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The Mediterranean of the refugees: For a reading of colonial implications in spatial imagination

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Abstract: In my paper I am interested in both a semiotic analysis that captures the contemporary discourse on the Mediterranean and a study that connects it to the analysis of the meanings attached to the transit and presence of migrants and refugees in Europe and the Mediterranean, and to the historical reasons, power relations, colonial archives and memories that constitute what Sandro Mezzadra calls the “postcolonial condition” (Mezzadra, 2008). I title it *the Mediterranean of the refugees* with the purpose of stressing the multilayered semantic structure of the imaginary related to the refugee in/and the Mediterranean, as the result of a complex (and problematic) overlappings of meanings, figures, practices, and texts, sedimented through history and providing the material for specific discourses on the Mediterranean, Europe and its s/he Other(s). Semiotics, history, cultural studies, feminist and postcolonial perspectives and critical race studies help me to redefine the Mediterranean in a symbolic frame reproducing those meanings, figures, practices that convey memories and violence, protest, resistance and conflict.

Keywords: Mediterranean, refugees, cultural studies.

Introduction

In my paper I am interested in both a semiotic analysis that captures the contemporary discourse on the Mediterranean and a study that connects it to the analysis of the meanings attached to the transit and presence of migrants and refugees in Europe and the Mediterranean, and to the historical reasons, power relations, colonial archives and memories that constitute what Sandro Mezzadra calls the “postcolonial condition” (Mezzadra, 2008). I title it *the Mediterranean of the refugees* with the purpose of stressing the multilayered semantic structure of the imaginary related to the refugee in/and the Mediterranean, as the result of a complex (and problematic) overlapping of meanings, figures, practices, and texts,

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sedimented through history and providing the material for specific discourses on the Mediterranean, Europe and its s/he Other(s). Semiotics, history, cultural studies, feminist and postcolonial perspectives and critical race studies help me to redefine the Mediterranean in a symbolic frame reproducing those meanings, figures, practices that convey memories and violence, protest, resistance and conflict.

Today the sea is no longer a space regulated solely by international law and State jurisdiction, but a space of governmentality. By space of governmentality I mean a space defined by the collaboration of a number of institutional and non-institutional actors (governance) in the management and biopolitical control over global and transnational trajectories of people, products, and capital's mobility. I interpret it here as invested in a specific exercise of power that reaffirms the symbolic and discretionary nature of its modern borders and of the border in general. Borders are deconstructed and reorganized across spaces according to the unceasing re-articulation of international power relations, national sovereignties, market technologies and systems of measurement and control of people's mobility on a global scale (Appadurai, 1996; Sassen, 2007; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: ch. 6).

A conception of the sea in terms of a border, or rather as a set of (often de-territorialized) borders that cut across lands, waters, and continents, is grounded on the acknowledgement that borders, in the Mediterranean like anywhere else, no longer exist only "at the edge of territory, marking the point where it ends" but "have been transported into the middle of political space" (Balibar, 2004: 109). "This is particularly apparent today in Europe: proliferation, mobility, and deep metamorphosis of borders are key features of actually existing processes of globalization" (Mezzadra, 2016; see also Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013 and Amoore, 2006).

From a semiotic point of view, the symbolic nature of the border, which cuts across the global political space, reveals the Mediterranean as a "stage" where boundaries are repeatedly performed. For the same nature of the symbolic construction is unstable and needs to be constantly reconfirmed, it reveals also the reading of the supposed 'crisis' associated to the recent high mobility of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean as concealing the fact that 'border-crossing *bodies*' contest while reconfirming those same boundaries. In fact, those bodies both disrupt bordered geographies and are the cause and the effect of the construction of new ones. Borders as symbolic objects don't disappear even when migrants and refugees' subjectivity challenge them: they get modified, rearticulated in shifting discourses, subsumed and transformed in other objects. Here I am expanding on the idea formulated by Paolo Cuttitta (2014), who understands Lampedusa to be a "proscenium." I venture to widen this stage to the entire Mediterranean, and to see it as a 'gate'. The Mediterranean has been, in fact, the gate through which a number of symbolic and material postcolonial effects must pass: the bodies of migrants – the *risky bodies* and *bodies at risk* identified by Daniele Salerno (2016) on the basis of his critical analysis of the security systems made operational or enhanced within the "frame" of the War on Terror (Amoore and de Goede, 2008) – as well as the memories of the colonial and post-colonial violence (Giuliani 2016b and 2016c). As a stage, it is a signifier that is immersed into a 'sea of meanings' that become "solid" – organized – according to the discourse that it sets up and that shapes it. As a "gate" it is configured as a constant carrier of borders' counter-representations.

