

Oranges and Riot Gear

Ousmane Sangare held up a small pair of clippers in one hand, an orange in the other. “This is how you cut them,” he said, snipping the stem to leave a few centimeters attached to the fruit. “If you cut them wrong, they don’t count, and you don’t get paid.”

He addressed the crowd of thirty or so people gathered around long tables at Rome’s collective space *la Città dell’Utopia*. We were there to learn about the labor and exploitation of the *bracciante*, the farmworker. The *braccianti*—a word that refers to the “braccia,” or arms, for manual labor—are seasonal workers. Historically a category for internal migrants, Italians who moved within or between regions to harvest for day wages, *braccianti* today are a diverse group increasingly made up of foreigners of many legal status designations. With this shift, in the twenty-first century the category of *bracciante* has become strongly associated with precarious migration and illegalized border crossing, and with African and South Asian border crossers who arrive by sea.

I first met Sangare, a twenty-nine-year-old from Mali, at Piazzale Maslax, the improvised camp run by Rome-based activist collective Baobab Experience that I discuss in chapter 3. In late spring 2018, he visited a camp assembly to share from his own experience of finding employment. He had spent several months working the harvest in Rosarno, in the southern region of Calabria, and vowed not to return. Back in Rome, he had recently landed a paid internship at IKEA. Now, having achieved some stability, he hoped to help others avoid the trap of labor exploitation.

The oranges were a small prop but a significant symbol of Italy’s dependence on migrant labor and, within the country’s large agricultural sector, of the *caporalato*

network of “gangmaster” middlemen who coordinate day labor for organized criminal syndicates and mafia-like organizations. These working conditions have been described as a form of enslavement.¹ Sangare described the physical toil, low and sometimes absent pay, and despicable conditions of improvised settlements where workers eat and sleep. He testified to his own experiences of exploitative harvest labor, he said, because he could finally speak out and wanted to mobilize others to stand up against these practices.

Migrant farmworkers are transit laborers, moving to follow growth and harvest cycles. Farmworker transit, in turn, enables the transit of goods over international borders that workers themselves would have trouble crossing. In addition, their labor is largely invisibilized: braccianti harvest the fruits and vegetables that appear on dinner tables throughout Italy and around the globe, yet workers remain largely out of public view. During the COVID-19 pandemic, farmworkers briefly shared the spotlight with other “essential workers,” but in general, their labor does not often take center stage. People across this especially diverse workforce, which includes Eastern Europeans, South Asians, and Africans, regularly face discrimination. Multiple violent deaths of braccianti in recent years, including a number of Black African men, underscore anti-blackness and racism in general as not only pervasive in this sector but structural to it, holding workers in precarious working and living conditions, and making some workers especially vulnerable to attacks.²

While orange groves and tomato fields may appear distant from the spectacle of arrivals by boat or the fraught limbo of reception centers, the emergency apparatus enables and relies on the exploitation of the labor that sustains these spaces. That is, emergency discourses, policies, and related practices together maintain a deportable, exploitable, and largely invisibilized workforce. One way they do so is through the “refugeeization” of labor. As Nick Dines and Enrica Rigo explain in their elaboration of this term, “The failure of the quota system [of work visas] to meet the agricultural demand has been offset by the growing number of asylum seekers making the decision to cross the Mediterranean Sea.”³ As the emergency management of migration has led to increasingly restrictive policies and the closure of safe, established modes of entry, precarious migration means people reach Italy as both asylum seekers and as part of a continuous supply of workers. As is the case across sectors, migrants’ legal precarity puts them in readily exploitable positions. In maintaining these vulnerabilities, the emergency apparatus thus also upholds systems like the caporalato. In a context in which Black suffering and death are central to dominant narratives about who deserves to reach Europe and to survive there, the intertwined refugeeization and racialization of labor constitute a crucial lens for understanding how this exploitation operates, and for combatting it.

This chapter situates the plight of migrant braccianti within the emergency apparatus of migration through the words of farmworkers themselves in testimony shared in interviews, film, and social justice campaigns. For farmworkers,

advocating for better working conditions means putting their livelihood—and sometimes their lives—on the line. Yet many have spoken out about their experiences, including in interviews and by bearing witness to their experiences through a range of performative testimony. Through testimony as method, after offering context on migrant farmworkers and exploitation within the caporalato system, I elaborate the struggles of the braccianti through a Black Mediterranean lens in two ways. First, I discuss how the emergency apparatus facilitates the refugeeization of labor through testimony shared by a camp resident in Rome about his experience working the harvest in Southern Italy.

Second, I argue that the struggles of migrant braccianti represent a kind of limit case in terms of witnessing. That is, forms of witnessing used to combat this suffering also articulate the limits of (self-)representation in such circumstances.⁴ The heightened extremes of visibility and invisibility that “emergency” sets in motion render it especially difficult for migrants to challenge their exploitation. Moreover, given the long history of the caporalato, along with news coverage and films that feature farmworker exploitation and public acknowledgement of migrant deaths during the harvest, invisibility in this case is not a problem of broader awareness but of an obscuring from view. This is a case of experiences “relegated to invisibility,” as Carter puts it.⁵ The challenge in disrupting this invisibility, then, is not to educate the public as if from scratch but to reshape how publics already understand these issues, and to challenge the structures, systems, and willful ignorance that facilitate and normalize that invisibility. To elaborate this limit case, I examine how (in)visibility informs uses of testimony for broader publics through a discussion of Jonas Carpignano’s 2015 film *Mediterranea*, set in Rosarno, and make reference to several social justice campaigns.

Across these different testimonial modes, I address how migrant farmworkers position themselves individually and collectively in relation to Italian and global publics and to issues of violence and exploitation. The witnessing relations these narrators invoke don’t simply call attention to their invisibility as workers; by illuminating how (in)visibility and deservingness operate in their lives, they point to how racial capitalism powers the emergency apparatus of migration.

HARVEST LABOR AND THE CAPORALATO

Farmwork is but one example of the kinds of precarious labor to which migrants turn, but it is a significant one.⁶ While harvest work has long involved seasonal and day labor, the neoliberalization of food economies and agribusiness models in recent decades has solidified the agricultural industry’s dependence on short-term, low-wage workers. This favors the underpaid and often undocumented labor taken up by migrants who, in turn, play a critical role in the global food economy but benefit little from their efforts.⁷ Migrant labor in Italy fits within a wider reliance on “permanent temporary” workforces to support agricultural

industries in high- and low-income countries in and beyond the Mediterranean region.⁸ These workers represent a mix of people with and without visas. Spain regularly recruits Moroccan women to harvest strawberries on temporary work visas, for instance. In the United States, H-2A visas support temporary seasonal harvest work. Undocumented workers also have a strong presence in these workforces, and exploitation affects workers across the legal spectrum.

