

PART I

## Arrivals

*Foreigners who, in their own country, are denied the actual exercise of the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian Constitution shall have the right of asylum in the territory of the Italian Republic, in accordance with the conditions set forth by law.*

—ARTICLE 10 OF THE ITALIAN CONSTITUTION



## Strange Grief and Elegiac Possibilities in the Black Mediterranean

At the end of the 2012 documentary short *A chiunque possa interessare (To Whom It May Concern)*, Somali filmmaker and narrator Zakaria Mohamed Ali stands before the boat cemetery in Lampedusa, the small island via which he entered Italy in 2008, which has become an EU migration “hotspot” in the years since, and which he’s come to revisit and record. “When I see the boats,” he says, “I have the feeling of remembering and of not forgetting my migration journey, from when I arrived at Lampedusa.” As he speaks, the camera pans across the remains of rickety wooden vessels brought or washed to shore after carrying migrants from Libyan, Tunisian, or even Egyptian coasts, into international waters and toward this southernmost Italian island (figure 1). “You risk your life, and so many names are still unknown,” Ali continues. “They died at sea and we don’t even know how many they were, whom they left, who was waiting for them in their countries. What were their dreams?” The boats are small, their metal rails rusting, hulls piled atop one another; it’s hard to imagine them upright in the water, filled with dozens of men, women, and children—yet here is a small collection of evidence testifying to the tens of thousands of migrants who attempt this crossing each year. In calling to mind the journeys themselves, the boats speak to both survival and death.

To write about Mediterranean crossing is to write into the spaces of incomplete records, a kind of impossible archive: of risk, of near death, of loss. Counts of lives lost at sea are rough underestimates (table 1, appendix). There is no standardized process for whether or when to recover bodies or vessels, or for determining whose responsibility that should be. Since 2014, of the more than 1.9 million people who have attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, more than thirty thousand have disappeared in a watery grave. We do not know most of their names.



FIGURE 1. Still from *A chiunque possa interessare*. Reproduced with permission from Zakaria Mohamed Ali, Archive of Migrant Memories.

All who cross confront the risk of death, and of anonymous death. Records that cite these migrants and their disappearance as mere numbers write them into “the farce . . . of counting people without being accountable to them.”<sup>1</sup> Ali’s documentary calls attention to the nature of this archive—built of wreckage and of absence, and caught between processes of memory and erasure. The boats on shore suggest survivors; countless vessels lie instead at the bottom of the sea.

The risk of death is central to the emergency apparatus that shapes the lives of people attempting to reach Europe and obtain asylum there. This risk permeates the discourses, policies, and material and imagined experiences of urgency that arise as European authorities regulate the movements and futures of Africans on the move, and in dominant cultural narratives of migration that portray today’s Mediterranean crossings to Europe as an encounter between disparate, unknown strangers with whom Europeans have no cultural or historical ties. In Europe’s crisis narratives, the sea often figures as *the* site of migration, ignoring that these journeys begin thousands of miles south or east of the sea and continue long after survivors reach Italian coasts. Coverage of shipwrecks and rescue operations dominates migration news, and images of packed rubber dinghies and of survivors wrapped in gold thermal blankets often accompany such stories, no matter their specific focus. The migrant boat features prominently, as a vehicle of criminality on the one hand, or a sign of migrant vulnerability on the other—regardless of the multiple other meanings it holds for those on board. Recognizing the real urgency of these crossings is essential, and visibilizing this violence can prompt humanitarian responses. Yet prevalent and repeated media representations of people suffering at Europe’s external borders, via images of Black African men in

particular, feeds a “spectacle of enforcement at ‘the’ border, whereby migrant ‘illegality’ is rendered spectacularly visible.”<sup>2</sup> This racialized, gendered border spectacle sustains perceptions of migrant arrivals as sudden and unanticipated, feeding an emergency imaginary of migration that is constructed around the erasure of migrants’ own individual and collective experiences and the heterogeneous set of uncertainties, fears, decisions, and desires that shape them.

This chapter focuses on the sea as a significant but by no means singular site of “emergency” in both material and narrative terms. Death and the risk of death set the emergency apparatus in motion, creating situations of urgent need, prompting emergency response policies, and perpetuating an emergency imaginary that perceives death at sea as either a natural tragedy or evidence of individual migrant criminality. *How* border deaths get written into or withheld from public memory is critical in a climate that necessitates precarious journeys while also criminalizing them, especially in contexts defined by historical erasure, or aphasia. Dominant European media and political discourse makes it all too easy to disregard border deaths as if they have nothing to do with Europe and European communities, as if the shores of Italy delimit a boundary of concern.

But spectacle-laden narratives are not the only ones in circulation. The sea is a site of contested witnessing where narratives of crisis and practices of mourning emerge simultaneously. That is, the risk of death at sea is a fulcrum for narrative negotiations between state actors who preserve dominant discourses of national cohesion and of migration itself as a threat or problem, humanitarian groups who cite shipwrecks as evidence of the state’s complicity in migrant deaths, and migrants and allies who offer representations of these dangerous crossings that move beyond dominant emergency frames. What limits do dominant representations of precarious migration establish, to invoke Saidiya Hartman, “on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of the historical actor”?<sup>3</sup> When are these losses inscribed into a collective conscious, rather than glossed in passing—through whose perspectives, and through what transactions of testifying and listening? Engaging these questions in the Afro-European borderzone requires recognizing the Mediterranean not simply as a geopolitical border, a site of tragedy, or an in-between space, but as what Iain Chambers terms a “liquid archive” where histories are produced, alliances made and broken, and journeys continued and interrupted.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing the sea as a site where transit is a matter of life and death, this chapter examines commemorative and elegiac witnessing acts that negotiate dominant narratives of migration, memories of sea crossing, and material and symbolic understandings of the migrant boat. I begin by elaborating the centrality of risk in emergency responses to migration, recognizing risk as a product of necropolitical border governance. The chapter then discusses Italian state commemorations at which authorities bear witness to migrant deaths through an erasure of individual experience and entangled histories.

These witnessing events are performances of what I call *strange grief*, a term I posit to describe a display of mourning that affirms the presumed unknowability of the deceased.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to *strange grief* and its erasures, the migrant-centered elegiac writing and film I then discuss instead inscribe shipwrecks into a larger narrative of colonial violence, contemporary border regimes, and collective mourning. The figure of the boat recurs throughout this chapter, and the final sections take up its significance in elegiac and scholarly work that bears witness to migration beyond the spectacle of “crisis.”

#### MATERIAL AND MEDIATED RISK

The Mediterranean is a rough sea, with pockets of fierce currents and powerful storms. But it’s not simply the challenges of navigating in inclement weather that make crossing dangerous. The risk exists first and foremost because boarding a rickety boat or rubber dinghy to claim asylum in Europe is the only route many people can access.<sup>6</sup> Then, there are the risks of the voyage itself: an unseaworthy vessel, a motor that breaks, no navigation tools, and too often, little hope of rescue. The dynamics of risk underscore how, as a site of emergency, the Mediterranean is also a site of production of race: the funneling of people in transit along more dangerous routes, and the treatment of their lives as disposable, perpetuates hierarchies of belonging that position Brown and Black migrants as Europe’s “undesirables.” In other words, death and the risk of death in crossing reveal the racial borders of Fortress Europe.

