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Stories from the Border.

**The Representation of Border Zones
and Migrant Subjectivities in Italian
Contemporary Literature**

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Abstract

The Central Mediterranean migratory route has made itself notorious for being one of the most dangerous illegal ways to reach Europe. Not only shipwrecks and deaths at sea: we continue to hear stories of disappearances in the desert, of tortures in detention centers and abuses perpetrated by smugglers as much as by local authorities in North Africa and Italy. All these stories have a common refrain; that the peaks of violence are registered there where a country establishes its frontiers. For migrants, crossing the border can entail forced political desubjectivization that, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, reduces them to bare life: to nothing more than living bodies subjected to state power.

Studying the literary representation of the relationship between migrants and border zones, this thesis hosts an attempt to disclose a nuanced understanding of how space influences subjectivation processes. Without rejecting the concept of bare life, this research puts it into dialogue with reflections on agency and resistance in order to find out whether an opposition to the biopolitical structure that binds individuals to the State is possible from the condition of non-political subjects at the border. The argument underpinning this investigation is that literary representations of border-crossing can disclose a thinking of the border as a third space, an elsewhere that enables specific forms of resistance and "re-existence" to come into being. In its literary representations, the in-between space of the border is often depicted as a fertile ground for the proliferation of violence. At the same time, it is the space that can let processes of subjectivization emerge and alternative ways of political existence be envisaged, against the idea that a depoliticized human being would automatically be excluded from all political sphere.

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Introduction

Numbers and maps tell horror stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice – were that even possible – is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look.

Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends* (e-book)

Referring to the Us-Mexico border zones, Luiselli advocates in this passage the need to stop the normalization of horror and violence testified by each story of migration. The only way to do this, she suggests, is to unceasingly listen to, tell, repeat, the individual stories of migrants who cross national borders. To let them haunt us. Let them instill horror in us, shame, and guilt.

It is no mystery that the Central Mediterranean migratory route, the stretch that connects North Africa to Italy, is the scenario for just as horrific stories. From ones of deaths at sea to those of tortures and rapes in Libya's jails, from barely avoided drownings to abuses and violence in Italian reception centers: illegal migratory routes become too often the setting for this kind of terror stories.

Nonetheless, the Italian public discourse on migration seems to overlook these happenings in favor of a common refrain: crisis, emergency, invasion. These are the terms that media are obsessed with. They all refer to something too big to rule, too out of control to handle. Yet, if something that has lasted for more than twenty years is still being labeled as emergency, this either shows political ineffectiveness to adequately solve the phenomenon or it implies a certain convenience for media and politics to portray it as an exceptional situation.

The concept of crisis evokes a rupture, an event or a series of events unsettling the normal order of things. But it should not be thought of as something a-political that requires exceptional political intervention. Rather, "crisis is coterminous with the wider political milieu that produces it" (Jeandesboz & Wilkins, 317), and it has a performative role in "transforming and ordering politics"

(317). The consequences of a crisis reverberate in the representation of the space where such crisis becomes visible, where its performativity takes a physical dimension. In Italy, the migration crisis has mainly been represented as taking place in the Mediterranean, the border zone where both humanitarian rescue missions and border-defense have been staged by media. The Mediterranean Sea and Lampedusa have increasingly become the most visible sites of control for inflows and the most-employed rhetorical image to convey national security¹ or humanitarian hospitality. As Paolo Cuttita has noticed in his analysis on the recent history of Italian governments' handling of immigration until 2012, media representation of Italian border zones – especially Lampedusa – has been key to strengthen either humanitarian or securitarian perception of the government's line (2012). Despite the spectacularized management of the “crisis” carried out through the mediatic representation of borders, the concepts of crisis and emergency – let alone that of “invasion”, mostly employed by far-right nationalists – are not the most appropriate to describe the migratory phenomenon. Luca Ciabbarri points at the necessity to interrupt the circular temporality that the employment of the concept of crisis permits in public discourse, as it identifies a certain happening as the original moment of a phenomenon, as a newly formed problem (xiii). Moreover, today's data on inflows do not match the quantitative disproportion evoked by these terms. The number of immigrants in Italy has always been low in relation to its population compared to other European countries, and immigration flows by sea have even decreased in the past years, reaching in the first months of 2019 a historical low.² Nonetheless, mirroring this decrease is a quite paradoxical raise of diffidence and fear towards newly arrived immigrants, and, together with it, a raise in consent for anti-immigration populist parties.

The government formed in the aftermath of March 2018 elections is riding the wave of a widespread feeling of insecurity by adopting measures³ destined to render asylum and residence

¹ Paradigmatic is the current Minister of Interns Salvini's refrain stating that “Ports are closed” when they are not and cannot be. (Camilli 2019, <https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/annalisa-camilli/2019/01/07/porti-italiani-sea-watch>).

² *Ansa* (February 20, 2019). http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2019/02/20/frontex-numeri-bassi-in-italia-da-anni_5fab9795-dea6-4d1f-9e88-ce6532b09169.html.

³ As the “Decreto sicurezza.” Access to the full text at: https://media.urbanpost.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Decreto-Legge-Immigrazione-e-sicurezza-pubblica_24124355.pdf.

permit for humanitarian reasons harder to obtain, and employing, at the same time, a rhetoric that invokes the reinforcement of national frontiers.

Securitarian approaches of this kind are not new to Italy's history, yet perhaps media and politics have never been animated by such polarized debate on immigration. Both liberal progressives and new nationalists portray the immigrant in such a way that responds to their political line-up, often reducing their subjectivity to victim or danger, respectively (Zizek 2016).

In an attempt to move past partial political views and instrumental media representation of migrant subjects and of their movement, this project intends to seek a complex understanding of subjectivities on the move in relation to the space of their journey. Following Luiselli's reminder on the importance of listening to individual stories of migration, the scope of this research will be limited to the analysis of their literary representation in three Italian works of both fiction and non-fiction, without nonetheless missing the chance for a wider political and theoretical reflection on the issue. These books present a variety of stories within each of them, enabling an analysis enriched by a multiplicity of voices and perspectives to shed light on how migrant subjectivities are shaped by the relation between their movement and the border zones on the Central Mediterranean route.

Literary migration stories will be studied by focusing on the spatiality of people's movement and instances of stasis; specifically, the concept of border will play a crucial role. As briefly discussed, whatever image politics and media wish to convey of the managing of immigration, the centrality of the border – its visual representation and conceptual evocation – is a constant. The strict implication between national borders and migration flows is of course not only rhetorical: all border-crossing, especially when illegal, is a challenge to national delimitations. At the same time, it is primarily at the border that sovereign power enacts national control and security policies.

It is also at the border that the highest rate of rights violations is registered, and that national law can be suspended at times, when exceptional situations call for unordinary measures.

The question guiding this research can be formulated in these terms: how is the relationship between the geopolitical space of the border and migrant subjectivity represented in Italian fiction

and non-fiction literature of migration? The hypothesis underpinning this analysis is that literary representations of border-crossing can disclose a thinking of the border as a third space that, not always tied to vertical territorial subjection, can open specific forms of resistance and “re-existence” in a self-definition that evolves around the embodied experience of mobility. From a space as such, that represents an in-between status, a process of subjectivation can be enhanced, against the idea of national belonging as the primary feature in identity-construction. The notion of border as a complex, exceptional entity that can host law suspension will be a fundamental theoretical starting point for this research.

Besides trying to detach the figure of the migrant from rhetorical and politicized readings of their person, the aim of this project is to open a theoretical reflection on whether migrant subjects can claim a space of political and ontological freedom despite finding themselves on alien territory that can even strip them of all rights. Specifically, it will search whether this can happen, according to the chosen case studies, in the various stages of their journey: in Africa, across the Mediterranean – the sea itself and the island of Lampedusa – and, finally, Italy.

In order to unravel the peculiarities of lives in mobility, their embodied and experiential dimension, this project will put at the center the spatiality of migration. An analysis of the relationship between migrants and the space in which they move will be pivotal to grasp the challenges that their movement raises and the role that the particularities of a territory play on the configuration of their subjectivity. Notions of embodied experience and of political recognition will be central to this task, as their correlation is highly affected by the spatial determinations on a person’s movement.

Focusing on a corpus composed by three Italian literary works, this project begins with exploring in literary representation the possibility of migrant resistance and contestation from border zones on the Mediterranean routes of migration from Africa to Italy. The analytical standpoint of the border permits to adopt a decentered perspective; to critically inhabit a space that stands in between countries, territories, and that at the same time constitutes the threshold of a nation's rules and legislation. It offers a view on the inside by nonetheless remaining anchored to the awareness of what

it means to be outside – or to be neither: to be undefined. A space as such, that flees all definition and strict categorization can come to be a neutral site that lets alternative ways of being in the world emerge.

As noticed, in the case of immigration from Africa to Italy the most geographically visible and the most media represented frontier is the Mediterranean Sea, which has become the privileged visual setting upon which to stage the migratory phenomenon. Yet, as border studies showed, the border is a complex concept and the geographical lines or areas that delimitate a nation always resound in a multiplicity of other visible and invisible areas throughout the territory.

An important turn on this matter was signed by Balibar's theorization of the polysemy of border (1998), which led to question the identification of border with external frontiers of a state. This theory broadened the concept of border from physical and geographically locatable zones – airports, frontier checkpoints, ports – to often imperceptible factors, such as technological collections of documents or security data. Instead of seeing the border as the result of social factors, Balibar has unveiled the tight connection between borders and politics. In his terms, borders are “no longer the shores of politics but [...] the space of the political itself” (222-223). Addressing the multidimensionality of the border is a way to unmask the presumption of border as a stable construct, as reflected in the metaphor of “lines in the sands” employed in the 2009 agenda for critical border studies (Parker et al.). Scholars now agree that borders and boundaries are enclosed by lines that are shifting, erasable, re-traceable, rather than ultimate and unchanging; and they are not necessarily visible to all (Rumford in Johnson et al. 2011). Elaborating on this concept, Rumford has argued that “borders are woven into the fabric of society” and thus “borders are the key to understanding networked connectivity as well as questions of identity, belonging, political conflict, and societal transformation.” (Johnson et al. 2011, 68). In the case of immigration from Africa to Italy, this becomes particularly clear; the territorial borders that constitute an obstacle or a site of confinement for migrants are often mirrored in the socio-political boundaries that impede or that slow down their integration.

In order to understand why this is the case, it is essential to discover the existing relation between the conceptual and spatial entity of the border and state power, and why it is possible that human presence at the border becomes defined by the same in-between status of that space. It is indeed often the case that the political status of migrants lies in the same limbo: between inclusion and exclusion. Agamben's biopolitical theory offers precious insights on this issue, as it provides a conceptual interpretation of the relationship between territorial power and political or apolitical subjects. His theory will therefore be considered as central, without nevertheless underestimating the critical debate concerning it.

Drawing from Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Agamben argues that the state of exception is the biopolitical original structure of state power (2003), and he explains the political subjection of citizens to the modern state in terms of bare life (1995). His theory unveils the constitutive contradiction upon which sovereign power rests: exception from the normal juridical order, i.e. law suspension, is what guarantees its stability. In other terms, the condition of existence of the law is the possibility of its abeyance. Although in his work this is never made explicit, it has been argued that Agamben's theory is primarily a spatial theory (Minca 2006), and the state of exception has been a useful concept to investigate the unordinary nature of the border, either understood as a physical or non-physical area of demarcation (Lemke 2005). Nonetheless, many scholars have disagreed with Agamben's definition of the refugee as an individual reduced to bare life when excluded from all political order (Owens 2009) as much as with his formulation of an overly powerful territorial sovereign that would be the only force in deciding the politicization of human beings. The critique moved to Agamben is that if sovereign power is all-encompassing and exception from the law is not only contemplated in its nature but a necessary part of it, there is no space left for individual political agency and resistance (Grelet 1999).

Yet, a careful reading of Agamben can show that his notion of power "does not necessarily preclude resistance" (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2007). In the concluding section of his book *State of Exception*, Agamben encourages future research to undertake the patient work that unveils the

deceitful distinction between life and right, between law and law abeyance. An investigation of this kind, that seriously engages with Agamben's suggestion, should be conducted at and from the border. A zone of indistinction between the law and its absence – as the border can be – is able to lay bare the constitution of power, and thus provide a liminal standpoint from which to critique the inside-outside structure of the political arrangement of space and people.

Only by focusing on the spatial relation between migrant and border, therefore, can we address questions about migrants' political agency and resistance. However, this research is less interested in exploring the dimension of resistance and migrant agency in strictly political terms. The intention is to conduct a reflection on the constitution of a subjectivity not only defined, negatively, in opposition to power – thus in terms of what rights a subjectivity as such is *not* entitled to – but rather, positively, in relation to the space of his or her movement. In order to clarify this, a redefinition of the key concept of resistance is essential.

The common understanding of resistance implies a collective or individual agency whose contestation has a specific object – a certain law, a regime, a political asset. Yet, this research is not interested in a sole political reflection on resistance in the sense of organized activism and systematic protest. As Mignolo notices, the notion of resistance is too tied to the negative connotation of opposition to an established order. It should rather be articulated as “re-existence”: a positive movement that avoids remaining trapped in the rules of the contested order (Mignolo 2017). This concept, which articulated as such exceeds an only political meaning, implies an ontological question. This question addresses the relation between human existence and territory, and it helps moving towards a way to conceive migrant subjectivities that are not necessarily embedded in the dynamics of politics. Moreover, it enables a reflection that conciliates individual, lived experiences with geopolitical factors, with particular attention to the bodily dimension of migration.

A problem emerges here: how to conciliate the study of a subjectivity that seeks to “re-exist” with a theoretical one on the relation between the space of the border and migrants without neglecting the specificity of each movement, journey, individual difficulties?

A new angle to explore the matter can be found in an interdisciplinary approach that combines border studies with literary analysis. Turning to literature means looking for an access, albeit mediated and with differences from case to case, into the individual stories that unfold at the border and that constitute it. As Newman and Paasi have noticed in their review on the notion of border in political geography that narrative can be fundamental to understand “how boundaries influence and are employed in the social construction of sociospatial identities” (1998). And literary narratives can enable a reflection that moves from the conceptualization of border as state of exception towards one of border as a liminal space where not only resistance in a political sense can happen, but also a “re-existence” in terms of a sociospatial identity. This research, indeed, does not take subjectivity to be a synonym of selfhood, which entails existential and perhaps metaphysical questions. Rather, it speaks of subjectivity as the early stage – or the stage that precedes and that leans toward – political subjectivity.

Literary narrative can provide a fruitful perspective on the matter. As Jacques Rancière noticed in his *Politics of Aesthetics* (2013), literature and politics share similar substratum in that they function as fictional arrangements of signs and facts. In the chapter “The Distribution of the Sensible” (12-19), he stresses what the arts and political projects have in common: “bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible.” (19) They are two different discourse modalities that share the function and the ability to organize space. Even “the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for” (19) rest on the same foundation, he explains. It is starting from this tight implication between literature and politics that the two discourses can be called, in this research, to speak to one another. A literary study of the border and its relation to migrant subjects will then start from the crucial observation of literature’s ability to organize the sensible, primarily considered in a spatial connotation.

A similar approach is undertaken by Emma Bond’s *Writing Migration through the Body*, which focuses on the narratives of embodied dimension of migration. She is interested in exploring “how the body becomes meaningful, how it is read, how it is written and narrated, and how it is

‘managed by subjects, others and nations’” (3). The privileged setting for this investigation is found by Bond in the written text, which links mobility studies to the humanities by providing a dynamic site of analysis where the narrativization of time and space is subject to variations in perception and interpretation. The tight connection of mobility and literature opens a critical angle for exploring the spatiality of migrant subjectivity that permits not to abandon the theoretical discussion on the nature of the border and its repercussions.

Literature provides an aesthetic encounter with reality that brings the reader to question his or her common understanding of the represented subject and to negotiate it under new spatio-temporal and logical lenses. Analyzing literary works allows to enter the space of representation par excellence, where the dynamics of narration are there to be touched, perceived, analyzed; where reality is shaped in a space created a-new, yet never pure. Literary narration is the result of a selection – of facts, language, form. Attention to the way the results of this selection are harmonized into the text can shed light on how every work organizes the complex reality of migration stories, thus adding essential information to the study of represented human identities and the codependence between their spatial and socio-political determinations.

For what concerns the relation between borders and migrant subjectivities, a literary approach provides a yet unexplored critical angle. Whereas theory on borders and migration is very rich, never has literary representation been studied in the sense of its capacity to nurture a new vocabulary on the spatially determined constitution of migrant subjectivities.

As Iain Chambers argues referring to the representation of the Mediterranean Sea, the space of representation is “the space that promotes and produces subjectivity. Both acquiescing and saying no to power occurs here” (11). To study the representation of border-crossing in literature allows to enter a space where the dynamics of power that channel and rule migration flows can be articulated and thus unraveled, disclosing possible considerations on the emergence of subjectivities in response to these dynamics. Representation is the space that opens up in the interval between words and things, the jump that all writing has to do to make reality intelligible, the margin that comes into being with

all linguistic interpretation of facts. It is from this space that this research begins; that a reflection, albeit theoretically informed, will let itself be shaken by the aesthetic encounter with texts that put us face to face with the representation of human beings whose life is marked by mobility.

For what concerns theory and methodology to conduct the delineated analysis, this research will refer to border studies as its main theoretical interlocutor, which will be brought into dialogue with theory on the relation between literature and mobility, between artistic expression and politics. In order to let individual stories and literary border representations in literature intervene in the discussion of border studies, this research will move within an interdisciplinary theoretical scope.

Specifically, this project will critically engage with the field of border studies and Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical theory, whose reflections on the state of exception will be a fundamental starting point. Agamben's notion of exception will be complicated by putting it into dialogue with its critiques, and by exploring its relation to individual agency, subjectivity, and re-existence through literary representations of migration. For what concerns the implication of literature and politics, Rancière's ideas on the politics of aesthetics will be necessary in order to disclose what is at stake in this relationship for the specific case of migration narratives. This theoretical investigation will be the object of the first chapter of this thesis, where primary attention will be given to the implications of literature and border theory as a necessary premise to the following analysis of singular case studies.

Besides conducting a critical analysis of concepts and theory, this thesis will follow the methodological approach of close reading in order to investigate the particularities of each case study and to bring them into communication with each other. Particular attention will be devoted to analyzing the representation of border zones in their different possible articulations, to see how they reverberate onto the broader narrative lines and how they portray the constitution of subjectivities shaped by movement. The case studies that will be taken into consideration are: Alessandro Leogrande. *La frontiera*. Feltrinelli, 2015; Stefano Liberti. *A sud di Lampedusa. Cinque anni di viaggi sulle rotte dei migranti*. Minimum fax, 2008; Francesca Melandri. *Sangue giusto*. Rizzoli, 2017.

Despite the existence of a vast literary production on the topic, this corpus has been chosen for being representative of contemporary Italian migration narrative. These works have all been published recently (since 2008), which allows for a specific temporal focus on the migratory phenomenon. Two fiction and one non-fiction works were selected, to explore the potentials and the limits of each genre, and to find out the different or similar directions towards which they will guide the research. Non-fiction structures certified happenings into a narrative, while fiction represents plausible, possible realities and situations. Between poetry and history – which in a perhaps reckless analogy can correspond, in this context, to the notions of fiction and non-fiction – Aristotle was convinced of the superiority of the first for its wider capacity: to include not only the real but also the possible, not only what happened but also what is likely to happen. Rather than determining the winner in an inexistent competition, the reason why this research decides to analyze both fiction and non-fiction is to confront theoretical analysis with different modalities of representation.

Leogrande and Liberti are journalists that move across Italy and Africa interviewing immigrants and emigrants, and construct coherent larger narratives starting from these. Liberti's analysis is more focused on the African continent, where he travels following the routes that lead either to Morocco or Lybia as the final country for migrants before crossing the Mediterranean (or Ceuta and Melilla's walls, in the case of Morocco). Melandri's novel narrates an immigration travel from Africa to Italy: the protagonist flees from Ethiopia and will present an asylum request in Italy in name of the *sangue giusto*, "right blood," that, as an Italian descendent, he could benefit from. This case study was chosen because it enables a reflection on the relation between Italy and its former colonies, challenging the Italian audience to face the violent colonial experience of the country. Moreover, this story offers precious insights on the dynamics of discrimination and exclusion that pervade Italian society and that constitute an obstacle to immigrants' integration. This case will permit an analysis of the projection of national frontiers onto social ones.

Each work sets migration narratives in a different context, which will permit a varied and complex analysis on what comes to be the border, at what time and under what conditions.

As a remark to the centrality of the concepts of space and territory for this research, its structure will also follow a topological organization. The first chapter will constitute the theoretical framework grounding the analysis that will follow. Rather than a closed-off, self-sufficient theory, this part will be considered as a starting point subject to transformation and nuancing as the research unfolds. If theory fails to become entangled with the specificities of literary case studied, the project itself loses its rationale and purpose.

The second chapter will be dedicated to studying representation of border-crossing in Africa as presented in Stefano Liberti's *A sud di Lampedusa*. Our focus will be turned to the experience of the travel itself, on experiences of mobility across certain African countries. The border, here understood as a primarily physical obstacle for the journey, will be investigated as a potential third space of re-existence.

The third chapter will move to consider the borders of Italy as they are represented in Alessandro Leogrande's *La frontiera*. The main border zones to be explored are the Mediterranean Sea and the island of Lampedusa. The analysis of this text will come into being as an attempt to answer to how these border zones affect immigrants' existence in Italy, and it will proceed from the exam of how these areas are represented within the wider context of immigration, in relation to state power and entrance policies. Chapters two and three will also provide a common space for reflecting on how non-fiction represents existence on alien soil in relation to the spatiality of mobility.

