

Introduction

Emergency Imaginaries

On October 11, 2016, at the height of what was then globally recognized as Europe’s “refugee crisis,” a group of men from Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia stood on the steps of the Campidoglio, Rome’s municipal square, and unfurled a banner that read *We are not dangerous . . . we are in danger!*

The men weren’t talking about their long and perilous journeys across the Sahara, their imprisonment and exploitation in Libya, or the unseaworthy vessels on which they eventually crossed the Mediterranean. Instead, they were calling attention to the danger they confronted after reaching Europe and making their way to the heart of the Italian capital. Holding the sign across the Campidoglio steps with a crowd of supporters behind them, the men—a few of them donning the orange life vests that had come to symbolize the plight of Mediterranean migrants—chanted: “We are homeless! We need protection!”

More specifically, they were protesting their eviction from the street they had occupied outside a former migrant reception center in Rome’s San Lorenzo neighborhood. When local authorities closed the center months earlier, volunteers and center residents moved to the street outside, forming a collective they called Baobab Experience. For more than eight months, Baobab coordinated meals and legal and medical aid there in Via Cupa for thousands of people who had recently reached Italy, mostly men in their teens and twenties, many originally from West Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. Despite repeated Italian state declarations of emergency that had released aid funds and facilitated the rapid opening of centers to accommodate people seeking protection in Europe, these newcomers found themselves unhoused and without access to official assistance. Now police had cleared Via Cupa, too, removing the mattresses and tents and blocking the administration of aid.

At the Campidoglio, the men's invocation of the language of danger called public attention to their struggles and to the implications of what they recognized as a broad misframing of their movements: popular discourses surrounding African arrivals to Europe suggest that border crossers are themselves the source of crisis and pose a threat to European and Italian security and culture. Yet these men feared for their own safety and well-being *within* Italy where, rather than obtaining protection, they were being held in limbo. City authorities refused to accommodate these newcomers, claiming to have reached capacity. In turn, while attempting to apply for asylum, the men could not access the meals, housing, or legal, linguistic, and medical aid available through such centers. They remained *in transit*: living in the liminality, or in-betweenness, of uncertain legal and social status, and effectively still on the move, despite having reached Europe, and despite their eagerness to build stable lives and plan for the future. At the October 2016 demonstration and in subsequent protests, social media campaigns, and public events, the group advocated for migrant rights not only through broad appeals for justice, but through testimony—in this case, through an embodied act of protest that centered migrants' understanding of the challenges they faced.

This book responds to the pervasive framing of migration from global south to global north as an “emergency” or “crisis”—or in Italy, an *emergenza immigrazione* (immigration emergency). Declarations of emergency dominate political and public responses to precarious migration—that is, mobilities sometimes called “irregular” or “undocumented” that, regardless of migrants' legal status, occur “under highly constrained conditions.”¹ From the US-Mexico borderlands, to oceanic crossings to Australia, to the Mediterranean, today's dominant narratives frame migration as a problem. The sense of crisis as a constant threat becomes rapidly clear in a quick scan of media. At one extreme, sensationalizing, fearmongering stories depict migrants as criminals or drug dealers. Yet more broadly, political and media discourse abounds that treats crisis and emergency as inherent facts, including headlines like “‘Naïve and Dangerous’: Australia Urged to Do More as Refugee Crisis, and Boats, Return” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2023); “Chaos, Fury, Mistakes: 600 Days Inside New York's Migrant Crisis” (*New York Times*, 2023); and “Is the Migration Emergency Back?” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2023).

Emergency and crisis labels correspond to actual situations of urgency, as people undertake incredibly risky voyages to seek legal protection and better lives. Yet, critically, they also cultivate what historian Michele Colucci has called “an obsession with the present,” suggesting that arrivals to southern borders are sudden, unforeseeable, and unprecedented.² Yet, while displacement from one's home country can happen abruptly, the migration “emergencies” so prevalent at global north borders often mark not sudden change but continuity. Precarious migration to Italy has been described as an emergency not since the mid-2010s, but since at least the early 1990s, when Albanians fleeing regime collapse crossed the Adriatic to the southern Puglia region.³ Broad legal and discursive

treatments of migration in emergency terms perpetuate a pervasive focus on precarious migration, and on border crossers themselves, as existing within an endless, ahistorical “now,” and as defined by their perceived unbelonging. Focusing on the Italian case, *Emergency in Transit* asks: In light of a more than thirty-year *emergenza*, what does “emergency” mean? What work do this label and related policies perform, and how do they influence cultural imaginaries? How do people in transit navigate the “crisis” their movements supposedly represent, if that “crisis” is both urgent and endless?

Through the testimonies of Africans who bear witness to their experiences reaching Europe via Italy and navigating Italian spaces and institutions, this book shows how emergency responses to Mediterranean migration reproduce colonial logics and racialize those crossing borders, and how people on the move expose and challenge this violence. I conceptualize “emergency” as an apparatus (via Foucault): what we might think of as a singular border emergency, or what gets framed in media as a migration crisis with clear temporal parameters, in fact reflects a set of shifting and often contradictory discourses, policies, practices, and material experiences that together shape people’s lives. The emergency apparatus operates at multiple scales and across geographies, from national borderzones to the living and working spaces where locals and newcomers negotiate new futures. It is powered by a pervasive *emergency imaginary of foreignness* that perceives certain bodies and lives as perpetual outsiders who embody threat, rupture, and risk.

The emergency apparatus is a crucial mechanism of the colonial present, or the ways that historical colonial campaigns and power relations repeat, echo, and continue to structure border regimes and notions of national identity and otherness today.⁴ In Italy, the emergency apparatus shapes migration realities by perpetuating power differentials, refusals of memory, and related racial logics. As a consequence, emergency responses often perpetuate circumstances of urgency and uncertainty, rather than resolve them, and the treatment of arrivals as a “crisis” at external borders in fact significantly impacts migrants and local communities throughout the country. The men at the Campidoglio faced an uphill battle not simply because of their legal limbo as asylum seekers awaiting a decision, but because of how their movements figure within the colonial present. As foreigners from former European colonies in the heart of a former colonizing power, these migrants were racially and socially excluded from a society that has yet to reckon with its own violent colonial history and how the racial hierarchies it reified continue to inform dominant ideas about who can be Italian. Like so many of the testimonies I heard, read, or viewed in research across Italian migrant reception sites and migration-centered cultural production, this witnessing reveals that what dominant media narratives portray as a crisis spurred by increased arrivals to Europe’s southern borders in fact involves a much more complex set of dynamics related to who is welcomed into Italian and European spaces, and through what legal and social processes.

Shaped by a politics of in/exclusion and (in)visibility, sites of “emergency” are sites of contested witnessing: emergency functions by relying on *some* witnessing accounts—by government officials and NGOs, for example—while severely limiting the possibilities for people in transit to bear witness to their experiences on their own terms. Indeed, as Janet Roitman writes of crisis, emergency “raises the dilemma of the very possibility of bearing witness, or of representation.”⁵ At the Campidoglio protest, most demonstrators did not yet have visas and could not risk returning to their home countries. Yet they viewed their struggles in Italy as extreme enough to merit the risks of hypervisibility, and they bore public witness to their presence and struggles in hopes of provoking change. Their witnessing aligns with other testimonies that point to the constructed nature of borders we often think of as fixed and clarify how borders change in geographical, political, and social terms, as Alessandro Leogrande observes in one of this book’s epigraphs.⁶ This is one illustration of how testimonies that emerge from within these constraints challenge emergency framings of migration and invoke alternative visions of mobility and belonging.

In conceptualizing the emergency apparatus and its relationship to witnessing, *Emergency in Transit* bridges critical refugee studies, postcolonial studies, and transnational Italian studies through the methods of narrative analysis, oral history, and ethnography. With this interdisciplinary approach, I adopt what I call “testimony as method” to document how the emergency apparatus shapes the lives of people on the move and, simultaneously, to challenge how emergency responses to migration often obscure migrant-centered, migrant-authored narratives.⁷ In doing so, I center how border crossers narrate, mediate, and navigate their experiences through testimonies including interviews, writing, film, and visual art. Ranging from the fleeting to the monumental, these testimonies document life well beyond the national borders where media and scholarly attention often focuses.⁸ Drawing extensively on ethnographic research I carried out at migrant reception centers, camps, and public spaces in four Italian regions (map 1), this book itself bears witness to the operations of emergency that shape contemporary Mediterranean migration.