While emergency discourses may paint precarious crossings as a problem of the current moment, deadly journeys are not new. On the sea’s southern shores, Tunisian fishermen in Zarzis have regularly rescued migrants at sea and buried the dead since the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, on northern coasts, Sicilian fishermen have testified to their ongoing work of rescue and to the risks they themselves face as a consequence of EU border policies, including their capture by Libyan forces.<sup>8</sup> In the 2010s, the three-hundred-mile trek between Libya and Italy became the world’s deadliest border crossing. In the infamous 2011 case of the so-called left-to-die boat, seventy-two people departed Libya only to find themselves stranded at sea for fourteen days, while multiple ships and helicopters observed their predicament and did not intervene, during which time all but nine of the passengers died.<sup>9</sup> This form of knowing abandonment has since repeated, for instance in April 2023, when a boat carrying four hundred people was left adrift near Malta for more than two days. As these incidents exemplify, the risks migrants confront are manufactured by border control methods that “bridg[e] humanitarianism and crime fighting.”<sup>10</sup>

Understood within a Black Mediterranean framework, today’s precarious migrations are not sudden or isolated crises, but part of the ongoing construction of Europe and a longer history of precarious mobilities and forced labor in

the region. Long before the Scramble for Africa, the Mediterranean was a site of enslavement and slave trade that supported expanding economies. As Cedric Robinson outlines in *Black Marxism*, these earnings powered Spanish and Portuguese colonial expeditions; they also profited Venetian and Genovese financiers from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup> These practices echo in the colonial present, as Europe's deadly border policies maintain a precarious labor force that sustains European economies, along with notions of blackness as an undesirable, unknowable foreignness.

The emergency apparatus relies on seemingly contradictory discourses of migration. For instance, crossings are described as threatening and unwanted, but shipwrecks are treated as tragedies, with headlines announcing "Migrant Tragedy," "New Mediterranean Boat Tragedy," "Tragedia al largo di Lampedusa," or "More Tragedy at Sea"—framings that appear to acknowledge loss. Yet, together with practices of border patrol and enforcement, these "tragedies" also construct the border spectacle, inscribing death at sea into public consciousness as a set of natural accidents that cause the death of "clandestine" or "irregular" migrants who should not have been traveling in the first place. While migrant deaths can certainly be understood in tragic terms, these deaths are not natural tragedies but consequences of violent bordering practices through which the Italian state, along with EU authorities, ensures that to reach Europe, African migrants must risk—and lose—their lives.

These bordering practices are necropolitical; that is, to apply Achille Mbembe's framing, they govern through death rather than support migrant survival, ensuring that people confront great peril while crossing borders.<sup>12</sup> As such, and as scholars and activists have emphasized, they enact what Judith Butler describes as "the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives."<sup>13</sup> In the Mediterranean, necropolitical bordering includes both direct acts of violence—as when the Libyan coast guard fires at migrant vessels from boats it was given by Italy—and the closing off or policing of safer routes.<sup>14</sup> These practices, along with limited visa options and immigration quotas, effectively abandon migrants to the forces of nature and weaponize land- and seascapes. Those fleeing violence and precarity in their home countries are effectively routed through terrains where they are more likely to die.

Weaponization of the environment and the policing and externalization of borders have defined Fortress Europe since the 1990s and the early days of Schengen, and are paralleled by similar shifts in policy and practice across the global north.<sup>15</sup> From US strategies that knowingly pushed border crossers to travel through what agents acknowledged as "more hostile terrain" (e.g., Operation Blockade in 1993), to Australia's island detention centers that incarcerate asylum seekers far from Australian shores, these policies render asylum an arduous process and treat asylum seekers like criminal suspects or anonymous pawns rather than people seeking protection. In recent years, these approaches have gained ground. In a 2016 deal with Türkiye, the EU agreed to trade "irregular" migrants arriving to Greece

by boat with Syrian refugees in Türkiye—an agreement that reified the notion of some migrants as more deserving of asylum than others. Türkiye has used the agreement as political leverage, threatening to “release” migrants across the Greek border.<sup>16</sup> Between 2018 and 2022, the United States implemented “Remain in Mexico” protocols that held Mexican and Central American asylum seekers on the Mexican side of the border, unable to file their claims. Beginning in 2022, a post-Brexit United Kingdom repeatedly attempted to send asylum seekers to Rwanda and has housed them in offshore barges. These instances of externalization paralleled Italian policies that kept migrants at bay, including efforts to close Italian ports to rescue ships.

Authorities claim that such measures discourage would-be migrants from attempting to cross, but this logic presumes that migration involves a binary choice between two equivalent options, staying or leaving. “Deterrence” policies do not alter people’s needs or desires to move. They simply leave people with no options except the dangerous journey. This is evident along Europe’s borders. For instance, beginning in 2015, the near-closing of the eastern Balkan route via heightened surveillance and new “smart” fences did not stop movement toward EU nations but held migrants in limbo in EU border states, including Bosnia, where they live in makeshift camps along the border.<sup>17</sup>

In the Central Mediterranean we see all too clearly how these policies enact a brutal disregard for Brown and Black migrants and reproduce colonial violence. The rate of death at sea has remained high even as stricter policies were followed by a decrease in arrivals; in the summer of 2019, nearly one in ten migrants crossing between Libya and Italy died (tables 2 and 3, appendix). The Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed in 2017 and subsequently renewed, formalizes Italian support for Libyan border control, enlisting the Libyan Coast Guard to apprehend migrants at sea and detain them in Libya, where centers are so reprehensible that the United Nations and Amnesty International have cited the country for human rights violations. This MOU recalls the 2008 agreement between Silvio Berlusconi and Muammar al-Qaddafi, when Italy promised Libya €5 billion if Libyan authorities would stem sea departures to Italy. Framed as reparations for colonialism, the agreement in fact reinforced Italian control over the movement of Africans there. By design, these policies mobilize risk to control people’s movements.<sup>18</sup> In a deadly circular logic, these risks are central in what leaders then term a crisis in need of a solution.

This violence persists in part because necropolitical bordering practices render witnessing a fraught process. Border deaths mark one of the emergency apparatus’s fundamental paradoxes: that the primary subjects of *emergency* cannot speak out against its effects. In a 2016 speech at the Centro Primo Levi, author Maaza Mengiste connected today’s deaths in the Mediterranean with Levi’s discussion of witnessing the Holocaust and the impossibility of understanding atrocity from outside—the idea, Mengiste says, that to impart understanding, we simplify

things, using ready symbols and “set[ting] aside the lingering questions.” The true witnesses, those who could testify the fullest to this violence, are those who do not survive it, who experience additional violence as they are anonymized in death:

If your body cannot be named then it is just a corpse. It is a corpse that is less than human, it is a thing. . . . There is no ritual for mourning the unclaimed. There is no paying of respects for unmarked graves. . . . You will become one of the disappeared, *gli scomparsi*. You were here and now you are not.<sup>19</sup>

The ultimate victims of state abandonment, those who die in transit, are unable to bear witness to these final experiences of suffering. How border deaths are recognized and recorded is essential to tracing the operations of the emergency apparatus and accounting for the histories and experiences that emergency imaginaries obscure from view.

#### STATE AS WITNESS: STRANGE GRIEF

The state is a primary witness of Mediterranean migration, including in its role surveilling the sea. Yet officials often opt for silence, acknowledging neither the thousands of annual deaths and disappearances, nor the struggles of survivors. Very occasionally, the government has held a memorial for migrants who drowned near the Italian coast. By my count, in the last two-plus decades, despite often daily deaths and disappearances at sea, the Italian government held state funerals three times: on November 17, 2017, for twenty-six Nigerian women and girls whose bodies were recovered near Salerno; on October 21, 2013, for 368 migrants from the Horn of Africa whose vessel wrecked near Lampedusa in a moment often seen as marking the start of the “crisis”; and on October 25, 2003, for thirteen Somalis who drowned near Lampedusa. In these rare commemorative occasions, the state positions itself as witness and mourner. Via government ministers and mayors who officiate, the state controls the narratives that Italian publics consume about border deaths—or at least indicates which narratives are sanctioned—by inscribing deaths at sea into a larger narrative of emergency that removes state culpability, framing losses instead as “tragedies at sea” or deaths “at the hand of nature.” These rare events serve as critical sites of negotiation over cultural narratives of migration, race, rights, and, sometimes, over policy.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of natural tragedy fosters a sense that Mediterranean crossings are unmoored from history and don’t represent connections between communities. For example, in the 2003 state funeral held in Rome’s Campidoglio Square for the thirteen Somalis who lost their lives, then-Mayor Walter Veltroni spoke of Somalia only as a distant place, “a forgotten land . . . destroyed for too long by civil war.”<sup>21</sup> This statement disregards Italy’s colonization of Somalia beginning in the late nineteenth century and the decades of migration between the two countries since. It rhetorically displaces Somali-Italians from the Italian national body and

disregards these shared histories, including for exiles who fled Siad Barre's regime in the 1970s, those who escaped civil war in the 1990s, and those who arrive today.

