

The Funnel Effect On Traces and Minor Details

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Abstract

Since 2015, the expression the “funnel effect of immigration” has been used to describe the drastic increase in numbers of people arriving in Italy, turning the peninsula into the main gateway to Europe. This expression also points to the contradictions at the heart of the European Union’s decisions on how to manage the “refugee crisis” and the frontline role played by the Italian government and civil society. I reflect upon the disembarkation procedures that people rescued at sea go through when they arrive at Italian ports. I approach the *sbarco* (disembarkation) as an assemblage of techniques that mirror sovereign power’s modalities. I then trace the emergence of worlds beyond the scrutiny of the port, such as the shantytowns in Southern Italy, and artists’ installations created with the debris left over from the shipwrecks. By paying attention to minor details that exceed the *sbarco* in the form of traces, a different account of movement and experience may become possible.

Keywords: Migration; Italy; Minor details; Traces; Art

Scenes of Arrival

In the Summer of 2016, I joined a group of doctors working for the Italian humanitarian NGO Emergency which, among other services, provides primary care at ports of entry in Sicily where boats of people rescued at sea arrive.¹ I became part of their team first as a researcher doing fieldwork at

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1 Since 1994, the humanitarian NGO Emergency has been offering free medical care in war torn countries such as Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. Fostering a “human rights-based medicine,” Emergency has opened hospitals, first aid posts, pediatric clinics, centers for the rehabilitation of victims of anti-personnel mines and other war traumas, outpatient clinics, and polyclinics. In 2006, Emergency started several projects in Italy. Under the umbrella of *Programma Italia*, 13 projects of social and medical support were opened in 9 regions. These projects comprise of mobile and outpatient clinics at ports, in or near shantytowns, and in urban neighborhoods. They serve a

ports of entry in Sicily, and later as a consultant for a book/report project on the medical conditions of foreign workers in the agricultural fields in various regions in southern Italy (Puglia, Campania, and Calabria).²

On an early morning in July 2016, I left Siracusa, Italy, with the NGO's medical team to drive to the commercial port where their mobile clinic was stationed. They had called me late the night before saying: "Domani c'è sbarco, incontriamoci presto" (Tomorrow there is a disembarkation, let us meet early). We drove for half an hour to reach the entrance of the port where two policemen checked our badges to make sure we all had clearance to enter the fenced areas. The team was composed of two doctors, a nurse, a psychologist, a cultural mediator, and a freelance photo journalist who had joined to document the procedures at the port.

Since 2015, Italian newspapers, political actors and humanitarian representatives have often used the expression "the funnel effect of immigration" to describe the drastic increase in numbers of people arriving at Italian ports from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, turning the peninsula into the main gateway to Europe where people often get stuck waiting for documents to be issued. This expression also points to the contradictions at the heart of current decisions made by the European Union on how to manage the increased numbers of incoming foreigners. While fostering liberal inclusion and multiculturalism, various EU member states advocate for stricter borders control by not accepting any quota of migrants and reinstating border control. In this context, the Italian government and civil society have played a frontline role in managing the so called "refugee crisis" in the Mediterranean, and at other borders.

According to the IOM (International Organization for Migration), in 2017, 103,175 people crossed the Mediterranean into Europe; 86,121 landed on Italian shores, and the rest at Greek (9,723), Spanish (6,973), and Cypriote ports (358) (IOM 2017).³ The discrepancy in numbers is partly due to the closure of French and Spanish ports of entry, and of other European borders.⁴

population of unserved and underserved foreigners and Italians alike. The main purpose of *Programma Italia* is to provide primary care to vulnerable populations, and to facilitate the relation between marginalized users and the Italian health care system. The two projects I refer to in this article were partially funded by the Italian state: the interventions at the ports in Sicily received support from the Ministry of Interior, and the one in the agricultural areas in the south from Puglia. Due to changing politics of reception and the change in government leadership in March, 2018, Emergency's service at the ports of entry are currently suspended. See also: <https://en.emergency.it/what-we-do/italy/>

² See the online version of the first two chapters of the publication that resulted from this collaboration: <https://dovelerbatrema.emergency.it/>

³ According to the 2018 UNHCR report, as of November 18th the number of people entering Europe by sea amounts to 102,882. The report states that Italy has received 22,473 people, Malta 1,182, Greece 28,684, and Spain 56,187. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/what-current-scale-migration-crisis-europe-future-outlook>

⁴ For an updated report on temporarily reintroduced border controls, see the Euro-

Moreover, according to the Dublin Regulation III (2014), an undocumented person entering Europe must apply for asylum or humanitarian protection in the country of first arrival. Once people arrive in Italy, they must apply for legal status and go through the bureaucratic phases leading to obtaining a permit to stay. The Italian asylum process, often stretched out by appeals, can take more than two years, thus creating a clog in the various institutional structures aimed at receiving and maintaining asylum seekers. Until the Summer of 2018, Italy remained the easiest entry point into the continent as a result of its geo-political position, and lack of cooperation on the part of other EU member states. In March, 2018, the shift in political leadership and the coming into power of a right-wing populist coalition with Matteo Salvini (Northern League) as Ministry of Interior has led to the closure of Italian ports of entry, and to the passing of a Security Decree (approved by the Italian government on November 28th, 2018) which, among other things, sanctions the closure of several reception centers for asylum seekers and other categories of applicants, and an overall hardline politics of border control.

