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Title: “From Roots to Routes ... to Borders: Trans-coastal narratives across the Mediterranean”

Name: Dr. Mariangela Palladino

Affiliation: The University of Keele (UK)

Abstract:

The contemporary trans-Mediterranean diaspora between Africa and Europe is a largely undocumented and peripheral phenomenon within European consciousness. Thousands cross the sea – and the border between these two continents – risking their lives. Drawing on the Atlantic Middle Passage as a theoretical framework to conceptualize today’s African diaspora, this paper probes the limits of contemporary postcolonial studies. How does Postcolonialism today engage with the trans-Mediterranean migration and its cultural manifestations? The present study offers a comparative analysis of Italoophone poetry by Moroccan-born Mohammed Lamsuni and Italian Erri De Luca. Lamsuni’s ‘Delirio del Mare’ [‘Sea’s delirium’] (2003) and De Luca’s ‘Solo Andata’ [‘One Way’] (2005) narrativize the trans-Mediterranean migration, their poetry functions as testimony and memorialization of migrants’ journeys of hope and death. This paper interrogates how these trans-coastal and trans-cultural narratives explore colonial legacies, how they tell of departure, arrival and loss. Further, it investigates representations of the Mediterranean both as a central element of continuity between Europe and Africa, a sea of currents/encounters, as well as a repository of memory of today’s diaspora. Inhabiting a new discursive category in Italian literary spaces, these texts offer innovative narrative and verbal strategies which both problematize normative discourses on migration and map alternative cartographies in postcolonial and critical studies today.

Biographical Note: Dr Mariangela Palladino has recently been appointed lecturer in the English Department at the University of Keele. Since obtaining her PhD in Postcolonial Studies from the University of Strathclyde (UK), Mariangela has lived and worked in Scotland for over nine years researching and teaching at the Universities of Strathclyde, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Subsequently, she joined the University of Coimbra, Portugal, as researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (2012-3). Mariangela’s research interests lie at the intersection of Postcolonial literatures and cultures, diaspora, migration studies, and narratology. Her work has been published in journals such as: *Modern Fiction Studies* (John Hopkins UP), *The Journal of South African and American Studies* (Routledge), *Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (Routledge), *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge). She has also co-translated the first translation in English of Elsa Morante’s “La Canzone degli F.P. and I.M. in tre parti” (The Song of the H.F. and of the U.M. in Three Parts) [Joker Edizioni, 2007]. Mariangela is currently working on a monograph titled *The Forms of Ethics*, forthcoming with Rodopi, and, among other things, she is co-editing a theoretically oriented book *The Globalization of Space: Foucault and Heterotopia* (Pickering & Chatto 2014).

From Roots to Routes ... to Borders: Trans-coastal narratives across the Mediterranean

**Mariangela Palladino
University of Keele, UK**

The contemporary trans-Mediterranean diaspora between Africa and Europe is a largely undocumented and peripheral phenomenon within European consciousness. Thousands cross the sea – and the border between these two continents – risking their lives. They are the *Harragas* (Arabic for *burners*), those who ‘burn’ the frontiers. This paper engages with narrativizations of *Harragas*’ multiple crossings: the sea, borders, cultures, languages and identities.

As Papastergiadis argues, there is an urgent need for ‘a new perspective on the relationship between the stranger and the resident’ (2006, 432). Through a comparative study of Italoophone poetry by Moroccan-born Mohammed Lamsuni and Italian Erri De Luca, this paper seeks to engage with narratives articulated between the two Mediterranean littorals. Rather than a fracture between cultural and geographical shores, the Mediterranean is understood as a central element of continuity between Europe and Africa, a sea of currents/encounters and complex identities. Lamsuni’s ‘Delirio del Mare’ [‘Sea delirium’] (2003) and De Luca’s ‘Solo Andata’ [‘One Way’] (2005) articulate representations of the Mediterranean crossings; their narratives function as points of rupture but also as reconciliatory encounters, as testimony and tales of these journeys of hope and death. Thus, the central aim of this study is to interrogate how trans-coastal and trans-cultural narratives ‘burn’ the divide across the Mediterranean, and tell of departure, arrival and loss. Inhabiting a new discursive category in contemporary postcolonial literature, these texts offer innovative narratives and verbal strategies which both problematize normative discourses on migration and map new cartographies in cultural and postcolonial studies.

