UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Refugee Worlding: M.I.A. and the Jumping of Global Borders

Long T. Bui

Published online: 17 Dec 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Refugee Worlding: M.I.A. and the Jumping of Global Borders

Long T. Bui

Department of Global and International Studies, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the life and work of refugee-turned-singer M.I.A. to explain the concept of refugee worlding, the transversal intersectional modes of being a refugee. Exploring the artist's unique aesthetics as well as her play with time-space, I indicate the ways such a practice is emblematic of the creative and critical methodology of Critical Refugee Studies (CRS). As a border hopper, M.I.A.'s imaginative mobilization and weaponizing of refugee-ness jump scales, musical and otherwise, a disruption of the militarized contexts that drive the flight of migrants. Such artprop takes stock of the many world(s) forged, embodied, performed, and crafted on refugee-centered terms.

"I was a refugee because of war and now I have a voice in a time when war is the most invested thing on the planet," said M.I.A. in 2005 newspaper interview.[1] This moment was one of the earliest that the pop star identified herself as a refugee in the media and a spokesperson for refugees everywhere. Extrapolating from her own celebrity status as a "refugee pop star" to artistic possibilities for other refugees, she wondered, "Can you be a global icon coming from nowhere?"[2] That "nowhere" describes a place that can be anyplace in the world.

While M.I.A. is indeed a global icon, she exists in a modern world that makes non-visible the complex struggles, abilities, and desires of refugees like her. Though born in London, M.I.A. moved to the United Kingdom as a young refugee from Sri Lanka. She spent her childhood in the South Asian country for a decade as her father worked to establish an independent nation for the Tamils in one of the world's longest civil wars. The father's politics forced him into hiding, while the family later returned to England as refugees (where they are still ethnic minorities like they also were in Sri Lanka). While her life story is unique, the artist's travels demonstrate the transnationalism of migrant lives. Rather than consider refugees as people who left or lost their homelands, M.I.A.'s lifeworlds reveal how refugees negotiate competing, interlinked realms.

This article introduces the concept of refugee worlding, which I define as the critical and creative practices which shape alternative social visions of refugees. If worlding refers to the art of being global and refugee is a contested term for forced migrants, then refugee worlding specifically denotes refugees (and their allies or kin) crafting worlds of their own. Rather than take refugees as merely populations set adrift, the speculative worlds conjured by refugee communities help disrupt the known world instigated by a "global

---

CONTACT Long T. Bui ✉ longb@uci.edu Department of Global and International Studies, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

refugee crisis." By resituating the "refugee condition" creatively and critically, refugee worlding refracts the many concerns of refugees, highlighting how they are simultaneously of this world and, also, "out" of this world.

To explain refugee worlding, this article focuses on the life and work of M.I.A. Unique among her pop star peers, this postmillennial singer-songwriter zooms in on the jumbled experiences of refugees and the human rights/terrorism discourse related to the refugee, which must answer to "the uncountable and the anonymous."[3] With an alias that alludes to missing people of war, M.I.A. (whose real name is Mathangi Arulpragasam) bears witness to all those people discarded and disappeared by conflict. Using an acronym associated with military personnel, M.I.A.'s appropriation of the term as a nonmilitary civilian is important, shifting the usual focus from soldiers and warmongering to everyday people and their quotidian worlds.

Through the songs of artists like M.I.A., we move beyond portraying the refugee as simply bound up *in* "the world" to grasp the dissonant worlds enabled by refugees themselves. To understand M.I.A.'s refugee aesthetic as a mode and matter of refugee worlding, I focus on key songs that reflect a central part of a politicized musical career. The subsequent sections thematically build upon each other, analyzing M.I.A.'s music in ways that broadly map onto her career trajectory. The first section links refugee worlding to Critical Refugee Studies (CRS). This literature review leads into discussion of how M.I.A. offers a creative practice that weaponizes refugee fun and play. Here, I elucidate how she increasingly identifies refugees as cultural producers and critics. This shifts into a section on scale about how M.I.A. jumps borders to emphasize the temporal flux and spatial warping of contemporary refugee life. I argue that border scaling is vital to understanding refugee worlding. A third section on refugee art and activism summarizes M.I.A.'s refugee background. Through a documentary, I grasp how the violent situations that she encountered as a child may inform her humanitarian knowledge-production. I conclude with commentary on M.I.A. and how her work presents new directions in Critical Refugee Studies and refugee studies in general.

Linking critical refugee studies to refugee worlding

In one way or another, M.I.A.'s songs contain political messages about the displaced, but the sheer gaiety found in them prevents such thoughtful messages from being ignored or put in the category of serious-minded "political" music. One music critic admits that though M.I.A.'s music feels silly or lighthearted, it bears "a voice from a violent place where kids throw rocks at tanks."[4] Her deep musings make obvious the ways refugees live "in our post-NAFTA/9-11/Abu Ghraib/AIG world," according to music critic Lorraine Ali.[5] This observation resonates with the research of musicologist Roshank Kheshti, who documents the adaptability of listeners to pick up on (cultures of) dissonance, harmony, and clamor. M.I.A.'s cacophonous music limns the danger zone and hybridity of what Kheshti calls "racial noise," the raw sounds that arise when "feminized sounds of the Other" are not fully incorporated into a generic colonized format like "world music."[6] In short, it is a form of thought found in the realm of unthought.