Back at the port, the morning sun was unforgiving. When we arrived, the mercantile boat that had rescued several small boats at sea the night before was already there. Those rescued sat on the boat, out in the sun. We stood on the quay for at least 3-4 hours waiting for the disembarkation process to start. The rumor among the various humanitarian groups operating at the port was that 600 people were getting ready to be disembarked. We later learned from a Cameroonian man who was among them that six small boats had been rescued the night before. From where I stood, I could observe the standard procedure of this kind of *sbarco* (disembarkation), while Emergency's medical team was getting ready to receive the newly arrived at their mobile clinic.

From field notes: Procedure

The doctors of the USMAF (Health Ministry Office of Areal and Borders Maritime Health), dressed in white uniforms and wearing masks over their mouths, were on the boat conducting a first round of medical triage, making sure no one needed immediate attention. On the quay, waiting for people to disembark, were members of governmental organizations (the Local Health Care Agency –ASL, the Immigration Office, Protezione Civile), international agencies (UN-HCR, Save the Children, Terres des Hommes, Unicef, IOM, the Red Cross), local NGOs, police forces (Carabinieri, Coast Guard, Frontex, municipal police), TV and radio channels, and newspapers.

People finally started to get off the boat in one line, one by one. As soon as they

pean Union Migration and Home Affairs website: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/reintroduction-border-control_en

touched the ground, they were asked to take their shoes off and they were given a pair of fake crocs. Crocs of all eye-catching colors: orange, green, red, blue, pink. The man handing them out was shouting the shoe size as he saw the next person in line approaching from a distance: "46!" "43!" I was standing right behind him. He turned to me, and proudly said: "I know all their shoe sizes! I have been doing this for the last 3 years and have gotten used to guessing!" People also wore an orange bracelet with a number that was assigned to them at sea, right after being rescued.

The boat was full of African men, a small number of families and African women, and many young boys, presumably minors. They disembarked the men first, the rest later, to keep them out of the sun, we guessed. After disembarking, people were asked to form a line and, one by one, to go through another medical triage under the Red Cross tent. They were then asked to sit on the ground on the quay until everyone was disembarked, forming a rectangle, encircled by policemen who kept the group in place. Once disembarkation was over, everybody stood up and marched outside the protected area of the port passing through the narrow gate that separates it from where all the organizations and institutions had their tents. Everyone was asked to sit on the ground forming another rectangle in front of the Immigration Office stand. People were identified by giving their name, date of birth, and nationality; then, they were photographed and finger printed. At this point, everyone was given another number on a piece of paper. They were now channeled to the big tents where camp beds were lined one next to the other, and people could rest. At around 1 pm, volunteers from local NGOs pushed supermarket carts overflowing with small white plastic lunch bags near the tents. Lunch consisted in one apple, a cheese sandwich, and water. People took showers; soap, shampoo, and some clean clothes were distributed. Some did laundry and hung their clothes at the tents or on the fences surrounding the port. After lunch, UNHCR officials gathered small groups under the tents to discuss the different laws and procedures to apply for asylum or other statuses. Those who needed medical assistance went to the NGO (Emergency) clinic; those in critical conditions were transferred to the nearest hospital. In the late afternoon, people formed another long line in front of a supermarket cart, just outside the tents, and another food bag was distributed with the same meal for dinner: one apple, a cheese sandwich, and water.

The port itself is not just a physical site of reception and identification, care and control. It is, in the words of one of the doctors, a "non-place" which marks a line of demarcation between the sea and the land, international and national borders, lawlessness and legality. As such, it is a highly bureaucratized and anonymous site that operates through an excess of administrative procedures (Augé 1992). It is a physical harbor that functions as a set of practices that different actors refer to as *sbarco* (disembarkation), but it also occupies an imaginary line between friend and enemy, the familiar and the stranger. In Italian, the word *porto* (port) shares the same root with the word *porta*

(door). It refers to a passage through which people and objects move, crossing a blurred zone of categorization. In this context, the *sbarco* comes to signify a complex and layered process of medical, bureaucratic, legal, military, and humanitarian screening and evaluation.⁵ It involves numerous actors and institutions, and a very compartmentalized approach to reception. There was something literal about the port functioning as a funnel that channels bodies through various phases of identification and recognition, and regulates the flows of people, stories, fingerprints, numbers, and documents.