This paper’s gestation has primarily occurred in Italy, during the summer and autumn 2013, at the height of the trans-Mediterranean migration – when migrants set off from North Africa with makeshift boats heading for the coasts of southern Europe. Several accidents have occurred thus far in which hundreds of migrants – precise figures are unavailable – tragically lost their lives at sea or attempting to gain the shore. ‘A thorn in the heart’, in the Pope’s words during a first ever papal visit to the area (July 2013) and commemorative mass for the thousands lives lost for ‘hope’, the trans-Mediterranean migration today is an under-reported and scarcely documented phenomenon. Marginal, casual and brief references make it to the news reports of the countries directly involved (Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece) while the rest of Europe remains silent and mostly oblivious to this disquieting phenomenon. However, most recently, the deadliest tragedy at sea occurred, and such hecatomb has awoken dormant consciences and previously un-interested media, as well as mobilized international political figures. On 3rd October 2013 a boat carrying 500 people, mostly from Eritrea, fleeing conflict or persecution, accidentally went on fire in an attempt to attract coastal guards’ attention, and sank off the coast of Lampedusa, a small Italian island in the Mediterranean sea. More than 360 people lost their lives, and to-date they are still counting the dead. The harrowing images from the rescue operations and the hundreds coffins neatly aligned on the docks have circulated across Europe and beyond leaving many astounded, angry, bereft. Such large-scale tragedy has inevitably – at last – gained the international authorities’ attention.

These *Damnés de la terre*, wretched of the earth, perish seeking entry into Europe. Reading poetry about the trans-Mediterranean crossing becomes an absurd and preposterous task, yet compellingly necessary; to read lyrical narrativizations of the voyages of ‘hope and other dangerous pursuits’ as Laila Lalami puts it (2005), while yet another tragedy unravels becomes ethically debatable. And becoming acquainted to the sight of South-European beaches teeming with tourists while corpses of dead migrants – at times secluded from view

by a beach towel – lay on the shoreline, is even more debatable. It is alarming. In this case, the work of a literary critic – so loyal to its primary texts and its theoretical frameworks – must be renegotiated in the face of what Agamben calls contemporaneity.

The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity. (Agamben, 2009, 40)

Contemporaneity in this case must be understood as not ‘allowing’ ourselves to ignore the obscure pages of our present. Hence, this paper is developed and articulated not only to contribute to scholarly debates on comparative literary representations, but also to function as a form of social accusation, and memorialization. Firstly, it will offer a brief overview about the context of trans-Mediterranean migration and set out a theoretical framework which draws on the trans-Atlantic ‘Middle Passage’. Journeys at sea, *harragas*’ crossings, will be explored through the poetry of Erri De Luca and Mohammed Lamsuni. Finally, in probing new boundaries for Postcolonial studies today, it will reflect upon the role of contemporary cultural phenomena surrounding the Mediterranean as forms of postcolonial resistance and responses to historical gaps and institutional shortcomings.

According to the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), nearly 20.000 migrants died at sea trying to reach the European shores of the Mediterranean since 1988. From 2011, upheavals in both North and East Africa (and other areas of the MENA region) and the war in Syria have triggered numerous perilous journeys across the Sea; thus, tragedies have risen exponentially (UNHCR 2012). EU restrictive immigration politics are responsible for such tragedies: bilateral partnerships with North African countries have displaced Europe’s frontiers further south, beyond the sea, making migrants’ journeys even more perilous. This substantial militarization of the Mediterranean area is further enhanced by the deployment of Frontex, European union agency which manages EU southern borders (Jorry, 2007). Such migration policies and practices have resulted ineffective in their aim to curb migration and have instead increased deaths at sea. Shipwrecks and washed-up bodies on southern European shores are recurrent; this significant loss of life, which makes the headlines only for large-scale tragedies, is a modern and disquieting evocation of the transatlantic ‘Middle Passage’ creeping at the doors of Europe.