M.I.A. makes bold a refugee intersubjectivity enmeshed with global spectatorship, offering a popular voice that can point out social injustice. M.I.A. exploits her superstar status

(and former refugee status) for artistic/political gain, often deploying her own invented lexicon against her critics and xenophobes in the name of what she calls "Third World democracy." This critical aspect of her art and media interviewing explains her penchant for interweaving the singular personal pronoun of "I" with an abstract "we" in almost all her songs as well as in media interviews.

M.I.A. has been written about by numerous scholars who are inspired by the singer's uncanny ability to concomitantly reveal matters of gender, youth, and inequality.[7] What they all find is an artist attuned to moral zones of indistinction around migrant/terrorist/ alien and recalibrating these categories through "guerrilla pedagogy" and by taking "refugee chic" to the next level.[8] The global artist produces something new out of the old and from translocal situations. As she puts it in an interview:

> It never sort of existed before, where a musician comes from where they come from, and becomes a pop star in that timeline within 15 years of landing as a refugee. And then having to also speak about a war, a civil war, that was coming to an end in real time, at the moment you get nominated for a Grammy. And because that's never happened, it was really difficult for the media or the public to get their head around. And I had to constantly make choices.[9]

Those choices – intentional and not – characterize M.I.A.'s rise to stardom, while refugees are fleeing. Her ability to speak to and reflect the times changes the face of pop music. Her documented life story and politically informed art revamps a media gaze that pictures refugees as a nameless mass and not as vocal critics or celebrities. A later section on scaling speaks more to this form of time-space crossing.

In my formal analysis of M.I.A.'s music and lyrics, I feature an artist with a style and perspective that embodies the spirit of Critical Refugee Studies in its critical creative approach. This cultural remixer provides innovative affective strategies of sound, speech, and thought that emphasize refugees as producers of knowledge and art. M.I.A.'s more refugee-specific subject matter even brings together disparate topics like sex, technology, and partying. One point of connection for all these themes is Critical Refugee Studies, an interdisciplinary field that counters perception of the refugee as only a problem to be solved. By centering the viewpoint of forced migrants, CRS offers a window into the complex personhood of refugees, flaws, and all. Ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu lays the field out as the nuanced study of refugeehood as one of imaginative intervention.[10] She calls for a critical juxtaposition of terms or concepts to flesh out novel ways of thinking. Mashing seemingly separate things together into something new is what M.I.A. does best.

Too often, the refugee concept is often bound to spatial limits (nation-state/borders) and framed under certain methodological traditions or disciplinary silos. The word refugee can denote asylum-seekers, internally displaced people, irregular migrants, border crossers, and boat people. It becomes necessary then to revise the concept of refugee to strive not for clarity, but rather celebrate chaos and confusion. My sense of refugee worlding arises from a feminist queer of color performative approach. It bears similarity to anthropologist Martin Manalansan's idea of "queer worlding," where gender-bending transient subjects play with globality.[11] By considering the refugee as a performative queer figure, I echo scholars who make perceptible what happens when non-normative subjects move through time and occupy spaces, where they may not always be welcome.[12]

Refugee worlding relays the resistant and resilient forms of refugee living, surviving, and thriving. Ethnic studies scholar Yvonne Kwan has characterized the worlding-building

character of refugees as a praxis, which gives shape to insurgent forms of consciousness and theory.[13] We can think of the worlds in which refugees and their progeny dwell, as they rub up with "alternative modes of sensing, feeling, and thinking about the world."[14] Refugee worlding, as I conceive it, disrupts the broader global context in which refugees live, while also applying to other intersectional realities in which refugee artists like M.I.A. operate, including diasporic cultural politics, digital musical practices, transnational feminism, and state surveillance.

Appreciation of this method of inhabiting and interacting with the world initiates greater sensibility toward the manifold facets of refugee life, jumping scales (musical/cultural and spatial/temporal) of what philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the in/difference ascribed to anyone, everyone, and any person that does not figure as the universal human subject.[15] To rupture this moral in/difference unmoors the asymmetrical relationship between (self-determined) subject and (outer-determined) refugee. But M.I.A. limns that tense relationship, as she points out in an interview about her unique sound: "If you're coming from the war zone … You have to adapt to a new place, you have to start new schools … fill out the forms, sit in the waiting rooms, get housed … this weird fabric of communities I experienced, that are all part of my sound in the end."[16]

While mainstream media looks at refugees as external public menaces or broken pathetic creatures of internalized trauma, they fail to heed the personal worldviews or artistry of refugees. By portraying them as enemies/victims, refugees are effectively weaponized for political purposes by state actors. Yet, as M.I.A. demonstrates, refugees can engage in fun activities that can be re-weaponized and mobilized for new cultural politics.