Italy remains in the top three countries in the EU for agricultural production and for number of workers in the sector,⁹ employing more than 1.1 million people in cultivation and harvest work. Nationwide, at least 37 percent of agricultural workers are foreign. Official counts, however, are notably incomplete, given the prevalence of uncontracted work; in some areas, migrants outnumber Italians.¹⁰ Since Eastern European nations joined the EU, their citizens, who have long been among Italy's primary foreign farmworkers, can travel freely across national borders as Schengen citizens, coming for seasonal work without the residency or legal status issues that many Africans face.¹¹ As of 2018, at least 59 percent of foreign farmworkers are African.

The sector relies heavily on irregular labor, with more than a third of farmwork uncontracted, and more than 40 percent in the South (sometimes much more).¹² In my conversations with migrants who had worked the harvest in Calabria or Puglia, *caporalato* and *caporali* were familiar terms. This is the system that has long taken advantage of poor workers, including Italians who moved locally or between regions to work and, increasing, migrants who arrive from abroad.¹³ Individual *caporali* are the middlemen on the ground, the ones who check that oranges have been properly cut. They recruit and transport day laborers to work sites with piecemeal pay, enforcing strict hours and low wages. In some cases *caporali*—some of whom are migrants themselves—retain workers' documents for the season, essentially holding them captive.¹⁴ At upper levels, the agricultural sector has strong ties with *agromafie* and other organized criminal syndicates who control (depending on the area) ports, equipment contracts, and transportation and waste systems, and who enforce oppressive labor conditions to keep prices low.¹⁵ Links between some reception centers and organized crime funnel migrants into this work. Despite a 2016 law criminalizing the *caporalato*, it remains pervasive, now controlling approximately one fourth of Italy's agricultural workforce.¹⁶ A system that has long profited from Italy's poorer classes now also exploits post-colonial migrations, joining in the conscription of migrants to benefit global north economies.¹⁷

As the *caporalato*'s exploitation of multiple marginalized groups shows, these practices are infused with class issues and are also racialized, exemplifying Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."¹⁸ In fact, these conditions have been widely recognized as a form of enslavement and denounced by politicians, activists, and international bodies including

the UN.¹⁹ Low-to-no-wage pay and abusive living and working conditions reflect Mbembe's definition of "slave" as a person "whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered—with impunity."²⁰ Exploitation and violence in the agricultural sector today carry on the extractive processes through which European colonial powers first established a hold over African subjects and territories. As these processes are reproduced in contexts of precarious migration and organized crime in Italy, they illustrate how individual migrants can so readily become casualties of the systems linking global capitalism, national sovereignty, and the regulation of bodies.²¹ Local and regional structures, including the caporalato, "mediate the relationship between global capital and local labor," maintaining a precarious workforce of racialized laborers by exploiting people who are already legally and socially marginalized.²²

This is an instance of what Mezzadra and Neilson term the "multiplication of labor," which manifests in part as an *intensification* of labor and of exploitation. As they contend, ongoing shifts in the composition of workforces and the multiple borders that differentiate people in turn shape labor and living conditions through the colonization of time and the manipulation of space.²³ Through this lens, we can understand the exploitation of African migrant workers in Calabrian orange groves as occurring within the very specific context of caporalato exploitation and as entangled in broader global shifts. This underscores the idea that the emergency apparatus does not simply concern arrivals at Italian borders but fits within a broader web of interconnected racial capitalist processes and practices.

Precarious work keeps people mobile across regional borders they might not otherwise cross so frequently. For instance, migrants who live in Calabrian reception centers while awaiting word on their asylum applications often imagine leaving the region, joining friends and family in larger cities or in northern European countries. Yet outside of accoglienza, the region is a destination, at least seasonally. Calabria employs the second highest number of agricultural workers (following Sicily) and relies heavily on migrant labor.²⁴ For those without permanent European residency, seasonal work is often their only option for obtaining the necessary funds to support themselves and, perhaps, as several people explained to me in interviews, to pay the debts they owe to those who funded their journeys.

Irregular labor does not necessarily mean irregular status; working local harvests, mostly without work contracts, are refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants with shorter-term humanitarian visas, and undocumented migrants. In major agricultural areas such as the Piana di Gioia Tauro, near Rosarno, migrants are generally unable to secure or afford housing and squat in makeshift camps outside of city centers, sometimes in the countryside, which local authorities generally tolerate and periodically evict. These camps may be entirely improvised, built by migrants as a set of lean-tos with salvaged metal and wood, housing hundreds of people at a time. Anticipating the arrival of seasonal workers, NGOs and local governments sometimes construct temporary encampments that offer slightly

more humane conditions (e.g., sturdy tents, running water, electricity access) but do not forestall exploitation and never suffice for all workers. Working alongside one another, migrant laborers with protected status and those without papers bear the risks of exhaustion and injury that accompany physical labor. Unions exist and support multiple movements, demonstrations, and legal reforms but lack the power to usher in sweeping changes.

Bearing public witness to reprehensible working conditions in this context necessarily means speaking out against systemic violence and corruption—which is especially challenging from precarious positions. While Italian publics are generally well aware of this system and the realities it encompasses, farmworkers and their labor are still readily invisibilized. For migrants, the invisibilization of labor is facilitated through the manipulation of categorical binaries such as “refugee” versus “economic migrant”—that is, through a focus on migrants’ individual deservingness as the fundamental issue shaping the so-called crisis. Within such logics, it’s easy to conflate workers’ invisibility with what is presumed to be their *clandestinità* or clandestine status. The very word *clandestino*, a common derogatory term for *migrante*, or “migrant,” suggests a kind of secretive or sneaky illegality. While invisibility can also be a right, invisibilization as a process of obscuring and erasure can enable violence to continue.

Migrant farmworker struggles remain invisibilized from mainstream concerns given how the refugeeization of labor is tied to the legal and political production of the Afro-European borderzone as one in which Black death is common, subject to either spectacle or disregard. As Carter explains, invisibility “often operates in plain view.” The invisibilization of undesirables helps normalize *emergency* because it is “orchestrated in such a way that it becomes part of a naturalized set of practices, supported by an economy of indifference.”²⁵ The association of migrants with both the security threat of “*emergenza*” and undesirable work reinforces public support for exclusionary policies that treat migrants as a problem, while ensuring they continue to arrive.