Veltroni's statements represent what I term *strange grief*, a performance of mourning that reifies the unknowability of the deceased. Strange grief reminds us that emergency responses to migration amplify some of the ways in which race has long operated in Europe, exacerbating what Cristina Lombardi-Diop calls the "moral imperative of whiteness" that excludes Black subjects from Italian communities or marginalizes representations of blackness as Italianness.<sup>22</sup> "Strangeness," which Sara Ahmed defines as the migrant's seemingly inherent and permanent otherness, is central to these processes.<sup>23</sup> Strange grief carries the production of strangeness into death. It pretends empathy while upholding emergency imaginaries of foreignness by obscuring both historical and ongoing ties between communities, and state culpability in border deaths.

Perhaps the most prominent state commemoration in public memory is the memorial service held for victims of the 2013 shipwreck that is often recalled in debates about deadly border policies. On October 3, an overcrowded, repurposed fishing vessel—a *peschereccio*—carrying more than five hundred people from Libya to Italy caught fire and capsized near the island of Lampedusa. Only 155 people survived. Most of the passengers were Eritreans and Ethiopians traveling to Europe to seek asylum. While immediately condemned as a tragedy, the wreck also prompted a moment of hope: the number of victims garnered global attention and returned Mediterranean migration to the public eye with conversations about migrant rights and policy reform. European politicians responded by calling for the immediate convening of EU leaders. Italian president Giorgio Napolitano called this wreck and one that followed a few days later "a succession of true slaughters of innocents," gesturing to the deaths as violent but emphasizing the sea as culprit.<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis called October 3 a "day of tears." Soon after, the Italian government launched Operation Mare Nostrum, the state-sponsored military and humanitarian operation that prioritized rescue and ran until November 2014—also launching the period EU leaders would soon term a crisis.<sup>25</sup>

Amid this global attention, the question of whether and how the Italian government should honor those who died at its doorstep remained fraught. Visiting Lampedusa with EU leaders, Prime Minister Enrico Letta promised a state funeral for victims. Lampedusa mayor Giusi Nicolini requested that the funeral be held on the island, where locals had assisted in rescue and recovery, and where victims' relatives now arrived daily from elsewhere in Italy and Europe. But to the dismay of Nicolini and other advocates, days went by, then weeks, without a service. Local authorities proceeded with burial, laying the bodies to rest in some 15 municipal cemeteries throughout Sicily, following Christian and Muslim rites. When possible, graves were marked with victims' names; most plots were simply numbered.

Questions of testimony pervade these negotiations: Who will bear witness to these lost lives? What would survivors say? Yet when a state-sponsored

commemoration finally did take place, nearly three weeks after the wreck, neither victims nor survivors were included. On October 4, Prime Minister Letta granted the victims honorary Italian citizenship, proclaiming, “The hundreds who lost their lives off Lampedusa yesterday are Italian citizens as of today.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, survivors remained in Italy’s reception system, waiting to learn whether they would be granted protection and allowed to remain in Italy.

Like the Campidoglio funeral held a decade earlier, the state-sponsored service for the October 3, 2013, shipwreck victims also furthered a narrative of tragedy at sea, failing to acknowledge how Italian colonialism and historical ties between Italy and the Horn of Africa have shaped both notions of Italian identity and belonging, and communities in diaspora. Held not on Lampedusa but at “the touristic port of San Leone” in Agrigento, on mainland Sicily, the event featured the sea as backdrop at a site notably *not* associated with migrant arrivals. Members of Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in Italy attended, as did some locals, though the service was not especially large. Speakers included Italian Minister for Integration Cecile Kyenge; Interior Minister Angelino Alfano; and Zemede Tekle, Eritrean ambassador to Italy, an especially contentious figure for Eritrean survivors of the wreck and others in the diaspora who had fled the regime that Tekle represented.<sup>27</sup>

This, too, was *strange grief*, a commemorative performance defined by its own delays and erasures and an event orchestrated in ways that affirmed migrants’ exclusion. Framing these deaths not as a political problem but as a tragic loss of life, the memorial displaced concerns about the state’s role in border deaths, relying on the faulty logic that demonstrating grief or empathy eliminates complicity. Indeed, journalists and demonstrators alike criticized the absence of victims and survivors, calling the service a farce and a political ploy. In these performances of strange grief, the state works to control the narrative around border deaths. Like other formalized “memory activities,” state funerals “are always mediated by relations of power and accompanied by elements of repression.”<sup>28</sup> Through discursive and material omissions, they circulate a narrative of border deaths as the tragic loss of unknown and perhaps criminal “others,” illustrating how acts of witnessing that claim to honor the dead can in fact perform additional erasures, recognizing some deaths while also marginalizing both survivors and the deceased. In this way, these memorials perpetuate emergency imaginaries that figure those crossing the sea as detached from Italian society and as a source of “crisis.” As a result, these rare funerals exceptionalize deaths that should be understood as *unexceptional*—as all too common—inscribing them as a consequence of sudden natural tragedies. The infrequency of such events serves as a reminder that where precarious migration, asylum, and racial politics intersect, victims are doubly abandoned—left to die in transit, then left to the elements.

The first official migrant funeral in contemporary Italy was held not for shipwreck victims but for a refugee shot to death by four white Italian men in the camp where he lived while working the tomato harvest. Jerry Essan Masslo, a South

African national, had reached Rome in 1988 and applied for asylum. At the time, Italy only granted political asylum to Eastern Europeans, so Masslo was denied refugee status by Italy but granted it through UNHCR. His funeral was held in Caserta at the request of national labor union CGIL, broadcast live on state television network RAI2, and attended by officials including Deputy Prime Minister Claudio Martelli. Masslo's murder was among multiple acts of racist violence that year that together prompted a state response and broader conversations about racism and rights.<sup>29</sup> A month following the funeral, "the first huge anti-racist demonstration was held in Rome," with more than 150,000 people in attendance.<sup>30</sup> In early 1990, the Martelli Law expanded asylum recognition beyond Eastern Europe and regulated immigration through country-based quotas for the first time in Italian history. Later that year, Masslo's attackers were sentenced to a total of sixty-one years in prison.

Yet Masslo's death didn't prompt a radical shift in racial politics; since the 1990s, emergency imaginaries of foreignness have prevailed. In Fortress Europe, the choice to occasionally host funerals for the drowned victims of "tragedies at sea," and no longer for the victims of racist violence within Italian spaces, mirrors the reliance on framing immigration as a crisis that can be managed by securitizing and externalizing European borders. But controlling and criminalizing mobility in the name of safety upends notions of rights and calls international law into question. "No society," Baldwin writes, "can smash the social contract and be exempt from the consequences, and the consequences are chaos for everybody in the society."<sup>31</sup> If dominant narratives and state witnessing are essentially constructed to "reassure" publics, then these are circumstances that beg for another kind of witnessing.<sup>32</sup>

#### LITERARY RESPONSES TO STATE NARRATIVES

State performances of strange grief serve, simultaneously, as a platform for protest and for the emergence of multiple counternarratives that challenge the abandonment of migrants in detention and in death. For instance, two literary accounts of the 2003 funeral in Rome by Somali Italian authors bear witness beyond the narrative offered by the state, narrating the scene at the Campidoglio from the perspective of diasporic communities who saw it as crucial, long-awaited recognition, while also temporary and symbolic. In her 2010 memoir *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home Is Where I Am*), Igiaba Scego recalls that when she arrived to the square and saw the coffins, she realized just how close to home this incident actually was: "It was full of Somalis, that little sunken vessel, here is reality! . . . That paper boat was full of people with my same nose, my same mouth, my same elbows. The day we heard that news, those of us in the Somali diaspora no longer knew what to do with our bodies."<sup>33</sup> Seeing herself in the bodies of the deceased, the narrator recognizes the inextricability of this twenty-first-century story from

her own. Her comment calls attention to the corporeality of displacement and the ways in which “narratives told by and about the body, even if they contradict, are inscribed on the body.”<sup>34</sup>