Italy offers a significant case for the study of migration “crises,” as a country historically shaped by internal migration and emigration abroad that is now a main port of entry for people hoping to obtain asylum in Europe. Focusing on Italy, I elaborate the emergency apparatus through the framework of the Black Mediterranean, which understands the Afro-European borderzone as a site of colonial relations and racialized anti-immigrant violence, as well as migrant agency.⁹ Black Mediterranean mobilities and politics shape the lives of people in the African diaspora living in and beyond the Mediterranean region; critically, they also shape Mediterranean spaces and communities as they posit a reengagement of colonial history, collective memory, and notions of belonging, and as migrants’ movements and words “defy Fortress Europe” and represent, as Harsha Walia observes, “a



MAP 1. Primary field sites. Made by the author with Datawrapper.

form of decolonial reparations.”¹⁰ Through this perspective, I address how migration “emergencies” are both lived and imagined, and how the ways the emergency apparatus holds migrants in precarity are directly related to the limits it imposes on conceptualizations of mobility.

We live amid multiple global “crises” of public health, climate change, racial and social injustice, conflict and terror, and economic hardship, and movements within and across borders are inextricable from these issues and are often upheld as a “crisis” or “emergency” in their own right. Declarations of emergency—whether legal or discursive—sound an alarm, the nature of which depends on distinguishing threatening subjects from citizens who uphold the normal order

of the law: Who or what is threatening? Who is outside the normal order? The prevalence of emergency rhetoric reminds us that, indeed, to invoke Walter Benjamin, “the state of exception has become the rule.”¹¹ Discourses and experiences of emergency are at the center of global debates about asylum, human rights, citizenship, and border regimes, and asylum seekers, refugees, and people in transit without papers are often understood to represent the state of exception, not considered full political subjects.¹² Refugees are simultaneously seen to represent both humanitarian concern and “a crisis to world order.”¹³ As Y en L  Espiritu has discussed, nations “externalize” refugees legally, socially, and ideologically.¹⁴ What rights and social and political capital newcomers can exercise changes radically depending on the racial politics and constructions of foreignness in the countries where they arrive.

The critical refugee studies focus on the *production* of the refugee in material and figurative terms prompts an interrogation of the current emphasis on “crisis” in global debates about migration. Rather than conceptualize refugees as harbingers of emergency, humanitarian subjects, or a singular figure of vulnerability or threat, a critical refugee studies approach recognizes those making precarious crossings as bearers and makers of knowledge and as people “who possess and enact their *own* politics.”¹⁵ In Saida Hod i ’s words, “the refugee” is not simply the “shallow figure” or “test case” of Agamben’s *homo sacer* but “a rich tapestry of complex human experience.”¹⁶ This perspective is fundamental for questioning the prevalence of crisis and emergency labels to describe precarious mobilities. In recognizing how those labels construct an *emergency imaginary of foreignness*, my approach is aligned with Craig Calhoun’s discussion of the emergency imaginary that shapes humanitarianism through a fixation on seeming suddenness and unforeseeability; in considering how such ideas are invoked more broadly in relation to foreignness, I focus on how they perpetuate racialized ideas of belonging.¹⁷

A growing body of migration scholarship critiques politicized invocations of crisis in North America, Australia, and Europe.¹⁸ Yet the often default use of such terms by politicians, journalists, humanitarian workers, activists, and scholars risks reifying the association between precarious mobilities and notions of threat, vulnerability, and unknowable outsidership. Debates about these labels often argue for one kind of crisis or another—refugee, border, humanitarian, institutional—revealing emergency to be a concept deployed in multiple overlapping, sometimes contradictory, and often problematic senses. In migrant advocacy, migrant-centered scholarship, and xenophobic campaigns alike, “crisis” and “emergency” get treated as inherent attributes of mobility or borders, or fixed points of reference.

Instead, these labels refer to what are in fact shifting dynamics produced by an apparatus itself in flux, and they rarely account for how migrants themselves describe their experiences. Likewise, the harms they pose to people on the move emerge through the constant production of “emergency” via a changing set of discourses, policies, and practices. These consequences exceed temporal bounds and

cross political administrations. Increasingly, they unfold in a context in which asylum itself is threatened, as countries around the world rely on prison-like camps and detention centers, or build walls to keep out people who would seek protection within their borders, or attempt to ship asylum seekers elsewhere for processing.¹⁹

Rather than presume crisis or emergency to be inherent qualities or conditions of migration, this book adopts a critical refugee studies approach to show how the emergency apparatus itself reshapes asylum and reception regimes, how a disregard for colonial histories enables these precarious realities, and how migrant testimonies invite audiences to witness precarious mobilities beyond the emergency imaginary that often defines them. In bringing this lens to bear on Mediterranean migration, and guided by the testimonies of people whose transit holds them at the margins of Europe, I posit the Mediterranean as a key site where global questions of refugeeness are being negotiated in relation to race and collective memory. In doing so, I also expand the transnational Italian studies focus on the place of migration in formations of Italian identity to encompass this reckoning with race, precarity, and refugeeness. Invocations of emergency in the Afro-European borderzone, I argue, recall and reproduce the colonial emergency, or what Frantz Fanon describes as a world “cut in two” along the lines created by the “rule of oppression.”²⁰ In tracing the operations of the emergency apparatus as imperial formations that enable Europe to continue to control African movements and futures, this book situates Mediterranean migrations in relation to Black Europe and border imperialism to advance recognition of migrant justice and racial justice as inextricably linked.

EUROPE’S “REFUGEE CRISIS”

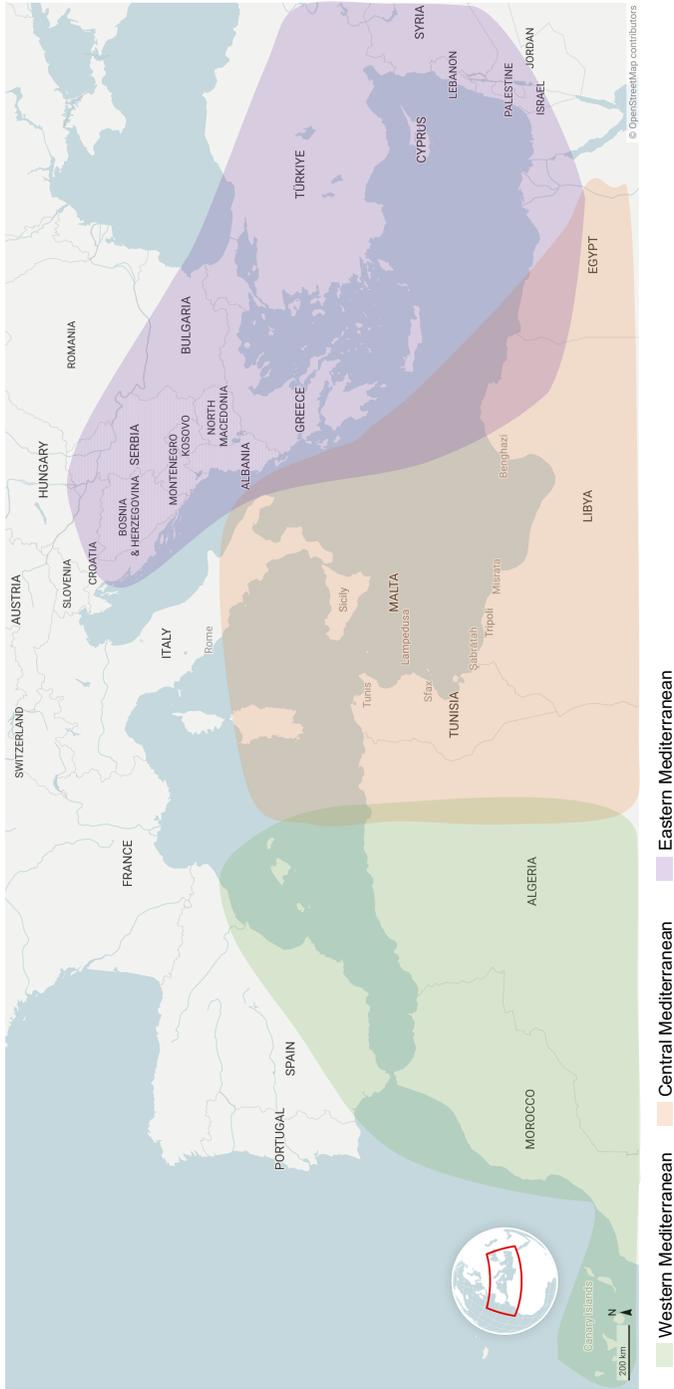
The year 2015 is widely recognized as a watershed year for migration to Europe, marked by the April 18 shipwreck near the Italian island of Lampedusa in which as many as eleven hundred people died, and by the September 2 death of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach. But in Italy, 2014 had already made its mark as a year of *emergenza*. When arrivals by sea from Libya and Tunisia increased fourfold between 2013 and 2014, Italian leaders and publics invoked “*emergenza*” to question the capacity of Italian systems to accommodate so many people, as well as how the presence of so many newcomers might impact Italian society. Following the now infamous October 3, 2013, wreck near Lampedusa in which at least 368 people lost their lives, Italy implemented the military-humanitarian mission *Mare Nostrum* (“Our Sea”) that prioritized rescue at sea through most of 2014. Authorities regulated non-European foreigners’ movements in new ways, with increased biometric surveillance and by modifying the reception system that houses people while their asylum claims are processed.²¹

