

Art and the refugee 'crisis': Mediterranean blues

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Artists are mapping new itineraries of the Mediterranean, throwing into relief an incurable colonial wound that continues to bleed into the present.



Saidou: Mali to Italy. "I came to Europe because of the war. I went to Algeria and from there I took a boat without knowing where I was going. It happened this way, that's destiny." Photo ©Kate Stanworth. The so-called contemporary migrant 'emergency' in the Mediterranean is the deliberate political and juridical construction of Europe. Refusing Article 13 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948), all European states have decided that not everyone has the right to move and migrate. This violent exercise of European and First World power reopens a profound colonial wound. Migrants rendered objects of *our* legislation and laws signal once again the asymmetrical relations of power that produced the colonial world and its ongoing fashioning of the present.

Today, the evocation of 'emergency' and 'crisis' in the Mediterranean, signalled in the brutal [necropolitics](#) of leaving some to drown, others to be turned back, and all to be forced to suffer horrendous journeys over desert, sea and increasingly fortified barriers, clearly draws on altogether deeper geographies of regulation and possession.

European colonial power was established, affirmed and secured by control of the seas. Just as in 1800, when Napoleon and Nelson were fighting for global hegemony around its shores and on its waters, the Mediterranean remains an exclusively European matter (with Israel and Turkey as subcontractors). It is part and parcel of the geometry of the colonial present, where our security invariably secures someone's else's death. There is a beautiful [short film](#) by the Ethiopian activist and film maker Dagmawi Yimer (*Asmat/Names*) that seeks to rescue from the anonymity of the depths those who have drowned by restoring their names to memory, transforming the sea into a vital archive for us condemned 'to listen to these screams'. Yimer was himself an 'illegal' migrant who made it across the sea.

In this situation, although consistently sidestepped and avoided for embarrassing the hollow claims of European humanism, a number of contemporary visual artists insist that we return to the scene of the crime. Here we explore the terrible gap between the arbitrary violence of the law and the insistence of social and historical justice.

On April 12 this year, in the context of an AHRC financed programme '[Responding to Crisis: Forced Migration and the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century](#)', involving Keele and Royal Holloway universities and the University of Naples,

'Orientale', a workshop entitled *Sea Crossings: The Mediterranean and its Others* was held in Naples in a former squat 'L'Asilo'. This structure is among the several occupied buildings in the city recognised by the town council as cultural centres. An intensive day of debate and discussion was punctured by three artistic instances involving Zineb Sedira, Kate Stanworth and Giacomo Sferlazzo. In different ways, the photographic work exhibited by Kate Stanworth, the discussion of her own work by Zineb Sedira and the performance by Giacomo Sferlazzo, proposed a radical realignment of the usual coordinates for registering and discussing migration in today's Mediterranean.

Kate Stanworth's [photographic exhibition](#) of diverse migrants dislocated in European cities – 'Where we are now' – rightly played on the ambivalence of 'we'. If, most obviously, the collective noun refers to relocated migrants in unfamiliar lands and cities, forced to re-negotiate their way in the world robbed of domestic referents, the insidious undertow is that the 'we' is also us and our responsibility for such situations. In the translation of transit we discover not simply that migrants, often under dramatic duress, are forced to transform themselves continually in order to engage with unplanned situations, but also that the very contexts of European culture and home are being translated. It is this mutual process, no matter how sharply asymmetrical the powers involved, that unleashes the slow but profound remaking of home, citizenship, culture and belonging... for all; not, and most obviously, only for the unexpected stranger. The narratives sustained in Stanworth's photographs and the brief captions provided by the migrants cut up ready explanations and the flat maps of our understanding with rougher, often difficult to assimilate, interrogations. The latter leave no one really feeling at home.