The reference to the Atlantic Middle Passage and the African Diaspora is not accidental, nor unique; far from seeking to compare the scale of historical tragedies, my aim is rather to identify comparable terms of reference in history to better understand and engage with the present. As Caryl Phillips aptly pointed out with reference to contemporary migration from Africa to Europe:

for asylum seekers, in particular, migration is forced upon them. It doesn’t involve chains, it doesn’t involve manacles, it doesn’t involve physically brutal labor, but the psychological trauma can fester for years. [...] They have cut the umbilical cord with their countries and their languages, as viciously and as traumatically as people did in the past with slavery. You see it most clearly, to my mind, in the Mediterranean. (2009, 12)

Phillips’ association of these two phenomena is powerful and effective, even more so for the collective European consciousness which still today fails to understand the scale, nature and often fatal consequences of the trans-Mediterranean migration. Chambers and Curti, in a seminal essay on migrant voices in the Mediterranean, explain even further the necessity for such connection:

to link the Black Atlantic to the Mediterranean, would also mean to re-insert that black leg into other histories. One would be that of slavery around all of the Mediterranean

(and not just in the Muslim world), another would be that of the long history of migration, invariably forced, that has characterized modernity from its very beginnings 500 years ago. This latter history also includes 27 million Italians. Although separated in time, yesterday's migrant who abandoned rural life in southern Italy for Buenos Aires, and today's migrant abandoned on a beach in Puglia or Lampedusa are part of the same historical constellation. (2010, 389)

Thus, the Middle Passage as a term of reference (and not comparison) is fruitful in providing a framework to conceptualise this phenomenon more broadly within postcolonial studies, as well as offering ethical and theoretical tools to engage with it.

The Lampedusa boat tragedy occurred in October, when most Western countries celebrate the *Black History Month* to commemorate the African Diaspora. The 3rd October events in the Mediterranean uncannily evoke dark pages of African history; as Derek Walcott once wrote about the Middle Passage in the Atlantic: 'Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? ... in that gray vault. The sea. The sea ~~keels~~ ^{keels} up. The sea is History' (Walcott 1987, 364). Today's martyrs in the *Mare Nostrum* ('our sea', ancient Roman name for the Mediterranean) are a powerful wake up call for the West, yet again faced with history repeating itself. The shifting nature of current Mediterranean politics, the urgency to document the contemporary trans-Mediterranean diaspora, and the limited number of published literary testimonies of such migratory experiences call for a focus on the few available accounts of the crossing, the *boat people's* stories who embark on a journey across the Mediterranean. *Harragas* (Arabic for *burners*) are those who 'burn' the frontiers imposed by 'Fortress Europe', and also those who burn their documents and papers prior to departure; they erase their past/former selves before embarking on a journey of hope toward Europe.

The borders established and patrolled by the EU, in cooperation and partnership with North-African nations, and with the specialized assistance of a contracted border agency – Frontex, southern Europe's watchdog – are spatially and figuratively debunked by *Harragas'* burning and trespassing of the frontiers. Yet, such *burnings* only increase the magnitude of patrolling operations and augment EU border restrictions both at the levels of policy and practice. The alleged border across the Mediterranean is an epitome of more significant and deep-rooted divisions between the two continents which cannot, as yet, be burned away by crossings. Indeed, as Badiou observes 'the price of the supposedly unified world of capital is the brutal division of human existence into regions separated by police dogs, bureaucratic controls, naval patrols, barbed wire and expulsions' (2008, 38). The unification of the global market has brought about the advent of multiple walls to separate the rich capitalist North, from the 'wretched' South; the former, visible and sane, and its counterpart, obscure and sick (Agier, 2010). Within this world-order migrants form one indistinct category, the undesirable, superfluous 'human waste' (Bauman, 2003). Dominant rhetoric portrays migrants as endangering European health, security, identity and welfare, as an inhuman presence gathering at the Southern frontier of 'Fortress Europe': they 'seemingly spew out of an immense and unknown continent that has been reduced in the world media to the wild site of the wretched of the earth: endemic famine, dictatorship, genocide, child soldiers, sexual mutilation' (Chambers, 2008, 10). Borders and frontiers today inhabit the rhetoric of crisis and emergency.

This perpetual division between worlds, people, and coasts is lyrically captured by Erri De Luca, an Italian writer and poet whose latest works deal with the Mediterranean and the stories it brings back. His collection of poems *Solo Andata* [2005] (One Way) includes a sort of epigraph – although De Luca calls it a 'note about geography' (*Nota di geografia*). This is a very evocative and powerful incipit which syncretically portrays the dynamics of today's trans-Mediterranean migration and its effects on people, their lives and destinies.