Scego’s parents, Somali political exiles, flew to Italy in the early 1970s, and Scego was born in Rome and now has Italian citizenship (a point I discuss at more length in chapter 5). As a member of Italy’s *seconde generazioni* (“second generations,” or “G2”), her Somali heritage directly links her to these thirteen victims, as does public debate about migration that reinforces the idea that blackness exists only outside of *italianità*. This exclusion is what Caterina Romeo observes as “racial evaporation,” or the invisibilizing of race to obscure, as well, the longer histories of colonialism so crucial to the building of the Italian nation, along with other European nations.<sup>35</sup> Literary works like *La mia casa* instead visibilize race and the colonial past together. As a memoir, *La mia casa* narrates an individual life while speaking also to collective experience.<sup>36</sup> Personally moved by the 2003 funeral, the narrator also describes how it had the potential to make these cultural and historical connections apparent. That said, narrator-Scego argues, the event took place at the wrong site: it should have been held not below an equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Renaissance-era municipal square, but in Termini train station, a gathering place for Rome’s Somali residents.

The 2003 funeral also appears in works of fiction. Early in Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s 2007 novel *Madre piccola* (*Little Mother*), the character Barni speaks to a journalist documenting Somali experiences. In describing Somali life in Rome, Barni begins with the funeral:

One story in particular that I think would be suitable for your project. Forgive me if I start in a roundabout way, but do you remember the shipwreck that happened a month ago? The bodies of those nine [*sic*] Somalis that were taken to Rome? The funeral that took place in the famous Campidoglio Square? I think that funeral struck a chord in the hearts of people. I don’t think that I’m overstating your role, the role of the press. But all week long newspapers and TV stations spoke of nothing else but that shipwreck.<sup>37</sup>

Ali Farah’s use of a journalistic exchange to incorporate the actual event into her novel signals this as an important witnessing moment. Barni emphasizes the importance of the funeral and of media coverage for bringing visibility to border deaths.

At the same time, she recalls the funeral as an event marked by incongruities. Through this nested testimony, we hear how her physical experience of that day reflects her reckoning with these realities and erasures, beginning with her own dizzying arrival up the “crooked” steps—“they seem to slant the wrong way”—to the square. Upon seeing the coffins, she feels “as if I couldn’t breathe.” The space feels wrong, but the event, once she arrives, appears inviting: “Everyone was clapping . . . [as if] this would mark the beginning of future cooperation between

Somalia and Italy.” Barni contrasts the funeral with the ways in which migrants’ bodies are usually seen, as part of the “garbage” that washes to shore: “tomato cans, shards of green glass, small tubes of medicine, clumps of tar, and plastic bags. . . . And, carried by the sea, lifeless bodies, wearing tattered clothes, their purplish skin blotched with white salt.”<sup>38</sup> In commemorating the dead migrants, the funeral potentially counters their representation as marine detritus.

But even if the funeral attempts to humanize the deceased and strikes a chord with the public, it still fails to acknowledge deadly border regimes. Barni remains skeptical of real change: “The boatloads of illegal immigrants did not stop coming, even after that solemn funeral. And what about the living?”<sup>39</sup>

Addressing the journalist and implicitly raising questions for readers, she calls attention to the limits of this performance of national mourning. She also leaves open the question of “the living,” especially as she recalls not only the official state ceremony but the Muslim burial that followed. It’s not at the Campidoglio but taking the bus with other Somalis from there to the mosque that Barni describes hearing “not a lullaby, rather the wail of a prayer.” As she describes watching the coffins carried in—“tears and salt”—she notes ongoing migrations as obviously, inextricably linked with established diasporic communities, and with their exclusion from discourses of national belonging. “You’ll see,” she recalls another woman saying, looking toward the coffins, “We, too, will end up like that, beneath wet earth that is not our own.”<sup>40</sup>

Amid strange grief and a pervasive lack of recognition of migrant deaths beyond sheer numbers, these literary accounts are critical records, inscribing grief not for a count or incident, but for lived and lost lives, generations connected through survival and grief. I mean to underscore how personal accounts of these deaths and their commemoration can bring the intimacy of mourning to the fore both for readers in the diaspora and for broader (white) Italian audiences and readers like myself, prompted to grapple with our own various connections to or distance from these losses and the structures that enable them. This is crucial to the kinds of witnessing that might recognize migration beyond crisis framings—not by cultivating empathy for an “other” but by prompting audiences to see their own position differently. Through memoir, fiction, and other forms, and inspired by oral histories and actual events, Ali Farah, Scego, and other writers and artists circulate an archive of experiences of migration and citizenship among and beyond Italian publics. They ask us to hold space for elegy while repeatedly asking, as Barni does, “And what about the living?” As Alessandro Portelli puts it in a reflection on the growing body of literature by Italians of African descent, “These books and these tales *are* us. Italy makes no sense if we don’t feel them to be ours. The most exciting new development of recent times . . . is that the very idea of what it means to be Italian is changing in our hands.”<sup>41</sup> In interviews, Scego has described creative work as “an incredible tool, because it has the potential to arrive at places closed off to politics, places that a slogan may

touch upon but not really explore.”<sup>42</sup> This is witnessing as both documentary and imaginative act, and a critical means for writing diasporic memory into national memory, while also interrogating the limits of the latter.

#### NAMES AND ELEGY IN *ASMAT*

A decade later, the 2013 memorial in Agrigento was itself a site of protest. Mayor Nicolini refused to attend, traveling instead to Rome to meet with President Napolitano and present a humanitarian plan for Lampedusa. Italian citizens and migrants alike stood just outside cordoned off areas of the pier, calling out the negligent laws that allow such wrecks to take place, shouting, “Leggi di assassini!” *Assassins’ laws!* and calling for the infamously restrictive Bossi-Fini immigration law to be overturned. A number of local advocacy groups including Jodit Abraha, representing Palermo’s Eritrean-Ethiopian community, and Noureddine Adnane, which combats race-based discrimination, released a statement citing the deaths as “sanguine nostrum e non mare nostrum”—our blood, not our sea (an implicit reference to the new SAR operation too). “We vocalize our pain, but also our indignation at the restrictive and xenophobic politics that have already killed more than 20,000 people and have transformed the Mediterranean Sea into an immense liquid cemetery.”<sup>43</sup> They protested the presence of the Eritrean ambassador and the exclusion of survivors from the event.

Survivors also protested. Still being processed into the Italian reception system and not allowed to travel to the ceremony, they left their center to hold a sit-in at the Lampedusa city hall and their own ceremony on a cliff overlooking the sea.<sup>44</sup> To be barred from the official memorial was to be excluded from public commemoration of the family members and fellow travelers whose deaths they would continue to mourn while awaiting documents and decisions in the local detention center. By preventing those who had survived the crossing from participating in public, state-sanctioned mourning, the state effectively sought to manage not only death but also the processes of grief. Survivors’ fugitive witnessing in the marginal space where their detention site joined the waters that had swallowed their boat exemplifies practices ongoing around the Mediterranean that construct and make visible the liquid archive.

Why continue to talk about the October 3 wreck, so many years after? As activist Amadou Diallo put it in a conversation we had nearly a decade later when at least ninety-four people died in a wreck near Cutro, Calabria, October 3 has become a clear marker for migrants and solidarity groups as a day of remembrance and of action, and an incident that echoes and haunts in the many wrecks that have followed. In annual demonstrations, organizers have remembered those who lost their lives and have also demanded structural change. It is an exercise, in part, in rupturing the temporalities imposed by emergency framings, which, as Miriam Ticktin argues, keep people “reeling from crisis to crisis” rather than

“look[ing] to the future, and not simply in hope but in mourning.”<sup>45</sup> Even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, on October 3, 2020, groups demonstrated across Europe. In Rome, Diallo said, they rallied in protective masks to commemorate the dead, denounce ongoing violence, and demand change, using the hashtag #NonSiamoPesci (We’re Not Fish).