European Union (EU) leaders formally recognized a migration “crisis” through multiple emergency measures from 2014 until March 6, 2019, when they declared

the crisis over.²² Yet in the years since, as arrivals by boat and by foot have continued, and given a backlog of asylum cases, emergency policies and rhetoric have remained at the fore. Mediterranean crossings have a long history, and it's now well established that people undertake precarious journeys only when safer legal routes are closed to them.²³ As Italy has increasingly limited visas and policed mobility, dangerous sea crossings have become a primary means of reaching Europe. Authorities insist, however, that precarious migration is itself the problem and frequently frame the post-2014 period as a crisis of numbers: between 2014 and 2019, more than three million people reached Europe's borders by boat or on foot. During those same years, more than nineteen thousand people died or went missing at sea—a conservative underestimate (table 1, appendix).²⁴ These losses, which have only continued, underscore how crisis discourses are bolstered by the failures of empathy—of imagination, as Susan Sontag put it—to prompt lasting, substantive change for people on the move.²⁵ Border deaths also raise the question of the (im)possibility of complete witnessing in the context of these crossings, if the true witnesses who could speak to this violence to the fullest extent, to invoke Primo Levi, are those who do not survive it.²⁶

The people behind these tallies include asylum seekers, refugees, and people with and without papers. While dominant crisis discourses in 2015 focused especially on Syrians fleeing conflict and heading to Germany, people undertake lengthy, precarious journeys to Europe from multiple world regions, often in hopes of obtaining asylum, the international protection that would grant them refugee status and legal residency in Europe. They leave Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Congo, Eritrea, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, and a host of other countries and reach Europe's borders by crossing in one of three zones: the Eastern Mediterranean, via Türkiye, Greece, and the Balkan countries; the Western Mediterranean route to Spain, including via the “autonomous communities” of Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands; or by crossing the Sahara and then the Mediterranean Sea, leaving Libya or Tunisia for Italy or Malta (map 2). This Central Mediterranean borderzone is notoriously treacherous; wrecks near Lampedusa and Southern Italian coasts regularly make the news. This route has been rendered more dangerous by political turmoil in North Africa, Libya in particular, and by Europe's abandonment of migrants in transit.²⁷

The spectacle of wrecks maintains emergency imaginaries because it repeats and repeats yet fails to wield real structural or systemic transformation. By repetition I mean, for instance: in February 2023, a boat carrying approximately 180 people hit a shoal near Cutro, on Italy's Calabrian coast. It splintered, sending passengers flailing into the water. The wreck made global headlines, but the ensuing public outcry quieted quickly. Just two months later, another boat carrying more than seven hundred people entered Greek waters, where it was observed by Frontex surveillance and commercial vessels and cited by activists, only to be pulled further out to sea by the Greek coast guard, where it capsized.



MAP 2. Mediterranean crossing zones (approximate). Made by the author with Datawrapper.

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These wrecks and the charged politics of rescue are significant. Yet, as I demonstrate throughout this book, the emergency apparatus operates not only at national borders but well within them. In fact, it was local dynamics that initially raised questions for me about the scope and limits of emergency as a frame for understanding migration. I began tracing the operations of the emergency apparatus in late 2015 as I witnessed how both large cities and small towns responded to the increased presence of Africans who had recently disembarked on Italian shores. That December, my partner and I traveled to visit his family in Campobasso, a city in the southern region of Molise and a place I had grown to know over a decade of such visits. While migration wasn't new in Campobasso, the recent arrival of hundreds of newcomers prompted concern among locals. I visited a large tent housing asylum seekers outside a local soup kitchen—an emergency response to increased arrivals. Until then, nearly all the news coverage I had seen showed images of people in boats, at crowded centers in Lampedusa, or on Greek islands, and scholarly work reflected this emphasis on sites of initial contact or arrival. At this tent run by Catholic organization Caritas, though, I was struck by the scope of the “emergency,” the desperation of the Italian response, and how it seemed bound to deeply affect both migrants and local communities.

It was there, too, that I first began to question the multiple and vague uses of the term *emergency*, or *emergenza*. The provisional tent with its cots and generators was absolutely an urgent situation, but locals were quick to critique the set-up. It wasn't sustainable, and arrivals were still on the rise – arrivals seen, in general, as a rupture or disruption of normal, everyday Italian life. Rumors circulated about the trouble that loitering migrants might cause. There and throughout Italy, the growing presence of nonwhite, non-European foreigners revealed familiar places to be “borderscapes,” or sites of inclusion, exclusion, possibility, and friction.²⁸ When I returned the following summer, the “*emergenza immigrazione*” dominated local and national news, marking not only boat arrivals but circumstances throughout the country.

In EU border countries, like along the US-Mexico border, emergency management has meant that migrants seeking protection must navigate legal systems in flux and social environments shaped by fear and suspicion. In Italy, asylum seekers bide their time in reception centers while awaiting a decision. As is increasingly true across global north asylum systems, this process often takes two years or longer. Alternatively, would-be asylum seekers attempt to transit on and reach another city or country where their chances might be better. Greece's emergency response to arrivals from Türkiye has included isolated and increasingly militarized island and inland camps and regular pushbacks of boats attempting to reach safety. Spain continues to police migration via its colonial holdings in the Canary Islands and enclaves Melilla and Ceuta in Morocco. From Bosnia to France, European countries have seen an expansion of informal settlements (camps and squats) as people transit between cities and as they wait.

Emergency produces precarity, with Europe as both destination and site of extreme uncertainty. Foreigners in legal and social limbo remain a key source of labor for European economies, including women in domestic positions or people working the harvest, as well as people in a larger set of temporary, uncontracted jobs (“There is no capitalism without migration,” Sandro Mezzadra reminds us).²⁹ In addition to precarious labor, migration “emergencies” position newcomers in social and political vulnerability that, to invoke Judith Butler, leaves people “differentially exposed to injury, violence and death”³⁰ and holds newcomers in transit, in positions from which they are largely unable to advocate for themselves.

Emergency is also a term thick with meanings, and it bears emphasizing early on that the precarity prompted and maintained by the emergency apparatus intersects with circumstances and conditions that people have long recognized on their own terms as emergency or the related notion of catastrophe. As Black studies scholars and writers have elaborated, Black life unfolds in the emergency conditions wrought by colonialism, enslavement, and ongoing oppression. “I am washed in this emergency,” writes Dionne Brand in *The Blue Clerk*, meditating on the constant state of risk she occupies as a Black woman living within the operations of racial capitalism: “I wake up in emergency.”³¹ Fred Moten describes this state as one of fugitivity—of constant flight, instability, desire, including the desire to be free.³² James Baldwin reflects on how this “terror” radically shapes what it means, for him, to bear witness as a Black man writing about racialized violence. In *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (from which I quote in one of this book’s epigraphs), he states, “My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness.” In this “stammering,” he grapples with the impossibility of remembering the terror of the past—“one blots it out.” At the same time, he sees confronting the terror of always-impending violence, of erasure, “not the terror of death . . . but of being destroyed,” as a crucial way to locate hope for change.³³ He bears witness to how this emergency shapes Black life in the US—a recognition, I want to suggest, that we must also bring to bear in understanding how race and refugeeness intersect today in Europe. In my focus on Africa-Europe migrations, this emergency is central. It speaks to how the emergency apparatus of migration exploits conditions already understood as perpetual crises, and how it renders some lives especially precarious, especially disposable. I trace the contours of the emergency apparatus in ways shaped by my implication in and struggles with structures of racial capitalism as a white US citizen,³⁴ and I engage the work of Black studies scholars who address emergency from both lived and studied experience.³⁵