Yet, I started to understand the *sbarco* as something that exceeds the port. The images of multitudes of people disembarking from boats and being rescued at sea have completely colonized our social imaginary and understanding of the most recent movements of people, and reduced migration to the moment of the crossing and, eventually, arrival (Pinelli and Ciabbari 2015). This media representation has often produced an understanding of the *sbarco* as a synonym of migration itself, and of the “invasion” and “crisis” it has caused. To counter this, I propose to attend to the *sbarco* as a more elaborate and composite concept that helps us see what happens beyond the fenced area of the port. To me, it encompasses an assemblage of sites, rules, techniques, and processes that go beyond the port and the disembarkation themselves. This includes shelters, camps, documents, offices, waiting, categories, archives, fingerprints, and signatures, that occur through temporalities other than the one allowed by an emergency. The *sbarco* exceeds the stories enabled by the grammar of crisis because it includes sites outside of the field of quick intervention such as reception centers, clinics, schools, social services, immigration and police offices, all sites that are made up by practices of recognition and care. The *sbarco* encompasses all these sites while also extending them, in sites left unmapped by the state, to which I turn in the second part of the article.

In an essay on the role of discovery in anthropological research, Ugo Fabietti reflects on the importance for anthropologists to err into bordering fields of knowledge and to be guided by what may at first appear as an “insignificant information” to discover uncharted territories and new ways of thinking of our ethnographic sites (Fabietti 2012, p. 16). Drawing from Carlo Ginzburg’s famous article on the “evidential process” (*processo indiziario*) as the typical mode of enquiry of the human sciences (Ginzburg 1980), Fabietti reclaims the importance of minor details and things serendipitously discovered while doing research. For Ginzburg (1980), the *processo indiziario* is a mode of reasoning and knowing that is gained by paying

5 Since the 1980s, there has been a proliferation of anthropological literature on humanitarianism and its ethical, political, and moral underpinnings. To cite only a few ethnographic reflections addressing the conundrums of humanitarian interventions, see Ticktin (2014), Fassin (2007), Redfield (2006), Pandolfi (2008).

attention to small details, or to what appears as an insignificant fact. He compares the work of the art historian, the detective, and the psychoanalyst to argue that they all work by attending to that which is minor. While they each operate in a different register (the aesthetic, the forensic, and the medical) depending on their field of investigation, they all concur in their method of prioritizing that which is damned to be insignificant by a first look. In order to discover a fake copy, for instance, the art historian must pay attention to the tiny details in which ears or hands are portrayed. It is in fact in the details that the painter betrays himself, not in the overall style of the painting. Ginzburg provides the example of art historian Giovanni Morelli who, at the end of the 19th century, wrote a series of articles about the correct attribution of original works of art. He also draws a parallel with Sigmund Freud who, as a psychoanalyst, was able to “see” his patients’ pathologies by observing their symptoms, minor and indirect signs which led him to the underlying problem. In the essay on “The Moses of Michelangelo,” Freud cites the work of Morelli and his method, and notes: “It seems to me that his method of inquiry is closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis. It, too, is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations” (Freud 1914, p. 222). Sherlock Holmes (Ginzburg’s third example), not unlike the art historian and the psychoanalyst, follows precisely these features that risk going unnoticed as waste and rubbish, and uses them as clues to solve the mystery of a crime. Here, too, what is marginal proves to be central in the resolution of a criminal riddle.

Looping back to my fieldwork at ports of entry and other sites of migrants’ reception, I was constantly reminded of the importance of the minor not only because of the generative nature that Ginzburg and Fabietti identify in it, but also for its political valence. In the midst of loud and sensationalist accounts of migration and emergencies that the media and political actors constantly produce and circulate, there are many secondary details that, despite going unnoticed in the official rhetoric, tell stories otherwise and show the making of worlds in the interstices of state institutions and practices. While I was investigating institutional modalities of reception and identification of foreign others at the very moment of the *sbarco*, I was also aware of the fact that most practices and processes exceeded themselves and pointed to worlds that were merely hinted at in the very context of the port. In this article, I follow the hints and clues encountered at the moment of the *sbarco* to enter the worlds that exist beyond the port’s fences. I attend to minor details as the sites where different grammars and accounts emerge.

At the port, while observing the procedures of disembarkation, I was struck by how well the figure of the funnel – used to describe an engulfed situation of bodies passing through narrow zones of identification and reception – captures the fundamentally split nature of power and sovereignty:

on the one hand, power functions as a form of custody and control (of foreign bodies and borders), and, on the other, it rescues and cares for those who make it under its sovereignty by fitting its categories of recognition (Giordano 2016). The expression “the funnel effect of immigration” points to the complex nature of power which observes and categorizes, excludes and discriminates, while protecting and taking care of those who make it within its purview. But the split way in which power operates (Foucault 1991) does not function in any linear or clear-cut way. Seen from a distance, the process of the *sbarco* seems to follow a step-by-step linear unfolding (from disembarking, to the first medical triage, to finger printing and other biometric identification, to more medical triage, etc.). There is a rational organization that brings together different organizations and institutions to fulfill the task of reception, identification, and care. Seen from within, though, the port and the *sbarco* look blurry: the roles of various humanitarian organizations and police forces often overlap or are reversed. It is not uncommon to witness a humanitarian actor denouncing the presence of “human traffickers” among the people who have just disembarked to the police. Or, to notice members of the police forces referring people in need of medical attention to the mobile clinics or the Red Cross tent. Power’s porous and shortsighted nature goes hand in hand with its split and opaque character. It is from this blurredness and pervasiveness – that Foucault so well taught us to see in the workings of institutions and population (Foucault 1991) – that power derives its effectiveness and strength. Such force lies in the fact that power cannot be localized in one single institution and practice, nor be identified as always working in a particular direction.

