9. Migrant stories between the archive and the garbage dump in the Mediterranean

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Abstract This essay engages critically with the idea of the archive and its postcolonial reconsiderations, to show how, through the work of activists and artists, the objects migrants leave behind during the Mediterranean crossing acquire an afterlife as material reworked into art, and create aspirational spaces of futurity. By analyzing a series of artistic and archival experiences based on migrants’ discarded belongings, this chapter argues that they contribute to creating a heterogeneous, transnational community whose memories establish counter-narratives about migration and displacement.

Keywords migration | archive | garbage | Mediterranean | narrative

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of garbage in relation to the experience of migration evokes directly Zygmunt Bauman’s (2004) notion of “human waste” or “wasted humans,” which he considered an inevitable outcome of modernity. As he argued in Wasted Lives, modernity has created enormous population pressures for which, in a post-colonial world, “there are no readily available outlets – either for ‘recycling’ or for safe ‘disposal’” (2004, p. 7). Hence the centrality of the migration issue to global contemporary political agendas, including the one supported by the White House administration under President Donald Trump, with its anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, but also to the Brexit debate and the rise of nationalism in much of Europe.

The garbage I discuss in this essay, however, is much more literal: it includes the debris, the objects discarded, lost, or forgotten by migrants and asylum seekers during the Mediterranean passage and left behind on the island of Lampedusa. Like all refuse, these objects pose material and philosophical challenges to those
who produce them, those who give them an afterlife by “recycling” them, and those who consume the recycled products. What stories do these objects tell us? What narratives do they construct about the journey and the people who make it? How do these objects contribute to collective memory formation? In this essay, I address these questions by engaging critically with the idea of the archive and its connections to memory, historical knowledge, and power, in dialogue with classic theories of the archive, as well as their postcolonial critiques.

I argue that the abandoned items, the vessels seized and dumped in Lampedusa’s “boat cemetery,” and the clothes that immigration officials require migrants to shed, are all traces of “transience and death while at the same time marking the future” (Merewether, 2006b, p. 15). Through the work of migrant-rights activists and artists, indeed these objects acquire an afterlife in the form of exhibits or as material reworked into art. In this sense, these objects open up a space of futurity that resonates with Arjun Appadurai’s (2013, 2016) notion of the aspirational quality of archives. In analyzing a series of artistic and archival experiences that engage with migrants’ discarded belongings, I aim to show how they contribute to the creation of a heterogeneous, transnational community whose memories establish counter-narratives of migration and displacement.

Federica Mazzara (2016, 2018a, 2018b) has discussed at length the role of art in challenging and resisting the ways in which governmental discourses and practices of securization have transformed Lampedusa from a cosmopolitan fishing port into a stage for border spectacle (De Angelis, 2012). In this essay, I am interested in continuing to investigate the subversive potential of art forms based on the material remains of the Mediterranean passage, but also in critically exploring the ethical implications of such art practices. Furthermore, my concern expands beyond the human to include the environmental impact of some of these aesthetic choices, and to highlight the gap that exists in humanistic approaches to the question of human migration and the environment.

**BORDER SPECTACLE IN LAMPEDUSA**

Since the early 2000s, and even more urgently since the Arab Spring movements of 2011, Lampedusa has attracted a constant flow of attention from activists, artists, and scholars for its particular role as a transit point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. From the institutional perspective of the European Union, Lampedusa is indeed synonymous with hotspot, intended both as “an area at the external border that is confronted with disproportionate migratory pressure. Examples are Sicily and Lampedusa in Italy or Lesbos and Jos in Greece. It is in
these ‘hotspots’ where most migrants enter the Union.” (IATE), and as a “first reception centre located on the EU’s external border where migrants arriving in the EU are initially identified, registered and fingerprinted” (IATE). Through this identification, Lampedusa has been transformed “into a strategic Mediterranean border” (Dines, Montagna & Ruggiero, 2015, p. 442) on which “bare life [must be] understood as a public spectacle that is functional to the management of Italy’s southernmost border” (p. 437, my emphasis). Paolo Cuttitta (2014) describes what happens in Lampedusa as “border play” and argues that:

[Its] high degree of ‘borderness’ also depends on political choices: on policies, practices and discourses that have been developed in and around the island, ‘borderizing’ Lampedusa and transforming it into the quintessential embodiment of the Euro-African migration and border regime. (p. 199)