These perspectives illuminate the emergency apparatus—from the securitization of borders to the broader treatment of “irregular” migration as a threat—as a set of racializing processes that structure the colonial present. With “colonial present,” I have in mind in particular Derek Gregory’s use of this phrase to signal “the constellations of power, knowledge, and geography that . . . continue to colonize lives all over the world”³⁶ and his insistence that the colonial present is

built not only through geopolitics and economics but via “mundane cultural forms and cultural practices that mark other people as irredeemably ‘Other.’”³⁷ Gregory developed this concept in the context of post-9/11 Western imperialism in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq, all countries from which people continue to flee and make their way to Europe. Coloniality operates in distinct ways across all these contexts; at the same time, by focusing on how coloniality shapes the present, we can recognize how, across these places and communities, questions of rights and belonging, and even the borders of the human, are articulated not only through historical echoes, but through an ongoing policing of mobilities that reproduces longstanding power differentials. Examining Italy’s colonial present via the Black Mediterranean reveals how the emergency apparatus relies on the racial logics that built Europe through anti-Black violence and the exclusion and subjugation of people deemed “other.”

That is, emergency framings of migration enact racial hierarchies and delineate Europe’s borders as racial borders.³⁸ In the Italian popular imaginary, Black migrants are presumed to be “economic migrants” attempting to steal places that belong to those more deserving of humanitarian protection and Italian residency. These ideas of crisis, deservingness, and refugeeness reflect a white European gaze, recalling Fanon on the violence of colonial projection in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without . . . I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare.”³⁹ In contemporary Italy, images of risk, danger, and crisis are projected onto the bodies and lives of migrants who are “laid bare” and overdetermined as an anonymous mass of strangers yet are in fact a heterogeneous group of people with no established platform for bearing witness to their experiences on their own terms.

MOBILITY AND MEMORY IN ITALY AND THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

As emergency imaginaries orient public and political attention around an endless present, they obscure how multiple mobilities have shaped Italian society, including historical movements within, out of, and to the country, and the notions of race that accompany them.⁴⁰ These movements are often presented in linear terms, including Italy’s shift in status from a country of emigration to a net destination country, with more arrivals than departures beginning in the late 1970s. While narratives that emphasize this shift recognize significant trends, they tend to elide the extent to which mobility and ideas of race have long shaped modern Italy.⁴¹ For instance, beginning in the late nineteenth century and expanded under Fascism, the country’s colonial campaigns sent thousands of Italians to the Horn of Africa and Libya, displaced indigenous populations there, and eventually prompted the arrival in Italy of students and political appointees from the colonies. Romani and Sinti communities

in Italy have dealt with exclusion and discrimination since before the country's 1861 Unification. The 1938 Racial Laws institutionalized antisemitism and restricted interracial marriage.⁴² The postwar period saw ongoing internal and international movements, including as Italians went abroad or returned; as Southerners moved north for jobs in a growing industrial sector, confronting racial stereotypes as they moved; and during decolonization, as the residents of former colonies moved to Europe.⁴³ Today, internal rural-to-urban migration continues, as do high rates of emigration of young Italians abroad for employment.

At the same time, compared to Northern Europe, Italy's status as an immigrant destination and the racial and religious diversity that brings are still relatively new phenomena, and this affects the reception of those crossing the Mediterranean today. In many smaller Italian towns, 2014 marked the arrival of the first Black residents. (Note that I am using "resident" to indicate someone who lives in a place, regardless of legal status.) Newcomers represent a diversity of backgrounds, as well as a range of needs and expectations. They navigate systems and communities that are grappling with the changes migration brings within a society that treats it as a novelty and that has largely not reckoned with longer histories of colonialism and mobility entangled in today's border crossings.

To elucidate the coloniality of the emergency apparatus and how it shapes and is shaped by acts of witnessing, this book engages the Black Mediterranean as both analytical framework and political praxis.⁴⁴ The Black Mediterranean builds on the Black radical tradition to center colonialism and racial politics in the histories, cultures, and mobilities of the Mediterranean region. Contemporary precarious migration marks the centrality of the Black Mediterranean—and its erasure from official histories—to the continual formation of Europe and its borderscapes.⁴⁵

Contexts deemed "border crises" may seem to represent the key "contact zones" of the twenty-first century. Yet a Black Mediterranean analytic reveals that the contemporary Afro-European borderzone only *appears* to fit Mary Louise Pratt's description of historical contact zones as "spaces where disparate cultures meet, grapple with each other." The emergency apparatus enables the circulation of this myth of the "disparate" and of migration as constituting an encounter between "peoples geographically and historically separated."⁴⁶ In fact, Mediterranean studies scholars have long defined the region not by how it separates different communities and cultures but as a space of ongoing trade, encounter, conflict, exchange, and imagination.⁴⁷ And as I show throughout this book, those occupying Italy's legal and social margins often express a keen sense of familiarity with Europe and with Italian culture. Instead, migrants and Italians of African descent are widely perceived as strangers who could never possibly be or become Italian, and who have no connection to Italian history or culture—an idea that emergency imaginaries of foreignness uphold. Discourses of emergency obscure how, in fact, contemporary mobilities extend longer histories of diaspora and relations between African and European communities.

Black Mediterranean perspectives also underscore Italy's fraught relationship with Southernness, via its own South and its position as a Southern European nation. As Gramsci's Southern Question (*questione meridionale*) articulates, debates about how to unify the country relied on racist stereotypes of Southerners as backward and behind, and Northerners as more industrial and advanced. Perceived differences between North and South concerned not only territorial Italy, but its position "between" Africa and Europe in terms of both geography and (perceived) development.⁴⁸ Italy's birth as a nation coincided with the expansion of European colonialism, and the newly unified country sought to assert its position through campaigns that could shift balances of power toward the Mediterranean—in particular in the Horn of Africa and North Africa (Libya).⁴⁹ Emergency rule was implemented repeatedly, both within the nation—for instance, in Sicily to quell unrest among workers known as the Fasci Siciliani in the 1890s—and in the colonies, including when Italian forces consolidated powers in Cyrenaica (Libya) by imprisoning people from rural and nomadic communities in concentration camps and cutting off key supply routes.⁵⁰ This in turn shaped public perceptions of those governed—Southern Italians or African colonial subjects—as disorderly and threatening. Notions of race and foreignness were reified in mainstream Italian culture through dehumanizing colonial propaganda, including music, film, and advertising that shaped dominant narratives about Africa, Italy, and Italy's "others."⁵¹

A Black Mediterranean analytic thus sheds light on the emergency management of borders and belonging as a historical practice applied in new ways in the post-Cold War securitization of migration.⁵² Indeed, since the 1980s, as Italy has grappled with its position as a gatekeeper for Fortress Europe, the country has largely handled fluctuating arrivals through emergency governance (table 2, appendix). The year 1990 saw a paradigm shift in Italy's approach to migration, including the country's first comprehensive immigration legislation, the Martelli Law, and Italy's signing of the EU's Schengen agreement. Schengen guarantees freedom of movement between EU member states for European citizens and legal residents; at the same time, it marks the tightening and securitizing of external borders.⁵³ The Martelli Law expanded the geographical scope of Italy's asylum adjudication so that non-Europeans could seek protection there, while also regulating the movements of non-Europeans more broadly through a series of visa stipulations. Like other major immigration legislation that followed, Martelli was instituted "under emergency conditions."⁵⁴ In 1991, thousands of people fleeing persecution in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia made their way to Italy. The August 8, 1991, arrival by boat of twenty thousand Albanians fleeing regime collapse affirmed widespread fears that equated precarious migration with invasion. Images of people leaping off the crowded *Vlora* ship as it reached the port of Bari still circulate in media as representative of so-called *emergenze immigrazione*.⁵⁵

In line with trends across the global north, the post-1990 period is marked by the conflation of migration, security, and “crisis.” As Mezzadra and Neilson put it, “‘migration management’ has become a kind of synonym for ‘crisis management.’”⁵⁶ Since the 1990s, lawmakers have on the one hand attempted to manage legalized migration “flows” through country-based quotas and periodic amnesty for undocumented migrants. On the other hand, they have repeatedly addressed “irregular” migration through emergency declarations that change how arriving migrants are processed and limit their options for accessing aid and claiming asylum.⁵⁷ In fact, from 2013 to 2024, the country saw seven different governments, including left- and right-wing leadership, each of which implemented emergency legislation and relied on emergency discourse to govern migration.

