

ROUNDTABLE

ECOCRITICAL TERRAINS; RETHINKING TAMAZGHAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN
ENVIRONMENTS

“The Trees POV”: Refugee Landscapes in Postrevolutionary Tunisian Cinema

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In early 2011, at the height of the so-called Arab Spring, Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime (r. 1969–2011) started to disintegrate. As violence convulsed Libya, hundreds of thousands of people fled across the borders into Tunisia and Egypt—not only Libyans, but also third-country nationals who had been living and working within Libyan borders, many from sub-Saharan Africa.¹ In response, and against the backdrop of a newfound revolutionary idealism, the Tunisian government chose to keep the border open.² In February, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established the Choucha refugee camp, located eleven kilometers from the Ras Jadir border post—Tunisia’s first refugee camp since the Algerian war in 1962.³ That same month, the filmmakers Ismaël, Youssef Chebbi, and Ala Eddine Slim drove south from Tunis to Choucha to make a film.

The documentary that emerged out of the three filmmakers’ experience in Choucha—titled *Babil* (Babylon, 2012)—rejects the cinematic conventions associated with films about refugees. Eschewing subtitles, explanatory cards, and the use of “characters”—select persons one follows throughout the film, who help ground the action in distinct plotlines—*Babil* is uninterested in helping the viewer identify with individual refugees, or with any of the various aid workers, soldiers, and members of the international media who converged on the camp. Instead, the film observes the Choucha camp “from the point of view of the trees,” as the filmmakers stated in a collective interview.⁴ *Babil* deploys long takes, extreme

¹ Since the 1990s, Libya had maintained a migration policy of “open doors” toward most of its African neighbors, partly in a bid to attract labor. See Mattia Toaldo, “Migrations through and from Libya: A Mediterranean Challenge,” in *Changing Migration Patterns in the Mediterranean*, ed. Lorenzo Kamel (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2015), 82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09850.9>.

² Hassan Boubakri and Swanie Potot, “Exode et migrations en Tunisie: quand la société civile se réveille,” *Le Club de Mediapart*, 10 March 2011, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/swpotot/blog/100311/exode-et-migrations-en-tunisie-quand-la-societe-civile-se-reveille>.

³ Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, “Choucha beyond the Camp: Challenging the Border of Migration Studies,” in *The Borders of Europe: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, ed. Nicholas de Genova (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 165. See also Inke Bartels, “Reconfiguration of Tunisian Migration Politics after the ‘Arab Spring’: The Role of Young Civil Society Movements,” in *Youth, Revolt, Recognition: The Young Generation during and after the “Arab Spring,”* ed. Isabel Schäfer (Berlin: Mediterranean Institute Berlin, 2015), 67. Whereas Garelli and Tazzioli refer to Choucha as the “first ever” refugee camp in Tunisia, Bartels notes that it was the first since 1962.

⁴ Ala Eddine Slim, Ismaël, and Youssef Chebbi, interview by Nicolas Feodoroff, *Journal Daily: FID*, 8 July 2012.

long shots, and unconventional framings to observe not only people but also the surrounding environment; the camp's imbrication with the landscape is the true subject of the film. I use the word "landscape" deliberately, not only because of its associations with art history and cinema, but also because it delineates a specific environment shared between humans and nonhumans. Landscape has "a collective character," and it is this collectivity between humans and nonhumans in which *Babil* is most interested.⁵ With a slow and persistent gaze, the film asks us to attend to the refugee camp's relation to trees, dirt, rocks, sand, bugs, pools of standing rainwater, and other nonhuman things that are generally grouped together under the umbrella term "nature." But to what end?