Building on Cuttitta (2014) and on Nicholas De Genova’s (2005) work on the notion of border spectacle, Mazzara (2016) observes how “Lampedusa has been used as a stage of spectacle […] where migrants are only allowed to appear in their desolation and misery” (p. 129, my emphasis). Alessandro Triulzi (2016), too, interprets Lampedusa as a laboratory that the European Union has established in order to create “Europe’s public image of the excessive number of Uninvited (Harding, 2000) poor migrants coming to European shores, and for the staging of successive and necessary ‘states of exception’ (Agamben, 2003) to limit their numbers whatever the cost” (p. 152, my emphasis). Rutvica Andrijasevic (2010), however, proposes that the concept of hotspot (or detention camp) should be viewed as an immanent feature of the management strategies of European citizenship – among which the “spectacle of militarized border enforcement” (De Genova, 2002, p. 436) contributes to reinforcing a notion of national borders as fixed, and a simplified view of migration as the crossing of such borders (Andrijasevic, 2010, p. 156).

Essential to the construction of Lampedusa as border spectacle is the language of emergency and crisis, which is implicit in the definition of hotspot, officially translated into Italian as punto di crisi. The Italian government’s discursive recourse to images of emergency legitimizes the establishment of the hotspot as a space of exception, justifies its repeated agreements with Libya as part of a strategy of deterrence that runs afoul of non-refoulement principles, and creates an image of irregular migration as privileging Mediterranean maritime routes which is inconsistent with the actual data. Footage and photographs from the island, disseminated by news media, tend to confirm this image of crisis. Especially important is the view from Molo Favaloro, the military pier where migrants rescued at
sea, whether by the coast guard or other branches of the military, are disembarked. Molo Favaloro is fenced off, but the three acts of the border spectacle that take place on its stage are perfectly visible to the public: first, the disembarking of migrants accompanied by military personnel who often wear face masks, gloves, and hazmat suits, while the migrants themselves are wrapped in emergency blankets; second, the lining up of the migrants, either standing or sitting on the pier; and third, the removal of the migrants to the local hotspot. As Chiara Dorbolò (2018) has written, this triptych of images effectively conveys the notion of an emergency that needs military intervention to be managed. It also manifests the overlap between “humanitarian and securitarian logics” in the “biopolitical management of migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean sea” (Gatta, 2018, p. 34).

Since 2000, Italy and Libya have been linked by both secret and public mutual agreements whose aim is to deter migration across the Mediterranean. In 2000, the two governments signed a collaboration agreement for the fight against terrorism, organized crime, illegal drug trafficking, and irregular migration. In 2003, then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi met with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and signed a secret agreement promising substantial financial incentives for preventing migrant boats launching from Libyan shores toward Italy. In 2004, Law number 271 gave the Interior Minister the authority to finance the construction, outside of Italy, of structures aimed at preventing irregular migratory flows. This allowed the Italian government to spend funds for the construction of detention camps in Libya. In 2008, a new Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation was signed, again with the provision that Italy would pay a substantial amount of money in exchange for Libyan collaboration in preventing irregular migration. Colonel Gaddafi’s statements about Europe becoming “black” if the EU did not offer more substantial financial support to Libya were widely broadcast by western media (BBC, 2010), at the same time that they criticized the Italian practice of steering intercepted migrant vessels back toward Libya without even identifying the people on board. The European Court for Human Rights has repeatedly condemned Italy’s practice of deporting migrants to Libya, a country that does not have an asylum system and is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Even after the fall and death of Gaddafi, in 2017 a new bilateral agreement between Italy and Libya came into effect, with the continued purpose of slowing Mediterranean crossings and providing military and technical support to Libyan forces to that end. All this, despite the fact that reports of human rights abuses, sexual violence, and people sold into slavery in Libyan migrant detention camps have been substantiated time and again.

