




Performing *I-ḥrig*: music, sound and undocumented migration across the contemporary Mediterranean (Morocco–Italy)

Alessandra Ciucci 

Department of Music, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research that is part of a larger project on the role of music and sound among migrant Moroccan men in Italy, this article focuses on ‘L-ḥarraga’, a song that narrates the voyage and the experience of undocumented migration that ends with the tragic death of a young Moroccan man crossing the Mediterranean. Through ‘L-ḥarraga’, a song which belongs to ‘*abidat rma*’ – a musico-poetic genre whose ‘rough’ sound is particularly meaningful for Moroccans from the plains and plateaus – it is possible to reflect on burning political questions concerning a geo-cultural zone where historically determined differences between North and South are increasingly acute: the Mediterranean. Expanding on earlier writings about music and sound in the context of contemporary Maghrebi undocumented migration in the Mediterranean, informed by contemporary debates about mobilities in reference to Islam, and drawing on concepts that emerged during fieldwork, this article attempts to explore ‘L-ḥarraga’ as a sonorous account of a hazardous crossing in which migration is presented as an ethical horizon.

KEYWORDS Morocco; ‘*abidat rma*’; sung poetry; undocumented migration; rurality; Islam

Introduction



wa fin ghadi wa fin ghadi l-wlid

Where are you going, where are you going son

wa mmwimti ghadi ḥarrag

My mother, I’m going to migrate (clandestinely).¹

Redouane, the leader of a well-known music group, is a native of Khouribga. A town of approximately 200,000 residents located in the Moroccan coastal plains and plateaus, Khouribga is renowned as the world’s largest centre of phosphate mining. Until the late 1950s its local economy had largely depended on phosphate, however, with the mechanisation of mining production processes and the world phosphate crisis in the 1970s, the town

CONTACT Alessandra Ciucci  amc25@columbia.edu  Department of Music, Columbia University, 2960 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, USA

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found itself in the middle of a deep crisis that led to the development of widespread unemployment that continues to exceed the national average (among others see Belbahri 1986; Adidi 2000; Bianco 2015). Today, Khouribga is an occasional stop for tourists. The town never developed as a full-blown urban centre like Casablanca. Its dysfunctional job market forces an exceptionally high number of people – particularly the youth who were once attracted to work in the mines – to migrate to Europe (Adidi 2000; Bianco 2015).

The theme of undocumented migration (*l-ħrig*) is very sensitive in our region', Redouane tells me. 'Do you know how they refer to our region? As the triangle of death (*mutallat al-mut*)! This is because of the great number of youths who lost their lives in attempting to cross the Mediterranean'. 'Is that why you wrote "L-ħərraga"?' I ask Redouane. 'Yes', he continues, 'we wanted to tackle the idea of undocumented migration in a song; we wanted to sensitize people about the crossing. We all have friends who lost their lives in the Mediterranean. If you think that in our neighbourhood alone we lost 12 youths in a day ...! We needed to send a message to those who want to make the crossing and go to Italy'.

Based on ethnographic research that is part of a larger project on the role of music and sound among migrant Moroccan men in Italy, this article focuses on 'L-ħərraga' (The Burners)² a song that narrates the voyage and the experience of undocumented migration that ends with the tragic death of a young Moroccan man crossing the Mediterranean. It is a song whose emotional quality hinges on a narrative which for the most part employs first-person narration – that of the migrant and of his mother – and an intimate dialogue between mother and son. It is a song that belongs to a musico-poetic genre whose 'rough' sound is particularly meaningful for Moroccans from the coastal plains and plateaus; a song which gives voice to different generations of Moroccan men engaged in the practice of migration across the Mediterranean; a commercially produced song that, while circulating beyond borders, is steeped in its locality; and a song through which it is possible to reflect on burning political questions concerning a geo-cultural zone where the historically determined differences between North and South are increasingly acute: the Mediterranean.

Maghrebi songs about migration can be roughly divided into two types: (1) songs about exile (*ghorba*) from the 1910s onward, which have focused on nostalgia, separation, loneliness, the temptation of alcohol, gambling and women;³ and (2) songs which, from the 1970s onward, have focused on socio-political issues in response to the oppressive conditions and the xenophobia migrants and children of migrants have experienced in Europe.⁴ Thus, whereas the themes of early songs reflect issues and concerns of the first generations of migrants, songs from the 1970s onward have

been important means of expression for diasporic communities struggling to carve out a space for themselves in the European countries they now refer to as home.

Although contemporary songs by Maghrebi artists continue to focus on the theme of exile, in the past decades it is undocumented migration that has come to the fore. Focusing on the obsession with leaving the miserable conditions of the homeland, on the dream of escape, and on the Mediterranean Sea and its potential crossing, contemporary Maghrebi songs have introduced a view of the Mediterranean from its southern shores that effectively questions the European ontology of *Mare Nostrum* and challenges the Braudelian paradigm – the by-product of colonial entanglements in the Mediterranean (Borutta and Gekas 2012) – that casts this sea as a quintessential site of exchanges. Their portrayal of the Mediterranean as a frontier, a barrier and a ‘fracture’ (Bensaâd 2006), calls to mind the way contemporary Maghrebi literature undermines a ‘Mediterranean cosmopolitanism’ (Head 2016), depicting the sea as an unknown and dreadful place where anything can happen (Checcoli 2010).