In this brief essay, I meditate on that question. *Babil* is one of a number of recent documentary and fiction films that examine contemporary Tunisia by probing the dynamic between humans and the environment.⁶ On the other hand, *Babil* also participates in a trend of Tunisian cinema about migration in the postrevolutionary era.⁷ Engaging both these topics simultaneously, *Babil* suggests that the question of refugees and the question of environmental harm should be understood not as isolated issues, but as intimately tied to one another. In this regard, the documentary might be understood as a partner to Slim's subsequent fiction film, *Akhir Wahid Fina* (The Last of Us, 2016), in which the themes of migration and the environment are similarly woven together. This film wordlessly tracks the journey of a young Black man (Jawhar Soudani) of indeterminate origin—in press materials, named only as "N"—as he traverses the desert, arrives at the Mediterranean and sets off to sea. Instead of arriving in Europe, he comes to shore in a forested enclave, cut off from the rest of society, where even his compass no longer works. There he adapts to life in the forest, learning from "M" (Fethi Akkari), a man much older than him, who appears to have subsisted in the forest, hunting and gathering, for many years. Viewed together, these two films demonstrate that the ongoing exploitation of the planet is not only analogous to the cruel treatment of those who seek refuge, but that it emerges from a shared impulse. That impulse becomes visible, I argue, through recourse to the concept of hospitality, or "hostipitality," as theorized by Jacques Derrida, another thinker from the Maghrib.

My discussion of hospitality in these two films draws on Derrida's critique of Immanuel Kant's essay, "Towards Perpetual Peace" (1795), which outlines a "philosophical sketch" of a cosmopolitan order based on the principles of hospitality.⁸ Discussing Kant's essay, Derrida draws out the ambivalences of the word "hospitality" to demonstrate not only its mutual etymology in both "guest" and "host," but also in the word "master." The buried desire for mastery, Derrida suggests, is latent in the notion of hospitality, especially in Kant's discussion of the "conditions of universal hospitality." Any such conditions, Derrida argues, expose the "violent" contradiction at the heart of hospitality: "the one who receives, lodges, or gives asylum remains the patron, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority in his own home." These principles of hospitality are evident in policies like "customs checks," "police checks," and governmental refugee policies around the world, which offer asylum only when certain conditions are met.⁹ They are visible as well

⁵ J. B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 8.

⁶ Examples include Slim's short documentary *The Stadium* (2010), as well as the fiction films *Ashkal* (Forms, 2022, dir. Youssef Chebbi), and *Sous les figues* (Under the Fig Trees, 2021, dir. Erige Sehiri).

⁷ Examples include the documentaries *Brûle la mer* (Burn the Sea, 2014, dir. Natalie Nambot and Maki Bercache) and *Est-ce ainsi que les hommes vivent?* (Is This How People Live? 2015, dir. Bassem Becha); the fiction-documentary hybrid *Les Filles d'Olfa* (Four Daughters, 2023, dir. Kaouthar ben Hania); and the fiction films *Corps Étranger* (Foreign Body, 2016, dir. Raja Amari) and *Harka* (2022, dir. Lotfy Nathan).

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingold (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 67.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," *Angelaki* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3–5.

in the Choucha camp depicted in *Babil*, where refugees receive hospitality, but with implicitly violent conditions attached, as is evident in the barbed wire that marks the camp's borders.

Kant's notion of hospitality is in fact subtended by an originary relation of hospitality between humans and the planet.¹⁰ Kant marvels at the gifts that "Nature" has provided humankind, from the camels that "seem virtually made for traversing" deserts to the "seals, walruses, and whales" that provide nourishment to the inhabitants of the Arctic coastline. The "provisions" of nature, Kant suggests, are there for humans to use and consume and to trade; they furnish humans with a "common possession of the earth"—in other words, a mastery—out of which arises the human right to hospitality.¹¹ But this is, as Derrida points out, an exclusively *human* right; although the planet provides humanity with gifts, it is not owed anything in return. Derrida draws attention to this apparent imbalance: "what can be said of, indeed can one speak of hospitality toward the non-human, the divine, for example, or the animal or vegetable?"¹²