The coasts of the Mediterranean are divided.
Departures and arrivals, but unbalanced:
more shores, more nights of boarding, than arrival,

so few the lives that reach *Italia*.
With our help, misfortune undoes the figures,
and yet – *Italia*, a word open with *aria*.¹

[Le coste del Mediterraneo si dividono in due,
di partenza e di arrivo, però senza pareggio:
più spiagge e più notti di imbarco, di quelle di sbarco,
toccano Italia meno vite, di quante salirono a bordo.
A sparigliare il conto la sventura, e noi, parte di essa.
Eppure Italia e una parola aperta, piena d'aria.] (De Luca, 2005, 7).

Erri De Luca in this note eloquently tells of the brutal figures of contemporary migratory routes between Africa and Europe. His poetry is not animated by personal experiences of the crossing, rather, from the other side of the shore, his poetry picks up and embraces what the sea brings, or gives back, or spouts adrift. Whilst a set of problematic issues might arise in relation to the ethics of representation, legitimacy and the right to assume others' perspectives, referring to De Luca's work, Zoppi points out that 'the will to participate, to testify arises and the only possible perspective is doing it from "this part of the sea"' (38-39). Almost in an attempt to justify and legitimize De Luca's voice, Zoppi highlights the ethical imperative to tell and identifies on 'this part of the sea' the circumstances to do so.

De Luca claims that through the power of imagination, we are able to see the others' point of view, to wear their clothes and inhabit their shoes – to imagine their future. His poetry responds to an urgency to bridge distances, fill history's blanks. De Luca, as well as Lamsuni's work bring me back to Giorgio Agamben's thought on contemporaneity and on being contemporary:

The poet—the contemporary—must firmly hold his gaze on his own time [...] so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present. (Agamben, 2009, 44)

These poets dip their pen in the most obscure pages of our times, they are truly contemporary in Agamben's sense – their gaze is held on the sea, the Mediterranean – the *Terrae di Mezzo*, or the lands in the middle, moved by this sea-blue obscurity. In one of his unpublished poems, which he recited during a long interview, De Luca says:

Blessed is that journey that brought you here,
The red sea that let you go,
The homage that you pay us
When knocking at our window.

[Benedetto il viaggio che vi porta,
il mare rosso che vi lascia uscire,
l'onore che ci fate
bussando alla finestra]. (De Luca, 2011)

This wonderfully evocative stanza, imbued with allusions to classical mythology, overtly refers to migrants' irregular – or as the authorities say, the illegal – entry into Europe, via the window, as De Luca has it; this is an unsettling phenomenon that takes place before Europe's eyes, and yet remains largely peripheral in the collective consciousness. In the case of Italy, this is due to its struggle to acknowledge the redefinition of its national subjectivities and to deal with its migrant population. Such inability and reluctance are rooted in Italy's postcolonial unconscious, as Ponzanesi put it (2004, 26). Indeed, whilst other European countries have dealt with the legacy of colonialism and the recent changes in migration

patterns, Italy has only just started confronting its colonial past and the consequences of global migration (Coppola, 2011, 121). Thus, ‘the collective amnesia of the colonial enterprise obscures the fact that at least some of the guests of today were the hosts of yesterday. [...] The colonial adventure is removed from the Italian imaginary and from historical memory; it is not studied in school, and until recently has rarely been the object of research and reassessment’ (Curti, 2007, 60-62). Italy’s colonial chapter is erased by a cultural amnesia; its colonial expansion to Africa was archived until very recently, as ‘mainstream culture selectively recollected the past while cultivating the idea of Italians as *‘brava gente,’* or good people, and of their colonialism as *‘straccione,’* that is to say, done on the cheap and somehow benign’ (Bouchard, 2010, 109). The country’s failure to acknowledge its colonial memory, its histories of racism and cultural plurality, its chapters of mass emigration, prevent it from understanding migrants’ socio-cultural and legal situation (Allievi, 2010, 97). Such failure also prevents the country from acknowledging and recognizing what is happening at its doors.

Whilst Italy slowly and belatedly recalls its colonial experiences, contemporary postcolonial writers are enabling the recovery of the country’s colonized, colonialist and migrant pasts (Bouchard, 2010, p. 106), as well as challenging the dominant nationalistic agenda sustained by social, legal and political institutions. In ‘Solo Andata’, a long poem in Erri De Luca’s eponymous collection, a migrants’ choir speaks back to Fortress Europe recalling the colonial past and its legacy.

Your new world is made out of our ribs [...]

You are the neck of the planet, its combed head,
Your delicate nose, you are the sandy top of humanity.

We are walking feet to reach you,
To hold your body, fresh with our strength.