However, it is impossible to understand Italy’s and Libya’s continued collaboration without an awareness of the colonial history that connects the two countries.
Libya was an Italian colony from 1911 through 1947, and was subject to a systematic campaign of Italianization. This was effected through the transfer of about 120,000 colonial settlers from Italy – equivalent to about 13% of the total Libyan population – and the displacement of nomadic and seminomadic populations of Eastern Libya into concentration camps, where they suffered brutal treatment, unsanitary conditions, and starvation. About 100,000 native people died as a direct or indirect effect of Italian conquest, rule, and repression in Libya (Del Boca, 2010). One of Gaddafi’s most significant gestures after claiming power was precisely to insist on Italian compensation for its brutal rule – the 2008 Treaty was framed as a concrete way for Italy to express its regret for the suffering of Libyans under Italian occupation. Among its most important articles was the promise for Italy to pay $5 billion over twenty years to finance infrastructural projects, including the building of 200 housing units and a highway, making available one hundred fellowships for Libyan undergraduate and graduate students, offering medical care for victims of landmines, the payment of pensions to eligible Libyan citizens, and the return of important archeological artifacts from Italian museums. The physical and symbolic similarity between colonial Libya’s concentration camps and today’s detention camps for migrants makes evident the connections between Europe’s colonial history of captivity and repression and contemporary patterns of migration, and invites a postcolonial examination of the new emergencies (Ponzanesi, 2018; Hom, 2019).

Upon arrival in Lampedusa, migrants are represented as abject subjects, whose presence elicits both compassion and fear. Their presence on Italian soil constitutes a potential danger for the body of the nation: they might carry both physiological and ideological diseases (e.g., Islamic fundamentalism) – hence the need for the military rescue personnel to wear both biohazard suits and carry weapons. Their alien status is also signified by the futuristic thermal blankets that envelop them, also known as “space blankets,” first designed by NASA in 1964 as insulation in space. At the same time, SAR (search and rescue) operations by coast guards and independent NGOs are the most mediatized, as exemplified in the January 2019 unauthorized docking of Sea Watch III under the command of German Carola Reckete, or the rescue scenes from award-winning documentary *Fuocoammare ‘Fire at Sea’* by Gianfranco Rosi (2016). These widely disseminated images obfuscate the fact that most of the migrants taking the maritime route to Italy from Libya and Tunisia arrive in Lampedusa independently of militarized and humanitarian organizations’ assistance (ASGI, 2019). These independent arrivals, which testify to the autonomy of migration, remain

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1 Autonomy of migration is a term that signifies a turn in migration study toward an emphasis on migrants as “autonomous subjects, with their own aspirations, needs, and desires, which necessarily exceed any regime of immigration and citizenship” (De Genova, 2017, p. 30).
largely invisible, while the media give visibility to migrants who are shipwrecked and need to be saved, thus blurring any distinctions between securization and humanitarian concerns.

**LETTING THE OBJECTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES: RECycling Migrant Trash in LampEDUSA**

Artists and activists have variously attempted to produce creative alternatives to the mediatized spectacle of misery and bare life described above. Many have focused on the boats, dinghies, or rafts on which migrants travel from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other. The Kosovar-Albanian artist Sislej Xhafa in 2011 built *Barka* – a sculptural boat constructed from hundreds of shoes found on Lampedusa.2 (Figure 9.1)


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2 Xhafa calls himself a nomad and has personally experienced exile and migration from his native Kosovo. He has lived in the United Kingdom and Italy before most recently moving to New York. He first became known internationally with his 1997 *Clandestine Albanian Pavilion* at the Venice Biennale. Dressed as a player for the Albanian national soccer team, with a backpack on his shoulders, he invited visitors to play ball with him, while also playing the chronicle of an Albanian-Italy match on his boombox. He thus offered a critique of the criteria used by the Biennale for inclusion in the festival – which that year did not include an Albanian pavilion. His performance also highlighted the way in which Albanian migrants in Italy were still considered illegal, or "clandestine", after the wave of migration that resulted from the fall of the Albanian dictatorial regime, the collapse of its economy, and the ethnic strife that followed the collapse of the former Yugoslavia.
Similarly, in 2013 British artist Lucy Wood received permission from the local authorities to turn a North African migrant boat, TO6411, into a floating exhibit that included the objects left onboard by the travelers that had utilized it for their maritime crossing. Wood sailed from Lampedusa to London, where the boat remained moored for several weeks, allowing visitors to experience the space of the boat. This attention to the materiality of the migrant passage also defines Xhafa’s 2014 Medusa Archive, an installation of objects recovered on Lampedusa, which the artist meant as an elegy to those who died in the October 3, 2013 shipwreck near the island.