Back in the village, the old people were always telling us about the sea, and each time in a different way. Some said it was like a vast sky, a sky of water foaming across infinite, impenetrable forests where ghosts and ferocious monsters lived. Others maintained that it stretched farther than all the rivers, lakes, ponds, and streams on earth put together. As for the wise old boys in the square, who spoke as one on the matter, they swore that God was storing up that water for Judgment Day, when it would wash the earth clean of sinners. (Binebine [1999] 2012, 15)

Despite their popularity, the academic literature on contemporary Maghrebi songs about undocumented migration has remained considerably smaller than that devoted to songs about exile or to issues concerning migrants of later generations (among others see Gross, McMurray, and Swedenburg 1996; Daoudi and Miliiani 2002; Miliiani 2002; Marranci 2005; Gazzah 2010; Landau 2011; Lebrun 2012). In recent years, however, songs about *l-ħrig* have been discussed as creative interventions in Europe (Swedenburg 2015); as cultural productions and as the articulations of the longing to escape (Nair 2007; Friese 2013); and analysed in reference to their principal themes (Salzbrun, Souiah, and Mastrangelo 2015), and in the context of other arts in the Mediterranean (Abderrezak 2016).

Expanding on earlier writings about music and sound in the context of contemporary Maghrebi undocumented migration in the Mediterranean, informed by contemporary debates about mobilities in reference to Islam, and drawing on concepts that emerged during fieldwork, this article attempts to explore ‘L-ħarraga’ as a sonorous account of a hazardous crossing in which migration is presented as an ethical horizon. I argue for the song’s critical reflection, its ability to convey the emotions and the state of mind of those

who cross, and for its effectively raising questions of subjectivity and existence in relation to Islam. Using ‘L-ḥərraga’ as a case study I ask: what role does a particular rural sound play in this journey across the Mediterranean? How is the unequal social, political, and economic reality between the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean transposed to an aesthetic of ‘roughness’ which is at the core of ‘L-ḥərraga’? What type of sonorous trace does it leave in the Mediterranean? How is the Mediterranean re-signified by a song that narrates undocumented crossing and death? And, consequently, what would it mean to conceive of this song as a sonorous travelogue that engages with a ‘theological and moral dimension of “departing”’ (Pandolfo 2018, 194)?

Ṣawt dyal L-ḥərraga: the sound, the voice of the rural

I’ll proceed now to discuss the ‘rough’ sound that is at the core of ‘L-ḥərraga’ and, in turn, the aesthetics associated with particular social, political and economic realities of the population of the Moroccan coastal plains and plateaus – specifically those of the Casablanca-Settat and Khenifra-Beni Mellal regions.

The ‘rough’ sound that I refer to is intimately connected with a specific notion of the rural or the countryside referred to as *L-ḥərraga*; a notion with which Moroccans from the regions in question summarise their sense of selves and frame their knowledge about the world. *L-ḥərraga* is a locus from which aesthetic behaviours, signifying practices, and performative and speech acts originate. It is a constellation of ideas, embodied dispositions, knowledge, experiences, and meanings. It is a notion grounded in the history of the coastal plains and plateaus, entangled with an Arab identity associated with a Bedouin past. It is an image that destabilises the colonial mirage – the vision of the French protectorate (1912–1956) of the coastal plains and plateaus as the ‘granary of Rome’ (Swearingen 1987; Davis 2007). It is a set of aesthetics that challenges the warm (*dafi*), beautiful (*zwin*), clear (*bain*), light (*khəffif*) and sweet (*ḥlu*) urban sound (*ṣawt medini*) connected with al-Andalus. It is a force which questions who and what has been erased in an image of Morocco forged by the urban elites, and in one of Europe forged by the global North. It is a ‘geographical imagination’ (Harvey 1973) that allows my Moroccan interlocutors to recognise the role of space in their biography, to relate to the spaces they see around them, to recognise the relationship which exists between them and their territory, and to fashion and use this space creatively. It is a symbol that characterises the population of the coastal plains and plateaus in Morocco, even though they may no longer reside in the actual countryside. It is a sound that produces intimacy, emotions, and collectively recognised meanings and experiences.

Critical to a discussion about the ways in which Moroccans from the coastal plains and plateaus experience *l-ʿarubiya* in sound are ideas about a high (*ʿali*), full (*qwi*), hard (*qaṣāḥ*) voice coming from the throat (*qārjuṭa*) whose timbre is described as ‘rough’ (*ḥārsh*), in a metamusical discourse which reveals an aesthetic that is said to reflect the everyday life of the countryside. A voice signalling an embodied sound with collectively recognised meaning, being that voice, as a ‘material embodiment of social ideology and experience’ (Feld et al. 2004, 332), can be iconic – embodying particular qualities – and indexical – pointing to particular subjectivities. For Moroccans of the coastal plains and plateaus this rough vocal timbre becomes critical because it is thought of as acoustically embodying nature, the environment, as well as experiences of space, time and memory. Voice is therefore used as a privileged medium to differentiate the rural and the non-literate population from the urban lettered elites since, as argued by Ochoa Gautier, voice works on a double register: it refers to its acousticity and to an ideology of language (2014, 97), making a voice recognisable as a generalised figure of a certain type. Understanding the significance of a vernacular Arabic rooted in place and a vocal timbre that is thought to be unaffected by urban influences allows for an exploration of how *l-ʿarubiya* is embedded in a set of aesthetics that is said to reflect the roughness of rural life, the land, the environment, the hard work of the peasants and their verbal expressions (Ciucci 2012).

The sound of the rural marks the musico-poetic genre to which ‘L-ḥərraga’ belongs and from which it cannot be disassociated. It provides the linkage between verbal art, everyday language, aesthetics, and ideological and moral discourse; it also refers to the historical conditions that tie my interlocutors to rural values and ways of living. Moroccans from the coastal plains and plateaus, and those engaged in the practice of migration, acoustically embody *l-ʿarubiya*.