[Dai nostri fianchi nasce il vostro mondo nuovo, [...]]

Voi siete il collo del pianeta, la testa pettinata,
Il naso delicato, siete cima di sabbia dell’umanità’.

Noi siamo i piedi in marcia per raggiungervi,
Vi reggeremo il corpo, fresco di forze nostre.] (De Luca, 2005, 36).

‘Your new world is made out of our ribs’. The yours-ours dichotomy is striking, it points to Europe-Africa division, but most importantly, to the inextricable connections and entanglement of the two worlds – like one body, connected by centuries-old colonial and imperial ties. ‘You are the combed head – we are the walking feet.’

De Luca’s biblical references and take on Italy’s colonial amnesia echo the work of Mohammed Lamsuni. In ‘Sea Delirium’ Lamsuni tells of the migrants’ sea-crossing experienced on their journey to Europe. Referring to Italy’s right-wing populist and radical-right government and its anti-immigration laws, he writes:

The Gospel according to the Northern League and Alliance eat
The flesh of memory and drink the African morning’s flame!
This is the delirium of thirst!

[Il Vangelo secondo la Lega e L’Alleanza mangiano
la carne della memoria e bevono la fiamma del mattino africano!
Questo è il delirio della sete!] (Lamsuni, 2003, 59).

Eating the flesh of memory institutions perpetrate the colonial unconscious and militarize the frontiers – this, is for Lamsuni, the real delirium of thirst. The poem narrativizes the strenuous journey across the sea, the suffering of hunger and thirst, the pain from the blistering sun, and yet – what comes closer to delirium – are in-human, absurd anti-immigration politics. The word delirium is key in his poem, not only for it features in the title. Indeed, Lamsuni employs the word to denounce systemic violence through the metaphor of the delirium of thirst – a harrowing condition experienced at sea. In the poem delirium also signifies migrants’ ambitious projects and expectations of what lies on the other side of the sea. Lamsuni is not uncritical of the phenomenon:

Who would give ‘papers’ to desire in delirium
Hitting its head against the sea?

[Chi dà il permesso di soggiorno al desiderio delirante
Che sbatte la testa contro il mare?] (Lamsuni, 2003, 58).

Interestingly, he defines delirium also the desire of those who seek refuge, protection, papers, who cross the water on a quest for a new life. Such critical stance is illuminating – far from portraying harragas as victims, Lamsuni’s text alludes to the absurdity and folly of migratory projects and of their expectations of the ‘other shore’.

More references to denied colonial pasts and to Italy’s inability to comprehend and relate to its ‘others’ are powerfully articulated in ‘Sea Delirium’; Lamsuni tells how news of more deaths at sea are announced on TV:

“Tragedy! More Tragedy!”
What to say?
The news is blond and perfumed.
The News on TV without punctuation
Has an erotic mechanism, it smells like fish:
“They died to cold, hunger and pollution!
They have yellow and black gold,
Sun, coffee and oranges.
How come they get here for their final ablution?
How come they choose our shores to reconcile with water”?

[“Tragedia! Ancora Tragedia!”
Che cosa c’è da dire?
La notizia è bionda e profumata.
Il TG senza punteggiatura,
ha una meccanica erotica, ha l’odore dei pesci:
“Sono morti di freddo, di fame e d’inquinamento!
Hanno l’oro giallo e l’oro nero
Hanno il sole, il caffè e l’arancia.
Come mai vengono qui per l’abluzione finale?
Come mai scelgono le nostre coste per riconciliarsi con l’acqua?”] (Lamsuni, 2003, 58).

The lack of punctuation, of a pause, of reflection and of mourning – just like it has been happening since 1988 – is Lamsuni’s strong accusation to the blind and deaf European consciousness. ‘Blond’ and ‘perfumed’, like the well-combed head in Erri De Luca’s poem, is a reference to Western wealth and polished appearance, to its remoteness and estrangement from the wretched of the earth. The last four lines in this stanza bespeak once again the failure of a colonial consciousness and of profound ignorance of the other. The allusion to colonial produces and resources is a sarcastic reference to the reaction of the ill-informed and bewildered general public which seeks to comprehend the trans-Mediterranean migration.

Moreover, it is also an open accusation to dominant, anti-immigration discourses solely animated by a quest for national integrity and state security.