In both Xhafa’s and Wood’s work, confiscated boats and rafts, lost items such as shoes, backpacks, or other personal possessions, clothes so ruined by sea salt, boat fuel, and human waste that they are stripped off and discarded acquire an afterlife by becoming signifiers of the personal and individual dimension of migration across the Mediterranean, both through aesthetic and ethnographic re-elaborations, or translations. These attempts at constructing an “aesthetic of subversion” (Mazzara, 2019), however, have generated tensions and conflicts between local, national and international agents over control of the stories that these objects tell and of the narrative of Lampedusa in its border function. As the members of Askavusa put it, “everyone was talking about Lampedusa, but—as usual—few listened to it” (Askavusa, n.d.).

Askavusa members feel strongly about the need to propose locally based representations of migration. The name, pronounced ask-AH-voo-sah, means ‘bare feet’ in the local language, making evident the “glocal” scope of its principles and activities. Askavusa was created in 2009, after a series of citizen protests against the creation of a new CIE (Center for Identification and Expulsion); their initiatives were aimed at resisting the increasing militarization of Lampedusa and its use as a detention center. Thus, from its inception Askavusa combined its concerns about the treatment of migrants with those about the impact of the migrants’ presence on the island. In particular, members of the collective protested the growing restrictions on the commons, imposed by new infrastructures of securization. They denounced the lack of involvement of the local community in the decision-making process regarding the construction on the island of mechanisms of surveillance, and warned against the ecological and public-health impact of the constant use of the electro-

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3 For more information, see Wood’s website, http://www.to6411.com/.
4 Lampedusa, like other remote islands in the south, served as a detention center already under Italian Fascism. Anti-fascist activists and leaders were often sent to these so-called “confinement colonies,” with heavy restrictions placed on movement, communication, and cultural access. See Poesio (2011).
magnetic technologies required by radars and cell phone towers. The multiple layers of Askavusa’s activism are reflected in the description of LampedusaInFestival, which the collective organized yearly until 2015: a “small festival of community, migrations, struggles, sustainable tourism, and stories of the sea,” which aimed to challenge the rhetoric of border securization prevalent in the language politicians and media outlets adopted in describing the island (Askavusa, n.d.).

The most significant and durable of Askavusa’s initiatives may be the establishment of a migration museum, named Porto M. The “M” of its name stands for the multiple dimensions of migration itself: Mediterranean, migrations, militarization, and memory. According to the Askavusa website, the museum’s purpose is to deconstruct mainstream representations of the border and construct new imaginaries on borders and migrations. Porto M rejects the traditional idea of “memorial museums,” which “close their doors around the historical memory of trauma and the communities involved” (De Angelis, 2012, p. 41). On the contrary, it offers itself as a “synchronic space” (Gatta, 2012, p. 12) where it is possible to recover the traces of that which would otherwise be lost. In order to do so, Porto M displays objects that belonged to migrants and that Askavusa members salvaged from the boats piled up in the two cimiteri delle barche ‘boat dumps’ on Lampedusa. In exhibiting these objects, they explicitly refuse to “curate” the exhibition of objects in Porto M, to affix explanatory labels and impose their own narrative structures over the ruins of other people’s migratory journeys. The museum displays all kinds of objects, from life vests to wood planks, kitchen utensils, food containers, toiletries, music tapes, books, and photographs (Figure 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5). Their display has been, from the beginning, “the expression of an anti-museum idea – there [are] no labels or placards to introduce the visitor to the exhibition” (Vecchi, 2016, p. 175).

Figure 9.2. Porto M Façade, Lampedusa. Courtesy of Associazione Askavusa.
Figure 9.3. Migrants’ life vests hanging to dry before being exhibited. Courtesy of Associazione Askavusa.

Figure 9.4. Objects exhibited at Porto M. Courtesy of Associazione Askavusa.
As the collective explains in the museum manifesto, any curatorial work has political implications, because of its inevitably exclusionary nature. Porto M instead proposes a view of the objects as breathing and living symbols of the experience of the Mediterranean passage:

Precisely because we believe that these objects must be displayed, not studied, catalogued, or restored; not “closed off,” but shown, with nothing added on. To do so without any explanatory label is not a neutral act, but a political choice. [...] Choosing means including and excluding. The decision to save these objects and preserve them is a way of considering them as living objects. [...] Whoever has saved the object has already placed it at a new level: from garbage it has turned into a layered symbol.