Performing *l-ḥrig*: undocumented crossing and ‘L-ḥərraga’

‘L-ḥərraga’ is a song whose title refers to those attempting undocumented migration (*l-ḥrig*) which is metaphorically described as ‘the burning’.⁵ The title also refers to the figure of ‘the burned life’; a life without a name and without legitimacy, since undocumented migrants who successfully cross the Mediterranean have been known to burn their papers in order to erase their legal identity and making their repatriation challenging.

The song belongs to the repertory of a musico-poetic genre known as *ʿabidat rma* (lit. the slaves of the hunters), a term which designates an all-male ensemble that traditionally performed for wealthy male patrons during hunting expeditions. The ensemble’s singing and dancing – indicated with the same term – is customarily accompanied by an array of percussion instruments: large circular frame drums (*bendirs*), small and medium size

single-skin goblet-shaped hand drums (*ta'rijas*), and a sawed-off pair of large scissors (*maqəṣṣ*) beaten with a metal rod whose timbre can modulate by opening and closing the shears.

In the last decades *ʿabidat rma* has gone from being a musical tradition performed by older men to a thriving genre of popular music performed by young men at private and public celebrations, festivals,⁶ and on television.⁷ Produced and disseminated through cassettes, CDs, VCDs, DVDs, MP3s and the Internet, nowadays *ʿabidat rma* circulates in Morocco and abroad. These changes have inevitably affected the poetic themes of *ʿabidat rma*, as in the case of the theme of undocumented migration, as well as changes in technology and instrumentation.

Greene (2005) has argued that Western sound technologies are drawn into music making around the world, and that their hard-wiring begins to structure local musical practices in certain ways, imposing their own musical logics into the societies that adopt them. The same author has also argued that sound technologies are also used to achieve local aims, and that the emergence of distinct studio sounds may reflect the drive toward difference and distinction in technological music production. 'L-ḥərraga' exemplifies his latter argument. In the recording the poetic lines are punctuated by a viola (*kamanja*), an instrument which is not present in the tradition and that affects the genre in two important ways. On the one hand, its amplified sound is a reminder of the viola-saturated sound of Moroccan *sh'abi*⁸ which draws from a musico-poetic genre closely associated with *ʿabidat rma* and that is also entrenched in *l-ʿarubiya*; on the other hand, the viola introduces melodic modes (*maqams*) which are absent in the genre, emphasising the act of singing in a tradition otherwise characterised by the intertwining of speech, cries, and singing. In the recording, furthermore, it is also critical to take notice of the addition of the bass – used to reinforce the low pitch strokes of the percussion instruments that traditionally signal the strong accents of a rhythmic cycle – and the use of a glass soda bottle in addition to the large scissors, for a better clarity in its sound in the recording.

The recording, therefore, continues to articulate an ideal 'rough' sound but it is adapted to the style of a popular music entrenched in the same notion of *l-ʿarubiya* articulated by *ʿabidat rma*. In doing so, 'L-ḥərraga' continues to appeal to its local audience – those of the coastal plains and plateaus in Morocco – while, simultaneously, repositioning itself in a popular and in a transnational context where the population of the same regions has migrated, is trying to migrate, or is imagining migrating.

In the following discussion about a commercial recording of 'L-ḥərraga',⁹ I aim to analyse some of the iconic sounds and poetic characteristics associated with *l-ʿarubiya* and, at the same time, to draw attention to changes and adaptations since, rather than static, the notion of *l-ʿarubiya* I present is also

necessarily forged against the backdrop of migration and, in particular, the crossing of the Mediterranean to Italy.

'L-ḥərraga' is a vernacular *qasida* (ode) characterised by a succession of verses divided into two hemistichs ending on the same or a similar rhyme, being that rhyming should be understood more in terms of similarity of sound rather than as following set rules. Like other vernacular *qasidas*, it has no single rhyme and poetic meter. The poem is divided into two large sections (*fuṣul*) separated by a *ḥəṭṭa* (pause) marked by a change in the poetic and musical structure (lines 9–11, and 20–21). 'L-ḥərraga', which recounts the experiences of the undocumented crossing from the point of view of a migrant and his mother consists of three main narratives: the imagination of and preparation for the voyage; the actual experience of the voyage; and the death of the migrant, as experienced in the first person, and as experienced by his mother.

In this commercial recording the first line of 'L-ḥərraga' is preceded by an instrumental introduction that presents the basic duple compound meter that, aside from changes in rhythmic accents, accompanies the song throughout. With the exception of the *ḥəṭṭa*, all the lines are divided into two hemistichs each followed by a short refrain; the lead vocalist sings the hemistichs and the chorus sings the refrain in antiphonal fashion.

The intimate dialogue between mother and son, but also their different perspectives, are effectively introduced in the first two lines. Particularly haunting is the mother whose plea, 'wa fin ghadi' (where are you going?), resonates throughout the first section of the song as a counterpoint to the migrant's desire to leave and his actual voyage. A sonic presence that is particularly meaningful for my Moroccan interlocutors in Italy; in fact, more than any other member of their family, it is the mother who they invoke all the time.

