



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Composing a world of common vulnerability

**Citation for published version:**

Farrier, D 2016, 'Composing a world of common vulnerability: Spectral metaphors and disoriented migrations in Ruth Padel's 'The Mara Crossing' Culture, Theory and Critique. DOI: 10.1080/14735784.2015.1104255

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/14735784.2015.1104255](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2015.1104255)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Culture, Theory and Critique

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

©Farrier, D. (2016). Composing a world of common vulnerability: spectral metaphors and disoriented migrations in Ruth Padel's The Mara Crossing. Culture, Theory and Critique.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Composing a World of Common Vulnerability: Spectral Metaphors and Disoriented Migrations in Ruth Padel's *The Mara Crossing***

**Abstract:** This article examines disorientation as a mode of thinking and a response to the emergency of irregular migration in the Mediterranean. As Iain Chambers and others have recently explored, the contemporary Mediterranean is a space of multiple contradictions increasingly defined by the negotiation of physical and political presence and absence. I argue that staying with the affective and intellectual disorientations of these contradictions, surrendering the orientation of reason and certainty, represents a means to ethically engage with the disempowered and dislocated experience of irregular migrants. Bringing together Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor as a momentary rupture in the direction of thought which invites us to not only accommodate difference but make it the basis for relationality, and Bruno Latour's concept of politics as 'the progressive composition of a common world', this article reads *The Mara Crossing*, Ruth Padel's recent collection of poetry and prose reflections on human and animal migrations, as composing a poetics of common vulnerability. Just as metaphor risks the decomposition of meaning in the arrangement of unlikeness, responding to the challenge to re-orient politics requires engaging with the productive potential of disorientation. In situating critical responses to the disaster of Mediterranean migration in the points of torsion which compose scenes of irregular migration as scenes of political and ethical disorientation, it is possible, I believe, to also discover a path towards a re-orientated, ethically-informed politics.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean; Irregular Migration; Metaphor; Animals; Ruth Padel

This article examines disorientation as a mode of thinking and a response to the emergency of irregular migration in the Mediterranean. As Iain Chambers and others have recently explored, the contemporary Mediterranean is a space of multiple contradictions increasingly defined by the negotiation of physical and political presence and absence (Chambers, 2008; Chambers and Curti, 2008; Hulme, 2005; Ponzanesi, 2011). I wish to explore the viability of staying with the affective and intellectual disorientations of these contradictions; of surrendering the orientation of reason and

certainty to engage with the disempowered and dislocated experience of irregular migrants. In situating critical responses to this particular compound disaster in the points of torsion which compose scenes of irregular migration as scenes of political and ethical disorientation it is possible, I believe, to also discover a path towards a re-orientated, ethically-informed politics.

The UNHCR has estimated that at least 2,200 migrants drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean between the beginning of July and the end of September, 2014 (UNHCR, 2014). Since records began in 2006, the numbers have risen inexorably, punctuated by sudden, dramatic upsurges (UNHCR, 2012). On 3rd October 2013, more than 350 people drowned after a boat carrying 500 migrants caught fire trying to reach Lampedusa; another 34 died a week later when their boat, loaded with 250 people, capsized.<sup>1</sup> This spike in what was already (and remains) a desperate trend found Mediterranean politicians reaching for the most elemental metaphors. Following the second incident Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta warned that the Mediterranean was becoming a ‘sea of death’. The judgement of the Maltese PM, Joseph Muscat, was equally stark: ‘The fact is’, he said, ‘that as things stand, we are just building a cemetery within our Mediterranean Sea’. In order to examine disorientation as a critical practice I read the action of metaphor as a figure of rhetorical disorientation which prefigures a re-orientation in thinking about the order of things. Metaphor brings things to mind via migrating contexts; the likeness in metaphor is always dependent upon the contiguous presence of the unlike. As such, according to Paul Ricoeur, it can be regarded as a momentary rupture in the direction of thought which invites us to not only accommodate difference, but make it the basis for relationality: as Ricoeur has said, metaphor demands that ‘one must continue to identify the previous incompatibility through the new compatibility’. (Ricoeur, 1978: 148) In contrast to the contiguity which is the basis for metonymy, metaphor is predicated on incompatibility, producing an encounter (in the text) between disjunctive associations in which understanding is re-oriented.