The objects of Porto M, in other words, should speak for themselves, and not be turned into objects of study or even of aesthetic contemplation, or art. Askavusa’s concern about the aestheticization of migrant memories foregrounds the danger of appropriating the experience of others from a perspective of cultural and economic privilege, which is crucial to their program.
This concern is, of course, entirely justified, but it implies a distrust of public art as a form of intervention and its potential for disrupting the archive as monument. As Charles Merewether (2006a) instead observes: ”artistic expression represents an intervention in the archives of a nation” (p. 162); it “fractures the seamless and monumental history of the nation” (p. 161). Iain Chambers (2012) also highlights the subversive potential of a museum like Porto M when he explores the notion of a “museum of migrating modernities” (p. 13). Such a museum places migration at the foundation of western modernity (Chambers, 2012, p. 15). It resists narrative continuity, highlighting instead the gaps, absences, silences, and wounds of contested histories. It rejects the practices that “other” and distance the audience from the objects exhibited, encouraging new entanglements and exchanges (Chambers, 2012, p. 24). In this respect, it is a postcolonial museum, insofar as postcolonialism “has always been about the ongoing life or residues, living remains, lingering legacies” (Young, 2012, p. 21). Such is the project of Porto M, with its emphasis on recovering and giving visibility to the traces that ongoing migrant journeys have left and continue to leave on the island, marking its geography and topography.

While Porto M is firm in rejecting monumentality as a memorial function, preferring instead a focus on the overlapping temporalities of migration, this dimension clearly defines Mimmo Paladino’s 2008 Porta d’Europa/Gate of Europe, built on the southern coast of Lampedusa (Figure 9.6). The gate, measuring 5 meters in height by 3 meters in width, and constructed of refractory ceramic, was commissioned by a number of private foundations and partially funded by the UNHCR to commemorate the many dead migrants who lost their lives in the Mediterranean passage. Although Paladino himself thinks of it as a something composed of the humble fragments of a life that all humans have in common, like food, hands, shoes to walk (Servadio, 2013), critics have pointed out that a gate implies the existence of a wall, of a barrier through which one must be granted passage (Dorbolò, 2018). In this sense, the Porta d’Europa is at the same time a memorial for those who died as a consequence of the increased securization of EU borders, and a monument to European humanitarianism – showcasing the blurring of these two dimensions in Western responses to migration.

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5 Chambers (2012) does not always distinguish between the museum and the archive, reflecting a turn toward the integration of Museums-Libraries-Archives as an interdisciplinary field of study (Brulon Soares & Smeds, 2016). At the same time, as Brulon Soares and Smeds (2016) point out, contrary to libraries and archives, museums have the institutional goal of interpreting and representing the cultural material they preserve, exhibit, and curate (p. 30). Indeed, Chambers (2012) observes that museums do not simply transmit the memory of the past, but always produce and transform it (p. 23).
Another important factor separates Paladino’s work from Askavusa’s cultural project: Paladino is not a resident of Lampedusa, and he has, admittedly, only mediated experiences of the current migrant crisis. Indeed, only few of the works of art that reflect on the Mediterranean passage are produced by artists based in Lampedusa, or engage the island’s own citizens in the work of co-construction of memory. One exception is Francesco Tuccio, a carpenter and wood sculptor whose Lampedusa Crosses now hang in the British Museum in London and in the Vatican, among other locations (Figure 9.7). Tuccio began making these crosses in 2009, when he found some wood planks that washed ashore after one of the numerous migrant shipwrecks that have turned the Mediterranean into a liquid graveyard – or a solid sea – as it has been alternatively labeled.6 Moved by the shipwreck of mostly Eritrean Christian migrants in 2011, and then in 2013, Tuccio continued to make crosses that, for him, were symbols of Christ’s resurrection, or rebirth and salvation and thus of the hope that moves migrants to cross the desert and the sea

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6 See the work of the Milan-based collective Multiplicity (2002).
to begin a new life in Europe (D’Ignoti, 2019). This recycling of the ruined remnants of migrant boats into crosses transforms them into universal symbols of human suffering (Catania, 2015, p. 472), but of course, the use of a Christian symbol to represent the lives and deaths of so many non-Christians in the Mediterranean can also be interpreted as an additional gesture of violence and silencing.