Emergency declarations open access to funding and aid and enable swift action, but they also serve as political tools. In Italy, policies issued under a state of emergency or *in via d’urgenza* (“urgently”) procure immediate funding for reception and asylum procedures, but they do not offer a long-term vision for migrant or community well-being—let alone an idea that “Italian communities” might be understood as including migrants and their children. Newcomers consistently represent a diverse and changing set of countries of origin⁵⁸ and include parents, children, cousins, manual laborers, artists, political organizers, veterans, teachers, university students, ambulant vendors, farmers, and tradespeople. A majority are men in their teens and twenties, and in light of the regular arrivals of people from West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel, the image of the young Black male migrant dominates Italian media coverage of migration.⁵⁹

This is the case because emergency imaginaries are shaped by a pervasive “forgetting” of the violent realities of Italian colonial campaigns, in particular those in Libya and the Horn of Africa. This “colonial aphasia,” as Ann Stoler terms these forms of displaced colonial memory, manifests in the widely held belief that Italian colonialism was a brief and finite endeavor, encapsulated in the common phrase *italiani brava gente*, or “good Italians.”⁶⁰ This phrase suggests that Italian colonizers weren’t as bad as, say, the British or the French. This idea stems in part from what is seen as an anticlimactic ending to colonial rule with World War II, when Italy lost its colonies to Allied forces, and from associations of colonialism with the twenty-year Fascist period only.⁶¹ “*Italiani brava gente*” discourse downplays the actual length and violence of colonial campaigns, and how they molded and furthered discourses of nationalism and “the other.”⁶² This phrase continues to circulate, even among younger generations, despite movements to correct the narrative. Media coverage of migrants as constituting an *emergenza* perpetuates this aphasia, with little acknowledgment of the histories linking Italians to migrants from former colonies in the Horn of Africa and to the role of Libya, also a former colony, as a key point of departure, detention, and struggle for those who cross the sea.

Processes of racialization in Italy are part of larger “racializing assemblages”⁶³ that exceed a single nation: they were applied across Europe to justify territorial expansion and exclusionary citizenship, and they manifest today in violent bordering practices and racist anti-immigrant sentiment that positions African migrants and people of color to feel they are “in but not of Europe,” to borrow from Stuart Hall.⁶⁴ Precarious Mediterranean migration and related testimonies inscribe Italian spaces not with the forgotten past but with these ongoing entanglements, that is, history as life unfolding, in the sense Baldwin describes: “History, I contend, is the present—we, with every breath we take, every move we make, *are* History.”⁶⁵

Emergency imaginaries also rely on gender stereotypes, with African men often presumed by European publics—and by border and asylum officials—to be economic migrants, and women presumed to be sex workers or the victims of sex trafficking. Although women consistently comprise less than 15 percent of people crossing the Central Mediterranean, their representation in or erasure from media coverage of precarious migration influences public notions of deservingness, or who is seen as meriting legal protection or social belonging.⁶⁶ A number of organizations and activists work to challenge these stereotypes, but sexualized language about black bodies still appears in mainstream cinema and television and can be traced back to the colonial racial logics that marked the bodies of colonized women as “dangerous.”⁶⁷ These discourses mark the Black Mediterranean as a site where colonialism’s *longue durée* shapes lives through widespread disregard for its influence.

Emergency imaginaries of foreignness construct “imagined communities” through an ahistorical view of belonging that enables the emergency apparatus to displace the already displaced.⁶⁸ The normalization of Italy’s emergency imaginary means that debates about immigration policy and border governance unfold almost exclusively within the parameters dictated by emergency thinking.⁶⁹ In turn, the repeated, seemingly endless *emergenze* *immigrazione* directly concern understandings of who deserves to move to and through Italian spaces or to have the chance to become Italian, and by extension, who can be European.

THE EMERGENCY APPARATUS: A CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES APPROACH TO “CRISIS”

As the Italian case shows, the emergency apparatus of migration is a definitive twenty-first century network of relations, an “ensemble” that, via Foucault’s notion of *dispositif*, “consist[s] of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid.”⁷⁰

Emergency reception policies and border surveillance practices, crisis discourses, media representations of suffering and vulnerability, detention and reception centers and improvised camps, and the routines and challenges of daily life

in borderzones operate in relation to one another to produce what is recognized as a migration crisis. These “emergencies” are mediated at multiple scales. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) maintains a web portal explicitly called “emergencies” which, during the writing of this book, has consistently included from eight to fifteen situations around the globe, including in Europe—situations of extreme urgency where emergency response mechanisms offer some relief but also risk decontextualizing and spectacularizing people’s suffering.⁷¹ Dynamics in Europe are echoed in Australia’s island detention system and at the US-Mexico border, which media and politicians alternately portray as a humanitarian emergency, a drug trafficking crisis, an immigrant invasion, and a crisis of institutions.⁷² In migration contexts, as in emergency-oriented governance concerning climate change or economic collapse, emergency policies and discourses radically alter collective imaginations about past, present, and future.⁷³ The “crises” that emerge through these ensembles shift and morph in relation to particular sites and subjects, “appear[ing] at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.”⁷⁴ That is, the emergency apparatus of migration is a “system of relations” that shapes how we conceptualize mobility and people on the move.

The crisis discourses that dominate Western imaginaries focus on transit from global south to global north. These regional designations are problematic; I use them here to indicate movements between former colonies and colonizing powers, and to trouble the homogenizing force of north/south terms. Epitomizing these problematics, emergency and crisis framings of migration in Europe, Australia, and the United States entirely disregard the fact that a significant majority of the world’s displaced people in fact reside in the global south and either remain within a country or move to a neighboring nation. Nor are walls and violent bordering only the purview of the West. Yet the border crossings that have come to define debates about immigration policy and migrant rights in the twenty-first century overwhelmingly concern the movement of people between former colonies and former colonizing powers.

At this broad level, then, the emergency apparatus reifies Eurocentric notions of development and belonging, and the racial hierarchies those notions affirm. In turn, as *emergency* has become the standard mode of response for these mobilities, it has defined the challenges that asylum seekers confront in the twenty-first century. In addition to putting border crossers’ lives at greater risk and bolstering xenophobia, the emergency apparatus furthers discourses that purport to support refugees yet in fact consistently undermine notions and practices of protection, calling into question the legitimacy of the refugee in legal and cultural terms, and upending how rights and protections are recognized.

Operating as an apparatus, emergency is anything but static, and I refer to it as “in transit” to indicate multiple kinds of movement. First, Europe’s “crisis” is a site of transit migration. Not only do migrants often reach Europe after crossing

multiple borders, but Southern European nations then often function as transit countries that people hope to pass through en route to a country where they already speak the language or have heard reception conditions are better.⁷⁵ EU policy renders this transit especially difficult. Through 2024, the Dublin Regulation (“Dublin III”) required migrants to apply for asylum in the country where they first enter the EU (and the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in April 2024, does not afford migrants any additional autonomy).⁷⁶ In practice, this has meant that Italy, Greece, Malta, and Spain have faced what media and politicians highlight as a particular burden to process a majority of applications. This is one reason that the phrase “refugee crisis” calls to mind images of lines of migrants disembarking in Lampedusa, or overcrowded Greek camps; Southern, external borders are seen as *the* sites of emergency.

For these border crossers, arrival means ongoing transit that involves both enforced precarity and strategic decision-making. This is akin to how Jodi Byrd defines transit in the context of settler colonialism and indigenous genocide: “to exist liminally in the ungrievable spaces of suspicion and unintelligibility” and also, importantly, as “active presence in a world of relational movements and countermovements.”⁷⁷ In this sense, transit is a crucial mode within the colonial present, and a focus on transit recognizes the agency expressed by people on the move and in solidarity efforts.