The construction of the Mediterranean as the space of bordered mobility – *the Mediterranean of the refugees* – together with the implications in terms of meanings, texts, practices, memories from the past and from the present (hidden and reconquered) are the thematic nodes of my contribution, which aims to reconnect the *Mediterranean of the refugees* to a geography that puts at the center the Mediterranean as a semiotic space. Here the sea plays a symbolic role straddling past and present, taking up space between new

governmental regimes and old forms of domination, between neocolonial devices and migrants and refugees' contestation, resistance and subjectivity.

Colonial memories, figures of race and actual crises

The Mediterranean sea is a “semantic potential” (Violi, 2015), a frame in which memories are spatialized: “a space that speaks of our social reality but also, and perhaps in the first place, of what have been the transformations that our reality has undergone, and of the values that in that same space have been inscribed. That space then speaks of our memory, while producing, rewriting, interpreting, and sometimes deleting it” (Violi, 2014: 21).

My argument is grounded in the notion of the postcolonial archive (Stoler, 2002) as a set of entropic colonial texts, constantly reinterpreted, transfigured, dissimulated, concealed and even denied but never fully disappeared. These texts constitute – even in their absence – the lens through which we look at/to the world. Consequently, I interpret the sea as an archive of memories: I read it as a place that connects texts and perspectives allegedly consistent and linear yet extremely confrontational, in a time when the Mediterranean shows very clearly its own postcolonial tensions.

To enable the Mediterranean to perform its endowed function, that being the containment and performance of the material devices that regulate national and international mobility between and from the former colonial areas towards Europe, it is necessary to also construct it as the place in which a number of symbolic devices operate in order to regulate the resurgence of colonial memories. In the space of the Mediterranean those memories *become discourse*, a containing discourse, designed to cover up and hide both the postcolonial symbolic archive and the material reasons for both migration and asylum-seeking. Nowadays, such a discourse reactivates the colonial archive of the *monstrous* (Giuliani, 2016a and 2016b) and/or the *victim* (the poor brown woman who escapes brown men domestic and political violence). The first is constructed in Colonial Modernity as the abject (Kristeva, 1980), the second as the target of the violence of the uncivilised (Spivak, 1988). These figures, that apparently deny the role and identity of the Western colonizer, in reality reaffirm and strengthens them, placing them back at the center of geopolitical power relations as well as at the core of epistemology and knowledge production.

The discourse on migration and asylum-seeking reactivates the *figures of race*, which I define as images that sediment transnationally over time and that crystallize some of the meanings assigned to bodies, which are gendered and racialized in colonial and postcolonial contexts. They include that of the black man depicted as physically strong with lower mental capacities, and sexually dangerous; that of the Eastern European man as barbaric and violent; that of the Asian man as a natural-born scam and maker of illegal and immoral business, that of the Arabic must-be-unveiled submissive woman; that of the Muslim man as fanatic and treacherous; and that of the black woman as a reassuring de-sexualized Mammy or a threatening hyper-sexualized Jezebel; but also the figure of the racialized child and his/her mother as defenseless and deprived of any agency, resilience and subjectivity.

These "figures" recombine in a series of discourses that, on one hand, legitimize the colonial past (and its regulatory violence) and, on the other hand, help dissolve the existing ties between that past and our postcolonial present (inhabited by the subjective choices of migrants and asylum seekers). These discourses function as a legitimizing practice for those

specific (and ever-changing) color lines² that contextually shape the biopolitical apparatus' (legislative, political, social and cultural) of inclusion, exclusion and differential inclusion of people who both are entering the 'gates' of Europe and already did. During a time of the so-called refugee emergency, these discourses are tailored to the figure of the threatening Muslim subject (male) and (some) victimized women and children who flee the Middle East as refugees. Those figures are based on texts and images constructed since the Crusades and the Reconquista, strengthened further by the Enlightenment and Positivism, by ideas of the indomitability and fanaticism of the "Semitic race". An analysis of those images is fundamental in order to investigate the symbolic material used in current discourses on borders and bodies.

