



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

*Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali*

## **From Borderline to Borderland. Old Devices in New Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

I want to reflect on margins and marginality focusing on the ways in which, approximately from the 1990s onward (Bennett et al. 2005, 4), the very notion of border has been changing over time. What used to be a line to be crossed to reach safety or freedom or a kind of protection, has gradually widened and become an extended area whose nature challenges the traditional organization of maps in which discrete sovereign territories are by lines and marked by different colors. I am focusing on this specific transformation, that in fact produces a strong impact on the migration journey and articulates the space/time in between the departure from one's own motherland and his/her final destination - often a mirage rather than a real possibility. Borders increasingly appear as complex composites not only when they are extended in space - as happens in the case of Mediterranean crossings - but also when they expand in the "time of waiting" spent in refugee camps or other carcereal locations.

I am considering recent artistic representations and forms of activism, all of them focusing on the Mediterranean area as to see how new maps of the margins are drawn. Chris Cleave (2008), Morgan Knibbe (2015), Mario Badagliacca (2016-ongoing), Valeria Luiselli (2017), as well as the artists working at the Trojan Women Project seem to pursue the idea that to renew their gaze on the enormous tragedy of migration, we need new tools, more dynamic strategies to see how, following the progress of globalization, borders change their nature, and the migrant journey to cross them much more complex.



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## 1. Shifting borders

My work here is part of ongoing research on migration and representation that is grounded in the firm belief that storytelling, and the ‘artivism’ sometimes connected to it, may unveil processes and changes that appear harder to untangle and understand when relying on supposedly more factual, historical, documented representations of the gigantic migratory phenomenon taking place in various parts of the world. I am specifically interested in the Mediterranean area, the closed basin where the ‘phenomenon’ has been more evident in recent years and has triggered more stringent and rigid anti-immigration policies, which, by the way, do not seem to reach the desired purpose. What comes to the fore in these specific contingencies is the high number of deaths, in paradoxical contrast with the increasing tendency of the asylum seekers and migrants in general to resort to smugglers and clandestine crossings to reach Europe. When approaching this topic, it is important to keep in mind not simply the critical definition of the process, but also, and primarily, the human side of the phenomenon, as investigated by Simon Gikandi as early as in 2001. What is taking place must be seen as an *actual* tragedy resulting in the *actual* suffering and death of human beings shipwrecking on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Gikandi 2001, 631-32) (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 12-13). Full awareness of this aspect implies the act of taking responsibility, both as human beings and as scholars, for what is happening as a consequence of the colonizing process. Therefore, if something is to be done, the work of those in charge of ‘shaping the stories’ must consist in understanding the changes in the process of migration and producing representations capable of emphasizing Western historical responsibilities in the current tragedy (Vallorani 2021, 207-10).



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In this specific analysis, I am focusing on borders as they have been perceived by those leaving home in search of safety, once upon a time and today, and on the way in which they have been resemantized in recent times, thus determining a change in the condition of the migrants.<sup>1</sup> The re-articulation of the very notion frontier, once the line delimiting nationhood, has taken place in a relative short time span, and the process is still on the way. Until more or less a century ago, the border was still, reassuringly, a line, the “edge” that the Conradian Kurtz stepped over when he decided to embrace the wilderness (Conrad and Kimbrough 1988, 69-70). Crossing it was, for Joseph Conrad as well as for the people living in his times, a final act: supposedly, there was no way back. In a play set more or less in the same historical moment when *Heart of Darkness* was written, the notion of border appears in the very title of the work and it is the hub of the story. It is apodictically supported by one of the characters – not surprisingly the Western colonizer – and ironically discussed by the other – the Eastern ‘other’. Ron Hutchinson’s *Durand’s Line* is set in 1893 and basically consists in a dialogue between the British diplomat Mortimer Durand and the Amir Abdar Rahman Kahn. When Durand proudly communicates that, by her Majesty’s order, a line is to be drawn to define a fixed and permanent border to Afghan, the Amir ironically replicates that “these are only imaginary lines on paper, after all [...] Will you fight for these imaginary lines?” (Tricycle Theatre 2009, 34). Historically, the dialogue refers to the line forming the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, originally traced – by the colonizers – to separate British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan and then made into one of the most contested areas in the world. This border was in all respects conceived as an imperial device imposed by the Westerners, alternatively

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<sup>1</sup> Sharing the same position as Mariangela Palladino in her “‘Island is no arrival’” (Palladino in Cox et al. 2021, 405), I’m choosing to use the word ‘migrant’ as an inclusive definition gathering refugees, asylum seekers, migrants of different kinds and fleeing people in general.



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rejected and accepted by the Easterners, and in any case identifiable and identified by both Afghans and the others as a line: if you crossed it, you were in another nation. In the second half of the XIX century, more or less at the beginning of Afghanistan's tormented history, Durand naively seems to believe that drawing a map is the basic act defining a nation, with its own, well-marked borders. It is felt, by him but apparently not by Rahman, as a geographical and a sociocultural division, in full congruence with the etymology of the word: "the Proto-Indo-European root \*bherdh-, 'to cut, split, or divide'" (Nail 2016, 2).

It is my position that this notion appears inapplicable today. The border as a line to be crossed once and forever has been replaced by an area stretching both in space and in time, transforming the migration journey into a process that has a beginning but cannot find an end, if not in death.