Also significant is the metaphor in the second half of line 1, where the son describes the exile, *l-ghorba*, as fire, as the burning desire to which the young man falls victim, a desire from which he cannot escape. Similar to metaphors used to portray love in 'aiṭa – a genre of oral poetry associated with 'abidat rma – but also common to Arabic poetry, it effectively describes the image of an elsewhere that becomes an obsession, the sickness of the individual affected by it and, consequently, the rift it produces with his own community.

wa mmwimti basləma rani ghadi / wa mmwimti nar l-ghorba ḥrəqtini
Farewell my mother, I'm leaving / my mother, the fire of the exile burned me

wa fin ghadi-(a) wa fin ghadi l-wlid / wa fin ghadi-(a) wa fin ghadi l-wlid
Where are you going, where are you going son? / Where are you going, where are you going son?

The use of a well-known poetic metaphor allows for new meanings to be juxtaposed with old ones and, thus, for a listener who knows the poetic codes to be intimately affected. In this line, however, it is the verb *ḥraḡ* (to burn) – which refers to ‘the burning’ – that is used in place of *kwa* (to burn with a branding iron, to cauterise), which is more commonly employed to express the pain of love as in the following verse: *a kwitini kwitini ‘la qalbi wa ‘ashnu ‘aibi* (you burned me, you burned my heart, what’s wrong with me?).

However, it is the evocation of *l-‘arubiya* that becomes central to a sense of self. In the second half of line 6, where Europe is referred to as the country of the Romans (*blād r-ruman*), we find an expression which is first and foremost used in the countryside. The rural is also reiterated with the extended use of vocative particles such as *wa*, *a*, and *ya* placed at the beginning of each line. These vocal particles indicate that a person is being spoken to, much like in everyday conversation in the countryside. Furthermore, the continuous elongation of final vowels, as in the emphasis placed at the end of *ghadi(a)*, mimics ordinary speech and, at the same time, as my interlocutors pointed out, the weeping of professional wailers traditionally hired at funerals in the countryside.

In the narrative, however, there are also a number of terms which derive from a form of standard Arabic that, as noted by Stefania Pandolfo, is increasingly used by a large section of post-colonial Moroccan society (2007, 333). Terms such as *khwan* (brothers) and *l-‘uṭān* (everywhere), in line 5, are thus symbolic of a young generation that is educated and whose language and sense of self are also affected by other ways of being. Similarly, the Arabic adaptation of Italian terms such as *lanshia* (from *lancia*), in lines 7 and 13, or *lamarin* (from *la marina*), in line 9 – in both their phonological and written forms – is yet another articulation of the post-colonial in this song.¹⁰

It is also important to notice the deviation from a linear temporality in the narrative, and more in particular the mixing of the tenses that accompany the different perspectives about the voyage. Lines 2 and 3, for example, use the future tense to express the decision to burn and the dream of ‘making it’, the change in status which can be displayed through material goods as in the case of a car designated by the term *ḥdid* (lit. iron), another everyday expression used in the countryside. Lines 5 and 6, instead, use the past tense to represent the reality of the voyage, while the physical rendering of approaching death, the claustrophobic sensation of being trapped with death, just like that of being trapped in Morocco without a horizon, is recounted using the present tense (lines 4, 7–8, 13–14). Throughout this first section, the mother’s plea, ‘where are you going’, continues to resonate and to juxtapose itself with the narrative of the son.

Section I

1.	<i>wa mmwimti baslama rani ghadi</i> Farewell my mother, I'm leaving <i>wa fin ghadi-(a) wa fin ghadi l-wlid</i> Where are you going, where are you going son?	<i>wa mmwimti nar l-ghorba hraqtini</i> My mother, the fire of the exile burned me <i>wa fin ghadi-(a) wa fin ghadi-(a) l-wlid</i> Where are you going, where are you going son?
2.	<i>wa fin ghadi wa mmwimti ghadi nharrag</i> Where are you going? My mother, I'm going to migrate (clandestinely) <i>wa u ndir bhāl nas</i> I'm going to do like the others	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?
3.	<i>wa njib hatta ana hdid¹¹</i> I'm also going to bring back a car <i>nkharraj yiddi man l-aj u nzid</i> For my hand to hang out the window and drive	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?
4.	<i>ya wāsh 'ajbek l-hal darwish</i> Would you like the condition of a poor man? <i>ma baqt laqi bāsh n'ayāsh</i> I can't find a way to make a living	<i>wa fin ghadi</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi</i> Where are you going?
5.	<i>a uṣalna s-sebta ya khwan</i> We arrived at Ceuta, ¹² my brothers <i>ya lqina n-nāṣṣ man kul l-awṭan</i> There were people from everywhere	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?
6.	<i>ya shi mṣabbat u shi hāfyān</i> Some with shoes and others barefoot <i>'ānihum fi blād r-ruman¹³</i> With their eyes towards Europe	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?
7.	<i>zdat l-lanshīd¹⁴ ya khut</i> The boat left, my brothers <i>wa rah l-hābs hdam l-mut</i> Next to the prison there is death	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?
8.	<i>ya kulha ishiyā b-idih</i> Everyone waves for rescue <i>wa yak l-mwaj l-hbib</i> It's only the wave my dear	<i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going? <i>wa fin ghadi-(a)</i> Where are you going?

The *ḥaṭṭa* (pause), marked by a change in the poetic and musical structure (lines 9–11), is sung over the same pitch in unison and antiphonal fashion by the ensemble, building up a crescendo and a tension that is resolved in line 12, as the second section begins. In line 9 a communal voice, which appears for the first time in the song, comments on how 'all the burners are worried'. It addresses first the mother and then the son, interjecting itself into the dialogue between the two, in the first-person speech that both mother and son use to narrate their personal experience. This communal voice reinforces the mother's message that 'your country is better than Europe' in the first half of line 11, commenting on how Europe, in the second half of the same line, has a 'poisonous heart'. The vocal quality used in the *ḥaṭṭa* deserves special attention because, aside from indexing the rural speech of the region, the crying quality of the solo voice – signalled by vocal or cry breaks – sounds a text which my interlocutors understand as reflecting a mother's cry for the death of her son.