At the same time, *transit* here can also be understood as a form of fugitivity—of flight, escape, the search for refuge, and movement toward an uncertain future. Semantically, fugitivity and refugeeness are linked as concepts that center flight—links Moten also highlights in describing fugitivity as an “essential” force of Black life,⁷⁸ naming fugitivity as a state of “stolen breath, stolen life” and as revealing a world of possibilities: “What if being-fugitive bears the possibility of a recalibration of the human, a reopening of, rather than an opening to, the not open?” Testimonies in transit, as forms of fugitive witnessing, create and signal some of these possibilities.⁷⁹

Emergency is also in transit across differing and oppositional rhetorics. As I emphasize above, invocations of crisis and emergency describe migration alternately as a problem of sovereignty, solidarity, security, or in Europe, as Vicki Squire has discussed, “European values.”⁸⁰ This is especially salient in visual media, which perform distinct forms of “image operations” that shape ideas about migration as they circulate, as Krista Lynes, Tyler Morgenstern, and Ian Alan Paul posit.⁸¹ Fear-mongering discourses that treat migration as a threat have oriented European public and political debate not around improving reception and protection systems, but around the gendered, racialized suspicion that most of those crossing must not be “real refugees” but are in fact “economic migrants.” Per Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, those crossing have a right to claim asylum. Yet in practice, they are othered and adjudicated—informally and now also formally—before they have a chance to testify before officials.

While governments regularly declare states of emergency in response to shifts in border crossing, not all such declarations function equally. A case in point: just over five years after the Campidoglio protest, Italy declared a state of emergency for Ukrainians fleeing Russia's early 2022 invasion of their country. While in principle the declaration tapped the same mechanisms and institutions used to manage Mediterranean crossing, the rhetoric surrounding Ukrainian flight had a wholly distinct tenor, including in decrees that recognized Italy's already large Ukrainian community and emphasized that Italian reception structures would expand to accommodate Ukrainians "regardless of whether they had filed a claim for international protection"—a stipulation unheard of for those arriving by sea.⁸² The welcome and necessary protections extended to Ukrainians thus also signaled a different kind of hospitality and set of expectations about those approaching Italy from Eastern Europe, rather than Africa.

In yet another kind of transit, these emergency imaginaries feed political shifts. Over the last decade, they have bolstered the election of populist leaders running on anti-immigration platforms. They also legitimize the militarization of Fortress Europe, which polices mobilities in the Mediterranean, within Europe, and beyond it.⁸³ These measures include border walls (more than doubled in number since 2015), pushbacks at sea, and agreements with third countries including Türkiye, Libya, and Albania to detain people attempting to reach Europe. Italian authorities have criminalized migration and rescue, including, since 2018, by periodically preventing NGO-operated vessels from disembarking rescued migrants at Italian ports—a practice that violates international agreements and effectively holds migrants captive at sea.⁸⁴ The emergency apparatus thus operates on people in transit to Europe and through externalization measures that move in the opposite direction, carrying Europe's borders into other countries. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 3, it also shapes the possibilities and limits of *accoglienza*, or reception, within a country.

Contemporary precarious migration to Europe has spurred a large body of research on violent border policies, racialized responses to migrant arrivals, the (post)coloniality of Mediterranean migrations, and the mediation of these issues across multiple outlets and platforms.⁸⁵ This work sheds light on the necropolitical, gendered, racialized, and Islamophobic realities of migration in Europe. In the Italian context, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship engages post-colonial perspectives, positing questions of migration, race, and racial capitalism as central to Italian history and culture, and recognizing the constancy of Italian discourses of *emergenza*.⁸⁶ Collectively, this scholarship underscores the urgency of "undoing border imperialism," as Walia contends, by recognizing, challenging, and dismantling the material and imagined borders that "keep us separated from one another."⁸⁷

This work requires that we interrogate dominant narratives and discursive framings that enable violence to continue. Yet it remains challenging to talk about

contemporary migration without invoking “crisis,” a convenient and widely used point of reference and one that many scholars adopt, even in scare quotes as I have done here, to signal a particular period of migration or conditions of extreme urgency. If we are to move beyond the ready othering of people in transit and the violence that borders provoke, then scholars, journalists, activists, politicians, and humanitarian workers must find ways to articulate migration beyond terms that reify spectacle and uphold emergency imaginaries of foreignness. In conceptualizing the emergency apparatus, this book attempts to move us forward in responding to this challenge.

A critical refugee studies approach to the emergency apparatus of migration builds on the premise that people on the move are knowledge producers who make meaning and write history through and despite circumstances of risk, uncertainty, fleetingness, and fugitivity. Refugees, undocumented migrants, and displaced people more broadly both risk and require anonymity, and their movements trace the limits and violence of the nation-state.⁸⁸ As “a paradigmatic figure of geopolitical critique,”⁸⁹ the refugee “illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change.”⁹⁰ People undertaking precarious journeys are fleeing a series of “crises,” including war, climate change, and economic hardship, only to be treated as if they are the source of disaster. In testimonies, and in creative work that utilizes testimony, they reclaim and resignify their positions in Italy.

This approach also embraces the tensions of terminology as a source of insight. As a term, *emergency* operates within the seemingly contradictory categories of urgency and permanence, describing situations whose initial urgency transforms into a longer-term state of unresolve, as well as circumstances of extreme urgency and unpredictability. Emergency refers to the biopolitics of sovereignty; it is also, following Calhoun, “the primary term for referring to catastrophes, conflicts, and settings for human suffering.” Colloquially, public discourse moves relatively fluidly between the term emergency and these cognates, including crisis.⁹¹ All these terms describe significant large-scale problems of significant consequence. In theory, calling these circumstances a crisis recognizes them as a turning point, via the Greek *krisis*. Emergency, from the Latin *emergere* or *emergens*, instead connotes a bringing to light, or an arising. In its associations with urgency and its shared origins with the emergent, I understand *emergency* to suggest a disruption of what is perceived as normal and, in line with Hall, as marking “a moment of profound rupture . . . an accumulation of contradictions.”⁹² I’m interested in how these emergent properties are revealed through a range of witnessing forms, themselves also emergent. While I refer to *crisis* throughout this book, my specific focus on *emergency* centers emergency response approaches to migration and the related situations that unfold at multiple scales across political, legal, humanitarian, and quotidian contexts.

While etymologically related to *emergency*, *emergenza* does not invoke the same association with “emergence” (“emergence” in Italian is more readily translated

as *emersione* or even *nascita* or *apparizione*, depending on the context). In Italian, *emergenza* frequently refers to institutional failure, and more generally to the simultaneous urgency and interminability of a crisis or disaster situation.⁹³ *Emergenza* has particular associations with polemics about government response to, and responsibility for, the aftermath of a range of crises, circulating in recent memory in connection with *emergenze rifiuti* (garbage crises) in Naples and Rome,⁹⁴ and with the *emergenze* that marked the long aftermath of the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila and the 2023 flooding in Emilia Romagna.⁹⁵ Italy's *emergenza immigrazione* intersects with numerous other issues in a neoliberal "crisis Italy" and, like its other emergencies, disregards the histories bound up in these multiple and entangled issues.⁹⁶ The cultural and historical specificity of *emergenza* informs my understanding of emergency as itself a concept constantly in transit and in translation.

The word *refugee* is especially contentious in the Afro-European borderzone, where public discourses of crisis reinforce a problematic binary between "real refugees" and "undeserving economic migrants." While some scholars and activists understandably use "refugee" for anyone who has fled their home country, here I adopt the broader umbrella term "migrant" in order to address mobility both within and outside of legal frameworks.⁹⁷ The protagonists of *Emergency in Transit* are border crossers, newcomers, people in transit, activists, demonstrators, camp residents, workers, authors, and narrators. Throughout the book, I use the terms with which they described their movements, spaces, and relationships, and when relevant to a specific situation, I refer to legal status—for example, "asylum seeker" or "refugee."

TESTIMONY AS METHOD

In this book I move between multiple witnessing accounts, including my own, to elaborate the emergency apparatus and new or alternative understandings of mobility and belonging that emerge in relation to it. Recalling Mezzadra and Neilson's "border as method" approach to the border "not only as a research 'object' but also as an 'epistemic' angle,"⁹⁸ I engage published life narratives and also participate in the production of testimony through what I term "testimony as method," through oral history and ethnographic research in which I bore witness as interviewer, listener, and observer. As I elaborate here, this approach encompasses an understanding of witnessing as a genre of encounter—one bears witness before a real or imagined audience—and testimony as the "text" that emerges from that encounter. My discussion is significantly informed by research I conducted in 2017–2019, years that saw critical shifts in policy and discourse, including the expansion of the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding, the rise of right-wing populist leaders and their emphasis on "emergenza," and the criminalization of migration and humanitarian aid. In subsequent research, I have seen the corresponding dynamics of transit and precarity become only further exacerbated.

