

Drifting in Dark Waters: Mediterranean Boat Journeys between (In)Visibility and Presence

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Abstract: *Boats carrying people fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea often depart at night. The boats are not visible to the authorities, or other vessels traversing the same space. But it is this same play on (in)visibility that enables these journeys of hope across borders. Last year over 150,000 people made it successfully across the central Mediterranean Sea. This figure does not include those that perished or others who were pushed back. In this article I interweave travellers' personal experiences with the social and political processes traversing this liquid border/space to capture a snapshot of the various layers of these boat journeys. This will allow me to draw out the paradoxes of (in)visibility and presence, and resistance and subjugation, and therefore locate these invisible boats and journeys in the web of global, geopolitical and historical processes that converge in this historical juncture reminiscent of Arendtian 'dark times'.*

A PRELIMINARY NOTE

Inspired by the art installation 'I will follow the ship' this article is an attempt to follow the contours of the ship, the tracks it leaves behind, in a bid to interrogate the layers of meaning, which, in my case, are not aesthetic but social, political and experiential contours.¹ This article is to be taken as an exercise in reconstructing and locating the boats in the web of global, geopolitical and historical processes that converge in this liquid arena of the Mediterranean. By methodologically applying a constructivist and interpretative point of view, I do not seek to build a definitive picture but to highlight the complexities and the interconnections of the actors and institutions that contribute to the socio-cultural and political processes surrounding Mediterranean boat crossings.

This article is based on material derived from extended interviews as part of ethnographic fieldwork in Lampedusa, Malta and Sicily carried out over the last twenty years. It is not merely interpretation (as understood in the tradition of interpretative anthropology) but should be

understood as a collaborative reconstruction between the anthropologist and the travellers.

The Mediterranean is conceptualised as a place where the fault lines, the paradoxes of our modern world, and of humanity, converge: where fathers are forced to risk the lives of their children, where women sink under the weight of their clothes, where people are forced to throw away the bodies of deceased relatives, where calls of distress go unanswered, where citizenship is used to reject people, where help is criminalised, where the hierarchy of life prevails among those who are saved and those who are killed. In the Mediterranean Sea, a persisting neo-colonial mindset is revealed; one that seeks to erase long-standing histories of colonial violence and boundary-setting and whitewashes Mediterranean mixing of peoples.²

INVISIBILITY

Migrant boats depart at night. Unlike other sea vessels, they do not have any automatic identification systems to transmit the boat's position to the authorities or other sea vessels. They have a satellite phone but will only switch it on when in dire distress for its charge runs out very quickly. Unlike other seafarers, they have no horns, no whistles, so essential for communicating between sea vessels. Their departure is not officially announced. Their journey does not follow a conventional trajectory for they do not have a captain. They have no lights. These boats are shrouded in a cloak of invisibility.

They do not appear on the monitors of maritime authorities. They chug slowly squashing the sea

under their excessive weight, emitting little noise, or just drift silently when their engines fail. Even when the passengers are drenched in sea spray, and their bare feet numb, soaked in seawater, they remain – especially at night – invisible to vessels nearby, swallowed by the vast expanse of the sea and the darkness of the night.

These journeys leave no sign, no trail. For the sea does not even give them the grace of making a mark. No tracks, no signs, no records remain, once these journeys end.

Invisibility allows the travellers to escape the vicious Libyan militias or coastguards generally acting on behalf of European states to take them back to Libya, or Tunisia, the same countries they are fleeing from.

Invisibility is what allows the travellers to flee, to traverse the sea, to transgress borders. It becomes, unwittingly, an act of resistance, a challenge to European imperialism, and to European selective borders also found in the sea.

Invisibility is part of a strategy for survival. This is a game they enter, wilfully though not necessarily freely, given the inegalitarian and violent systems these travellers inhabit.

The lack and denial of visibility, however, does not remove its presence. Presence is the state or fact of existing, which invisibility cannot obliterate. The boat and its passengers inherently possess a strong presence which contrasts with the apparent and sensory invisibility. Around these crossings there is a flurry of sociality, of messages, of prayers, at the place of departure, but also across borders in every direction of the compass. Friends and kin in Libya, in the countries they have lived in, in countries elsewhere, in Europe, in America. All are tuned in, in temporally different waves, through different technologies. Even when invisible, the boat and the travellers have a presence which rather than obscured is magnified through social networks. Despite their invisibility, they are metaphorically being followed, in the hope that this invisibility is only transient.