My enquiry into metaphor as a mode of critical dis- and re-orientation will focus on Ruth Padel’s *The Mara Crossing* (2012), a collection of alternating prose essays and sequences of lyric

---

<sup>1</sup> The October 2013 deaths prompted the Italian Government to establish *Mare Nostrum*, a search and rescue service in international waters. Despite saving the lives of around 150,000 migrants the service was discontinued on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2014. Rescue services will in future be conducted by the EU’s operation Triton, whose range is limited to the area around Italian coast and has only a third of *Mare Nostrum*’s budget.

poems which reflect upon what animal and human migrations have in common. It is composed, broadly, according to an ascending scale, beginning with cell migration, and continuing through those of birds and animals, and finally presenting a selected, historical survey of human migration which culminates in deadly journeys like those of the 500 migrants drowned off Lampedusa. Within this ostensibly teleological organisation (which problematically puts non-human migrations in the service of enlightening understanding of human migrations) Padel explores the relations between human and animal journeys in ways that highlight the contingent, discontinuous, and supplementary. She performs multiple crossings—between poetry and prose; human and animal worlds; or the start and end points of migration—which form the basis for an extended reflection on the play between compatibility and incompatibility in relations between different constituencies on the move. In the course of this, she offers a tentative poetics of Latour’s compositionist politics. ‘Composition’, Latour says, ‘underlines that things have to be put together while retaining their heterogeneity’; he connects it also with composure (in art, music, dance) and thus with choreography; with the ‘diplomatic and prudential flavour’ of compromise; and with the *decompositional* potential in compost. ‘Above all’, he says, ‘a composition can fail’, and must be evaluated based whether it is ‘*well* or *badly* composed’. (Latour, 2010: 473-4) The composition of a common world, Latour says, does not lead to the creation of a whole, but ‘at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material’. (Latour, 2010: 474) Just as metaphor risks the decomposition of meaning in the arrangement of unlikeness, responding to the challenge to re-orient politics--to ‘do politics all over again’, where politics is understood as ‘the progressive composition of a common world’ (Latour, 2013: 8, 11, 12)--requires engaging with the productive potential of disorientation. As Padel carefully composes her text from the heterogeneous fragments of sometimes failed human and animal journeys she also, this essay will argue, builds a portrait of a world of common vulnerability.

I wish to pause briefly before commencing with a reading of *The Mara Crossing*, to further illustrate the disorientations which the following discussion will examine. In May 2006 the Barbados coast guard made a disturbing discovery: an unmarked and apparently unpiloted, motorised yacht on board which were the corpses of 11 young West African men, partially preserved by the sun and

saltwater. The ghost ship, as it became known, was eventually determined to have set sail from the Cape Verde islands on Christmas Day carrying as many as 50 migrants, and to have been headed for the Spanish territory of the Canary Islands. Each passenger had paid as much as thirteen hundred Euros to a Spanish people smuggler. Exactly what led to the deaths of all on board, and the disappearance of many is unclear, but it was established that the vessel experienced mechanical difficulties near Mauritania, and was towed for a time by another boat sent by the smuggler. The tow rope, however, was cut, and the yacht left to drift, disoriented and disabled, in the Atlantic. Several of the dead men were found to have notes on their person, including one Senegalese, which read, 'I would like to send my family in Bassada a sum of money. Please excuse me and goodbye. This is the end of my life in this big Moroccan sea'.

Multiple disorientations are at play here. The ghost ship is a scene of fatal disorientation, in which losing one's way has had the most drastic of consequences. But it also creates a profound sense of imaginative disorientation in anyone exposed to it--compelled to wonder what prompted each individual to undertake such a difficult, dangerous journey, in which life is held so cheaply--which entails a further, ontological disorientation. The petrified condition of the 11 bodies attests to the way irregular migration, entering a space of torsion between states, has divested them not just of the characteristics of the citizen but of the human. Joseph Pugliese has written of how the dehumanisation of migrants whose bodies are washed ashore is such that, 'disconnected from the legal category of a rights-bearing person', they become 'utterly coextensive with their marine environment, dissolving into [...] "bodies of water"'. (Pugliese, 2009: 676; see also Pugliese, 2006) That is, in losing the rights not only to be called citizens but to be called human they assume an affinity with the sea and therefore with what Sandra Ponzanesi has called the 'liquid figurations' of European borders. (Ponzanesi, 2011: 67)

In addition, the account of the ghost ship induces a particular sense of spatial disorientation which might be further categorised as a peculiarly *Afro-European* disorientation. It illustrates how spectrality informs the influence irregular migrants have on the experience and understanding of space, most especially that of the sea in which they themselves so often become fatally disoriented.