It is precisely as a correction to that silence that Archivio Memorie Migranti (Archive of Migrant Memories) was founded in Rome, initially as part the cultural association Asinitas, from which it became independent in 2012. The purpose of the archive is to gather individual stories of migration, organize them, and make them accessible to the public. It is based on a principle of collaboration between academics, activists, and migrants, who are active participants in the production of oral, written, and audiovisual documents chronicling their experiences of migration. Their narratives are then included in an open-access archive. As Jacques Derrida (1995) argued: “[T]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (p. 11). This democratization was part of the archive’s unifying “ethical and political project” that wanted to transform “transnational migration from being something allegedly ‘other’ into a collective shared patrimony” (Triulzi, 2016, p. 154). In this respect, the ambiguous use of the adjective ‘migrant’ in the name highlights one important goal of Archivio Memorie Migranti, which both aims to collect stories of migration and wants these stories to migrate, move around, be disseminated and contribute to the public discourse about migration.

One of the stories that the Archive includes is a short (16’) documentary video To Whom It May Concern, by Somali journalist Zakaria Mohamed Ali (2013), in which he chronicles his return to Lampedusa in an attempt to retrieve a friends’ lost belongings from the hotspot. None of the military or civil personnel, to whom he appeals, accepts responsibility for the fate of the objects that are sequestered from migrants arriving in Lampedusa, and all of them ignore the meaning that each of those documents and objects carries for the migrants’ sense of self and identity. Ali himself had this experience when he first arrived in the Lampedusa CIE after crossing the Mediterranean in a dinghy. The facility’s authorities insisted that he needed to throw away the belongings he had carried with him across the desert and the sea, while he constantly reasserted their value to his own sense of being:

They wanted to throw away my jumper, along with the certificates and documents, but I told them that I didn’t want to lose all these things because they have value. Memories, photos, these important objects are memories that are taken away from the person, and that is really a violence, losing a memory like they forced me to. But I spent hours and hours, days and days, protesting and saying: ‘these are my things, the diploma. I don’t want to lose them because
I risked my life to cross the desert and the sea, and I don’t want to lose them. They are my identification cards, no one knows me, I just landed now, but they show what I have studied and who I am.’ (Ali, 2013, 10:54)

Ali’s resistance to being deprived of his sweater and papers is an affirmation of his agency and dignity as a migrant in the detention camp. His perspective is in line with the aspirations of the AMM – of which he is co-vice-president – but at the same time it introduces some fractures in Askavusa’s Porto M project.7 Ali’s words make visible the tension between, on the one hand, the collective’s desire to preserve and showcase migrants’ objects as a way to archive their memories and, on the other hand, the appropriation of these objects without the active engagement of migrants themselves in the archival process. Indeed, as Chambers (2012) points out, “questions of property, ownership, and the entanglements of multiple histories” must remain at the forefront in the construction of the museum as a critical space (p. 25).

These same ethical tensions are embedded in Giacomo Sferlazzo’s artwork. Sferlazzo is one of the founders of Askavusa, as well as being its spokesperson. His “Discaricarte” – a play on the word discarica ‘garbage dump’ – is articulated into two main series: The first, Oggetti migranti ‘Migrant Objects’ incorporates found objects including books, wood, and other personal items into original creations (Figure 9.8). The second is called Munnizza, or ‘trash.’ For Sferlazzo (n.d.):

The garbage dump represents the true dimension of our time, and it is the objectivation of the economic and political system in which we live. The question of refuse opens up a lot of other crucial questions, first of all the issue of value. Consumerism, which is both inevitable and necessary in capitalism, produces refuse in the first place.

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7 Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two associations worked together for a short time, until AMM’s funding from the Open Society Foundation as well as other international organizations caused Askavusa to break up the partnership. Askavusa is, in fact, fiercely independent of any outside interference, and does not accept financing from either private foundations or public institutions.
Sferlazzo’s project in giving these objects an afterlife is precisely to affirm the value – beyond their labor capital – of the migrant lives that they accompanied across the sea. At the same time, however, his use of sacred texts, like the Qur'an, in his works of art, raises important and complex ethical issues. As Maya Ramsay (2016) observes:
[These objects] may be all that remain[s] of people who have not been found or whose bodies are otherwise unidentifiable. [...] They may have belonged to people whose family do not know what happened to them and who are unlikely to have a gravestone to visit. (p. 214)8

Yet, she acknowledges, objects that are not retrieved from the dump might end up being forever lost, burned in one of the fires that regularly (and intentionally, as in the arsons in 2010 and 2014, for example) destroy the cimitero delle barche 'boat cemetery' in Lampedusa, thus preventing the safe disposal of the boats sequestered by the coast guard and managed by a waste management company based in Sicily.