The fourth chapter will concern what can be defined border projections. Italian national borders will here be studied in their social repercussions on dynamics of integration or discrimination. This section will be dedicated to the study of the novel *Sangue giusto*. Melandri's work will look at spatial instances of confinement within the Italian territory and raise questions on the sedimentations of colonialism in contemporary Italian society. The analysis will follow the process that the immigrant protagonist undergoes to obtain a legal recognition of his person, despite finding himself constrained to spatial and social discriminations.

Chapter I

A Theoretical Overview: Bodies, Borders, Narration

1.1 *The Body: One and Many*

Mi accorsi, di colpo, che stavo osservando [quelle crude immagini] senza essere in grado di interpretarle. Eppure quelle immagini per Shorsh erano tutto. Non erano un prodotto della Storia, erano il suo presente. Non erano una riflessione teorica, erano carne viva.⁴ (Leogrande, 12)

The images Leogrande speaks of are from a recorded video of the Halabja massacre of 1988 that Shorsh, a Kurdish immigrant, shows the author ten years later in Rome. Halabja is a Kurdish city of Iraq that suffered a terrible chemical attack in March during the country's war with Iran. The video captures the moments following the attack. An inhuman silence accompanies the steps of the cameraman, who films a desolate landscape where innumerable corpses lie abandoned amid debris and dust.

After the initial astonishment for such rough and painful visual testimony, Leogrande realizes that he is not able to interpret what he sees. Or rather, he is aware that any interpretation he would provide would never make justice, nor even come close, to what those images represent for someone who has experienced that war in first person, whose life belonged to the filmed place now reduced to ruins. The author remarks that the video, which for him would only constitute a historical testimony, is for Shorsh the fresh wound of a time that does not achieve to be secluded to the past, remaining inscribed in his memory as an interminable present. If we continue to read Shorsh's story in *La frontiera*, we discover that he was submitted to hardly tellable tortures during his migration travel from Iraq to Italy, and that he had to undergo a series of struggles until he was finally able to legally

⁴ "I realized, all of a sudden, that I was not able to interpret the harsh images I was looking at. Yet those images were everything to Shorsh. They were not History's product, they were his present. They were not a theoretical reflection, they were living flesh." (Leogrande, 12). This translation and all the following ones in this thesis are mine, as none of the case studies that this research considers have official English translations.

settle in Bolzano. However, even before providing the reader with the details of the story, Leogrande reminds us that every story of migration begins long before the journey and continues long after the destination is reached.

The factors that push someone to leave their natal territory are of varied nature, and they constitute the substratum that imprints a certain meaning on what comes after. But these factors cannot be interpreted as forming linear causality or reconstructed in a chronological unfolding of events. The past of each person deciding to emigrate is never a concluded phase that can be translated into traceable causes of that particular migration. In other terms, Shorsh's experience of the war and the sufferings that, together with the Kurdish community in Iraq, he had to endure were probably sufficient reasons for his decision to move – at least, they are the only ones available to the reader. But they should not be read as mere exterior determinations. The story of “before” does not imply a temporal break; rather, it is constitutively essential to the person's subjectivity and to his or her self-perception. This is why Leogrande describes the images as “living flesh.” The impact of that atrocity, whatever the configuration it assumes in Shorsh's memory, is lived, embodied and absorbed in every aspect of Shorsh's life. Far from proposing a deterministic reading of self-construction, this reflection points at one of the core aspects to bear in mind in the analysis of migrant subjectivities: that the embodied experience of migration begins from life experiences articulated in present tense.

When the author realizes how different the perception of the video is for him and for Shorsh, this awareness is translated in terms of different temporalities: for Leogrande the images belong to a past that can easily be crystallized in historical knowledge; for Shorsh, they are the visual reminder of a first-person living that cannot be erased, they are the lingering of a past space and time that continue to live on in memory.

This excerpt shows that the body's existence is defined by its persistence in time: its eternal present is what gives consistency to an individual's story and its mutations. The material configuration of the body guarantees the possibility of a chronological ordering of facts that happen to it, inaugurating a temporality defined on a personal tempo. The images are thus “living flesh”

because they are a projection of Shorsh's lived experience, they are the reflection of his own bodily, physical and psychological suffering.

In her analysis of migration writings, Emma Bond explains: "I [...] understand the intimate terrain of the body to be *the* privileged site of lived subjectivity, yet also a means of experiencing the local and the global simultaneously. The body at once occupies the here and now of lived embodiment, but also functions as a carrier of memories and imprints from other times and spaces." (9) The choice to put at the center of her analysis the body is a way for Bond to conciliate what in Leogrande's narration seems like a hardly traceable bridge between two levels: the historical or theoretical take on contemporary migration and the first-person migratory experience. It is precisely in the "living flesh" that every migration story is composed of that Bond finds the perfect locus to begin her analysis.

In an ethnological research about the making of migrant subjectivities in contemporary Italy, Cristiana Giordano discusses that an individual's story can work "as the unique expression of experiences that are inscribed in, produced within, and productive of a larger context" (590), and can thus not only be representative of the context itself, but can also provide a paradigm for understanding other individual stories in the same context. If we relate this idea to Bond's argument that the body is the privileged site to analyze the individual story it hosts, it becomes clearer why the author also suggests that it can work as a multileveled concept to grasp the global and the local dimension of migration.

On the same thread, this research will consider the body as an important analytical site for understanding the different marks and imprints that migration, taken as a process that simultaneously encompasses and exceeds the journey, produces on a subject. The fact that the body unites the local and the global, as Bond puts it, is a matter that will return in the analysis of how the singular stories narrated in the case studies can shed light on the wider context that contains them, and vice versa.

Yet, there is another aspect of the corporeal dimension of migration that interests me, and that Bond left unexplored. Whereas it has been argued that the body can reveal the paradigms around

which stories are crafted, not much attention has been given to the fact that the body is highly implicated with politics, and it is therefore subject to a varied set of connections, forces and determinations. The next section will host a theoretical reflection on the spatial and physical connections between the body and the space of its movement, in an attempt to understand the relation of power dynamics and mutual influence that the two entities stand in. In order to do this, the notion of body needs further nuancing: what happens when the body is taken within a net of power relations that constrain it? This is a first step in the research of subjectivity construction: detecting the political implications of a person's mobility, the spatial connections between embodied movement and territorial limitations.

1.2 Biopolitics

Speaking of body is a first and urgent way to put at the center of this research the idea that migration cannot remain an abstract geographical concept. The journey remains on one's skin, in either visible or invisible forms. Each individual that decides – or is forced to – leave their home country is constantly on the verge of a risk: that their whole being be touched and irreversibly transformed. Part of the risk begins with exposing the body to the potential perturbations of the route, to the disfiguring and refiguring that the body undergoes.

Nonetheless, the concept of body is a complex one, and an elucidation of how it is employed in this context is indispensable. First, it is essential to detach it from the secondary position that the history of Western thought has relegated it to. Descartes' theorization of the separation of mind and body – which, in the Catholic tradition, was always present in the form of a soul-and-body divide – has led to a privileging of the first over the latter. For a long time, the body has been considered a mere mechanical instrument responding to the decisions of the mind. More recently, this divide was questioned and abandoned, as no clear-cut distinction could possibly be traced between these two dimensions of a human being. The body is not a separate entity that can be studied in total

independence from the mind. The mind is always an embodied one, and it also always lives in the flesh; it is flesh.

The body is here central in that someone's presence in the world as a living individual is the first observation that leads to considering the net of relations that entangles human beings to the space of their movement and of their existence. In the quest for how migrant subjectivities are shaped in relation to territory, an analysis of the relational nature of the living body is crucial to set the focus on the power dynamics that decide of the status of individuals that set foot on alien territory, thus finding themselves to be, in that very moment, no more than living bodies.

These considerations find in Agamben's biopolitical theory their main referent. Opening his *Homo Sacer*, the author states the intention to develop a point hinted at, yet left unexplored, by Michel Foucault. The French philosopher was the first to argue that modern states are characterized by a power structure whose target of control and subjection is the individual as a simple living body. He also noticed that Western modern states implemented techniques that hold the individual in a double bind with power through simultaneous procedures of subjective individualization and objective totalization (Agamben 1995, 5-8). The political subject is, at the same time, chained to its personal self and identity and to an external power that acts alike on every individual. What Foucault did not further investigate is how these two aspects coexist, and how to possibly explain them within a unitary biopolitical theory. Agamben's aim is to take on this task and ask a first fundamental question: how is bare life, i.e. the living body as such, entangled with politics? And what is the relationship between, as in Aristotle's distinction, an individual's bare life (*zoe*) – the physical existence that human beings share with animals – and his or her political life (*bios*)?

According to Agamben, the production of a biopolitical body is the original performance of sovereign power (1995, 9) in modern states: life and politics are implicated to the point that a separate analysis of the two aspects is hardly possible. The philosopher sees this entanglement in the very constitution of power. The law comes into being with the inscription of bare life (*physis*) in the law itself (*nomos*) in the form of its exclusion from the law; and the law's existence is guaranteed by this

founding relation. Whereas this formulation can seem paradoxical, Agamben clarifies that the relation between the law and bare life is a relation of exception in its etymological meaning: life is “taken outside” the law, it is included through its very exclusion. Exclusion is indeed a particular form of relation (1995, 32-33). In order to exist, the juridical order needs an outside: a non-juridical order that permits its definition and delimitation. Positive law only exists in relation to its outside. In his *State of Exception*, Agamben further analyzes exception as the founding structure of power, beginning with Carl Schmitt’s consideration that the sovereign is defined by the power to deliberate about the state of exception. The sovereign is the person that can decide both of the application of the law and of its suspension. Agamben complicates this notion providing a biopolitical interpretation of the state of exception, which would be the original structure that, defined as the law’s own suspension, includes in itself the living being (2003, 12).

Just as the state of exception is the zone of indistinction between the law and its absence that guarantees the very possibility of the law, the individual can only exist as a political subject as his or her bare life is also implicated within power through an inclusionary exclusion. The creation of a citizen, subject of and to the state, relies on the fictitious exclusion of the living body from the domain of the law.

Agamben analyzes the historical situation that most evidently shows how bare life is actually extremely implicated in the power structure of modern states: the politicization of life enacted by twentieth century totalitarian states and its tragic outcome. This domination model consisted in conferring to the state total power of decision over the life and death of its subjects’ (in the primary connotation of those “submitted to” power), which led to the institution of concentration camps. In an attempt to detect the juridical procedures and political devices that permitted human beings to be completely deprived of all rights (1995, 191), Agamben argues that this horror that will forever stain the pages of history is only the most tragical manifestation of a paradigm that is increasingly common to modern states: the camp as the biopolitical structure *par excellence*. The camp is the materialization of the state of exception; the creation of a space where bare life and law enter a zone of indistinction

(1995, 195). Why it has been argued that Agamben's theory should be interpreted as a spatial theory (Minca 2006) becomes clear if we notice that the suspension of law – and thus of rights –, which reveals the subjection of bare life to power, creates a legally void physical space, that Agamben chooses to define as a camp. We shall not forget that the sovereign that the author speaks of is indeed primarily defined by its power over territory: a space enclosed and rendered homogeneous by one same set of rules. If the state of exception is the empty space (2003, 66) where all juridical determinations are neutralized, then such neutralization will firstly concern the individuals that are relegated to that space, one that makes it possible for them to be stripped of all rights and thus reduced to bare life, to no more than living bodies. “The state of exception captures bare life outside the juridical order, excluding it from the category of citizen while subjecting it to biopolitical intervention” (Dines et al., 432).

Migration studies applied this theory to the spatially defined locus of the border zone, a legally liminal space when it comes to unregulated immigration flows. Agamben himself described in terms of bare life what, according to him, is the paradigmatic condition of the refugee.⁵ As he notices drawing from Hanna Arendt's chapter “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” (1973), “the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man reveal their ineffectiveness at the very moment when they can no more be configured as rights of the citizens of a nation-state” (Agamben 1995, 139). Referring to the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, Agamben notices the ambiguity between the concepts of “man” and “citizen”, due to the fact that when someone is not a citizen of a state, and yet *is* in the territory of that state, all that a political individual is entitled to seems to fade; the rights lose their referent when they would be needed the most. Therefore, the refugee is the figure that most clearly shows the biopolitical nature of nation-states, whose power structure rests on the hidden inclusion of bare life as its precondition. The fact

⁵ I use this term to respect Agamben's terminology while reconstructing his theory. Nonetheless, throughout this research I prefer to use the word *migrant* unless I am referring to someone who has been granted political asylum. *Refugee* is indeed a policy related label, and it is not possible to assign it a priori to a group of migrants (Scalettaris 2007).

that the refugee is representative of the modern subject is similarly stressed by Iain Chambers, who argues that “if the migrant body is directly inscribed in punitive legislation, her mobility exposes the instability of abstract distinctions and confines. This dramatic figure is not merely a historical symptom of modernity; she is, rather, the condensed interrogation of the very identity of the modern political subject” (7).

Agamben’s contribution on the relation between bare life and the state of exception is essential for a research that seeks to disentangle the relation between migrants and the unstable and metamorphic space of the border. This investigation is not interested to discover whether what Agamben describes as the founding principles of state power are, indeed, the political *arkhê* of modern states. Rather, the concepts of the state of exception and of bare life will be assumed in their relation as a paradigm for the migrant’s presence at the border, and compared, in literary analysis, to the single stories that narrate this relation. Before arriving to this point, it is nevertheless crucial to lay out the theoretical process that can lead to a thinking of bare life to one of subjectivity in a broader sense.

1.3 At the Border. From Bare Life to Subjectivity Construction

Discussing Agamben’s theory, many scholars dedicated to border and migration studies have disagreed with his arguments on the state of exception and bare life. As highlighted in the “Introduction,” the main problem with the application of his theory would be a portrayal of the migrant as someone completely helpless as she steps on foreign soil. The political inability to act implied in the concept of bare life raises doubts on its capacity to grasp the condition of human beings that are only subjected to the law without being subjects for the law. Illegal or legally unrecognized migrants often perform acts of resistance such as identity stripping (Ellermann 2010), protests and rebellions that lead to concrete transformations in their condition. Peculiar was, for instance, the

closure of the Lampedusa reception-detention center also known as “hotspot” in 2018 after numerous protests and the suicide of a Tunisian man.⁶

It is undeniable that the condition of those who illegally arrive on alien territory is that of mere living beings who lack all form of political recognition. Yet, it is fallacious to deduce from this observation that bare life cannot disclose any form of political existence. If the mere body is subject to the force of biopolitics, then its implication in politics is extreme: political recognition is not one and the same with political existence. To exist as a living being is only a different form of political existence to that of the citizen: exclusion from politics is a relational formula. Crossing the border as a migrant implies a political de-subjection that reveals bare life as the founding structure of the political subjection. In this process, the border coincides with the spatial concretization of the state of exception: the liminal somewhere of legal uncertainty. This research moves from Agamben’s theory to exploring whether the reduction of human beings to bare life in the state of exception – which is always at once a conceptual and a concrete space – discloses some kind of possibility from which to revendicate a subjectivity that comes into being as a consequence of a de-subjection.

In an interview published on the French journal *Vacarme*, Agamben, interrogated about the pessimism that his theory of bare life would lean towards, provides this answer:

La désubjection n’a pas seulement un aspect sombre, obscure. Elle n’est pas simplement la destruction de toute subjectivité. Il y a aussi cet autre pôle plus féconde et poétique, où le sujet n’est que *le sujet de sa propre désubjection*. Permettez-moi, donc, de refuser votre accusation : je suis sûr que vous êtes plus pessimistes que moi... (10; emphasis added)

What is at stake in this research is precisely the possibility of a subjectivation that begins from the de-subjectivizing experience of border-crossing. Thus, the condition of the migrant as a potential

⁶ Camilli, A. (March 15th, 2018). “Perché il centro per migranti di Lampedusa è stato chiuso.” *Internazionale*. <https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/annalisa-camilli/2018/03/15/hotspot-lampedusa-chiuso>.

political subject is considered secondarily compared to the ground zero of such possibility. This means proposing a primarily spatial reflection – conducted on and within literary representation – on the possibility to become a subject despite political invisibility. In the volume *Borderscapes*, the editors Rajaram and Grundy-Warr argue that questions about belonging and appeals for recognition can only be raised after a necessary grounding reflection on “the question of what and where it is to be effectively and properly human” (xvi). Following their suggestion, this research will look into modes of existing “prior to [...] the conferring of political subjectivity that distinguishes and separates” (xvi).

Exclusion from political recognition can result in a potentially strengthening force for a subjectivity construction that has no other bind to power systems than a bodily presence – as bare life – in a territory. As border studies scholar Mark Salter notices, “performances of sovereignty can be found, and resisted, at the dispersed and heterogeneous sites at which the border function of exclusion from the political community takes place” (Johnson et al., 66). The border, whose liminality offers the perfect alibi for the application of exceptional measures and suspension of regular ones, relegates the migrant to a space of legal undefinition. But at the same time, it can provide them with the possibility to re-act to the biopolitical ties that still bind them to the new territory, precisely for its exceptional condition of territorial and legal marginality. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that, although the state of exception is primarily a spatial condition and can find in the border its most suited manifestation, this does entail that, likewise, the border would be some sort of permanent state of exception. If this misleading deduction was made, the concept of border would lose its connatural indeterminacy. The border can host law suspension as much as it can function as the privileged outpost for policies application. But it is also a place filled with voices, sounds, human movement.

The relation between migrant and border might begin as a contingent spatial relation created by someone’s movement through an obliged space. Yet, it constitutes an intricate bind that can disclose new relational modalities between inside and outside, towards the overcoming of strict dichotomies both in terms of politics (citizen/illegal migrant) and of subjectivity and identity

(native/foreigner; belonging/exclusion). This intention of this research is thus to stop and linger at the border: to assume a methodological perspective that questions binary oppositions and strict categorizations, not only following the way they are presented in literature but also in theoretical and political formulations. From this position, it will be possible to find out whether an opposition to the all-encompassing biopolitical structure is achievable from the condition of living bodies; whether some kind of subjectivity can be envisioned despite, and within, political undefinition.

Whereas these theoretical premises are necessary for the development of this project, the intention is not to provide a geopolitical analysis of the relationship between migrant and border. Rather, the idea is to move to a literary analysis of this geopolitical relationship: to see if subjectivity construction can be spatially determined starting from literary representations of individual or collective embodied experiences of migration. In the next section, the aesthetic encounter with reality offered by literature will be analyzed as providing an angle from which to look at how subjectivation can challenge exclusive and static conceptions of political community.

1.4 Narrating the Border

The border is not a definite, immobile site where one can stand. Political and social factors concur in rendering the border not only a site enabling functions of sovereignty, but also a geographically shifting area. Borders “are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled” (Balibar & Williams, 71). Balibar & Williams stress the border’s function of control in relation to political power. Yet, mediatic, artistic and discursive representations of territories are also crucial in defining what and where a border is, and how it should be absorbed into public perception. “Observation and information capturing systems do not only contribute to redefining and redrawing them – they also confer a new mode of existence on them that is of both a physical and a media nature, simultaneously spatial and informational” (Cristofol, 4). In Italy, political and mediatic portrayals – that are often ideologically nuanced – of

areas directly concerned with the arrival of immigrants highly influence their configuration as border zones. For instance, the Italian island of Lampedusa underwent a process of this kind since it became the busiest shore for the arrival of immigrants from Africa. Paolo Cuttita spoke, for the Lampedusa case, of a spectacularization of the border achieved by political rhetoric and mediatic campaigns (2012); Nick Dines et al. similarly argued that a “spectacle of bare life” (432) was being performed on the island. These authors’ interpretations of the process of turning Lampedusa into the Italian and European frontier *par excellence* rely on the assumption that, one way or another, the island was made visible to the public in a way that was meant to create a certain impression, that had to remain in the viewer’s imagination. If the conceptualization of border as state of exception permits to reveal the nature of the relation between the (yet) illegal migrant and the law of the state where she arrives, until now the crucial matter of representation has been left out of the analysis. The way that the border and the migrant’s presence at the border are represented is something central to consider, inasmuch it concurs in shaping this space and relation.

Lefebvre’s famous argument that space is a product, and that social space is a social product, has largely influenced border studies in the analysis of the causes and dynamics of border construction. Of his rich volume, a particularly interesting passage discusses the issue of spatial perception in the specific form of visibility. He argues that “walls, enclosures and façades serve to define both a *scene* (where something takes place) and an *obscene* area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated: whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, thus has its own hidden space on the near or the far side of a frontier” (36; emphasis original). Although he is not referring to the specific place of the border, Lefebvre here clarifies that enclosing lines fulfil a double purpose for the organization of space: they both show and hide. Visibility and invisibility depend on such organization. This process is especially relevant for the representation of migrant journeys towards Italian coasts. In the case of Lampedusa, the spectacle of immigration – whether destined to expose tough immigration policies or humanitarian rescue missions – was made available to the public by the setting out of the right scenario. The Mediterranean

Sea surrounding the Island was the dark area, the “obscene”, or rather, the off-scene, from which media selected few images and facts: the ones necessary to construct a narrative of the visible.

Applying Rancière’s argument that politics is very concerned with the distribution of the sensible, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani show the results of their study on media representation of migrant sea crossings in an article titled “Drifting images, liquid traces: disrupting the aesthetic regime of the EU’s maritime frontier.” What they notice is a systematic instrumental and decontextualized use of photographic material that consists in omitting images or in putting together temporally and spatially unconnected ones, in such a way to form particular narratives of the phenomenon and of its control. They explain that “the concealing of the photographs exemplifies the ambivalence of the ‘partition of the sensible’ of the EU’s maritime frontier, oscillating between controlled spectacularization of border enforcement and the occlusion of the violence perpetrated against migrants” (3). Mediatic and discursive processes craft taxonomies of space that render a territory visible and legible to public perception in the form of visual maps and common narratives. Hence, the configuration of a space as border can be enhanced by modalities of representation that turn it into a scenography, that make it visible in the form of organized space. Visibility is the primary factor that permits a narrative to come into being around an established, recognizable setting.