Farmworker invisibility became globally salient in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. As many scholars, journalists, and activists remarked, farmworkers were “essential yet expendable,”²⁶ their perceived deservingness of legal residency bound up in their status as workers who provide fundamental goods and services. In Italy, early pandemic lockdown prompted a labor shortage; migrants were both unable to move and concerned about the risks of relocating for work at that time. In May 2020, lawmakers passed a bill intended to temporarily regulate up to six hundred thousand migrant workers if they could demonstrate an employment contract.²⁷ Yet implementation failed, and abuse increased during this time. Of the only two hundred thousand applications filed, 85 percent were for domestic workers. One key problem was the necessity of the advance contract, which caporali offered in exchange for a hefty fee.²⁸ A failed amnesty amid the high stakes of converging public health and migration “crises” illustrates a kind of systemic captivity

that holds migrants within an exploitative and racialized system of labor—a “precarity trap” in which they move from one exploitative situation to another and which reinforces their invisibility.²⁹

THE REFUGEEIZATION OF LABOR

The week Sangare spoke about the orange harvest, his words felt especially urgent. Just a few days before, Soumaila Sacko, also from Mali and active in a labor union supporting migrant seasonal workers, was shot to death near Rosarno while collecting materials to use to build a shelter. The white Italian man eventually convicted of killing him and injuring two others claimed to have been defending his property, the grounds of a factory closed several years earlier for toxic waste pollution. Sacko’s June 2 death did not lead to extensive statements by the newly instated Conte administration, which included Salvini as interior minister. Nor did it prompt state memorials—a marked absence even of strange grief. It did, however, prompt demonstrations where people marched for migrant worker rights, as I mention in chapter 3. It was also what led people to gather at the Città dell’Utopia to hear directly from braccianti about their experiences working the harvest and from humanitarian groups operating in the area. Struggles for migrant rights, worker rights, and racial justice intersect in these responses and campaigns.

Several people I met through Baobab Experience had worked the Rosarno orange harvest. Their experiences of hardship and exploitation illustrate how the refugeeization of labor positions them for precarious work. Yousef, whom I mention in earlier chapters, is among a significant number of African harvest workers who do have papers. A legal resident of Italy originally from the Gambia and in his late twenties, Yousef had spent several seasons doing this kind of work while awaiting his protection documents, and later while awaiting renewal. When we met in 2018, he was living in a tent at Piazzale Maslax while waiting for a document renewal appointment. He talked about how the costly, lengthy process of waiting for documents made precarious labor necessary. We recorded an interview upon his return from a short visit to Milan to meet with fellow organizers supporting migrant rights.

Yousef came to Rome after two years of harvest work. He needed to renew his passport at the consulate there in order to proceed with extending his humanitarian documents. Unable to afford a hostel or rent, he had come to live at Baobab while waiting for his questura appointment. One of the challenges he articulated about living there was the absence of work options:

So that’s the way I came to Roma. Before I will see [the consular officer] it takes me almost one week. So the money I came with, it’s finished. I can’t get money to go back to Foggia [Puglia region] again. . . . [The consular officer] also told me that I need to pay money there also. That was forty euro. Plus the passport photos, that is almost forty-five euro. So at that moment I [didn’t] have money, I came to Baobab and I

asked help, for them to help me. So they give me that money, I went to take pictures, and I pay [the consular officer] also to get this paper, to the *questura*. So from there it's a problem . . . since then I cannot leave. I am here for almost ten months.³⁰

Here Yousef describes his position as an uncontracted manual laborer and when we spoke, as the occupant of a tent in Rome, as inextricably linked with the lengthy, costly asylum process. His words highlight waiting as an active process, but one in which his sense of his own agency fluctuates.³¹ His situation is almost paradoxical: he came through the Italian reception system to become a legal resident of Italy, only to live in occupied spaces, performing uncontracted work.

When I asked him to talk about his experiences in the Calabrian orange groves, he spoke through a collective “we,” bearing witness to his own struggles by framing his personal history as part of shared experience:

We are moving season to season because when the season is finished, we have to find farming assistance [elsewhere]. Because in Rosarno they work for oranges. . . . When the orange season is finished, maybe in Rosarno in a few months you have . . . asparagus. So there we work for *asparagi*, but that work is very painful and the money they pay people also is [much less].

Following the logic of emergency response, a migrant exiting Italy's formal *accoglienza* system no longer resides within emergency purview: their case has been adjudicated and a status assigned or denied, and while they may count within the total number of arrivals, they no longer result as part of a population in need of immediate aid. For migrants, authorities' decision on their asylum claims often instead marks a transition or the beginning of new uncertainty.

Legal recognition matters: it opens up a number of doors for foreigners, including access to healthcare and other forms of aid, to contracted work, to fair housing. Those granted refugee status in Italy can move freely among Schengen countries. At the same time, however, as Yousef's case illustrates, obtaining papers does not guarantee stability. While reception processes enable people like Yousef to obtain protection, the pressure to resolve the “crisis” of thousands of annual migrant arrivals by processing asylum claims more swiftly and denying at high rates has also bolstered the production of a precarious workforce. In Italy, the high number of people who exit *accoglienza* without papers—in recent years, 50–80 percent of first-instance asylum cases were rejected annually—lose access to aid and benefits and cannot obtain legal work contracts.³² Undocumented status severely limits the options available for finding housing and work, and for crossing borders.

At the same time, as Yousef attested, in the *caporalato* system, refugee or humanitarian visa status does not protect a worker from exploitation. When Yousef was injured on the job, for instance, he received no compensation. To obtain work in the first place, he had to forego any official contract. Now he had to find ways to continue working in order to survive:

A machine's supposed to do that work . . . not human beings, you know? But we force ourselves because we don't have money to eat, we don't have nothing to help ourselves [for] our health. . . . And we are in the document process also . . . you need to pay the lawyer also to take out the documents [for] you. All those things. You have to go to the field and you work [for low wages] and you give it to the lawyers. So you pay the lawyers and those lawyers also still they don't do nothing for your document process, with all the sufferings that you have [gone through]—so it's very stressful.

So this is the problem, you know, when I was there—so I decided that I cannot do this *campagna* [rural] work and so I created a business also. . . . I'd go to the supermarket, I'd buy things and sell them. Maybe I get a two cent profit or three cent profit. . . . It's not much, but I cannot do that power work [in the fields], it cannot go for my health, but I need to help myself . . . maybe not to go steal, not to go and tell lies to people, you know, to get money from them. But if I can solve my problems, it is better than being in another situation. This is why I'm involved in a business.

While moving for seasonal work, Yousef continuously looked for alternative opportunities. He also opted to work as an ambulant vendor but found it not very fruitful. He was navigating these obstacles on his own but aware that his participation in informal economies was a common one among newcomers. Like many people seeking asylum and humanitarian protection, he hadn't arrived with a work permit. Moreover, people applying for asylum and protection have limited work options while their case is in process. They can only begin working two months after filing their claims, and given the uncertainties of that wait, potential employers understand asylum seekers to be temporary workers. In these circumstances, many opt, like Yousef, for uncontracted positions and day labor.

