

Drowning by Numbers

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Contextual Essay

This essay is a curatorial take on the representation and reception of displaced and dispossessed populations trying to escape life-threatening conditions in the Middle East and North Africa through sea voyages across the Mediterranean and Aegean seas during the past decade. It is written in the style of narrative politics. It explores how the definition of a public audience shape and are shaped by the very politics of representation. In particular, it addresses how the use of narrative and story-telling approaches in non-textual formats situate the events in question under a different ethical and political light.

With this work, I do not claim to produce a 'resistance narrative' per se, though the effect I seek in engagement amounts to a form of normative mobilization that underlines the common humanity of experiences of death and disappearance. In this regard, the images that accompany this essay are essential for shaping the collaborative production of a text into a political act regardless of the actual local setting of the audience/observer (O'Neill, 2008). Providing an in-depth understanding of the 'governance' of recent mass migration attempts [here the word 'attempts' must be underlined] at continental, regional and national levels through cross-national comparative research or to critically analyse governance practices, enhancing Europe's migration governance capacity and policy coherence of its member states and 'third countries' is the background against which this hybrid genre of presentation was put together (De Genova, 2013). However, these themes do not represent its priorities.

Although narrative accounts have long been recognised as a key component of discussing individual and mass trauma, there has been little critical investigation of how such narratives are constituted and mobilised, and with what consequences (Mayer 2014). An analysis of the politics and possibilities of narratives of survival reveals that these narratives could create a desired albeit imaginary conversation with the researchers, policy makers and the public at large. Here, my focus is not on the specific stories of individuals, though they are most valuable, but on the form, function and effects of survival as well as death narratives as a highly circumscribed kind of storytelling. There are assumptions and areas of tension which compel a more critical and perhaps daring approach to the way this genre is operationalised in forced migration studies. I believe normally alien, non-

academic forms of intervention such as art would allow us more space to reconsider the by now normalized death and disappearance of the dispossessed populations. Possibilities offered by stories told via other communicative formats, spaces and practices could help us further develop the main implications of a radical theory of aesthetics suggested by Theodor Adorno and Ranciere in the context of the complex relation between political and aesthetic encounters, and could highlight the role of materiality in political contestation through establishment of shared meanings deliberated by aesthetic inventions.

The political theory of aesthetic engagement subscribed to here traces what has been violently erased from memory and history, and, asks how this erasure could be inscribed into new possibilities for remembering, accounting, and engagement. In current discussions of vulnerability and resilience, both negative and recuperative readings tend to operate at a level that externalizes aesthetic engagement. However, the relational character of politics and art offers us the possibility of putting forward the idea of political intersubjective alliances. The oscillation between loss and transformation, political aesthetics has to approach any artistic practice in the context of resistance to the given (Edkins 2011). As such, transformative artistic practices can offer resistance to art's appropriation by the politics of modernity and contemporary neoliberalism (Ziarek 2014).

As to the perception policies, practices and humanitarian responses to the current refugee crisis exemplified by the increasing death toll of the displaced peoples resulting from their deadly voyage to cross the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas leave much of the story untold. The notable efforts to achieve harmonization between Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Sweden, UK, Turkey and Lebanon and Libya often resulted in further fortification of the borderscapes of Europe.

The roles, relationships, and strategies of both state actors and civil society institutions in problem solving and service delivery concerning the survival of the dispossessed across the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas are best described as in constant flux. The involvement of community organizations, grassroots groups, and local-level institutions of civil society and advocacy bodies, as well as unsung individual heroes saving lives, is widely discussed in existing research which has tended to conceptualize these interventions through a series of oppositional dialectics, such as co-optation versus resistance. They produce a variety of scholarly narratives that are politically engaged by strategically displaying the multiple roles played by a diverse

set of actors and institutions. Each study applies their own interpretive frameworks to local needs, conditions, and suffering of asylum seekers, sans-papiers and non-status people in order to negotiate politics of forced migration on the ground.