The October 3, 2013, wreck is also significant because, for the first time, and thanks to survivors’ assistance, officials were able to assemble a list of many of the victims’ names. Identifying the deceased is rarely a priority for authorities in the Mediterranean; wrecks and bodies are rarely recovered from the seafloor.<sup>46</sup> When it does happen, identification is challenging: migrants may travel without documents or with falsified papers to protect their identities, and the Mediterranean’s salty waters can rapidly make them unrecognizable. For film director Dagmawi Yimer, having the names necessitated another kind of commemoration that would make them present for multiple audiences. Yimer’s 2014 short film *Asmat* (*Names*) is an elegy to the 368 Eritrean and Ethiopian victims. Shot mostly looking up from underneath the water, and shifting without explication between the sea, artistic renderings of the journey, and a reading of the names, the seventeen-minute film commemorates outside the terms dictated by dominant discourses and state authorities. *Asmat* bears witness to loss through necropolitical violence, enabling public mourning for viewers while countering the Italian state’s strange grief. In important contrast to the 2013 funeral, *Asmat* counteracts the anonymous, disembodied modes of state commemoration, inscribing the wreck and each life lost within the Black Mediterranean.

This dreamlike elegy moves between watercolors of a migrant’s journey, by Luca Serasini, and underwater shots of the legs and torsos of dancers threaded together by a giant swath of white cloth. These scenes foreground the physicality of crossing and of loss by centering dancers’ legs and torsos, and by giving physical space on the screen to each name. Given trauma’s bodily impact, corporeal experience remains “one of the most singular and effective dimensions of testimony.”<sup>47</sup> The pain of trauma can split the body from language—that is, can separate a person’s corporeal experience from their ability to articulate that experience with words. Given the impossibility of representing the actual bodies of the deceased, now drowned or buried, the film’s lyric visuals return the body to the center of the moment from which it has been erased.<sup>48</sup> One of the early watercolors shows a man with enormous hands—emphasizing the body and the graspability and ingraspability (or problematic ungrievability) of these drownings and their afterlives (figure 2). Near the beginning, the hull of a boat shot from below resembles a whale, breathing, swelling, and shrinking in the water. A voiceover hums a soft melody, then reads a kind of invocation—I hear it as a poem—before reciting the names.

The poem, read by Eritrean human rights worker Eden Getachew Zerihun, creates “virtual witnesses”<sup>49</sup> by describing the context of the wreck, and of the broader crises of which it is part, by addressing the multiple audiences engaged in this



FIGURE 2. Still from *Asmat*.

emergency—survivors and relatives of the deceased, whose experience viewing the film I cannot pretend to know, as well as African and European audiences who could challenge the violence causing these deaths. Read in Tigrigna with English or Italian subtitles, the poem invokes European publics who are “condemned to listen to these screams . . . because our cry is loud and strong.” It calls out African politicians who “make people flee . . . you make laws you would not enforce on your children.” To European politicians, the speaker says, “we are here, we came here to observe your actions, the civilization you boast of.” Meanwhile, the sound of waves gives way to the periodic strum of a guitar, and to silence. The camera cuts to underwater shots of people standing and swaying beneath the sea. The speaker also acknowledges the parents of the deceased who “live without knowing what happened to your children,” says the speaker, “Call them / if they can hear you / tell them the meaning of their names / Speak their endless names.” Then Zerihun reads the names, from Adhanom to Yohannes, pronouncing each name together with its meaning, read in English. Typed names crowd the screen. It takes ten minutes to read the list.

Yimer has described the urgency of this project in interviews, saying, “In *Asmat* I wanted to force my spectators to listen to all of [the names], from first to last.”<sup>50</sup> *Asmat* is a form of fugitive witnessing and an example of what Christina Sharpe terms “wake work,” responding to movements between former colonies and colonizers that occur “in the wake” of the violences of historical displacement and enslavement.<sup>51</sup> For Sharpe, wake work “troubles mourning” by refusing the seeming finality of a memorial—refusing, that is, to pretend that the violence has ended.<sup>52</sup> The film as wake work addresses historical and ongoing violence, in part by enacting elegy as a testimonial form that creates an intimate space for mourning while demanding witnessing from a broader public. It is both elegy that

emerges from a state of overwhelm, to invoke Brand—“[Elegy] is the great complaint . . . the complaint is ‘what’s happening to me overwhelms me.’ Not simply that I am in pain but what has taken away my power of action overwhelms me. And why do I see these things why do I know these things why must I endure seeing and knowing.”<sup>53</sup> And it is elegy that asks viewers to see the single wreck within a history of systemic violence.

Testimony is a critical act of visibility for those bearing witness to necropolitical violence and to the losses it enacts. Here, testimony is collective elegy, heard in the “we” of the voiceover. This “we,” a diasporic collective defined in part through the crossing of borders, expresses communal agency and counters the “we” of the state and its construction through borders and ideas of cultural homogeneity. In this sense, the film embodies the abolitionist and emancipatory possibilities that are a crucial part of a Black Mediterranean political praxis.<sup>54</sup> *Asmat*’s “we” speaks from the wake, from the grave—the seafloor. In contrast to the formal, procedural rituals of government officiants and clergy at the state funeral, the “we” that narrates *Asmat* is a grieving and grievable subject that bears witness to the suffering of the drowned, who can no longer speak for themselves, and recognizes that suffering as a form of historical trauma that has long affected this “we,” directly related to what Hall describes as “the traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience.’”<sup>55</sup>

Naming and elegizing are not inherently subversive, but in *Asmat* they serve this function in that they disrupt the border spectacle, “working on the gaps and fissures that are opened up as instabilities in such constructions.”<sup>56</sup> The film creates an encounter between narrators, performers, images, and viewers that functions as both archive and call to action. In line with other testimonial films, *Asmat* is “designed to summon politically, morally, and socially engaged publics.”<sup>57</sup> These witnessing texts frame precarious Mediterranean mobilities within an imaginary that refutes the erasures and displacements of emergency discourses, even as it calls attention to the extreme urgency of these circumstances.

Within Italian cinema, *Asmat* is part of a body of films that portray the risky boat journey and its afterlives with particular care to center the voices, bodies, and experiences of border crossers, including work ranging from Zakaria Mohamed Ali’s short film, to the widely released *Terraferma* by Emanuele Crialesi (2011), to Jonas Carpignano’s *Mediterranea* (2015), which I discuss in chapter 6, and the Oscar-nominated *Io Capitano* by Matteo Garrone (2023).<sup>58</sup> While these films don’t all focus on a shipwreck, they integrate scenes of precarious voyages to push for a reckoning both within Italy—to situate these losses within Italian history and culture—and beyond it.