What's more, it would have been difficult for Yousef to arrive with a work permit, even if he hadn't had to flee his home country. In Italy, seasonal work visas fall under a country-based quota system. However, the annual limits placed on these visas since 2002 have not matched the constant need for workers, especially in agriculture. While the 1998 Turco-Napolitano law established visas for entering Italy to obtain work, the 2002 Bossi-Fini law tied many immigrant visas to work contracts; that is, one has to secure employment before reaching Italy (table 2, appendix). Bossi-Fini, implemented with the aim of eliminating "irregular migration," is instead credited by migration scholars as part of a web of policies and practices that led to growth in precarious migration. Since its implementation, visa quotas have been consistently lowered. By way of example: in 2007, Italy offered 170,000 visas for non-EU foreign workers. A decade later, the *decreto flussi* (official quota decree) offered 30,850 visas, not all of which were finalized within the year.³³ Not only are visas fewer in number; the contracts on which they depend are difficult to come by. These factors have accelerated the refugeeization of workforces: with fewer visa options and fluctuating annual quotas, the agricultural industry

increasingly relies on people with precarious or uncertain legal status, and more people have resorted to reaching Italy by sea and applying for asylum.

This work, in turn, keeps migrants in transit between Italian regions, which holds them in further precarity. Even though the government's "distribution" of asylum seekers to reception centers throughout the country's twenty regions has expanded the foreign population in rural areas, and while those in small villages may not have to travel far to find cash-paying harvest work—because the work is seasonal—many braccianti do travel.³⁴ Yousef described moving between Calabria and Puglia, living in encampments that were at constant risk of *sgombero*, or eviction. In Foggia (Puglia), Yousef described how "police brutality also came there and they destroyed [the migrant encampment]." He was referring to the so-called Gran Ghetto in Rignano Garganico, near Foggia, where up to three thousand migrants lived until it was razed by Italian authorities in 2017, in the act he describes as police brutality. Other camps have since been built and occupied.³⁵

With a term like "police brutality" (which does not have a direct Italian corollary), Yousef analyzes what happened at the Gran Ghetto through the language of anti-racist, abolitionist movements across the English-speaking world. In this way, he links his experience as a Black migrant navigating Italian spaces with experiences across the African diaspora, perhaps most overtly in police brutality against Black communities in the United States. In situating experiences like his in the broader context of struggles against anti-blackness and state violence, testimonies like Yousef's illustrate lived experiences of the refugeeization of labor and speak to how, as white supremacy crosses borders, anti-racist struggles link across geographies.

The refugeeization of labor transpires amid multiple economic shifts that are themselves related to mobility. Calabria is one of the country's poorest regions and continues to see significant out-migration of locals to northern regions and to other European countries. While the *caporalato* operates throughout the country, Southern Italian regions have higher rates of uncontracted agricultural labor and higher unemployment rates in general.³⁶ Hiring and leasing without contracts, however problematic, are relatively common practices: landlords avoid paying taxes on unregistered rents and can maintain lower prices for tenants. But to maintain their visas, migrants need official residence contracts. In interviews, women and men I spoke with in Calabria described how hard it was to obtain a housing contract that would have allowed them to live near a better job. Redeem, from Nigeria, lamented having to close the business she had opened because once she exited official *accoglienza* and lost access to state support, she would not be able to afford to live in the town where her shop was, and she was struggling to find anyone who would rent an apartment to her. Studies spanning the 1990s through the present have established that immigrants often face higher rental costs and a narrower set of possibilities, as rental ads may say outright "*no extracomunitari*" (no non-EU foreigners).³⁷ Black migrants report this housing precarity as a particular hardship.³⁸

In 2018, medical NGO MEDU observed that more than 90 percent of migrants who visited its Rosarno-area clinics were in Italy legally, with most migrants possessing protected status or awaiting a decision on an asylum application. Despite their ability to work legally, fewer than 30 percent of migrants that MEDU met with had obtained a contract for their work. The grave conditions in which migrants live and work “has a serious impact on seasonal workers’ physical and mental health,” including respiratory and digestive conditions and, often, psychological issues from their experiences in Libya.³⁹ In the informal settlements where most workers live, the cold, rainy fall weather and lack of running water or heat exacerbate their symptoms.

These conditions are grave enough that deaths are a regular part of the story of migrant harvest labor. To name but a few from recent years: In 2018 alone, the year I recorded the interview with Yousef, Italian news media repeatedly covered camps in the Rosarno area following the separate deaths of three residents there. Soumaila Sacko was killed on June 2. Two other people died in fires: Becky Moses, a Nigerian woman of twenty-six, died on January 27 in a fire in the camp she had made home after her asylum application was rejected; and Suruwa Jaithe, an eighteen-year-old from the Gambia, burned to death on December 2 in another such camp. These fires were likely started by other residents seeking to stay warm; in the makeshift settlements, they quickly spread.⁴⁰ In August that year, workers went on strike following the death of sixteen braccianti in two separate incidents involving overcrowded vans transporting migrant workers. In addition, precarious conditions include working in increasingly extreme temperatures with little reprieve. In the summer of 2023, at least two farmworkers died while laboring in record-breaking heat: Nasser Al Masoudi from Tunisia, who died in Lazio, and Famakan Dembele from Mali, who died in Puglia.⁴¹ In 2024, when Satnam Singh, from India, lost his arm in a machinery accident in Lazio, his employer left him to die outside. A number of additional deaths on the job, including suicide, should be added to this list.⁴²

These deaths are consequences of the emergency apparatus that has long operated not only in the Mediterranean Sea but within Italian orchards and fields. In fact, today’s braccianti deaths should be understood as occurring in the wake of the 1989 murder of Jerry Essan Masslo, the South African refugee I mention in chapter 1 who was living in a camp for tomato harvesters when he was shot to death. Like these more recent deaths by attack, neglect, and fire, Masslo’s murder signaled more than thirty-five years ago how racism and exploitative labor practices are linked in the disposability and ungrievability of migrant lives and bodies.

Popular media representations of migrant precarity often focus on incidents of violence or degrading circumstances that reiterate negative stereotypes without addressing the systemic issues that produce these circumstances. In fact, while common knowledge, farmworker precarity still often only becomes more widely visible in the immediate aftermath of violence, as they did in news coverage of Sacko’s murder, or of the 2010 demonstrations in Rosarno that turned violent, which I address in the next section as a touchstone for the interconnected issues

of labor exploitation and racism. These acts of violence reflect the interconnectedness of precarious mobility with global agribusiness, local economic strife, racism and anti-immigrant discrimination, and organized crime.

TESTIMONY AND (RE)INSCRIBING PUBLIC MEMORY

Amid the failures of empathy and this ongoing violence, how do those who bear witness about their circumstances choose to tell their stories? How are the limits of witnessing related to the politics of deservingness? Witnessing can bring visibility to a situation—from revealing unknown aspects of a situation, to telling another side of a story. This is one reason so many advocacy campaigns employ testimony.⁴³ Migrant farmworkers represent a kind of limit case: the stakes of their witnessing necessarily reflect the politics of (in)visibility. Moreover, while exploitation in this sector is common, not exceptional, migrants' differential treatment shows that it is racialized. Given that the living and working conditions of braccianti often only make the news in connection with acts of violence, *how* such incidents are written into public memory is critical. Media coverage of these issues often sensationalizes violence or further criminalizes migrants, and news and political debate rarely center migrant perspectives beyond quick clips.