Salma: Syria to Germany. "I still have this dream to come back to Syria. If I complete my studies I can make radical change there, I can give benefit for the people and the country." Photo ©Kate Stanworth. In her [visual and mixed media work](#), the Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira draws us into the slippage and the translation that accompanies the transit of contemporary '[traveling cultures](#)': women in white veils who oscillate in the interval of Islam and Christianity: perhaps Muslim or the Madonna (*Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary*, 2000). Elsewhere, between rusting hulks of ships bobbing in the sea waters of Mauritania (*Shipwreck series*, 2008), derelict colonial buildings on the Algerian coast (*Haunted House*, 2006) and the glances northwards from the African shore, maritime horizons promotes desire and dreams of a better life.

Here the sea, as a troubled archive, constructed as a site of multiple crossings, is transformed from a presumably dumb accessory to the political life and histories occurring on land to become a historical interrogation. If occidental modernity depended on its marine mastery to realise a colonial appropriation of the globe, a maritime reasoning (*Floating Coffins*, 2009) today insists on the transit of other narrations on and over its waters. The ambivalence of the sea as both bridge and barrier reveals the deeper political economy of migration and its long term centrality to the making of the modern world. The ruins of a European colonial past here haunt the configurations of the present.

Giacomo Sferlazzo [recounts in song and storytelling](#) a history of Lampedusa. Once again, this is an oblique narrative. It refuses to tow the line. It transforms this tiny island of desert scrub (once covered in woods and full of wild life until charcoal burning brought about an ecological disaster) that lies 200 km south of Tunis and Algiers into another tale. As an outreach of Europe in Africa, at least geographically speaking, the island has in recent decades notoriously become a 'hot spot' for 'illegal' migration. A lost out island far to the south of Sicily, once home to Muslim, Christians, pirates, sponge divers and fishermen, Lampedusa has been transformed into a border outpost and militarised zone, a juridical fortress with a detention centre.

Sferlazzo's words and music unpack the arbitrary rigidity of this existing situation. The sedimented histories, resistance and refusals of a homogenous and static representation, stamped by the authority of Italy and Europe, falls apart. Crossed by multiple bodies and histories, the island escapes reduction to a frontier settlement and becomes the laboratory for questions and processes that neither Italy nor Europe seem capable of answering. Contrary to unilateral definitions of the Mediterranean and of Lampedusa's role in policing and protecting its borders, Sferlazzo's songs and stories rescue from the archives sustained by this island and the surrounding sea a humanism that exceeds the limits of European and Occidental sovereignty.



Bourak: Syria to Germany. "I wanted to make the journey like an adventure, discovering new places and cities. We called it an adventure and something to remember. It was only when we saw families and children on our journey that we thought about the suffering." Photo ©Kate Stanworth. Tracing itineraries that commence from the south – from south of the Sahara, from the south of the Mediterranean, of Italy, of Europe – the work of all three artists disorientate and reorientate our mapping of the modern world. Here we confront the journeys induced by music and the visual arts: their invitation to look, and to look and listen again, that is always accompanied by the grit in the eye, the dissonance in the ear, that scratches the conventional framing and figuration of the world. This produces a slash in our habitual tempo-spatial coordinates. As such it leaves a potential trace, the after-life of a disturbance, an interrogation.

In an important sense, art in its concentrated attention and affects is always about matter out of place. The figuration of the migrant in the contemporary field of vision deepens and disseminates this unhomely quality. For the modern migrant is not only the reminder of a colonial past that powerfully and unilaterally made the world over in a certain fashion. She also shadows present artistic practices with what the prevailing sense of modernity structurally seeks to avoid or negate, precisely in order to secure its particular sense of home and belonging.

On the other side of the canvas, in the margins of the frame, throwing a constant shadow across the visual field and disturbing our ears, those other histories fester as an incurable wound that continues to bleed into the present. Reopening the archive of a modernity whose art seemingly revolves around itself, the critical pace here quickens,

threatening to spin out of the regulated order of its institutional reception in order to dirty the whiteness of its walls and the rationality of its knowledge with the dirt, death, despair, destitution and desires of an other worldly order.

This article is part of the series [Forced Migration and the Humanities](#). This dialogue is an editorial partnership with openDemocracy 50.50 led by Mariangela Palladino (Keele University) and Agnes Woolley (Royal Holloway University of London).

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