THE MEDITERRANEAN JOURNEYS OF HOPE

Contrary to the dominant narrative portraying the sea as some lawless sea devoid of authority – a *mare nullius*,³ the Mediterranean Sea is ruled by a complex array of international and maritime laws and has ‘a complex and dense network of maritime traffic, with a developed system of monitoring movements and dealing with boats in distress’.⁴ The central Mediterranean is used by people fleeing to Europe. UNHCR and IOM report that in 2023 there were 212,000 people who attempted the crossing. Around 150,000 made it to Italy and Malta. The rest were push backed to Libya and Tunisia. 3,155 are reported dead or missing.⁵

These crossings are shrouded in secrecy, hidden and further removed from the public eye. They are not to be celebrated, they are not to be even reported, they are made invisible – kept hidden – by politicians determined on normalising these deaths and arrivals as accidents of ‘nature’.⁶ They are passed over and ignored by societies perhaps seeking to avoid painful reminders of privilege and suffering. They are the superfluous, the outcasts, the ‘wasted lives’ produced by a modernity that has exploited the developing world, in the interests of the developed one.⁷ Complicity is the mass media that often fails to challenge dominant narratives spewed by the powerful, and just reports on these border crossings when driven by states or powerful institutional actors.⁸ These crossings are intrinsic to a global system afflicted by racial capitalism, intent on the creation of human hierarchies and the subjugation of black bodies.⁹

The survivors are not celebrated, they are not welcomed, they are placed in detention centres sometimes called ‘reception centres’, impenetrable black holes where people are treated as ‘less than human’ in contradiction with the principles of liberal democracy and human rights that Malta, Italy, Spain and European states profess.¹⁰ Some apply for asylum in detention, those from the EU-wide contentious list of ‘safe countries’ are ‘fast-tracked’, a policy that allows states to swiftly deport people directly from this same detention centre, and one

that does not allow detainees to set foot in Europe beyond the detention centre.

Just as the survivors' voices are silenced, effectively, through various processes of subjugation typified by a chain of detention-at-arrival centres which hangs along the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the missing, the dead, often remain without graves, unidentified, their worldly existence ebbing away. Like dying wave crests at sea, together with the reassuring horizon, they contribute to the appearance of an impending calm. Yet we know that below the apparently peaceful surface the dark waters lurk, the 'dark times' remain.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt used 'dark times' to describe the 'unprecedented horrors' of totalitarianism, where 'citizenship' was problematically used to dehumanise people.¹¹ These Mediterranean journeys similarly draw on a problematic use of citizenship. Rather than a pragmatic organisation of humanity, citizenship is used to annihilate, to exclude, and to construct enemy aliens, and 'Others'. The Othering at sea manifests itself in deadly policies where assistance can be delayed and denied often without the fear of retribution. Justice is elusive in these cases, in sharp contradiction with delayed or denied assistance of other seafaring vessels such as private yachts or merchant vessels. As Itamar Mann has shown 'maritime legal black holes' have been created because of the EU's externalisation efforts through Mediterranean migration routes.¹² The contemporary 'dark times' of political and moral decadence are seen in the continual justification of these processes of dehumanisation, the stagnant silence surrounding them, and the unnecessary, avoidable deaths in the Mediterranean.

VOICES FROM THE INVISIBLE BOATS

Moving towards an emic view: the prevalent setting of the survivors' narration of these journeys is 'darkness' in an empirical and metaphorical manner. Drawing on conversations with survivors, the poet Glen Calleja wrote a series of poetic variations in Maltese in which he explores the

spectacle of (im)migration and which he evocatively and fittingly called *Iswed Assolut/Pitch Black*.¹³ Indeed the night, the darkness, is the setting of all these narratives, and the darkness has different layers of meanings.

I remember the beach, and the sound of the sea.

We were all staying in a dark small room for maybe two or three days. Very little food, but that didn't bother me – I was so stressed that I couldn't eat. Then one night, they came for us. We walked along the beach for quite some time, then we walked into the water towards the boat. When I saw the condition of the boat, I understood that only a miracle could save us. (Berhane,¹⁴ 2017, Lampedusa, Eritrean – travelled in 2011)

Ma nafx fejn konna. Bejn baħar u ilma u x-xejn. Il-magna waqfet. Baħar, ilma u s-sema biss baqgħu. Bqajna hekk, ma stajna nagħmlu xejn. Biża' kbir. Sakemm ġew il-Maltin. Il-mewt kont qed nara. Maġija biex salvajna aħna. Il-Maltin ħsibnihom Libjani: qabadni biża' iżjed mill-biża' tal-baħar. Nippreferi immut milli jaqbduni huma. (Mahmoud, 2015, Malta, Palestinian – travelled in 2004).