While the *sbarco* provides a space of governmental and humanitarian surveillance that moves people through techniques of care and control, it also allows for other practices to occur. Some people refuse to be fingerprinted, or find ways to escape from the port and go off the radar of institutional gazes; others get identified at the port, are transported to shelters and disappear shortly after to travel North, or enter a parallel world of squatted homes and unmapped shantytowns. The funnel describes a spatial configuration of bodies moving through narrow zones of identification to be inserted – or squeezed – into the register of the law. The “funnel effect” is also the expression that the media, the nation states, and various political actors use to emphasize – and create – a sense of engulfment caused by the presence of foreign others. Yet, this figure only partially captures the complexity of the *sbarco*. Institutions work more like porous apparatuses that often fail to “funnel,” process, move objects and people through; a lot leaks out of institutional procedures and processes, and it is constitutive of how these very institutional practices work and re-instantiate themselves. What falls outside of the legal jurisdiction of the state constitutes a lawlessness land that is produced by law itself, but that state discourse represents as an outside to it. As Vena Das and Deborah Poole

explain, “margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule” (2004, p. 4).

In the non-place of the port, the *sbarco* also presents the opportunity to pass through the fence that separates the port from the fields, and to go undetected. Many of the people entering Europe under the paradigm of humanitarian emergency becomes part of a growing unrecognized workforce in the seasonal agricultural industry throughout Italy. They enter into a lawless system of exploitation which, while violent, also provides shelter from state monitoring (Giordano 2016; Peano 2017). As a funnel, the *sbarco* simultaneously enables forms of legal identification that can lead both to papers and access to services and rights, and to forms of escape into alternative undocumented and heterotopic forms of life.

In conversation with my first project on politics of recognition of foreign others and the institutional logics that translate them into categories of legal inclusion and diagnostic treatment (Giordano 2014), my current research pays attention to those experiences, practices, and sites that fall outside the official grammar of the state – and the paradigm of political emergency. They relate to the question of traces, and the spaces of radical difference produced by institutional discourses within their own cracks and interstices. In this line, I follow the “tiny details”⁶ that remain at the margins of the state. I treat traces and minor details as forms of excess (incommensurability) because they fall out of the master narrative of history, and elude the official archive of the state. They belong to a different kind of archive that may present stories otherwise.

Traces, or Other Scenes of Arrival

Later that Summer, my friends and collaborators Ramzi, a Tunisian artist and social worker, and Antonino, an Italian retired coast guard, invited me to join them to the old port of Porto Palo, an hour from Siracusa. They wanted to show me a cemetery of boats where many of the relicts of vessels used to cross the Mediterranean were confiscated by the state. In the early 1990s, people fleeing Africa and the Maghreb used to arrive directly at small ports like Porto Palo. There were no bureaucratic or medical procedures to follow at the ports. As Antonino explained to me, people in the village would come out and open the ovens to bake bread and other goodies for the newcomers. All the identification processes happened at police offices and hospitals in town.

⁶ Carlo Ginzburg argues that the *processo indiziario*, typical of the human sciences, is effective precisely because: “Tiny details provide the key to a deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods” (Ginzburg 1980, p. 11).



Picture 1: Lampedusa, Italy, cemetery of boats. Photo by the author.



Picture 2: Porto Palo, Italy, cemetery of boats. Photo by the author.

On that windy morning, we went hunting for the objects and fragments of boats that were abandoned at the damp. Many things cross with the humans, and sneak in the shores of Europe otherwise, leaking out of the

screening procedures of the *sbarco*. Ramzi had been collecting objects that once belonged to those who crossed for an art installation he organized in an empty unconsecrated Church in Ortigia, the old part of Siracusa. Entitled “Uprooted,” the exhibit displayed art work by various local artists around movement and borders. His personal installation – entitled “Museo dei sogni frantumati” (museum of the fractured dreams) – was made of shoes, belts, hats, water bottles, photos, books, empty cans, faded documents, life jackets, and backpacks recuperated at ports, on beaches, and at boats cemeteries. He also collected remnants of the boats themselves: rusted nails, slats of rotted wood, and engine parts.

At the damp, that morning, the debris of shipwrecks made me think of what novelist Elena Ferrante, in a completely different context, calls *frantumaglia*. For her, *la frantumaglia* is a Neapolitan dialect word which describes a sense of loss and uncertainty enveloping the mind and body at certain moments in life. It refers to a psychological state characterized by “bits and pieces of uncertain origin [which] rattle around in your head not always comfortably” (cited in Ferri and Ferri 2015). The word comes from *frantumazione*, a noun in Italian, which means a breaking or a shattering, and *frantume*, another noun, refers to the shards themselves. Although Ferrante uses the term to evoke a sense of existential loss, a labyrinth of emotions one can be caught in without escape, there is something very material in the root of the word *frantumaglia* which makes it evocative of the enmeshment of things and emotions, fragments of objects and the affects that emanate from and stick to them. Ferrante says more: “The *frantumaglia* is the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story. [It] is an effect of the sense of loss, when we’re sure that everything that seems to us stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of debris that we seem to see” (Ferrante 2016, p. 100).