As an elegy that calls out the violence behind border deaths, *Asmat* is also part of a transnational archive of texts and practices that honor the dead across and beyond the Mediterranean region. The work of recovering bodies and burying the dead transpires at the edges of emergency and often goes unnoticed in mainstream

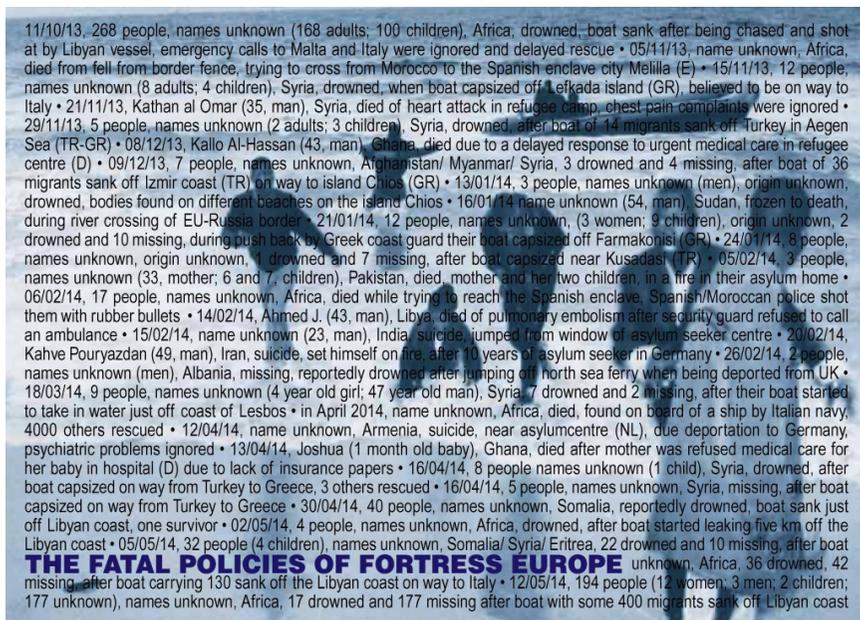


FIGURE 3. Postcard from the campaign Fatal Policies of Fortress Europe, listing a selection of deaths from 2013 to 2014. Reproduced with permission from Amsterdam-based United Against Refugee Deaths (<https://unitedagainstreftugedeaths.eu/>).

media coverage. But in what Maurice Stierl terms “grief activism,” these practices of elegy and care are also used to draw attention to state negligence.<sup>59</sup> Some more explicitly link death at Europe’s geopolitical borders with violence within European territories, like campaigns by the Dutch group United Against Refugee Deaths (figure 3). The list of the dead they maintain is one such example: initially produced through a collaboration with Istanbul-based artist Banu Cennetoğlu, the list is a catalogue of migrant deaths, with and without names, from 1993 through the present. Posted in public spaces and repeatedly published in *The Guardian*, the list is an attempt to record, aggregate, and publicize deaths and to connect drownings with migrant deaths throughout Europe. I first encountered it in 2017 in printed spreadsheet form at a museum in Milan, where it stretched the length of a gallery room, at that point containing more than thirty-three thousand deaths.

Now, nearly doubled, it would require a larger room.

Literature and visual media play an especially powerful role in documenting and reflecting on violence and loss. As anthropologist Michael Jackson observes,

as long as we think of refugees solely as victims, we do a grave injustice to the facts of refugee experience, for loss is always countermanded by actions—albeit imaginative, magical, and illusory—to regain some sense of balance between the world within and the world without.<sup>60</sup>

These elegiac modes are critical for revising Italian collective memory, and these uses of testimony expand Italy's literary and artistic canonical boundaries. At the same time, they resonate across global contexts. Naming the victims of racist violence and police/state brutality has united people in the Movement for Black Lives and situates work in Italy within transnational justice movements around the globe, including by reciting the names of victims in lists that are always incomplete.<sup>61</sup> These recitations are part of a web of counternarrative practices, protest, and meaning making that work to do what Hartman describes as "recover[ing] the insurgent ground of these lives."<sup>62</sup>

Testimonies that perform wake work in the context of Africa–Europe migration make the Black Mediterranean present for their audiences as a site of the colonial present whose future can still be liberated from today's "oppressive regimes."<sup>63</sup> As the speaker says: "We are more visible dead than alive . . . We existed even before October the Third / We have been sailing for years / We've been traveling for years / We've been drowning for years." These lines and the repetition of "for years" are one example of how the film speaks against forgetting.<sup>64</sup> Like *A chiunque possa interessare*, the short film with which I opened this chapter, *Asmat* is the product of an interrogation of loss and displaced histories, and one that challenges the violence of borders. Both films wrestle with the problem of making visible the journeys and deaths of those who can no longer speak. They also center the figure of the boat, which is itself a key site of emergency and an icon that has generated a multitude of memorials and elegies.

#### TITANICS IN THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

Today's migrant vessels are a means of escape for people from countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, even as they reflect the (neo)colonial forces that create the situations from which people need to escape—and even as they deliver migrants to European countries where they are not free. I close this chapter on death, strange grief, and elegy by reflecting on the migrant boat as both material vessel and symbol. These boats—rubber dinghies or rickety pescherecci taken from Tunisian fishermen and repurposed by Libyan smugglers—are vessels of memory, sites of death, hope, trauma, and survival.

For some survivors, the sea crossing becomes evidence of flight, of arrival, of survival. "Google my arrival date," a Liberian man told me at an Italian reception center, "my rescue is on YouTube."

For others, the crossing continues to haunt. A Gambian man I'd interviewed and stayed in touch with, who would eventually be granted a humanitarian visa, once texted me photographs of dead bodies washed to shore—he didn't say whether in Libya or Tunisia—their flesh swollen and scarred with salt. "Today is my birthday," he wrote.

Redeem (pseudonym), a Nigerian woman I met in Calabria, said the boat journey was so harrowing, “I couldn’t remember things again. It took me time before I would be myself.”<sup>65</sup>

For many, to cross is to survive *and* to be haunted—to leave “the abyss” of the sea and of the boat, as Edouard Glissant writes of the slave ship, and to carry the knowledge and experience of that abyss into the limbo of life in Europe. Ferrying people between former colonies and former colonizers, today’s Mediterranean boats are inextricably tied to slave ships that transported “human cargo” across the Atlantic, linking the Black Mediterranean and the Black Atlantic, “pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.”<sup>66</sup> Understanding today’s Mediterranean mobilities within the wake of history means recognizing the boats as material and symbolic structures within the “crisis of capital,” as Sharpe elaborates, “in the forms of migrants fleeing lives made unlivable.”<sup>67</sup> That is, migrant boats move within a colonial present shaped by the *longue durée* of history, by the ongoing extraction of resources in Africa, by the reliance of European economies on exploited laborers, and by white supremacy and the refusal to see those crossing as people with whole lives and with rights.

Journalistic and popular media accounts sometimes gesture to this comparison but often remain problematically superficial or reify the crisis-spectacle of black bodies in a crowded boat. A *New York Times* article about an October 2016 rescue operation described the situation in this way: “The wooden vessel’s cargo hold contained two-thirds of the roughly 1,000 people found aboard, Ms. Lanuza said, calling the conditions ‘just like a slavery boat—the same.’” Another aid worker quoted in the same article calls the analogy “exactly right—except that it’s not hundreds of years ago.”<sup>68</sup> Here the slave ship is most immediately a point of reference for the *spectacle* of today’s boats: crowded, tragic nonspaces, their passengers absent of agency.

Comparisons that suggest these vessels as analogous rather than entangled figures risk affirming the idea that precarious crossings deserve periodic attention only because they happen at Europe’s gates, without interrogating migrant shipwrecks as part of a broader set of violent structures and practices. These boats bound to sink move in the same wake as young men of North African descent killed by police in France, as Black US citizens shot by police while driving to work or playing in a park, and as migrants abused in borderzones while seeking safety—think of the Haitians beaten and whipped by US Customs and Border Patrol agents on horseback while attempting to cross the Rio Grande into Texas in 2021, or more recently, the Central and West African men captured by Tunisian police and abandoned at the border, left to die in the desert. Collectively, these incidents reveal the violence “emergency” enables as it transits across contexts and times—evidence of the “colonial structures” that render some groups as unwanted, disposable, deportable.<sup>69</sup> Such violence is foundational to “the emergency” that

Brand describes, one in which, she says, “I leave my house and immediately my body is ripped from me to enact some colonial idyll.”<sup>70</sup>

As the *Asmat* voiceover reminds us, authorities on all sides of the sea are complicit in enabling what Yimer has elsewhere called “essentially a twenty-first century slave trade”<sup>71</sup>—not a descriptive metaphor but a fact of material reality. Within the “afterlife of slavery,” today’s migrants transit between oppressive conditions, sometimes including their enslavement in Libya and the exploitation of their labor in Italy, their lives “still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.”<sup>72</sup> Recognizing today’s precarious mobilities within this afterlife, rather than as merely analogous to historical images of Black victimhood, is critical for understanding how the emergency apparatus reproduces colonial relations in the present.