Emergency in Transit moves from the premise that our colonial present is shaped in part by the failures of empathy. That is, my focus on witnessing acts is not an appeal to empathy; the seemingly endless deaths in global north borderzones are themselves a stark lesson in the limits of empathy. In this context, some kinds of witnessing power the emergency apparatus, for instance when the state memorializes deaths to control broader narratives of migration, as I discuss in chapter 1. Other kinds of witnessing, including the migrant-centered literary and multimedia works I discuss throughout the book, imagine beyond emergency. In focusing especially on migrant testimonials, I consider how narrators transact with (potential) audiences. While trauma is absolutely relevant, in line with narrative scholars Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel, I do not limit my engagement to representations of trauma.⁹⁹ Here I understand testimony as an account that bears witness to lived or observed experiences of struggle, suffering, or transformation.

Testimony is critical to the operations of emergency for at least two reasons: First, testimony is *the* critical genre for asylum seekers, whose potential legal recognition as refugees hinges on the account they give of why they had to flee their home country. In other words, refugee status determination is largely a narrative problem, dependent on establishing a “well-founded fear” of persecution, per UNHCR protocols. The burden of proof, though, generally rests with the asylum seeker: to furnish evidence and, crucially, to tell the story of their fear, persecution, and escape in ways that are recognizable to asylum officials.¹⁰⁰ How asylum seekers tell their story—what they include or omit, what they name or emphasize—influences asylum officials’ assessment of whether someone’s fear is well founded. This notion of deservingness operates outside of asylum courts as well, as discourses of emergency center the economic migrant, widely viewed as “undeserving” of protection or legal residency. Carried out amid the absence of individual testimony, this public adjudication is a vehicle for the “overdetermination”¹⁰¹ that racializes people in transit and protection processes.

Second, emergency itself depends on acts of witnessing. Emergency, like crisis, is in one sense “an observation that produces meaning.”¹⁰² How circumstances come to be marked as emergency, and the questions we can ask about them, depend on that initial observation, or witnessing moment. Emergency responses depend on witnessing as a real possibility: to make known what is happening in circumstances of flux requires ongoing transactions of testifying and listening, or bearing and becoming witness. Witnessing is neither inherently “good” nor always possible. Witnessing can reveal or obscure particular experiences, spotlighting or censoring details. States of emergency and related discourses simultaneously prompt acts of witnessing and raise questions about the “tellability” of certain experiences, where tellability refers to the possibilities and limits for representing those experiences in narrative form.¹⁰³ Through acts of witnessing and the narrative and discursive questions to which they call attention, *emergency*, initially an observation, becomes a narrative frame that enables and engages testimonial

narratives. Processes of witnessing are linked to the politics of visibility: whose testimony emerges and how it circulates are crucial for eliciting public and political responses to actual need, for the writing of history, and for imagining alternative futures.

The designation of emergency is managed through a range of testimonial forms, including direct witnessing acts, as in eye-witness journalistic accounts or migrant-authored memoirs; and secondary witnessing such as news coverage with interview clips, works of literature where narrators report the testimony of others, or scholarship that reproduces witnessing texts, as I do here. Testimony is also crucial for humanitarian workers who assess risk. For example, UNHCR trains responders on specific interview processes for crisis situations. NGOs regularly feature migrant testimony in reports and press releases about border violence or detention. Bureaucratic records constitute yet another form of witnessing texts. Italian reception center managers submit monthly reports documenting life in the center; in this sense, they regularly testify to the functioning of emergency response. These texts represent distinct and critical encounters through which the emergency apparatus takes shape, including both acts of witnessing that support emergency imaginaries, as well as testimonies that reveal their limits and omissions.

Instances of witnessing abound, but these “texts” are often excerpted without extensive engagement¹⁰⁴ or are used in ways that reify crisis framings. In cultural texts, media coverage, and political debate, uses of testimony often align with “available narratives” of migration—those already dominant in discourse—and reproduce border spectacle or underscore suffering and vulnerability.¹⁰⁵ The globally celebrated film *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, dir. Gianfranco Rosi, 2016), for instance, incorporates the witnessing of a Sicilian child, of Nigerian migrants, and of surveillance technology. While the account of Lampedusa is moving, the film ultimately positions viewers to see migration via the lenses of surveillance and anonymized migrant suffering. Likewise, in media and political discourse, spectacle abounds. Meanwhile, in general, migrants’ own witnessing possibilities are limited because of the legal and social structures that hold them in limbo, and because the narratives that do circulate overwhelmingly treat migration as an immediate, unforeseen problem. Yet testimony is critical for countering violence and its subsequent erasure from public memory, as we know from the testimony of Holocaust survivors.¹⁰⁶ Narrators bearing witness from within contexts of limbo and extreme uncertainty may struggle to find “adequate witnesses” who receive testimony on its own terms, and they often have to find new forms for their stories—a shift in form, practice, and even language in order to hold the world to account.¹⁰⁷

As a genre of encounter, testimony is an emergent form, taking shape through the transactions of bearing and becoming witness. As such, testimonies are evidentiary and relational: they represent material circumstances, and they do so

through the actual or potential exchange of an account produced for an audience, be it media consumers, readers and viewers, or an individual interviewer. That audience, whether real or imagined, necessarily shapes the testimony itself, in form and content. This witnessing transaction can be understood in rhetorical and ethical terms as an exchange that enlists witnesses in both “an appeal and an oath.”¹⁰⁸ In this sense, testimony is also a political form, one that “*emerges* out of a political context, in response to a particular set of political circumstances and rhetorical conditions.”¹⁰⁹

Testimony’s emergent property inscribes it as a form bound to the state of emergency, recalling Homi Bhabha’s oft-cited statement that “states of emergency are also always sites of *emergence*”—which he observes through a reading of Fanon’s work on resistance from within the colonial state of emergency.¹¹⁰ At the same time, witnessing is also a process for imagining beyond “crisis.” In this sense, in engaging testimonies in transit, I draw on Baldwin’s work on witnessing and Black life, which bridges struggles across the Atlantic, and in which he recognizes witnessing as truth telling and as a gesture toward the future, a practice of being “witness to what I’ve seen and the possibilities that I think I see”¹¹¹ and a site of hope or possibility, however small. As he wrote in a piece protesting the US war in Vietnam and arguing for global racial justice, “I think that mankind can do better than that, and I wish to be a witness to this small and stubborn possibility.”¹¹² To witness beyond crisis logics, then, is to create and communicate modes for understanding movement outside dominant framings, and also to make possible the “small and stubborn possibility” of change.

This is not to suggest that testimony is necessarily on the side of the oppressed. Testimonies can be deployed by those in power to maintain dominant narratives and are fraught, even in humanitarian contexts where individual testimonies are used to “mak[e] individuals ‘save-able’ or ‘rescue-able’ by those with the power to do so.”¹¹³ Critically, they are also potentially “mobilized as potent political weapons to wield against agents of a state, political factions, and the threat of national forgetting.”¹¹⁴ Like the Latin American practice of *testimonio*, which has itself been described as “an ‘emergency’ narrative,” testimony can challenge dominant narratives by reorienting narrators and audiences in relation to one another, and to a particular set of dynamics.¹¹⁵

Testimonies produced by those whose voices are most often disregarded in political debate and media coverage constitute an alternative archive and are also processes of seeing and making visible that might unsettle dominant narratives about refugees, rights, and national belonging, including by potentially “troubling” the distance between various groups.¹¹⁶ I focus on testimonies that document underrepresented experiences and that emerge through an impulse not to cultivate empathy across difference but to shift how audiences understand their own position. I see these testimonies as enacting what Baldwin proposes as a key function of witnessing: to prompt a new way of seeing among audiences and to

challenge the ways one is seen by contesting what others accept as normal. “The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal,” writes Baldwin about his experience in a Swiss village, “that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being.”¹¹⁷

The testimonies I consider represent the voices of border crossers, Black Italians, and staff and volunteers working with migrants at reception sites in Italy (not mutually exclusive categories). They include memoir and film that center migrant experiences and “(re)inscrib[e] the presence of racialized communities onto the European landscape,”¹¹⁸ oral history interviews I conducted during ethnographic research, and a set of encounters in urban spaces. To be clear, literary and filmic witnessing and oral history interviews produce distinct kinds of testimony. As Johanna Sellman contends, “literary narratives of migration are often powerful precisely because they operate in a very different kind of truth economy . . . [and engage in] intertextual dialogue with various other *kinds* of narratives about migration, literary and otherwise.”¹¹⁹ In conceptualizing testimony as method, I acknowledge and respond to these differences while also recognizing various testimonial forms in relation, within an expanding “testimonial network.”¹²⁰ In discussing published literature and film together with locally circulating narratives and oral histories, I build on Gillian Whitlock’s discussion of literature and recognize cultural texts as having a particular capacity “to ‘bear’ testimony—not just to duplicate or record events, but to make history available to imaginative acts.”¹²¹ My discussion of multiple textual forms draws extensively on the time I spent with refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and Italian volunteers and staff in Italian cities, reception centers, and camps, during ethnographic research in 2017, 2018, and 2019 in the regions of Lazio, Tuscany, Molise, and Calabria, in follow-up correspondence, and in post-pandemic field visits in 2022.