This essay narrates the biopolitical control practices across the borders of Europe from a different stance. Though its subject matter falls squarely within the study of borders and biopolitics, the diverse surveillance mechanisms used to control the borderzones (Topak, 2014) in order to monitor, intercept, apprehend, and ultimately to push back migrants and block their passage to Europe at all cost, its methodology is one of engaged story telling via alternative forms of representation. Constant surveillance marked by the inner logic of exclusion does not always yield death and disappearance. However, when it does, especially at the bottom of the deep blue waters of ancient seas, the proportions of these losses are nothing less than epic in the tragic sense as far as the glorious history of the European civilization is concerned.

The forms of 'grief-activism' commemorating those who have perished while on the move, and in the waters surrounding Europe, as well as at the continent's physical border barriers or inside its detention centres ideally should amount to more than contestations of death. They must invite us to clearly mark the differential distribution of vulnerability and an accompanying politics of division, abandonment and necropolitical violence, all of which provide the foundation that border regimes thrive upon. Judith Butler's notion of 'grievability' (2004, 2009) and Jacques Rancière's proposition of an 'impossible identification' (1992) as a form of politics, attempts to form solidarities via the articulation of precarious moments of loss in the language of a desired collective mourning must make exclusions bare. A transformative engagement with an accounting of encounters with death and ultimate loss, however, cannot create a community 'beyond borders' *ex nihilo*.

The series of paintings accompanying this brief essay are inspired by real stories of migrants and refugees continuing to die by drowning in growing numbers as they attempt to cross into Europe through the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. The *raison d'être* of these works of art is not to re-examine the issue of 'dying to live' or to draw renewed attention to these deaths and disappearances in relation to biopolitics of citizenship (Vaughan-Williams, 2017). This is already done amply and ably by scholarly work on the growing mobilization around refugee and migrant deaths and disappearances along Europe's borders. Solidarity with migrants, refugees

and their families in response to these deaths is an integral part of political struggles for greater rights at a global scale. An examination of struggles around rights of the dead suggests that they can be transgressive of the logic of modern citizenship.

This installation is a testimony to the fact that the practice of art as a creative and critical form of human engagement could be conceptualized as part of research on human suffering. Questions about the purposes of artistic and scholarly inquiry and the institutional and political influences that shape each of them are not categorically separate. Notions of arts-informed research, and practice-based research are comparable according to the forms, agencies and actions that are part of the theoretical, structural, interpretive and critical traditions informing both. Art is a multidisciplinary endeavour that is open to the re-envisioning of political engagement as a transformative practice. In this installation comprised of a curative essay and accompanying artworks, paintings are specifically employed as a framework for theorizing practice. The kinds of questions raised by relating to the images as an act of engagement, and looking closer and giving time to decipher the bare reality of loss can contribute to advancing a more complex, nuanced, and productive discourse on displacement and dispossession (Pezzani and Heller, 2013).

In Judith Butler's terms, asking the question of "what it means to become ethically responsive, to consider and attend to the suffering of others, and, more generally, which frames permit the representability of the human and which do not" constitutes only the beginning of genuine engagement and not an end in itself (2004). Combined with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social suffering (1999), which is experienced both personally as well as within structural inequalities and power relations as a positional aspect of living, or dying, the concept of suffering must be thoroughly reconsidered in the context of forced migration studies. Furthermore, loss is to be examined not just as a flat reading of physical death, but in relation to the severing of communities, the losses of social recognition and attacks on human dignity. The complex concept of suffering, in which loss accrues more loss and is re-experienced in concentric circles, is to be openly discussed. Perhaps the heaviest of all kinds of suffering is when it happens in silence. Drowning at the depths of a deep sea, surrounded by kin and strangers alike, all holding onto a brief hope of remaining alive, is an incontestable sign of injustice. However, it is also a relational category that could potentially draw attention to the co-implication of the way in which certain types of exclusion and oppression are rendered politically invisible by being normalized as corporeal dispositions. This is a stark form of

embodied domination, in which the focus remains on the silence of the dead.