This same question, I argue, is raised in *Babil* and in *Akhir Wahid Fina*. In their sustained attention to landscape, these films frame the relationship between humans and the environment as one of guests and host. In doing so, they expose the violence to which both refugees and the planet are subjected—a violence that emerges in each case out of an impulse toward mastery. This shared violence, I suggest, is what the trees of *Babil* can see, and what the documentary makes visible to us. Whereas *Babil* lays bare the violent conditions that structure not only human relations, but human and nonhuman as well, the fictional film *Akhir Wahid Fina* conjures an idealized landscape in which those conditions are upended. In the mythic forest landscape of the latter film, relations between both humans and nonhumans occur within a framework of mutual respect and hospitality, instead of exploitation, offering a sharp contrast to *Babil*. Yet this utopian vision of man's unity with the environment also poses its own risks. With its images of a young Black man silently stalking the forest, adorned in animal skins, the film's second half rehearses racialized tropes that posit Blackness as inherently linked to "nature." This recourse to primitivism evokes a long colonialist imaginary, complicating the film's attempt to represent a new positionality for both migrants and the environment.

***Babil* (2012)**

The filmmakers Chebbi, Slim, and Ismaël describe *Babil* as a documentary about the ephemeral "city" that emerges in Choucha. But rather than individual characters narrating the story of Choucha, they say it is "the space" (*l'espace*)—or as I suggest, the landscape—that narrates the story of the individuals who come to stay there.¹³ Indeed, the transformation of the desert landscape of Choucha into a place that hosts the camp is in many ways the film's subject. In the opening frames, we observe a desert environment with no sign of human activity: sand, dirt, rocks, scrubby bits of vegetation, and a grove of eucalyptus trees that reappear throughout the film, standing watch like sentries (Fig. 1). A black beetle makes its way among shrubs while we listen to the whipping of the wind. Far from empty—as desert landscapes have often been portrayed in the colonial imaginary—*Babil* reveals the Choucha desert to be a vibrant place even before the refugee camp is constructed there.¹⁴

¹⁰ Film scholar Jennifer Fay elaborates on Kant's discussion of nature in *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12–15.

¹¹ Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, 82, 87.

¹² Derrida, "Hostipitality," 4.

¹³ Slim, Ismaël, and Chebbi, interview by Nicolas Feodoroff.

¹⁴ See Diana Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).



Figure 1. A grove of Eucalyptus trees reappears throughout *Babil*. Tunisia: Exit Productions. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.

As the film proceeds to show us the construction of the camp, this environment will be disturbed. After a cut to black, we observe a bulldozer ploughing its way across the terrain, its engine thrumming.¹⁵ A close-up reveals a giant hole of unearthed dirt. Another shot gazes at three large drums of oil. These images of environmental harm are then echoed at the film's end, after most of the refugees have apparently left, when we observe the camp's demolition as well as its discarded remnants. The camera observes the collection and subsequent dumping of trash into a landfill—mountains of plastic bags, flattened cardboard boxes, clothes, plastic water bottles. In the film's final shots, we gaze at fields of rubbish while listening to the same desert wind with which the film started, as well as the chirping of birds (Fig. 2). The guests of Choucha have come and gone, but these last images suggest that the landscape has been drastically altered by their presence.

Yet if these final images of refuse function as a critique of the camp's environmental destruction, they also call back to the human inhabitants of the camp, who are similarly treated as undesirable remnants.¹⁶ Although we observe various tender moments between refugees and humanitarian or military officials—as when a UNHCR worker coos at a baby, or when Tunisian soldiers laugh along with camp residents at an impromptu talent show—*Babil* discloses the conditions of hospitality to which the refugees are subject. Aid workers hand out food, but Tunisian soldiers and their dogs police the boundaries, marked by barbed wire. The refugees themselves separate into groups, according to language and ethnicity,