The reference to the ‘big Moroccan sea’ in the young man’s note attests not only to his own geographical disorientation, but also to a wider and more profound disorientation in the relationship between territory and sovereignty. The re-naming of the Atlantic as the *Moroccan* sea does a work of double spatial disorientation: first, it reinforces the manner in which the various poles of the ghost ship’s journey (Cape Verde in West Africa; the Spanish territory of the Canary Islands; and Barbados in the Caribbean) replicate those of the triangular Atlantic slave trade (a reminder of how, in colonial modernity, past sea crossings between Europe and Africa have also involved the production of the inhuman); and secondly casts this as a *Mediterranean* as well as an Atlantic crossing, moving out from Africa and oriented, in terms of aspiration and intention, towards European territory. As such it suggests complementary lines of enquiry with recent revisionist readings of the Mediterranean by Peter Hulme, Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. For Hulme, the historical status of the space between southwest Europe and northwest Africa as ‘one of the world’s most influential frontiers’ is reinforced by contemporary crossings from Africa to southern Europe, a perspective which presents ‘new horizons’ to be ‘glimpsed across the straits that have appeared in recent years to encircle postcolonial studies’. (Hulme, 2005: 41) Chambers and Curti contend a need to ‘link the Black Atlantic to the Mediterranean’, as a means to engage with other histories of migration in the Mediterranean: ‘Although separated in time, yesterday’s migrant who abandoned rural life in southern Italy for Buenos Aires, and today’s migrant abandoned on a beach in Puglia or Lampedusa are part of the same historical constellation’. (Chambers and Curti, 2008, 389) Both sets of scholars propose a work of historical and geographical doubling—Chambers and Curti suggest re-thinking the Mediterranean ‘in the disquieting light of its doubling and displacement by a past that never fades away’. but rather persists, in the manner of the spectre, ‘to interrogate and interrupt the present and its potential futures’ (Chambers and Curti, 2008: 389)—a disorientation of the Mediterranean in the form of attention to its other, spectral histories and formations which can, in turn, lead to new and better understandings of how contemporary Afro-European passages have contributed to the composition of its current, resurgent incarnation as a key frontier between the wealthy global north and poor global south.

*The Mara Crossing* includes a poem on the Barbadian ghost ship. ‘Ghost Ship’ addresses an

anonymous migrant impelled by unnamed forces (each line of the first stanza carries a recursive reference to the urgent need to migrate: ‘You have to get out’; ‘you might go’; ‘moving on’. Padel: 2012: 219) to venture on a journey to better prospects but inhibited by its lethal possibilities. The poem conveys the same sense of the migrant’s body conflated with the marine environment as articulated in Pugliese’s ‘bodies of water’ in its central image of the conflicted would-be migrant haunted at night by the sound of ‘the redslick in your temple beat / like waves around the ghost ship / discovered off Ragged point, Barbados’. (Padel, 2012: 219) Elsewhere, a related conflation occurs in ‘The Miracle of the Fish-Counter in Budgens’, which pictures

eels, born in the shoreless sea, who journey  
a thousand miles then thousands more  
through the bruised Mediterranean  
to Ohrid and Crni Drim (Padel, 2012: 91)

As with ‘Ghost Ship’, ‘Miracle’ blurs the boundary between the migrant and the medium through which they move. This is not only an echo of Pugliese’s ‘bodies of water’, however, but also an inversion, for whereas Pugliese’s image addressed the dehumanisation of the dead migrants washed up at the wrack line, Padel’s image of ‘the bruised Mediterranean’ casts the sea itself as a body. This somatic sea suggests both the precarious state of life for irregular migrants and the biopolitical basis for the securitisation of Mediterranean borders, emphatically shifting the emphasis in the watery discourse of ‘waves’ of migrants ‘swamping’ European borders, and presenting us with a compelling, compounded image of the vulnerability of irregular immigrants to forces beyond their control.

As has been demonstrated widely, securitisation is a defining feature of the modern Mediterranean. Since 2004 the control of immigration to the European Union, including border management, has been devolved to Frontex, a Warsaw-based agency, which has rescued as many as 16,000 individuals who encountered difficulties trying to cross the water to Europe. The boundaries of Ceuta and Melilla, autonomous Spanish enclaves on the northern coast of Morocco, are each surrounded by vast perimeter fences designed to impede the many thousands of African migrants who

try to cross into European territory each year. The deployment of extra-territoriality by Western states as a means to assert territorial control (such as processing asylum claimants away from mainland territories, in the case of Lampedusa and Christmas Island, for example) creates a kind of territorial spectre, an expression of place that is also out-of-place.