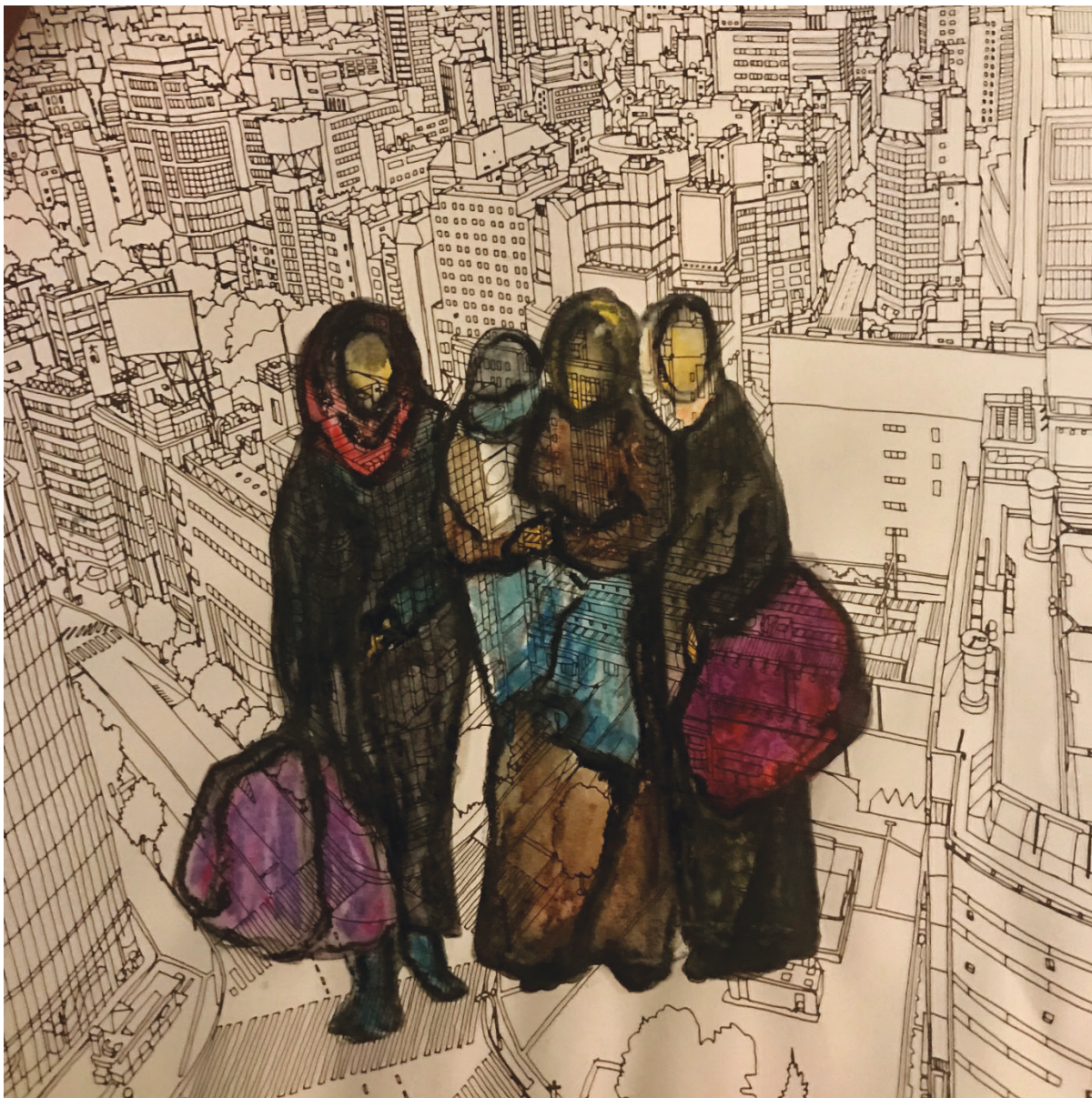
What remains behind is photographic images of symbolic violence indicating accommodation of oppression via lost or discarded bodies, thus yet again undermining the capacity of the dispossessed for agency in so far as individuals are rendered unable to act out their own desires, dreams, and visions even as they keep drowning. The role of accounting for the dead and other calculative practices in the context of mass exodus across the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas must rely on document analysis and interviews with key participants, determination of numbers and body counts. But how to account for the suffering that is a continuum, and to how to account for the things that were witnessed by the dead? The dead body counts' represent a 'moral economy' that is cleansed of any understanding of social and political conflicts that lead to the denial of the very basic human need for recognition and regard even of the dead (Mbembe, 2013). We must consider developing a distinct 'ontology of recognition' in forced migration studies that can mitigate the staunch objectivism of body counts and quantification of loss in numbers (Brown 1995, Fraser 2001, McNay 2007).