¹⁵ For a history of the bulldozer's transformation of the North American landscape, see Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ This evocative connection between the refugees and the landscape of waste is made doubly poignant by the knowledge that many refugees were still living at the camp even after its official closure in June 2013, purposefully unseen by the rest of the world. These were largely third-country nationals whose asylum claims were denied on the basis that they were not Libyan, and therefore could not be considered refugees of the Libyan war. UNHCR representatives told researchers that "rejected refugees are not people of our concern"; Martina Tazzioli, "Migration (in) Crisis and 'People Who Are Not Our Concern,'" in *Spaces in Migration: Postcards of a Revolution*, ed. Glenda Garelli, Martina Tazzioli, and Federica Sossi (London: Pavement Books, 2013), 112–13.



Figure 2. In the final shots of *Babil*, we gaze at a field of trash while listening to the chirping of birds and the same desert wind with which the film started. Tunisia: Exit Productions. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.

although it is unclear whether they are self-segregating or being forcibly organized by camp authorities. Over the course of the film, tension rises between different ethnicities in the camp, emerging from conflict over limited resources, and culminating in physical fights and an angry protest. The film makes clear that the conditions imposed on the refugees are ultimately, as Derrida suggests, a form of violence.¹⁷

In contrast to the highly conditional hospitality offered to the refugees at the camp, *Babil* highlights the unconditional hospitality of the landscape of Choucha. This place hosts soldiers, aid workers, journalists, and refugees alike without distinction, regardless of the waste and destruction that the visitors wreak, as we see at the film's end. The camera demonstrates this relationality by virtue of embedding its human subjects within a broader landscape that includes and often elevates the nonhuman. Close-ups of individual faces are interspersed with extreme long shots, where human figures are dwarfed by the landscape. In one shot, the skitters of marching ants in the foreground take up as much space in the frame as a trash truck in the background (Fig. 3). The eucalyptus trees that we observe at the film's start play a particularly important role, often by silently offering services to the humans in their domain. We see them provide shade and shelter from the wind and heat. In one shot, a trunk becomes a receptacle for a megaphone (Fig. 4); in another, a tree is crowded in with other human bodies in the frame, a witness to their waiting in line for food. The trees are centered in these images, upending the hierarchy between human and nonhuman life that traditionally characterizes the cinematic frame. These unconventional framings suggest that the trees are in fact the main characters of this film. Unlike the humans, whose nameless faces come and go, the grove of eucalyptus trees returns throughout the film, anchoring us in the landscape. Although the humans in the film appear largely uninterested in the environment, beyond the benefits it provides, the film's restructuring of the cinematic frame suggests that the environment sees them.

The contrast between the trees' unconditional hospitality and the conditional hospitality of the camp is underscored around two-thirds of the way into the film, when tension

¹⁷ Derrida, "Hostipitality," 7.



Figure 3. Skittering ants in the sand take up as much space in the frame as a distant trash truck, *Babil*. Tunisia: Exit Productions. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.



Figure 4. A tree, centered in the frame, acts as a receptacle for a megaphone, *Babil*. Tunisia: Exit Productions. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.

between different nationalities climaxes in an angry protest by Bangladeshi refugees. One man holds up a sign written in broken English, presumably aimed at Western journalists: “We are need air.” Here we cut abruptly to a eucalyptus tree. Over the course of an almost two-minute-long take, soundless except for the wind and light chirping of birds, the camera arcs and tilts to trace the tree’s outline, following its thick trunk, its arching branches, and its thin gray-green leaves. The exuberance of this shot is unlike the rest of the film, which is largely characterized by a stoic, dispassionate style. Its lyricism and beauty are contrasted

with the explosion of anger observed in the protest that just precedes it in the film. In particular, the image of the tree framed against the sky is juxtaposed with the refugees' just articulated need for "air." The tree's ability to convert carbon dioxide into the oxygen that humans need highlights the trees' unconditional and undifferentiated hospitality that we have observed throughout the film. This is opposed to the highly conditional hospitality of the Choucha camp, and implicitly to the notions of scarcity and limitation that typically characterize discourse around refugees.