In particular, those images are often to signify the idea that the Middle-Eastern (the Syrian refugee, read as Muslim in the common discourse on 'the crisis') is and remains an outsider, an enemy instead, the hidden amongst 'Us', who resurges as such in specific historical moments. This specific rearticulation of the colonial archive and the figure of the 'Arabic' casts some light on the connection made between refugees' crisis, terrorist attack, the 'scourge' of brown men's sexual assaults against women (Colone, New Year's Eve 2015), and the 'unbearable view' of the 'offensive' oppression of veiled women in France and elsewhere (August 2016). This connection thus reveals the mutual implications of coeval political phenomena on a global scale and, consequently, the impossibility to sever concomitant effects and the people's response to structural inequalities – they experience in the countries from where they emigrate, together with discriminations and limited possibility of personal fulfilment, insecurity and repeated violence, war and destruction.

Moreover, this connection reveals the persistence of a colonial archive of meanings and practices that connects past, present and future. According to this connection, the refugees' emergence emerges as the effect of a *longue durée* phenomenon that finds its roots in colonial and post-colonial national and international settings. The consequential deconstruction of the same idea of the emergence has important consequences in an understanding of the context we inhabit – *the Mediterranean of the refugees* -, of the perspective through which it is commonly seen and analyzed, of the sinews of power that compel a viewpoint on the current situation and that reposition postcolonial (white, privileged) Europe always at the center of the scene.

Draining and refilling the Mediterranean

In order to satisfy the regulatory function assigned to the Mediterranean, the selective reactivation of the colonial archive must be determined by the double practice of the emptying and filling of its semantic space: it has to be filled with omens of disaster (the "death" of the supposed "Us" as conveyed by refugees, migrants and terrorists invading its space) and therefore by practices of bio- and *necropolitics* (Mbembe, 2003) (left to die in the Mediterranean and/or made to die by hands of the Libyan or Turkish armies). At the same time, it is emptied of its history, reduced to a non-place – a fault line that connects worlds discursively created as distant, and conversely structurally connected by the effects of North-South of the Mediterranean's unequal relations. The emptying of the Mediterranean has much

² Here I transpose in postcolonial contexts the concept of "the colour line" articulated in 1902 by William E.B. Du Bois (1989) in order to describe the proliferation of figures of race through the colonial, imperial and post-colonial borders.

to do with the practice of hiding the multiple encounters between its many shores. The multivocality within and along the borders of Europe which resulted not only in terms of the constellation of religions inhabiting Europe, but also in terms of the specific relation the different cultural, religious, as well as political minorities built with the early modern state (1700s) and then its nation-state (1900s), has been and still is long denied (Dainotto, 2007). This denial has generally been functional to the construction of a mythological narrative of Europe as a result of a natural-like and historically linear process, and consequently as grounded in “the same civilization.”

The practice of emptying the Mediterranean found a further stage in the decades following anti-colonial wars and independences: the future of those liberated countries won't have anything to do with the legacies of colonialism and former colonial metropolises won't have any responsibility. Nowadays this practice is made effective with the purpose of transforming the Mediterranean into a space that could be legitimately occupied by the strategic rationality of control and of management's devices that transform migrant and refugees into *working bodies*: these bodies produce money *on the border* (within the security/humanitarian industry; Garelli e Tazzioli, 2016), and become highly exploited labor force *within the European borders* (for the Italian case, see Dines and Rigo, 2015). As Dines and Rigo maintain, an increasing refugeeization of migrants, then, serves the concealing of the functioning of the border regime (and of the billions invested in security and migration management) as provider of (and as an investment in the reproduction of) cheap labor force. In the meanwhile, in constantly redrawing the line between *who deserves* international protection as refugee and *who does not*, the regime that governs the crisis migratizes the asylum seekers. The ones (like Afghani, Pakistani and Iranian youth reaching Lesbos or Idoumeni, East-, North- and Sub-Saharan Africans reaching Lampedusa or Gibraltar) the regime itself does not acknowledge as deserving asylum were on the Turkish/Greek frontier immediately rejected and repatriated, for the conditions of individual and collective insecurity, death and disaster they are fleeing are not recorded and classified as such by Europe, the West and their border agencies' intelligences. Later the new European approach to refugees turned to total rejection and confinement in camps of the whole refugee's community: the new strategic plan has been implemented since then thanks to the EU-Turkish agreement signed in March 2016. In deciding who deserves rescue, help and support, and who does not, European border regime draws the lines that partition the Mediterranean land and water, their stable as well as their transiting population, according to a specific set of (racialized) epistemologies.