Həttə

9.	<i>a l-hərraga a lalla kulshi məštun</i> All the burners are worried	<i>lamərin tqəlləb a lalla fi tkun</i> The Italian Navy is searching where you are
10.	<i>wa kilo həmməş bghiti huma bash nkun</i> A kilo of chickpeas in order to survive	<i>a mən hərr l-khəl' a lalla fi qobbi¹⁵ məkhzun</i> Because of burning fear, everything is hidden in my hood
11.	<i>wa rjə' l-bladək a wulidi qbəl bləd r-rum</i> Come back to your country my son, it is better than Europe	<i>a bləd r-rum a lalla ra qəlbū məsmum</i> Europe has a poisonous heart

In the second section we find another reference typical to the countryside in lines 16 and 17, where the emotions of the mother are expressed according to an old belief which makes peasant women wary about ingesting food connected, in one way or another, to their children.

a l-hut ma nshri / a kal wuldi mən 'əinih¹⁶
Never again I will buy fish / it ate my son's eyes

As one of my interlocutors commented upon listening to this verse: 'my mother never ate liver in her life because she believed that, since the liver, rather than the heart, is where sentiments reside, that she would somehow hurt us'. An association which is even more apparent in the last line of the song, where the mother asks her son not to wound her liver and uses the diminutive *l-kbida*, rather than *l-kebda*, to refer to the liver. Because diminutive forms are mostly used by women to express endearment, they inscribe verses with a sort of 'feminine speaking' (Kapchan 1996) that further dramatises the poetic discourse.

'əishək rjə 'ya wulidi / la tkhəlli l-jərḥ fi l-kbida
Please my son, come back / don't leave your wound in my liver

Section two continues reflecting a mother's cry for the death of her son; this is particularly evident in line 15, where the son asks his grandmother to summon the wailer, and in line 16, where he asks his mother to prepare for his funeral.

wa dada ya dada / a jibu shi 'addada
Grandmother, grandmother / bring a wailer

ya l-mmwimma diri n-na'y / wa wuldek mḥal iji
My mother, prepare the funeral / your son will never come back

In this section, however, one cannot ignore the expression of rage of a mother against a country that forced her son to migrate, as particularly evident in lines 17 through 19.

Section II

12.	<i>wa gulu lya wa gulu lya l-banat</i> Tell me, tell me my daughters <i>wash bṣāḥḥ wuldi mat</i> Is it true that my son is dead?	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
13.	<i>tqallabt l-lanshia ya khut</i> The boat turned over, my brothers	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
14.	<i>ya mən sebta tasm'a l-ghwat</i> From Ceuta you can hear the screams	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
15.	<i>wa dada wa hiya dada</i> Grandmother, grandmother <i>a jibu shi 'addada</i> Bring in a wailer	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
16.	<i>ya l-mmwimma diri n-na'y</i> My mother, prepare the funeral <i>wa wuldek mḥal iji</i> Your son will never come back	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
17.	<i>wa shabab rahum day'in</i> The youth wasting away <i>ya fi flaik rahum ḥargine</i> They are migrating in small boats	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
18.	<i>'la ṣābyan lli qādmī</i> To the children you offered <i>a l-hut ma nshri</i> Never again I will buy fish	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me
19.	<i>a kal wuldi mən 'ainih</i> It ate my son's eyes <i>wa a 'la shaban li day'ati</i> To the youth you lost	<i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me <i>wa gulu lya</i> Tell me

Ḥaṭṭa

20.	<i>wa rja' rja' a wulidi la tkhəllinīsh wahida</i> Come back my son, don't leave me alone	<i>klam n-nas ra shəlla wa bhər mwaju madida</i> People's gossip is too much, and the waves of the sea are long
21.	<i>'aishək rja' ya wulidi la tkhəlli l-jərḥ fi l-kbida</i> Please come back my son, don't leave your wound in my liver.	

Sounding the Mediterranean

The high level of anxiety about the growing presence of Muslims in Europe has focused the debates on what Europe owes to Islamic civilisation and, in turn, on a particular construction of the past which continues to affect the present. Building on influential scholarship from both sides of the Mediterranean, academics have explored how through Andalusian music, the cultivated urban music tradition traceable to mediaeval Muslim Iberia or al-Andalus, it is possible to promote a configuration of the Mediterranean that is also based on historical connections to Islamic civilisation and culture (among others see Ibn 'Abd al-Jalil 1988; Guettat 2000; Reynolds 2009; Davila 2013, 2016; Shannon 2015; Glasser 2016). Despite their undeniable significance, the sonic construction of the Mediterranean advanced by these and other

works focusing on a musical tradition associated with the elites, the urban bourgeoisie and an Andalusian heritage,¹⁷ has paid particular attention to flows, mobility and exchanges. There is a risk, however, of downplaying the reality of the contemporary Mediterranean as a barrier since, as Martin Stokes reminds us,

the Mediterranean is the site of a number of powerful fantasies about migrants and migrant culture, in which music – which indexes migrant bodies, but can at the same time so easily be separated from them – has played a particular important role. (2011, 29–30)

Although the Mediterranean has always been a space of movement and trade, nowadays it has become central for understanding the global process of mobility, transformation and social change (Vacchiano 2013, 337). The rebordering of the Mediterranean, which also entails the reconfiguration of tactics and techniques of border policy and immigration enforcement (De Genova 2017), is not only influencing the control of the so-called migration ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’, but is also a way of wielding sovereignty, perceiving membership and producing citizenship in Europe and beyond (Suárez-Navaz 2004). This, I argue, is the Mediterranean that ‘L-ḥərraga’ sounds and asks us to listen to.