Weaponizing refugee pleasure and fun

How does refugee worlding work as a matter of aesthetics and critique? How can those things be performatively embodied and disembodied? We can claim here that being a refugee denotes more than the negative experience of migration, since refugees can also be intellectual, sexy, and politically savvy. Deeming refugees as cosmopolitans with rich stories, instead of describing them with a deficit or a part of "lacking," helpless group, helps to transform their (self)representation. In this regard, M.I.A. makes refugees seem cool with something to say about the world and the ability to speak back to it. If it is possible to sum up her unique refugee aesthetic, which opens a portal to refugee worlding, we can say that M.I.A. seizes upon the pleasure, desire, and fun of refugees to mobilize against the social forces that deny them those delights or mark them as moving targets.

This section considers how M.I.A. operates as an artist and as cultural critic to move beyond hegemonic refugee discourse. To unpack how M.I.A. creatively mobilizes Othering discourse, I draw on the insight of performance studies scholar Leticia Alvarado who writes about the "non-redemptive" body art of refugees like Ana Mendieta. Women of color artists like Mendieta re-signify their denigration through strategies of refusal, which move beyond empowerment or inclusion to suggest ambivalent states of being, fissured historical memories of violence, and a not-yet-there future "geared toward ungraspable alternative social organization," in Leticia Alvarado's words.[17] This movement of time, space, and place exemplifies the sense of openness or ambivalence needed to approach a provocateur like M.I.A., who often contradicts herself. Solely a celebratory stance toward her work would

obfuscate all its many layers. Shunning the gendered politics of respectability, M.I.A. often freestyle dances on stage in a way signals the movement of brown femme bodies to the "sounds of sophisticated sonic warfare."[18] The dancing is simultaneously assertive, sensual, and awkward. Though her musical style is multiplex, it has also been perceived harshly by others.

A song that brought early political controversy to M.I.A. was "Sunshowers" (2015), a song about a man gunned down for his association with jihadists. She was banned by MTV for refusing to remove these lyrics: "You wanna go? You wanna win a war? Like PLO, I don't surrendo." Finding solidarity with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, M.I.A. risked early commercial failure to stake allyship with a "terrorist-identified" group and the stateless internally displaced people of occupied Palestine. Weaponizing refugee politics but still make it sound "fun," M.I.A.'s music counters what sociologist Lila Sharif describes as the vanishment of Palestinian presence.[19] Through refugeecraft or the creative act of representing refugee life, M.I.A. and others announce themselves otherwise in the world by both engaging world systems and imagining them moving to a different beat. Through her controversy-ridden career, M.I.A. has remained a chameleon, and one must approach her political claims with skepticism, as an interesting yet difficult artist to write about.[20]

At a minimum, M.I.A. explodes many myths about what refugees can do (to and for the world). Tropes of war feature prominently in her music, taking jarring images from conflict zones and throwing them up against the consumption of high-income nations. This musical collage charts a "consistent theme of rootlessness in the world" as part of a "transglobal express."[21] Foregrounding world practices that are refugee centered, M.I.A. refutes the "humanitarian violence" in the name of the "the West" trying to save or destroy "the rest."[22] This refutation transpires through lyrics for "Fire, Fire" like "row the boat/straight to the ocean/give em a run, a run at his own game/signal the plane and I landed on the runway/a survivor, independent foreigner." Spotting military violence as the origins of refugee flight, she constructs a club hit that draws similarities between eighteenth-century enslaved runaways and twentieth-century refugees, braiding struggles of yesteryear with those of today.[23]

Whereas M.I.A.'s 2005 debut album *Arular* honors a derelict father fighting a civil war in Sri Lanka, the second album *Kala* in 2007 pays tribute to women like her mother.[24] Her mother's "ambition, her education, her contradictions, her history of violence" gives M.I.A. the strength to be a dark-skinned "insider for as long as her visa holds up."[25] *Kala* aims to "put people on the map who never seen a map," as the album's song "$20" suggests. Together, the first two albums personalize the intergenerational trauma and joys of refugee families/communities. As one music critic put it, this dancefloor rebel captures nothing less than the clamor of "the Third World demanding entry to the First."[26] Refugee worlding then re-narrates the personal terms by which refugees enter the First World gaze.

Blending influences from various cultural sources, M.I.A.'s "refugee repertoire" and refugee artistic practice defy simple Othering.[27] If this "refugee repertoire" describes the catalog and aesthetic styles of performance by refugees and their descendants, then refugee worlding suggests a greater phenomenological level of object-self relations. Worlding is not just what refugees do or how they live in micrological terms, but how they detach from a modern world that otherizes "foreign" people and places at the macrolevel.[28] In 2006, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security denied M.I.A. a visa after she had planned to travel

there to work with American music producers. She had been listed on a F.B.I. terrorist list due to her father's affiliation with the Tamil Tigers, a guerrilla organization seeking to establish an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. The former refugee became an exile once more without even knowing it.