From the landscape of debris where Ramzi collects elements for his art, we moved back to his studio where he was working on the “Museo dei sogni frantumati.” He re-assembled everything in an installation that staged the fragmented and deadly nature of the crossing. He scattered the collected objects – or what remained of them - on the wreck of a boat: an unpaired shoe, ripped documents, a torn Koran, unopened cans of food. The whole installation stood as a witness to the traces of the crossing. To me, it also gestured towards the impermanence and performativity of materials, and the ways in which waste can be presented to people as their own discarded material turned into art. In the midst of what looked like waste and garbage, apparently unimportant details (Ginzburg 1980, Fabietti 2012), or a *frantumaglia* of things that had lost “the orderliness of a history” and the coherence of a story (Ferrante 2016), his installation also provided a holding of the absence of those who died during the journey, and did not make it to the port. It displayed that which cannot be funneled through the official channels, and doesn’t get translated through the various phases of the *sbarco*

into one of the categories of recognition of the state (“asylum seeker,” “refugee,” “victim of human trafficking”). The dead and the debris cannot be transported – translated – into the language of the state which categorizes them as waste. As trace, the debris remains uncaptured by the logic of recognition; it gestures towards an absence which remains open to meaning (Derrida 1967). In this sense, Ramzi’s installation differs from the fixity of the museum where objects are enclosed in specific meanings and positions. As waste the debris is represented at the margins of the state as that element of dirt and savagery that is supposed to lie outside state’s jurisdiction but that also threatens it from within (Das and Poole 2004). Ramzi’s curation recuperates the debris from its disposable waste-like state, and positions it as a full object, a living object that conjures living people in their absence. The debris becomes to matter as a trace and, in this sense, it is cared for. These traces were generated by everything that didn’t make it through the funnel of the port and the *sbarco*, and that created a different kind of presence in the form of undetected damaged objects and their splinters. Ramzi’s intervention is in tune with the disposition towards minor details – that Ginzburg attributes to the *processo indiziario*, and that Fabietti suggests as a generative research posture – because he knows that the debris of the shipwreck conveys a different story, usually un-told by official discourses.



*Picture 3: “Museo dei sogni frantumati” by Ramzi Harrabi, Siracusa, Italy.
Photo by the author.*

Michel de Certeau understood traces as the left-over of histories (1992) that don't fit into the master narrative of the present (Napolitano 2015). The installation consigns the traces of those who survived the crossing or died to another order of possibility. It allows lost objects to bear witness to those whose stories of life and death are not documented in the state archive that translates experience into categories and stories, and erases the traces of the shipwrecks. Ramzi's assemblage becomes a different kind of harbor, of point of arrival of the dead, which attends to the wrecks in the fullness of their splintered presence. It provides a different kind of archive which is affective and points to the limits of linear representation (Navaro-Yashin 2012). In some ways, his installation re-stories the various wrecked materials by restoring an order (the installation) wherein they have a place. The decayed objects are delivered to the language of art which stages the absence in its non-narrative form. Unlike the *sbarco*, Ramzi's art consigns the lost objects to an order different from the law and its politics of recognition, re-inscribing that which exceeds the funnel (the dead and the lawless) within another order of existence.

I was intrigued by Ramzi's "Museo dei sogni frantumati" not so much as an aesthetic assemblage, but as an act of creation and invention. In his work, art becomes a form of translation or, in Fabietti's words, a form of *errance*, typical not only of our objects of inquiry that move around, but also of our anthropological endeavor (Fabietti 2012, p. 15). Ramzi literally transported objects from one place (the damp, the beach, the boats cemetery) to another (his studio, the church, the installation). Translation becomes an act of staging. This transposition allowed him to perform a scene where the dead could be alluded to, and the shipwreck acknowledged. It resembles an act of simulation where the dead is not literally displayed – as in a funerary ritual – but is simulated through ruined objects and debris. The installation as a whole, and the single elements and materials that compose it, re-signify the debris and move them into the order of the symbolic, transposing them from the status of disposable waste, to what Cassirer called "organs of reality" (Cassirer 1946, p. 8). For Cassirer, symbols don't mimic the reality they stand for, they are themselves organs of that very reality. Ramzi's installation is not symbolic because it stands in place of the dead, but because it becomes the reality of the shipwreck itself that can be apprehended only through an oblique act of creation, a non-linear story line, and the materiality of what remains. As organ of reality, the debris opens up various horizons of performativity. The "Museo dei sogni" staged the undocumented and the dead so she can be mourned, and attended to, even though un-named.

