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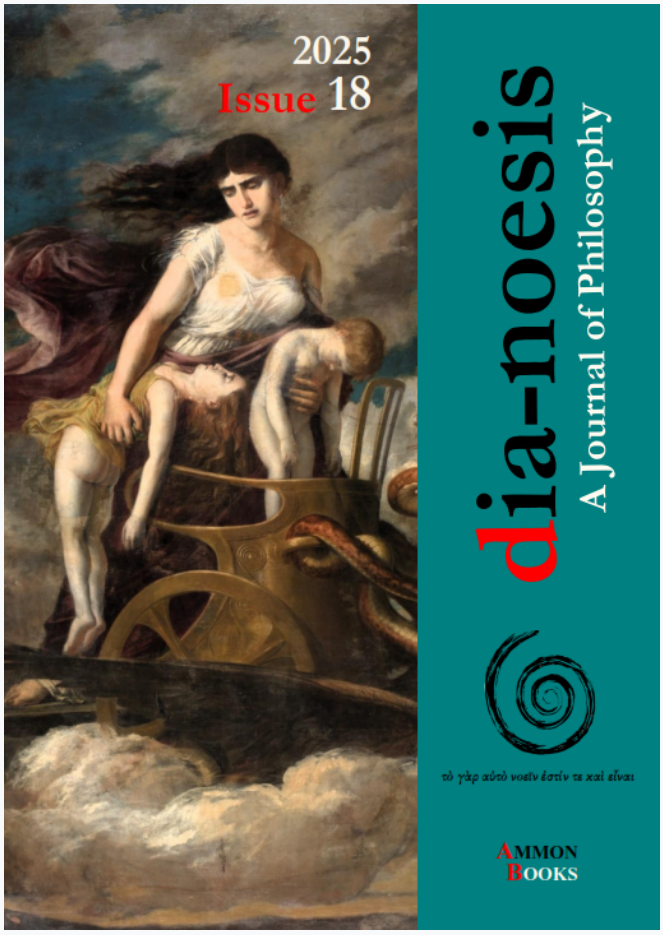

Displacement and Climate Disrupted Subjects

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Displacement and Climate Disrupted Subjects: A Phenomenological Reading of Agamben

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Abstract

The displacement of the bodily subject under conditions of forced migration, particularly in the context of climate-induced exile, invites a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of dislocation. Phenomenology foregrounds the body as the primary site of being-in-the-world; yet, when uprooted, the embodied subject undergoes a radical rupture in the continuity of place, memory, and identity. The loss of familiar spatial and social coordinates is not merely geographical but ontological, destabilizing the structures through which subjectivity is constituted. In this frame, displacement is not only a matter of movement across borders but a reconfiguration of the self's relation to the world. The phenomenological body, once anchored in a horizon of meaning, becomes estranged; its gestures, rhythms, and sensory engagements are disrupted by the absence of a sustaining lifeworld. The subject's sense of identity is fractured, caught between the memory of belonging and the uncertainty of alien space. Agamben's notion of homo sacer and the state of exception sharpens this analysis. Climate refugees often exist within juridical vacuums, stripped of political recognition yet governed through humanitarian management. Their bodily presence is both included in the global order through mechanisms of control and excluded from the full rights of political community, embodying Agamben's

paradox of "inclusive exclusion". From an ontological perspective, displacement reveals the fragility of the body's embeddedness in political and spatial orders. The dislocated subject becomes a threshold figure, existing in suspension between life as zoē (bare existence) and bios (politically qualified life). This convergence of phenomenology and Agamben underscores that climate-induced displacement is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a profound disruption of subjectivity and identity. Recognizing the displaced body as a site of contested ontology demands political frameworks that restore agency, visibility, and the conditions for human flourishing.