While M.I.A. admits that she was a refugee in early interviews, this self-identification became more pronounced in 2008 with the Tamil massacre in Sri Lanka. The mythology of M.I.A. as a militant refugee crusader came up in response to accusations that she and other Tamils are terrorists. Much like her defense of the P.L.O., M.I.A. troubled the distinction between violent terrorists and innocent refugees. Those fighting and fleeing for their lives are often labeled terrorists, which is how governments deny the political experiences and struggles of oppressed people, and the ordeal of being refugees.

Against these charges, M.I.A. mobilizes her personal history as a refugee as moral counterweight. In an interview, she says this: "As a Sri Lankan that fled war and bombings, my music is the voice of the civilian refugee."[29] She raised her voice to an even greater extent, when a new global refugee crisis engulfed the world in the second decade of the twenty-first century; her body and voice became a metonym for all refugees. That famous stars like M.I.A. can be construed as terrorists is evidence that refugee bodies, even elite ones, disturb the global order, requiring expulsion even as they are consumed for public enjoyment. In an interview, M.I.A. speculated why she was denied entry: "I'm a Third-World refugee terrorist or whatever."[30] The buzzwords "refugee" and "terrorist" and "Third World" converge into a "whatever" of endless social categories that easily bleed into one another. When a reporter claimed it was disingenuous for M.I.A. to inhabit a jet-setting lifestyle while identifying with the downtrodden, the artist affirmed an intent to always be an "outsider." M.I.A. approaches the refugee (and pop star) as an ungrateful "bad" subject, a tactic which responds to the call by Critical Refugee Studies to turn refugee tropes inside out and disavow the good refugee narrative.

That overturning of the refugee trope is both narrative-based and temporal/spatial. The next section grapples with M.I.A. straddling and overcoming borders. As I contend, her unique form of refugee world-building presents a global scaling that signals refugee im/mobilities. I highlight the rhetorical strategies and self-fashioning of popular imagery by an artist of great import, one able to restage the refugee on the international scene in "worldly" fashion.

Scaling borders and the time-space continuum

M.I.A.'s mode of scaling inspires my concept of refugee worlding, doing the kind of work that moves *beyond* making apparent an always sensible or legible "refugee experience." Understanding not everything that is apparent makes a world, I heed literary scholar Vinh Nguyen's recommendation to consider the refugee geographies beyond concrete moments or clearly demarcated spaces.[31] Refugees shape their own global realities that not only throw into doubt what and who refugees are, but bring into sharp relief *where* they are. This section considers my own approach to analyzing M.I.A. as a kind of space invader and time traveler. As a world-class scaler, M.I.A. spotlights refugee worlding as a matter of bending space and time to one's will and reality.

In conventional studies of refugees, we only obtain a narrow view of the helpless expunged from their home country with nowhere to go, given no proper historical or social contextua-lization, shunted from or enclosed by borders. I am departing from this research by offering

a differing analysis of M.I.A. work that deems refugees as unbounded, hypermobile subjects. Moving beyond thinking about refugees in terms of linear movement from exodus to resettlement to assimilation, I extend concepts from the previous section to reflect on border scales and scaling. It remains vital that we consider refugees as not just lost bodies, but globetrotters actively involved in dismantling/expanding cognitive scales. In terms of musical scales, M.I.A. jumps across genres by including the sounds of children playing and gunfire juxtaposed alongside weird "outer space" bleeps, computerized autotune, hip-hop beats, Bollywood samples, and Western pop-rock instrumentals. To hear M.I.A.'s music is to hear the sounds of a global conjuncture and intercultural dialogue.

To make worlding a refugee-specific concept requires moving beyond confinement of refugees by the nation-state to reach toward the prospective worlds built for and by refugees (and their allies). As a scaler of worlds, M.I.A. can be seen bouncing around, not staying in one place, a theme explored in the eclectic fourth album *Matangi* (2013).[32] Now forced to travel outside the United States to find new sounds after being labeled a security threat, M.I.A. devised a more adventurous musical palette reflecting her status as a kind of roaming creative exile. We can gleam this range from a song like "AtTENTion," where she critically juxtaposes refugee tents with other "tents." M.I.A. claims "I am a refugee" from a yellow brick TENT (an allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*), implying that road to asylum is a path paved with scary illusions. She expresses how the ghetto's enclosure feels like a (prison)senTENTS." Decoding such wordplay requires a deconstruction of the spatial frames in which all kinds of social exiles are ensconced.[33]

The *Matangi* track "Exodus" echoes how the political devolves into the personal, how global movement of bodies includes sexual communion. With a chain rhyme that proclaims, "my eyes can see in 3D/I see 360," M.I.A. refers to the sun and moon, Zaire and Kashmir, and lastly a "new frontier" with a "new frequency." With kaleidoscopic optics and back-to-back puns, such lyrics can be best described as an example of refugee worlding in various scales, because they tell us what the refugee thrown around the world can see or sense. With little distinction among planes of existence, M.I.A.'s apprehension of space is at once worldly and otherworldly. As a promiscuous merger of worlds, M.I.A. creates what literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha calls the "threeway imperfection" which is "developed among the subject observed, the subject observing, and the tools for observation."[34] M.I.A.'s soundscape discerns the dialectal tension between the local, the global, and the national. Despite stressing refugee causes throughout her career, M.I.A. hammered the issue as another global refugee crisis unfolded in the mid-2010s.