As it erred elsewhere, the installation did something else. After staging it in the squares of old Ortigia – where I first saw it in 2015 – and later in the unconsecrated Church of Gesù e Maria, Ramzi was invited to bring it to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. A delegation of Italian congressmen

from the Italian Democratic Party sponsored his traveling and the setting up of the installation in the plenary session hall. Renato Soru, the European congressman who organized the event, framed it as a testimony of the shipwreck which is often eclipsed in its tragic consequences. Alarmed by the numbers of deaths in the Mediterranean, he linked the current “migration crisis” to a “new Holocaust” occurring in the middle of the sea. To him, the scattered objects of Ramzi’s installation resonated with the mountains of shoes and random objects amassed in concentration camps. Soru’s idea was to bring awareness of the violence of migration in the heart of European politics. In his words: “Bringing these objects inside the plenary session means that the shipwreck has arrived right here. We hope this will force people to take responsibility for it.”⁷

The Strasburg installation performed yet another transposition – or translation – in a literal and symbolic way. It continued to perform what Ramzi had intended to: bearing witness to those who didn’t make it to the other side of the sea, and to those parts of their stories that cannot be translated into an official archive because they exceed it. Yet, using the European Parliament as a stage allowed a different kind of statement. It raised the question of the relation between aesthetics and ethics, of how the installation relates to the traces of the shipwrecked. But it also begged for a deeper reflection on aesthetics and the law. How to welcome into the law those who have remained lawless and lost at sea? In Strasburg, the installation consigned these traces to the sphere of international law, in an attempt to challenge law’s self-understanding as punitive. On the one hand, it staged an ethics of hospitality and its potential to disrupt the law from its biopolitical distinction between the living and the dead. On the other hand, the installation implicitly stated that it is the very law that produces death, and the very debris that are damned to be forgotten at the margins of the state. It is also on the grounds of this forgetfulness that the law is constituted and sustained.

There is another way in which I think with Ramzi’s work. It relates back to the question of heterotopias and difference which institutional grammars produce within their own cracks. If we understand heterotopias as spaces of radical otherness that disturb shared discourses, where categories no longer hold, and institutional languages are shattered and unable to name experience (Foucault 1994, p. xviii), Ramzi’s urge to collect the objects of the shipwreck is a way to care for the unnamable and the underworld of the crossing. His installation is an effect of these other worlds, bodies, and objects that the *sbarco* – as an assemblage of practices and places that regulate

7 https://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/rubriche/voceeuropdeputati/2015/04/29/naufragio-soru-rischio-nuovo-olocausto-nel-mediterraneo_01809ab3-abfb-4106-97f5-331d9d0347ac.html

the arrival of people – doesn't detect, or simply cannot account for. Ramzi recuperates the debris that make up this form of heterotopia, and re-organizes them into an installation. He rearranges the heterotopia by staging it, so that it can be apprehended by a European audience, it being the European parliament or the passerby in the streets of Ortigia who are surprised to see the remnants of the shipwreck on what was once the Church's altar. Ramzi's art does not create another world/reality; his work does not partake of the heterotopic potential of the catastrophe (Giordano 2016). He slides a *topos*, he moves it from the underwater to the surface, from the garbage pile to the altar, from the Southern port to the heart of European political power, so that it can be witnessed. This slip mirrors a difference (*hetero*), but it does not create another place (*topos*). What are, then, the other worlds that the *sbarco* sets in motion without capturing or controlling? What falls through the cracks of the port creating other spaces of life and death? Spaces don't exist a priori, but emerge as effects of practices and the relations enabled by them. The *sbarco* in all its complexity and layers, is a world-making process that exceeds itself and all it encompasses.

Scenes of Flight

One late morning at the end of summer, we left Foggia (Italy) to reach one of the *ghettos* in the middle of the agricultural fields of this part of southern Italy where seasonal workers (mostly foreigners) live and work throughout the year. They are mostly involved in forms of exploitation also known, today, as *caporalato*: a system by which agricultural workers are illegally hired, paid below the national minimum wage, and put to work in precarious conditions often leading to death. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to mention that there is a larger economy in southern Italy – of which the *ghettos* are a product – which is based on centuries of landowners' exploitation of Italian peasants, low wages, absence of contracts, and organized criminal groups that control the agricultural labor market.

My traveling companions on that morning were another team from Emergency. A year prior to our trip, they had asked me to supervise a book project about their medical interventions in this part of the country, where they used to run mobile clinics in areas mostly unserved by the national health care system whether because too remote or because off the radar of institutions. The amount of clinical and statistical material covering the last ten years of their interventions lacked the more personal narratives of both care providers and patients which they wanted to incorporate in their book project. We decided to do some fieldwork together, spending time in the sites where their clinics are or were operative, conducting interviews with policy makers and local stakeholders, and conversing with the people who

live in the shantytowns and work in the agricultural fields.