Keywords: *Agamben, Displacement, Identity, Ontology, Phenomenology, Subjectivity*

Introduction

The phenomenon of climate-induced displacement unsettles more than the geographical coordinates of human life; it ruptures the very ground of subjectivity and belonging. When individuals are torn from their familiar landscapes: homes, languages, and the sensory textures of daily existence, their loss is not merely material but existential. Phenomenology, with its focus on the body as the primary site of being-in-the-world, provides a critical lens through which this rupture can be understood. The displaced body is not simply in motion across borders; it is severed from the lifeworld that gave coherence to its gestures, memories, and relations. The climate refugee thus emerges as a paradigmatic figure of ontological dislocation, whose exile from place mirrors a deeper exile from meaning itself. Displacement, in this sense, is not a passage between two locations but a suspension between worlds – a condition where the body continues to live but struggles to *inhabit*.

It is within this interstice of lived experience and political exclusion that Giorgio Agamben's thought becomes profoundly relevant. Agamben's analysis of *homo sacer* and *bare life* exposes how modern sovereignty governs through the logic of inclusion by exclusion, producing lives that are biologically sustained yet politically nullified. The climate refugee embodies this paradox: rendered visible through humanitarian concern yet stripped of the rights that confer political identity. When read through a phenomenological lens, this biopolitical condition acquires a new depth; it is not only the juridical status of the refugee that is suspended, but also the phenomenological continuity of the self. To comprehend

the refugee's plight, we must therefore interrogate how sovereignty, embodiment, and worldhood intersect in the displaced subject's struggle to remain human in the absence of a stable world.

Phenomenology and the Embodied Subject: Being-in-the-World

Phenomenology, as articulated by Husserl and later expanded by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, situates the body at the center of existence. It rejects the Cartesian separation of mind and matter, positing instead that consciousness is always embodied, and that the body is not a mere vessel but the very condition through which the world becomes intelligible (Gallagher and Zahav,i 45-46; Moran 78). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is *le corps propre* – the lived body – through which perception, movement, and meaning coalesce:

> Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it sees and moves itself, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of my body; they are incrusted in its flesh; they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body. (Merleau-Ponty, 109)

Merleau-Ponty implies a reciprocal ontology where perception is co-constitutive – the world shapes the body as much as the body shapes the world. This vision of embodiment foregrounds a profound interdependence between self and environment, dissolving the illusion of separateness that underpins modern subjectivity. Our gestures, postures, and orientations are not incidental expressions of selfhood; they are the foundation of our being-in-the-world (Crowell 102; Gallagher 59). The phenomenological body is, therefore, both subjective and worldly: it experiences and is experienced, acts and is acted upon. Its identity arises not in isolation but through its relational embeddedness in space, temporality, and social interaction (Gallagher and Zahavi 112; Merleau-Ponty 137).

Within this framework, displacement is more than a geographical or political condition – it is an ontological event that fractures the embodied continuity of existence (Merleau-Ponty 94; Moran

122). To be displaced is to be estranged from the spatial and temporal rhythms that ground identity. The familiar lifeworld – constituted by routines, gestures, languages, and sensory landscapes – collapses, leaving the subject suspended in a void of meaning (Husserl 178; Gallagher and Zahavi 83). The refugee's body becomes disoriented, no longer attuned to its environment, its movements stripped of habitual significance. Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) captures this rupture: when the world ceases to be a horizon of familiarity, existence becomes unhomely (*unheimlich*), marked by anxiety and loss (Heidegger 231; Crowell 67). The dislocated body, once a site of orientation and recognition, becomes the site of estrangement – a self that can no longer locate itself within a coherent world:

> Readers and writers should not deceive themselves that literature changes the world. Literature changes the world of readers and writers, but literature does not change the world until people get out of their chairs, go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks (Nguyen 10)

Nguyen's assertion redefines the social function of literature by drawing a sharp distinction between aesthetic awareness and material change. While literature can awaken consciousness and reshape the inner worlds of readers and writers, it remains impotent without corresponding action. His statement challenges the romantic ideal of literature as an inherently transformative force, grounding its potential instead in praxis. Ultimately, Nguyen situates literature as a catalyst rather than a vehicle of change; its ethical power lies in its capacity to move people from reflection to intervention. The phenomenological disruption of displacement also extends to the realm of intersubjectivity, the shared horizon through which individuals recognize themselves in relation to others (Merleau-Ponty, 412; Gallagher, 56; Mitrou and Kolyri, 2025). In exile, this relational matrix is destabilized; the displaced subject encounters others not as participants in a shared world, but as figures within a new and often indifferent social order:

