

On the migitude of maps

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ABSTRACT

This paper recognizes the multiple emotional inclinations and political scripts performed by cartographic imaginings and objects in the (anti-)immigration discourse, and explores the diverse cartographic expressions of migration that emerged within the crisis generated at the outer and inner borders of Europe. By referring to the several ways that migrants, policy actors, journalists, writers, filmmakers, artists, and activists relied on mapping and map-like objects to navigate, represent, touch and commemorate the forms of social, cultural, and physical im/mobilisation that characterise the present age of migration, the *migitude* of maps is unravelled through reflections on the *transitude*, that is, the ephemeral and materially transient range of mappings that facilitate the passage across the alpine route; the *digitude*, the portable and often reliable mobility offered by mobile mapping devices to migrants during their terraqueous journey across the desert and the sea; and the tragic *finitude* of many clandestine journeys, which is evoked by necrotic symbols, acts and materials signalling deaths on maps.

Keywords

migitude, immobility, migrant crisis, digital mapping, cartographic humanities

Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a deluge of images, charts, maps, statistics, and discourses depicting human migration as a ‘crisis’, an unprecedented, massive, and faceless flow of people coming from different countries and continents. The ensuing rhetoric incited by the repeated pronouncements on the closure of ports or border walls made by several political leaders in various countries across the world gave rise to the emergence of the public figure of the migrant as a ‘threat’, without any reference to his or her humanness: personal experiences, aspirations, emotions, and traumas. Day by day, year after year, the symbolic and physical processes of dehumanisation affecting people on the move contributed in many ways to the stifling of their life’s breath. Although the number of studies on how images and discourses evoke the feelings of a crisis on the issue of migration have increased in the social sciences and the humanities (Bischoff et al. 2010; Bleiker et al. 2013), cultural and social scientists have surprisingly overlooked the multitude of ways that ‘cartographic’ imagery affects the migrant crisis’s narrative. The popularity of maps within migration discourse, mostly proliferated through Western news and political institutions’ press releases,

is, however, growing dramatically: maps published in the media often indicate ‘irregular’ migration by oversized red arrows and viral flows, raising a subtle anxiety about a continent – either Europe, North America, or Oceania – under siege by millions of clandestine invaders. “In the optic of crisis,” Tyler Morgenstern recently remarked, “the migrant appears as a vector of, or vectoralized, risk – an improper intentionality, an unwanted willfulness, a suspect directionality” (Morgenstern 2019, 56).

Under the conditions of such illegalized and undocumented migration, migrant subjects, rather than boosting viral flows, more realistically float, often invisibly, in a frustrating suspension. Their infinite movement of crossing and refoulement, of back-and-forth across countries, shelters, camps, prisons, fences, deserts, seas, and mountains, perpetuates a condition of paradoxical stasis, an often-imperceptible stillness amid the din and magnitude of an imaginary and continuous flow. Moving across continents and countries to flee war or other unsettling circumstances, the ‘wretched’ of migration experience many forms of immobility in appalling conditions such as lengthy confinement in prisons and detention centres, as well as paralysis and disability through torture and other incidents. ‘Stranded’ is indeed the label defining those people who become stuck in the course of their journey, either in transit or in host countries. Paradoxically, the multifaceted array of obstacles encountered by migrants during the journey is not antithetical to migration mobility but a constitutive, inextricable part of it. For indeed, without a border to cross, there would be no need to call ‘migration’ this human movement (De Genova 2017).

Surprisingly enough, through media and political discourse, the morphology of immobility is often hard to hear, conceive, and see in all its complexity and nuances. And yet, a focus on the temporal and spatial constraints that define the migrant journey should transform the alarmist media perspective on migrants’ movement into a much more intermittent and corpuscular experience. Considering this aspect, as critical scholars and readers who do not want to surrender to the mainstream rhetoric of the crisis, we should pursue this matter further: are ‘aggressive’ arrows in news maps the only symbols by which we can make sense of migration from a cartographic perspective?

Beyond the media spectacle of the migrant crisis, much more sensitive, disturbing, or imaginative representations of migration can flourish unexpectedly. I would argue, at the risk of sounding too general, that every small, large, hopeful, and tragic event of migration might call for the creation of a map. However, it could also be asserted, to the contrary, that a map produces a migratory event, namely by detecting it, channelling our attention to it, and recasting it according to a peculiar configuration.

This paper, with the perspective of a cultural geographer working at the intersection of critical migration studies, map studies, and media studies in mind, aims to compose such a kaleidoscopic view of the contemporary media cartographies of migration. Contributing to the “transdisciplinary and transmedial field of cartographic humanities” – as proposed by the

editors of this special issue – the adoption of a humanistic cartographic lens means situating the bond between ‘mapping and migration’ within an eclectic literature, a messy methodology, and a variety of examples that interlink recent debates on postcolonial literature, critical migration studies, post-representational cartography, and visual culture more broadly. If one listens carefully to the narratives, artistic performances, film experiences, activist projects, and daily events where a deep cartographic stance may whisper and emerge, one can grasp indeed the multiple emotional inclinations and political scripts performed by cartographic imaginings and objects in the (anti-) immigration discourse. This is what I refer to as the migrant attitude of maps or the ‘migritude’ of maps.