Recently, M.I.A. has only intensified her persona as a global refugee. We can sense how refugees do not fit in the world (and do need to). This recognition is evident in the song "Freedun" from the 2016 album *AIM*[35]:

> Refugees learn about patience
> Sometimes I have many visions
> I'm a new frontier, horizons
> Whose world is this, the world is mine, so bring it on

The staccato wordplay brings a remapping of place for migrants, asking whose world this is and claiming the world as ours/hers. Worlding as scaling flips this script to demand new global visions of the refugee through an unsettled horizon of deterritorialized consciousness, one that traverses multiple forms of value. With references to videogame characters, politicians, dinosaurs, aliens, and Tarzan, the song delves into all kinds of weird topics. The

track presents M.I.A. on top of the world, singing about herself from the imaginary "People's Republic of Swagistan." Refugees constitute one part of this dreamworld imagined in M.I.A.'s mind, which is filtered through her lived experience as a refugee, cultural and political.

Incensed by the growing refugee crisis erupting in the new century, M.I.A. began speaking out more, pointing explicitly to what she saw as general indifference to the plight of the largest number of migrants since World War II. M.I.A.'s fifth album, entitled *AIM* (2016), offered even more migrant-related tracks with titles like "Foreign Friend" and "Visa." When asked why she focuses on migrants, she said in an interview, "Refugees are a faceless concept … It's like basically *District 9*, but we're the aliens."[36] Alluding to a sci-fi movie about extraterrestrials imprisoned by South Africa's apartheid government, M.I.A. exposes an international/intergalactic color line delimiting who gains entry to humanity – who actually qualifies as human. The world treats refugees as though they do not belong to the human world; they are aliens in every sense.

As the lead single for *AIM*, "Borders" identifies "smart refugees" coming to Europe only to be turned away. She sings in patois, "Let's be 'dem/we'dom smart phones/weah fuck 'em when we say we're not with them." Acknowledging refugees are fully plugged into telecommunication networks, M.I.A. nods to refugee voices that are never heard on radio: "They don't play us on the FM." Through linguistic repetition, the song incessantly questions a post-9/11 American "New World" and promises to "keep up an order" that refuses spatialized conflict.

> The New World
> What's up with that?
> I'm gonna keep up an order
> Yeah fuck 'em when we say we're not with them
> This is North, South, East and Western.

The scales of refugee worlding pries open the possibility of a borderless refugee planet, one where refugees are free to go wherever they want, and all the demarcated regions of the world are combined or confounded. This scaling counters the anti-refugee world that we currently live in but must transform. In response to refugee xenophobia, M.I.A. notes the "dynamism of multiple migrations and returns."[37] The self-directed video for "Borders" finds M.I.A. riding boats, crossing deserts, and climbing barbed-wire fences. She simulates a refugee voyage while singing "boat people … what's up with that?" Brown male dancers contort their bodies into the shape of boat upon which the singer stands. The men don gold foil security blankets, while M.I.A. wears a soccer shirt with the airline logo of Fly Emirates replaced with "Fly Pirates." The displaced are not forgotten castaways; they are projecting their bodies into space. They do this by hijacking the mass publicity naturally accorded to refugee groups and turning it into a grand spectral performance.

In response to the video's controversy and criticisms, M.I.A. says she rejects the generic rescue narrative of "I'm-a-refugee-please-save-me-UN."[38] For M.I.A., refugees should be more than inert objects pitied, spurned, or gawked at. They can be (and are) powerful subjects watching and commanding attention. Grasping audience reception and how a global audience takes up M.I.A.'s music is essential, since her international fans are a loyal bunch that spend time online dissecting her cryptic lyrics, which often sound nonsensical or inane to the uninitiated. On fandom sites, listeners give lessons on her coded references. Fans engage in a bricolage to modify what the artist said and combine them with their own interpretations. Some of the lyrics

to "Freedun" are borrowed from fan-made lyrics on Twitter. Open-source collaboration includes the voices of those enthusiasts who are not refugees, but who sympathize with outcasts. Refugee worlding ripens as collaboration between artists and everyday creatives, building toward a refugee-friendly world.