> ...exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between

> the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (Said 173)

Said's reflection exposes exile as both an existential wound and a paradox of representation. He distinguishes between the lived anguish of displacement and its often-romanticized portrayal in art and history, revealing how narrative attempts to sublimate pain into meaning. The "unhealable rift" he describes underscores exile's permanence; its sorrow is not merely situational but ontological, marking a fracture between self and belonging. This estrangement fractures the self's narrative continuity, dislodging identity from the context that once sustained it (Gallagher and Zahavi 97; Moran 144). As the phenomenological body loses its rootedness, the subject's sense of temporality also unravels – past and future blur into an uncertain present. Thus, the displaced person's being is neither fully here nor there, but stretched between memory and anticipation, belonging and exclusion. To examine displacement phenomenologically, then, is to confront how the erosion of place entails the erosion of self – a crisis not only of home but of ontology itself.

Displacement as Ontological Rupture

Displacement fractures the ontological foundations of existence by severing the intimate bond between the body and the world (Merleau-Ponty 178; Moran 92). In phenomenological terms, the world is not a neutral space but a field of significance through which the subject's identity takes form (Husserl 108; Gallagher and Zahavi 63). When a climate catastrophe, war, or political crisis forces migration, what is lost is not merely a geographic location but the entire horizon of meaning that once anchored the self (Crowell 214). The familiar textures of sound, smell, and rhythm that sustained bodily orientation are replaced by the foreign and the unstable. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* reminds us that the home is the primary site where the self "takes root in the

world" (Bachelard 5). Its loss, therefore, is not simply spatial but existential:

> In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies; its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world... (Bachelard 6)

Bachelard presents the house as the foundational structure of human existence, a spatial metaphor for stability, identity, and emotional rootedness. It is not merely a shelter but a vessel of continuity that safeguards the self against the chaos of external and internal storms. Bachelard fuses the material and the metaphysical, showing how the home integrates physical dwelling with psychological being. His vision transforms architecture into ontology, suggesting that to lose one's home is to suffer a fracture in the very coherence of existence. The displaced subject finds themselves unmoored, unable to dwell, condemned to perpetual motion both externally and internally – a life lived in the aftermath of world-loss.

This ontological rupture manifests as a profound disruption of temporality and embodiment. The refugee or climate exile inhabits a suspended present where the past becomes inaccessible and the future unimaginable (Merleau-Ponty 182; Moran 147). The phenomenological sense of continuity – the feeling that one's life unfolds within an intelligible narrative – disintegrates. Heidegger's *unheimlich* (unhomeliness) captures this existential homelessness: a state in which the world no longer offers a sense of belonging or care (Heidegger 233; Crowell 219; Filippopoulos, 2024; Papacharalambous, 2021). Displacement exposes the fragility of our dependence on spatial and social coordinates for the constitution of selfhood. The body, once a medium of orientation and intentionality, becomes instead a marker of precarity – watched, documented, and regulated (Gallagher 77). It is a body that moves but cannot arrive, that perceives but is not perceived as belonging. The ontological wound of displacement thus opens at the intersection of visibility and erasure: to exist, yet not to be recognized as existing within a shared world (Gallagher and Zahavi 121; Merleau-Ponty 190):

> The war was over, but the past was not. It was alive, and it had a grip on her. She had lived in three different countries, worked five different jobs, and changed her name twice. Yet, she felt like she was still standing on a beach in the middle of a war, waiting for a boat that would never arrive. She was a collection of scars and memories, not a whole person, not a person moving forward. (Nguyen, *The Refugees* 156)

Nguyen's passage captures the haunting persistence of trauma that renders temporal and geographic displacement meaningless. Despite physical relocation and the passage of time, the protagonist remains psychically tethered to the scene of loss, illustrating how war inscribes itself onto the self as an unending present. Her fragmented identity embodies the phenomenological paralysis of exile, where the past continually infiltrates the now. Through this portrayal, Nguyen exposes the illusion of recovery, showing that survival does not guarantee wholeness, only endurance.