The term ‘migritude’ is commonly associated with the title of a poetic oeuvre written by Shailja Patel in 2010. Composed of seventeen fragments, the work celebrates the several forms of migration that are expressed in contemporary society, particularly from the point of view of the author, a third-generation East African of Indian Gujarati descent (Patel 2010). Recalling the antiracist and anticolonialist black movement of *negritude* of the late 1930s, *migritude* also partakes in the sense of continuity between contemporary anti-immigration rhetoric and normalised racist and colonialist discourses. In francophone African literary studies, Jacques Chevrier (2004) denotes *migritude*, for instance, as the third space of postcolonial African writers, whose identity becomes defined through the ongoing negotiation between the culture of origin and the receiving culture, giving rise to hybridity and contaminations. Calling attention to “the material and psychic being-in-the-world of the migrant within the current context of global movements” (Foster 2019, 9), *migritude* has been more broadly conceived in postcolonial literature as an attitude, a critical posture towards the present, and a sensitivity towards the problematics of global mobility that characterise both migrant writers and artists. However, a consideration of *migritude* specifically with regard to what happens during the journey of oppressed migrants has not yet become prominent in postcolonial studies. By contrast, critical migration studies – a heterogeneous socio-geographical field “concerned with identifying and challenging the processes that serve to marginalize and oppress migrants” (Gilmartin and Kuusisto-Arponen 2020, 19) – has become increasingly mindful of migrant experiences formed during clandestine movement toward Europe, drawing attention to how migrants’ undesirable passage is inhibited and interrupted by borders of different kinds.

Without neglecting the genealogy of the term that has influenced postcolonial literature so far, the aim of this brief contribution is to touch on *migritude* as a cartographic disposition towards contemporary undocumented, illegalized, and oppressed forms of migration that are currently addressed by critical migration scholars. In this context, the *migritude* of maps outlines a certain propensity that the cartographic ontology has towards migration issues, including questions of travel, movement, immobility, and necropolitics. What are the conditions and contexts, in short, that make maps, mappings, and cartographic imaginings gen-

uinely *inclined* to represent the migratory journey and its ambivalent rhythms? How does a migrant, motional, emotional, immobilising attitude manifest within a map-minded culture?

If we live in the “age of migration” (Castles and Miller 2003), or more properly the “postcolonial” age of migration (Samaddar 2020), shades, vestiges, and marks of such phenomena should indeed remain impressed on a wide variety of mobile and travelling objects, such as maps and mapping processes. Such a posture thus requires us to find events in which maps appear intertwined with migratory formations, tracing the intricate visual, material, literary, and sonic textures of their emergence.

In media, narratives, and arts, maps indeed take many forms: they are constantly changing contexts, media, devices, and audiences. Therefore, attributed meanings can be modified, enriched, or diminished through several semantic codes. When attention is drawn to the spatial and cultural dynamics of maps, in sum, the idea that maps are meant to move, become contaminated, and change as images of a broader visual culture soon emerge, requiring our deep attentiveness. Additionally, a critical disposition towards the mapping of migration further calls for the deconstruction of the many faces of political power that define the crisis, and the detection of the ideological and symbolical discourses within certain maps of migration that appear at certain times. Unfolding the migritude of maps, whether in the past or in the present, or projecting it programmatically into a future to come does not mean, however, essentialising the function of mapping in migration. It suggests the recognition of the public and intimate intricacies, imbrications, and tensions that arise between the two. In truth, the relationship between mapping and movement has not always been felicitous, especially in geographic circles. Many scholars maintain an unfavourable critique of the Euclidean map as having a static and fixed frame and therefore as unable to depict kinetic geographies and human mobilities (Cresswell 2006; Massey 2005). For instance, Tim Cresswell argued more than a decade ago that traditional maps of movement “neglect” the content of the journey (Cresswell 2006). In a map, geographer Doreen Massey states, “a movement is turned into a static line” (Massey 2005, 108). Beyond the alleged stillness of the cartographic representation, post-representational map scholars argue, however, that there is an often-neglected mapping practice (Dodge et al. 2009). Mapping, in this sense, emerges as a performative trajectory, an agentive tracing of different kinds of movements beyond those that are (sometimes) mistaken for fixed and frozen representations (Lo Presti 2020).