The crisis – in its real meaning and functioning – is generated by the overflow of direct and indirect effects of colonial and post-colonial violence: the social and symbolic pressure exerted by migrants, whose subjectivity take place precisely in reclaiming their own right of mobility (De Genova *et al.*, 2014: 29-20), subverts the geography imposed by Europe as well as by the official national narratives enforced by regimes and majority parties in the countries of emigration. It draws counter-maps that make the Mediterranean into an “open,” or unstable, space (Ivi, 12 in De Genova, Mezzadra, and Pickles 2014).

The subversion of institutional narratives of the many diasporas, fostering ideas of both monstrosity and victimhood of migrants/refugees, stability and instability of borders is operated by migrants and refugees' micro-narratives that are the engine itself of their mobility and search of better conditions. These narratives challenge the institutionalized ‘collective’ memory that Homi Bhabha describes as the convergence of “nation and narration” (1990) and Chakrabarty (2000) as a *History* contrasted by irreducible subaltern stories.

In becoming the stage where borders imposed by the governance and management of global mobility are continuously performed, the Mediterranean also becomes the stage where the constellation of memories/conflicting diasporic and nomadic identities are constantly

revivified and recombined in a multiplicity of deconolonizing projects. In other words, the Mediterranean becomes the space of practices having to do with the emergence of projects and bodies of resistance.

Decolonial practices and narratives

In Italy, the emergence of the micro-narratives of experiences and memories has been recently thematized by a few important visual documents. These include *Mediterranea*, directed by Jonas Carpignano (2015) on the migrants' riot in Rosarno in 2010, *Fuocoammare* by Gianfranco Rosi (2016) on the landings in Lampedusa, and *Mare Chiuso* by Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti (2015) on the transit of migrants in Libya under the agreement between former Prime Minister Berlusconi and Colonel Gaddafi. These works correspond to a specific *docufiction engagé* whose explicit positioning within the 'migrant Mediterranean' finds its first example in *Come un uomo sulla terra* by Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer and Riccardo Biadene (2008), which engages with the transit of both men and women migrating from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia through Sudan and Libya, and a further important example in the more recent documentary *Oltre il mare* directed by Yimer together with Fabrizio Barraco, Giulio Cederna (2010), on the personal migration experience of the same director, who crossed the Mediterranean from Lybia and landed in Lampedusa in 2006.

In these products, the biographical narration of a collective dramatic phenomenon – originated by aspirations, wishes, hopes, and a subjective "right to escape" (Mezzadra, 2006) – becomes, as a postmodern transposition of the Atlantic *Middle Passage* (Gatta and Muzzopappa, 2012), a place of 'identification' through a shared experience – in the words of Paul Gilroy (2003) – of contestation, resistance, and subversion.

These practices of decolonization contribute to a comprehensive pan-Mediterranean, transnational, intra-European mapping of micro-narrative of resistance. This mapping has recently been at the core of an important volume by Renate Siebert (2012) focused on the eccentric trajectories of the Algerian liberation, read along the two key-figures of the Algerian feminist artist and filmmaker Assia Djebar and the Martinican intellectual and activist Frantz Fanon. The lived experience of memory and mourning in Algeria as well as in France are at the core of the analysis, which pays particular attention to the season of murders and massacres that characterized the Nineties, when the hegemonic purpose of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) implied the slaughter of civilians, activists and intellectuals amongst Siebert's friends.

In investigating, through their own experiences and reflections on (post)colonial conditions, racism, sexism, social and geographical structural inequalities, and the responsibilities of postcolonial governance and governments in the making of violence and repression that produce the *crisis*, migrants and refugees' voices un-silence the voices of the subaltern: women and men whose micro-narrative of resistance are constantly denied of public recognition.

The Mediterranean and the regained subjective memories of border-crossing bodies

The body is the 'object' signified by both the border regime (Hess and Kasperek, 2010) and migrants' subjective re-semanticization; it is the signifier through which the practice of symbolic decolonization reveals the power of signification of the border regime itself.

As a visual text that encapsulates both border's transgression and border regime's reorganization, the body has been thematized by the French-Algerian artist Zined Sedira in

some works (*Floating Coffins*, 2009; *Decline of a Journey I and II*, 2009 and 2010; *Lighthouse in the Sea of Time*, 2011) that connect space, colonial memory, body, and migration and that have been explored by Gabriele Proglia (2014) through the lens of the concept of *space invader* articulated by Nirmal Puwar (2004). The body is also central in the analysis of some Serbian artists, an analysis of which is provided in the collective volume edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani, *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* (2015). Representations of the figure of the “Yugoslavian woman” after-1994 are here taken into consideration in order to unravel the constructions of a ‘superior’ European identity faced with its ‘backward’ internal Other. Milica Trakilović’s (2015) essay investigates the ongoing (colonial) discourse, which describes the Balkanic Peninsula as a barbaric place, violent and conflictual ‘by nature’ due to the indomitable hyper-masculinity of its population which transforms men into beasts and women into masculinized objects.

