

Epilogue

Mobility in an Age of Emergency, or, A Small and Stubborn Possibility

In recent years, the area of jungle between Colombia and Panama known as the Darién Gap has regularly made international news as a treacherous passage for people making their way north to Mexico and the United States. This site of transit is also a site of border externalization and control, via surveillance, detention, and collaboration between US, Panamanian, and Colombian governments to prevent people from moving any further north.

Attesting to how such dangers resonate across contexts, in the last decade, scholars, journalists, and activists have increasingly referred to the Darién Gap as “the new Mediterranean.”¹ *Mediterranean* as global metonym for deadly crossing, for policed borders, for journeys of extreme risk.

To invoke one “crisis” to explain another: at the surface, this rhetorical move contains no future but simply trades in labels that convey migration as a rupture, a threat, an emergency. It also reflects a trade in kind. In the 1990s, the Mediterranean was called “Europe’s Rio Grande,” a label used in part to make a point about divisions, that is, about the border—the sea, the river—as separating regions entirely distinct.²

What if we instead understood the analogy not as concerning division or the disruption of norms, but as pointing to the porosity of borders and to ongoing entanglements across geographies? After all, crisis and emergency discourses orient European and North American attention to southern borderzones not only figuratively but because these crossings are among the very few options available to tens of thousands of people on the move each year. The Darién Gap is “the new Mediterranean” not simply because it is a dangerous borderzone, but as a now frequent transit corridor for Africans who opt to fly to Brazil, Ecuador, or

Colombia and make their way north via the Americas rather than via the Mediterranean Sea.³

As this book has shown in the case of Italy, how a so-called *emergenza* immigration or border or refugee crisis takes shape is not simply a matter of how people cross borders but is the product of a complex and shifting apparatus of policies, discourses, and practices that obscure some voices and experiences while making others hypervisible, and that operate together to perpetuate circumstances of risk and precarity. In other words, crisis begets crisis. Asylum itself is increasingly under threat. In Italy and throughout Europe, the criminalization not only of migration but of rescue and aid transforms practices of care from ethical obligations and community practices to exercises in risk. Emergency and crisis rhetorics shape the experiences of migrants and local communities; they also limit broader understandings of mobility by positing migration as the cause of dire circumstances and by construing rights as negotiable or not always applicable.

In this age of emergency—of climate change, pandemics, wars, race- and gender-based violence, economic disparity—migration articulates the intersections of multiple overlapping issues and how they impact individuals and communities. Matters of real, material urgency—genocide, wildfires, a lethal virus—become recognized “crises” as they are managed, mediated, and manipulated over space and time. This is not to say that they don’t require radical, immediate intervention, but that the constant treatment of these issues within emergency frameworks defines them through emergency imaginaries, operating as a “counterrevolutionary force” that holds the future hostage, making it difficult to recognize how contemporary issues are interwoven with longer histories and linked injustices, or to envision possibilities for care and community that do not rely on the logics and temporalities of emergency.⁴ It’s hard not to perceive emergency as a way of being and its accompanying structures, risks, and acts of violence as the terms to which we are collectively bound.

As emergency transits through regions, languages, and lives, how to see outside the grammars and logics it imposes? How to know the world beyond the constraints of crisis—or to create such a future?

Moving from the understanding that “emergency” is both experienced materially and produced through our collective imaginaries, this book has investigated the workings of the emergency apparatus through testimony as method. The makers and narrators whose testimonies I document, analyze, respond to, and in some cases coproduce, make evident some of the violence of emergency migration governance and also signal alternative ways of understanding mobility and its intersections with history, belonging, identity, and rights. These testimonies shift our understanding of the Mediterranean from a sea of “crisis” to a critical site of production of race, where notions of rights and refugeeness are being tested. In Italy, where precarious migration has long been framed in emergency terms, refuting the notion that migrants are the bearers of crisis requires seeing beyond the interminable present of *emergenza*. As I have shown through oral, written,

and filmic testimonies, and examples that illustrate migration realities via material space, this work of witnessing is already in play, actively reinscribing interactions, discourses, spaces, and memory with displaced histories and transforming what narratives of migration are available to broader publics.

