's abrupt lockdown in March 2020 drove [more than ten million internal migrants](#) from their jobs and homes in big cities back to their villages of origin. In [Italy](#), undocumented agricultural and domestic workers were deemed essential and granted a temporary amnesty in the spring of 2020, only to find that [they lacked the proper paperwork to qualify for the COVID-19 vaccine](#) a year later.

The pandemic has also magnified a paradox of migrant existence: migrants—in particular, migrant workers—often play a fundamental role in many countries; at the same time, migrants, international and internal alike, tend to be marginalized, if not excluded altogether, within and by the host or dominant society. I call this the paradox of assimilation in my 2020 book, [Assimilation: An Alternative History](#).

To illustrate that paradox, we need not look far. In March 2020, the Migration Policy Institute reported that migrants in the United States were [“over-represented in coronavirus-response frontline occupations,”](#) such as health care. Migrants, including undocumented ones, were also disproportionately represented in other [“industries vital to pandemic response,”](#) such as retail, manufacturing, and [food production](#). In April 2020, the [US Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) classified farmworkers as essential, even though [roughly half of farmworkers in this country lack legal status](#). While these migrants were deemed essential by the very agency charged with hunting down, rounding up, incarcerating, and deporting them, they were [denied federal coronavirus aid](#). They were simultaneously essential and excluded.

Migration has long been cast as a [national security](#) issue, hence its inclusion in DHS's purview. Yet the convergence of crises we have faced since the World Health Organization announced the pandemic on March 11, 2020, has prompted a rethinking of security not as sovereignty or defense but as social or public goods, such as health care, housing, food, water, and education. The science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson calls these social and public goods “the necessities for a good life” in his 2020 novel, [The Ministry for the Future](#). “Security is the feeling that results from being confident that you will have [the necessities for a good life] and your children will have them too,” he writes. “So it is a derivative effect. There can be enough security for all; but only if all have security.”<sup>1</sup>

Security is the antithesis of and antidote to precarity. Yet what does security look like and how do we envision it in a world increasingly forged by precarity? How do we recognize the acute precarity many migrants endure and

include those migrants in our visions for a world in which all have security? These are some of the questions with which I approach *Drowning Sorrows* and *Walk on Water*.

### *Drowning Sorrows*

There are multiple instantiations of *Drowning Sorrows*. The one I describe here has been part of the [San José Museum of Art's](#) (SJMA) permanent collection since 2017. It consists of roughly a hundred clear, glass bottle fragments. The fragments sit in a corner of the gallery on the wood floor in the form of an oval measuring about eight feet by eight feet. Some of the fragments are the top part of the bottle; others are the bottom half. They are illuminated from above and appear to be bobbing in water.

As its title alone makes evident, the painting's subjects include drunkenness and grief. In various iterations of this artwork, Hatoum has used wine and beer bottles. In the SJMA's, she has used flasks, a bottle associated not only with spirits but with portability and secrecy. After all, a flask is not meant to sit atop the dinner table. Instead, it tends to be tucked into a pocket and carried away. Cut in different places and at different angles, the bottle fragments appear to be drifting on an unstable surface. This variety lends a sense of movement to the artwork. The fact that only a portion of each flask is visible also enhances its air of stealth.

*Drowning Sorrows* captures the tension between transparency and opacity and fragility and danger. The glass Hatoum has used in the SJMA installation is clear, but the flasks appear to be partially submerged, as if they contain or bury secrets. And glass is a fragile material. Yet when broken, it can be sharp, lethal even.

In [many of Hatoum's works](#), including *Drowning Sorrows*, seemingly harmless household objects, like bottles and kitchen utensils, morph into unfamiliar and menacing forces. For some of us—for example, the person facing domestic abuse or deportation—home is a hostile, indeed dangerous place. Recent wildfires, polar vortexes, heat waves, and floods have underscored that for *all* of us, even for inhabitants of the insular [“wealthy world,”](#) home is ephemeral and fragile. When seen in this light, Hatoum's bottle fragments evoke rising sea levels, and *Drowning Sorrows* becomes a commentary on the Anthropocene. Beautiful and sinister, her artwork leaves us with a sense of precariousness, with the impression that all is not as it seems and that the ground on which we tread may not be as solid as we think or hope.

The [circumstances of Hatoum's life](#)—her family's exile from Palestine, an embattled nation, her exclusion within and by the country where she was born and raised, and her second exile due to war—testify to the instability, hostility, and mutability of home. Hatoum is a Palestinian who is not from Palestine. Rather, she was born in Beirut in 1952 to Palestinian parents. However, she is not Lebanese. Like the majority of Palestinians who found themselves living in exile in Lebanon after 1948, she and her family were denied Lebanese identity cards. Then, in 1975, while Hatoum was visiting London, Lebanon erupted in civil war. She remained in the United Kingdom. Today, she is a London-based Palestinian artist.

While Hatoum created *Drowning Sorrows* over 2001–2, it evokes more recent images of migration—specifically, the treacherous trek over bodies of water that millions of migrants make. Think, for example, of the Rio Grande, the Mediterranean Sea, or the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico. The partially submerged bottle fragments call up the tragic and shameful images of people who have drowned as they have tried to realize the freedom to move.