WASTE MANAGEMENT, TOURISM, AND THE FUTURE OF THE MIGRATION ARCHIVE

As Askavusa members are quick to point out, waste management on the island of Lampedusa is a major political, as well as civic and environmental, issue. For years, they have denounced the ways in which the tragedy of migrant shipwrecks, rescues at sea, and boat confiscations have been seized as business opportunities by waste disposal companies based in Sicily (Sibiriu, 2015). These companies, they have argued, obtain public contracts to manage trash disposal, but fail to fulfill their obligations to their employees, their customers, and ultimately Lampedusa itself (Sferlazzo, 2019; Sferlazzo et al., 2018). Indeed, the fragile ecosystem of a small island like Lampedusa cannot independently sustain the weight of the garbage produced not only by its 5,000 permanent residents, but also by the additional tens of thousands of tourists that visit it during the summer months. Most, if not all, the waste produced on Lampedusa has to be expensively transferred to the terraferma for disposal. The arsons that plague the official dumps allow contractors to avoid this expensive obligation. Despite the funds that the Italian government has allocated to build a waste management center on the island, Lampedusa still does not have one, and its citizens end up establishing additional informal dumps, where refuse of all kinds is amassed. Arsonists use fire both as a way to eliminate this waste and to make political statements – in 2010, for example, the fire at the cimitero delle barche was widely interpreted as a gesture of protest against the idea of the migration museum. But fires have a profoundly negative environmental impact, as they burn both toxic – fuel, electronic components of the boats’ naviga-

8 For the question of burials for unidentified migrants who die at sea and their ungrievability, please see Stierl (2016) and Butler (2009).
tion systems, rubber, etc. – and neutral waste, which filters into the soil and is dispersed via smoke into the atmosphere (Seminara, 2019).

Since parts of the island are natural reserves, like the famed isola dei Conigli ‘Rabbits’ Island,’ where the royal seagull and an indigenous lizard live, and its beach, where loggerhead turtles lay their eggs, questions of preservation, waste management, and tourism are firmly connected. The spiaggia dei Conigli ‘Rabbits’ Beach,’ for example, is considered the most beautiful beach in Italy. In order to preserve its ecological beauty, Legambiente – an Italian environmental association – and WWF close the beach during the night hours and protect turtle nests with fences. If Legambiente and WWF can partner to keep the waters and sands of spiaggia dei Conigli pristine, however, they cannot always keep away the “human waste,” to reprise Bauman’s (2004) provocative phrase. Indeed, occasionally a migrant boat runs aground on one of the tourist beaches, making the “safe disposal” of its passengers – their removal from sight into the militarized zone of the hotspot – harder because of their visibility to the beachgoing crowds.

But the connection between migration, waste, and tourism is perhaps most evident in the spectacularizing of Lampedusa as a site of migrant tragedies. The cimitero delle barche itself has been transformed from a dump to a tourist destination (officially listed as such in Google Maps) – a location for thanato-tourism, or dark tourism, which Malcolm Foley and John Lennon (1996) define as “the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (p. 198). Tourists in Lampedusa can thus move seamlessly from their enjoyment of the natural maritime beauty of the island to the contemplation of the remnants of the dramatic crossings of the sea collected at the dump. Visitors can take pictures with the boats in the background; the vivid colors, the wooden materials, the traditional shapes of Mediterranean fishing vessels all contribute to the picturesque photo compositions that will serve as a reminder of their Lampedusa vacation.