The reason why the matter of representation is fundamental for this research is that representation and narrative construction are not only of mediatic domain. Public representations of phenomena such as migration have a highly political reach and, likewise, politics is extremely implicated in the way space is rendered available to perception. According to Rancière, politics is particularly tied with aesthetics in that it deals with perception and with the organization of time and space. Politics, according to him, is not “the exercise of power or the struggle for power,” but “the configuration of a specific world, a specific form of experience in which some things appear to be political objects, some questions political issues or argumentations and some agents political subjects” (2011, 7). Although he does not speak of biopolitics, Rancière’s theory shows that individuals’ existence is affected by how politics arranges society in a perceptive universe that binds

them to precise experiences of time and space. “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (2004, 13). Those excluded from the polis are those excluded from the sensory experience of the polis. When he argues that politics is aesthetical, he is therefore not referring to the political dimension of artistic expression – at least not only to it.

Aesthetics is here conceived in its primary etymologic meaning of sensible perception and it concerns, as in Baumgarten’s first formulation (1735), sensible knowledge (Lamarra 1993). The epistemic implications in the political organization of the sensible is what here interests us. Border representations usually respond to the need to construct narratives that are crafted in such a way to determine what has to appear and what to remain unseen; narratives whose take on perception is meant to convey ideological or pre-established configurations of immigration flows and of the figure of the migrant. If the border is embedded in narratives that participate in ordering and defining the space and perception of a territory, this research will pay special attention to narration, in the specific form of literary production. This means moving from the broad concept of narrative to the narrower one of literary narration, whose primary aim is to tell a story.

According to Rancière, politics is interested in the organization and distribution of the sensible, although this has always been a more patent prerogative of the arts. The main difference lies in that, in artistic productions, aesthetic processes and mechanisms are, if not completely transparent, at least there to be explored, addressed and questioned. Politics and the arts are thus mutually implicated in that they share an aesthetical potential that should not be considered as what only has to do with form and judgments of value. In Cristofol’s definition, aesthetics should be conceived as a “confrontational space dealing with lines of separation between what is perceived and what is disappearing, what is worth and what loses its value, along with its capacity to make sense and produce emotion” (Cristofol, 5). The consequence of this assumption, for this research, is of methodological order. If politics and literature have the common ability to generate spatial and visual organizations of the sensible, literature will have to be deemed “seriously,” not only as a discourse

that can counter politically inclined narratives that contribute to border-enforcement, but also as one that has to capacity to create and recreate reality. It should be considered as going beyond the aim of representation in the sense of a site where reality is presented “again.” Given that politics is the sphere where borders are created and media where they are enforced, in their literary transposition they can undergo multiple transformations. But they can also be abolished, erased, existing frontiers can be crossed and new boundaries can be drawn. Providing alternative representations of space, literature can aid a reconceptualization of the notion of border and become part of a dialogue with politics in which contrasting images and different realities are presented. If, as seen, representations of the border can have performative consequences on its spatial configuration, then studying the way borders are transferred and refigured in literary writing is a way to directly address these consequences in a genre where “that which is uttered, told and depicted is given as a construction and an invitation to the free exercise of our capacity to perceive, to feel and to reflect” (Cristofol, 2).

As noticed in the “Introduction,” literature is also the place where new subjectivities can be envisioned. Opening this chapter with the crucial matter of the body, we argued that no analysis of migrant subjectivities can begin without acknowledging the specificities of each story, of the embodied dimension of inhabiting of the border, and that it is fundamental to nuance these particularities. Jean Cristofol excellently expresses how the study of the border and literary writing offer a conciliatory space for an examination aimed at respecting the differences and complexities of every migration context:

Literature can become the space where a word emerges and writing works to turn back the spectacularization of the border and its mechanical effect of de-individualizing and anonymizing the migrants, refugees, and undocumented individuals by recognizing writing, a singular, personal story, a story conveyed by voice, inscribed in a body and affirmed with a face. (5)

Although this definition might evoke an overly optimistic view of the potentials of literature, the next chapters will come into being as an attempt to verify whether these potentials are real, and whether the singular stories narrated can indeed provide a concrete standpoint that gives corporality to abstract theoretical concepts. Bringing theoretical discussion into dialogue with narration forces theory to be challenged, questioned, and renewed by a reality drenched in the complexity of human lives in mobility. Studying literature of migration and its formal and aesthetical arrangement is a manner to take the distances from politically inclined discursive narratives that dominate public discussions on migration. Moreover, the study of literature as a primary source of investigation is a way to let the present theoretical reflections be confronted with narrations seeking to convey the complexity of movement across countries.

The present theoretical overview sets the direction towards which the analysis of the case studies points at. Nevertheless, as stated above, this framework remains opened to further theoretical reflections that will be incorporated in order not to impose on the different works one only perspective, and therefore not to fall in a flat and monotone investigation.

Chapter II

The Borders of Africa. Narrations from the “South” in *A Sud di Lampedusa. Cinque anni di viaggi sulle rotte dei migranti* by Stefano Liberti

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the analysis of the reportage *A Sud di Lampedusa* (2008), where Stefano Liberti concentrates his five years' experience of documenting migrant journeys from the Sub-Saharan areas of Senegal and Niger, through Mauritania, North-Africa until reaching the island of Lampedusa. The twelve chapters of his book follow this geographical order.

Born as a reportage, this work is the least literary, in a strict sense, of the three that will be analyzed. The first step in the analysis will consist of an explanation of the reasons why it can nonetheless be considered, and analyzed, as a literary text, including a reflection on the writer's position in relation to the narrated situations. After, border representations will be taken into consideration, with particular emphasis on the cases where migrants linger for a certain amount of time in the areas among states that constellate the route through Europe. By encountering cases of border-zones that permit independent forms of organization or that compel migrants to prolonged stays; that either protect them from or expose them to risk, the key objective of this chapter is to begin a reflection on matters of agency, displacement and territorial obstacles for migrants on the way across North Africa. A final reflection is reserved to the concluding chapter on the island of Lampedusa, the place that Liberti visits after all the others, just like the migrants.

2.2 A Non-Fictional Account of Migration

In his introduction to the book, Liberti explains what pushed him to travel for five years following African migrants' journey to reach Europe to write this reportage: the necessity “di capire le ragioni

dei cosiddetti ‘viaggi della disperazione,’ le cause e i meccanismi mentali alla base dell’emigrazione dall’Africa verso l’Europa”⁷ (9). The need to undertake a first-person investigation of the phenomenon reflects a widespread feeling among those who were born on the lucky side of the Mediterranean: the incommensurable distance in life experiences that does not make us capable to fully grasp why someone would put their life and the life of their children at risk to reach a foreign land. Liberti decides to channel “una curiosità che è diventata fissazione, una ricerca che è diventata mania”⁸ (9) into a project that intends to find out the motivations of people’s movement and the dynamics of this movement, the territorial configuration of the travel and how it reflects on migrants’ experience of it.

As noticed, the organization of the book mirrors the geography of Liberti’s stops. But the author’s intention, as he explains, is not that of giving a detailed account of space in a descriptive manner, although it is a present component of his work. What interests him the most is the human experience of the crossing of such space, to perceive and narrate “l’universo dei viaggiatori”⁹ (11). He is interested in the geographical mapping of the journey only as long as this mapping is not a re-tracing of migrants’ travel: his primary intention is to register what it means to inhabit the space of the journey. Therefore, he mainly moves through “ghetti malsani ai bordi del Sahara, in quartieri clandestini nelle città di transito, nei luoghi di partenza e in quelli in cui [i migranti] venivano parcheggiati quando erano rispediti indietro”¹⁰ (10). Liberti foremost chooses to visit the outskirts and marginal areas along routes that necessarily unfold as far from the eye of the law as possible.

The border zones, passage sites and zones of forced wait that appear in the reportage as areas of spatial marginality are often defined by unusual experiences of time for the people who occupy them. These are areas where time stretches out, where it loses shape, consistency and uniformity.

⁷ “To understand the reasons behind the so called ‘disperation travels,’ the causes and the mental mechanisms at the heart of emigration from Africa to Europe. (9).

⁸ “A curiosity that turned into obsession, a research that became compulsive” (9)

⁹ “The travelers’ universe” (11)

¹⁰ “Derelict ghettos on the edge of the Sahara, in the clandestine neighborhoods of transit cities, in sites of departure and those where [migrants] are placed before being sent back” (10).

Time crumbles apart in the uncertainty of what will come after in the journey and of *when* it will come. The author's attempt is to recreate the logics that bind these liminal zones to national policies and international agreements while never losing sight of the lived experience of migrants' stay or passage through areas as such. The overall image of migration that stems from the book is that of a very complex reality, much more nuanced than the simplistic descriptions of political and media discourses.

Once cleared out the reasons of his work, Liberti poses nonetheless a problem that haunted him since the beginning of his project, and of which he became increasingly aware: "mano a mano mi sono trovato a scoprire un mondo e a interrogarmi anche sul ruolo che rivestivo io stesso – giornalista europeo sulle tracce dei migranti africani – nella strutturazione di questo mondo"¹¹ (10). Not only he acknowledges the issue of positioning – the European journalist describing a phenomenon he is not directly involved in, with the constant risk of misinterpretation and biased projections. He also raises the problem that all non-fiction writing entails: that the need to describe something objectively has to pass through a linguistic structuring of facts, and linguistic choices inevitably concur in the construction of the world that needs represented. The distinction between fiction as the realm of the unreal or imaginary and non-fiction as dealing with the real becomes way more complex when faced with the fact that both genres recur to similar devices in order to render narration coherent, captivating and understandable. Non-fiction is commonly conceived as standing closer to the truth as its referent is to be found in the real world. Nonetheless, non-fiction supposed objectiveness trembles when confronted to the fact that its veracity relies on an interpretation of its object of representation. Liberti is aware of this problem and alerts the reader about it in advance. This does not put into question the accountability of the reportage as a genre: the increasing hybridity between fiction and non-fiction does not entail a progressive abandoning of truth. Leaving aside the problematic definition of truth and the philosophical quarrels concerning it, it is nothing new that the

¹¹ "As I proceeded, I was faced with a whole new world and I started to question my own role – as a European journalist tracking African migrants' travels – in the construction of this world" (10).

employment of fictional elements to tell a real story can make it much more appealing and relatable for the reader. In his essays collection *El concepto de ficción*, the Argentinian writer Juan José Saer asserts that the common distinction between fiction and non-fiction reiterates the misleading supposition that there would be one privileged way to tell the truth, and that the other would only concern imagination. “La paradoja propia de la ficción reside en que, si recurre a lo falso, lo hace para aumentar su credibilidad”¹² (16), he explains. Fiction needs to be credible. Drawing from the imaginary helps it reach this credibility. Fiction and non-fiction can perhaps be distinguished according to this primary feature: their different intentions. Non-fiction wants to be as faithful as possible to its referent in the world – in the measure that language allows for this operation. Fiction, on the other hand, concerns stories that *could* be real, or that need to be believed as real as long as the tacit agreement between the reader and the author lasts: that one will take what they read, while they read it, as real.

Stefania Ricciardi notices that in the first decade of the twenty-first century the Italian literary panorama has seen a notable increase in non-fiction production, boosted by the success of the non-fiction novel *Gomorra* (2008) by Roberto Saviano. She defines this sudden increase as a challenge to “preservare il reale” (197). The aim of *A Sud di Lampedusa* is clearly inherent to this intention that is common to all non-fictional writing. Nonetheless, Liberti’s introduction is enough to show that his writing has to take shape, just like any literary text, through an organizing of themes, facts and content according to aesthetical and formal arrangements that would make the information comprehensible. This is a first reason for the analysis that will come: the need to overcome to supposed pure objectiveness of reportages by paying attention to how the stories and facts are recounted, tied together, and inserted in the larger geographical and historical context of their happening. At the same time, an analysis of non-fiction permits to remain close to the urgency that stems from the stories gathered in the book: one that acknowledges that these narrations of suffering, hope, life-risking

¹² “The paradox of fiction lies in that, if it recurs to the false, it only does so to increase its credibility” (16).

situations and of unrestrainable movement are true stories. To conduct a literary analysis on a text that is not strictly literary means paying attention to the way these stories are narrated, to how migrants and space are represented, and to the aesthetical features that convey a certain perception of the main object of investigation of this thesis: the relation between border zones and migrant subjects.

For reasons of space, this analysis will mainly focus on three of the chapters of *A Sud di Lampedusa*, as they exceptionally exemplify how specific border zones are transformed by migrants' passage, with the possibility to delineate differences and analogies among the cases.

2.3 Maghnia, Algeria. A self-organized community (105-121)

Maghnia is a frontier city between Algeria and Morocco to be found on the migrants' route towards the Moroccan-Spanish frontier points of Ceuta and Melilla, after the crossing of the Sahara. Before deciding to visit it in first person, Liberti had heard a lot about it, as it returned in almost every story that migrants told about their previous journey. Despite this, the author was not able to picture the nature of that place before his arrival. Two contradicting versions circulated about Maghnia: "inferno e paradiso allo stesso tempo; terra di soprusi e oasi di pace. Le informazioni erano contraddittorie"¹³ (105-6).

His first impression of Maghnia, as anything that turns out to be unexceptional can be for a journalist, is somewhat disappointing. Maghnia is a calm village of Maghreb, with linear streets, a varied market, stands of olives of all sizes and colors and cheap hotels for passers-by. But Liberti and his photographer friend, who joined him for the visit of Algeria, have the suspect that what they see does not coincide with the Maghnia of the stories they heard. They make up the story that they are looking for a Nigerian friend and ask a taxi driver where he thinks they can find him. "Lì in fondo, nel villaggio dei sub-sahariani"¹⁴ (106). A Tanzanian man they meet gives them directions to reach

¹³ "Hell and paradise at once; land of abuses and peaceful oasis. Information about it was contradictory" (105-6).

¹⁴ "Down there, in the Sub-Saharan suburb" (106).

it, but warns them not to trust migrants' directions, in case they get lost, "cercheranno di sviarvi"¹⁵ (107), he explains. He is keen to stress that the inhabitants of this second Maghnia, unlike him, are irregular men and women who desperately dream about Europe but remain stuck here, "in questo modo gettano discredito anche su noi regolari"¹⁶ (108).

The African suburb of Maghnia is two and a half kilometers away from the center, and it opens to the eye of the two visitors as an overcrowded shanty town with scattered cabins and tents, busy people walking around with barrels of water, dirty clothes to be washed or transporting merchandise. The mystery is solved: "la Maghnia degli africani non era la stessa Maghnia degli algerini. Le due città erano adiacenti, ma comunicavano poco. Vivevano esistenze parallele: stabile e trasparente la prima, invisibile e precaria la seconda"¹⁷ (106). A deserted area, plunged in a deep silence, separates the visible from the invisible part of the city; a sort of no man's land, a further frontier within an already frontier city.

Other than just describing what he encounters, Liberti inserts in the narration the reflections, anxieties and hopes that accompanied him through the discovery of migrants' realities. The reader is therefore led to adopt the point of view of the journalist, heightened by the fact that Liberti also shares professional considerations about the project he is conducting. When he first realizes that he is finally facing the so-called "republic of Maghnia," that many times he read about in Spanish secret services reports as the hub for emigration towards the Iberic peninsula, his first thought is of how great a journalistic news it would be. A self-organized city, completely built by migrants in transit towards Europe, at the edges of the Mediterranean Sea (109).

After a first moment of diffidence towards the visitors, the inhabitants of the village let them enter and speak to Amadou, one of the presidents of the village. Each ghetto, divided by nationality, has indeed four representatives that are called to manage every aspect of the community, from internal

¹⁵ "They will try to mislead you" (107).

¹⁶ "This way they also discredit those of us who are here regularly" (108)

¹⁷ "The African Maghnia was not the same as the Algerian Maghnia. The cities stood next to each other but communicated very little. They conducted parallel existences: stable and transparent, the first; invisible and precarious the second." (106)

economic distribution and circulation of goods to external relations with the *passeurs* that organize migrants' passage through Morocco. Liberti states he had never before encountered a community endowed with such an articulated mechanism of self-organization (112), and to his astonishment Amadou replies: “perché ti stupisci? È normale: dove c'è comunità, c'è legge”¹⁸ (112). The relations between the ghettos were not always peaceful, and the partly public management of financial incomes permitted the creation of an elite whose privileges would at times cause social dislikes. Yet, the overall functioning of the city was guaranteed, and a series of unwritten laws ensured a fair distribution of duties and goods, as well as the absence of robberies and brawls. But the stability of this parallel universe would soon turn out too good to be true. The existence of the “republic of Maghnia” had discreetly been permitted by the Algerian government until it started to comply with European diktats that imposed higher controls on illegal frontier-crossings. Two months after the two visitors' departure, the shanty town of Maghnia would be dismantled by Algerian security forces and border control heightened, forcing its Sub-Saharan residents to follow their clandestine journey towards Europe, despite the even more rigorous controls enacted by the adjacent state of Morocco.

An outbreak of popular protests followed this decision, and the uprising was extremely furious: barricades were constructed, public buildings were burnt down, authorities were beaten. But two are the factors that Liberti finds the most interesting in his description of the protest. First, the fact that those who protested were not the migrants themselves. It was the Algerian inhabitants who organized it; and it was not for humanitarian reasons. Since the immigrants settled in Maghnia, the city lived an economic rebirth. Traders took advantage of the fact that the Sub-Saharan did not go to the city to sell their products at higher prices, and land owners did not miss the chance to employ them at a very convenient price to work in agriculture. The disappearing of this incredibly cheap labor was a threat to the land owners, who had been relying on it, year after year, for olive harvesting (114). In light of these facts, it does not come as a surprise that the first to start the rebellion were the

¹⁸ “Why so surprised? Wherever you find community, there you find law” (112).

Algerian inhabitants, the ones who belonged to the official, visible version of the city. For their part, migrants had no particular interest in joining the protest. Although Maghnia was a relatively secure haven, for most of them Algeria only represented a temporary stop where to work and gain some resources to follow the journey towards Europe. The second point that Liberti makes when discussing the protest is related to the first, and it exceptionally represents one of the highest contradictions inherent to the handling of illegal immigration. He expresses it in these terms:

La rivolta di Maghnia mostrava una cosa chiarissima: a differenza dei discorsi ufficiali che si fanno in tutto il Nord Africa, dalla Libia al Marocco passando per l'Algeria, in cui i sub-sahariani vengono stigmatizzati in quanto portatori di miseria e malattie, l'emigrazione di transito genera ricchezza e occupazione.¹⁹ (115)

Amadou had expressed a related concern to Liberti, during their talk. “C'è una cosa che non capisco, [...] gli Europei hanno bisogno delle nostre braccia per la loro agricoltura, ma fanno di tutto per non farci entrare. Non è una contraddizione?”²⁰ (119) This consideration resounds in Roxanne Lynn Doty's article “Bare life: border-crossing deaths and spaces of moral alibi,” where she argues that “Third World migrants have at various times been both wanted and unwanted – wanted for their labor but unwanted as human beings. In a word, they are the perfect candidates for being reduced to bare life” (600). This strong contradiction permits the exploiting of migrants as source of labor while denying them legal protection as workers and human beings. Bare life is a concept that allows to understand the specific form through which undocumented or “illegal” migrants are subjected to power: they are taken within the power net of a state as living bodies, rather than as political beings. The migrants did not take part of the protest not only because it was not their primary interest to

¹⁹ “The Maghnia protest showed a clear thing: unlike the official discourses that, in all North Africa, from Morocco to Libya passing through Algeria, stigmatized Sub-Saharan migrants as carriers of misery and illnesses, emigration of transit produces richness and employment.” (115)

²⁰ “One thing I don't understand, [...] Europe needs our labor for its agriculture, but it tries its best not to let us in. Is this not a contradiction?” (119)

remain in Maghnia, but also because, from their position, they would have been risking more than they could gain from the protest. Liberti points out that those who did not succeed in fleeing in time were arrested to be repatriated. Entitled to nothing more than what a mere living body is, migrants were at the mercy of the Algerian forces.

Perhaps things would have been different if an organized migrant protest took place. Being reduced to bare life, thus unpoliticized, does not automatically exclude someone from the sphere of politics, which encompasses many layers of society. But in this case, migrants' aim was not to revendicate their status as subjects in the eye of the Algerian government, but to continue their travel. As noticed in the "Introduction," the concept of bare life risks to obscure the possibility of resistance for migrants, and it was argued, following Mignolo, that the more inclusive and affirmative notion of "re-existence" would be better suited to speak of ways of contestation that are not primarily directed at a specific law, political asset or decision. The case narrated by Liberti permits a further exploration of these concepts. The author juxtaposes in his chapter two very different forms of political contestation. The one that comes from the Algerians is resistance in its common understanding of collective protest, clearly opposed to the dismantling of the Maghnia shanty town. The other form is the one that precedes both this action and the government's action, and it consists in the Sub-Saharan migrants' gradual appropriation of the outskirts of the city. These people made their way into an opened space – in a perhaps forsaken, or just sufficiently invisible territory – that they reclaimed by giving life to a self-organized community with a pseudo-political asset, outside all official order. This state of exception – that when enacted, as noticed earlier, always has a spatial expression – takes the form of an alternative third space where a paralegal public life unfolds. The so-called condition of bare life excludes the possibility to act as a political subject within a specific political asset, but it does not entail absolute passiveness. Acting outside the given legal order means finding other ways of surviving, working and existing. Re-existence is in this case articulated as an appropriation of space that turns such space into the junction that intercepts parallel or illegal activities dealing with the circulation of people and goods that cannot pass through official channels. The "republic of

Maghnia” has therefore come to be an unofficial yet surprisingly well-functioning system and, as such, it is the embodiment of what appears to be a great contradiction. It is indeed a static center, a geographically located village whose primary aim is to give hospitality to people on the move. It is an area for passage, a refuge to come back to if the border-crossing does not go as expected. The case of Maghnia shows that the principle according to which societies are “static places with fixed characteristics and persons” is erroneous (Nail 4): society is always the result of human movement, and thus defined according to mobility, even if its structure seems to rely upon *stasis*.