Yet just as the tree converts carbon dioxide into oxygen, the shot also reminds us that human's ability to convert oxygen into carbon dioxide is a gift to the trees. The environment offers humans hospitality, but humans also reciprocate this hospitality, whether they acknowledge this to be so or not. When Derrida emphasizes the double etymology of "hospitality" in both "guest" and "host," he illustrates the way these categories break down: the guest becomes the host, and vice versa. In *Babil*, the camera's emphasis on landscape—on the human and nonhuman held together within a single frame—similarly evokes this relationship, even as we observe the cruel treatment of both refugees and the environment. In Slim's subsequent fiction film, *Akhir Wahid Fina*, the implicit hospitality on view in *Babil* becomes explicit in the film's depiction of a refugee who finds home in a preindustrial forest.

Akhir Wahid Fina (2016)

Slim has described *Akhir Wahid Fina* as an ode to the thousands of refugees who disappear while crossing the Mediterranean, their bodies never recovered.¹⁸ No words are spoken throughout the film, and we never learn the backstory of "N." Yet the film makes clear that N's journey is clandestine. In the film's first half, N goes largely unnoticed; most of the humans who do acknowledge him end up exploiting him. This first half is shot in a largely realist style, documenting N's trek with a companion across vast desert landscapes. They stop at a gas station, where the owner hospitably offers them tea; an arrangement is apparently made for a clandestine ride. As night falls, a truck driver arrives, is paid by N's companion, and hides the two travelers in his truck bed. Yet this turns out to be a ruse. The truck stops unexpectedly, the bed is opened, and N and his companion are suddenly beset by a group of attackers, armed with tear gas and pipes. While his friend is beaten, N manages to escape into the night; he catches a ride the next morning and continues on his trek alone. Upon reaching the city of Tunis, N walks the city streets, including the central plaza of the Avenue Habib Bourguiba, where crowds gathered in 2011 to protest the regime of Ben Ali.¹⁹ While the streets are abuzz with voices and crowded with people hurrying past and chatting with one another, N speaks with no one and is acknowledged by no one. His isolation is compounded by the choice to film him in shallow focus, such that N is depicted clearly while those around him are blurred. Throughout the film's entire first half, we never see N make eye contact with anyone. Like the street cats and dogs alongside whom N scrounges for shelter, our protagonist is someone whom other humans ignore.

Eventually, N steals a fishing boat and heads out to sea. At this approximate half-way point of the 95-minute film, a breach occurs—a gulf or a *béance*, as the Tunisian film critic Saad Chakali describes it—whereby something happens that we cannot see or name.²⁰ We

¹⁸ Ala Eddine Slim, "Rencontre avec Ala Eddine Slim pour 'The Last of Us,'" interview by Sarah Imsand, Le Billet, 17 February 2017, <http://lebillet.ch/rencontre-ala-eddine-slim-au-black-movie>.

¹⁹ Slim was present for the uprising that took place from December 2010 to January 2011, during which he filmed an experimental four-part video series, *Journal d'un homme important* (Diary of an Important Man).

²⁰ Saad Chakali, "Entretien avec Saad Chakali, Critique" (Interview with Saad Chakali, Critic), Supplement, *The Last of Us*, directed by Ala Eddine Slim, DVD (Tunisia: Exit Productions, Inside Production, Madbox Studios, SVP Production, [2016] 2019).

cut to black, and a kind of poem appears on the screen in both Arabic and English, including the following:

تقيأت الجنس البشري
عقدت العلائق بالطير، بالنبات و الحيوان
إنجذبت إلى غاب الطبيعة
تلذذت النور والماء
I vomited humankind
I related to the birds, plants and beasts
I was enchanted by the woodland
I relished the light and the water.