ArtWork



































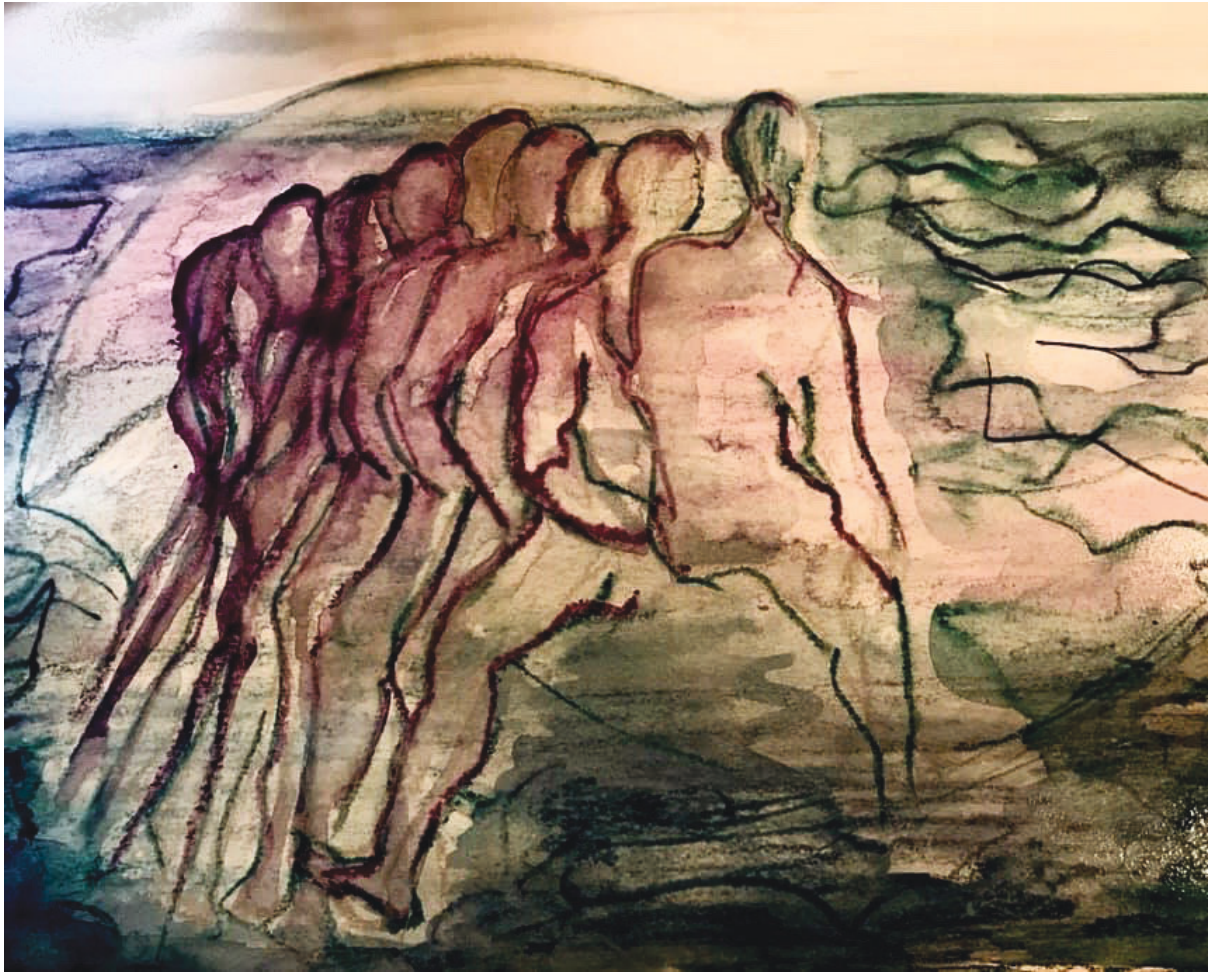
















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