(Translation from Maltese) I don't know where we were. Between sea and water and nothingness. The engine stopped. Only the sea, water and the sky remained. The fear was immense. Until the Maltese arrived. It was death that I was seeing. Our rescue was like an act of magic. We initially thought the Maltese were Libyans: the fear that engulfed me was more than the fear of the sea. I would have preferred dying than ending up in their hands. (Mahmoud, 2015, Malta, Palestinian – travelled in 2004).

The night is long, never-ending. The darkness is all around you. I tried to sleep to while away the time, but the darkness that is everywhere, comes inside you. The darkness stays forever. It is still here today (pumping on his chest). (Mohammed, 2017, Agrigento, Sudanese – travelled in 2014).

Survivors of Mediterranean crossings carry a collective memory of their journeys. For years after

they continue narrating the crossing, and the arrival. They describe their feelings, the fear, the thoughts that raced through their head and the social side of the journey rife with violence but also with solidarity, acts of kindness and improbable friendships. Intimacy is forced upon survivors, who, despite coming from the most disparate of backgrounds, feel a connection to others who have been through this ordeal. The dead are brought together through this experience as expressed by the award-winning poet and traveller Murad Shubert in his 2022 poem 'Twaħħad' (translation, 'Making One'):

Fuq id-dinghi kienu, ġnus differenti.
Gilda differenti.
Fidi differenti.
Ilsna differenti.
Imbagħad waħħadhom il-qiegħ

*(Free translation from Maltese):
On the dinghy they were, different peoples.
Different skin colours.
Different faiths.
Then the seabed made them one).*

In the same way, the living are also brought together in a forced intimacy brought about by the journey. As survivors they collectively carry the experience, and at times the collective guilt evocative of Primo Levi's 'The Drowned and the Saved' and the impossibility of trying to make sense of something so senseless.¹⁵

VISIBILITY, OR THE GAME OF (IN)VISIBILITY

The boat/the travellers and the authorities play hard at what may be described as a 'game of (in)visibility'. This portrayal draws on Ruben Andersson's description of border patrols and security experts engaging in a 'game of risk' as they construct and engage with the industry of European bordering.¹⁶ The 'game of (in)visibility' can be conceptualised as the other side, or the outcome of the 'game of risk' enacted by the European border regime. Invisibility is both the solution and the problem, for all involved. The sea travellers choose

when and with whom to be visible. They switch on their satellite phones when in distress: when the engines fail, when the weather lets them down, when travellers get sick. They shed their intended invisibility by calling for help. Calls are pointed:

*We are dying, please. We are dying. Three hundred persons. We have no captain, the captain run away. You understand me – we have no captain. Don't throw us. We have a woman having an abortion and have two kids injured. I have not enough in the account in the mobile, it will cut, please please, call me you, please ...*¹⁷

This was the sixth and last appeal for help by a Syrian traveller, over a period of five hours. It was the 11th of October 2013. Their reach for visibility was successful but not their pleas for rescue. The punctuated responses by officials of the state sound like stale refrains, 'you are talking to Italia ... you have to call Malta, you have to call Malta, sir'.¹⁸ A desperate attempt to gain visibility for the purposes of rescue failed. The indifference, be it from personal convictions or socially produced by bureaucracies, cuts straight through the core.¹⁹ A few moments later the boat capsized: 268 people died, including more than 60 children. Two states, Malta and Italy, failed to take timely action in a system deliberately designed to avoid responsibility and inflict violence.²⁰ Ironically this took place less than a week after the 3rd of October tragedy when 368 people died less than half a nautical mile outside Lampedusa.

The shipwreck of the 3rd of October 2013 off Lampedusa was a classic moment of hypervisibility. The boats, the travellers so carefully kept hidden from the public suddenly erupt into public space. Crossings and deaths at sea which, however violent, are an everyday experience for so many, are suddenly thrust into the public sphere. The travellers are not portrayed as survivors, not as courageous people, not as moral actors, but merely as victims. Perhaps the images that have become almost iconic as a symbol of the 'Mediterranean graveyard' are those of coffins lined up neatly in the hangar of Lampedusa – 368 of them, or 369 if one

adds the baby boy who was found still intimately connected by his umbilical cord to his mother, whose birth and death took place while they were drowning together.

The hypervisibility of the crossings and the travellers renders visible the 'boat', and the sea border crossings, to the public, but the framing, the dominant discursive constructions are dictated by states and other powerful actors, to serve their own interests. This was entrenched in Nicholas De Genova's concept of 'border spectacle' which describes how the presumed 'illegality' of migrants is made spectacularly visible in Europe, while producing a racialized portrayal of migrants as both criminals and victims.²¹ And it explains how even hypervisibility through spectacles of tragedies and death fail to bring about political or social change.