At its deepest level, displacement reveals the instability of being itself. When the lifeworld collapses, what remains is a stripped form of existence – what Agamben would call *bare life* (Agamben 8). The phenomenological and political dimensions converge here: the body that has lost its world is also the body deprived of rights and recognition (Heidegger 233; Merleau-Ponty 182). To live in exile is to inhabit a liminal ontology, suspended between *zoē* – biological existence – and *bios* – the meaningful life of political community (Agamben 10; Arendt 179). This threshold existence renders visible the vulnerability that underlies all human beings-in-the-world (Butler 29). Yet it also gestures toward the possibility of reconstitution: a search for new forms of dwelling and relationality, however fragile (Bachelard 47). Displacement, then, is not only a catastrophe but a revelation – it exposes the dependency of identity on worldhood and the necessity of rethinking being itself under the conditions of global precarity (Mbembe 39; Moran 215): "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who can live and who must die" (Mbembe 17).

Agamben and the Politics of Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben's philosophical intervention in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* redefines the relationship between life, law, and power by revealing how modern sovereignty depends on the capacity to separate bare life (*zoē*) from politically qualified life (*bios*) (Agamben 4-6). Drawing upon Roman law, Agamben's figure of *homo sacer*—one who may be killed but not sacrificed, embodies the paradox of inclusion through exclusion: the subject who is simultaneously inside and outside the political order (Agamben 11; Esposito 45):

> The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). The life caught in the sovereign ban is the originally sacred life... and, in this sense, the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty. (Agamben 181, 83)

Agamben's formulation exposes how political power is grounded in the paradox of exclusion that constitutes inclusion. He reveals that sovereignty operates through the capacity to suspend law and thereby determine which lives count as politically meaningful. The "bare life" produced within this suspension occupies a liminal space (neither fully inside nor outside the legal order) where existence is preserved yet stripped of significance. In this way, Agamben unearths the hidden violence of modern governance: its authority rests not on the protection of life but on the perpetual creation of lives that can be abandoned.

The refugee, for Agamben, becomes the emblem of this paradox, representing a life reduced to its biological minimum, stripped of juridical and political significance (Agamben 132; Mbembe 16). This biopolitical logic is not an aberration of the modern state but its foundational mechanism. Sovereignty, in Agamben's reading, is constituted through the power to decide which lives are protected by law and which are exposed to abandonment (Agamben 83).

The condition of climate refugees vividly materializes this logic of bare life. Displaced by ecological collapse yet unrecognized

within international legal frameworks, they exist in what Agamben calls the *state of exception* – a zone where rights are suspended, and legality gives way to administrative control (Agamben, *State of Exception* 22–24). Camps, detention centers, and "temporary" settlements function as contemporary spaces of exception, where the rule of law is both enacted and withdrawn (Agamben, *State of Exception* 35; Fassin 51). Here, the refugee's body is neither fully excluded from nor fully included in the political order; it is managed, categorized, and monitored under the guise of humanitarianism (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 133; Fassin 57). Agamben's analysis reveals that this humanitarian governance does not restore political agency; rather, it perpetuates a depoliticized form of life that must be preserved but not empowered. The result is a regime of care without recognition, where existence is maintained but meaning is denied (Agamben 135; Mbembe 29):

> Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life (), the camp was... the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation... The camp is the space that is opened up when the state of exception begins to become the rule. (Agamben 169, 171)

Agamben's depiction of the camp as the ultimate biopolitical space reveals the terrifying culmination of sovereign power. In this space, life is reduced to its biological essence, devoid of political recognition or rights. The camp exemplifies how the suspension of law, initially an exception, can become a normalized mechanism of control. Through this analysis, Agamben exposes the dark continuity between modern governance and totalitarianism: both depend on transforming human beings into mere bodies to be managed, surveilled, and contained.