Similar cases to the one just analyzed exist along migrant routes all over the world. Here we have explored the possibility of contestation from the condition of unpoliticized human beings, but what remains to be analyzed is the specificity of this border area and of others of the same kind. Following another case from the book, the next section will introduce Foucault’s concept of heterotopia so to explore what kind of alternative spaces border areas constitute.

2.4 Oujda, Morocco. A Heterotopic Encounter at the Border (122-135)

Specular to Maghnia, just across the frontier with Morocco, stands the city of Oujda. It takes two days of traveling to legally pass from one to the other, although the two cities seem very close to each other on the map. The overland route is forbidden, and no direct passage is possible (122). In 1994, Moroccan authorities decided to close the land border with Algeria, and since then the city of Oujda, which had lived of the relations between the two countries, has been waiting for the withdrawal of this measure.

Liberti’s description of the city presents a sort of suspended atmosphere; the city is very quiet, there is little traffic, movement, little life. The only people around seem to be the Algerian gasoline smugglers who stand on the side of the road waiting to refill vehicles. The chapter depicts the city of Oujda as a typical border-area, its undefinition being the most salient characteristic. To increase this feeling, soon after a general description of the area, Liberti tells about his first meeting with a

Moroccan NGO activist which took place at the café of the train station of Oujda. The author's choice of when to highlight certain spaces is never accidental; the happenings would result decontextualized without a meaningful spatial setting that encloses them. The train station, indeed, heightens the diffident tone of the conversation, and the identification of the reader with the first-person experiences of the author leads to perceive the spaces in which the action unfolds as not very welcoming. The non-place of the station gives an impression of indefiniteness and time suspension. The figure of the train station is employed soon after as a metaphor for the city of Oujda itself. We read:

Oujda è la stazione intermedia per eccellenza. È un imbuto in cui tutti sono costretti a passare. E nel quale molti vengono risucchiati. Perché il movimento non è unidirezionale, ma avviene nei due sensi: ci sono quelli che vanno verso ovest, in direzione delle foreste che circondando Ceuta e Melilla o dei quartieri ghetto di Rabat, da dove tenteranno il salto in Europa. E quelli invece che da lì provengono, deportati su autobus e camion dalle forze di sicurezza marocchine. Gli immigranti catturati nelle retate vengono portati a Oujda e respinti in Algeria, da cui poi faranno rapidamente ritorno in Marocco. È come un pendolo che oscilla senza tregua. Su e giù. Giù e su.²¹ (125)

The limbo that the border zone of Oujda constitutes is the junction of a double-sided trajectory. Those going to West with the objective to attempt the dangerous fence-crossing of Ceuta and Melilla have to pass from there as much as those that, having failed at this attempt or having been arrested before trying, are sent back to Algeria. It is a never stopping pendulum, an unrestrainable movement that many are forced to undergo more than once. Algeria also places security controls along the frontier, often forcing migrants to wait in the no man's land between the two countries, on the imaginary line where the border is traced, before they can escape in one direction or the other.

²¹ Oujda is the in-between station par excellence. It is the funnel that everyone has to pass through and that many get sucked into. The movement is not one-sided but it happens both ways: some go West, towards the forests surrounding Ceuta and Melilla or towards the Rabat slums; from there, they will try the jump to Europe. Those who do not make it are brought back on buses and vans by Moroccan security forces. The immigrants caught in raids are brought to Oujda and pushed back to Algeria, from where they will rapidly return to Morocco. It is like a pendulum that never stops, continuously moving. (125)

The hostile relations between Morocco and Algeria, sharpened by European interference, ratcheted up the tension in the frontier area, as controls and security forces were increased in this shared strategic point. In the narration, Oujda emerges as an indefinite space, suspended in a time of its own as all relation with the adjacent land is prohibited. The inhabitants of the city, this time, are for the most part absent from the text, while more relevance is given to the journalist's encounter with migrants who are on a temporary stop in Oujda.

Behind the university of the city, a dry-stone low wall surrounds an abandoned terrain that offers a safe provisional shelter for migrants. It is not a hidden spot, but the fact that the university is there keeps the police at distance, for a custom inherited from the epoch of student strikes in the '80s. Moreover, migrants never stopped there for more than a few days. Liberti visits this place following a doctor of the NGO Medici Senza Frontiere (MSF) who, during the car journey to get there, explains to the journalist how hard it is to provide proper cures to migrants: for the most part they have to intervene with emergency operations, and cannot follow a person's recovery as they never remain long enough. Yet, people are often exhausted from the journey, and still have a long travel ahead.

Liberti arrives to the migrants' shelter of Oujda on an exceptionally cold winter morning. Migrants wear a double layer of clothes, which is all they possess as luggage. The encounter is lived by the journalist as an almost epiphanic moment that, compelling him to compare himself to the migrant other, makes him question his role and position, laying bare the contradictions and hypocrisies inherent both to his job and to the European mode of looking at the migrant. This scene can be analyzed as recreating a lived experience of heterotopia; we should see why more in detail.

According to Foucault, heterotopias are "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). These spaces are highly related to all the others, or to the rest of space in general; but this relation is articulated as suspect, neutralization, or inversion (24). What happens in other spaces is re-presented in heterotopias under other forms. Heterotopias thus conciliate in their nature the repetition of certain organizations of space and a challenge to them.

Foucault distinguishes between crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation: the first are “privileged or sacred or forbidden places” (24), and they are typical of so-called primitive societies. Nowadays they are disappearing and letting emerge heterotopias of deviation: “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). The case of the small piece of land behind the university destined to migrants’ short stop hosts individuals who deviate from the law not as criminals, but as ontologically illegal. In fact, the migrant’s whole person, and not only their behavior, is considered deviant; this divergency regards society as much as the political norm. This space and the people that inhabit it are mutually influent in constituting a heterotopia.

Heterotopias are not only spatially defined: they also present a particular temporal dimension. Foucault explains that these places imply “a sort of absolute break” (26) with traditional time, thus also permitting the juxtaposition of different, even incompatible, time slots. Therefore, the idea that “the heterotopia is capable for juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25), is equally applicable to space and to time. This is why heterotopias are also heterochronies; the two dimensions concur together in creating a counter-site of this kind. In Joseph Pugliese’s reading of Foucault’s theory, the concept of heterotopia “enables the conceptualization of absolute difference within the space of simultaneity” (664). This definition stems from the close examination of two cases that, similarly to Oujda, underwent gradual borderization as a consequence of immigration: Lampedusa and Australia’s Christmas Island. In his analysis, both islands conciliate the existence of greatly contradicting experiences. On the one side, seaside tourism, together with its imaginary of paradise beaches and crystalline water; on the other, the dehumanizing reception centers for immigrants, hidden from the eye of tourists while standing in high proximity to them. These conflicting accounts of the same space create a heterotopia, the place that enables very distinct perceptions of time and reality. The festive time of the tourist, which allows for a defined temporal break, one in which time itself is suspended from its normal ticking and reversed into the timeless experience of pure enjoyment, is the strident opposite of the heavy time of segregation that

the migrant is compelled to live during a stay of often undefined duration. Not only, therefore, do heterotopias oppose to the rest of space, they even allow for disjunctive and contradictory accounts of that same space.

Something similar happens in Liberti's description of his encounter with migrants in Oujda, but with the crucial difference that whereas Pugliese presents two different realities that never communicate, here they are face to face. The cold winter morning that opens the setting of the encounter surprises both the migrants and Liberti with snow. Just before, some people were running up and down the field to warm up, some had found shelter from the cold in an underground tunnel where they had lit a small fire, and some were sitting in groups under the blankets left by MSF volunteers. But the arrival of the snow suddenly changes the atmosphere: "la neve ebbe un effetto di sospensione sul campo. Tutto si fermò. Quasi tutti gli immigranti osservavano il cielo a bocca aperta"²² (134). The sharp rupture introduced by the snow gives a sense of deferral in the scene, it creates a pause that precedes the encounter.

Un ragazzo nigeriano con il quale stavo chiacchierando tacque improvvisamente e si mise a fissare in alto. Spalancò gli occhi e fece una smorfia contorta, una specie di risata aggrottata. Gli strinsi la mano. Era gelida. Gli diedi i miei guanti e il cappellino. Non sapevo che fare. Mi scoprii in preda a uno strano imbarazzo. Cominciai a pensare a me in quel momento e in quel luogo. Mi guardai dal di fuori, ridicolmente vestito con una giacca a vento e circondato da immigrati mal coperti in preda alle intemperie.²³ (134)

²² The snow had an effect of suspension on the field. Everything stopped. Almost everyone, among the immigrants, was speechlessly looking at the sky.

²³ A Nigerian man that I was talking to suddenly stopped the conversation and looked up. He had his eyes wide open and a twisted grimace on his face, some kind of frowning smile. I shook his hand. It was freezing. I gave him my gloves and hat. I did not know what to do. I had a strange feeling of embarrassment. I started to think about myself in that place and time. I looked at myself from the outside, ridiculously covered up in an anorak while surrounded by light-clothed immigrants in the middle of winter. (134)

Lending his gloves and hat to the Nigerian man, Liberti understands the enormous hypocrisy of that gesture, which comes to be a symbol for the disproportion, incommensurable distance between the subjects in question. Even if sincere, the act of altruism seems like a ridiculously insignificant form of compensation to the fact that Liberti, appropriately equipped for the weather and disposing of all the needed comforts for his journey, owes the profits that will come from his work of documentation to the difficulties that these people undergo. But this disproportion also resounds on a larger scale: the European lending a hand, or providing humanitarian support, to the refugee who will have no other option than accepting it, while Europe is partly responsible for the instability of many African countries and for the strict anti-immigration controls across North African frontiers. In the embarrassment that Liberti feels in that gesture, he experiences a self-perception from the outside. He is adopting, even just for a moment, the gaze of the other, and understands this painful discrepancy. The gap is perceived at multiple levels: between the two individuals with their specific identities sharing the encounter, and between two ways of physically inhabiting that place, two ways of experiencing the fact of being a body in a specific place and time.

The heterotopic symbol *par excellence* is, according to Foucault, the mirror. “I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent” (24), and again, “from the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there” (24). In the gaze, the handshake, and in their facing one another, Liberti and the man whose name we do not know stand specular, offering their person as a mirror to the other. The author – whose thoughts are the only ones that the reader has access to – sees himself from the outside through the eyes of the other, just like a mirror would permit. The gaze that stems from this encounter lays bare the contradiction of extremely opposing experiences of one same space, which for the journalist is a site for exploration and documentation, while, for the migrant, it is an alien, uncanny site of passage and yet the only inhabitable one for this trait of the route. The gesture of lending gloves and hat makes him feel very

embarrassed, revealing his position – and with him, of any European – of the one who can give and yet only gives gloves and a hat.

In the heterotopic frontier area of Oujda, a further heterotopia is created by this scene. There where he is absent, Liberti sees himself reflected and discovers his distance from the migrant and the hypocrisies inherent to his position. Foucault explains that one of the roles of heterotopias is “to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (26). If the illusion is given by a brief, ephemeral encounter that will not disclose any change – not even on the level of narration –, then nonetheless this encounter in the abandoned field behind the university leads Liberti to stumble upon a disenchanted self-reflection that exposes the contradictions of the humanitarian attitude of Europe; of the power relations among subjects that relegate the migrant to a lower step. This hidden site on the Moroccan border uncovers the consequences of the strict organization of space in inside and outside, one of them being the ontological hierarchizations of human beings according to their provenance. The encounter narrated, then, plunges Liberti in a harsh self-critique that will close the chapter without any sweetening or self-absolution. It is perhaps the price to pay when looking at oneself in a mirror that sends back the image of what we are in the eyes of the other, and it is, perhaps, the inevitable harshness that comes with awareness.

2.5 Lampedusa, Italy. The Island of the Invisibles (185-198)

Lampedusa is the final step of Liberti’s trip, and the setting for the concluding chapter of the book. After the long and detailed account of what it is like to travel across Africa and how migration unfolds to South of Lampedusa, we – the reader, together with the author – finally reach Europe.

A disruptive and surprising sentence opens the chapter: Giuseppe, the owner of a restaurant on the main street of the island, convincingly declares “Lampedusa è l’unico posto d’Italia dove non

ci sono immigrati”²⁴ (185). Contrarily to what the reader would expect, the first part of the chapter is indeed dedicated to show how imperceptible the presence of immigrants is on the island. Although Giuseppe, like many locals, is concerned with detaching the image of an island that survives on tourism from the phenomenon of mass immigration, Liberti himself notices that “l’isola degli immigrati era senza immigrati. Tutte quelle immagini rilanciate dalle televisioni – gli arrivi drammatici, le manifestazioni al centro di permanenza temporanea (CPT) – apparivano tutto a un tratto esagerazioni mediatiche, piccoli episodi gonfiati a dismisura dalle telecamere”²⁵ (186). If all over the world Lampedusa is known for being the European pivot for immigration from Africa, the perception that Liberti has of the island is that of a calm and somewhat anonymous place. This image is at once very far from media representation of mass arrivals of immigrants as much as from that of the heavenly touristic destination. “Lampedusa sembrava avvolta in una bolla assurda e contraddittoria: quello per cui era nota in tutta Italia, e ormai nel mondo intero, non si vedeva”²⁶ (186). This apparent paradox is explainable with an analysis of politics. Immigrants that undertake the Central Mediterranean route mainly arrive to Lampedusa, but they have no access to the island: they are immediately transferred to the reception center – placed, far from sight, in the inland – waiting for a further displacement to various parts of Italy. The author considers it an explicit governmental strategy that aims at keeping them as hidden from perception as possible. It is a very clear example of Rancière’s observation that exclusion from the sensible experience of a place determines political exclusion from it (2011). Immigrants are relegated to a place that keeps them in the shadow. Denied to them the possibility of appropriation of time and space on the island, their visibility is replaced by the hypervisibility that media representation provides. This yields to an objectification of the figure of the migrant, in the sense that their subjectivity is obscured but their

²⁴ “Lampedusa is the only place in Italy without any immigrants” (185).

²⁵ “The immigration island had no immigrants. All those images showed by the TV – dramatic arrivals, protests from the reception center – appeared, all of a sudden, as media amplifications; small episodes unduly overemphasized by cameras” (186).

²⁶ “Lampedusa seemed plunged into an absurd and contradictory bubble: that which made it notorious all over Italy, and by now all over the world, was not visible there.” (186)

figure is overexposed and inserted in narratives that respond to the end that each representation has to tend to.

When we reach this point in the reading of the book, it becomes clear that most Southern European border does not offer a brighter panorama than those that the journalist portrayed through his travel in the “South of Lampedusa.” No redemption comes with this closing chapter, and the disappointment that the reader feels is reflected in the author’s own experience. To introduce Lampedusa, Liberti chooses a disorienting opening that would mirror his own disillusionment, and later explains:

Dopo tanto girovagare ‘a sud di Lampedusa,’ sulle rotte di coloro che sognavano questo scoglio mitico e irraggiungibile, ero arrivato finalmente dall’altra parte. [...] Ma non appena arrivai all’aeroporto, fui assalito dalla delusione. Lampedusa era triste e scontata. Era banale, provinciale, intrisa di quell’atmosfera desolante che solo i luoghi di villeggiatura fuori stagione sanno trasmettere. Il punto d’arrivo sognato e maledetto di quelle rotte che avevo esplorato in lungo e in largo era uno scoglio senza identità.²⁷ (188)

If Liberti, who had followed the route of the migrants as a journalist, with all due comfort and equipment, experiences such disappointment in reaching the place known in the common imaginary as the gate of Europe, one can only imagine what it must have been like for someone whose whole life project depended on that destination.

Moved by the curiosity to find out the extremely contradicting nature of this place, Liberti meets two immigration experts in the island; one is Giusy Nicolini, the local representative of the association *Legambiente*, the other is Michele Niosi, captain of the Coast Guard. In both of their

²⁷ After all the wandering further South than Lampedusa, on the route of those who dreamt about this mythical and unreachable site, I had finally arrived on the other side. [...] But as I got to the airport, I was soon disillusioned. Lampedusa was sad and banal. It was drenched in the desolate and provincial atmosphere that only off-season holiday resorts can convey. The desired and cursed destination point of the routes I had widely explored was just a rock without identity. (188)

analysis, Lampedusa had become the privileged shore for immigration due to Rome's targeted decisions rather than for its geographical location. According to Nicolini, the arrivals did not just happen in Lampedusa: they were directed there to avoid influxes into Sicily or Pantelleria, "l'isola dei vip" (190). The government had decided to rule the phenomenon by instituting a CPT, center for temporary stay, on the island, and since then migrants had to pass from there to be identified and managed. Niosi considers Lampedusa in the wider European context; he blames the treaty of Schengen for creating unnatural frontiers, building a wall in the middle of a sea that had always been a common space (192). This interesting connection between Schengen and the borderization of the Mediterranean Sea, and, later, of Lampedusa, reveals the incongruous European attitude towards its borders: the revolutionary opening of borders that Schengen inaugurated relied on the enforcing of external frontiers of the European community. David Jacobson similarly explains that "to loosen internal border controls," the EU institutions "had to compensate by strengthening the community's external borders." (92) The constitution of Europe as the opened space where people could freely circulate led to a displacement of frontiers, a clear indicator that all territorial definition needs to detect an outside in order to be guaranteed as inside. This is what, according to Niosi, gradually brought to the securitization – and, more recently, militarization – of the space that would by definition flee all circumscription: the sea. Later in the chapter, Liberti elaborates a similar reflection after three days of visiting the island. If for what concerns the African part of the route Europe entrusts the task to manage the flows to third states in North Africa, a similar kind of delegation occurs when the migrants succeed in arriving to Europe. This dismissal of responsibility is enacted through the externalization of the problem to one of the most remote sites of the European soil. But everything has to happen in the dark in the island, "tutto doveva avvenire in modo poco vistoso. Tutto doveva essere gestito nella più assoluta discrezione" (196).

Liberti depicts a very unusual image of Lampedusa. If, following scholarly analysis, in the previous chapter of this thesis we spoke of the island in terms of a spectacle, the account of the island provided by Liberti reveals a completely different scenario, where the "desiderio di non dire" (196)

plunges the immigrants' presence in absolute invisibility. Yet, these two versions are not contradictory. The spectacularization of the island is the mediatic maneuver that permits, enforces and legitimizes the consecration of Lampedusa as the frontier of Europe; at the same time, life in the island needs to continue as if nothing was happening to avoid the decrease of tourism, its main source of income. Both accounts of the island, spectacle and concealment, reveal one and the same thing: that Europe has barely any interest in giving space to African immigrants to emerge as individuals, as agent subjects, to give them a voice or a visibility unless its mediated by instrumental mediatic representation.

In this disenchanting picture, Liberti envisages a dim light: that perhaps, in the mediatic (partial) representation of migrant journeys as fortune travels of life-risking danger, some sort of admiration would sparkle in public opinion. But again, he is aware that “[forse] ero io che vedevo eroi dove altri vedevano incoscienti”²⁸ (197), and that stereotypes never make justice to the complexity of human lives. The author recognizes his own inability to fully comprehend the reasons of the travel, the sufferings inherent to the experience of the journey, of the arrival and the continuous displacements. Despite his first-person experience of many years of traveling through the African continent, at the end of the journey Liberti still acknowledges the enormous distance between his own travel and that of migrants, a distance that he tried to bridge with his detailed work of collecting information and giving it an order, making it intelligible, relatable, and available to a vast public.

2.6 Conclusion

The bright analysis of the migratory phenomenon in *A Sud di Lampedusa* gives a detailed account of the part of the journey that is the least present in European public discourse on migration. The reportage aims at showing the complexity of each travel, the multiple stops, the deviations, the forced,

²⁸ “[maybe] there where I saw heroes, others only saw irresponsibility.

prolonged waits. Going in depth as much as it does to highlight the singularities of each site of passage, also has the effect of building up an extremely nuanced general picture. The way migration unfolds through territorial constraints is understood in the larger context of international relations in which Europe plays a fundamental part, and each piece of the story is perfectly included in the puzzle.

As we have seen, the territorial aspect takes primary importance. Attention to space is perhaps the most salient feature emerging from the text. Liberti's operation intends, indeed, to move towards an understanding of this phenomenon that would not renounce to its complexity and to its dark spots. The analysed cases of Maghnia, Oujda and Lampedusa reveal that territorial specificities are intrinsic to the way migrants live their journey towards Europe. The first two, located on the North African border between Algeria and Morocco seem to offer more freedom to migrants' existence on their soil than the island of Lampedusa. The three cases are very different. Maghnia shows the possibility of (illegal) self-organization for migrants, whereas at the same time making it hard for them to manifest political agency, as, on the one hand, they do not wish to remain in Algeria and, on the other, they are mostly envisaged by the Algerian locals as labor force.