In this game of (in)visibility, migrants acquire, along the route, a steady stream of allies, activists, solidarians who magnify their efforts to gain visibility. *Watch the Med Alarm Phone* is one such organisation which was born from collective indignation after the intentional lack of state action that led to the October 2013 tragedies. Alarm Phone acts as an interlocutor bringing migrants' pleas of distress from the sea to the authorities.²² Another ally are NGOs conducting search and rescue at sea, a small but established fleet, fulfilling a critical function of both saving lives and monitoring what goes on at sea.²³ These actors increasingly use various forms of technology to make visible these boats and the plight of migrants: from calls, to emails, to social media and the press – they have effectively used these means to increase the visibility of migrants on their own terms. NGOs are often wrongly depicted in dominant narratives as a powerless David that manages to overcome the fierce and strong Goliath, to use the Biblical story that has come to represent courage and the overcoming of the impossible. Katja Franko has argued that this portrayal is incorrect. In her analysis of the discursive and conflicting worlds constructed by Frontex and Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) on X (formerly known as Twitter), she shows how their social media reach contradicts

this depiction. Up until December 2024, Frontex had 67,000 followers and MSF_Sea had 110,000 followers (and the mother organisation, MSF International 236,000 followers) on X.²⁴ This game of (in)visibility can be disrupted by chance. Fishermen, transportation vessels, military boats, leisure boats can all, by chance, come across migrant boats and either become 'occasional allies', or close an eye and speed on prompted by tangible concerns of criminalisation. It is a border game that like the European border regime's 'game of risk' described by Andersson also relies on 'abstractions', the 'migrant', the 'crossings', 'illegality'; rather than a focus on the personal and the social.²⁵ As a result, the game does little to obliterate presence, even when presence is invisible.

PRESENCE

People from near and far are conscious of their presence. Presence is not hindered by visibility; it refers to an existence even if not seen. Presence supersedes visibility. The risks of the journey are so well known, that when on the boat their presence is magnified. Friends and relatives monitor their phones and look for news on various sites. Texts and prayers fly across borders. People navigate through networks to find out the outcome of the journey. Texts, calls, emails are sent to authorities, humanitarian organisations and equally to activists, researchers on Facebook, X, Instagram.

Boats which fail to ever re-gain visibility, which disappear, swallowed by the dark waters, bring together unlikely communities of relatives and friends. Some are more organised, at times photos are collected of people on board a particular boat and start circulating on social media. Others use television, radio and any means at their disposal in their search for information, and at times to denounce the violence at sea. Yet others, like Hadia, for years after their rescue, made trips to Lampedusa with the last photos of her son, showing them to all, in hope of finding news about him. Her son's presence, long after his likely passing, is brought to activists and politicians, strangers and tourists who look at the photo of a five-year old on

the mobile phone of a mother still grieving, and suffering, and inevitably, try to imagine what he could look like six, seven years after as an 11- or 12-year-old. Lives lost at sea, at the border, are not 'ungrievable'. Judith Butler writes, 'without grievability, there is no life'.²⁶ And life there is, because grief and mourning are real. And yet, as Chiara Denaro and Paolo Boccagni show, dominant power structures differentially shape the visibility and grievability of those who are missing and dead at the border.²⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has connected different affective, social, cultural and political processes to locate the boats that are engaged with powerful sea and global actors in this 'game of (in)visibility' out at sea. The game is not an exceptional spectacle but the mundane, ordinary for these travellers. The back and forth, between the hidden and the visible, between presence and absence, gives us an indication of the flows of power. This essay shows how political and social structures are inextricably intertwined with the very most personal, private experiences of people. In following these boats, and this game of invisibility, we are also left in awe at the actions of these sea travellers who caught up in global processes and conflicts, which stretch across borders and across history, unknowingly or consciously are putting up such strong resistance.

The persistence and the resistance, and how people are forced into a game that entails such big risks, shows the depth of the darkness of our times. Arendt, when writing about dark times, and of the imperative urgency to act, reminds us of our duty to shine a light wherever possible:

*That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination might well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given to them...*²⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] 'I will follow the ship' was an installation at the Venice Biennale of 2024 by artist Matthew Attard. This multi-processual installation using AI and drawing technology used maritime graffiti of ships found on chapels around the Mediterranean island of Malta. The installation explores these ship graffiti by following the contours of the design with eye trackers and superimposing them on each other.
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