On that morning, we drove toward Borgo Creto,⁸ several miles from Foggia. Before arriving in the borough, I asked my traveling companions to describe the *ghetto* for me, and their impressions the very first time they went there. *Ghetto* is the name that seasonal workers and the media use to refer to the encampments where workers live during the harvest, and often end up staying for lack of other living and working situations. I wanted to imagine this particular place through their memories before forming my own. Claudia, the project manager, remembered the café in the main square of the village where, as she put it, “The owner doesn’t talk, he growls (*ringhia*)” to people, especially when they are black. Laura and Greta – an Italian and a Bulgarian cultural mediator – also remembered people from the village as fairly “racist and insufferable.” With these images in mind, we drove through the center of the borough where I recognized the fascist-style church on one side, and the town café on the other. By the time we got there, it was early afternoon and people were indoor for lunch and a siesta. Everything was shut down. The square had a deserted feel to it, except for a group of African men waiting at the bus stop. Just passed the square, we took a fairly narrow dusty road, following the sign *centro di accoglienza* (reception center). At the end of it appeared the C.A.R.A. (*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* – Reception Center for Asylum Seekers). Once a military zone with its airport and administrative buildings, the whole complex had been turned into a shelter.

This part of Italy is marked by a particular history. The country side is punctuated by various *borghi* (boroughs, villages) that were built during the fascist era as part of a project of *bonifica*, of reclaiming lands. *Bonifica* was central to many discourses of fascist modernity. It started as a conversion of unusable lands into agricultural fields, but it soon turned into the fascists’ desire to purify the nation of all social and cultural ills. *Bonificare* saw human society as an organism that could be manipulated by means of a vast surgical operation (Ben-Ghiat 2001). According to Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Initially the term referred to the conversion of swamp-land into arable soil. [...] The campaigns for agricultural reclamation (*bonifica agricola*), human reclamation (*bonifica umana*), and cultural reclamation (*bonifica della cultura*), together with the anti-Jewish laws, [were] different facets and phases of a comprehensive project to combat degeneration and radically renew Italian society by pulling up the bad weeds and cleaning up the soil” (2001, p. 4).⁹

8 In the remaining of this article the names of places and people have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

9 Engineering, medicine, and science provided the paradigms of this fascist approach to governance. In fact, Mussolini used to refer to himself as a “clinician” (Ben-Ghiat 2001, p. 5).

The lands once reclaimed by the fascist regime are now left to their own demise, except when they are “reclaimed” by foreign seasonal workers or those who exploit their labor. Though, of course, reclaiming here has a different feel to it.

We reached the end of the road, and parked in front of the wired gate of the old military airport. We began walking along the fenced zone, observing the desolate landscape around us. I could see the old edifices of the airport and behind them a series of new containers built to expand the capacity of the reception center. There was a marked difference between the two parts of the fenced area: the old buildings of the airport base had bars on the windows and looked poorly maintained; clothes were hanging from the windows which were for the most part closed or darkened. The containers were painted in shining white color, and looked sparkling clean. Their almost aseptic look contrasted with the piles of bicycle parts amassed outside on the concrete, along with piles of plastic, cardboard, and other waste stuff.

We kept walking along the dusty trail, flanked by broken glass, plastic bottles, trash of various sorts, towards the countryside. Coasting the C.A.R.A. we found ourselves at a stretch on our right, and in front of us an expanse of shacks that had developed outside of the fenced zone, adjacent to it. We arrived at what we later came to refer to as *il buco* (the hole): a breach in the fence that surrounded the old airport now turned into reception center, and through which a continuous flux of people passed to go in and out of the military zone. The hole was just a few meters away from one of the main gates to the C.A.R.A. where two armed policemen stood, knowingly indifferent. What developed on the other side of the hole was a vast shantytown, bristling with activity of all sorts. People, bicycles, animals, merchandise, food, objects of various kinds passed through the hole in the fence. The shantytown was immense and had developed along the 3 km long *pista* (the landing strip) that once served for the general operations of the airport. It now functions as the primary arterial road around which the shantytown is being built.

The shacks were elaborate in that they were made from various recycled material: beams of wood, doors, glass, tubes, cardboard, nails, planks, strings, bicycle parts. While we walked we saw men who were making new shelters, transporting materials in the trunks of cars, hammering and sawing, constructing with makeshift stakes found by chance. Some of the shacks were designated as stores for clothing, shoes, bicycle's parts, tires for cars, food, restaurants, and hardware. All materials were in part recuperated from landfills, dumpsters, perhaps from warehouses of charitable organizations, and were then resold and re-purposed here. In some cases, the same kind of debris that ended up in Ramzi's art were here used to build a shelter to live, a grill to cook, or a bicycle to get around. But while his installation reorganized a *topos* without creating a new one, here one had the feeling of

entering a *topos* of another kind.

As we stopped by a shack that functioned as a taxi station for the *ghetto* (a banner said: “If you need a taxi, call here”), Omar, the Emergency’s Senegalese cultural mediator, explained to me that there was an important market of construction materials which had become a profitable occupation for the inhabitants of the shantytown. To the point that some didn’t work in the agricultural fields any longer. Other commercial activities within the *ghetto* have emerged which are more lucrative than the seasonal harvests. That the inhabitants of today shantytowns find various forms of income beyond the harvest points to the pervasiveness of the black market, of which the shantytown is a product. It also shows how people have been able to build an economy and infrastructure at the margins of the state, that constitute an alternative world not yet mapped nor managed by the state.