Oujda is described by Liberti as a frontier zone that lives in suspension. Migrants only make very short stops there. But the scene of the encounter permits a deeper reflection on how that space enables a self-critique for the journalist, and, by extension, for the European – most likely Italian – reader. The analysis of Oujda as a heterotopia permits to conceptualize the close relation that links the place of the encounter with the individuals that live it, turning it in one of the few occasions in which a real encounter with alterity occurs in the book. The author acknowledges the feeling of inadequacy that makes him uncomfortable in the direct interaction with the migrant, but he assumes it rather than reject it. It is due to this awareness that the book is not a direct attempt to give voice to migrants. Liberti prefers to describe the migratory experience without pretending he knows what it means to really live it. He is not asking the reader to believe that this is what it *is* like to be a migrant; rather, he shows what it means for him to try and grasp what it *would* be like to be a migrant. This is why his attention is primarily spatial: because, in order to understand a subjectivity on the move, it is

indispensable to understand the territory through which she or he moves, and it is indispensable to question the position from which this understanding has to take shape.

For what concerns Lampedusa, the writing operation is different: migrants are completely absent from the description of the island, just as, in the author's words, they are invisible there. And yet, the situation of Lampedusa is extremely complex, and the reception center that according to Liberti is the pivot for the management of immigration will, in the years following his visit, undergo a series of changes, openings and closings. And yet the island – or its evocation – remains, today, at the center of the debate. We should therefore better explore the particularity of this place following Alessandro Leogrande's *La frontiera*.

Chapter III

Lampedusa and the Mediterranean Sea in *La frontiera* by Alessandro Leogrando

Ithaca gave you the
marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

C. P. Cavafy, "The City"

3.1 Introduction

Like *A Sud di Lampedusa*, *La frontiera* (2015) is a non-fiction long essay that provides detailed information on immigration from Africa to Europe through Italy. Unlike Liberti, Leogrando does not move outside the country: his intention is not strictly journalistic, he does not want to reconstruct a route. In fact, he manages to depict the complexity of the phenomenon following a different methodology. His idea is to give space to as many migrant stories as possible. He speaks to all sorts of people on the Italian territory who are willing to tell their personal experience. And yet all the stories, albeit different from case to case, do not constitute a chaotic whole: they are constantly inserted by Leogrando in the larger picture in which they gain wider significance and historical relevance. *La frontiera* is composed of nineteen chapters, thematically and stylistically intertwined.

The book will be analyzed through a thematic order. The first part will be reserved to an analysis of the concept of frontier as it is articulated in the text, whose centrality we can already hint at from the title. Leogrando questions the European move of depicting Lampedusa and the Mediterranean as *the* frontier, as if they corresponded geographically to a natural and self-standing

separation from all that, as a consequence, becomes the “South.” Second, the case of the October 2013 tragic shipwreck will be explored in Leogrande’s narration, who, in occasion of the one-year recurrence of the massacre, flies to Lampedusa to assist to the remembrance ceremony. There, he meets some of the survivors of that day, whose stories have great relevance in the reconstruction of the happening. Last, the story of Shorsh will be analyzed. It is perhaps the most detailed story in the book, and it is spread out through five chapters with the same title: “Vedere, non vedere.”

The steps of the investigation shall lead to a gradual understanding of how the relation between frontier and migrant subjectivities is envisaged by this work, how it is presented in a book that, in its intention and meaning, is located at the frontier.

3.2 The Frontier

The short prologue of *La frontiera* situates us in the middle of the sea, off the Lampedusa coast. It describes the slow movements of a group of divers from the Coast Guard who bring to surface the bodies trapped in a fishing boat laying on the seabed. Notably, the frontier of Europe, the frontier *par excellence* when it comes to immigration from the South, is the Mediterranean. This book centrally concerns this geographical area, but, rather than being a thematic line, it works as a reference point, as a junction for all the stories that revolve around it. It is the background scenography for stories that come from Eritrea, Libya, Greece, the Sinai and more, and that are all heard and registered by Leogrande in Italy, a country that inevitably enters in these narrations. If the Mediterranean Sea is, therefore, the pivot of the narration, the author is careful never to portray a natural identification of the sea with the frontier. Repeatedly throughout the text he stresses the indefiniteness of these margins, the historical arbitrariness that produces frontiers there where they did not exist.

Opening the book with the macabre scene of the search of bodies deep in the sea, Leogrande presents the incredible violence that a border can host, a violence that remains far from everyone’s eyes. As a way to contrast this fact, the author states “se le coste europee non possono essere che

frontiera, tanto vale provare a fissare sulla sabbia alcuni dettagli, alcuni brandelli di esistenza, che altrimenti verrebbero meno col venir meno delle persone”²⁹ (16). In setting out this premise, Leogrande already takes a different direction than Liberti. Rather than finding the causes or reconstructing the routes, his first aim is to collect and save the pieces of human existences that are too often unheard, obscured or forgot; that, in the worst cases, are swallowed by the sea. If frontiers are always “lines in the sand,” then the least we can do is collect from this sand the traces of the human lives that were forever scarred by them. And record these traces, preserve them in language and memory.

As frequently noticed throughout this research, the mutability of borders goes hand in hand with the exceptional situations that these areas host. In Leogrande’s terms, they can be gates (*varchi*) that alternately open and close to what surrounds them and that can come to constitute new worlds in themselves. Borders allow the emergence of “una particolare società di confine che definisce le sue regole e i ruoli al suo interno. Sono a tutti gli effetti dei porti franchi. Ma poi anche questi mutano nel tempo, e vengono sostituiti da altri porti franchi”³⁰ (25). We have seen this idea confirmed in Liberti’s description of the self-organized community of Maghnia, on the Algerian border with Morocco. The exception that every border zone allows does not always correspond to the strategic device for state power to take unordinary measures or to suspend the normal law, as in Agamben’s theory (1995, 2003). It can also open an-other space that enables the emergence of another set of rules, social norms and living modalities. But, as in the Maghnia case, things are never as bright. Exception is defined, other than by opposition to a normal state of things, by temporariness.

The border is thus the unordinary place that, always subject to spatial change, permits, at once, the existence of free areas with independent social assets and of oppressing and violent structures

²⁹ “If the European coasts are nothing but frontiers, we may as well try to imprint some details on the sand, the shreds of existences that would otherwise disappear with the disappearing of people” (16).

³⁰ “A particular border society that defines its own rules and assigns its own roles. They are real free ports. But these also mutate in time, and they get replaced by other free ports” (25).

such as detention centers. This strange place is the measure, mirror and gauge to understand the historical moment that we live in. According to Leogrande, it is:

Una linea fatta di infiniti punti, infiniti attraversamenti. Ogni punto una storia, ogni nodo un pugno di esistenze. Ogni attraversamento una crepa che si apre. È la Frontiera. Non è un luogo preciso, piuttosto la moltiplicazione di una serie di luoghi in perenne mutamento, che coincidono con la possibilità di finire da una parte o rimanere nell'altra.³¹ (40)

Recalling the idea of an overlapping of places and experiences into one site, that, as discussed in section 2.4, is typical of a place configured as a heterotopia, Leogrande here reminds us that, ultimately, what the border does is determining entrance or exclusion. Therefore, it has a direct impact on those lives whose *raison d'être* is to succeed in the crossing. So much so that its nature is impregnated with the stories of these people. Its spatiality melts into a deeper significance when read in light of the drawing that their trajectories form.

Since the start, the reader is included by the author in the reasoning that led to conceive the project of the book as it is. Leogrande refers to a conversation he had with his friend named Elena while he was working on his project. She asked him, first, why he would want to give so much attention to the shipwrecks, and, second, why he wanted to choose the specific focus of the border. On the spot he gives brief answers to both, but he later thinks them over and reaches more consistent conclusions. The need to speak of the shipwrecks and to discover as many stories as possible around them stems from the necessity to contrast the deep, desperate silence that surrounds the uncountable deaths, the continuous slaughter. When Elena asks about the frontier, instead, he has a ready, sure answer: “Perché le frontiere cambiano”³² (25). Reflecting later on this answer, he adds in the text: “le frontiere cambiano, non rimangono mai fisse. Si allarga l'Europa e mutano i punti di ingresso.

³¹ A line composed of infinite points, infinite crossings. Every point is a story, every knot a handful of existences. Every crossing is a crack that opens up. It is the Frontier. It is not a precise place. Rather, it is the multiplication of a series of places in constant change, all of which disclose the possibility to end up on one side or the other. (40)

³² “Because frontiers change” (25).

Scoppiano guerre, cadono dittature, esplodono intere aree del mondo e si aprono nuovi varchi”³³ (25).

And if borders are this mutable, if the definition of these landmarks is always dependent on historical alterations and political interventions, it becomes all the more urgent to give voice right now, in this particular historical moment, to *this* particular frontier.

This frontier is of course multifaceted, its spatiality can shift according to policies. In a large sense, it coincides with the Mediterranean. But specifically, it depends on the discourse in which this concept circulates: it can be Lampedusa, it can be the “international waters” or the Italian ones, as if the sea was limitable and ownable. The text analyzed in the previous chapter presented in its title an explicit geographical reference. To go “further South than Lampedusa” meant, for Liberti, to follow the routes of those whose life objective was to reach Lampedusa, the symbolic shore of Europe. This dreamed destination turned out to be disappointing and restrictive, very far from the image of the gate to a welcoming continent and opened society. Nonetheless, the island remains the point of comparison for any path of migration: it scans a before and an after, a South and a North. It is the reference point for people who have been traveling for a long time through inhospitable lands, but that will mostly be received in a just as harsh manner. In Leogrande this second aspect remains: Lampedusa is a symbolic point in every story, in most of them it plays the role of a break, a sort of turning point that changes scenario, although the change is not always positive. But a real description of the island only comes in the fourteenth chapter when Leogrande, like Liberti years before, visits it in person. The way this visit is narrated will be better analyzed in the following section, but it is already important to highlight that the description of Lampedusa occurs in very different occasions than Liberti’s. Leogrande does not speak as a journalist. The descriptive part of the chapter is not an end in itself; rather, it seems to work as a contour for the narration of an action, i.e., the ceremony for the one-year recurrence of October 3rd tragic shipwreck.

³³ “Frontiers change, they are never permanent. Europe stretches out and entry points get transformed. Wars start, dictatorships fail, whole areas of world burst into chaos, and new gates are created” (25),

The chapter opens with an almost cinematographic view. Leogrande reaches the island by plane and what he sees for a long time during the travel is only the immense blue of the sea. “Dal finestrino, il mare sembra una lastra di pietra azzurra. Immobile, imponente, assoluta. Mare davanti, mare alle spalle. Mare a destra. Mare a sinistra”³⁴. (135) A tiny piece of land emerges, all of a sudden, in the middle of the blue expanse that “unisce l’Africa all’Europa senza soluzione di continuità, senza la minima crepa che intacchi la sua superficie”³⁵ (136). Unlike the land, the sea presents no visible leap or alteration that the human eye could interpret as division or limit. The sea cannot be owned, it cannot be tamed or ruled. Only the land is manageable, and this is what happened with Lampedusa: it was turned into the Mediterranean outpost to rule immigration, embodying the symbol of gate and fortress, according to the discourses in which it is invoked.

The Mediterranean, and Lampedusa with it, often appears in public discourse as the source and origin of the European identity, as the stronghold that preserves Europe from external threats and as the cradle of European civilization. What is often forgotten is that the Mediterranean has always been, historically, a source for connection, encounter and exchange. Iain Chambers notices that

Today’s immigrants from the South of the planet, however feared, despised, and victimized by racism and social and economic injustice, are the historical reminders that the Mediterranean, firmly considered the origin of Europe and the ‘West,’ has always been part of a more extensive elsewhere. (39)

When Leogrande gives his first glimpse at the island from the airplane window, he recalls something he had read in a geography book long time before: “Lampedusa appartiene alla placca africana, a differenza di Linosa, l’isola vicina, che appartiene alla placca europea”³⁶ (136). Then he adds that in order to avoid a strong turbulence in the air, “il comandante ha deciso di compiere un ampio giro sui

³⁴ “From the window, the sea looks like a blue stone slab. It was still, massive, absolute. Sea ahead, sea behind. Sea to my right. Sea to my left.” (135)

³⁵ “seamlessly connects Africa to Europa, without the smallest crack interrupting its surface” (136).

³⁶ “Lampedusa belongs to the African Plate, unlike Linosa, the neighbor island, which belongs to the European Plate” (136).

cieli della Tunisia”³⁷ (136). Although he never explicitly says it, Leogrande’s literary operation in this passage molds the same concept expressed by Chambers. Just like the Mediterranean, Lampedusa is part of “a more extensive elsewhere.” The division between Africa and Europe is much less strict, geographically and spatially, than we are used to imagine. The Mediterranean covers at once the African and the European Plates, and Lampedusa, considered the European frontier above any other, paradoxically originated in Africa and still is, geographically speaking, Africa.

If Liberti, then, presented Lampedusa as the disappointing destination of migration travels and pointed at its policy related borderization, Leogrande takes a step back and depicts it as immersed in a broader geography in which no sharp division between Africa and Europe exists. Liberti positioned his book further South, and the reference point to determine this South was Lampedusa. Leogrande privileges the shifting, geographically undefined frontier as the space where to locate his reflection. Lampedusa will remain central, but the stories that his book reconstructs need to be read in light of the net of exchange and relation that the Mediterranean has always been.

The book makes explicit, since its title, the position that it is going to adopt. It decides to stand in the indefinite space of the frontier, in the suspended zone that functions as a limit to the European “inside,” to its identity and scope. The words of this book emerge as a direct challenge to the silence of the frontier, without nonetheless looking to be secured as an inside: they wish to remain there where undefinition rules, as they also belong to those who are, or have been, stuck in the limbo. Albeit Leogrande is aware that this operation will never make justice to all the deaths, violence, desperate sea-crossings, and that it will never compensate the feeling of salty, freezing water into the lungs, his words are an attempt to at least extract this horror from the ultimate violence of silence and oblivion. *La frontiera* reverses the temporariness congenital to the border into a written account of something that needs to be saved from the obliteration of sea waves.

³⁷ “The pilot decided to take a long detour on Tunisian skies” (136).

3.3 *One Year After the Shipwreck. Prayers and Names Beyond Bare Life*

This section investigates the description of the commemoration ceremony to the October 2013 shipwreck, which took place in Lampedusa one exact year after. Specifically, it looks into how this particular occasion offers the chance for the survivors to express disagreement with a political structure that enables tragedies of this kind. This disagreement is not incarnated by protests. Rather, it is conducted through the proactive performance of another kind of remembrance that lets humanness take over political subjectivity, which is present in the form of political recognition or total depoliticization. We will here see the emergence of an aspect that exceeds, at the same time, bare life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*), to follow Agamben's categories (1995, 11)

In the summer of 2013, a group of migrants is left in the middle of the Lybian desert by Sudanese smugglers, where they will wait for hours before the Libyan come pick them up. They are squeezed into crowded pick-ups and transferred to a courtyard until the following night. At night, the travel starts again and they are moved from place to place for many nights in a row. During the day they remain hidden from sight, they only travel at night. Finally, they are taken to some other hidden court near the city of Tripoli, where they will stay for more than a month with no possible interaction with the outside world. They are around five hundred people. In reclusion, they get to know each other; most of them are Eritrean, some Ethiopian. Armed guards surveil them; to any request or sign of protest they respond with violence. Then one night they finally receive the notice that there is a boat ready for them to sail to Europe for that same night. They are brought in small groups to the beach, but soon the beach gets crowded and, at the sight of the boat, “la prima cosa che si chiedono è come farà a contenerli tutti”³⁸ (43).

Their concern was right. The boat was not prepared for all of those people. During the journey, just before dawn and very close to the coasts of Lampedusa, a small fire on board that was readily

³⁸ “The first thing they ask themselves is how it will possibly contain them all” (43).

extinguished spread nonetheless the panic among the passengers. Those who were standing on the stern, close to the fire, all moved to the bow, causing the unbalancing of the boat and its inevitable capsizing. It is October 3rd of 2013, a date that will be dramatically remembered. 368 are the registered victims. 360 were Eritrean and the other eight were Ethiopian, four men and four women. The survivors are all Eritrean.

One year after, Leogrande flies to Lampedusa to take part of the commemoration of this tragic episode. As already noticed, he reaches the island by plane and meets there his Eritrean friend Syoum, who moved to Italy with his parents in the '70s, with an earlier immigration wave. Syoum, who fluently speaks Italian, works as a cultural mediator for the new immigrants who only know Tigrinya. They are not the only ones there: most of the survivors of the shipwreck are present for the commemoration, although they had to fly there from Scandinavia. The families of the victims who could make it there are also present. The commemoration ceremony begins on October 2nd, on the square in front of the sanctuary della Madonna di Porto Salvo from where the sea is visible and sends a pleasing breeze. After an interconfessional prayer to which almost all of the Sicilian religious communities took part, the Eritreans start a religious song from traditional liturgy. Leogrande describes this passage in a particular way: “un canto fatto di versi che procedono a onde, si inseguono, si allungano, si mescolano con la brezza del mare”³⁹ (141). The lines of the song stretch out to reach the sea and become confused with its breeze. Just like the breeze, they seem to emerge directly from the sea. It is an imposition of voice that gradually cedes to a reconciliation with the horrific sea that haunts the survivors' dreams. The song, sung at the border between two worlds divided by a merciless gorge, is entrusted to the air which, unlike the land, is exempt of limits and barriers.

Among the survivors, Leogrande meets Adhanom, whose story takes up great part of the chapter about the commemoration. Adhanom is around twenty years old, he is now living in Sweden, and in the famous shipwreck he lost a brother and an uncle. He is one of the immigrants who was

³⁹ “A song made of lines that flow like waves, that chase each other, that stretch out and mingle with the sea breeze” (141).

able to escape controls soon after been displaced from Sicily to Rome, so that he would not be forced to remain in Italy. The Dublin Regulation establishes, indeed, that immigrants who arrive to the EU can only apply for asylum in the country where they are first identified. His original plan was to reach Sweden, where refugees receive a monthly check and a two-years course to learn the language. He managed to travel by train eluding controls in each country along the way and presented his request to the Sweden government as if arriving out of nowhere. Now, after having obtained the arduous objective of being a legal resident of Sweden, he is back to Lampedusa to remember the atrocious day in which, the year after, he feared for his life and lost part of his family.

The way Adhanom is presented stresses the wide fracture between these two stages of the survivors' life: the longed-for dream made reality and the ineradicable scar that corrupts their new life. "In ognuno di loro traspare una sorta di ombra. Annebbia i loro sguardi, inasprisce i loro pensieri"⁴⁰ (138). The horrific images of the shipwreck cannot be deleted, "I'm afraid" (138), often repeats Adhanom, although there is no concrete threat. He tells Leogrande that it is too hard for him to remember, too hard to think back on those days, to his brother's lifeless body, the screams and the feeling of powerlessness. Nonetheless, he is back in Lampedusa, perhaps to exorcize the fear of the past, to see "con occhi diversi l'isola e il mare che la cinge"⁴¹ (138). Or, maybe, there is no other reason for his journey than just to go pray. "Non a manifestare o a chiedere qualcosa di particolare. È venuto solo a pregare insieme a tutti gli altri"⁴² (138). Adanhom already has what he wanted, he does not need to protest: what he lost cannot be replaced. His presence in the place where his brother and uncle went missing is, nonetheless, a silent scream, just like prayers are quiet protests.

The day after, on October 3rd, the ceremony continues throughout the whole day. After a long Mass with prayers and songs, the participants start a procession from the Church to a high side of the coast, standing at the edge of a cliff to throw flowers in the water. For the whole walk, the singing

⁴⁰ "In all of them a sort of shadow transpires. It veils their look, makes their thoughts bitter" (138).

⁴¹ "With a different look the island and the sea surrounding it" (138).

⁴² "Not to protest or to ask something in particular. He just came to pray like everyone else" (138).

never stops, not even when a heavy storm begins. Despite the bad weather, none of the Eritreans will move back to the center by car: the procession did not finish with the throwing of flowers (154).

The depiction of the commemoration ceremony highlights the spirituality of the moment. The bodily presence of a heterogeneous group of people on the island – survivors, other refugees, families of the victims, locals and other Italian citizens – has not the semblance of an organized protest. In a funeral-like atmosphere, with a high religious density, these people offer their presence to the memory of the disappeared, as if their visible bodies, not interested in drawing attention to themselves, functioned as a replacement for those who can no longer be seen, speak, and protest. Leogrande's description respects the nature of this gathering, but it succeeds, at the same time, to function as an even stronger image than a ceremony in the name of memory. Rather than a reconciliation with the past, this representation works as a firm objection to the indifferent atmosphere surrounding a tragedy that keeps unfolding in the present. In Lampedusa, arrivals stopped for a few months after October 3rd shipwreck thanks to the "Mare nostrum" operation that detected boats in danger and directly brought them to Sicily or Puglia, but in 2014 they had begun again, causing more than two thousand victims in a year. People kept dying at sea in great number although there were less victims for each shipwreck; and small numbers are no longer shocking to European ears, accustomed to the horror of this ongoing tragedy. A symbol of this indifference is the anonymous cemetery that, in Lampedusa, was quickly set up to bury all the victims of the October 3rd shipwreck. The headstones carry no names, only a white cross ("Mai una volta che abbia visto un nome"⁴³ (57), commented Syoum earlier in the book). The ceremony provides a way to contrast this indifference.

The priest and another person read out loud alternately the 368 names of the dead, one by one. "L'elenco è talmente lungo che ascoltare uno per uno tutti i nomi e cognomi risulta straniante"⁴⁴ (147). The alienation that the long list produces is nonetheless a necessary part of the ceremony, a first attempt to challenge the indifference that permeates the atmosphere around immigrants' arrivals,

⁴³ "Never once have I seen a name" (57).