One set of events that remain present in public memory is the migrant-led demonstrations in Rosarno in January 2010. Here I focus on this episode as one that suggests how testimony can (re)engage publics in recent history and related social issues. These incidents remain a common reference point in the Italian national imaginary for debates about racialized violence, but they are often remembered through one-sided tellings as migrant riots. Initially, migrants protested after a drive-by shooting by local Italians of two Africans living in Rosarno, like many, as farmworkers. The protest quickly became violent, with incidents carried over three days, including locals hurling rocks, wielding metal rods, and physically attacking the protesting migrants, and migrants smashing shop windows, beating in car frames, and also fleeing the city. At least fifty migrants, several locals, and several police officers were wounded. Authorities arrested and prosecuted ten migrants in what an article in the *Guardian* referred to as a “bloody ethnic cleansing.”⁴⁴ News coverage of the incidents included multiple images of Black migrants marching and visibly angry, with captions describing the violence and damage to the town. Even stories addressing attacks against migrants still focused on the violence and disorder of those days. While these stories document actual events, they also offer a narrow representation of the broader issues behind the demonstrations and risked affirming racist associations of Black migrants with violence.

In following, a counter-archive of testimonials and more in-depth coverage has documented the events of January 2010, and the broader circumstances in which they unfolded, through the perspectives of migrant workers.⁴⁵ The 2010 documentary film *Il sangue verde* (*Green Blood*) directed by Andrea Segre incorporates

interviews in which migrant harvest workers describe their legal and social precarity, and their relationship to the spaces of the orchard and the camp, in connection with the demonstrations. We hear migrants testify to what happened in 2010, and their narration of the memories of those days offers a fuller, more complex picture of worker exploitation in Rosarno. The film also situates these narrations historically, including through footage of Fascist-era *braccianti* labor performed by Italian locals, emphasizing how despicable working conditions have affected citizens and foreigners for generations. Historicizing labor within Italy offers viewers a way of understanding migrants' struggles outside standard representations that figure migrants as outsiders detached from Italian history. That is, the film expands the tellable narratives about migration.

But changing tellable narratives is not simply about a need for more context. The forms testimony takes can shape the ways that alternative or more complete representations engage audiences. In what additional ways might documentary forms expand or transform tellability, especially considering the problem of migrant (in)visibility and the challenges it poses for witnessing? Here I turn to the 2015 docudrama *Mediterranea*, which reenacts the 2010 events through the eyes of migrants. The film uses layered forms of witnessing in ways that reject dichotomies of deservingness and highlight invisibility as both condition and political strategy. The film is based on the experiences of migrants who live in the area, several of whom act in the film and have worked as citrus harvesters. Directed by Italian-American filmmaker Jonas Carpignano, *Mediterranea* follows the journey of Ayiva, played by Koudous Seihon performing a version of his own story, and Abas, played by Alassane Sy. Given the use of nonprofessional actors, Carpignano's work has been described as a kind of new neorealism; that actors draw on lived experience is certainly crucial to their performances.⁴⁶ Through this layered witnessing, the film illustrates two approaches to repositioning publics and rewriting public memory: first, it offers testimony through reenactment and through the use of actors who perform versions of their own experiences. Second, through these doubled acts of witnessing, its retelling of the 2010 demonstrations counter dominant narratives that portray precarious migration as an "invasion" of "fakers" and challenge associations of Black migrants with violence and degradation.

Ayiva and Abas are two friends who travel from Burkina Faso to Italy. They cross the desert, and then Ayiva steers the crowded dinghy on which they cross the sea. In Rosarno, they live in an informal settlement with other migrants, and they struggle to find steady work and to earn enough to afford better housing. The men's new acquaintances reflect the diversity of Rosarno's migrant community: men from several West African countries, the Maghreb, and Eastern Europe, and a group of women from Nigeria. The film's languages alone reflect the heterogeneity of experience and background, as characters move between English, Italian, Arabic, French, and Bissa. Ayiva befriends a kid-hustler from the local Romani community who helps him navigate the Rosarno scene, where it is not clear who



FIGURE 24. Abas harvesting oranges. Still from *Mediterranea*, by Jonas Carpignano. Used with permission from Stayblack Productions.

is safe to approach for help. He looks after his boss's child, who is the only Italian character who expresses curiosity about Ayiva's home country or family; for others, Ayiva is simply Black, a worker, or a "clandestino." The child also reminds him of his own daughter in Burkina Faso, with whom he chats periodically via Skype. We see the men harvesting oranges and their mistreatment by the caporali who monitor their work (figure 24).

One especially remarkable aspect of the plot is that, apart from a brief scene alluding to a conversation with legal advisors, the narrative does not coalesce around questions of legal residency, asylum, or other visas. As the film resists criminalizing migrants, it also resists victimizing them, instead foregrounding their agency within legal and labor precarity and their physical exclusion from local communities. Part of a trilogy in which Carpignano recounts the complex racial and class politics in the area of the Piana di Gioia Tauro, *Mediterranea's* central story concerns the racial tensions amplified through the intersections of labor

precarity, poverty, organized crime, discrimination, and migration to and within Southern Italy—tensions that erupted in the violent clashes between migrants and locals.⁴⁷ In the film's climax, Ayiva and Abas march with other migrants in the January 2010 demonstrations. In this telling, multiple testimonial acts shape viewers as witnesses who “see” these circumstances through the eyes of migrants, and of Ayiva in particular.

Mediterranea performs a specific kind of memory work that, I'd argue, differs from that of other films that nevertheless embrace related ethics of representation. Matteo Garrone's 2013 Oscar-nominated *Io Capitano* (*Me Captain*), for instance, also tells the story of two friends (cousins) who traverse the Sahara to Libya and then cross the Mediterranean. Like *Mediterranea*, it employs the layered witnessing of amateur actors. Seydou Sarr and Moustapha Fall, who play characters Seydou and Moussa, have spoken in interviews about having themselves reached Italy through lengthy, precarious journeys, experiences surely recalled in different ways in their performance of the journey from Senegal. While both films recount these journeys in compelling ways, *Mediterranea* differs as a docudrama reenacting specific historical events. In this way, its narrative works not only to shift broader narratives of migration—challenging stereotypes about West African men reaching Italy, for instance—but to rewrite Italian collective memory of the events of January 2010. The film builds its account of those events both by recreating actual scenes and by drawing on the power of fictionalization to represent unknown or otherwise untold aspects of the story, raising provocative questions about the borders of testimony.