When we connect *Drowning Sorrows* to grief and alcohol, as its title implies, *and* to movement and migration, then it becomes a work about migrant mental health, a subject that received relatively little attention outside activist and mental health worker circles until images of [migrant children separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border](#) began circulating during the years of the Trump administration. For far too many migrants, especially those who are undocumented—which is yet another way of being denied an identity card—migration is a traumatic experience. People flee poverty, violence, and fear in one land only to confront poverty, violence, and fear in another land. Families are separated not just for weeks or months but for entire lifetimes. So it should come as no surprise that some migrants have mental health needs stemming from their experiences of dispossession and displacement.

For example, how are the people who survived the capsizing of the dinghy that resulted in the drowning death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi off the coast of Bodrum, Turkey, in 2015? How do they cope with their trauma and profound loss? One of those survivors was Alan's father, Abdullah Kurdi. He and his family were fleeing a war-torn Syria and trying to reach the Greek island of Kos when he lost not only Alan but his wife, Rehana, and their five-year-old son, Galip, to the Mediterranean Sea. Does Abdullah suffer from anxiety, depression, or worse? How is Nilüfer Demir, the Turkish photographer who described the beach that Alan and the other drowned passengers washed up on as a [“children's graveyard”](#)? What impact has her infamous photo had on her mental health? On the viewer's mental health? On our moral compass? On the way we see and treat migrants?

Sadly, the deaths of Alan, Rehana, and Galip Kurdi have not changed how migrants are seen and treated. Indeed, things seem to have gotten worse, as the images of caged migrant children and the drowned bodies of [Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his twenty-three-month-old daughter, Angie Valeria](#), attest. After fleeing their gang-controlled neighborhood in San Martín, El Salvador, and traveling over thirteen hundred miles to Matamoros, Mexico, Óscar Alberto, Tania Vanessa Ávalos, and their daughter were caught in the Rio Grande's mighty current as they tried to enter the United States on June 23, 2019. Along with Mexican photojournalist [Julia Le Duc](#), Tania Vanessa bore witness as the water swept her husband and daughter away.

To honor Óscar Alberto, Angie Valeria, and all other drowned migrants, Nuyorican poet and [2021 National Book Award recipient](#) Martín Espada penned "[Floaters](#)" in 2019. In US Border Patrol parlance, Espada tells us, a "floater" is a drowned migrant. He opens his poem with the image of a bottle bobbing in a river:

Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry,  
like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river,  
like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float.

Just as the glass, Styrofoam, or wood that end up in a river remain there, so do the dead—as "floaters," as [ghosts](#), or as the trauma of the bereaved. When put in dialogue with Espada's poem, "Drowning Sorrows" becomes both a memorial to the displaced, the dispossessed, and the drowned and a provocation to take better care of one another.

### ***Walk on Water***

Caring for each other is at the center of Maravilla's oeuvre. Many of his elaborate mixed-media sculptures, immersive installations, and collaborative, ritualistic performances grapple with his ["traumatic experiences"](#) as a former unaccompanied child and undocumented migrant, a refugee, and a cancer survivor. In addition to being part of his self-healing process, his Salvifuturist works are his offerings ["for self-healing to the immigrant community and beyond."](#)

Formerly known as Irvin Morazán, Maravilla was born in 1976 in San Salvador. At the age of eight, he fled the civil war in El Salvador and migrated to the United States as part of what is now referred to as ["the first wave"](#) of unaccompanied children to travel from Central America to the US-Mexico border. With the assistance of a coyote, he hid beneath a dog in a truck, crossed the Rio

Grande, and made his way to New York City, where he grew up undocumented. At twenty-six, he naturalized as a US citizen. Ten years later, he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He sought remedies from Western medicine, “[shamans, Brujox, \[and\] curanderos](#)” and was drawn to sound therapy in particular. “Our bodies are over 60% water,” he explained in a [January 2021 interview](#). “And in the water, we carry anxieties . . . stress . . . trauma. In some cases, we carry . . . illnesses. Or sometimes, these untreated traumas can manifest in an illness. . . . The sound vibration shakes up the water in your body.”

Water plays a prominent role in many of Maravilla’s works. For example, in *Illegal Alien Crossing* (2011), he returned to the Rio Grande. Yet rather than hiding beneath a dog in a truck, he donned a large, silver, metallic headdress with solar panels, submerged himself in the river, and walked across it. The headdress’s “hyper-visibility,” the art historian Kency Cornejo has observed, contrasted sharply with the secrecy and invisibility to which so many undocumented migrants are subject as they make their way to and in the United States. “By exalting his presence,” she notes, Maravilla transformed the “trauma of negation into a healing ritual of light and preservation.” As he emerged from the Rio Grande, he was reborn not as an “illegal alien” but as a luminous, “hybrid half-man, half-machine extraterrestrial creature”—“a futuristic border crosser,” in Cornejo’s words. In this act of self-baptism, he transformed not only the undocumented migrant but the river from a site of violence and death into one of “healing powers and the sacredness of water.”<sup>2</sup>