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One of the most widely circulated images of Europe's "migration crisis" is an aerial photograph of a migrant boat in the Central Mediterranean. It's a photograph you have most likely seen; it continues to be reproduced under headlines around the globe. As viewers looking down from above, we see the faces of dozens, perhaps even hundreds of migrants packed in together, gazing up at the camera from the boat. It's a colorful image, with people in bright clothes. Viewed on a laptop or cell phone, it seems to capture a crowd, but zooming in, individual faces become visible. Some grin at the camera. Some hold infants in their arms. Some raise their hands as if surrendering, or make the peace sign with their fingers. It's an image that invites us to ask, Who is witnessing whom? That is, what relations of witnessing does the photograph capture or invoke? To what ends does such witnessing aim?

This image was circulated by newspapers and activists as a call to action to resolve the "humanitarian crisis" of contemporary Mediterranean migration. Taken in 2014 by Italian photographer Massimo Sestini, its caption in *Time Magazine* read, "Italian navy rescues asylum seekers traveling by boat off the coast of Africa on the Mediterranean, June 7, 2014." It was recognized with a World Press Photo award that year and seemed to cultivate compassion; an effort followed to identify the people in the photograph.

Some six years later, the same image appeared in a campaign ad for Silvia Piani, running for office with Salvini's Lega Party in the Lombardia region. Calling up pandemic-era politics, the ad reads: "When you forget your mask: €1,000 fine. Arrive in a *barcone* [migrant boat]: room, board, and phone plan."⁵ The photograph is flipped, so that the boat is moving in the other direction. Banking on viewers' perhaps subconscious memory of the original image, Piani's ad turns the boat around, as she would, sending it back to Africa.

Proof that, as Sontag argued, photographing atrocities does not guarantee their singular reception, this image and its subsequent manipulation remind us to understand witnessing not as a straightforward exchange of objective evidence but as a transaction always contingent on the people involved and the circumstances of their seeing (or hearing, or reading, etc.).⁶ The crucial question is not what the photograph means but how it circulates, who owns it, whether those photographed are aware their faces have traveled the world. Simply seeing the image, while it may sometimes enable compassion or empathy, will not resolve border violence or racial injustice. Witnessing is not always transformative. As I have emphasized throughout this book, the violence of emergency is itself evidence

of the failures of empathy. The point is not to redeem empathy, but to rethink the work of witnessing itself.

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Emergency is everywhere, experienced differentially and also circulated through a range of media. Yet as much as it stuns, emergency shouldn't surprise us. For Benjamin, recognizing our present as an age of emergency means refuting the temptation to see today's circumstances as unexpected. "The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical," he wrote shortly before fleeing Vichy France. "This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."⁷ Likewise, we should recognize the ongoing dehumanizing and deadly violence that today's emergency-response border regimes impose not as ruptures but as emerging from longer histories and efforts that created no space for what Ahmed terms "the conditions of possibility of hearing" that testimonial ethics can open.⁸

Where do the failures of empathy leave us?

They leave us in a police car in North Macedonia with Abu Bakar, the husband of Fatmata, a woman from Sierra Leone shot to death by a border guard as she tried to cross from Greece with a small group of people. They leave us with the death of Soumaila Sacko in Calabria, trying to gather building materials to build a shelter to sleep in after harvesting tomatoes. They leave us with blocked ports and abandoned boats, with barbed wire buoys in the Rio Grande and US governors campaigning for reelection by bussing asylum seekers to distant cities, with asylum seekers imprisoned on a barge in the English Channel, with live-streamed genocide as Palestinians document their own violent erasure. The failures of empathy leave us with the strange grief of states and authorities who pretend empathy while depoliticizing violence. They leave us with a perplexing sense that "crisis" is both inevitable and unpredictable, that national borders trump individual rights.

At the same time, this age of emergency is also a time of transnational movements and reconfigured practices of care. I'm thinking of how I learned of Fatmata's death, from comrades at Greece-based NGO Second Tree, which mobilized to support Abu Bakar, sending staff to be with him those first weeks and to ensure Fatmata's body was returned to her family for burial. Or of the organizations by and for migrant women, like the Donne di Benin City in Palermo, which helps people exit trafficking networks. Our age of emergency is also a period of protest and organizing, of solidarity encampments, of migrant-centered art, of expanding dialogues on race, borders, and decoloniality. It is a time of accountability, with activist collective Alarm Phone running a hotline for sea crossers and inspiring related efforts in the Sahara. And it is a time of storytelling—of reclaiming narrative through a range of media—from Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani's memoir *No Friend but the Mountains*, written via WhatsApp from the

Australian detention center on Manus, to documentaries made by border crossers on cell phones, to graffiti inscribed onto prison walls and culverts en route.