The following sections attempt to make sense of the semantic and empirical richness of mapping acts that are entangled with migration by putting together pieces of the literary, visual, and aesthetic geographies that, together, narrate the current migration crises. This will be done through some extemporal reflections on ‘transitude’, a condition in which mapping emerges as an act of ‘transit’ – of helping migrants passing through or over an unfamiliar alpine route – but performing or leaving often ‘transient’ and ephemeral traces; ‘digitude’, which refers to the portable and reliable mobility offered by devices integrated with GPS to

migrants during their terraqueous journey across the desert and the Mediterranean Sea; and the tragic ‘finitude’ of either a normal life, unsettled by war, as in the recent case of Syria, or the many loose ends of clandestine journeys, which are evoked by activists and artists through persuasive symbolisation and manipulations of exhausted cartographic remnants.

#1 *Transitude*

Getting lost in the snow, in an attempt from Italy to reach France, is equivalent to surrendering to a broken and merciless compass.

Andrea Bajani, “La terra è di tutti” (2019, 9)¹

Without an inscription on a durable material, a map would hardly be imagined to have an aesthetic value or a navigational function. However, the horizon of clandestine human migration is studded with extemporaneous, asynchronous, and fragile mapping acts: a meshwork of directions, paths, loopholes, and shelters that migrants have to learn by heart or in advance and subsequently discover *en route* by following the ephemeral landmarks left on trees, on the ground, on the snow, on makeshift maps, and, at best, indicated by human mappers. For this reason, an unwanted, denied, and hindered movement, as the one embodied by clandestine migration, can still manifest itself in the sphere of landscapes, taking, however, the shape of a transient and transitory environmental mapping, of an empirical navigation.

The Alpine route, known in the last years as the twelve kilometres that separate the Italian border-zone of Claviere from the French town of Briançon, is a dramatic and at the same time genuine example of the transitude of migratory mapping, that is the transitory but crossing-driven salvific bond that mapping builds with the rhythms of unwanted bodies. Not all the people rescued at sea, after crossing the desert and experiencing psychological and physical distress in Libya, land, in fact, on Italian shores with the will to remain in the country. Many so-called ‘secondary movements’ continue in the following months or years inside and outside European member states. Those attempts to cross borders are often obstructed and deterred, hampering the possibility to live in the dreamed-of country of arrival. It should be clear, in fact, that one of the tragic effects of the rhetoric of the migrant crisis is that not only the security of borders between European and non-European countries has been intensified, but also that of borders between countries within the continent. For this reason, “fortress Europe implodes into a multitude of mini-fortresses” (Ponzanesi 2016). In particular, after the closure of the border between Italy and France in 2015, the usual path that would lead migrants from the town of Ventimiglia to France, a growing number of migrants decided to make their way by less-familiar routes, across the Alps. The closure of the road to the Roya Valley, which starts about thirty kilometres north of the Riviera and which has often proved a dead-end for many, pushed migrants to move north to the Briançon passage (see fig. 1).

However dangerous it may be, considering also the unfamiliarity of African migrants with the Alpine landscape, it must be remembered that the Alpine route was also a well-beaten, although neglected, clandestine trail in the past, for instance, during the Italian emigration to France. As remembered by Martina Tazzioli (2020, 3-4), during World War II, many Italians escaped through the Alpine passage and, after the war, they continued to cross illegally the French border to find jobs. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Alps became a crossing point for non-European migrants, especially in the 1980s, when people escaping the former Yugoslavia passed through Italy.