⁴⁴ "The list is so long that listening to all the names and surnames results alienating" (147).

the terrible conditions of their journeys and their constant proximity to a potential disaster. This passage presents a clear contrast to the image of the undignified cemetery in which anonymity rules: here the victims are individually remembered. They are no longer a number too big to imagine, they are recalled by their names, by the faces that these names evoke. In the text, this passage is followed by an empty space that seems to ask the reader to stop, to imagine herself the recital of the long list, to try and feel the estrangement that those 368 names, said out loud, can spawn.

A ceremony of this kind undoubtedly encompasses the commemorative aim but, at the same time, it exceeds it, carrying a profound political significance. As Lorenzo Rinelli notices, an episode of bitter irony followed the tragic shipwreck of October 2013: “the Italian government promptly granted citizenship *post mortem* to the deceased while the survivors risked being incriminated for illegal immigration” (492). While his brother was granted posthumous citizenship and an anonymous coffin, Adanhom was still illegal, he was a clandestine – to use a word dear to Italian public discourse. This absurd situation was “violent irony turned tragedy” (Rinelli 493): the European community will admit and recognize your legal presence on its soil only once you are buried in the ground. The remembrance ceremony where all the names of the victims are read is thus an open challenge to a system that reduces you to a body, that allows you to be a citizen only if you are no longer a human being, if you do not take up the space of appearance where you are not welcome to exist in. In a macabre parody of Christian salvation, the migrant has unwillingly become a sort of new political martyr: you have to sacrifice your life in the name of the longed for – now eternal – political recognition. The survivors that are now back in Lampedusa to read those names out loud, to pray for two days in a row and to throw a flower into the water are manifesting a form of dissent that breaks through the heart of this biopolitical structure. By lending their bodies to the memory of the disappeared, they are providing an honorable remembering to those who not only have been killed by European strategic indifference but also awarded with a mocking posthumous citizenship. At the same time, their bodies, now subtracted to the state of bare life as most of them have been granted political asylum, are performing a clear denounce of that previous condition.

At the ceremony, Leogrande also has the chance to speak to Costantino, a retired constructor who, the morning of October 3rd, decided to go out in the sea in the early morning to fish with his friend Onder. None of the two is a professional fisherman, but they share this common hobby. By chance, they arrived very close to the point where the shipwreck had occurred a few hours earlier. Another boat of locals – a bigger boat than theirs – had already stopped there, having heard screams from the sea. After the first shock at the sight of an incredible amount of people at sea, the two promptly start picking them up, paying attention to the weakest sign of life. Their arms are slippery, their skins, immersed in the fuel that leaked from the boat, are immune to friction. Costantino has to lift them up from their clothes, as fast as he can. Their boat is lower than the one who was already there, which makes this operation easier for them but, at the same time, it is smaller, and not everyone will fit onboard. When the boat cannot host anybody else, Costantino and Onder go back to land, and only later they will find out, following the news, the immensity of the tragedy. They had only seen the bodies that were floating, but there were two hundred and fifty more locked in the bottom of ship.

This episode is reconstructed in the book through a long dialogue between the author and Costantino (148-154), interspersed with the description of the surroundings as the procession goes on. Specifically, the words of Costantino are interrupted by brief descriptions of the welcoming Gate of Europe, the 2008 art work by Mimmo Palladino that is supposed to embody a symbol of solidarity. A great contradiction stems from the juxtaposition of these intertwined levels of narration – dialogue and description. The words of Costantino recount of a common citizen, a local, who, being in the place of the shipwreck by chance, saves from the water as many people as he can. The Gate of Europe functions as the ironic reminder of the great absent in Costantino's story: competent European rescuers, who only reach the site of the drowning later that morning. Lampedusa resulted that day into the opposite of a gate: it worked as the ultimate barrier to Europe, who did nothing to prevent the death of hundreds of people, that day, and of thousands of them over the years.

A crucial aspect emerges from this passage. In Costantino's gesture to reach out and rescue migrants from the sea with tremendous physical effort is revealed the primary human condition: to

be bodies, to be embodied and living beings, in this case fighting together to satisfy the instinctive primary strive to survive. The migrant, who in this moment epitomizes bare life at its highest vulnerability, reveals in this encounter the founding equality in the modality of political existence of modern subjects: in the potentiality of becoming, or returning to, bare life (as discussed in 1.2, especially Chambers 2008; Agamben 1995). If the encounter with the other is always at the base for any recognition of oneself as a subject, even outside the political discourse, then this encounter can open glimmers of collaboration on an ethical ground before than on a political one. A dimension of para-political existence sparks here, and it is enhanced, one year after, in the way the remembrance ceremony is performed and recorded in paper. The border zone of Lampedusa permits at the same time the strongest violence and the emergence of an alternative way to conceive political existence, one that begins with a mutual acknowledgment of oneself and the other as embodied beings, potentially equally subjected to state power, which can manifest itself even in the form of its absence.

All these episodes recounted by Leogrande to reconstruct the ceremony have one common leitmotiv. That there is a deep human dimension exceeding from the political individual recognition, that can neither be identified with *zoe* nor *bios* (Agamben 1995, 11), as it is more than mere bodily existence and more than mere political subjectivity. This dimension permeates the survivors' attentive listening to the long list of names of the victims, it manifests through the shadow that still obscures their eyes. It is a humanness that coincides with the fear that haunts the survivors in the present as much as with the helping hand of the improvised rescuer. At the border this dimension is disclosed, proudly affirmed and the space for its appearance revendedicated. The fact that this extremely human aspect exceeds political categories does not mean, nonetheless, that it does not or cannot have political impact. We shall better explore what this means in the story of Shorsh.

3.4 Shorsh's story. The struggle for identity

The story of Shorsh is narrated throughout five chapters of the book, including the opening and the closing ones. It is the only story that accompanies the reader from the beginning until the end, and, perhaps, it is the one that helps the most to make sense of the entire book, to understand the intent of the writer to remain at the frontier.

The story that is told is of a very personal kind. It covers the transformation in Shorsh's identity, his struggled adaptation in the new place, his relationship with the past and with the life choice that migration entailed. The five chapters dedicated to his story are titled "Vedere, non vedere,"⁴⁵ followed by the numbers from one to five. This title, although quite vague at first glance, appears to suggest that there is an implied subject of the action of seeing, despite the verb being an infinitive. It could imply the author himself or whoever assumes the position of listener towards the other, who will turn out to be a complex self whose grey areas can be so hidden that they struggle to even leak out. The sections in which the story is divided present an attempt of the author to reconstruct the story of Shorsh while also giving an account of how their friendship evolves. Leogrande is therefore greatly implicated in this story, and the reader follows his efforts to learn more about his friend— in terms of identity, of his past life and his present emotions.

Shorsh is a Kurdish immigrant who escaped from Iraq in the 1990's and obtained political asylum in Italy. Leogrande met him when he was working as a volunteer teaching Italian to foreigners in Rome, and they kept in touch from time to time since then, with a long pause caused by Shorsh's temporary return to Iraq.

In "Vedere, non vedere 1," Shorsh is at the future writer's student house and shows him and some other friends the video of his city after bombing, during the war with Iran. This story was already introduced in Chapter I (1.1) to analyze the specificity of each embodied experience of migration, always tied to individual backgrounds and to a bodily position that orders the perception of this experience according to personal schemas. The closing line of the chapter, indeed, suggests

⁴⁵ "To see, not to see."

what Leogrande deduced, back then, to be a reason for Shorsh's decision to emigrate: "sulla sua pelle è stato edificato un mondo che gli appare inalterabile"⁴⁶ (16). The author stresses that the circumstances that push someone to leave are imprinted on their bodies, just like the travel that follows will create inerasable scars, whether visible or invisible.

But Shorsh did not have enough visible scars on his skin. To obtain political asylum in Italy, he had to show that, as he sustained, he had been victim of torture. But he had no signs, no cuts, no deformations to show. He had to make up a story turning the only noticeable bodily signs that he had into marks of torture. Having received a surgery for hemorrhoids, he showed the scars that this operation left him stating that, when he was held in an Iraqi jail, his torturers made him sit repeatedly on a glass bottle with his underwear off. Only in "Vedere, non vedere 4" Shorsh reveals this to Leogrande, almost twenty years after their first encounter in Rome, uncovering a truth about his asylum that the author had no idea of. Standing behind the counter of his pizza and kebab shop in Bolzano, Shorsh explains to him that he had been victim of torture for real, he had been repeatedly beaten and humiliated during imprisonment, he just had no words to tell it. "Non c'è mai stata nessuna bottiglia. Le emorroidi dipendevano da altro, non dalle torture. Ma non avevo le parole, e questo era l'unico modo per rimanere qui"⁴⁷ (277). The lack of words to communicate does not only concern the new Italian language, "non riusciva a trovarle in curdo o in arabo"⁴⁸ (276). There were just no words for the extreme violence, for the unbearable terror of this violence. "Più che la violenza, ricordo il terrore della violenza, il terrore che ogni notte potessero capitarti le cose peggiori che vedevi fare agli altri"⁴⁹ (277). Shorsh needed to obtain asylum but his words were not capable to deliver the terror. What he lived exceeded the capacity of horror that human languages can contain, and decided, therefore, for a necessary deception.

⁴⁶ "A world that seems inalterable has been imprinted on his skin" (16).

⁴⁷ "There was never any bottle. Hemorrhoids were caused by something else, not by the tortures. But I didn't have the words, and this was the only way for me to remain here" (277).

⁴⁸ "He could not find them in Kurdish or in Arabic" (276).

⁴⁹ "Rather than violence itself, I remember the terror of violence, the terror that every night the worst things you saw done to others could be done to you" (277).

In “Vedere, non vedere 3” Shorsh had already revealed to Leogrande something else about his identity that the writer never thought about. “Io non mi chiamo Shorsh”⁵⁰ (229), he repeats a couple of times, noticing his friends’ stunned look. This change of identity happened in Germany. Germany was his planned destination, but the police caught him a few months after his arrival and sent him back to Italy according to the Dublin regulation, as he had to have passed from there to reach Germany (even though he had not been identified in Italy). When German authorities asked his name, he made up one. And he wrote on the paper they put in front of him “Shorsh.” He tells Leogrande: “Shorsh è nato lì, però nei giorni, nei mesi e negli anni successivi si è creata un’altra identità. È nata una nuova persona. Tu consoci Shorsh, non quello che ero prima. Tu conosci una persona che pensa e parla in italiano”⁵¹ (230). The person known by the name of Shorsh results from the negation of someone who was there before but that was left to no more than a trace in the body that once belonged to him. This person thinks and speaks in a new language. In a game of lights and shadows, Shorsh gradually reveals himself as someone who had to erase and rebuild, reset and start over, beginning with the primary indicator of identity: his first name. But some traces always remain of what has been removed. If not of the thing removed in itself, at least of the act of removing. By letting Leogrande “see” and “not see” the pieces of a past person that precede and exceed Shorsh, the refugee is revealing a distance intrinsic to his self. A remoteness opened in the moment of the departure and never reseeded if not in the bitter, nostalgic anchor of memory.

“Shorsh può essere annoverato in questa categoria di saltatori di frontiere, di traditori dei blocchi monolitici, a cominciare da quello della propria identità e del proprio nome”⁵² (300), argues the author. To refer to Agamben’s expression (Chap. I, 1.3), Shorsh realizes to be the “subject of his desubjectivation” and takes part in it. On the one hand, he enhances the desubjectivation that illegal border-crossing entails by denying his name (and protecting thus a certain dimension of his person).

⁵⁰ “My name is not Shorsh” (229).

⁵¹ “Shorsh was born there, but in the following days, months and years a new identity was created. A new person was born. You know Shorsh, not who I was before. You know a person that thinks and speaks in Italian” (230).

⁵² “Shorsh can be listed in this category of jumpers of fences and traitors of monolithic blocks, beginning with that of his name and identity” (300).

On the other, he lights the spark for a further subjectivation that begins with deceiving the political machinery of asylum allocation to overcome the linguistic obstacle that would have kept him from becoming a political subject in the eye of the Italian state. “It is precisely when one enacts the rights that one does not have that one becomes a political subject” (Rinelli 500). But Shorsh’s transformation should not only be read as political subjectivation, it can be thought of as a more comprehensive form of re-existence. Besides finding a way to circumvent the law, disclosing therefore a certain resistance to it, he also constructed a new identity that unfolds through the twists of a language that belongs to the new world and emerges with a name invented anew. The person who existed before Shorsh is saved from the biopolitical power that instead subjected *this* Shorsh since he was discovered in Germany. That person remains in an intimate, nostalgic relationship to himself, only existing in the human dimension that is neither bare life (*zoe*) nor political existence (*bios*), that lingers in the conciliatory ground between those two categories that, according to Agamben, are unified and indiscernible in the citizen’s subjection to power (1995, 11). Yet this dimension is not completely relegated to the personal, lonely sphere of reminiscence. In his decision to speak about this with his friend, and in the literary amplification of the story that Leogrande carries out by giving large access to it, this human dimension acquires a political resonance.

For this to happen, visibility is necessary, as hinted at by the title. Leogrande is performing an attempt to confer visibility to the part of Shorsh’s life that remains behind, in time and space, this Shorsh that he knows. The struggle inherent to Shorsh’s transformation is reflected in the author’s realization of the abyss that exists between the complexity of the person he is facing and his own idea of that person. As in a silent apology, Leogrande is trying to make justice to his friend’s story by conveying the abyss behind the surface, by rendering the layers that compose an extremely complex life experience visible and imaginable.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter began with the exploration of how the concept of border is employed, explored and enriched by *La frontiera*. Two different episodes from the book have been analyzed in detail and one main conclusion can be drawn.

In the various steps of the commemoration, what emerges is the existence of a human dimension that Agamben's categories of bare life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) do not encompass. This dimension flees subjection from power as it remains in an intimate, rather than in a public, relation with those other two. But this intimate relation is not to be read as a romantic or decadent inflection of the self. All the contrary, this dimension can be extremely political if allowed to become uncomfortably visible.

The remembrance ceremony was uncomfortably visible for European indifference as it functioned as a strong opposition to the degrading condition of bare life to which the European community reduces immigrant human beings. Shorsh's story is uncomfortably visible as it reveals the tricks that upheld his political insertion in the Italian community, his capacity to thwart the barriers of the law. At the same time, Shorsh's story reveals the human struggle that accompanies migration before and after the travel is concluded. For this visibility to be restored, a space of appearance is necessary. And this space is the physical and abstract space of the border.

Just like the border works as the limit between territorial definitions, the third dimension disclosed by migrant subjectivity in the text is the limit between *bios* and *zoe*. The nature of the limit is always that of a *mélange*, it is the area that absorbs the characteristics of the entities it separates while never being identical to them. The third dimension of subjectivity that stands in between two aspects of human existence defined in relation to power is the one that depends on personal agency and re-existence and can therefore avoid being implicated in power.

For migrants, this means that a possibility to thwart the dehumanizing and desubjectivizing experience of border-crossing is possible in the revindication of a space that flees strict categorization. A space of this kind, fluctuating, ever changing and constitutively exceptional, enables forms of political existence based on collaboration and mutual recognition as subjects among individuals. This

space can be physical, as in the survivors' pacific yet firm re-appropriation of Lampedusa, but it can also be the figurative space of narration, as in Shorsh's story, where a complex subjectivity emerges from the words of a book configured as a determined opposition to silence and invisibility.

Chapter IV

Border Projections in *Sangue giusto* by Francesca Melandri. Re-existence Across Social Borders

Migrare è un gesto totale ma anche molto semplice: quando un vivente in un posto non può più sopravvivere, o muore o se ne va. Umani, tonni, cicogne, gnu al galoppo nella savana: le migrazioni sono come le maree, i venti, le orbite dei pianeti e il parto, tutti fenomeni che non è dato fermare.⁵³
(Melandri 42)

4.1 Introduction

"Io so solo questo: qui tra noi vivi non puoi ritornare. Chi muore è un profugo, un richiedente asilo. Ha ricevuto un Diniego per il resto dell'eternità. Non rivedrai più la tua casa. Anche tu ora sei *uscito*"⁵⁴ (9; emphasis original). *Sangue giusto* opens with the flashforward of the death of the old Attilio Profeti. The comparison between death and migration in the very first page of the novel refers to a drastic turn, an irreversible movement grounded in the certainty about the impossibility to go back and in the uncertainty of what will come. Determining a clear-cut closure with a world, migration and death impose a jump into the unknown.

Sangue giusto, published in 2017 by Francesca Melandri, is a novel that connects two distant moments of Italy's history. One is the colonization of Ethiopia during the fascist regime, the other is the current immigration from Africa to Italy. They are connected by a narrative line that follows a blood line, where the "right blood," as expressed by the title, is essential for the Ethiopian immigrant for his asylum request to have more chances to be accepted. Attilio Profeti, a long-lived man who

⁵³ Migrating is a definitive action, but it is also very simple: when a living being cannot survive in one place, it either dies or leaves. Humans, tunas, storks, galloping wildebeest in the savanna: migrations are like tides, winds, the orbits of planets and childbirth, all phenomena that cannot be stopped. (Melandri 42)

⁵⁴ "This is the only thing I know: you cannot come back among the living. When you die you are a refugee, an asylum seeker. You received a Refusal for eternity. You will never see your home again. Now you too have *exited*" (9).

took part in the Ethiopian expedition as a soldier and supporter of the regime, is the biological grandfather of Shimeta Ietmgeta Attilaprofeti, the Ethiopian asylum seeker that reaches Rome hoping to receive help from his relatives. In particular, Ilaria, the protagonist and daughter of Attilio, is the most involved in the proceedings of her newly discovered nephew's story.

The novel intertwines two narrative lines that draw from different epochs but that are deeply connected, as the effects of colonization reverberate in the present on many levels. The intricate plot of the novel smoothly combines broad historical contexts with the vicissitudes of the Profeti family.

Focusing on a work of fiction that is, for the most part, set in the city of Rome, this chapter maintains the focus on the concept of border by looking at how national frontiers can be dispersed within the territory and reflected and transposed into society. Another central point of reflection will concern the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among Italian characters and the Ethiopian ones, which often reproduce the violence of subordination that the state applies towards its alien inhabitants. The possibility for Shimeta to affirm himself as a subject despite these barriers will be investigated in parallel with the transformations in Ilaria's character enhanced by her new awareness about the grey areas in her family history and the history of her country.

4.2 Other Times and Spaces. The Borders within the Italian Territory

As introduced, the protagonist of the novel is Ilaria Profeti, a forty years old school teacher who lives in Rome. She has two older brothers and a younger one whose existence she only discovers at the age of sixteen, when his father reveals to the whole family that he had been living a double life shared between two households. After the initial shock, Ilaria builds a strong fraternal relationship with Attilio, her young brother named after their father, to the point that they live in two apartments of the same building. However, Attilio owns a boat with which he organizes day trips for tourists interested in dolphins and fish sighting in the surroundings of Genoa, reason why is not often in his apartment in Rome. He is not home, indeed, when Ilaria calls him, alarmed, after finding right outside her

apartment door a black young man claiming to be her nephew. She will let him in her house and wait for her brother to get to Rome with the first available flight, and together they will discuss the credibility of Shimeta's story and look for a way to handle the situation.

Their father, a controversial figure whose many lives are only discovered by his sons and daughter when he is very old and no longer mentally lucid, is not able to answer coherently to his daughter's inquiry over his experience in Ethiopia. The reader will anyways find out the twirls of his story as the novel offers much space to his past, where his relationship with Abeba, the Ethiopian woman with whom he has a child, is closely narrated. But Ilaria and Attilio junior do not have any access to this side of history, and they hesitate to believe, as much as to reject, Shimeta's version.

In their first interrogation to him, the three sitting at Ilaria's kitchen table, the Profeti siblings ask all sorts of questions to learn more details about his life, to understand the steps of the travel that brought him to Rome and to discover the reason why he left Ethiopia. Shimeta decides to answer truthfully, without enriching ("rafforzare" (79)) his story, as volunteers said he should have done when presenting his asylum request. When they ask why he speaks Italian so well, he replies that he learnt a bit of it from a group of volunteer nuns in Ethiopia and improved it in the year and a half he had already spent in Italy. Surprised, Attilio wonders why he let all that time pass before he went to find them, if they indeed were his relatives. The narrator gives us brief access into the thoughts of Shimeta the moment when he is confronted with this question: "*Tutto questo tempo parla, il figlio di Attilio Profeti? Di quello di un cittadino italiano, anzi europeo? O di quello di un Bruciato?*"⁵⁵ È chiaro che fa questa domanda perché non ha idea di quanto siano diversi, questi due tempi"⁵⁶ (80; emphasis original).

Shimeta provides a detailed list of his movements, since the first day of his arrival in Lampedusa until the present moment of their conversation. The omniscient narrator reports his speech

⁵⁵ "Bruciato," literally someone "burnt" is a person who left the country and cannot go back, or that has not left yet but who should leave as soon as possible, as his person is in great danger.

⁵⁶ "*All this time*. What time is he talking about, this son of Attilio Profeti? Is it the time of an Italian citizen, or better, European? Or is it that of a Burnt man? Clearly, he asks because he has no idea how different these times are." (80)

in the indirect form, and the long list takes a very schematic shape. To every place of passage corresponds a precise duration of each stay, with few intervals that explain the amount of time employed to repeatedly present asylum requests, and for competent authorities to evaluate it, reject it and again evaluate and reject. The list, very detailed in the book, continues for four pages (81-84), and it is reported through indirect dialogue. The precise and monotonous tone in which the list is presented spawns an estranging feeling as it seems to refuse the need to spark empathy in the listeners – inside and outside the story – for Shimeta’s experience of this fluctuant year-and-a-half. Shimeta is not longing for compassion. Rather, his only aim seems to be that of providing an understandable explanation of his story. He needs to be understood, not commiserated. The beginning of the long list can be summarized as follows. First reception center in Lampedusa: two days. Transfer by military boat from Lampedusa to Trapani: six hours. Detention center of Trapani: two months. First judicial evaluation of his asylum request: zero minutes (postponed). Detention center of Trapani: five more weeks. Statement in court to explain the reasons of his flight from Ethiopia, including the death of his cousin: six minutes. Detention center of Trapani: forty-two days.