Padel's poems therefore present a corrective to what Ponzanesi has called the 'suspiciously celebratory' and 'alluring metaphors of liquidity' which persist in postcolonial discourse and which can, albeit inadvertently, 'justify asymmetries'. (Ponzanesi, 2011: 68) To obviate this, we must set Chamber's advocacy of a 'maritime poetics'--co-opting 'the metaphorical force of the sea' to contest sovereign territoriality's 'dubious dependence on the fixity of immediate kinship, blood, and soil' (Chamber, 2008: 150, 27)—alongside sovereignty's co-option of fluidity in the name of border security. Daniel Heller-Roazen has described how contemporary securitisation can be traced in the history of maritime law and the pirate as the 'enemy of all'. one who in occupying a space without lawful master became an 'agent of the threshold, who crossed the moving border at which things pass from belonging to someone to belonging, alternatively, to one and everyone'. (Heller-Roazen, 2009: 11, 68) Heller-Roazen's reflections on piracy have a particular significance for Chambers' notion of the 'multiple Mediterranean' as a fluid space of encounters. Heller-Roazen cites the 'illegal enemy combatant' as the pirate's contemporary incarnation; but we may also consider the crew of the ghost ship as ironic variations on the pirate's status as the icon of the Mediterranean as a space of disputed jurisdiction: abandoned to the forces of the exception and to a hostile environment, but in that environment captured as subjects *outside the law* by European border controls. The securitisation of the Mediterranean involves just the same collapse in the distinction between criminal and legal categories which Heller-Roazen identifies in the history of piracy--the migrant, as 'enemy of all' (suspected of illegitimately obtaining wealth), is both produced by and produces the sea as a space of conflict, uncertainty, and indistinction in the service of power.

In their resistance to fixity, then, metaphors are open to abuse by the same inequalities we might perhaps employ them to contest. The responsibility which this imposes on the poet is one of which Padel is acutely aware in her efforts to 'hold migration up to the light' (p.4); as Miriam Gamble



has astutely observed, one of the book's unstated objectives is 'to hold poetics to the same scrutiny, and to weigh the implications of how art acts on the 'real'. (Gamble, 2012: np) Nikos Papastergiadis' account of the animal ('mad dogs') and spectral ('living corpses, walking zombies') metaphors with which migrants (including second generation) sometimes self-identify illustrates some of the more pernicious operations of metaphor upon the real. (Papstergiadis, 2009: 151, 149) Padel's sensitivity to metaphor's potential is not restricted to exposing how it obscures or even reinforces the realities and inequalities of contemporary migration, however, but attempts also a positive disorientation of the dominant, pejorative metaphors of migration, transforming perception of the 'flotsam' tossed 'on the beach' to appreciation of 'a pageantry of lights'. (Padel, 2012: 84) That she takes the mediaeval genre of the *prosimetrum*, a mix of prose and poetry inspired by Boethius' sixth-century discourse on happiness *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and which found its greatest expression in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, is no accident. *The Mara Crossing* is a book of horror and wonder which argues that the only ethical response to contemporary migration is to be open to both.

To speak of Padel's 'disorienting dominant metaphors' is, of course, to also use disorientation itself as a metaphor; and just as Ponzanesi warns against over-determining metaphors of liquidity, I do not wish to overstate the extent to which Padel's exploration of the tension between 'the fixed and the wandering' (Padel, 2012: 17), between pattern and chaos, intention and chance, in the great swells and shifts of multi-species migrations, are organised by disorientation. Throughout *The Mara Crossing* Padel underscores the signal importance of *the destination*: none of Padel's migrants embrace disorientation or fluidity as means of liberation per se. Migrations, after all, are about territory; about seeking a home. 'Nesting seems the opposite of migration' as Padel puts it, 'but is also its goal'. (Padel, 2012: 40) Disorientation as a critical mode is not prized for itself, then; rather, as the risk in-built in the 'system' of migration, it is the basis for a productive re-orientation of imaginative relations between citizen and non-citizen, human and non-human.

Metaphor is, as has been acknowledged since Aristotle, concerned with affinity; and throughout *The Mara Crossing*, Padel is animated by the question of resemblance. Its opening displays a preoccupation with equivalence or mirroring, in references to inverted seasons on 'the other

side of the equator' and to 'home' and 'migration' as 'two sides of the same ancient coin'. (Padel, 2012: 1, 2); and reflected in the restless movement between prose and poetry. Balance rapidly gives way to an insistent sense of inner ambivalence, however: a Yeatsian appreciation that 'Otherwise is built in'. (Padel, 2012: 13) Padel's key image for this inherent unsettledness is eukaryote cell reproduction, where the cell breaks itself apart, 'the twirls of the helix unwind[ing] into two caterpillar-like halves whose flailing legs are the vulnerable genetic code'. (Padel, 2012: 8) In the prose account this ambivalence is conveyed in strikingly unsettling terms: the cell, as a 'house of many chambers' is home to 'a swift, enormous violence'. (Padel, 2012: 8, 9) The poetic equivalent, 'Breaking the Bond', is equally disconcerting but more concise: 'Got to be done. Like snapping a bone / to reset it' (Padel, 2012: 14), where the partial internal rhyme of done/bone evokes the bifurcation, the enjambment the reordering of the form. In the cell's dual role as author of its own apocalypse and renewal there are echoes of Les Back's observation that, for asylum seekers, 'movement and suicide are woven into one another' (Back, 2009: 338); but echoes only, for Padel is less interested in conjuring the most apt metaphor for the catastrophe of contemporary migration than in re-orienting a sense of affinity between different migrations in the metaphoric process.