The body as a place of re-semantization of the subversive and tragic experience of migration is also central in the art works *Infìn che ‘l mar fu sopra noi richiuso* (2012) by the Albanian artists Arta Ngucaj and Arben Beqiraj, on the sinking of the boat *Katër I Rades* (rammed by a corvette of the Italian navy offshore Puglia in 1997), and *Asmat-nomi* (2014) by Dagmawi Yimer, which narrates the sea tragedy occurred on the 3rd of October 2013 offshore Lampedusa (where almost 400 people mostly of Ethiopian and Eritrean nationality drowned) (see Salerno, 2015). They represent a contrapuntal response to the Western hegemonic discourse around migration to Europe, able to bridge past and present, Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa. Their goal is to re-subjectivize the experience of migration, giving back a face (Ngucaj and Beqiraj) and a name (Yimer) to the people who were involved in the drowning. This operation is meant to remove the experience from the official de-responsibilized and impersonal enumeration of dead bodies, and return to the protagonists and their beloved the “right to mourn” (Butler, 2009). Such practices are in fact narrative and aesthetic forms of decolonization. The subjective experience of the body in transit between Albania and Italy has also been recently thematized by the important *La nave dolce* by Daniele Vicari (2009), a documentary that focuses on lived testimonials of some of the protagonists of the shipping from Durazzo and landing in Bari of the Albanian merchant ship *Vlora’s* in August 1991. In this text the voices address the subjective memories of the events, shaped by the hopes, aspirations, and traumas of the Adriatic *Middle Passage*.

The body in transit through Africa, the Mediterranean and Italy is at the core of the documentary *Asmarina* (2014) edited by Medhin Paolos and Alan Maglio, on the complex rearticulation of the Italian-Eritrean identity in a ‘postcolonial condition’ that sees the tension between, on the one hand, a Duboizian ‘double presence’ of Eritrean migrants and Italians of Eritrean origins in Milan, and, on the other, the memories of the colonial relation between African Horn and Italy. This experience can be read alongside the Moroccan migration to France and Belgium at the core of the essay by Laura Odasso in this volume, with the migration of Eritrean care-givers in 1970s Italy investigated by Sabrina Marchetti (2014), and with the historical enquiry provided by Valeria Deplano on Somali students and young Eritreans, Ethiopians and Libyans’ migration to Italy between the Fifties and Seventies (2014 and 2016).

In conclusion, what I proposed here is a reading of the Mediterranean as an “unstable space” constantly resignified by both border control devices and processes of subjectivation inscribed in the migratory/asylum seeking experience by both the reorganization of (neo)colonial power relations by postcolonial hegemonic institutions and discourses, and migrants and asylum seekers’ micro-narratives and strategies of contrast and resistance against those same discourses and institutions.

A conception of the Mediterranean as a “cultural object” (Violi, 2011: 17) which is all but ‘natural’, being itself a social construction (Appadurai, 1996), and, consequently,

inherently instable *in itself*, has two important consequences. First of all, it reinforces – in line with semiotics – the idea that the sign-Mediterranean is necessarily unstable, being constantly re-signified, reinterpreted and rearticulated. Secondly, and more importantly, it testifies to the re-signifying power of the subversive actions, aspirations, forms of protest and resistance, of those who move across the transnational "political space" referred to by Balibar. This reading not only valorizes the ongoing practices of decolonization and emphasize their transformative capacity – in line with the essays collected in the present volume – but also addresses the issue of decolonizing knowledge. The Mediterranean is an exceeding space (Proglío, 2016). In fact, it is a space that is constantly emptied out and re-filled with rhetoric and meaning that re-colonizes its physical and symbolic dimensions; the Mediterranean becomes a semantic excess that generates “crisis.” Decolonizing knowledge about/of the Mediterranean means to acknowledge and foster this crisis, to break the homogeneity of its hegemonic narrative, dislocate the view from the hegemonic position, identify the devices that reproduce the epistemic power relations, and place the production of knowledge along those symbolic and spatial axes that enhance multivocality, resistance, and conflict.

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