The difference in the time experiences, which he highlights before the long explanation of his displacements through Italy before getting to Rome, the unbridgeable gap between the time of a person whose future rests in complete uncertainty and the tamable time of stability. Barbara Sorgoni argues that reception, detention and identification centers are places where the harshness of the external frontier is tangible, specifically, in the suspended time that can precede a rejection of asylum request that leads to refolement or repatriation (2011, 23). It is the case of Shimeta, whose time spent in these centers is completely other than the solid, manageable time of someone who has his life secured among the walls of a household. The time of reclusion and uncertainty is an unbearable time. The exasperation of reclusion is enhanced, on the one hand, by the impossibility to know the duration of the stay and, on the other, by the uncertainty about the result of the asylum request. In a prison-like atmosphere, the stay in centers is worsened by absolute insecurity over one’s fate.

However, the time of an illegal immigrant is not only uncertain when he or she is kept in a center. The liquid time of indeterminacy is extended to the whole period of illegality, as one's existence must unfold in constant invisibility from the state, from the police, from the world. Later in the novel, after staying some time at Attilio junior's and being strongly encouraged by him and Ilaria not to leave the house, he nevertheless decides to adventure outside the house walls to go for a run. Stopped by the police and asked for his documents, once more he is brought to a center: the CIE of Rome. Born for identification and expulsion, as if the two things were naturally correlated, these centers often result in a further denial for "clandestine" immigrants to remain in Italy. If their country has repatriation agreements with Italy, they will be sent home against their will, condemned to face in the most optimistic scenario the terrible humiliation of empty-handed return, or worse, if they had left their country for political persecution, as in the case of Shimeta. If not, they will receive a written order to leave the country, and they will have no other option but to exist in the shadow of law if, for disparate reasons among which the Dublin Regulation is central, they cannot leave Italy. Stressing the indeterminacy of the wait in a CIE (*Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione*), Melandri explains: "questa non è una prigione. È un *centro*. E il ragazzo, come gli altri insieme a lui, è un ospite, non un detenuto. Eppure, proprio come nello stanzone di Tripoli, nessuno sa quando potrà uscire"⁵⁷ (338; emphasis original). Again, the prolonged, indefinite time becomes the salient feature of Shimeta's stay. "Eccolo ancora qui, il tempo-catrame della reclusionie, dei posti dove Dio sta più zitto di un muro; cola vischioso dentro un buco nel petto, lo riempie di nero"⁵⁸ (338). Time acquires the material consistency of tar, it becomes one with the walls of an alienating room; heavy, it occupies an empty space in the chest. Loneliness, hinted at by the allusion to God's absence, is especially tangible in a time that stretches out uncontrolled and unknowable. But it is also enhanced by the feeling of abandonment that physical separation from the rest of society delivers. These centers, strictly

⁵⁷ "This is not a prison. It is a *center*. And the boy, like the others with him, is a guest, not a prisoner. However, just like in the large room in Tripoli, nobody knows when he will be allowed to leave" (388).

⁵⁸ "Here it comes, the tarred time of reclusion, of the places where God is more silent than a wall; it streams, dark and sticky, into an opened hole in the chest and covers it in black" (388).

separated from civil society's everyday activities, maintain a relation of complete disconnection with the rest of space. As in Liberti's presentation of the Lampedusa center discussed in chapter 2, 2.5, it is as if these places existed in a parallel dimension to their surroundings, destined to categories of individuals that are not allowed to exist and to be seen outside them. In their physical detachment from their environs, these structures function as firm repetition of external territorial frontiers, as will be discussed. Their inside is characterized by the same undefinition that permeates border areas, and they stand in the same relation to the rest of the territory. In order to better understand how the experience of Shimeta in Italy is shaped by these places, in the following section the border nature of reception and detention centers – which with every government undergo changes in nature, name and role⁵⁹ – will be analyzed drawing from Balibar's and others' theoretical insights.

4.3 Immigration Centers and Social Partitions

Detention, reception and identification centers for asylum seekers are inland spaces that attain to the governmental function of immigration control and management of immigrants according to national laws and international agreements. Located throughout the whole territory, they effectively enact border tasks, keeping immigrants under restriction until their request is evaluated. If the fact that borders not always coincide with the outer limits of territory has largely been noticed (Balibar & Williams 2002), with the creation of these centers we assist to a specific displacement of border functions to spaces that are better suited for the application of national and international normative frameworks. As Balibar notices drawing from deleuzean concepts, the “territorialization of space” (2009, 192) is often a simultaneous process to that of deterritorialization. In this case, the softening of external borders – which, being Italy surrounded by sea, cannot effectively stop incoming flows

⁵⁹ I do not consider here the relatively new centers defined *hotspots* mainly destined to identification, opened in 2015 when Melandri had been working on her novel for three years already. A separate analysis could be reserved to them only, as their purpose enables violent practices of forced identification that include torture, as documented by the 2016 report by Amnesty International: <<https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Hotspot-Italy-final-WEB.pdf>>.

or already select who is entitled to enter and who is not – is reflected in their dislocation and in the transposition of their functions to enclosed spaces that permit administrative and judicial managing of immigrants. However, while attaining to administrative aims these centers have effects on a much larger scale. Structuring immigrants in sharply separated spaces to the rest of society contributes to the formation of categories of individuals that exceed normative distinctions and enter society in a racialized form. In Balibar's analysis, indeed, the territorialization of space is the primary condition for the emergence of politics; in other terms, it is that which enables the formation of a category such as that of *citizens*, as territorialization is not only to be intended as the organization of spatial units (192). From a functional arrangement of space aimed at the enactment of state law, reception centers turn into the trigger for societal separations among groups, beginning with that of citizens/asylum-seekers/ clandestine. And this separation is lived, first of all, in the first-person experience of the interned, who feels himself detached from the world and from others' perception of the world. The case of Shimeta makes this very clear: his physical solitude in the CIE is amplified by the particularity and the solitude of his perception of time. *His* time is only his own, influenced by the condition of illegality and by the fact that confinement allows no possibility whatsoever to enter the sphere of shared perception. The time of the border becomes, here, the time of the body. The experience of migration ties them together.

Barbara Sorgoni expresses a similar idea to that of Balibar, which she argues for in these terms: “l'articolazione – o la confusione – tra le due frontiere [interne ed esterne] rivela come le une siano modellate sulle altre, così che ad un 'ordine nazionale delle cose' se ne sovrappone uno razializzato, informale, invisibile, cui si applica non più solo un registro giuridico di distinzione ma anche uno morale di giudizi di valore squalificanti” (23). In Sorgoni's idea, although society seems to be the cradle for racism, this is actually rooted in political practices of confinement linked to border-making or border-enforcement, and only as a consequence it resounds in society. Dorothy Roberts similarly argues that race is “a political system that governs people by sorting them into social groupings based on invented biological demarcations. Race is [...] a political category that has

been disguised as a biological one” (4). In *Sangue giusto*, an immigration lawyer that Ilaria speaks to while trying to help Shimeta get out of the CIE provides a definition of these centers:

Sono le nostre frontiere. Quelle che abbiamo fatto finta di togliere. Le sbarre e le terre di nessuno non ci sono più ma le abbiamo solo nascoste. Ora sono i CIE la frontiera d’Europa. I bastioni della nostra identità. Di noi che godiamo dello Stato di diritto e mica siamo nazisti, mica mettiamo gente innocente nei lager per quello che è – tipo perché è ebrea, o zingara. Però, guarda un po’, nei CIE non ci finisci se commetti un reato. Ci finisci per quello che sei. Perché sei un *clandestino*. (458; emphasis original)⁶⁰

This passage highlights the extremely ambiguous nature of immigration centers, spaces created for normative purposes but that, reserved to individuals whose condition of non-citizens has been criminalized and baptized as *clandestinità*, end up forming or strengthening societal hierarchies. If external borders meet the need for protection from potential outer threats, these inland frontiers work as a further safeguard to keep national identity from possible contamination, as the immigration lawyer of the novel suggests.

The way in which Melandri presents CIEs is closely related to Liberti’s description of the Lampedusa one discussed in section 2.5. Whereas here Shimeta has a first-person experience of them and Liberti maintained the outside perspective of an observer, both cases stress the lack of interaction with the outside, the impossibility for migrants to revendicate rights and affirm subjectivity as their person is at once criminalized, reduced to bare life and hidden from the social and civil sphere. Rather than speaking of spaces of exception where law suspension is abided (Agamben 2003) and unusual measures can be justified by their border function, Sorgoni suggests reading these spaces as margins, sites where “sussistono diverse forme di potere il cui fine non è necessariamente la leggibilità dei

⁶⁰ They are our frontiers. The ones we pretended to eliminate. Barriers and no man’s lands are no longer there but we only hid them. Now CIEs are the frontiers of Europe. They are the ramparts of our identity, of us who enjoy a constitutional state and are for sure not Nazis. We do not put people in lagers for what they are – Jewish, Gipsy. But what a coincidence: you do not end up in CIEs if you commit a crime. You end up there for what you are. Because you are a clandestine. (458)

soggetti” (24). These centers, created as sites for the conciliation of state policies and supranational laws and agreements, the “legibility” of the subjects that they host is not contemplated as a primary objective. In Sorgoni, the notion of legibility is linked to the possibility of being inscribed in existing political categories. However, this research has frequently stressed that political recognition lies on the condition of the subject’s visibility. Therefore, speaking of margins aids grasping the societal repercussions of this spatial arrangement which has the effect of disfavoring certain groups in their visibility and participation in the *polis*. “The issue of space has to be thought of in terms of distribution: distribution of places, boundaries of what is in or out, central or peripheral, visible or invisible,” explains Ranci re (7). The state’s decisions over who is welcome in the territory and who is not are reflected in spatial arrangements that condemn the excluded ones to invisibility, which is not always a direct imposition but can be a consequence. It can also be a self-imposed condition, as Shimeta’s confinement in Attilio’s house shows. To avoid severe consequences as deportation, Shimeta renounces to his freedom of movement for his fear of being seen. And, as Rinelli notices, “we cannot separate the space of appearance from the space of politics and to be deprived of the space of appearance or visibility is to be deprived of reality” (496).

These stages of the novel of reclusion and forced confinement keep Shimeta from entering a space of appearance that could translate into a revindication of that space, and a necessary interaction that would ask the others to acknowledge his presence. Detention centers and home confinement are moments that preclude any possibility for Shimeta to affirm his subjectivity, relegating him to a position of subjection from which the struggle to be recognized as a subject is impeded by two other factors than just the law. Firstly, by the limitation of his space of existence and, secondly, by the solitude of perception – and thus his exclusion from the “normal” sensorial experience – which begins with his particular, distant and different experience of time.

Despite this political and social exclusion, *Sangue giusto* presents a transformation in the condition of Shimeta, who, similarly to Shorsh (section 3.4), finds a way to intervene in the excluding

mechanisms of asylum allocation. Unlike Shorsh, however, his subjectivity affirmation is configured as a dialectic and intersubjective process, as it concerns all the individuals involved in the story.

4.4 Crossing Frontiers. Space and Identity

The long travel that Shimeta undertakes to reach Rome includes some forced stops within the territory of Libya. As we saw in *La frontiera*, Libya is often hinted at by migrants as the most inhospitable country along their route.⁶¹ Melandri reconstructs in fiction a scenario that is common in many testimonies: dangerous crossings of the Libyan desert, tortures in detention centers and underpaid illegal labor. The instances of exclusion and reclusion in Italy were thus preceded by others along his journey. All these moments, wherever he was, there was something that Shimeta held on to as a safe anchor: “l’unica cosa che non avevano potuto togliergli, perchè tutto si può togliere a un Bruciato e tutto infatti gli verrà rubato tranne quello: il suo indirizzo email”⁶² (76). During the crossing of the Mediterranean, when thirst, hunger, cold and fear were torturing him, he repeated it to himself over and over again like a prayer, “per ricordarsi di non morire”⁶³ (76). Every Internet point was savior for him, in Libya as much as in Italy. Attilio and Ilaria are surprised by the amount of time he spends on Ilaria’s computer, typing (74). Denied to him the possibility to familiarize with the space of the Italian territory nor to reclaim a space of appearance, the web becomes the only shared dimension to which Shimeta can freely access, his only possibility of evasion. Enclosed by spatial boundaries that limit all interpersonal interaction, the internet provides a space where to break these boundaries, to cross the walled frontiers of a house or of a center.

Also, the only sense of belonging to a community that he could maintain was tied to the invisible line that connected computers through the world. “Così era stato in Libia, prima e dopo

⁶¹ Indeed, Libya never signed the 1951 Geneva Convention regarding the status of refugees, result of the progressive development of international human rights law, which can be found at: <<https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>>.

⁶² “The only thing they couldn’t take from him, because everything can be taken from a Burnt man and everything will indeed be stolen to him: his email address” (76).

⁶³ “To remind himself not to die” (76).

essere rinchiuso nello stanzone. Così dopo, in Italia, nei campi con le grate e in quelli senza. Perfino nel deserto, percorso da frontiere di sabbia tracciate con l'inchiostro invisibile della geopolitica coloniale"⁶⁴ (76). Within these hostile spaces, the connection that the web permits represents the only chance to transgress the physical and spatial restrictions imposed by it. There where people are blocked, their movement extremely controlled and restrained, the virtual space of the web allows everyone to run freely. But Shimeta's attachment to his email reveals a deeper level than the need for evasion. "La spirale dell'@, al suo centro, non connetteva solo il suo nome e cognome con la sigla di un server, era diventato il perno del suo senso di sé"⁶⁵ (76). The email was also the last string that kept him tied to a home that he could never again visit in person, at least for a very long time. If "la realtà intorno a lui in ogni istante lo cacciava via dalla sua identità" (77), his email was the access key to the virtual community whose shared lymph is vital for the identity of the individual. Shimeta's identity would undergo slow erosion without that spiral symbol to keep it in (virtual) proximity to a home that is otherwise unreachable.

If the virtual portal of electronic mail represents the desire to cross space that can never fully be actualized in bodily presence, other instances of boundary-crossing, linked to Shimeta's identity, can be found in his story. One aspect, especially, is crucial for the plot as much as for a wider reflection on subjectivity construction, as it revolves around the struggle for recognition and belonging that the Ethiopian man fights since his first day in Italy.

When someone decides to leave their country, he or she must have three things: "un indirizzo email, un cellulare e tutti i soldi che può"⁶⁶ (35). It is better to leave documents behind, if one wishes to have higher chances to decide *their* European country of destination. Shimeta, nonetheless, knows that *his* document is extremely valuable, as it carries the name of a father of a father. It is the guarantee

⁶⁴ "So it was in Libya, before and after being locked up in the big room. So it was after, in Italy, in the camps with grates and those without them. Even in the desert, crossed by sand frontiers traced with the invisible link of colonial geopolitics" (76).

⁶⁵ "The spiral of the @, at its center, did not only connect his name and last name with the acronym of a server, it had become the pivot of his sense of self" (76).

⁶⁶ "An email address, a mobile phone and as much money as possible" (35).

of his *italianità*. That piece of paper testifies a blood line that would render him eligible not only for asylum, but, as he thinks, even for citizenship. It was “una traccia d’inchostro, una linea di sangue che dal passato portava al futuro”⁶⁷ (37). Aware that in Italy, to obtain citizenship, “conta solo il liquido che ti scorre dentro le vene, come dice la legge chiamata *ius sanguinis*”⁶⁸ (342), Shimeta is very surprised to see that competent authorities reject his asylum request, despite his precious document. This is why he looks for the Profeti family and asks them for help, given their higher authority to make claims to the state as Italian citizens. Ilaria and Attilio will help him, although they are never completely sure if what he says is true, if he really is their nephew.

However, at the end of the novel we assist to a surprising revelation: Shimeta’s identity document does not belong to him but to his cousin, who was killed before he could flee from Ethiopia. “Quello che vi ho raccontato è tutto vero, solo che io ero lui e lui era me”⁶⁹ (512), he reveals to Attilio and Ilaria. Senay is his real name, but Senay was not entitled to any claims in Italy, he did not have the “right blood,” the blood that permitted him to finally obtain asylum, although it was not easy.

Similarly to the story of Shorsh that told by Leogrande in *La frontiera* (3.4), Melandri presents a fictional account of identity-stripping enacted by an immigrant who otherwise would have been forced to remain in Italy clandestinely if he was lucky enough not to be repatriated. In both cases, deception was the only available device for the two men to become legible within existing legal categories that excluded that of *clandestini*. In the case of Shorsh, this was thanks to the visible signs of torture that he could show; in the case of Senay, to his cousin’s ID. Both character’s capacity to circumvent the law reveals a space for individual agency to be located in the cracks of the legal system of the Italian State. These silent practices of rejection of certain impositions and subjectivity revindication add to the notion of border-crossing nuances that exceed by far the only spatial connotation. According to Rinelli, “the border emerges whenever practices of statecraft enter in relation, or rather collide with the migrants’ obstinate trajectories” (499), where we should think of

⁶⁷ “A trace of ink, a blood line that brought from the past to the future” (37).

⁶⁸ “The only thing that matters is the blood that runs through your veins, as the law called *ius sanguinis* says” (342).

⁶⁹ “Everything I told you is true, except that I was him and he was me” (512).

these trajectories as including the processes that follow arrival at destination. Martina Tazzioli similarly notices that:

seguendo le pratiche di rifiuto esercitate dai migranti, non solo nella loro dimensione di sottrazione ma nelle rivendicazioni politiche che veicolano, ciò che si apre oltre la contestazione delle politiche migratorie è una riarticolazione possibile tra politiche di asilo e pratiche di autonomia di movimento. (2016)

The possibility of such a re-articulation, albeit rooted in migrants' autonomy of movement, is to be located in the systemic cracks which the individual can enter and contribute to his or her legibility as a subject, even from the position of someone who is not yet politically recognized. The fact that the one claiming a political and legal recognition in the Italian territory is not effectively a descendent of the nation unfolds an attempt of challenge to the established order and to the modalities through which citizenship is granted. It is a clear contestation to marginalization, one that comes precisely from someone who was put at the margins of society, literally and figuratively.

Melandri's choice to embed this story in a very clear historical framework and to link Shimeta's vicissitudes to the revindication of a blood line reveals the attempt to provide an interpretative key for his story. It could be read as a challenge to trigger a postcolonial discourse that "in Italia non è ancora maturo" (Yimer qtd. in Rinelli, 504). The colonial experience of Italy plays indeed a central role in the text, as it remains to strengthen societal and political practices of exclusion and marginalization. Shimeta, the living reminder that this past is not completely sealed, likewise raises a challenge, with his presence on the Italian soil, to the social structures and boundaries towards an overcoming of colonial legacies.

4.5 Decolonial Re-existence

In Melandri's narration of the story of Shimeta, the condition that so far in this research we have defined as bare life (Agamben 1995) is often presented in the text as *clandestinità*. The philosophical concept of bare life is thus translated in the political category that corresponds to that condition: an excluding category employed to define illegality. Other than being nothing more than a body, the body of a clandestine is also illegal. However, in depicting the condition of Shimeta, Sangue giusto highlights not so much a mode of existence as mere living body (*zoe*); rather, it stresses the extreme proximity between exclusion from politics (annihilation of someone's *bios*) and exclusion from society. When reduced to bare life and consequently denied a sphere of appearance, the immigrant becomes someone belonging to a category to despise, as noticed in 4.3, where we argued that spatial distribution contributes to the formation of categories of this kind. Nevertheless, the narrative line of the novel that intertwines colonialism and current immigration hints at a deeper ideological sedimentation at the heart of the Italian attitude towards African immigrants. Discriminations of the spatial and social kind that we earlier described would then also derive from this mentality. Anna Scacchi argues as follows:

Che la questione razziale sia sostanzialmente estranea alla nostra storia, in cui la colonizzazione dell'Africa è stata un fatto accidentale e minore, e nasca dalle difficoltà di convivenza con le "ondate" di migranti che arrivano in un momento di forte crisi economica, appare chiaramente una lettura miope, che ignora tanto la realtà violenta e la durata del nostro colonialismo, quanto la sua sopravvivenza nelle dinamiche di esclusione sociale, politica e culturale, e nella nozione di un'identità collettiva omogenea ed etnicamente "pura," che trova le sue radici proprio nei decenni a cavallo tra Ottocento e Novecento. (237)

Ilaria, whose perspective is often the dominant one in the novel, mediated by an omniscient, third-person speaking narrator, becomes aware of this little by little. Confronted with the arrival of Shimeta, she gradually comes to question her identity, self-perception and the beliefs and convictions that found her approach to the other. This process originates as she discovers the details of Italy's colonial

past and of her father's direct involvement in this historical phase. In the Italian common imaginary colonialism is largely considered a very marginal phenomenon, if not completely forgotten. But its heritage still afflicts Ethiopia and lingers in the mentality that determines patronizing approaches to the other. In Scacchi's words, the violent reality and the length of our colonial experience remain in the notion of a collective homogeneous identity, ethnically "pure." The idea that to become a citizen you must have the "right blood" and the fact that, in Shimeta's vicissitudes, it is only when Ilaria intervenes that the document stating his "right blood" will be trusted are indicators of the truthfulness of Scacchi's argument.