For Ricoeur, metaphor consists in a 'deviance' concerning the predicative structure of the sentence. That is, it introduces a disorientation in the direction of thought, which presents the reader with the challenge of accommodating this new, incursive perspective. Padel's spectral metaphors are not limited to the sentence, however, but rather are scattered through the text in an elaborate play of associations. Throughout the book Padel builds layers of associations between different kinds of migrant: prokaryote cells produce copies of themselves 'uncountable as starlings'; the motile arms of the fractured helix in eukaryote reproduction are likened to honeysuckle sheltering the nests of robins. (Padel, 2012: 10, 14) More significant, though, are the implicit resonances with the hazards of contemporary human migration which play throughout the text. In the initial sections we learn of large land birds seeking out the shortest crossings, the same routes used by human migrants (Padel, 2012: 39); and that 'Fruit trees migrate by forced migration' (Padel, 2012: 19); a humpback whale, who initially proves an astonishing visitor to the Thames, is later found washed up dead near

Dartford, ‘probably starved to death’ (Padel, 2012: 29); ‘children of storm’, the idiomatic name for Europe’s smallest seabird, the European storm petrel, is both the title of a poem on the birds’ difficult crossing to Africa and recurs as the title of a later section of poems on human migration (Padel, 2012: 44, 205). This play of associations has a deeply serious objective. Like the eukaryote splitting and reforming, Padel’s reflections on malarial contagion fracture the negative associations which bind culture and biology in a discursive hostility to immigration (‘Syphilis has always been seen as the unwelcome immigrant’. Padel, 2012: 20), and forge a new understanding: parasites, she asserts, ‘drove evolution’, adapting to avoid the ‘policing’ of the host, which in turn adapts to protect itself. (Padel, 2012: 19, 20) Linking together humans, mosquitoes, and *Plasmodium* (the parasite which causes malaria) in this way both presents a critique of biopolitics and reinforces the moral neutrality of migration. This foreshadowing, worked with care into the fabric of the text, gives rise to awareness that metaphor is not only a crossing or migration in sense but also a movement of *dis-* and *re-*orientation.

Ricoeur draws attention to the essentially *spectral* nature of metaphor, as the confluence of things out of place and out of time: ‘is not the word “metaphor” itself a metaphor, the metaphor of a displacement and therefore of a transfer in a kind of space?’ (Ricoeur, 1978: 143) Indeed, the function of these unvoiced metaphors is that they allow spectrality to become the central, orienting perspective of *The Mara Crossing*. In ‘Dance of the Prokaryotes’, the image of the circular chromosome ‘like the ring of hippos / dancing in pink tutus in *Fantasia*’ (Padel, 2012: 11) conjures the infamous aerial photograph of 27 African migrants clinging to a tuna pen off Malta in 2007, but heavily ironized, their ‘dreams of pattern / and form’ (Padel, 2012: 10) as European citizens exposed as fantasy. In ‘Allele’, Padel’s description of the variant form of the gene in a pair, she summons a trace presence which will haunt the rest of the text:

the ghost who stalks the body like a shadow  
in the mirror, invisible -- just so --

as planktonic stars on pulsing gills of foam

that seem themselves an animal

in the wake of the midnight ferry. (Padel, 2012: 23)

‘Allele’ sets up a chain of spectral metaphors which recur throughout the text, in a ‘ghostly flotilla’ of jellyfish, (Padel, 2012: 84), the ghost ship, the 23 Morecambe Bay cockle pickers who drowned in 2004 (whose story was told in Nick Broomfield’s 2006 film *Ghosts*), and in the spectral colossus who looms over the later sections. The poem expresses Padel’s abiding interest in discovering a metaphorical relation which both articulates ecological interconnectedness and troubles the sense of an easy affiliation: of heterogeneity within the common world or, as Ricoeur puts it, where ‘Remoteness’ is preserved within ‘proximity’. (Ricoeur, 1978: 146) The planktonic stars address the contingency of perceptions of species boundaries, as well as once again recalling the men cast adrift on the tuna net, an association picked up and extended in ‘Cell Begins her Travels’ where the ‘little net / of peel and fibrous scaffolding / within the cytoplasm’ (Padel, 2012: 24) resonates in the later poem, ‘Maltese Fishing Boat and Broken Net’ (‘Cut the rope! What would *you* do? / We lose our catch but we get home’ Padel, 2012: 223).