In this sense, the refugee's plight is not a deviation from modern governance but its logical culmination. The global management of displaced populations exposes the underlying structure of modern power: the capacity to create spaces where human beings are reduced to their biological existence and rendered politically invisible. Climate refugees, like *homo sacer*, inhabit this liminal zone between law and life, embodying the tension between visibility and

rightlessness. Their existence demonstrates how sovereignty extends its reach not merely by governing territories but by governing the very threshold between life and death, inclusion and exclusion. To interpret their condition through Agamben's framework is to understand that climate displacement is not just a humanitarian crisis but a manifestation of the political ontology of modernity itself – an order that sustains itself through the continual production of *bare life*.

The Displaced Subject: Between Phenomenology and Biopolitics

The intersection of phenomenology and biopolitics exposes the dual register of displacement: it is simultaneously a lived rupture and a political production (Merleau-Ponty 112; Agamben 6). From a phenomenological perspective, the displaced body experiences exile as a disruption of worldhood, an existential fracture in the continuity of being (Husserl 78; Heidegger 245). From a biopolitical standpoint, however, this rupture is deliberately structured through mechanisms of governance that manage, contain, and classify populations (Agamben 122; Fassin 59). The refugee's subjectivity is thus doubly alienated: on the one hand, from the familiar textures of a meaningful world; on the other, from the political structures that recognize and protect identity. In this intersection lies the figure of the displaced subject, a being whose embodied existence is both lived and legislated, whose ontology is defined by exclusion. Displacement here is not accidental but systematic, revealing how modern forms of power operate by producing zones where the boundaries between life and law dissolve (Agamben, *State of Exception* 33; Mbembe 29).

Phenomenology allows us to understand how this political exclusion is lived from within, as a bodily and affective condition (Gallagher and Zahavi 104; Moran 87). The loss of worldhood translates into the erosion of agency, voice, and recognition. The refugee body becomes a site of inscription where global inequalities, environmental violence, and state sovereignty are etched into flesh (Mbembe 21; Fassin 63). Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body as a "general medium for having a world" becomes tragically inverted: in displacement, the body is reduced to a medium for survival, stripped of its capacity to project meaning or inhabit the

world creatively (Merleau-Ponty 203; Gallagher 55). Yet this embodied vulnerability is also what makes the displaced subject a critical site of resistance.

> Relationality [is] not only a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence. (Butler 20)

Butler's conception of relationality underscores that human existence is inherently interdependent rather than autonomous. She reframes relationships not as optional or external to the self, but as the very conditions through which identity and ethics emerge. This recognition of interdependence introduces a moral imperative: to acknowledge that our lives are constituted through and sustained by others. In the context of displacement, Butler's idea demands an ethics of recognition that restores visibility and responsibility toward those rendered precarious or excluded. Judith Butler's notion of "precarious life" and Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" extend this insight by showing how the management of vulnerability becomes a means of political control – but also, potentially, a ground for rethinking ethical responsibility and collective care (Butler 33; Mbembe 39).

Agamben's *bare life* and phenomenology's *lived body* converge in their revelation of the subject as both material and metaphysical, biological and meaningful. When displacement reduces the subject to biological persistence, the phenomenological perspective restores visibility to the inner experience of loss, memory, and longing. The *displaced subject* is thus neither purely passive nor purely constructed – it inhabits an ontological threshold where the self is continually reconstituted through acts of endurance and remembrance. To dwell in exile is to negotiate between being managed and being human, between survival and selfhood. The phenomenological-biopolitical synthesis, therefore, compels us to see climate displacement not simply as a matter of governance or compassion but as a crisis that lays bare the fragility of subjectivity itself – the point at which the political and the existential collapse into one another.