The poem's insertion into the film marks a departure from the relative realism of the first half to the oneirism of the second, as N comes ashore in a mysterious forest landscape. Its announcement of N's relation "to the birds, plants, and beasts" forecasts the harmony he will experience there. N pokes at his compass but it has stopped working, suggesting he has arrived in "a different kind of geography, where alternative means of orientation and understanding are required."²¹ Critics have suggested that the film's abrupt cut to black while N is in the fishing boat might be interpreted as a metaphor for his death at sea.²² In this reading, N's dreamlike forest abode in the film's second half might be understood as a vision of a utopian afterlife.²³ Yet I want to examine the film's two halves for what they suggest about hospitality, and for how we might connect N's status as a refugee to the film's depiction of the landscape.

N's journey toward the sea in the film's first half is mostly framed in a series of long or extreme long shots in which he cuts a lonely figure (Fig. 5). He often appears against stark natural landscapes that are nonetheless marked by signs of human intervention, including power lines, construction, and factories. His own physical movement occurs in tandem with signs of industrial and infrastructural movement, like highways and shipping containers; these images throw into relief the contrast between the licit movement of commodities and raw materials and the protagonist's own clandestine and dangerous journey. Yet these landscapes also show evidence of environmental harm, like factory smoke drifting into sea air and piles of upturned earth next to newly built developments. The neglect and abuse that N experiences at the hands of other humans is thereby juxtaposed with human degradation of the environment.

The representation of the environment as well as of N's relation to other humans is entirely upended in the film's second half, which takes place in a preindustrial woodland. The only signs of human intervention in this landscape appear to have come at the hands of "M," the older man whom N encounters in the forest, and who wordlessly teaches N how to live there. In contrast to the humans whom N meets in the film's first half, M treats N with hospitality, feeding him rabbit that M has trapped and inviting N to share his small shack. As Chakali notes, their first encounter is the only instance in

²¹ Chris Lippard, "The Refusal of the Migrant in Ala Eddine Slim's *The Last of Us*," *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World* 18, no. 1 (2024): 82, https://doi.org/10.1386/jciaw_00121_1.

²² Alyssa Miller, "Tunisian Cinema after the Arab Spring: Portrait of a Nation in Transition," *Anthropology Now* 13, no. 2 (2021): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2021.1973858>.

²³ This reading also evokes the Drexiciyans, the Afrofuturist myth of a people who live underwater, the descendants of enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. See Kadwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 300–1. On the connections between the Black Atlantic and the Mediterranean refugee crisis, see, for example, Alessandro Di Maio, "The Black in the Mediterranean Blue," *Transition* 132 (2021): 34–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48680792>.



Figure 5. N framed in long shot as an isolated and lonely figure, *Akhir Wahid Fina*. Tunisia: Exit Productions, Inside Production, Madbox Studios. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.

the film of the classical editing technique of shot-reverse shot, typically used to depict two people who are conversing.²⁴ The camera focuses first on N's startled expression, before cutting to observe M staring wordlessly back at him. This suggests a mutual recognition and an exchange between two equals that N never experiences in the film's first half.

This ethical human relationship is inextricable from the forest landscape in which the two characters dwell, for this ecosystem is presented as one in which M and N participate equally with and alongside other beings. Although the two men must hunt and forage to survive, they also face danger themselves in the form of predatory wolves. M dies from what is implied to be a wolf's wound to the head, and N builds him a funeral pyre. Later in the film, N comes across a dead wolf, suggesting a reciprocity or equilibrium between the two species. The environment is not an endless bounty for these humans to exploit as they wish; the forest is not their "common possession."²⁵ Rather, as guests to the landscape, these two humans adapt to the forest's conditions. As N adjusts to his new life, his relationship to his environment evolves. No longer framed as an isolated and lonely figure, he begins to blend in with the grays and greens of the woods; he grows his hair long and wears animal fur, adopting the image of his mentor (Fig. 6).²⁶ The film's final shot suggests that N's immersion into his environment is complete. It depicts N from behind, standing before a waterfall; in the last seconds, we watch as his body becomes briefly transparent, before disappearing altogether. Finally, the film's refusal of language, outside the insertion of the gnomic poem, frames M and N as equals alongside the trees and other species they encounter. Like *Babil*, the film privileges the act of seeing over the act of understanding. Perhaps we might

²⁴ Chakali, "Entretien."