Padel’s spectral metaphors are not restricted to the level of the image, however. Ricoeur argues that metaphor, as a ‘work of resemblance’. is also a ‘semantic innovation’ achieved through ‘a change in the distance between meanings’. (Ricoeur, 1978: 145) Throughout much of *The Mara Crossing* this change is implemented at the level of sound patterning. For instance, ‘Cell Begins Her Travels’ picks up the strong, liquid alveolars of ‘Allele’ to uncover a lyrical music in the scientific language of cell reproduction:

Cell waves longhaired

flagella like the spray of spores on mould.

In a blitz of lamellipodia, Cell

sprouts her motile fronds. She, the queen bee,

will fibrillate each organelle

in turn. (Padel, 2012: 24)

The repeated liquid ‘l’ sounds which dominate this flow of fricatives, sibilants, and alveolars

gather in the ear, appearing elsewhere in the text as the wing-beats of migrating birds, 'licking silhouettes' which 'keep going / on a butterball of gold fat glowing / in the breast like a secret love / where clavicle and wishbone fuse'. (Padel, 2012: 43) Padel's distributed, spectral metaphors are not bombastic or stridently declared; caught, rather, in the ear or the corner of the eye. This modest weaving of associations, expanding the range of the image and redirecting it as sound, allows *The Mara Crossing* to quietly but insistently interrogate the operation of metaphor in contemporary discourse around migration.

Essentially, Padel's task is to justify metaphor as a means of talking about migration, to rescue it from cliché (birds as 'an image of hope', Padel, 2012: 32) or from moralising condemnation ('If you superimposed human and avian journeys on a world map, many lines would become one'. Padel, 2012: 209): to allow, that is, these certainties and conventions to *decompose*, and in the process generate the more diverse composite material Latour describes. The aural shift instituted by poems such as 'Cell Begins' replicates the shift in focus from cellular to avian migrations; and in one sense, takes things back to the projected origins of metaphor itself. According to John Berger, the first metaphor arose from the proximity of man and animal. (Berger, 2001: 261) The results have often been troubling: Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have noted the historical imbrication of Western racism with discourses of speciesism (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010: 134); and Erica Fudge has argued for the need to understand animals as always *constructed* as other by drawing a parallel with Stuart Hall's assertion of the hegemonic status of 'black' experience (whereby what ideological formations came to be represented as natural. Fudge, 2002: 162-163). The parallels with the totalizing effect of the label 'asylum seeker' should be evident, but with some critical assistance can be taken further, into even more disorienting fields of thought. Giorgio Agamben argues that the division of life into animal and human is only possible because it arises, first of all, as 'a mobile border within living man'. (Agamben, 2004: 15) Man's experience of the distance and proximity of the non-human occurs primarily within himself, as an 'intimate caesura', which prompts Agamben to ask what follows if man, or woman, is thought of, not (as is traditional) in terms of conjunction ('the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*'), but rather as separation, as 'always the

place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?’ (Agamben, 2004: 16)

Although Agamben does not put it in these terms, his enquiry posits man as a metaphor for himself, an image produced by an ‘anthropological machine’ in which man, looking at himself (or indeed, woman at herself), ‘must recognise himself in a non-man in order to be human’. (Agamben, 2004: 26-27) That is, he says, man *is an animal which resembles man*. The anthropological machine operates thus according to the same principle of producing recognition in unlike elements as occurs in metaphor. Man’s ‘proper nature’ remains adjacent to his self, ‘captured’ in the image projected by the machine. In this way, and crucially for this discussion of irregular migration, the machine’s operation links the operation of metaphor with the state of exception, Agamben’s model of contemporary political relations:

the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion). Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside. (Agamben, 2004: 37)

The exception is Agamben’s term for the power is organised around a zone of indistinction between what is inside and outside the political order. As both irregular migrants and asylum seekers, and animals are defined by their simultaneous exclusion from and inclusion in regimes of knowledge (to the extent that each term—‘asylum seeker’; ‘animal’— achieves a perverse hegemony, emptied of all differences save that of not-citizen / not-human), both can be said to be captured (*composed*) in a state of exception which is also a condition of the spectral (both in and out of place and time).

Padel’s examination of the play of spectral metaphors present a challenge to this non-recognition, a re-orientation of recognition which in turn raises questions about the disorienting *caesura* Agamben interrogates. Padel’s interest is in breaking and reforming the clichéd, metaphorical associations which (badly) compose human and animal worlds—i.e. birds as images of hope and harbingers of change—seeking out the signal differences which their putative equivalence obscures.