Witnessing is not only about testifying to or documenting the past; it's also about seeing the potential for change. Writing in response to the US war in Vietnam, Baldwin argued that "when the black populations of the world have a future, so will the Western nations have a future—and not till then." He was protesting the US conscription of Black Americans into an imperial war, sent to defend a nation that holds them in harm. Until such a reckoning occurs, he wrote, "Western populations . . . will precipitate a chaos throughout the world which, if it does not bring life on this planet to an end, will bring about a racial war such as the world has never seen." This warning, a recognition of the racial violence that structures the colonial present, echoes in today's intersecting "crises." It's also his point of departure for that slimmest line of hope: "I think that mankind can do better than that, and I wish to be a witness to this small and stubborn possibility."⁹

A small and stubborn possibility: amid widespread violence and uncertainty, this is the scale on which a different future might be set in motion. I don't mean this as a metaphor for resilience. Rather, I mean to take Baldwin at his word, to invoke a small and stubborn possibility as what might emerge through the kinds of witnessing I have discussed throughout this book. Witnessing is about making visible, about seeing differently, but it is equally about imagining otherwise. To imagine—to create—a world that no longer perceives migration as an inherent threat requires reckoning not only with the individual law or shipwreck or discriminatory act (though all of these merit direct response), but also with how these acts fit within a broader apparatus that posits them as solutions to the sudden, unprecedented "problem" of migration, and that renders such acts always possible and increasingly likely. It is to center mobility as a way of being, to mourn and care in ways that defy strange grief, to practice radical hospitality, to challenge systems that build borders as violent, racialized spaces of hypervisibility and erasure, of extreme risk, of nationalisms. This is what we might think of as witnessing for abolition: engaging the world in ways that practice emancipatory rather than emergency politics, that participate in imagining a future not structured by crisis logics.

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Amadou Diallo led me on a walk through Palermo, his adopted city. We meandered past the Quattro Canti; stopped into Ciwara, an African café in the famous *Vucciria* market; walked past a couple of African-owned stores as we made our way to the waterfront. There, I accompanied him to a meeting of local organizations connecting around creating an anti-racist network. Diallo was there representing *Stra Vox*, the NGO he cofounded on June 6, 2020, amid the initial massive uncertainties of the pandemic, in response to the murder of George Floyd.

For Diallo, this work is about migrant rights and anti-racism, but it's also about Italy and Europe, now his home. It's about Italian youth who are leaving because



FIGURES 27a and 27b Across the street from each other are this mural of George Floyd and the entrance to BarConi (2022). Photos by the author.

they don't see a future here, while Africans arrive by boat to build a better life. He sees these movements as connected—not analogous, but linked, yet another reason to think expansively about what belonging looks like in the world these movements are both responding to and building.

In the Ballarò neighborhood, Diallo introduced me to the staff of a new gelateria run by newcomers from the Gambia and Nigeria, with the support of restaurant and community center *Molti Volti*. They named the spot BarConi, a pun that recalls the boats on which they crossed the sea to reach safety—*barconi*—and that alludes to the ice cream *coni* they fill for happy customers (figure 27b). They see the name, they said, as signaling a shift “dalla disperazione alla speranza”—away from the despair of the boat and toward hope for the future.

That gaze toward a different future is akin to what I imagine Baldwin had in mind in hoping to be a witness to a “small and stubborn possibility” for change, for “doing better than that.” His is a statement about surviving, and also about imagination.

The reorienting gaze of wordplay—a pun that contains lives and livelihoods—offers a small and stubborn possibility for yet another reason. When BarConi employees look out the front of their shop, they see a mural of Floyd, by local artist Cristian Picciotto, the words “no racism” emerging from Floyd’s mouth (figure 27a). This positioning—Floyd’s face before a migrant-owned gelateria named after precarious vessels that move in the wake of colonial violence—recognizes the structural violence linking Mediterranean crossings and anti-Black racism across regions. It’s a juxtaposition that makes present the entanglements of

today's precarious crossings, global anti-blackness, the Movement for Black Lives, evolving debates about who belongs in Italy, and the ways that Africans in Europe are creating solutions and services and imagining other ways of being together, via transnational networks and local actions. It's a perhaps small, perhaps stubborn act of reframing that asks passersby to reflect on the relation between the boats, the city, the presence of migrants, and questions of rights and justice, and to orient themselves—ourselves—in relation to these struggles and possibilities.