The idea of a national identity whose homogeneity would be threatened by outer incursions is not only present in practices that determine allocation of political labels, that decide over inclusion and exclusion. It permeates a certain approach to the other on many levels of society. Ilaria gradually realizes how her attitude towards Shimeta hides an unadmitted feeling of superiority, which, once brought to light, is uncovered to be the indicator of an existential need for protection. During the dark hours of a sleepless night, "Ilaria capisce quale sia la vera domanda che le impone la presenza del ragazzo. Che poi è la stessa che si nasconde, inespressa e negata, dietro la maggior parte di ciò che etichettiamo come razzista. Ovvero non la domanda: 'Chi sei tu?' bensì: 'Chi sono io?'"⁷⁰ (87). The unconscious fear of asking this question to oneself is what strengthens unbalanced intersubjective relations. Echoing the heterotopic encounter analyzed in Liberti's *A Sud di Lampedusa* (2.4), Ilaria's encounter with Shimeta leads to an existential questioning of one's position in society and in the world, faced with a reality marked by deep societal fractures and injustices. In this case, there is not a border zone to function as the heterotopia enabling an encounter. The *topos* of the heterotopia is not a precise space. Its genesis is located in the bond that Ilaria and Shimeta create as they expose themselves to the transformations in identity and self-conception that the encounter with the other entails. Here, heterotopia is the space of a relationship, a relationship *other* than the distant, impersonal one

⁷⁰ "Ilaria realizes what the real question that the boy's presence imposes. Which is the same question that hides, unexpressed and denied, behind everything we label as racism. That is, not the question: 'Who are you' but rather 'Who am I?'" (87).

that divides the individuals of a territory in citizens and clandestine. If heterotopia is a counter-site that represents, contests, and inverts (24) all the other sites of a culture (or a society), then the fictional representation of Shimeta and Ilaria's encounter is the metamorphic mirror for relations in which subjects remain secured in their convictions, in their spaces, in the securities that their political category guarantees.

In section 4.3 Balibar's idea of territorialization was introduced. In the light of this further reflection, we can argue that the process of categorization of individuals produced by spatial arrangements is enhanced and confirmed by colonial modalities of thinking that linger in the Eurocentric mentality. Indeed, Balibar explains that "such a process is possible only if other figures⁷¹ of the 'subject' are violently or peacefully removed, coercively, or voluntarily destroyed" (2009, 192). He adds that this process is haunted by

the possibility that outsiders or 'nomadic subjects', in the broad sense, resist territorialization, remain located outside the normative 'political space', in the land of (political) nowhere which can also become a counterpolitical or an antipolitical space (for which Michel Foucault coined the expression heterotopia). (192)

Shimeta, relegated to a space of confinement from which any subjectivity affirmation is hardly possible and whose only site of escape is found in the parallel space of the internet, finds another way to resist the kind of territorialization that leads to the categorization of individuals. Imposing his presence to the Profeti family, claiming an identity that is not his and firmly decided to re-exist (Mignolo 2017), and not only survive in the shadow, in Italy, Shimeta gradually builds this antipolitical space or heterotopia gaining the trust of Ilaria and Attilio who, for their part, see the necessity to question their identity as a consequence of a potential new member of their family.

⁷¹ He refers to figures other than that of *citizen*.

Walter Dignolo explains that re-existence is a process that acquires meaning in the project of decoloniality: its goals are

to delink in order to re-exist, which implies relinking with the legacies one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage. [...] This is not to suggest that decoloniality calls for delinquency. On the contrary, it calls for both civil and epistemic disobedience, which could be enacted at different levels and in different spheres. (41)

Sangue giusto makes clear how individual processes of re-existing rely on “civil and epistemic disobedience” in terms of defying political existing categories and attempting to reverse social and epistemic categories that bind individuals to discriminating definitions of colonial legacy. In this sense, Shimeta’s subjectivity revindication is to be seen as a process rather than as a definitive act: one that not only strives for political acceptance but that triggers a decolonial thinking grounded in the overcoming of subordinating intersubjective relationships, both in the legal and in the social sphere.

According to Rancière, the written page of literature presents a particular kind of equality: one that “destroys all hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers [...] formed only by the random circulation of the written word.” (2011, 14) This randomly formed community of readers of *Sangue giusto* is confronted with a redistribution of “what is common to the community” (2011, 12), where this community is intended as the political ensemble of citizens, that is, “what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc.” (13) Rancière argues that literature can provide different distributions of the sensible than the ones existing where that work of art circulates. The destruction of hierarchies, in this case, is not only due to the space of representation granted by Melandri in her novel, but also by a narration that demolishes the boundaries that impede the Italian society from becoming an including community. First, it demolishes them spatially. The reader is given access to the closed off space of detention centers that plunges who is inside them in invisibility, thus reversing this condition. Moreover, Melandri presents

an intersubjective relationship of a kind that struggle to exist in reality, one where both subjects undergo changes that lead them to question their identity, the group to which they belong and the community that they form. The defiance of strict categorization that Melandri attributes to Shimeta, but also to Ilaria, is based on the awareness that in order to build an inclusive political community, both the individual and the community have to face and question their assumptions and the fundamentals upon which they rest. As in Leogrande's story of the local rescuer Costantino in *La frontiera* (3.3), what emerges here is the possibility of a horizontal solidarity based on social interactions that can enhance and protect the affirmation of subjectivities from outside existing political frameworks.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, border-crossing is analyzed in a less literal meaning than in the previous sections. Here, the borders are dispersed within the Italian territory and recreated in society in the form of exclusion, confinement and consequent discrimination. For the most part of Shimeta's travel, his email was the only invisible line that kept him secured in a familiar space, there where his surroundings were extremely hostile.

When he left Ethiopia, he enacted an identity-repression that consisted in his occultation of his real identity, the identity of Senay, to take up the name and document of his missing cousin. If the Italian rules for asylum and citizenship allocation still rest on a conception of national identity rooted in a colonial thinking of the other (*ius sanguinis* instead of *ius soli*), Shimeta found a way to intervene in his fate claiming to have the "right blood" for belonging to the Italian political community. Linking a personal story of re-existence to the wider present and past context that gives meaning to it, Melandri poses with her work the basis for rethinking categories across many levels, she asks the reader to demolish the same boundaries that Shimeta, but also Ilaria, try to break. This novel especially permits a reflection on a broader level about the function of literature in organizing space

in such a way that reverses existing discriminatory arrangements. In the conclusion of this thesis, this aspect will be examined alongside the other analyzed case studies, in order to draw the consequences of the singular investigations for a broader consideration on how literature has enabled the analysis of the relationship between the space of the border and migrant subjectivities.

Conclusion

Departing from three case studies of Italian literature, this thesis presents an attempt to grasp how the relation between border and migrant subjectivities is articulated in literature, in two works of non-fiction and one of fiction. The rationale of this research is to find out how, if at all possible, in the chosen works the spatial configuration of border zones permits the emergence of practices of subjectivity construction. Agamben's biopolitical theory is taken as a starting point to shed light on this matter, as his contribution on the relationship between the state of exception and bare life is fundamental for understanding the power ties that bind politically unrecognized subjects to a State and its territory. According to the philosopher, the migrant is the figure that best reveals the inclusion of bare life in sovereign power, a condition shared by all individuals of modern states, be them citizens or illegal residents. This idea is brought into dialogue with Mignolo's formulation of re-existence, a concept that allows to interpret how the reduction to bare life can be countered not only by political resistance but also by individual or collective forms of subjectivation.

One of the central issues that this research considers is that the border is not so easy to define. On the contrary, it is the device that enables definitions, the expedient that permits territorial and epistemological separations. The border is the precondition for categorizations of any kind. As all limit and line, the border can shift, it can mutate, it can slowly fade or be strengthened. But it can also be resisted, crossed, taken down. When focusing on the territorial border zones along the Central Mediterranean Route and the inland border zones of Italy, this thesis tries not to lose sight of the mutability and temporariness of borders and of the polysemy of the concept of border. Indeed, the border has a double significance for this research. First, it is an object of investigation approached in terms of how it is represented in the case studies. Second, it is a methodological standpoint that leads to a systematic questioning of spatial and epistemological categories as they appear in these works.

In this concluding section, the process of this thesis will be retraced in order to unite the analyses of the single chapters in a broader reflection; to insert them in a consideration on how

literature disentangles the relationship between a country's border zones and migrants that cross them or that inhabit them, and how it presents migrants' possibility to begin processes of subjectivation regardless of their condition of exclusion from the political sphere of that State. After a brief summary of the first chapter, the three case studies will here be put in dialogue in order to track thematic connections that shall speak to the theoretical framework at the fundament of this thesis, discussed in the "Introduction" and in Chapter I. Especially, a broader consideration on the specific form in which literature enables this discussion shall close this concluding section.

This thesis has shown the centrality of the body for an analysis of stories of migration. In the first place, it acknowledges the fact that migration is defined by a bodily experience of movement: it is a physical displacement that exposes the body to possible dangers of unknown spaces. The body is the page upon which each journey is written, the reminder that every story of migration is particular, embedded in a specific context and specific conceptions of mobility. This is a necessary premise to understand that each story is unique, and each begins from the condition of a body that sets out to move, disposed for the drastic – sudden or slow – change that migration entails.

The concept of body is central for another reason. Bodies are what migrants are reduced to in the desubjectivation imposed by the biopolitical systems of the states that they cross: they become individuals denied all rights and political recognition but still subjected as bodies to state power. However, a positive glimpse is given in Agamben's formulation. Desubjectivation does not necessarily translate in subjectivity annihilation. Rather, it plants the seed for subjectivity revindications to flourish studied, in this thesis, as forms of re-existence. Therefore, if the border embodies the state of exception that reveals the inclusion of bare life in the nets that uphold state power, it is also the place where reduction to bare life can be contrasted, exposed and criticized. It is a place that, although part of a national territory, can be reclaimed and inhabited by individuals who are excluded from the rest of that territory.

Furthermore, in this chapter border construction is analyzed as the consequence of multiple factors. One that is often overlooked is the performativity of media and political narratives that

circulate in different discourses. The more a place is inscribed in narratives that define it as a border area or as having the characteristics of one, the more the establishment of border functions in that place are justified and normalized. Following Rancière's theory on the correlation between politics and aesthetics, literature is explored as an artistic expression that provides different representations of the same topic, while maintaining the political relevance that its aesthetical nature enables.

In the second chapter, the first case study is analyzed focusing on the representation of external borders. *A Sud di Lampedusa. Cinque anni di viaggi sulle rotte dei migranti* is a reportage by Stefano Liberti published in 2008. Liberti collects in this book detailed descriptions of the areas "further South than Lampedusa," i.e. in the African continent, that mark the passage of emigrants on the way to reach Europe. Given the richness of information of the reportage, this chapter selects three of the border areas described by Liberti, as they permit a close analysis of spatial constraints and consequent marginalization (Maghnia and Oujda) and reclusion (Lampedusa) that largely hinder migrants' agency and freedom of movement. The way space is organized and controlled affects all aspects of the journey, from its length to the quantity of obstacles or safe areas on the way. Unlike the other two works analyzed, this one, in view of its journalistic nature, is less interested in reconstructing singular stories than in providing a complex picture of the emigration from Africa to Europe. Therefore, migrants are represented collectively more often than individually, although personal reflections and one-to-one encounters are sometimes included in the narration. The first border zone analyzed is Maghnia, an Algerian town at the frontier with Morocco. Here Liberti is faced with an impressive example of self-organization in a community that lives outside the law according to its own unwritten laws. It is a community born as a consequence of human movement. The exception from the rest of the territory that this community constitutes offers some freedom to migrants, but as soon as the Algerian State orders its dismantling they can no longer remain nor protest, as they are not entitled to reclaim anything or to appeal to any authority, given their condition of bare life. What is also to bear in mind is that the people forming the illegal community of Maghnia are not interested in becoming legally settled in Algeria. Their stop here is functional to the continuing of the journey. The fact that

they do not take part in the protest that follows is partly due to the dangerousness of rebellion in their condition of illegality, partly to a lack of interest in remaining in that place. Notably, those who protest are the Algerians, the ones who belong to the visible part of the city. The description of Maghnia indeed recreates the dichotomic spatial organization of the city: one part is the visible Maghnia, neat and calm, of the Algerian citizens; the other, separated by a no man's land that incarnates a further frontier in an already frontier area, is the shanty-town put up by migrants during the years.

The pattern of visibility and invisibility at the border is found again in the chapter of Liberti's book dedicated to Lampedusa. This island, which for the travelers symbolizes the entry point in the new continent, is spatially organized in such a way to prevent the presence of immigrants to damage the touristic perception of the island, as much as to keep the phenomenon as hidden as possible from the inhabitants. The immigrants are rendered invisible: as they disembark, they are immediately transferred to the reception center where they will remain for an unprecise duration and then moved to Sicily and other parts of Italy. Overall, Liberti does not present an optimistic scenario regarding subjectivation processes. Immigration flows are strongly contrasted in all the countries he visits, and the only space of relative freedom for migrants is found in Maghnia. Yet even here what the journalist highlights is the invisibility that border zones compel migrants to.

The same theme is addressed by Leogrande and Melandri, as seen in Chapters II and III. In *La frontiera*, there is a patent awareness that migrants, completely excluded from the sphere of politics as political beings and only included in it as bare life, are not only oppressed by the violence of indifference at the Mediterranean border; they are also subjected to the ultimate violence of invisibility. Their presence and their stories are rendered unperceivable to regular inhabitants of the territory that they reach and countered by a mediatic hypervisibility according to the depiction of the phenomenon that each representation intends to provide. In *Sangue giusto* invisibility is inherent to instances of reclusion in identification centers, which are presented in the book as internal border zones and analyzed in this research as such. Shimeta, the Ethiopian immigrant who arrives in Rome and asks for help to his relatives, lives the marginalization produced by the loneliness of confinement

both when he is held in these structures and during his voluntary reclusion in Attilio Profeti's house. In all the three books is present the idea that exclusion from politics is linked to and relies on exclusion from a shared sphere of appearance, enabled by the marginality of border areas along migrants' passage. This marginality is not due to a natural territorial organization. It is often corroborated ad hoc for the managing of immigration decided by each government. *Sangue giusto* integrates into this idea the consideration that exclusion from a space appearance – which is always at once strictly physical and political – reverberates in social discriminations, and that these practices of marginalization are attributable to the legacy of a colonial mindset, in the case of Italy.

The theme of visibility is therefore a constant in the works analyzed. Nevertheless, the matter of representation, which always entails a subject in charge of what and how to represent, raises necessary questions on the way the authors relate to what they are rendering visible. In Leogrande's work, there is an explicit intention to extract from silence and invisibility the stories of those who can no longer speak or who are not entitled to speak. The author makes his intention clear since the opening of the book. In Liberti, whose journalistic aim is rather to understand the phenomenon and the causes that convince so many people to leave the African continent, his author position is the object of meta-considerations throughout his work. The representation of Oujda is an emblematic moment of the questioning of his position and of his project. Specular to Maghnia, Oujda is a Moroccan frontier city described by Liberti as an extremely undefined area. It is a city that flourished from the exchanges and trades between Morocco and Algeria, but since migration controls were increased Oujda was isolated, and it lives, at the time of the journalist's visit, in a suspended time that renders it anonymous and silent. The indetermination that envelops this city, in Liberti's narration, accurately conveys the idea of a border zone: a site firstly defined by virtue of its separatory function. Here, the encounter that Liberti has with a Nigerian man whose name we do not know is read through the lens of heterotopia, as it is conceptualized by Foucault. This concept permits to understand what a place "other" than the normal places that constellate a national territory functions in relation to the rest of space. This encounter occurs in a hidden place of the city and it leads the author to deeply

question his position as journalist, as writer and as European citizen in relation to this man and to any man or woman in his same condition. The border zone of Oujda is represented as a heterotopia in that it lays bare the contradictions inherent to the approach to immigration that characterizes the rest of space, sparking in Liberti an awareness about the partiality and relativity of his perspective. A similar moment of self-questioning is faced by Leogrande as he reconstructs the story of his friend Shorsh, who only reveals to him after many years of friendship that there is much of his story and of his person that he never told him and probably never will. Leogrande concentrates in the title “Vedere, non vedere” (“to see, not to see”) of the chapters dedicated to his story the sense of his relationship to Shorsh, whom he had never dared to look at beyond the surface of his name and of the official version of his story. Leogrande wants to give space and voice to how Shorsh succeeded in intervening in the modality of his subjection to the State, something that happens in a similar way in the fictional story of Shimeta in *Sangue giusto*. These two stories present subjectivity affirmations that, through processes of re-existence that reclaim a space of agency against state power, lead to effective recognition of their political subjectivities. Both stories shape re-existence as a process that entails gradual changes such as the slow conciliation with the new territory and the radical changes in personal identity like the characters’ change of name. Melandri’s author position is different, as her work of fiction presents a narrator that does not coincide with the author, which is instead the case for the other two texts. Nevertheless, the fact that the central protagonist of the story is Ilaria and that the reader is given access to her thoughts more than to other characters’ can be read as an attempt by Melandri to maintain a perspective that she feels nearer to.

In fact, although invisibility at the border remains a central obstacle for migrants’ integration on many levels, some instances of subjectivation are presented as possible in the analyzed works. The authors present very different situations, even within each of their work, yet some general conclusions can be inferred. Liberti does not present a bright scenario for migrants on their way to Europe. The story of Shorsh was already introduced as an individual case of re-existence leading to a positive subjectivity recognition, in a similar way to the case of Shimeta. Theoretically, they testify the

possibility to carve out a space of agency from the condition of bare life or *clandestinità*. In the other passage from *La frontiera* analyzed, another important aspect emerges that nuances this possibility of access to the political sphere. The representation of the commemoration ceremony to the Lampedusa shipwreck of October 2013 poses indeed the basis for a reflection aimed at complicating Agamben's philosophical categories of *zoe* and *bios*: bare life and political life, or life and right. In Leogrande's reconstruction, the island of Lampedusa and the surrounding sea function as the background for the staging of a solidarity that stems as an ethical response to the tragedy that took place in the Mediterranean. The survivors' presence and the predominance in the chapter of the figure of a local rescuer are instances of solidarity based on the recognition of a founding equality in the modality of political subjection to the State: in the potentiality of becoming, or returning to, just bodies. Something similar happens in *Sangue giusto*, where the possibility for Shimeta to be recognized the status of refugee is strengthened by Ilaria's intervention, rather than in the form of a concession from above, in the construction of a mutual relationship of trust that entails a radical self-questioning. In the case of Ilaria, this questioning has a larger echo as it addresses the need for the Italian nation to come to terms with a past colonial experience too often underestimated.

In the "Introduction," Agamben's suggestion for future research was discussed: concluding his *Homo sacer* he alerts that the categories of *bios* and *zoe* rest on a deceitful distinction that should be retraced and understood. Rather than undertaking an extremely complicated genealogy of the conditions that these concepts denote, this research suggests looking at the very junction between the two to discover a space that permits a horizontal resistance to the boundaries and spaces of exception that isolate or submit to danger and humiliation human beings deprived of their political nature. This space, this research suggests, should be described as a pre-political and ethical dimension of human collaboration that can nonetheless have political impact. The choice of the word "space" here is not accidental. On the one hand, it indicates an opening, a gap between categories that awaits to be understood and signified. On the other, it refers to the tangible ground where this gap becomes meaningful, where the relational dimension that permits forms of subjectivation from outside politics

has room to materialize. In other terms, the collective form of re-existence testified by the shipwreck commemoration relies on a revindication of the very border area that renders the ongoing tragedy of deaths at sea a possible, excusable phenomenon for European governments.

This thesis shows that literature puts spotlight on spaces as such, taken in both the nuances just elucidated. Literary representations of border zones stage the shortcomings of the political and philosophical categories discussed. At the same time, it opens a space that, just like a conceptual border, is exempt of pre-existing classifications and enables a critical thinking that is not reduced to simple rejection. What stems from these stories is that those of “citizen” or “clandestine” (specific forms of what Agamben defines *bios* and *zoe*) are not the only possible declinations of political existence. There is another dimension to be found at the limit of the division between bare life and political life, a human dimension that lies in the fracture between these two forms of political subjection. If it is true that, as Rancière argues, literature permits a rearrangement of the sensible in a different form than the one performed by politics, it is also crucial to notice that it does not so through the presentation of an inexistent and imaginary reality. Rather, literature renders visible the invisibility that certain spatial arrangements relegate migrants to. It opens a space to think and act politically beyond and before political recognition; it shows that, whereas processes of subjectivation (either individual or collectively enhanced) can be possible for migrants at the border zones of a nation, these processes require visibility to have larger political resonance.

Recalling that mediatic representation of border zones are often based on the spectacularization of immigration and a hypervisibility that ends up obscuring instead of describing, the written page of literature reconstructs complex stories and sheds light on the grey areas left uncovered by such representations. At the same time, presenting the possibility of a border-crossing that from a literal meaning acquires the potential signification of overcoming restraining categories, literature paves the way for thinking of an including community by re-presenting, thus making visible, the already existing seeds of such community.

For reasons of space and of thematic consistency with the chosen case studies, this research has not studied in depth what the condition of bare life can entail before immigrants succeed in becoming recognized subjects in the eye of the state, and how this condition is presented in literature. Illegal work is the first instance of a paralegal world in which migrants become trapped, as described by Liberti for the case of Maghnia, in Algeria. Future research in this direction shall include more case studies that would permit to include the role of gender in the analysis of subjectivation from the condition of bare life. This would be necessary to discover whether women's experiences of migration, almost absent in the media, likewise disclose possibilities of subjectivation despite a condition of illegality that in Italy like in North-African countries often translates in coercive prostitution or other forms of illegal work. The case studies explored in this thesis, indeed, mostly presented stories with male migrant characters, which did not permit to include gender in the investigation. Further work in this direction would also entail a more general research on matters of production and circulation of Italian literature on the topic of migration, to find out how much space is given to the stories of women, how they are presented in comparison to those of men and how they are received.

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