A life of refugee art and activism

To further unpack the spatial politics and world-reshaping of M.I.A., let us delve into her rise to fame as artist and activism. As revealed in the documentary film, *Matangi/ Maya/M.I.A.* (2018), M.I.A. aspired to be documentarian in her youth. Going back and forth between England and Sri Lanka, where her extended family live as internally displaced persons in Colombo, she taped home videos about the family struggling to survive amid violence.[39] The documentary's footage captures the artist's feeling of always wanting to return to the war-torn country as "backhome-ness." It also captures her budding activism. Despite achieving pop celebrity, she admits to wanting to go back to school or "work to rescue refugees from the sea." She opines, "I lived through war, came as a refugee that is now a popstar. I made it all fit together." Yet, M.I.A. has been criticized for collapsing various refugee issues. For an artist who went through different iterations without much consistency in ideology, it is necessary to critique M.I.A. and how she speaks with careless nonchalance and, at other times, with hyperbolic authority.[40]

Without ever settling for definite answers, we can only scale the epistemological borders of what is (un)knowable, frustrating any reductionism of her or of refugees. She explains her evolving stance this way: "Conceptually, we just want to keep it broader than a border, whether that's geographical, psychological, physical, emotional, whatever the thing is, and just keep going."[41] For M.I.A., there exists no border that cannot be crossed, no migratory journey that ever concludes. She questions what becomes represented about refugees and how they are made palatable to the masses. When invited to the 2012 Super Bowl as a supporting performer to the headliner Madonna, she flicked middle fingers to the audience in a true punk gesture. But her performance only generated massive backlash, which again cast doubt on M.I.A.'s role in the music industry. This trite move can be analyzed as M.I.A. refuting a sexist, racist pop world she had been invited into, while also manipulating and toying with that celebrity world.[42]

M.I.A.'s style and position in the music industry complicates what a refugee star looks and acts like. Both experimental and mainstream, M.I.A.'s refugee scaling explicitly raises structural issues like genocide, racism, and war. It emphasizes cultural practices that are fantastical in terms of evoking reincarnation, time travel, spiritual trances, and teleportation. There is the song "Space" from *Maya*, the release of which she tweeted as a response to the *New York Times* naming Sri Lanka as a top travel destination in 2010. M.I.A. questioned this vacation label for a country that just a year before wrapped up a civil war and still had thousands of exiles or internally displaced people. Yet, the song's lyrics are not on face value about refugees, but they bespeak odysseys that wandering refugees can take: "The stars are bangin' close to me/As I'm floatin' in a life odyssey … I'm 'head of time." Tourism, migration, and space travel are fused together in a discombobulated manner. The implication of this fusion is that people's lives stretch way beyond the earthly borders constructed for them.

This border-hopping approach has given M.I.A. a niche in the music industry, which cannot put the genre-busting artist in a single box. Moreover, popular music critics from *Spin* to *Rolling Stone* have consistently promoted M.I.A.'s music, turning it into a multicultural commodity with the support of a large media apparatus. Despite censorship by entertainment conglomerates like MTV and YouTube, other alternative venues supported her even when she was first speaking out against the "War on Terror." The cultural capital that M.I.A. accrued over time suggests that she is less an "outsider" compared to other refugee artists without major sectors of the industry backing them. Borders are malleable or porous, while the scaling of borders are continuous. M.I.A. is more mainstream than other artists, but less mainstream than the biggest pop stars.

A performative element seems on display when M.I.A. continually refers to a "we," making synonymous her role as a troublemaker-entertainer and the less-privileged status of vulnerable refugees. In this way, M.I.A.'s outerworldly approach to life as an artist merges with the richness of refugee inner worlds. In the documentary, the star contemplates this: "We're used as scapegoats to build a wall, but people have always mixed, and mingled, and moved. Interesting things happen because of it … you don't know that kid can access a 505 machine and a mic and become Michael Jackson … you don't know." This quote emphasizes the intrinsic talent of refugee youth who would become the next global superstars. Refugees do not need just to eat and sleep … they also need to sing and dance. The documentary begins and ends with the artist making the video for "Borders."

The final two scenes of the documentary feature M.I.A. bonding with her grandma in Sri Lanka and peering from plane window of her return flight upon the world. The solo contemplative shot of the artist and the scene of women's shared intimacy enable a vantage that does not claim singular mastery or dominance over the world. From a gendered perspective, it brings a critical feminist refugee lens that uses art to reinterpret displacement to consider social reproduction and innovation.[43] This is M.I.A.'s story, but one shared with family and all refugees – those who left home and those who have not. This globe-spanning story exceeds any narrative frame.[44] As a kind of refugee world-craft or worlding, it toggles between the personal and the political, the individual and the communal.

Conclusion

The very complexity of refugee issues and migration calls for more connections between Critical Refugee Studies and cognate fields like queer of color feminist performance studies. M.I.A.'s iconic career indicates potential areas for expanding upon these links. This article contributes to fostering more creative and critical vocabularies for analyzing the various worlds in which refugees dwell. Refugee worlding stages new encounters between the world as it is and what it could be. Artists like M.I.A. enact this vision by playing with relations between capital/nation/state and refugee/terrorist/alien.