To that end, oral history shaped this project in significant ways, as a method that reckons explicitly with witnessing as a layered, relational, and interpretive act.¹²² In narrativizing individual and collective memories, oral history can attend to the consequences that nations and nationalisms bear on bodies and communities, especially in its application as “a postcolonial enterprise [that] pays special attention to nationalism’s excesses: the violation of borders, forced migrations, global wars and internal political conflicts that disturb the social order.”¹²³ The Italians I interviewed were, in general, locals who worked or volunteered with migrants in their own hometowns. Reflecting general trends in migration to Italy, the migrants I interviewed had fled situations of conflict, persecution, and extreme precarity in countries throughout the Middle East and Africa. Given my focus on (post) coloniality and the convergence of anti-immigrant and anti-Black sentiment in the last decade, the interviews and exchanges I draw on here are primarily with people who left their home countries in West Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, traversed the Sahara, and spent time in Libya before crossing the sea. Conscious of the ease with which portrayals of suffering can perpetuate the power dynamics

they criticize, I take care to honor their stories and experiences as critical sites of meaning making while also protecting their identities. To this end, I offer different degrees of detail, depending on individual situations. This means I often use pseudonyms, especially for interlocutors who were still in transit when we spoke. These priorities apply to the images I share as well.

Working across multiple languages requires attention to the pressures, risks, possibilities, and inadequacies of translation. In the case of oral histories, I conducted interviews in Italian or English, and though I offered to include an interpreter, few people opted for this. Many of the migrants I interviewed were still awaiting papers yet had lived in Italy long enough to have learned the language and feel confident discussing their experiences in Italian. Transcribing and translating multilingual or second language interviews raises important ethical questions. Here, following oral history principles, I have edited for clarity without imposing my own “corrections” on anyone’s speech. Ethnographers approach this process in multiple ways; here I view staying close to the language people themselves chose to use as a matter of respect and honesty.

This book is of course also my testimony, one that emerged in conversation with the myriad people, spaces, and texts that I discuss in its pages, through my perspective as someone who has come to know Italy and the Italian language through my own foreignness. The difference between the ways my whiteness, my US citizenship, or my marriage to an Italian citizen facilitates my movement across borders and within Italian spaces becomes starkly apparent in encounters with people whose every movement toward and within Europe is treated as suspect. My interrogation of Italian colonial memory as a transnational problem began more than two decades ago, when my initial encounters with literary and artistic work by Italians of African descent prompted me to reconsider what I knew about Italian history and how I experienced Italian spaces. Reading Somali Italian authors Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego on the erasures of history in a place so weighted with historical layers, I also grappled anew with US history and racial politics—with Baldwin observing the civil rights movement from France, with Toni Morrison on how a “real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to [white writers’] sense of Americanness”¹²⁴—recognizing how the specificity of underdiscussed Italian histories not only mirrors but is entangled in broader structures of racial capitalism. My motivation to challenge the pervasive public and political fixation on “crisis” became clearest to me in moments like a conversation I had in 2018 with Yousef (pseudonym), who had reached Italy to seek political asylum after fleeing the Gambia. As we shared mint tea at an improvised camp in Rome, he talked about migration as a creative act, one that is both necessary for reaching safety and that remains full of possibility. “Even if in Italy they ban migration,” he said, “that will not stop migration. Because the world is big. [Migration is] something with you—it must *have* to be in my life and I have to travel in life. . . . No one is useless on this earth.”¹²⁵

In drawing oral history and written, visual, and filmic testimonies into conversation, I move between multiple kinds of borders, recognizing them as virtually ubiquitous “complex social institutions”¹²⁶ and “structures of the imagination.”¹²⁷ In this way, the book transits across multiple sites in which the emergency apparatus operates, via multimedia and ethnographic testimonies that reveal the coloniality of emergency while also proclaiming the emergence of new subjectivities, networks, and mobilities. They point to how, from amid widespread injustice and the failures of empathy, we might reclaim rights and come to see the world—and our own place in it—differently.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The following chapters trace a temporal and geographic arc, following migrants’ paths from sea crossing to longer-term living in Italy. Each main chapter centers a key site of encounter along this journey and presents witnessing texts that emerge at these sites through meetings between migrants and a range of actors and institutions. The appendix contains tables representing arrival and death data, Italy’s emergency-driven migration policies, and types of reception centers.

Part 1, Arrivals, focuses on the production of crisis and the machinery of the emergency apparatus as it immediately affects people crossing the Mediterranean, turning to the sea, the reception center, and the camp. Chapter 1, “Strange Grief and Elegiac Possibilities in the Black Mediterranean,” addresses the centrality of death to the emergency apparatus, and the relationship between emergency, border violence, and grievability. I put state commemorations that use migrant deaths to bolster crisis narratives in conversation with migrant-led elegies that document peril and death at sea. Unlike what I describe as the *strange grief* of the Italian state, these elegies honor lost lives in ways that challenge necropolitical bordering practices. Chapter 2, “Hospitality as Emergency Response,” focuses on Italy’s official *accoglienza* (reception) system. I turn to oral history interviews with reception center residents to show how structural responses to emergency hold recently arrived migrants in *paradoxes of proximity* in which they are encouraged to “integrate” into Italian society and yet are held, geographically and socially, just outside those communities. Following frustrations with official reception or rejected claims, migrants may exit the formal system and make their way to one of the country’s numerous informal settlements. In chapter 3, “Emergent Practices of Hospitality in the Camp,” I draw on observations, interviews, and writing produced at an encampment in Rome to argue that, rather than spaces of exception, these camps should be understood as sites critical to the government’s emergency response strategies, as well as sites of struggle and collective agency, and spaces constructed through multiple acts of witnessing.

In part 2, The Right to Remain, I consider witnessing practices that challenge the sense of an interminable present imposed by crisis framings. These chapters

explore the complex social and historical entanglements that emergency labels obscure, how those entanglements affect migrant realities today, and how border crossers stake a claim in Italian spaces, challenging their exclusion and imagining alternative futures. This second part moves away from immediate contexts of arrival to consider how emergency framings of migration shape lives well beyond those spaces and temporalities. In chapters 4 and 5, I consider these social and historical entanglements in cities. Senegalese street vendors are central figures in Italian imaginaries of foreignness and blackness and in the material history of irregular migration and migrant labor in Italy. Chapter 4, “Street Vendor as Witness,” considers how ambulant vendors’ witnessing reveals the high stakes of their labor and the ways it enacts possibilities for social change. Chapter 5, “Seen and Unseen in the City,” discusses how emergency imaginaries and emergency responses to migration obscure the ways colonialism’s *longue durée* visibly shapes urban spaces within the former colonizing power, taking Italy’s capital city as a key site of encounter. Within contexts deemed “crisis,” I argue, urban space prompts creative acts of witnessing that remap relations between migrants, white Italians, and Italians of African descent. Chapter 6, “Oranges and Riot Gear,” addresses the relationship between precarious mobility and precarious labor, recognizing exploitative agricultural labor in particular as a product of the nexus of globalization, border control, the criminalization of migration, and organized crime. By invisibilizing migrants’ key role in these economies, emergency approaches to bordering fail to disrupt this racialized violence and support an exploitative system that produces further precarity.

The epilogue, “Mobility in an Age of Emergency, or, A Small and Stubborn Possibility,” reflects on how the emergency apparatus of migration thrives on the failures of empathy and intersects with multiple other global issues including climate change, pandemics, racial and social injustice, economic precarity, and conflict—circumstances that necessitate mobility even as they restrict it. As I argue throughout the book, critical and creative uses of witnessing not only address these challenges but invoke alternative modes of encounter, imagination, and action that recognize migration beyond the restrictive bounds of *crisis*.