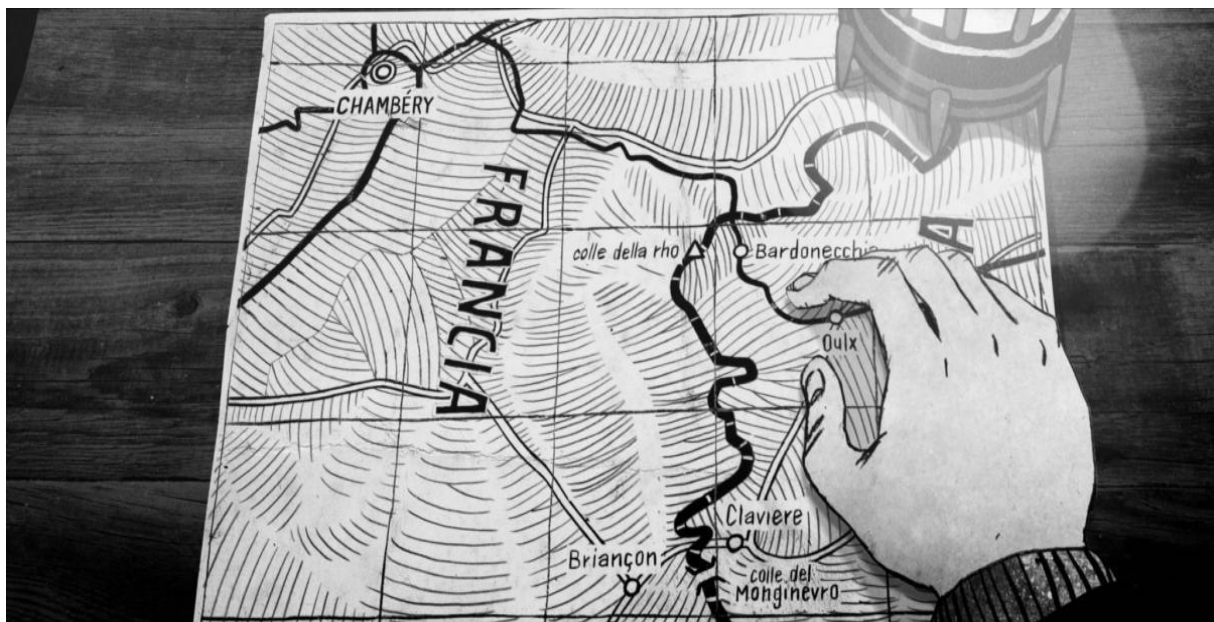


Fig. 1. Video still from the movie *The Milky Way* (SMK Factory 2020 – directed by Luigi D’Alfie). Through glimpses of everyday life and animated graphic novels, the movie tells the story of local solidarity and the dangers faced by migrants during the crossing of the Alpine route. Courtesy of SMK Factory.

Despite the fact that, in media and politics, the spotlight remains focused on migration across the Central Mediterranean Route, there are pathways that are less travelled but no less dangerous or decisive for the lives of migrants, such as the mountain trail. In the recently published narrative reportage of Maurizio Pagliassotti, *Ancora dodici chilometri: Migranti in fuga sulla rotta alpina* (Twelve more kilometres: Migrants fleeing on the Alpine route), a “biopolitical map” of the last passage of the African migration through the inner borders of Europe viscerally unfolds, foregrounding the solidaristic network built through the years between activists of the Susa Valley, locals, religious associations, and the thousands of people attempting to cross the borders between Italy and France (Pagliassotti 2019, 17). The book is rich in cartographic references, suggesting a deep bond between mapping and migration to the extent that migrants are willing to pay “for some verbal indication or a piece of paper that should serve as a map” (Pagliassotti 2019, 74). However, throughout the book, a profound tension emerges between the use that maps can be made of by those with map-reading skills, familiar with the local environment, in comparison with migrants who try to

orient themselves alone in a foreign landscape, often following merely natural signs.

Considering the peculiarity of this clandestine route, both digital and paper maps may be considered sometimes useless for the real-time progress of the journey. Smartphones loaded with the Google Maps app and its well-known automated path should in fact be turned off at night to avoid the detection of the light screen by French gendarmes. The journey thus often results in “a walk into the unknown, following a map they [migrants] don’t even know how to position, or a phone that will soon lose its connection or charge” (Pagliassotti 2019, 54). Alpine ‘*passseurs*’ (usually activists of the Susa Valley or locals, but also truckers), who have better knowledge of the mountain, may thus decide to help these migrants for different reasons, not least because of the impulse to “go and look for a missing person, to give him back, even before a warm place, a location” (Bajani 2019, 9). In an environment which apparently lacks clear indications and coordinates, such clandestine guides easily orientate themselves. They behave like human mappers and sensors, guides ready to offer direction to those unfamiliar with snow who, as if at sea, see only a homogeneous and continuous horizon.

The contested relationship between mapping experienced as a form of transient wayfinding – an empirical navigation – and the map considered a ‘professional’, perhaps abstruse, device requiring specific reading expertise, continues in the following pages. During a visit in the Oulx refuge, the author Pagliassotti found ‘detailed maps’ in a corner that helped him to reflect on the dramatic situation lived by migrants today, where orientation has somehow become a privilege of the few, although its function is vital for the positive outcome of the journey. These detailed maps, personalized by activists with many symbols, represent the points “where to pass, where the border is, where the police are, where the gendarmes are stationed, where the rescue point has been set up” (Pagliassotti 2019, 149). They are not so different from the many counter-maps that activists involved in migration issues have produced in the last years (Campos-Delgado 2018; Casas-Cortés et al. 2017; Kollektiv Orangotango 2019). Commenting on the spread of such counter-mapping attitudes among activists, the author more cynically claims:

I don’t know if it makes sense to put maps in the hands of those who, usually, do not have the slightest idea where they are: but those maps are a symbol that explains many things well, or at least highlights the contradictions of this incredible, extraordinarily human practice. (Pagliassotti 2019, 149)

What are, in fact, these maps a symbol of? They are an attempt to reflect on the conditions of humanity in our times; they hit us with their cruel and cynical geometric evidence, a landscape made of borders which, however, is not static and hermetic at all, since a migrant, counter-border posture continuously bubbles to its surface. On paper as much as on land, migration is interrupted by borders, fences, and defence systems, but it is also defined by the stubborn indolence of crossing those borders. As Nicholas De Genova more incisively

noted, “such human mobility has come to be pervasively construed as migration only to the extent that it is understood to involve the crossing (or transgression) of one or another sort of state-imposed border” (De Genova 2017, 6). The activist attitude towards migration implies that human movement cannot be easily blocked, and such counter-maps open up a space for further introspection and relationality. In this situation, the migritude of maps more intuitively unfolds as a transitude, an ephemeral impulse, offered by mapping performances “of going through, around, along, above or under space” (Willmott 2019, 119) by any possible means. The Alpine route is thus a context in which “mapping as wayfinding – as situated and embodied practices of mobility” (Roberts 2012, 4), takes on different forms, even forcing the deactivation of its artificial functions to then remerge as a sensory and empirical navigation, driven by spoken tips, landscape markers, and the help of local activists.