²⁵ Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, 87.

²⁶ The film also recalls aspects of French author Michel Tournier's novel *Vendredi ou Les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967; *Friday*, trans. Norman Denny), which reimagines the story of Robinson Crusoe. In Tournier's retelling, Crusoe abandons his obsession with "civilizing" the island and instead learns from Friday how to coexist in and with nature. Growing his hair and becoming tanned, Crusoe comes to greatly resemble Friday.



Figure 6. N begins to blend in with his environment, *Akhir Wahid Fina*. Tunisia: Exit Productions, Inside Production, Madbox Studios. Courtesy of Ala Eddine Slim.

understand N, upon his adaptation to life in the forest, to have adopted the point of view of the trees.

Yet, as noted in my introduction, the representations of M and N in *Akhir Wahid Fina* recall colonialist and racist tropes about the links between Blackness and preindustrial “nature.” In the film’s effort to conjure a “decolonized” landscape “where modernity and commoditization have not taken hold,” does it in fact rehearse racist narratives that place Blackness outside of history?²⁷ In the political environment of Tunisia today, this question is particularly fraught. Since the rise to power of President Kais Saied’s reactionary regime, “migrants” have been increasingly scapegoated for the country’s troubles, leading to a wave of violence by both state and non-state actors directed toward Black Africans—including Black Tunisians—that has not abated as of April 2025.²⁸ The rising xenophobia and racism is linked to changing environmental conditions. A long-running drought in Tunisia has contributed to shortages of food staples like bread and rice, exacerbated by an economic crisis and the war in Ukraine. One of the popular explanations for these shortages is the refrain that “Africans eat too much,” falsely attributing blame to migrants.²⁹

In conclusion, I suggest that these two films illuminate the way in which—far from being perpetrators of environmental degradation—migrants and refugees in fact suffer with and

²⁷ Lippard, “Refusal of the Migrant,” 76.

²⁸ In February 2023, Saied gave a speech to the National Security Council in which he blamed Black migrants for Tunisia’s ongoing challenges. “Hordes (*jaḥāfil*) of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa” were bringing “violence, crime, and unacceptable practices” to Tunisia, the president said, according to the statement published on 21 February 2023 on the official Facebook page for the Tunisian presidency (translation mine). For an overview of the events that followed Saied’s speech, see, for example, Shreya Parikh, “Making Tunisia Non-African Again: Saied’s Anti-Black Campaign,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 1 March 2023, <https://roape.net/2023/03/01/making-tunisia-non-african-again-saieds-anti-black-campaign/>; and “Saadia Mosbah, Black Tunisian Activist, Arrested on 6 May 2024,” *Jadaliyya*, 19 June 2024, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/46064/Saadia-Mosbah,-Black-Tunisian-activist,-arrested-on-6-May-2024>.

²⁹ Parikh, “Making Tunisia Non-African Again.”

alongside the environment. Together, they are co-constituted victims of a violence that arises out of what Derrida suggests is an urge toward mastery. The barbed wire fences that we see erected in *Babil* enact a violence that harms both the refugees encamped at Choucha, and the Choucha landscape itself. In *Akhir Wahid Fina*, the wooded dreamscape of the film's second half conjures an alternative world, governed by an ethos not of mastery, but of mutual hospitality among human and nonhuman. Yet in its efforts to imagine an alternative ethics, perhaps this film summons a hospitality that has yet to be fully conceptualized. As Derrida writes, "we do not yet know what hospitality is."³⁰

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³⁰ Derrida, "Hostipitality," 7.

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