Back to the *pista*, the landing strip, Laura, who used to work on the mobile clinic that served the *ghetto*, explained that the Muslims lived on one side of the strip, which was also where all the cats of the *ghetto* gathered. The Christians occupied the other half of the strip, where the dogs of the *ghetto* settled. There were both species running around their respective side of the *pista*: many, skinny, a little battered, making a life with the humans. In the middle of the *pista*, car seats functioned as traffic dividers so that the cars slalomed between them. From the *pista* itself, smaller infernal alleys developed in asymmetrical and irregular forms, out towards the countryside. Even the state road we had taken to get to the shantytown, bumpy and narrow could turn infernal during the rainy season.

On this particular research trip to Borgo Creto, we met several people who had lived in the informal settlement for a long time, collected their reflections and frustrations on the conditions of life, access to health care, and work contracts. We met with the international group of activists running Radio Ghetto, a radio program of music, testimonies, and stories done in collaboration with the people of the *ghetto*. We also spent time just sitting and being there. When we retraced our steps back to the car, we passed by the *buco* again—the hole in the fence. Aside from the usual traffic of people that passed through, this time there was a sheep tied to the fence, in preparation for Eid, the end of Ramadan, which was a few days later. It was late afternoon when we started driving back to Foggia. The sky turned black. It started raining with lightening and thunders. The countryside from the car windows looked suddenly blurred, muddier, and dustier. Everything seemed to move slower: animals, humans, cars, clouds, with the exception of the grass and trees which were slapped by a wind growing stronger by the minute.

When I revisited this walk through the *ghetto*, I started to think about the *buco* in the fence as one of the “tiny details” Ginzburg and Fabietti invite us to attend to, a minor detail that is damned marginal – a defect in the fence – but that gestures towards something of the institutions and the *ghettos* that

is not visible at first. As a site in and of itself, the *buco* resonates with Anna Tsing's idea of the frontiers as "particular kinds of edges" which

[...] are deregulated because they arise in the interstitial spaces made by collaborations among legitimate and illegitimate partners [...]. They confuse the boundaries of law and theft, governance and violence, use and destruction. These confusions change the rules and thus enable extravagant new economies of profit – as well as loss". (Tsing 2005, p. 27)

Tsing further writes that frontiers are "imaginative projects" (p. 32), zones "of not yet – not yet mapped, not yet regulated" (p. 28). Following these reflections, the *buco* appears as a site that, despite being produced at the margin of the institution – and partially by the institution itself –, is not yet mapped, not yet captured. It doesn't demarcate a here and there, but creates instead a space of confusion where the inside and outside of the reception center and the shantytown are blurred and unmappable. This confusion enables a certain kind of creativity that, as Deborah Thomas, is often "materialized through profound violence" (2011, p. 45), and can easily lead to destruction. It is a creation that doesn't follow the linearity of progress (Tsing 2015), nor of history, but that makes the worlds in which most of the people who are funneled at the ports through the linear logic of humanitarian care end up forging their existence.

While the *buco* is the product of a "collaboration" among the institution and the informal world, it also operates as a scene of flight through which uncharted places emerge and develop in unexpected and precarious ways. These places take on a lifeform of their own, while remaining intrinsically interwoven with the practices of state identification and recognition that, in Borgo Creto, are incarnated in the reception center within the fence. These worlds live side by side, implicated in one another by holes in the walls that allow people, objects, animals, waste, debris to move in and out, around, and above. The *ghettos* are worlds that host undocumented foreigners and people who have been documented for a long time, have lost their regular jobs, and have moved near the agricultural fields to sustain themselves seasonally. They resemble Ferrante's *frantumaglia* that has lost the orderliness of a history; they often remain unrecognized because they do not fit into common categories of recognition. In the midst of great precarity, the waste and debris that would normally go unnoticed become not only world-making, but also a clue, or a symptom, of how laws and institutions work by producing their opposites – lawlessness and parallel worlds – as their excess.

In this article, I have followed minor details from the port, to an art exhibit, all the way to the *ghetto*. In this process of paying attention to the minor, I have encountered holes of different kinds: the port as a *porta*, the funnel as a channeling of people, and the *buco* as an unmapped open space. Attend-

ing to the humans and materials that pass through these holes, with a taste for that which official discourses on migration and borders usually ignore or damn as irrelevant, I have tried to listen to tiny details as ethnographic sites that show the emerging of heterotopic worlds (the shantytown), and the forms of curation that reclaim the debris from its waste-like connotation to that of organ of reality, of material that is one with the humans it belonged to (the art installation). In this process of bearing witness, I have explored the ethnographic and political valence of the debris/minor, and the alternative worlds that they open into. As traces, they also provide a way to tell stories of movement otherwise: not always in the register of borders and the nation-state, of legal versus illegal migration. Just as the artist who reassembles the traces of the shipwrecks, and the people of the ghetto who repurpose waste to make an alternative lifeform for themselves, as an ethnographer I have re-assembled pieces that fall through the cracks of institutions and pass through the holes to image an account otherwise, that pays attention to the presences and absences of bodies, words, and objects. To attend to that which occurs beyond and through the fences of the port and the old airport/shelter is not a way to provide a truer account, but to create a confusion in the linearity of stories about migration and borders, and to think with the chaos that aminate the holes that power simultaneously creates and is challenged by.

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