What she presents is what Latour calls a ‘composite of action’. (Latour, 1999: 182) For Latour, agency is radically distributed among what he calls *actants*, which can be human or nonhuman and, because the composition of any action is such that it has folded within it all the actions which led up to and made it possible, organic or inorganic. We daily experience multiple encounters with actions and processes which are only made possible by what Latour calls the ‘silent entities’ of orders of knowledge and forces set in motion many years, and in the case of the raw material from which so much of contemporary life is fabricated, *hundreds of millions* of years ago. As he says, ‘an action, long past, of an actor, long disappeared, is still active here, today, on me’. It is critical to note that Latour’s assertion does not equate agency with intention—intentions, he states, belong neither to humans nor non-humans, but to formations or apparatus—rather, his purpose is to ‘*avoid using the subject-object distinction at all* in order to talk about the folding of humans and nonhumans’. (Latour, 1999: 189, 192, 194) Padel is alert to the difference from which this folding together is composed: ‘Human history, like that of plants and animals, is a story of migration’ she observes, but crucially whereas ‘Birds, who seem so free, are slaves to their genes’, ‘Human migration is about not only need but want’. (Padel, 2012: 116, 56, 117) Intention, as I have said, should not be confused with agency, however. What really links human and non-human in a composite of action are the ironies frequently cast up by Padel’s reflections: that European over-fishing has helped compose the world in which West African fishermen become migrants caught in the same nets which depleted their fish stocks; that the same anthropogenic climate changes which are reducing some bird migrations also increase human migration from the global south to the global north; these correspondences do not assert a simplistic association but rather expose the ways in which the world is currently very badly, or at least unevenly, composed. Two short poems, arranged alongside one another, illustrates this: whereas ‘Sharing Space’ recalls the indifference of birds to momentous events in human history (‘The night before 9/11 // a million Swainson’s thrushes / must have flown / over the towers’ [Padel, 2012: 200]), ‘Farming the Wind’ describes the contemporary indifference to migratory rhythms that means wind farms becomes ‘Knives hidden in cloud’, ‘slicing thorax’ and leaving a ‘spectral litter / of dead and dying biological masterpieces’. (Padel, 2012: 201) Rather than simply replicating the notion that birds

are ‘the heart beat of the planet’ ‘weaving the world together’ (Padel, 2012: 31) Padel’s ironies ask what is a responsible poetics with which to approach the often failing composition of human and nonhuman, citizen and noncitizen.

It scarcely needs restating that the world of common vulnerability Padel describes is not one in which vulnerability is evenly experienced. The sparse, carefully unmusical poems on asylum seekers’ experiences, which foreground bodies exposed to violence, cast an ironic light on the earlier accounts of dangers faced by migratory birds, such as the blackpoll warbler. Again, however, the point is not equivalence but the manner of composition. The casual violence done to asylum seekers is less described than *itemised* in these poems, a numbing of the poetic register which makes even the occasional embedded off-rhyme a moment of shock: ‘They say you don’t belong. They give you / a broken finger, a punctured lung’. (Padel, 2012: 230) Ultimately, though, the collection is not content to stay with that which is poorly composed. The ‘Children of Storm’ section closes with a poem, ‘Dancers with Bruised Knees’. in which the violated bodies of the preceding poems are composed anew:

Bodies hurtle over space, their calloused feet

accurate to music of glass and steel

by Domenico Scarlatti. Pieter, Gemma, Eryck,

Dane; Estala from Spain; Miguel

from Cuba – following Acosta, star

of *No Way Home*. They’re here, they’ve made it.

Krill from Latvia, Vanessa from Singapore.

*Show foreigners hospitality, says the Bible,*

*for many have entertained an angel unaware.* (Padel, 2012: 234)

Here Pugliese’s ‘bodies of water’ are replaced with points of connection and sinuous unfolding, recomposed in the choreographed moves of a dance: ‘When they touch the floor // or touch each other, how do they pitch their body / and not get in their partner’s way?’ (Padel, 2012: 235) The



composition of all agents in space and time, Latour says, must occur ‘slowly and progressively’. and from the arrangement of ‘discontinuous pieces’. (Latour, 2010: 484) The image of the dance, of bodies moving towards and away from each other, each distinct but held together by common movement, is an effective image of a compositional poetic. Effective, I think, but nonetheless tentative. Padel is careful not to presume there are easy answers (even less that answers may proceed from poetry), but to invite a new way of thinking and looking, via metaphor, which might perhaps contribute to a more well-composed world.