Given its 2015 release at what many recognized as the height of Europe's “refugee crisis,” *Mediterranea* offers contemporary viewers an opportunity to look to the not-so-distant past for perspectives on the social and historical entanglements that perpetuate this violence. By aligning viewers with the film's migrant protagonist—we see through Ayiva's eyes, and we follow his story—the film functions in ways similar to the docudramas that film scholar Leshu Torchin has described as having “a witnessing function, producing eyewitness testimony, a narrative of suffering, trauma, and injustice in encounters designed to summon politically, morally, and socially engaged publics.”⁴⁸ The story emerged through Seihon's oral testimony to Carpignano, and so the final production is, in one sense, Carpignano's own act of witnessing, based on these testimonies. Yet it also offers the embodied testimony of several actors who perform versions of themselves to reenact historical events at which they were present.⁴⁹ These layered testimonies emerge through relations of witnessing partly enabled by the film's publicity, which featured Carpignano's collaborations with survivors in press releases and festival interviews. Carpignano's work has been supported by the Sundance Festival and director Martin Scorsese, and while the film was not as widely celebrated as other migration cinema—for instance, Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea*, which came out around the same time—*Mediterranea* still represents Hollywood funds and interests and is now available

to stream on Amazon. To that end, the film bears witness to the January 2010 events for an Italian and global audience simultaneously—rewriting history for some, and for others, telling it for the first time.

By (re)inscribing January 2010 events, and migrant exploitation more broadly, into public awareness in a moment when global attention was newly (and has repeatedly) focused on precarious Mediterranean mobilities, the film potentially prompts viewers to recognize how ongoing sea crossings are linked to other precarities within Italy, including in labor. The audience's awareness of migrant farmworkers' lived realities, and in particular Seihon's reenactment of his past—for instance, his own role steering the boat across the sea, or his work harvesting oranges—enables viewers to recognize the film “as an extension of [survivors'] testimony.”⁵⁰ There is a sense of intimacy here that can alter viewers' memories of the events depicted, reconfiguring their representation—especially since for most viewers the January 2010 events were not experienced directly but were always a matter of representation. These new, revised, or expanded memories “have the capacity to transform one's subjectivity, politics, and ethical engagements.”⁵¹ The resonance of the film's reenactments with viewers—that is, its potential to produce new or revised memories—is one way of understanding how “extensions of testimony” function in the world. This is witnessing not to evoke sympathy or pity for “the other,” but to reconfigure and expand memory.⁵² The layered witnessing of the docudrama frustrates the tendency of the white colonial gaze to abstract or objectify, to render a subject either one among *any*, or to treat the subject as thing.⁵³ By making the matter of invisibility part of the production itself, *Mediterranea* resists this urge.

Even if viewers aren't aware of the film's layered acts of witnessing, *Mediterranea*'s mise-en-scène establishes its witnessing authority. Shots in which Ayiva and Abas appear with a group of other border crossers reenact Seihon's personal experiences and, at the same time, echo images familiar to viewers from media coverage of migration between Africa and Southern Europe. Upon nearly reaching the Italian coast, the migrants jump from their small boat and cling to a tuna net, a scene which recreates a 2007 photograph that captured global attention. This image, published in news outlets including the *Guardian*, the *BBC*, and *La Repubblica*, and featured in *The Independent* with the headline “Europe's Shame,” accompanies the story of twenty-seven migrants rescued after having hung onto the steel rails of a tuna net for three days.⁵⁴ In the photograph, taken from an Italian navy helicopter, migrants visibly cling to the net, but all detail is lost to distance. In the film, instead, viewers first glimpse the net from below, as people swim from their sinking raft to the rails. Near the close of this sequence, a wide shot recalls the newspaper photograph, as the camera cuts to a view of the whole structure, with migrants holding the rails; it then cuts back underwater, where two bodies float. Italian audiences' conscious or unconscious recognition of the famous scene is reimagined through this more intimate view, through the characters of

Ayiva and Abas, and through this haunting acknowledgement of death. In these examples of “media witnessing,” the medium itself essentially assumes the position of interlocutor, “aid[ing] in the transmission of the experience to an audience” and enabling viewers to sense an intimacy with these current events, in their portrayal through individual characters.⁵⁵ These recognizable shots depict crucial details in the protagonists’ lives. They also simultaneously recall and question media coverage of precarious migration, reinterpreting those visual and narrative memories.

As a docudrama, *Mediterranea* is concerned with representing history, but its main project involves “performing a memory of the past,” making history “accessible not so much as static ‘fact’ as [via] a process of remembering.”⁵⁶ *Mediterranea*’s portrayal of the demonstrations recognizes them as a moment of violence and, critically, as a moment of anti-racist action, a portrayal that contrasts with the emphasis in much media coverage of the riots on the physical violence of the demonstrations and the damage inflicted on private property. Such coverage often elides or obscures the crucial role that migrants’ individual and collective agency plays within the constraints imposed by these circumstances, and the extent to which such incidents indicate entangled systems of exploitation and discrimination.

In Carpignano’s retelling, and in Seihon’s portrayal of Ayiva, the demonstrations mark a turning point for the protagonist. By this point in the film, viewers know why the migrants are upset, having seen their exploitation by local employers, the abuses hurled at them by locals, and the gunshots aimed at their friends as they walked to their camp. Still, Ayiva resists marching; he tries to convince the others not to protest. Yet he follows them, and viewers see, from his perspective behind the group, the migrants gathering and walking into town. Their chant, in English, of “Stop shooting Blacks!” carries across the scene before any shot portrays the signs or the migrants’ faces. As viewers, we walk with the migrants, looking up with them at the balconies from which a few locals throw rocks. Ayiva watches, in silence, as rocks hit two of the women with their group. The camera follows his gaze from friend to friend, as migrants help their wounded comrades away from the scene. When Ayiva grabs a metal rod and smashes car windows, this action does not come as a surprise, though its decisiveness is notable.

Here again the film recreates images that circulated globally, repositioning them as moments within the story of Ayiva and Abas. A photograph by Franco Cufari shows migrants marching with street signs, dark smoke rising behind them. Although taken from some distance, their angry expressions are still visible (figure 25). At the time, the image was reprinted in Italian, US, and UK papers. In the years since, it has also been miscited, for instance appearing in memes that circulated in Australia suggesting that the photo represented Black protesters in Melbourne (“where the locals live in fear,” one meme reads). When *Mediterranea* presents a version of this recognizable shot, we as viewers are brought physically closer to protesters, and we have already been marching with them for several



FIGURE 25. This photograph of the January 2010 riots by Franco Cufari circulated widely. Reproduced with permission.



FIGURE 26. Recognizable scenes were recreated with a different perspective in *Mediterranea*, by Jonas Carpignano. Used with permission from Stayblack Productions.

minutes and witnessing their exploitation throughout the film (figure 26). It's not about excusing violence but about seeing the violence alongside them, with fury at the conditions we know they confront.