#2 *Digitude*

In the desert only the man with the GPS knew the right direction: one led to life, all the others to a terrible death.

Francesca Melandri, *Sangue giusto* (2017, 40)

The sense we get from the first scenario is that an essential feature of the map is to allow migrant people to move undetected or at least to give them the hope of doing so, whether this map is imaginary or real, mental or physical, natural or artificial. Yet, the presence of a palpable geometric map can be useless in those environments that are not well marked by anthropomorphic landmarks or where movement is considered suspicious in the first place. Unsurprisingly, a map is an inscription “that does (or does not do) work in the world” (Pickles 2004, 67). For many other reasons that I will discuss below, the transformation of the paper map into a digital device, enmeshed in a wider network of other materials, bodies, spaces, practices, and relations, has in any case enormously impacted the phenomenon of migration. This is why a second disposition that mapping embodies to support or hinder the migration journey is what I call here its digitude.

Over the last decade, many institutions devoted to border control and migration management in the European Union, such as Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), have in fact relied on advanced digital mapping tools to track and detect migrant events, even before any actual border-crossing. “These operations” – Sebastian Cobarubbias explains – “can include military vessels, surveillance technology and the deployment of multi-country border guards both in sea and land territories, thousands of kilometers away from the actual EU borderlines” (Cobarubbias 2019, 771). Scholars are often sensitive to distinguishing the cartographic applications of military or governmental policies from civilian ones (Goodchild 2007; Herb et al. 2009), and this distinction proves important even for unpacking the multiplicity of actors involved at various levels in the

exploitation of digital technologies which deal with migration issues and border-control. In this respect, despite the fact that such algorithm-driven forms of bordering are criticized for their oppressive and coercive ways of detecting and containing unwanted bodies (Amoore 2007), it is also fair to underline the bottom-up effects of digital mapping for assisting migrants in their daily crossing of Fortress Europe. As Mark Latonero summarises, “social media, mobile apps, online maps, instant messaging, translation websites, wire money transfers, cell phone charging stations, and WiFi hotspots have created a new infrastructure for movement as critical as roads or railways” (Latonero 2015). This new infrastructure performs what the author calls the “digital passage to Europe” (Latonero 2015). Dana Diminescu also recognises the crucial importance of the digital network for migrants, referring to the figure of the “connected migrant” to highlight the ability of displaced and diasporic subjects to construct virtual spaces of encounter, contact, and organisation where physical ones are hard to find (Diminescu 2008). However, in the context of the clandestine journeys across the desert and the Mediterranean Sea, such a digitude, the other feature that is increasingly imbricating mapping with migration, constitutes a contingent and material space, subjected to the opportunities and limitations of different objects and infrastructures. Not every individual can, in fact, gain access to smartphones and Wi-Fi during the clandestine journey, but these are often considered indispensable, so much so that many migrants prefer to trade or sell their food and water in order to gain access to the digital space through a smartphone. More importantly, the crossing of the Sahara Desert, usually starting in Agadez, would be impossible to undertake for those who are not equipped with satellite technology. In the novel *Sangue giusto* (The Right Blood) by Francesca Melandri, tracing, among others, the story of a young Ethiopian man who embarked on a journey to Italy through the desert, the vital importance of digital mapping is explicitly recognized, as illustrated in the epigraph above (Melandri 2017). Only convoys equipped with satellite navigation have the ability to cross the desert without getting lost.

Mobile digitude, moreover, might activate virtual, open, unfiltered territories that stand in contrast to the physical immobility and the exclusive local information-gathering experienced by ‘stranded’ migrants. Since many countries in Europe discourage immigration, and also finance anti-immigration campaigns directly in African countries, the one who embarks on a clandestine journey is, in fact, vulnerable to exposure because he or she will encounter enormous difficulties in finding trustworthy information about safe routes (Dekker et al. 2018). This information gap is normally filled by smugglers who provide information that is often deceptive or false about the best route to take. There is, however, a third space between the dissuasive one performed by institutions and the persuasive but dangerous passage promised by smugglers, and this is the one that migrants construct autonomously, navigating through the routes marked by Google Maps, and always adopting new strategies, also with the help of activist organisations and the support of family networks already in

Europe. In this contest, mapping technologies are gaining momentum. They are instances of connectivity that allow people to share their needs with peers and organise safer routes, revealing new forms of intimacy, solidarity, and activism.