Aurally inscribing the crossing: the *hijra* and the *riḥla*

In her work among Moroccan youth Stefania Pandolfo traces the debates related to the experience, but also to the imagination, of undocumented migration to Europe, focusing on the way Islam provides a framework within which despair, and the existential stakes of life and death, are understood and creatively reconfigured (2007, 2018). In what follows I attempt to connect Pandolfo’s attention to ways in which the Moroccan youths she writes about understand and describe their predicaments, to two particular lines of ‘L-ḥərraga’, a song about the hazardous crossing of the Mediterranean entrenched with despair and death, in the attempt to present this song as a sonorous travelogue that engages with a moral dimension of ‘departing’.

ya wəsh ‘ajbek l-ḥal darwish / ma bqit laqi bəsh n’ayəsh

Would you like the condition of a poor man? / I can’t find a way to make a living

and

məlli təllit ‘la l-bhar / ya l-mwaj təthdar

When I looked toward the sea / the waves are speaking.

The first line unequivocally expresses the despair, alienation, closure, depression and loss of hope experienced by the migrant, which address and reflect on the reality and the experience of youth in Morocco, themes

that are also debated in academic writings about migration in and from Morocco (among others see Pandolfo 2007, 2018; Alaoui 2009; Badimon and Bogaert 2015; Bianco 2015), in Moroccan literature (among others see Binebine [1999] 2012; Elalamy 2000; Fāḍil 2000; Lalami 2005; Ben Jelloun 2005), in Moroccan popular songs, and in Moroccan popular culture (see Sabry 2005).

My interest, however, is on how the second line presents the crossing and, in particular, on how it captures the state of mind of the young burner who sees the Mediterranean as a horizon. The geographer Claudio Minca, reminds us how the Mediterranean is:

A horizon which paradoxically provides us with the sense of boundary and also with the possibility of crossing over, it reminds us that it is difference and the thrill toward the elsewhere which articulate who we are and, most of all, who we would like to be. (2004, 1)¹⁸

A horizon that, however, is inevitably shaped by the shore from which one departs, and on the voyage one chooses or is forced to undertake. In this context “*baḥr r-rum* (the sea of the Romans), as the Mediterranean is commonly referred to in Morocco,” is also a barrier whose waves are indelible from the memory of the burners.

Every time I listen to that song it sends chills down my spine. I came to Europe from Khouribga in 1999, as an ḥarrag. We left Tangier at night and arrived to Almeria in four hours. What I remember of that night? All I remember were the waves, those terrifying waves. There were so high and I was so scared. But I made it. (Abdelilah, personal communication, 28 December 2017, San Giustino)

Victory in the face of the noble and heroic death of trespassing, becomes a symbolic recognition that is intimately connected to a theological and moral dimension of departing, articulated by Redouane during a discussion about the song in the following statement:

The aim, the horizon of migration (*l-wijha dyal l-hijra*) in our region is Italy, everyone dreams about Italy. There is nothing here for the young people; we needed to send a message. (Redouane, personal communication, 13 August 2015, Khouribga)

By modelling the perilous journey of young Moroccan migrants to that of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina (622 C.E.), Redouane adapts the doctrine of *hijra* to a rather different interpretation from what is commonly used to describe the flight from a country governed by the unbelievers in order to join the Muslim community.¹⁹

Muhammad Khalid Masud has shown how the doctrine of the *hijra* has been quite adaptable to varying political contexts as in the case of Ibn al-ʿArabi – the great Muslim mystic-philosopher of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – who had already permitted *hijra* from a land of disease and financial

insecurity to a better place (1990, 42). According to the same author, a new dimension of *hijra* has also emerged in contemporary times as Muslims have travelled and even settled to non-Muslim lands for different motives and objectives such as education, training, and employment, and how a number of distinguished scholars of Islamic law in the Middle East have argued on the necessity and the lawfulness of this type of *hijra* (42). In this context, it is possible to see how undocumented migration – often viewed as the only alternative to what is compared to a slow death (see Pandolfo 2007, 350) – may take on a rather different dimension; pilgrimage and migration in Muslim societies are, in fact, ‘forms of political and social action’ (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990, 3).

That song tells the truth, it talks about what really happens. There was nothing for me in the village where I was born, nearby Khouribga. One must make sacrifices in order to leave, in order to ameliorate one’s life ... and death, at times, is necessary ... it is part of the sacrifice. (Hassan, personal communication, 5 November 2018, Umbertide)

These responses need to be understood in local social, economic, and political contexts as well; that is to say, in reference to the historical denigration of the population of the Moroccan coastal plains and plateaus. The notion of *l-‘arubiya*, which the sound of ‘L-ḥərrega’ articulates, has historically been associated with negative values and linked to the uneven development of rural areas. These regions have been weighed down by a colonial and a post-colonial political and administrative structure characterised by failure of agricultural development efforts; an agrarian capitalism which made it possible for land and wealth to be concentrated in a few hands; the extreme poverty of dispossessed peasants; corruption; economic instability; and an inadequate infrastructure (Daoud and Engler 1981; Swearingen 1987; Sebti 2013). The urban-rural divide is therefore a powerful paradigm through which Moroccans from the coastal plains and plateaus understand and approach their world. Their discursive division of the countryside and the city comments on the long history of the economic crisis and the profound disparity between rural and urban Morocco,²⁰ and responds to their historical denigration. The heroic act of crossing, framed in a theological and moral dimension of departing, effectively talks back to such denigration.