Lamsuni's poetry is harsh and evocative, delicate and corporeal, but also tremendously aware of its limits, of the impossibility to narrativize such horrific experiences. He opens 'Sea Delirium' with self-referential notes:

The rhetorical figure leaves room for a strange one,
for the eloquent language of sin
And for the greedy, folly-eyed sea, vomiting nameless colours.

On the rocks of obesity the dream dies
In the world's most beautiful cuisine hunger meets its death.
No Emergency.

[La figura retorica lascia lo spazio alla figura strana,
alla lingua eloquente del peccato
e al mare porco che vomita con occhi impazziti
i colori senza nomi.

Il sogno muore sulle rocce dell'obesità.
La fame si suicida nella più bella cucina del mondo.
Nessuna emergenza.] (Lamsuni, 2003, 58).

There is no room for rhetorical figures in his writing, una figura strana – a strange figure – instead takes its place. Lamsuni's work probes the limits of representation and overtly refers to the impossibility of ethically telling the unspeakable. Rhetorical devices and figures of speech are deemed inadequate to represent the horror of deaths at sea. Nevertheless, whilst announcing to its readers that rhetoric has no room in his lyric, Lamsuni does not fail to tell of today's atrocities. As Susan Sontag states, 'let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer. They still perform a vital function. [...] remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself' (Sontag 2003, p. 115). Mohammed Lamsuni's words memorialize and testify with a unique, majestic simplicity: the lifeless bodies of migrants become 'nameless colours', and Europe's southern shores, where dreams shatter, are 'obese' with wealth.

In Lamsuni's evocative and powerful lyric, the Mediterranean, defined by many today as a cemetery, is 'the greedy, folly-eyed sea, vomiting nameless colours'; the 'nameless colours' are the 360 victims of 3rd October, whose anonymous coffins were identified only by a number in black marker. Lamsuni's 2003 poem uncannily tells of death at sea, his lines, like a Tiresian prophecy, are frighteningly pertinent today, ten years after. In Italy, with its world famous cuisine, dreams are shattered and those hungry for a new life meet death. The Lampedusa boat disaster has shaken consciences, but has it woken up Europe to its responsibilities, to its faults and shortcomings? In 'Sea Delirium' there is 'No Emergency'. Lamsuni subtly points to Europe's failure to address this phenomenon with a consistent approach, and condemns the discourse of emergency surrounding each tragedy at sea. The 3rd October became emergency, but it was sadly bound to repeat itself, and only a few days after, another tragedy unravelled.

In 'One Way', Erri De Luca's while narrativizing the tragic circumstances of departure and the anxieties of arrival, exposes the in-humane EU patrolling practices. The choir says:

Our swallowed land no longer exist under our feet,
Our homeland is a boat, an open shell.

You can push back, you cannot bring back,
Scattering of ashes is departure, we are only one way.

[La nostra terra inghiottita non esiste sotto i piedi,
la nostra patria è una barca, un guscio aperto.

Potete respingere, non riportare indietro,
è cenere dispersa la partenza, noi siamo solo andata.] (De Luca, 2005, 34).

I wish to focus onto the word ‘swallowed’, *inghiottita*; here there is an effective figurative and literal reference to suppression and oppression. The image of being swallowed not only echoes oppression during colonialism, but it also recalls most recent eco-disasters – natural and man-induced – that afflict large areas across the African continent. Whilst hinting at the impossibility to go back, at the tragedy that departure entails – like a perennial loss, these lines also tell of the homeland as a contingent space: the boat – an open shell – becomes the fragile haven of migrants’ lives till another shore embraces them. Furthermore, the line ‘You can push back, you cannot bring back’ unequivocally strikes at the *push back operations in high sea*, a patrolling practice whereby boat migrants are interdicted in the Mediterranean Sea and forced back to the point of departure. Pushing back, whilst in violation of the ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights), is indiscriminately practiced across the southern and central Mediterranean area. However, as De Luca has it, although the EU pushes back, there is in fact no going back, there is no return in such journeys, departure is ‘scattering of ashes’. The metaphor of death and of burnt ashes is salient to harragas’ stories: *harrāg* are those who burn frontiers, who burn the papers of their past lives to set on a journey for a new life, those who burn the path behind them. Their voyage has no return. The ‘scattering of ashes’ also evokes death and destruction before departure, it is metonymic of war, famine and genocide afflicting many areas of the global south from which migrants flee.