Since the performance of navigation is exponentially boosted by digital tools, the map can be conceived as what has been elsewhere defined an ‘actionable object’ (Lo Presti 2020), an amplifier of human agency through which the potential for movement is enacted. Whereas along transit routes, the digitude of mapping expresses a real-time adventure, a directional lifeline towards arrival, it can also help to strengthen migrants’ narratives. In this sense, many stories recorded with digital tools unfold the map as a spatial archive, a motion recorder that can be navigated backwards. Many documentaries and memories about migration produced in recent years rely in fact on the immersive and aesthetically engaging atmosphere of digital mapping to retrace and remember the beginning of biographical journeys until arrival in Europe. *It will be Chaos* (2018), a documentary directed by the Italian filmmakers Lorena Luciano and Filippo Piscopo about the unfolding of the migrant crisis in Europe, tells the story of the Eritrean refugee Aregai (who survived the tragic shipwreck of 2013 near the island of Lampedusa) through the narratological proximity of a mobile mapping device (fig. 2). Touching and zooming in and out of the hills surrounding his native city, Aregai cartographically illustrates his journey from Africa to Italy: “I start from Eritrea from the small city of Teseney. It’s near the border of Sudan” (Luciano and Piscopo 2018). Following the fingers and verbal description of Aregai, the spectator is afterwards forced to recognize how Italian past is entangled with the present of African migration. Since 1929, Teseney has in fact been called by Italian colonizers the Village of Gasperini (named after the former colonial governor of Eritrea, a native of Treviso in Italy).

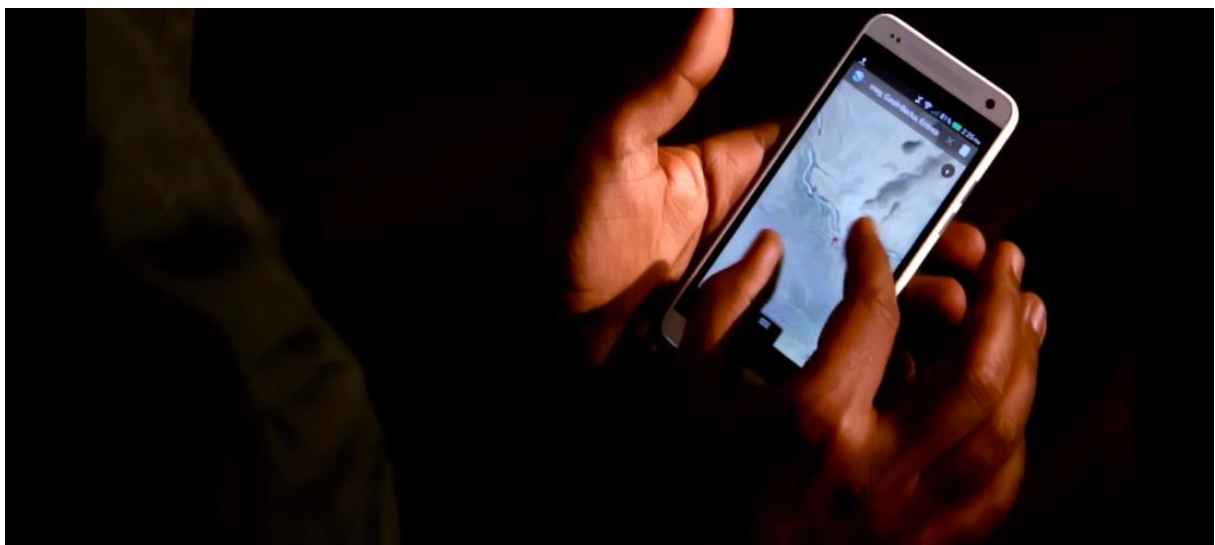


Fig. 2. Video still from *It will be Chaos*, a 2018 HBO documentary directed by Lorena Luciano and Filippo Piscopo. Aregai narrates his journey from a small market town in Eritrea to Italy. Trapped in the bureaucracy of the Italian immigration system, he decides to move to Sweden. Courtesy of Niccolò Bruna and the directors.

The line that divides the documentary universe from that of academic research is thinning. In migration research, data-gathering about the journey through trajectory ethnography (Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017) also shares an increasing appeal with mapping devices, especially for those researchers “unable to physically travel along with their research subjects” (Büscher and Urry 2009, 103). Since trajectory ethnography requires informants to be tracked through GPS, it examines how migrants develop alternative routes and new strategies while being temporarily immobilized at “transfer points” or “places of in-betweenness” (Büscher and Urry 2009, 108). After the process, the researcher can assess the different uses of maps enacted during the convoluted journey. He or she can also consider visualising, through geovisualisations, the final map that emerges at the end of the route. The many digital maps produced during migration research then function as narratives, offering a “back story [...] composed of an intricate network of varied routes crossing the different regions from which refugees and migrants had originated” (Crawley et al. 2018, 33).