Akin to the healing powers and sacredness of water, Maravilla’s sound baths are performances/rituals with gongs that seek to restore participants’ well-being. From April 2020 until December 2020, he offered them on a weekly basis. His [sound bath on July 7, 2020](#), for instance, was for undocumented migrants who had been released from detention. Then, from May 15 until September 4, 2021, he offered sound baths for undocumented migrants, people affected by cancer, and the general public at [Planeta Abuelx](#). Spanning sixty feet in Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, this exhibition consisted of two towering, cast aluminum and steel sculptures, two massive gongs, a ring of medicinal plants, including corn, squash, and beans, a ground drawing made of water-based paint, an aluminum fire pit, and a *retablo* (devotional painting) the size of a billboard. Images of his sound baths show participants relaxing on [yoga mats](#), beach towels, and [picnic blankets](#). These images stand in stark contrast to those of migrant children wrapped in mylar blankets in [bieleras](#).

Maravilla’s sound baths stem from his autobiographical trilogy, a combination of musical performance, dance, and sculptures. Using science fiction tropes and reenacting moments from his own life, the trilogy invents what he calls

[“new mythologies”](#) and [“a new visual language for border crossing stories.”](#) The first installment, *The OG of Undocumented Children*, performed at the Whitney Museum in 2018, recounted the story of his journey to and arrival in the United States as a child. The second installment, *Walk on Water*, which I discuss below, took place on July 21, 2019, at the Queens Museum as part of the exhibition *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*. Fantastic, mixed-media, gong-bearing sculptures make up the third installment, *Disease Thrower*. These totemic sculptures, two of which were part of *Planeta Abuelx*, link the trauma of his border crossing to his cancer and highlight [“the ways he overcame the disease.”](#)

*Walk on Water* was set in the *Panorama of the City of New York*, a 9,335-square-foot architectural model of New York City that was created for the 1964 World’s Fair. Accompanied by the [“songstress”](#) La Momia (Sam Xu), a [“team of \[gong-playing\] healers,”](#) and two [“futuristic border crossing coyotes”](#) with exposed torso organs (Nima Jeizan and Maxwell Runko), Maravilla invoked his colon cancer and his traversing of the Rio Grande at age eight as he trod across the *Panorama*’s waterways. The green, inflatable suit he wore transformed him into the [Alien Abductor](#), an enormous, otherworldly creature, and, at the same time, the Alien Abductor’s abductee. [In the Alien Abductor’s arms](#), Maravilla’s own arms were extended. In addition to appearing small, vulnerable, and childlike, he resembled Christ on the cross. Connecting illness and illegality, “ilLEGAL” was written across the Alien Abductor’s back.

Like many of Maravilla’s other works, *Walk on Water* had a strong spiritual and therapeutic component. Its title alone evokes the story of Jesus’s miracle, and the gongs’ swirling, overlapping sounds were [“intended to cleanse political phobias and blockages of New Yorkers”](#) during the third year of the Trump administration.

What’s more, *Walk on Water* was an homage to migrant labor. With their hand-held vacuum cleaners and fluorescent mop slippers, the coyotes cleansed the space of the *Panorama*. As the coyotes and Maravilla walked along the miniature replica of the East River, Jamaica Bay, and the Upper Bay, they enacted that which Alan Kurdi, Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, and all other “floaters” have been unable to achieve: they walked on water. In addition to transforming the migrant housecleaner and domestic worker into a powerful shaman, *Walk on Water* likened the unaccompanied and undocumented child migrant to a miracle worker.

Resembling a liquid hole in the middle of the floor, *Drowning Sorrows* is an apt image for precarity. In contrast, *Walk on Water* envisions security for all as it turns water into solid ground. Where Hatoum’s installation evokes illness, in the form of alcoholism, and death, Maravilla’s performance used the tropes of science fiction to achieve a very real goal: healing. Differences notwithstanding, *Drowning*



*Sorrows* and *Walk on Water* offer new stories and images (and, in the latter work, sounds) for migration. Against the backdrop of the Mediterranean and the Rio Grande, both works testify to the ongoing, unexpected resonance of art in and beyond the classroom.

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Catherine S. Ramírez, chair of the [Latin American and Latino Studies](#) department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is a scholar of Mexican American history; race, migration, and citizenship; Latinx literature and visual culture; comparative ethnic studies; gender studies; and speculative fiction. She is the author of [Assimilation: An Alternative History](#) and [The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory](#), and she is a coeditor of [Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship](#). She has also written for the [New York Times](#), [Atlantic](#), [Public Books](#), and [Boom California](#). Her current project examines the ways migration has been visualized in and by the Global North since the invention of flash photography. A [first-generation](#) college graduate and former Pell grant recipient, she holds a PhD in [ethnic studies](#) and a BA in English from the University of California, Berkeley.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Orbit, 2020), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Kency Cornejo, “Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art,” *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, edited by Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska-Myers (Riverside: UCR ARTSblock, University of California, Riverside, 2017), 26.