Through M.I.A., I make an intervention in CRS by clarifying fuzzy connections within a global milieu characterized by new migratory patterns, but also the cultural "proliferation of difference."[45] Cultural studies scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials finds refugee-produced texts destabilize essentializing narratives of victimhood and "engender an alternative mode of politicized selfhood."[46] My effort to conceptualize M.I.A.'s life work as refugee worlding

reaches beyond official discourse to expand the potential for social revolution and address nascent methods for approaching the refugee figure.

M.I.A. continues to spark uproar with every new song, video, interview, and performance. In the process, she along with her collaborators/fans devise newfangled methods for seeing, knowing, locating, and being a refugee in this manifold world. Such resistive articulations crystallize the "refugee problem" as a global matter that needs to be turned on its head. Addressing this issue means digging deeper into the discursive conditions responsible for the involuntary or forced relocation of people. The polysemous meaning found in refugee worlding takes the study of refugees from rights-oriented debates anchored in certain geographies or knowledges toward "other" worlds.

Notes

1. Emma Forrest, "MIA, Myself and I," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2005, www.theguardian.com.
2. She campaigned with companies like H&M, asking them to donate clothes to refugees. Responding to criticism that she was working with an exploitative multinational, she pivoted tangentially to the issue of why she must "deal with 90% of the world" and other pop stars get to focus on the United States. YouTube, "Can You be a Global Icon Coming from Nowhere?," YouTube, October 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDg3RZuI1jw.
3. Brett Stalbaum, Amy Sara Carroll, and Micha Cardenas, "The Transborder Immigrant Tool: Violence, Solidarity and Hope in Post-NAFTA Circuits of Bodies Electr (on)/ic," *www.tacti calmediafiles.net*, May 6, 2011.
4. Sasha Frere-Jones, "Bingo in Swansea: Maya Arulpragasam's World," *The New Yorker*, November 22, 2004 https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/11/22/bingo-in-swansea.
5. Lorraine Ali, "M.I.A. With a Rebel Yell," *Spin*, November 20, 2008, www.spin.com.
6. Roshanak Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 104.
7. Brian Creech, "Refugee Status: Tracing the Global Flows of MIA," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 3 (2014): 267–82; Ronak Kapadia, "Sonic Contagions: Bird Flu, Bandung, and the Queer Cartographies of MIA," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26, no. 2–3 (2014): 226–50; Mary Beth,""If You Catch Me at the Border I Got Visas in My Name": Borders, Boundaries, and the Production of MIA," in *Rock Brands: Selling Sound in a Media Saturated Culture*, ed. Jeremy Adolphson, Bob Batchelor, Michael Bertrand, Hazel James Cole, Charles Conaway, Daniel Cochece Davis, Bryan P. Delaney (New York: Lexington Books, 2010); Anamik Saha, "Locating MIA: 'Race', Commodification and the Politics of Production," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 6 (2012): 736–52.
8. Lisa Weems, "MIA in the Global Youthscape: Rethinking Girls' Resistance and Agency in Postcolonial Contexts," *Girlhood Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 55–75.
9. Lulu Garcia-Navarro and Sarah Handel, "It Never Existed Before': M.I.A. on Changing Pop and Documenting Her Story," *NPR*, September 30, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/09/30/653021947/it-never-existed-before-m-i-a-on-changing-pop-and-documenting-her-story.
10. Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
11. Martin Manalansan, "Queer Worldings: The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York," *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 566–79.
12. José Esteban Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 81–103; Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York:

New York University Press, 2018); Sandra Ruiz, *Ricanness: Enduring Time in Anticolonial Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

13. Yvonne Kwan, "Navigating Refugee Subjecthood: Cambodian American Education, Identity, and Resilience," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 15, no. 2 (2020): 1–7.

14. Ibid., 2.

15. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "No-bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence," *Griffith Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 212–36.

16. Andrew Trendell, "MIA opens up about 'the issue' of being a refugee in the UK," *NME*, September 28, 2016, https://www.nme.com/news/music/mia-191-1194664.

17. Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Esthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 11.

18. Matthew Bennet, "M.I.A.-MAYA," *Clash Music*, June 23, 2010, www.clashmusic.com.

19. Lila Sharif, "Vanishing Palestine," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17–39.

20. There inheres a certain performative element to M.I.A.'s entire public persona, so we may take most of her political claims with a grain of salt. Different stages in her career will yield different ideological positions, which makes it tough to stake a consistent claim to what M.I.A. is doing. She often provides counterexamples to her own positions, which makes her interesting and difficult, but not immune to criticism.

21. Adrien Begrand, "M.I.A., Arular," *PopMatters*, February 18, 2005, https://www.popmatters.com/music/reviews/m/mia-arular.shtml.