#3 *Finitude*

When I thought about life I got sick, so I left.
Abour Bakar Sidibè in *Les Sauters* (Sidibé et al. 2016)²

In May 2018, I had the opportunity to visit the *Imago Mundi* art exhibition in Trieste, Italy. My attention at that time was caught by hundreds of smartphones, set like so many gems on a rocky surface, glistening on a panel explicitly dedicated to Syria (see fig. 3, on the left). Rather than embodying the function of mobile devices, they stayed put, immobile, separated from the continuous wandering of their owners, as illustrated in the previous section. Their screens were, however, animated by different lights, voices, sounds, movements, and gestures that referred to the war in Syria that led millions of people to flee their homes but also to practices of resistance and border-crossing enacted by these now destitute citizens. One of these smartphones streamed a map of Syria. Such a map seemed docile, harmless, and stable compared to the martyrdoms that the Syrian body had experienced throughout the last decade. But first a cigarette and then an iron was suddenly wielded by a hand inside the screen to inflict wounds on the map (fig. 3, on the right). The paper texture of the map, mediated by the screen, curled up; the names of the cities vanished under the ash of the cigarette and the smoke of the iron. The map began to suffer and become corrupted like the territory of Syria. *The map was now Syria.*

Just like human skin, maps can be flexible and resistant but also vulnerable and perishable (Rossetto 2019), marked by violence, holes, and wounds of different kinds. Symbolically, they are ‘finite’ representations of spatial phenomena; physically and temporally, their material suggests that they are destined to die. These ephemeral maps may

also emerge on the bodies of those who embark on the migrant journey. Mrs. Nicoletta, a former teacher who now helps migrants crossing the French border in the Susa Valley, tells the author of *Ancora dodici chilometri* of a bodily map that took shape on an African boy she once hid in her home. Such corporeal cartography is “clearly visible thanks to large scars scattered around the body,” sculptured by the torture and violence that the boy had had to face during his imprisonment in Libya (Pagliassotti 2019, 53).

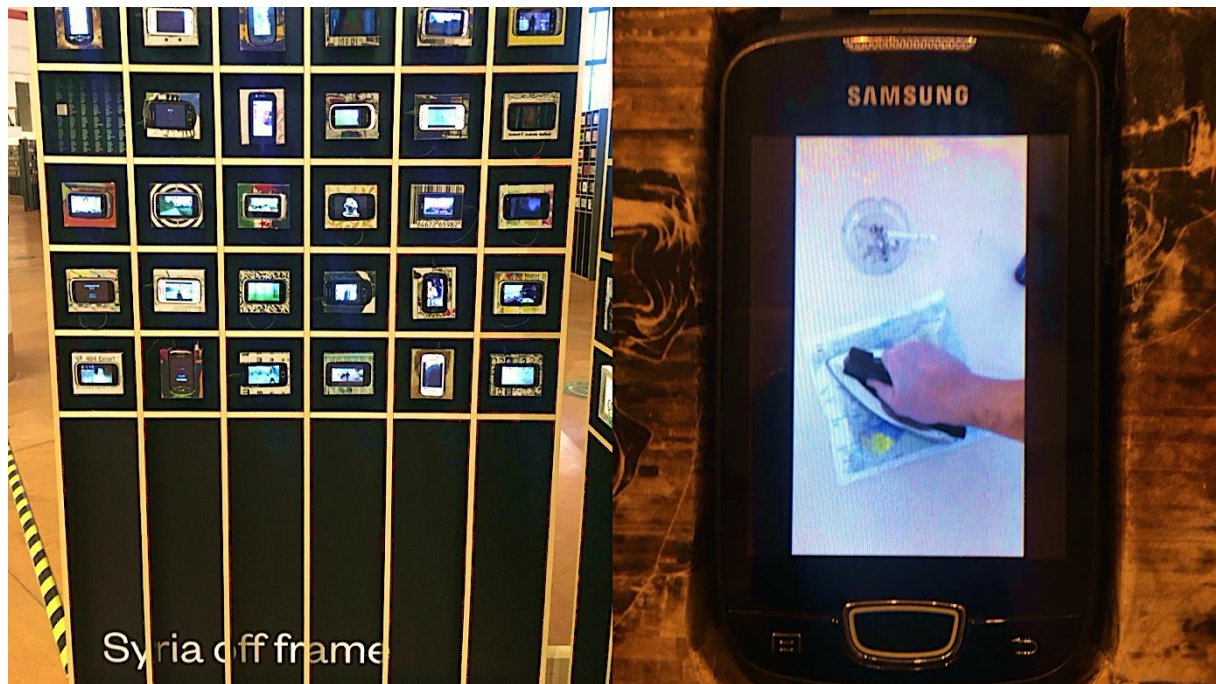


Fig. 3. Ali Safar, *Iron, Syria*, 2015. Imago Mundi Collection, Fondazione Benetton, Trieste, 2018. Author's photograph.