In this context, migration becomes an adventure, a necessary risk to take if one is to cross over to the other side of the Mediterranean with all that is entailed: anticipation, fear, skills, but also excitement (Pandolfo 2018, 194). By narrating this perilous journey, the text of ‘L-ḥərrega’ conjures the concept of *riḥla*; a term which can be translated as journey, but which also defines a whole genre of travel accounts. *Riḥla* was particularly linked with the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina; a long and risky journey that necessitated a written record of it, which, in turn, served as a useful guide for

future pilgrims (El Moudden 1990, 69). From the sixteenth century onward, *rihla* flourished in North Africa, particularly in Morocco. As argued by the Moroccan historian Abderrahmane El-Moudden, however, the mediaeval traveller was not detached but often involved in the situation described, and this is why the *rihla* text must also be seen as an autobiographical travelogue. A travelogue that, in the context of a different voyage, may be oral and aurally circulate as Si Mohammed recounts:

In the 1980s and the 1990s Moroccans used to send audio cassettes back home to their families. They were illiterate, and so they used to send vocal accounts about their voyages to their families ... they wanted to narrate their voyage and, at the same time, reassure their loved ones about their well-being. (Si Mohammed, personal communication, 27 July 2016, Gubbio)

As the anticipation and the excitement recounted in the first person in lines 2 and 3 give way to a more detached depiction of the arrival in lines 5 and 6, to the fear expressed once again in the first person in lines 7 and 8, and the display of skills in line 10, it is possible to conceive of 'L-ḥərraga' as a *rihla*, whose mass-mediated circulation reminds future travellers – but also the loved ones who are left behind – about the risky voyage.

The song speaks about a voyage just like a *rihla* does. It is about someone who decides to travel to change his life, the useless life he has in Morocco, and in order to do so he must make this dangerous journey by sea. It is an imaginary voyage, but it is also a voyage which is well known to all Moroccans. For us, Muslims, the *hijra* is omnipresent; this is why there is always a sacred dimension to a voyage (...) the *hijra* is a model for us. We salute anyone who departs by saying that he is in the hands of Allah (*fi idd Allah*). (Hassan, personal communication, 28 October 2018, Rome)

The sound of the *fantasia* (pseudo-French) or *tburida* (from *barud*, gun powder; to fire muzzle-loading rifles), terms which describe the free running of Arabian horses that are abruptly stopped as they reach the edge of a field as the riders shoot their long rifles into the air, marks the end of 'L-ḥərraga'. The rhythmic crescendo, the change in the dynamics, the vocal cries used to incite the horses to gallop faster (*a*, *ha*, and *hay*), and the fast antiphonal singing link the song to Bedouin values and to the beauty, honour, strength and vigour of the horses and the noble cavaliers in their battles. A sound that is also intimately linked to specific ideas about masculinity, a gendered sound that these migrants celebrate to counter, at least symbolically, the otherwise humiliating conditions they experience in their daily lives.

Conclusion

In his analysis on the production of the sea as a concept, Alexis Wick argues that geography is discursively constituted and is a terrain replete with the presence of power, proposing that the sea is 'central to the human saga

(...) and to the many ways we can understand and relate to it' (2016, 743–745). A human saga that, in reference to the Mediterranean, is inextricable from the question of what Europe is supposed to be and who may be considered as European.

[A]nyone concerned with the question of Europe today cannot avoid eventually confronting the urgent and anxious problem of the borders of Europe, and therefore must inevitably come to recognize that the question of Europe itself has become inextricable from the question of migration. (De Genova 2017, 22)

In this context 'L-ḥərraga' becomes a sonorous 'site of memory', a travelogue that offers the possibility to listen to how migrant Moroccan men experience and narrate their passages, and seek their futures in Europe albeit at the cost of their lives. It provides the basis for reflecting on the complex and asymmetrical connection between regions, broader modalities of power, and a critical undercurrent transforming²¹ the contemporary Mediterranean. It allows us to reflect on migrants not from the shores but, rather, from a sea which unites and divides, a passage that holds the memory of other forms of clandestinity – of oppositions, resistances, and struggles – which are not considered a stigma but, rather, viewed as a choice (Di Cesare 2017, 12), turning us into witnesses and auditors. As the song penetrates the Mediterranean, questioning and upholding its very foundations, 'L-ḥərraga' acts as a counterpoint to the mass-mediated images of silent bodies at sea, giving voice to those who travel in search of different possibilities of life, making them audible, recapturing a voice critical for societies that Abdelkadir Khatibi defines as silent because, 'even as they speak, they are not heard in their difference' (2019, 28).

Julia Clancy-Smith urges us to view land and sea relationships rather than cutting off coast-hugging provinces from the interior, 'home to land-lubber peasants and pastoralists' (2016, 750), and to look into different centres and margins. For Moroccan men from the coastal plains and the plateaus who are engaged in the practice and in the imagination of migration, men whose rural sense of self has historically been excluded from other sonorous formations of the Mediterranean, 'L-ḥərraga' allows them to respond to such exclusion by experiencing the rural at a local and at a transnational level, introducing a different network of sites linked by people, history, narrative, genealogy, movement and affect.