22. Neda Atanasoski, *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

23. *Arular* is the codename her father used as a founder of the Tamil independence movement in Sri Lanka against the Buddhist Singhalese majority. Though she held little contact with the estranged patriarch growing up, newspapers would identify M.I.A. as "Daughter of Tamil Tiger" linking her to the guerrilla group that originated the suicide bomb. See for example Asian Pacific Post, "Daughter of Tamil Tigers Roars to the Top of the Hip-Hop Charts," www.theasianpost.com, May 5, 2005,

24. M.I.A., *Arular*, © 2005 XL Recordings; M.I.A., *Kala* © 2007 XL Recordings.

25. Robert Christgau, "Worldly Woman." *Rolling Stone*, August 23, 2007, www.rollingstone.com.

26. The video for the *Kala* album's first single "Boyz" deploys psychedelic visual effects with many Black African boys dancing to the romping chorus, "how many no money boyz start a war?" With a cacophony of technologically enhanced acoustics, M.I.A. sings of orphaned kids displaced by war who cannot escape as refugees and become child soldiers. In off-kilter style, M.I.A.'s mellifluous warbling and choppy cadence combines with the polyphonic fury of this infectious dance song to exemplify the partying that can happen even during war. "Dance-Floor Rebel Blows up the Spot," *Spin*, January 18, 2008.

27. Long T. Bui, "The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 41, no. 3 (2016):112–132.

28. Even for her debut album, she sent out a promotional mixtape called *Piracy Funds Terrorism* (2004), implying that those fans bootlegging her music are underwriting money laundering.

29. Matthew Solarski, "M.I.A. Responds to Pro-Terrorism Accusations," *Pitchfork*, August 6, 2008, https://pitchfork.com/news/29930-mia-responds-topro-terrorism-accusations/.

30. Alex Mar, "Album in Limbo," *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 2005, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/m-i-a-album-in-limbo-96649/.

31. Vinh Nguyen, "Refugeography in 'Post-Racial' America: Bao Phi's Activist Poetry," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 41, no. 3 (2016): 171–93.

32. M.I.A., *Matangi*, © 2013 Interscope.

33. With the voice shouting "Attention!" taken from a raucous sample of activist-rapper Killer Mike, the refugee tent doubles as a hip-hop club in the Black American south. The personal agency/angst of a "I" stuck or held in place correspond with the feelings of a detained/dancing collective "we."

34. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Other than Myself, My Other Self," in *Travelers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Melinda Mash, Tim Putnam, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner (London: Routledge, 1994), 8–27.
35. M.I.A., *AIM.*, © 2016 Interscope.
36. Chris Riotta, "M.I.A. Explains Why the Refugee Crisis Shouldn't Be Nearly as Controversial as It Is," *mic*, September 9, 2016.
37. Tina Chen, "Context, Coordinate, Circulation: The Postrepresentational Cartographies of Global Asias," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3, no. 1 (2017): vi–xiv.
38. Ryan Bassil, "M.I.A. Talks about the 'Borders' Video and Why She's Getting Legal Threats for a Soccer Jersey," *Vice*, January 12, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/64y57q/mia-interview-2016.
39. In an interview related to the documentary, the artist admits while her "dad went off and became a terrorist," he was also a peacemaker and humanitarian. Just as refugee and terrorist are wedged together by fearmongers, so too are terrorist and humanitarian not mutually exclusive. See Spencer Kornhaber, "Listening to M.I.A., Finally," *The Atlantic*, March 30, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/03/mia-documentary-review/556733/.
40. Despite having a song praising Black Lives Matter., M.I.A.'s harsh words to the *Evening Standard* propelled a boycott against her. Claiming she felt ostracized after the B.L.M. fallout but apologizing for it in her own way (posting a black square on Instagram as a gesture of solidarity), M.I.A. still wondered why there are no other pop artists talking about migrant persecution. M.I.A. fiercely resisted critics that implied she should stay in her artist lane, tweeting there is no lane for 65 million refugees whose lands are blown. After much outcry, M.I.A. apologized, but the lacuna in her thinking was clear in terms of separating anti-Blackness from anti-refugeeness. This is ironic since the name of her second album *Kāla* means "time" in Sanskrit, but it can mean "black" or "stained," denoting caste-based skin colorism. See Lewis Cetta, "Myth, Magic, and Play in Genet's 'The Blacks'," *Contemporary Literature* 11, no. 4 (1970): 511–25.
41. Bassil, "M.I.A. Talks."
42. Yet feeling continuously dismissed as a Tamil Sri Lankan in Western media, M.I.A. remains strident in being a "bad girl," who can be "really popular" and still "say shit." A non-accommodating, unapologetic brown person is worse than a murderer, she asserts in her documentary.
43. Yen Le Espiritu and Lan Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 587–615.
44. Like everything in M.I.A.'s life, the documentary was mired in controversy, with the director disagreeing with the vision of the singer-rapper, who should be the one telling the story.
45. Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Sing Chen and David Morley (London: Routledge, 1996), 223–37.
46. Cathy Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 17–18.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Long T. Bui is an associate professor in the Department of Global and International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (NYU Press, 2018).