Beyond the intuitive understanding of the map as a navigational medium that allows humans to physically move from one place to another, these two examples suggest that there is also a symbolical and emotional aspect of the map that links it to the experience of migration. This semiotic aura cannot be easily overlooked. Since the migrant journey has an end or encounters a limit, so do maps, as prostheses of migration, experience or represent many expressions of finitude. More generally, the imagery of the map has most often burst into humanistic and artistic work to express, in both an intimate and geopolitical sense, the current and dramatic violence of our times, marked above all by the idea of corruption, deterioration, and the tragic finitude of humanity, which is peculiar to wars and environmental crises. Similarly, cartographic and archival anxiety about migrant fatalities is particularly increased in a time in which migration and border policies are transforming many passages, like the Mediterranean Sea, into deathscapes (Heller and Pezzani 2014; Lo Presti 2019). According to the International Organisation for Migration, more than 19,000 people died at sea between 2015 and 2020, and this number is still far from the actual reality, as many deaths were unreported. Pronouncing the word ‘migration’ more often means equating this

process with death, and maps like affective sponges have started to absorb and dramatize the sense of suffering and tragedy surrounding the whispering of migration. This necropolitical atmosphere is usually expressed by the many red dots that activist researchers and journalists put on maps to make visible the incidents of violence and death that occurred to migrants during the terraqueous passage across the Mediterranean Sea. Vivid examples are offered by *The Migrants' File*, *Migreurop*, *Liquid Traces* (Heller and Pezzani 2014). Those maps transform the aggressive arrows directed to Europe into holes and barriers. Exhausted by the dominant political debate on the crisis of migration and the perils of an invasion, they reveal the lack of humanity in our times, and thus re-signify maps as the “epitome of the unliving” (Lo Presti 2019).

Conclusion

In this paper, the boundaries of the term *migritude* are expanded to include clandestine migrant trails and their cartographies, highlighting several moments and conditions where maps are implicated in the lives and deaths of migrants. The scattered examples discussed above cast light on the ways that maps, mappings, and cartographic imaginings differently intrude upon, infiltrate, and challenge the narratives of migrant journeys. The triad of *transitude*, *digitude*, and *finitude* suggests that there is no a singular or dominant way through which maps of migration can be experienced today nor an exclusive disciplinary gaze that can claim to speak for them; their *allotropy* (the possibility of maps to exist in different forms) makes the agonistic coexistence of surveillant maps and counter-maps, of paper and digital spaces, of mobility and immobility, of humanities and social sciences, thinkable and practicable in the larger subject of postcolonial humanities. Against the heterogeneous background embraced by the *migritude* of maps, displacement becomes both a dense narratological and sociological tool, by which the intensity of the line that links A to B can be progressively unpacked through several inquiries, rhythms, images, and events.

While *transitude* evokes the power of mapping as a multisensorial, undetected, and concerted practice of border-crossing, cartographic *digitude* enhances, in many contexts, the agency of migrants during their decision-making, making maps a means of navigation, a communication device, and often a life-line tool. Moreover, maps can become commemorative images and political remnants of the current necropolitical regime of migration by following not just the movements, emotions, and feelings of displaced people, but also their interruptions and sufferance. In this sense, it would be unfair to refer to the present cartographic media culture as one that has been exclusively dominated by the aggressive, hard-hearted, and vectorial cartographies of the crisis. When maps are re-appropriated, subjectivized, and re-narrated in unpredictable ways by the many subjects involved in the migration trail, we can instead attune ourselves to the suggestive ways that human maps disrupt the mainstream cartographic system and open up to different spaces of imagination and critical

thinking.

The emphasis of cultural map scholars, like that of postcolonial writers and artists, is on those transformative mappings in which the geometry of power can be subverted, subaltern bodies can reclaim the right to inhabit abstract spaces, geopolitics and intimate geography may converge, and the solid and abstract fixity of maps ends up unravelling:

In this myriad of different ways of thinking about mapping, attention shifts onto processes, institutions, social groups, power, interactions between different elements in networks, emotions at play in mapping, the nature of mapping tasks, and a concern with practice. (Perkins 2008, 152)

This practice-oriented perspective is currently handled by post-representational and non-representational geographers to unpack the many roles played by maps in society, but it has not been fully directed onto migratory events where maps and mapping are intensely imbricated. To appreciate the migrature of maps in its variety of cultural forms and practices requires an interdisciplinary effort, and the postcolonial cartographic humanities are an opportunity to retrace alternative imaginations of human mobility that are sensitive to the complex nuances and experiences of migrant stories.

Notes

¹ All citations of sources in Italian that appear in the article were translated by the author.

² Abou Bakar Sidibé is a migrant from Mali who filmed for a year his and other people's attempts to cross the border between Morocco and Melilla. These videos gave birth to the documentary *Les Sauteurs* (2016), co-directed by Sidibé, Moritz Siebert, and Estephan Wagner.

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