Amid oppressive violence, as postcolonial and Black feminist scholars and artists have argued, the slave ship is not a singular monolith of victimhood. Katherine McKittrick describes it as a site of “struggle for freedom *in place*.”<sup>73</sup> Donald M. Carter emphasizes the “translocal, transcultural” communities disrupted and (re)shaped through these experiences and posits the slave ship not as a singular, definitive icon for African diaspora, but as a site to understand in relational terms, both among those “held together in this extraordinary voyage” and in terms of the multiple journeys, vessels, histories, and lives that the slave ship might point us to interrogate. Responding to Gilroy’s notion that Black lives move “from slave ship to citizenship,” Carter also cautions against writing the slave ship into a narrative that reifies the nation-state as the primary frame for conceptualizing belonging – one that forecloses other possible configurations of belonging, past and future.<sup>74</sup>

As a heterotopia, in Foucault’s words, the boat exemplifies relationality and the significance of space and spatial relations to modern life, and it speaks to a range of experiences.<sup>75</sup> Mediterranean crossings might also make us think of the stories of “boat refugees” fleeing Europe during World War II, Cuba beginning in the 1960s, or Vietnam in the late 1970s. As Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi observes in the case of Vietnam, “images of the boat refugees circulated prominently in the international media, prompting the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to declare a global crisis. In response, countries around the world . . . offered to resettle the boat refugees.”<sup>76</sup> In the contemporary Mediterranean, images of boats also prompt talk of crisis, but their circulation often sparks only short-lived sympathy and stokes anti-immigrant sentiment. The boats’ abstraction through surveillance technologies that visualize them as dots on a map literally dehumanizes these crossings, as Ruben Andersson notes, making it easy for authorities to “fram[e] migrants and facilitators as sources of risk.”<sup>77</sup> As iterations of the hold that “repeats and repeats in and into the present,”<sup>78</sup> migrant boats in the Mediterranean signal the wake in which contemporary migrations unfold and speak to this complex web of meanings.

One set of associations within this web comes in the form of testimonial narratives that use the migrant boat to push the discursive boundaries of the colonial present by moving the vessel between multiple symbolic grammars. We might think, for instance, of the Wolof phrase “Barça wala barsakh” (Barcelona or death) used by Senegalese migrants as they embark on pirogues to cross the Atlantic toward the Canary Islands, knowing and claiming the risks.<sup>79</sup> For Zakaria Mohamed Ali, the boats are an archive, a record he hopes reaches broader publics. As he stands at the Lampedusa boat cemetery near the end of his short film, these words appear on screen:

These boats which have been abandoned here  
They are monuments to those who seek freedom  
To remember all the people who arrived, and make our story known,  
to whom it may concern.

They are their own commemoration, a memorial statement meant to make new witnesses.

Another set of texts invokes the *Titanic* and its place as a tragic voyage in collective memory. In Abu Bakr Khaal’s 2008 novella *African Titanics*, the title itself highlights the severity of these dangers and victims’ anonymity, qualifying African deaths in the Mediterranean through reference to the famous ship that sank while transporting mostly European passengers across the Atlantic. The novella is a tale of fugitivity. Focusing on the fictional account of Abdar, who leaves Eritrea and crosses Sudan and Libya in hopes of reaching Italy, it offers a story of characters who dream of boarding “Titanics” on Libyan shores and yet never set foot in Europe. They die or turn back; imprisoned in Libya, they speculate on the experiences of their travel companions and those who have passed through these spaces before them. The risks of crossing and the possibility of survival arguably comprise the novella’s main subject, though mobility is a way of being in the story, and unromanticized. Eritrean author Khaal wrote the novella in Arabic while living in Libya and published it serially in the Libyan newspaper *Oya*. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, he fled Libya, eventually reaching Denmark. The book was translated into English in 2014.<sup>80</sup>

In the novella, the suitability of the term “Titanic” comes up directly when an Egyptian migrant waiting with others in a holding space near Tripoli challenges Abdar and his companions for referring to boats as “Titanics”:

[He] contemplated the group of Eritreans huddled around the TV. “Isn’t it you lot that called the boats “Titanikaat”?” he continued, mimicking our Arabic, “As in *al-Titanik*?”

“Yes, that’s us.”

“Damn you all! Who gave you the right to pluralize it as Titanikaat anyway? Are you experts in Arabic grammar these days—or is the great grammarian Sibawayh travelling with you and personally advising you on new words?”

“What else should we call them?”

“Something optimistic. Noah’s Ark perhaps. Or any other ship that never sank. Well? What d’you have to say for yourselves?”

“What can we say? The matter’s closed. You are the all-knowing one.”

“Whatever! Just so long as you know that around seventy percent of your Titanikaat sank—only around thirty out of a hundred survive! So I guess Titanic is an appropriate name for them after all. *Tita . . . niikiik*,” he said with force, heavily emphasizing the second syllable, transforming it into the Arabic word for “fuck.”<sup>81</sup>

Titanic, acknowledged as an “appropriate name,” alludes to the hope of the original ship, pre-iceberg, while acknowledging the risk. In this spirit, death in the novella is not a tragedy but a moment of heroism and celebration. The characters sing about figures like Abdar’s friend Malouk, a Liberian man whose drowning transforms him into a legendary figure. A woman tells Abdar of Malouk’s death, “He was apparently walking on the crest of a wave as calmly as people walk on land.”<sup>82</sup> These descriptions figure mobility itself not along a scale of tragedy but as a matter of both fate and choice, underscoring the agency border crossers exercise despite that Titanics are their only option.

Among some Somali diasporic communities, “Titanic” also refers to survivors. In Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola*, after describing the 2003 funeral, Barni links experiences of death, survival, and diaspora through a brief reference to “Titanic.” As she mourns the dead and questions the possibility of real change, she refers to “all those who wash up on these shores in the boats or who have escaped the shipwrecks, nicknamed Titanic by their fellow countrymen.”<sup>83</sup> Both a gesture of solidarity and an acknowledgment of great risk, this naming also suggests a degree of irony in the notion of survival or arrival. In interviews, Scego has described Titanic as one turn in a name game played between older Somali women who came in the 1970s and the younger migrants, mostly men, arriving now. Younger men dubbed “Titanic” by older women refer, in turn, to these women as “vecchia lira,” or “old money”:

Naturally one can’t be disparaged and not respond. Since, in Somalia, verbal exchange becomes theater or poetry, it happened that the young asylum seekers, tired of being called Titanic, started calling women of the diaspora old money. As if to say, “Fine, we’re Titanic, but you’re coins that are no longer in use.” A lot of cruelty, mutual distancing, misunderstandings. I wanted to use it in [*Adua*] because for the media, Italians and migrants are like two giant football teams. But who are the Italians? The Friulians? The Campanians? The Venetians? What is their social class? Their sexual orientation? And the migrants, who are they? Albanian? American? Somali? Eritrean? Syrian? Brazilian? WHO?<sup>84</sup>

If dominant narratives posit “Italians” and “migrants” as singular, fixed categories in opposition, uses of Titanic within diasporic communities instead highlight

migration and identity as broader, historical, and complex phenomena. Secco herself invokes *Titanic* in her 2015 novel *Adua*. The protagonist, a Somali woman named Adua who moves to Rome in the 1970s, vents in the present-day about her marital troubles with Ahmed, a younger man she calls “Titanic,” who arrived more recently by sea. Adua feels she has rescued Ahmed through marriage, saving him from a life on the street. She confesses, “It’s not nice to call a guy who risked his life at sea by the name of a sunken ship. . . . Once my husband even said, ‘I know that Titanic is a film where everyone dies. But you have to remember that I didn’t die.’”<sup>85</sup> The name “Titanic” is the site of Ahmed’s plea for recognition in the book’s present day.