This work challenges invisibility not simply by making visible, but by “locating” the specific modes and harms of that invisibility, in the sense Moten invokes of

locating as a kind of seeing that responds to “crisis.” Defining crisis as “deprivation on a global scale” that is shaped by policing, Moten argues for *seeing* as a form of criticism that recognizes both the crisis and its production within a specific set of dynamics.⁵⁷ Applied to this episode, the generative possibilities of criticism-as-seeing (as locating) can create modes for viewers to *see*—to witness—just how these events and the dynamics that shape them unfold in relation to individual lives, collective experiences, and histories. Testimonial documentary work could also reify crisis—could orient debate around the question of representation. Seeing *beyond* crisis, or understanding migration beyond emergency framings, is not simply about “the constant disruption of the normal.” Rather, it is about creating new ways of seeing, finding new grammars, resisting the need to counter “crisis” on its own terms.

Such acts of witnessing are a reminder that, as Hall writes, “rioting and civil disorder are only the outward, if dramatic, symptoms of this inner unravelling of our social, political and community life.”⁵⁸ To respond to migration as emergency is to pretend that border crossing is an isolated act of individual choice rather than part of a web of relationships, histories, and structures, including these systems of exploitation. As Alessandra Corrado argues in her discussion of the post-Fordist politics of Rosarno and the agricultural industry, “The Africans of Rosarno, by claiming their dignity and rebelling against this complex local racist system . . . have revealed the contradictions and limits of national and European immigration policies.”⁵⁹ In doing so, they also speak to the “contradictions and limits” of their imposed invisibility—one that aligns migrant farmworkers with precarious laborers more generally, while also taking shape through racialized forms of exploitation. *Mediterranea* articulates this invisibility as a potential platform—as migrants join forces to challenge their invisibilization—but also as a condition that limits the actions they can take, as we see in both the narrative the film recounts and in the layered witnessing it adopts to tell this story.

THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY AND THE LIMITS OF WITNESSING IN THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

Bearing witness to how anti-Black, anti-immigrant racism upholds labor exploitation and frustrates the efforts of individual workers to assert their rights, individual testimonies like Yousef’s interview and more widely circulated cultural texts like *Mediterranea* make clear that this violence doesn’t transpire in a vacuum. Nor are the January 2010 protests or the deaths of Sacko, Moses, Jaithe, Keita, Al Masoudi, Dembele, Singh, and others exclusive to the agricultural sector. Rather, attacks on agricultural workers in Italy, and the lack of structural changes in response, are part of the continuum of racialized suffering and death shaping the borders of Europe and reifying the otherness against which Europe defines itself. The perceived expendability of Black subjects in particular is directly related to the

deportability of the asylum seeker or undocumented migrant *and* to what P. Khalil Saucier discusses as *carne nera*, or black flesh:

Black flesh is not simply and only the point of departure, but the vortex of struggle. . . . Europe needs the Black but is allergic to its existence. . . . Thus when only one or more than a thousand move across the aquatic threshold of the Mediterranean, we are witnessing the drift of boundaries between the human and non-human.⁶⁰

Saucier calls us to recognize that the stakes of these precarious crossings are not only a matter of individual lives and deaths but also encompass the very definition of the human. These boundaries “drift” and articulate not only at sea but throughout Italy, throughout Europe. In this vein, the stakes of (in)visibility are not confined to a single worker or moment. To *witness* farmworker exploitation—to attend to these testimonies—is to be asked to account for the construction of the human, or the reassurance of one’s own humanity, through the suffering and “dehumaning”⁶¹ of Black migrant workers. And to tell one’s story from a position of border crossing or enslavement is to make this “drift of boundaries” visible.

Unfolding within the racial capitalist mechanisms of contemporary border regimes, these experiences of exploitation are directly related to the violence of sea crossings. Seen through Sharpe’s framing of the wake, these harvest testimonies are “accounts of the hold in the contemporary”⁶² that show the farmworkers’ camp to be an iteration of the hold of the slave ship where “the logics and the calculus of dehumaning” repeat and augment over time, with repeated deaths “fill[ing] the archives of a past that is not yet past. The holds multiply.” Yet, Sharpe underscores, “so does resistance to them, the survivance of them.”⁶³

A Black Mediterranean perspective makes explicit that the solution to the problem of worker exploitation is not simply to regularize workers, as Italy has done periodically since the late 1980s. Maintaining an industry through the intermittent legalization of workers does nothing to move us beyond the violent idea of migration as an ongoing emergency, and migrants as sortable into categories of deservingness. Instead, responding to the refugeeization of labor requires a shift in perspective, following Saucier, to recognize “*carne nera*” as the site where “the continuum of violence and theft of the body locate ground zero for the conceptualization of the human.”⁶⁴ Migrant farmworker-led movements that challenge their invisibilization reveal Italian spaces to be one site of this ground zero. We see that in their representation in *Mediterranea*, and in continued work on the ground.

For example, just a year after the Rosarno protests, a month-long strike involving hundreds of farmworkers in Nardò, Puglia, prompted a number of local farmers to issue work contracts and was part of efforts that led to the national anti-caporalato law, ratified in 2016 (Law 199/2016). Arguably one of the most successful farmworker-led campaigns, workers protested not only in city centers but in spaces where their presence disrupted the movement of goods—for instance, blocking key roads used for transport. This kind of embodied witnessing shifted

where and how workers appear in the public's line of sight and drew attention to the system's dependence on migrants' actual presence, so that their demands for an end to corruption and slavery-like working conditions would find an audience of "adequate witnesses." The 2016 law has not ended corruption but does give authorities and activists a means for denouncing abuses. Yvan Sagnet, originally from Cameroon and a key organizer in this movement, was inspired to take action when he worked the harvest while in Italy earning a university degree. He also founded NoCap, an organization that certifies goods sold in supermarkets that are produced under fair labor conditions.⁶⁵ NoCap media campaigns position viewer-consumers as witnesses to the need for such a network, and Sagnet continues to draw on his own experience as a bracciante in meetings with activists, politicians, consumers, and university students who plan to work in agriculture in some capacity.⁶⁶

Yet as a set of ethical relations, witnessing is tenuous, volatile, especially in a context where national (white) publics are accustomed to the comfort of disregard, or of suspicion. This has played out in the case of Aboubakar Soumahoro, who, like Sagnet, has used his own narrative as a former farmworker-turned-activist to work for migrant rights and to build a movement that embraced invisibility itself as a political platform. Soumahoro, born in Côte d'Ivoire, became a recognized voice following the murder of Soumaila Sacko, when Soumahoro began speaking more regularly at anti-racist and migrant rights demonstrations. He has a strong social media presence, has collaborated with reporter and television host Diego Bianchi, and published a memoir (*Umanità in rivolta*, or *Humanity in Revolt*, Feltrinelli 2019). The movement he helped build, "Gli Invisibili," or The Invisibles, gained international recognition during the pandemic when organizers brought protective equipment to migrant farmworkers, among other critical and much-needed work—and as media beyond Italy covered a short documentary about the movement (I heard about the documentary on NPR).⁶⁷ In 2021, Soumahoro formalized the movement by founding the Lega Braccianti (the Farmworkers' League), a platform for advocacy and fundraising to support the rights of the Invisibles. He was elected to Parliament through the Green and Left Alliance party in 2022.