The lack of choice for those who embark upon the trans-Mediterranean route is exemplified in the line ‘We are only one way’. In the original Italian, as well as in my English translation, the use of the verb ‘to be’ is unusual and un-idiomatic. De Luca’s verse merges the selves with ‘one way’: rather than ‘to have’ one way to go, they ‘are’ one way. Migrants’ lack of ownership and possession is rendered even more effective by the use of ‘to be’ which signifies mere existence, *bare life* in Agamben’s terms (Agamben, 1998). The tragic, existential tone of this line does not however victimize migrants, whose voices in the poem’s choir retain agency and self-assurance. These one-way journeys often have no arrival; ‘with our help, misfortune, undoes the figures’– as De Luca reminds us: a long history of EU policies and practices have created the conditions for this to happen time and again. Thus, the ancient Roman *Mare Nostrum* becomes *Sangue Nostrum* (our blood), as one of the banners displayed in protest at Lampedusa had it. Mohammed Lamsuni lyricizes the tragic ends of such journeys as follows:

The project disappears in the water.
Alphabet and numbers seek refuge in the wet sand.

[Il progetto svanisce nell’acqua.
L’alfabeto e i numeri si rifugiano nella sabbia bagnata.] (Lamsuni, 2003, 58).

So, the migratory project – often of an entire family or a community project – ends in the water, it disappears. And the letters, the books, the photographs, the names and documents end buried in the wet sand – a much feared refuge. The Mediterranean becomes a repository for bodies and stories. Over the years the sea has given back what it took – like a restitutive gesture, it washed on Italian shores (among others) the remains of these journeys and dreams. De Luca too in his verses does not fail to allude to the sea as an immense graveyard, in ‘Solo Andata’ the choir declares: ‘with our skeletons we pave your sea’ [lastrichiamo di scheletri il vostro mare] (De Luca, 2005, 35).

As Chambers and Curti argue, ‘right now [the Mediterranean] is actually the site of a crossing that recalls the atrocities of the “middle passage” so recurrent in the postcolonial imaginary’ (2010, 392). The Middle Passage not only offers a framework to conceptualize

and understand the present phenomena, but it also functions as a necessary historical perspective to comprehend migration and the present African diaspora. Reifying a postcolonial imaginary, migrants' crossings epitomize the present times. Migration is 'the greatest contemporary theme, the comparison that alienates and absorbs, the irreparable event that somehow ought to be remembered, the conflict that must be converted in creation, a trans-shipment that must become transportation and transformation' (Zoppi 2007: 37). Zoppi's take on migration, the greatest contemporary theme, foregrounds illuminating connections between alienation and remembrance, conflict and creation. To trans-ship, transport, and trans-form suggest fruitful creations that arise from migration and its irreparable tragedies. Drawing on the Middle Passage, it is imperative to remember, comprehend and memorialize, as it is equally imperative to engage creatively with the present.

The newly founded Museum of Migrations on the Lampedusa island converts loss into creation. A meeting point in the middle of the Mediterranean which 'witnesses the passage of human beings, animals, cultures, and histories' (Museo delle Migrazioni), the museum offers a permanent exhibition of what the sea has given back and what has been found on the migrants' boats, those which made it to the harbor, as well as those which did not. There are objects, shoes, clothes, photos, letters, prayer books, cups and bits of wood which tell the stories of those journeys. This exhibition is a powerful reminder of what happens today; it is also and most importantly an incredible testimony to the countless stories that unfold in the Mediterranean, a memorialization to the thousands lives lost at sea and to those that have crossed it. Like the museum of migrations in Lampedusa, Erri De Luca's and Mohammed Lamsuni's poetry denounce, accuse, document and memorialize what happens between Africa and Europe. Resurrecting the colonial past and documenting its perpetrating legacy in the capitalist present, they are part of an energizing cultural ferment from borderlands. These cultural responses to the Mediterranean crossings draw on colonial history, reflect on the present and memorialize losses by telling, creating, transforming. The postcolonial imaginaries stirred, evoked and reified by these phenomena call for novel ways to conceptualize contemporaneity. Postcolonial studies must shift its focus onto the Mediterranean and offer critical tools to shatter colonial amnesia, wake up consciousness and to act. Past and present stories – which incessantly fluctuate in the Mediterranean – beg to be written and sung, painted and drawn, told and retold. It is thus imperative to formulate new critical, postcolonial perspectives, to transform the darkness of our contemporary times into a new light; as Agamben has it:

to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. (Agamben, 2009, 44)

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ⁱ All translations are the author's.