Neither do I want to close this essay with any more than a tentative gesture in a better direction. For this reason, the final disorientation I would like to draw upon is a photograph, taken by Javier Bauluz in 2000 at Zahara de los Atunes in Spain.<sup>2</sup> At first glance it looks like a very conventional holiday scene. In the foreground sit two holidaymakers under a beach umbrella, relaxed and at ease. A second look, however, brings to the viewer’s attention an unexpected and distressing detail: namely, in the middle ground, the washed-up corpse of a migrant drowned in the crossing to Europe from Africa. The horror of this seems lost, however, on the couple in the foreground of the photograph. As Peter Hulme has remarked, the scene’s most troubling aspect is the couple’s ‘unthinking, unseeing gaze’ which Hulme reads as a species of disavowal, an insistence ‘that this stretch of sand is still a beach, rather than one of the contemporary globe’s most significant fault lines’. (Hulme, 2005: 58) The image graphically illustrates the power of *unseeing*, of choosing elements with which to compose our field of vision. In response to this unseeing, I propose disorientation as a form of deliberate seeing which challenges viewers to acknowledge their complicity in the scene’s composition, and in examining the distance between their identification with holiday-makers and with the ‘body of water’ to stay in the inevitable space of disorientation until their sense of affinity is re-oriented. ‘Hope’ says Padel, ‘that word which powers migration, lies in staying open to what is happening. In not looking away’. (Padel, 2012: 217) Look again, the picture invites us, and try to see not just the body on the beach but also the way in which we are all enmeshed in an

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ha-ka.dk/kf/tarifa.htm>. This site includes Bauluz’s own account of taking the photograph, in which he states he also took pictures of the man’s personal belongings as they were examined by the *Guardia Civil*: ‘I took several pictures which turned the black bundle on the beach back into “a human being” who had experienced love and dreams: somebody’s son, he had been a Christian who loved [Bob] Marley, clean, poor, a manual labourer.’ (Bauluz, 2000)

unevenly composed world of common vulnerability.

## References

- Agamben, G.. 2004. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Back, L. 2009. 'Beaches and Graveyards: Europe's Haunted Borders'. *Postcolonial Studies* 12.3, 329-340.
- Bauluz, J. 2000. 'Dead Body By an Umbrella'. Available at: <http://www.ha-ka.dk/kf/tarifa.htm> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> November 2014).
- Berger, J. 2001. *Selected Essays*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Chambers, I. 2008. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Chambers, I. and L. Curti. 2008. 'Migrating Modernities in the Mediterranean'. *Postcolonial Studies* 11.4, 387-399.
- Fudge, E. 2002. *Animal*. London: Reaktion.
- Gamble, M. 2012. 'Review of *The Mara Crossing*', *The Guardian*, 17th February.
- Heller-Roazen, D. 2009. *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations*. New York: Zone Books.
- Huggan, G. and H. Tiffin. 2010. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hulme, P. 2005. 'Beyond the Straits: Postcolonial Allegories of the Globe'. In Ania Loomba et al (eds), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 41-61.
- Latour, B. 1999. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, Mass & London: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. 2010. 'An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto''. *New Literary History* 41, 471-490.
- Latour, B. 2013. 'War and Peace in an Age of Ecological Conflicts'. Available online: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/130-VANCOUVER-WARandPEACE.pdf>.

(accessed 20 November 2013).

Padel, R. 2012. *The Mara Crossing*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Papastergiadis, N. 2009. 'Wog Zombie: The De- and Re-Humanisation of Migrants, from Mad Dogs to Cyborgs'. *Cultural Studies Review* 15.2, 147-178.

Ponzanesi, S. 2011. 'Europe Adrift: Rethinking Borders, Bodies, and Citizenship from the Mediterranean'. In G. Huggan (ed). *Moving Worlds: Postcolonial Europe* 11.2 , 67-76.

Pugliese, J. 2009. 'Crisis Heterotopias and Border Zones of the Dead'. *Continuum* 23.5, 663-679.

Pugliese, J. 2006. 'Bodies of Water'. *Heat* 12, 13-20.

Ricoeur, P. 1978. 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling'. *Critical Inquiry*

5.1, 143-159. UNHCR, 2014. 'Mediterranean crossings more deadly a year after Lampedusa tragedy'. Available at

<http://www.unhcr.org.uk/news-and-views/news-list/news-detail/article/mediterranean-crossings-more-deadly-a-year-after-lampedusa-tragedy.html> (accessed 4 November 2014).

UNHCR. 2012. 'More than 1,500 drown or go missing trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2011'.

Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4f2803949.html> (accessed 29 August 2012).