The seeming incongruity of the *Titanic* and the slave ship is part of their rupture within Black Mediterranean discourse, which calls into question what we view as tragic and how we locate agency in violent borderzones. They also link the Black Atlantic and Black Mediterranean as sites of racialized transit. More than a century ago, the *Titanic* transported ticket-paying citizens between Western Europe and New York. The 1912 wreck has since entered global popular culture, becoming “something of a currency in tragedy.” Those who drowned with the ship were “uncomplaining heroes rather than terrified captives.” They were victims in part of institutional hubris, given the lack of sufficient lifeboats on board.<sup>86</sup> In cultural mythology, the original *Titanic* is recalled as “a floating microcosm of society,” part of “one of the great human migrations,” and a famous disaster.<sup>87</sup> That we can scroll its passenger lists in online archives contrasts with the anonymity of those who have lost their lives in the Mediterranean. It was in fact the sinking of the *Titanic* that prompted the first International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, at which participants established international agreements on search and rescue.<sup>88</sup> The US government formally protects the site of this wreck as “perhaps the most important historic shipwreck in history.”<sup>89</sup> In June 2023, when five self-dubbed explorers died attempting to visit its ruins underwater, multiple governments spent millions to recover their bodies and the wreckage of their submersible. Migrant *Titanics* wrecked in international waters are generally left where they fall.<sup>90</sup>

Whether they are referring to the historical event or its representation in James Cameron’s 1997 blockbuster production, migrant narrators’ use of this symbol calls attention to the very different currency that today’s migrant boats have. Narrators who reinscribe Mediterranean migration with this complex icon call attention to the dynamics of hope and fate, and to the power of nature in shipwrecks, but also to the role of institutions. Rupturing emergency logics might begin with such shifts in perspective. The various *Titanics* here, from a derelict boat to a young migrant moving north, suggest multiple means through which narratives of Mediterranean migration participate in the project of decentering Europe. These narrators claim *Titanic* as an African story, refuting accounts that use migrant deaths

to reify national borders or that abandon migrants at the bottom of the sea, as if unknown, as if nameless.

#### CONCLUSION: ON ART AND EDEN

A fraught and powerful symbol, the boat also returns our attention to the materiality of migration. Most wrecks remain on the seafloor, but very occasionally, a boat is recovered. Some of those vessels have been made into memorials. Setting the wrecks before European and global publics has not stopped ongoing violence and erasure—but could it point us to another ethics of witnessing?

In 2019, I visited two boats recovered more than twenty years apart. In Venice, Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel's team had installed a migrant boat as part of the Venice Biennale global art exhibition (figure 4). The boat, which sank on April 18, 2015, remains the largest known migrant shipwreck in recent years: only twenty-eight of its estimated eleven hundred passengers survived. The wreck and its continued transit in Italy highlight some of the challenges of transforming emergency imaginaries without relying on empathy. Forensic investigator Cristina Cattaneo, whose team led the recovery of human remains from the wreck, has called for a "human rights science," or rights work based in materiality rather than moralism. The boat's inclusion at the Biennale, in Venice's historic Arsenale (fortress) site, made it publicly visible—through media coverage and for ticket-holding visitors—rather than locked from view in the NATO dock near the Sicilian town of Augusta, where it had sat for the previous two years. At the same time, its installation as a memorial artwork called *Barca Nostra* (*Our Boat*) prompted more debate about artistic provocation than attention to migrant deaths at sea.<sup>91</sup> With no label or explanation, the boat appeared to unknowing visitors as part of the Arsenale architecture. When I asked a couple sipping Peroni at the bar in front of the boat if they knew it had carried hundreds of migrants to their death, they were shocked. Already knowing the boat's story can instead enable witnessing. As Rinaldo Walcott writes, "*Barca Nostra* allows Black subjects (like myself) to bear witness to our dead in the contemporary era in a way that we were not able to do in the era of transatlantic slavery"—linking Mediterranean and Atlantic through processes of erasure and of witnessing.<sup>92</sup> The boat has since returned to Augusta, a key disembarkation point for migrants. Local groups have proposed a memorial garden, but for now the boat sits at the military port there, closed to the public, its witnessing role uncertain.

There isn't much precedent for such memorials.<sup>93</sup> A second boat sits in Otranto, at the southern tip of Italy's heel. This boat marks the initial period of contemporary mass migration into Italy, with the post-Cold War mobilities of the 1990s. It now also marks Italy's aphasic relationship with migration histories. The Albanian *Katër i Radës* sank on March 28, 1997, when an Italian coast guard boat rammed its hull. Only eighty-five of at least 142 passengers survived. Recovered for the trial



FIGURE 4. Barca Nostra as seen from a bar at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Photo by the author.

against the captains of the two ships, the boat initially served as criminal evidence. It then stayed in Brindisi for years, cordoned off and left to decay at the port. Since 2011, the boat has stood at the port of Otranto, which offered to give it a permanent home (figure 5). Apparently because no funding source emerged to send the boat back to Albania, it has stayed in Otranto, geographically and symbolically far from victims' relatives. There, the vessel was rendered a memorial artwork by Greek sculptor Costas Varotsos, who added horizontal sheets of glass to the relic. In its memorial form, the boat's structure, largely intact, appears cut by waves, or perhaps held together by them. Yet the memorial's title—*The Landing: Work Dedicated to a Migrant Humanity (L'approdo: Opera all'umanità migrante)*—renders it a generic monument to those who die at sea rather than enabling people to recall “the actual story of the sinking” or to recognize the victims as grievable subjects.<sup>94</sup>

A material trace of migrants' precarious crossings and their hopes to reach safety, the boat is also a trace of the systemic violence that compelled them to incur such risks. These memorials and installations may respond to the practical and ethical question of what to do with the relics of these wrecks. But do they make those traces apparent to visitors—and for which visitors are they intended—or do they transform the boats into objects of strange grief? *And what about the living?*

When I first visited these vessels, I was struck by how small they seemed—impossibly small for the number of people who died in their hulls. In Venice,



FIGURE 5. The *Katër i Radës* at the Port of Otranto, 2019. Photo by the author.

then in Otranto, I was both upset and profoundly moved. But then, I had traveled the length of the Italian boot to reach these vessels: I recognized what I had come to see, the histories and events bound up in these metal and wooden hulls. Objects can represent, trigger, or suggest particular memories, but they rely on their human witnesses to complete the memory work they initiate. As Leogrande wrote about his own encounter with the *Katër i Radës*, “Monuments . . . remain whitewashed coffins, empty containers, if they are not sprinkled with stories and memories, of anger and redemption. They remain as empty structures if memory does not intervene, rendering them living sites.”<sup>95</sup>

Enabling witnessing is a crucial part of enabling a reckoning with past and present, and positioning people to see a different future. Walcott’s meditation before *Barca Nostra* takes up this future as an ethical gesture that might move us “toward a planetary resolution where a possibility for full life/lives becomes conceivable as a necessary reinvention of the planet.”<sup>96</sup>

When I think about what that “necessary reinvention” might entail, another boat comes to mind. This one appears in a mural painted by the residents of a reception center in Africo, a small town on the Ionian coast in Calabria. Outside the center, a kind of graphic narrative of sea crossing runs along a concrete wall (figure 6). Across the bottom half is a turbulent black and blue sea. Above the water at one end stands a horned devil, holding out a device shaped like an “L”—Libya?—then we see a boat crowded with silhouettes who hold up their arms as a storm rains down. To the right of the migrant boat, a rescue scene unfolds, with two figures observing from the deck of a large ship as others in smaller vessels reach out to people on board a boat. Then: Eden. The mural turns the corner of the wall and shifts from a scene of rescue to a lush garden with animals and fruit-bearing trees.



FIGURE 6. Rescue scene on a mural by a reception center in Africo, 2018. Photo by the author.

The mural is a reminder that those who reach Italy are survivors. Eden appears as a gesture toward the future. But in the meantime, their arrival in Europe often marks less an arrival in Eden than the beginning of an extended period of uncertainty, including, sometimes, of uncertain hospitality.