Though these pictures might also evoke humanitarian feelings in the tourists, they do not contribute to the living archive of migrant stories, subjectivities, and forms of resistance that other actors on Lampedusa – like Askavusa, Sferlazzo, or Tuccio – have been working to create. On the contrary, they risk fetishizing the boat cemetery as “a literal substitute” of the reality of past and present migrations (LaCapra, 1985, p. 92). When the archive is fetishized, it becomes “a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself” (LaCapra, 1985, p. 92). If the archive, as in the case of the boat cemetery, corresponds to a signifier of death and abandonment, it negates the aspirational quality of migrant agency, the essential role that imagination plays in the migratory project and that situates
migrants’ journeys well beyond market and institutional logic (Appadurai, 2016, p. 14). Appadurai (2016) proposes instead a view of the archive as an intentional project that connects memory and desire, stating that, as an institution, “the archive is a locus of memory, but as a tool it is a way to refine desire,” as the capacity for aspiration (p. 18) for individuals and communities alike. This view of the archive opens it up to futurity and implies an ethical engagement with society.

**CONCLUSION**

It is precisely this ethical dimension that is central to the short film, *Asmat* (Yimer, 2013), with which I end this overview in a gesture of affirmation of migrant agency. The film, directed by a former Ethiopian refugee, Dagmar Yimer, reclaims for migrants the right to tell their own stories and mourn their own dead. *Asmat* was produced by Archivio Memorie Migranti, with the sponsorship of other NGOs, after the shipwreck of October 3, 2013 in which almost 370 people, mostly from Eritrea and Somalia, drowned in the Mediterranean.9 It is narrated in voice-over by Eden Getachew Zerihun, also a former refugee, who now works as a consultant for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Eritrea. The film escapes clear categorizations in terms of genre, situating itself between the documentary, the video essay and video art, and uses a variety of multimedia techniques, all of which foreground water. In the opening shots, Yimer’s camera lingers on Luca Serasini’s ink drawings, which evoke the style of a graphic novel. The drawings are either superimposed on footage of the sea waves, or accompanied by the sounds of the waves, reminding the viewer of the maritime nature of the tragedy being memorialized. Spliced in between shots of the drawings are brief underwater sequences, in which the camera bobs in and out of water, like a person drowning and gasping for air and light. In this first part of the film, the voiceover sings, in Amharic, an invitation to remember and not bury, under a layer of indifference, the memory of the dead. The second part includes a series of under- and above-water sequences in which dancers, clad in white linens, move in the water as though evoking the ghostly presences that litter the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, while the voiceover starts reciting the names of the victims of the shipwreck, in Amharic and then Italian. The names themselves emerge from the watery background as they are mentioned, moving toward the viewer, as though to exceed the limits imposed by the screen and enter the audience’s own space and

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9 For a discussion of the aftermath of this particular shipwreck in Italian society and politics, see Gatta (2014).
The film thus displays the haunting dimension of the archive, its ability to let “the repressed and buried reality” of history, in all of its “discontinuous interruptions,” emerge from the liquid memory of the sea and envelop us in an ethical gesture of remembrance (Spivak, 1999, p. 208). Gayatri Spivak is an apt reference here, as Yimer’s film builds a postcolonial archive, in which the names of the drowned serve as haunting echoes of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa and its legacy of social, economic, and political instability in that region. Yimer’s project is not, however, solely about the past; it is forward looking, spurring the viewers to take responsibility for preventable tragedies such as the October 3, 2013 shipwreck. Thus, it realizes the potential of the postcolonial archive as “a democratic laboratory of emerging citizenship” (Chambers, 2012, p. 24). If, as this essay suggests, the political art created by Italian-born migration activists cannot easily escape the asymmetries of power embedded in European migration policies and practices, it is imperative that more projects like the Archivio Memorie Migranti, working with as opposed to about migrants, be given space to emerge and grow in the current Italian artistic and cultural landscape. In this respect, Yimer’s experimental video memorial offers a glimpse into a future in which the traces of migrant lives are not discarded or erased, but contribute to collective memory formation in ways that are collaborative and participatory, in which migrants re-appropriate their rights to tell their own stories and contribute to the co-construction of knowledge, talking back to Lampedusa, Italy, and Europe.

REFERENCES

10 See Duncan (2016) and Wright (2018) for in-depth analyses of Asmat.
11 On national amnesia about the Italian colonial past, especially as it emerges in relation to the October 2013 shipwreck, see Scego (2014).


9. Migrant stories between the archive and the garbage dump in the Mediterranean


Rosi, G. (Director). (2016). *Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* [Film]. Stemal Entertainment; 21Unofilm; Istituto Luce Cinecittà; Rai Cinema; Les Films d’Ici; Arte France Cinéma.