Toward a Phenomenological Ethics of Recognition

If displacement reveals the fragility of subjectivity, a phenomenological ethics of recognition seeks to restore its ontological ground. Recognition, in this context, is not simply the moral acknowledgment of the other's suffering but a radical reorientation of perception – a return to the intersubjective basis of existence that phenomenology foregrounds. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty, recognition must begin with the embodied encounter, where the self apprehends the other not as an abstraction or political statistic, but as a living, sensing being who co-inhabits the world. In this sense, ethical response emerges not from juridical obligation but from the shared vulnerability of corporeal life – the very condition Agamben's bare life exposes yet fails to redeem. A phenomenological ethics, therefore, challenges the biopolitical logic that reduces life to survival (Merleau-Ponty 112; Gallagher and Zahavi 57). It calls instead for a recuperation of what Hannah Arendt names the *bios* – the life of political existence and shared action – rather than the mere *zoē* of biological persistence (Arendt 42):

> The fundamental problem of the stateless person is not the loss of freedom, but the loss of a community willing to guarantee and execute any rights whatsoever... Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed, but that nobody cares even whether they are oppressed or not. (Arendt 293)

The individual ceases to exist not because they are denied specific rights, but because they are expelled from the very structure through which rights become meaningful — the political community. In Arendt's view, rights are not innate or universal in practice; they are performative, enacted only through a state's recognition. Thus, the stateless person becomes the paradigmatic other of modern sovereignty – existing outside law, history, and accountability.

To recognize the displaced subject is to resist the state's framing of them as administrable life, as population or data (Agamben 83; Butler 119). It is to affirm, through the phenomenological lens, that displacement is not only a crisis of territory but of appearing: the

dislocated body becomes invisible to political sight (Merleau-Ponty 98; Crowell 213). Recognition must thus restore visibility, reinstating the displaced subject as a being capable of meaning, expression, and world-making (Gallagher 67; Moran 154).

This ethics, finally, gestures toward a post-sovereign understanding of community –one grounded not in citizenship but in co-presence. It imagines an ontology of being-with, where recognition is sustained by empathy and openness rather than by borders or categories. Such a framework transforms displacement from a state of exclusion into a potential site of ethical renewal. In the phenomenological sense, to recognize the displaced subject is to recover the lost dialogue between self and world – a gesture that both precedes and exceeds the politics of belonging.

Conclusion

The displacement of the bodily subject, when read through the intertwined lenses of phenomenology and Agamben's biopolitical theory, reveals a profound crisis in the ontology of human existence. It is not merely a geographical or sociopolitical dislocation but an estrangement from one's own being-in-the-world – a rupture that severs the link between embodiment, identity, and place. Phenomenology exposes how displacement fractures the continuity of lived experience, transforming the body from a medium of intentional action into a site of exposure and surveillance. Agamben's *homo sacer* becomes a haunting figure here, the displaced as one who exists outside the political order yet remains entirely subjected to its power, existing in a state of suspended humanity.

Within this philosophical terrain, subjectivity is not annihilated but rendered precarious. The displaced body, caught between phenomenological invisibility and biopolitical control, embodies the paradox of modern existence: to be alive but politically dead, visible yet unseen. However, phenomenology provides a countermovement – it reasserts the ontological primacy of perception, of being-in-relation. Even in situations of extreme marginality, it provides the chance to regain agency by establishing subjectivity in lived experience rather than in legal recognition. The displaced subject, when viewed phenomenologically, becomes a mirror for the world's ethical failures, but also a site of ontological renewal –

a reminder that meaning is always co-constituted through relation, not possession.

Ultimately, the dialogue between phenomenology and Agamben opens toward an ethics of recognition that transcends the limits of sovereignty and identity politics. To recognize the displaced is to acknowledge that subjectivity itself is relational, fragile, and always at risk of erasure. The phenomenological return to embodiment allows for a reimagining of politics – one that begins from vulnerability rather than dominance, from shared existence rather than exclusion. In this sense, displacement is not merely a symptom of crisis but a philosophical threshold – a space where ontology, ethics, and politics converge to question what it means to be human in a world that continually renders life disposable.

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