Notes

1. In my rendering of the colloquial Arabic used in everyday life in Morocco I have adopted the IJMES system for consonants. For vowels, I have diverged from this system, since in Moroccan Arabic the differences in vowel length are not as distinctive as in standard Arabic. In order to represent Moroccan pronunciation, I have employed full vowels (a, u, and i) and short vowels (ə, o, and e). Since so

many French and English forms and transliterations have become standard, place names, tribes, and proper names are written as they have been conventionally transliterated in Morocco. I have kept the letter ‘ayn (‘) in all these transliterations. Spellings used by other authors are retained when I reference or quote their publications.

2. The song is by Abidat Rma Khouribga.
3. For an example see the compilation ‘Hna Lghorba: nous sommes l’exil: 1937–1970, maîtres de la chanson maghrébine en France’.
4. For an example see ‘Ramsa’ by Carte de Séjour (1984) or ‘Les bruit et l’odeur’ by Zebda (1995).
5. From the verb *ħraq* or *ħrag*, ‘to burn’.
6. Since the year 2000, Khouribga is the site of a yearly festival dedicated to ‘*abidat rma*’ sponsored by the King Mohammed VI, the Ministry of Culture, the province of Khouribga, the Office chérifien des phosphates (OCP) and the communal councils of Khouribga, Oued Zem and Boujad.
7. An episode of the television program ‘Suna’ al-furja’ was dedicated to ‘*abidat rma*’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBgRNRn4c10>.
8. A music genre commonly categorized as popular music, but that it is best understood at the juncture between the folk and the popular.
9. The song, which appears in a full-length film titled ‘Latiqa fi ‘atiqa’, was produced by the same group of ‘*abidat rma*’ and is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKy7rIBQ3Xw&start_radio=1&list=RDJKy7rIBQ3Xw&t=4234. The song alone, along with its accompanying images, is also available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Orb8zeZ5kGM&frags=pl%2Cwn>.
10. Although the term *lamarin* has been used to refer to the French Navy, in this song *lamarin* refers to the Italian Navy.
11. *ħdid*, which literally means iron, is used to refer to a car.
12. Ceuta is a Spanish enclave in Morocco which is about 14 kilometres from Spain. Aside from its proximity to Europe, Ceuta, together with Melilla, are the only two places from which Africans can reach the European soil without risking their lives in the Mediterranean. Both enclaves have become significant for migration flows; IOM UN Migration estimates that land arrivals to these Spanish enclaves between January and September 2018 were at least 4.820 (<https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-82100-2018-deaths-reach-1741>). The fact that Ceuta and Melilla were fenced off by the Spanish government, has given a special significance to these territories turning them into paradigmatic examples of EU migration policies and as metaphors of Fortress Europe. In this context, the second half of line six may be considered as reflecting this new experience of migration for Moroccans. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reading.
13. *Blād r-ruman*, literally translated as country of the Romans, refers to Europe.
14. *Lanshia* is the Moroccan Arabic adaptation of the Italian term *lancia* which refers to the boats used for undocumented crossings of the Mediterranean.
15. Here it refers to the hood of a *jellaba*, the traditional long, loose-fitting outer robe with full sleeves. In the countryside the hood functions as a pocket.
16. The danger of being eaten by the fish is one of the common themes also present in Tunisian songs about the *ħarraġa* (Salzbrun, Souiah, and Mastrangelo 2015, 45). Recently, another trope about the same dangerous fate for undocumented migrants who attempt to cross the Mediterranean has begun to emerge in Morocco on social medias. An image of the display of fish in a market is

juxtaposed to that of an overcrowded boat in the Mediterranean with the following comment: 'Moroccans do not eat fish because it is too expensive, but the fish eats Moroccans since they are cheap' (*I-mgharba mayakulush l-hut hit ghali wa l-hut yakul l-mgharba hit rkhas*).

17. Although Carl Davila makes a compelling argument on the importance 'to distinguish between the "high" cultural forms dominating the historical sources and the local "popular" tradition with which elements of high culture become integrated into other levels of society' (2015, 150), Andalusian music cannot be easily extricated from high urban culture and from issues related to class and ethnicity.
18. [U]n orizzonte che paradossalmente ci fornisce il senso del limite e anche la possibilità del suo superamento, ci ricorda che sono la differenza e il brivido dell'altrove a dire chi siamo, e soprattutto chi vorremmo essere.
19. Clifford Geertz writes about a similar usage of the notion of *hijra* in relation to Sefrou. In the 1970s and the 1980s, a significant rural migration to Sefrou created tension between Real and Outsider Sefrouis. The Outsider Sefrouis felt they were being treated as barbarian intruders, and that they were morally unwelcomed and materially neglected. In response to such a treatment and characterisation, Geertz writes that 'the term they usually use to indicate their move from the country to the city is not the Real Sefrouis' exode rural, which makes them sound like tattered refugees, but *hijra*, the Arabic at once for emigration and immigration, and, of course, for the Prophet's move from Mecca to Medina that inaugurated the Muslim Era' (1989, 299).
20. According to a study about poverty in Morocco presented by the High Commission of Planning in October 2017, multidimensional poverty remains predominantly a rural phenomenon. Furthermore, according to the same study, the poorest region in Morocco is Beni Mellal-Khenifra of which Khourigba is the capital.
21. Stephen Blum warns us about how the term 'influence' is 'an appropriate choice when scholars would rather not specify how they are thinking about one or another process of exchange among individuals or groups', suggesting for music scholars to memorize the list of 46 verbs proposed by art historian Michael Baxandall (2015, 201, 206). 'Transform' is one of the 46 verbs in the list.

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ORCID

Alessandra Ciucci  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5954-4641>

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