A widely circulated photograph of Soumahoro's arrival in Parliament shows him standing outside Montecitorio wearing a suit and muddied work boots, his fist held high. It's an image that communicates both his literal embodiment of this cause, as well as his entry into at least the lower rungs of the political establishment. This victorious, defiant rhetoric made it even more devastating to his supporters—me included—when, shortly after his appointment, his wife and mother-in-law were investigated for embezzlement and corruption in their oversight of migrant reception centers. They have since been indicted. Soumahoro denied knowledge of these deeds, but the case cast suspicion over the new MP, one of the few Black parliamentarians to serve in Italy. It also threatened the causes he was seen to represent, through suspicion and by removing the spotlight from those causes.

As the voice and face of a movement he then shepherded into his Parliamentary work, Soumahoro embodied the movement's successes but also established the conditions for its failure. As journalist Annalisa Camilli astutely pointed out at the time, part of the problem for Soumahoro was that he came to embody *Gli Invisibili* in a moment when he was also widely seen to embody oppositional, moralistic politics—"campaigning on values, rather than policies."⁶⁸ The Soumahoro fiasco did not suddenly reveal problems with the MP; rumors had circulated earlier about his own lack of transparency in union leadership and fundraising, for instance. Instead, this case points to systemic issues, including how racism pervades political party structures and discourse—as Soumahoro's race made it that much easier for people to discount him and the work he represents. As Camilli argues, Parliament had all but dropped the focus on criminality in the *accoglienza* system, until those problems could be pinned on an MP of African descent. Moreover, discourse surrounding this case has failed to address broader structural issues within *accoglienza*, including the gradual reduction in funding since 2018.

I raise the Soumahoro example because it illustrates another kind of limit case, as political heroics may utilize witnessing to gain visibility but are still subject to the operations of systemic racism. They can also distract from ongoing movement work and from "the collective visibility of invisibility."⁶⁹ The image of Soumahoro in his work boots may be about representation and the promise of visibility, yet it does not wholly counter the complex problem of invisibilization—a set of processes that have only continued to obscure the issues facing farmworkers and people living in reception centers. (We might think, too, of how an emphasis on persona-based visibility contrasts with other movements built around invisibility, such as the Zapatistas' decision to wear masks *in order to be seen*, obscuring their own faces to move collectively and "undermine hierarchy.")⁷⁰ Instead, by channeling the movement through his persona—a tactic not uncommon in politics—Soumahoro essentially made the issues he stood for contingent on his own story, in a moment of widespread suspicion against African migrants.

The further suspicion cast on farmworker movements and precarious migration also distracts publics from recognizing what is in fact longstanding collective work. And this work continues. A number of translocal, transnational efforts are organizing for change in ways very rooted to place and community. Actions include a range of locally based collaborations in which migrants produce and obtain social and legal support. In Campobasso, several Italian employees of a local CAS started a small farm where they work alongside newcomers. This small-scale farming operates in a system almost wholly separate from the national and global markets that large-scale agriculture supplies. It doesn't compete with agribusiness, but it does create alternative forms of agricultural employment for those involved. In Palermo, the NGO Porco Rosso and the restaurant and workspace *Molti Volti* ("many faces") are hubs for migrants and Italians to build solidarity and support one another in work and through community, and through food produced in just,

sustainable ways. One answer these groups offer to the problem of (in)visibility is orienting their efforts toward recognition, at least in part, on a local scale. Through a focus on the (trans)local and on intersections across multiple issues, these efforts challenge social erasure and the withholding of rights.⁷¹

CONCLUSION: WITNESSING BEYOND VISIBILITY

Transnational migrant and racial justice movements are bringing renewed global attention to the exploitation of migrant workers in agribusiness and other sectors. These activists' efforts exemplify the possibilities for migrants to exercise agency despite the limits placed on their autonomy by the severe social borders that divide, for example, the realities of global agribusiness managers from those of the laborers harvesting their products. These borders highlight "a fracture at the very heart of the concept of citizenship"⁷² that is further enunciated by the mobility of Mediterranean migrants, by the policing and exploitation of their movements, and by the solidarity, activism, and cultural production that emerge in these same spaces.

These are ongoing struggles that manifest not only in demonstrations and media campaigns but in everyday labor and the routines that accompany it. As Carter points out in a discussion of African diaspora and (in)visibility,

working against invisibility and insisting on one's social presence is what people do all the time—Senegalese migrants create an African market on the streets in an Italian shopping district, where police detain them and sequester their wares, colonial soldiers insist on their right to equal pay, and others everyday refuse to succumb to the indignities of social exclusion, immigration restrictions, discrimination, and neglect.⁷³

Again, witnessing is not simply about making visible, just as the stakes of witnessing in contexts of precarious migration do not come down to empathy. The conditions in which migrant farmworkers live and labor index the failures of empathy to sustain material change. If change depended on empathy, then the fall of Soumahoro would devastate farmworker rights movements. They will struggle, but they will also persist.

Crucially, the case of braccianti also reveals how embedded the emergency apparatus is beyond immediate sites of migration. The so-called emergency of Mediterranean migration is neither a sudden, unprecedented rupture, nor an isolated set of issues. Rather, it involves a multiscalar set of interlocking systems of exploitation and exclusion that function in part through a reliance on the invisible farmworker, and that connect death at sea to the single orange clipping and to the more than 1.7 million metric tons of oranges harvested in Italy each year.⁷⁴ The emergency apparatus serves globalized Western economies by maintaining a labor force about whom publics not only don't have to care but, crisis framings suggest,

should be wary. Emergency imaginaries ignore and exacerbate the structural and systemic issues that hold *some* lives in precarious conditions—tightening borders for people while facilitating the movement of goods, capital, and services.⁷⁵ Put another way, the racialization of those presumed to a source of “crisis” for Europe allows European and Italian publics to ignore their perpetual dehumaning, for the traveler who drowns and for the migrant filling crates.

Europe’s reliance on deportable workers shows the colonial present to be an age of emergency—or put another way, shows how integral “emergency” is to maintaining the colonial logics and structures that define the present. Working for stability from Italy’s margins, the people whose experiences I have discussed here challenge the boundaries imposed on them by the asylum regime, by racist structures and practices, and by Italy’s emergency politics. Their testimonies present the right to remain in Italy as the right also to have one’s presence and work recognized through contracts and fair wages. Just as these testimonies show the urgency of the issues that intersect in the orange groves, they also show the need to find ways not simply to address repeated “crises.” Framing their stories and experiences not through categories of “legal” or “illegal” migration, but in ways that expose the structures linking precarious crossing and migrant worker exploitation, they illustrate how exercising these rights in the colonial present requires a shift from emergency to emancipatory politics.