Time and space are overlapping categories: it is not only a matter of geography (the in-between areas that the migrants have to travel before reaching their destination), but also a matter of time (spent in trying to cross several borders). In his *Politics and the Other Scene*, within a chapter meaningfully entitled "What is a border?", Étienne Balibar mentions the final, desirable and clear-cut frontier that migrants eventually happen to face when near to their destination. In these occurrences and according to the philosopher, the border tends to be experienced not only as an obstacle almost impossible to surmount, but also as "a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing and repassing through it as and when he is expelled or allowed to rejoin his family, so that it becomes [...] a place where he *resides*" (Balibar 2002a, 83). This way the border to be crossed finds its symbolic extension in the camp (in all its multiple inflections), that can be read as "an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone, almost a home – a home in which to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life" (Balibar 2002a, 83): it is delimited in space, though endless in time.



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Within the frame of current mass migrations and in terms of critical approach, at least another possible interpretation of the word ‘border’ appears brand-new, and focuses on the condition and experience of the undocumented migrants. To them, “the border may appear as a discontinuous division across which they are forbidden to pass and from which they are redirected” (Nail 2016, 4-5). Such an interpretation seems poetically connected to Said’s notion of counterpoint, which the scholar applies to the act of reading and analyzing colonial texts (Said 1994), but whose usage may be safely extended to the condition of one’s intermittent belonging to places that are never to be developed into new homes. The space/time in between the departure from one’s own motherland and his/her final destination – often a mirage rather than a real possibility – is by no means a line but a whole area, psychological and geographical, crisscrossed by lines, walls, frontiers, checkpoints and other demarcations. The increasing transnational traffic, both of people and of capital, marking the global age, has produced contradictory effects on the idea of border: for the purposes of commerce, there is a strong drive towards an increasing porosity and easier crossability of national frontiers, but the same frontiers are required to work as “instruments of discrimination and triage” reinforced by efficient and sophisticated apparatuses of control (Balibar 2002b, 82). In Sandra Ponzanesi’s words, the “liquid’ theories” so often mentioned in “recent discourses on transnationalism and globalization have revised the notion of frontiers and borders as being connected to ‘solid’ geographical barriers, invoking the notion of ‘liquidity’ instead in order to pay attention to back-and-forth movements of goods and people” (Ponzanesi 2011, 67).<sup>2</sup> If the border is transformed from a line into an area interspersed with difficulties, filtering and triage happen on the way and they do not require sophisticated apparatuses operating only along the frontier

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<sup>2</sup> Also quoted by Akim Abderrezak (in Cox et al. 2021, 376).



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line of the destination country. In the economy of costs and advantages, however cynical it may appear, driving a migrant for hundreds of miles through a number of different countries all over Europe and the Middle East is much more functional to the purposes of the ex-colonizers.

What is certainly true is that borders are complex composites, that may take on different names, ranging from fence to frontier, from wall to checkpoint, and so on and so forth, and therefore acquiring different flavor though belonging to the same semantic cluster. Balibar clearly states that

The idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd: to mark out a border is, precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it. Conversely, however, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders (in Greek, *hams*; in Latin, *finis* or *terminus*; in German, *Grenze*; in French, *borne*). The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of **going round in circles**, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition. (Balibar 2002a, 76)

In very recent years, Balibar's position has been developed by many scholars, who, struggling with the attempt to stick to the traditional definition of the border as a line, have gradually switched to a more plausible interpretation of it as "spatiality, wherein human encounter and appearance are uniquely charged, and often representational (see, for example, Pugliese 2010; Nield 2008; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007)" (Cox et al. 2021, 143). The critical and practical awareness of this change has led them to add more flexibility and complexity to the traditional notion, also emphasizing the possible ambivalence of the liminal places experienced all along the journey of migration not only as coercive sites but also as productive and generative. The various conditions of emplacement that punctuate the process of moving from one's own old home to the desirable new one define the repeated biopolitical pivoting



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from a provisional border to another one, all of them located in a transitional area that is in fact liminal in all respects.

The traditional and usual polysemy of the national frontier – which does not, as Balibar notes, “have the same meaning for everyone” (Balibar 2002b, 81) – unavoidably multiplies the complexity of the crossing process, and in the specific case of the migrants the perception of the border is at least duplicitous. It is quite true that for them “*some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all*, in the geographico-politico-administrative sense of the term” (Balibar 2002b, 84).

For the purposes of this work, I will focus on two spaces that may be also read as metaphors: the sea – mostly the Mediterranean sea, as a topographical border area that is diachronically marked as a place of displacement and therefore gradually constructed as a borderland where the migrant identity has been historically rewritten (Horden and Purcell 2000); the camp, variously inflected (refugee camp, detention camp, prison, ICE box...), but always marked as a place of transition, where the time of stay is uncertain and the moment of freedom/safety is constantly postponed. What they have in common is the relevance of the time required to cross a border that is no longer a line, and that may be spent travelling (by land or by sea) or waiting (in a camp, whatever its specific nature). The novelty of the migrants’ condition in this respect has been engendering a huge amount of aesthetic and representational work. I will select some case studies that I believe are particularly effective.

## 2. A liquid space

*Human flow* is the title of an extremely effective documentary film released in 2017 and co-produced and directed by Ai Weiwei. The brilliant and controversial Chinese artist and activist



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decided to shoot the film after visiting Lesbos to understand more about the gigantic tragedy taking place in the Mediterranean sea and filming, with no precise plan whatsoever, scenes of the arrival of the boats and the salvaging operations. The experience left a strong mark:

I could see in their faces an expression of uncertainty. They were scared and had no idea what they might find in this new land. That, even more, made me want to know more about who these people are, and why they have risked their lives coming to a place they don't understand and where nobody understands them. I had so many questions.<sup>3</sup>

In the “sprawling journey” that followed, starting in 2015, Ai Weiwei and his crew visited many entry points for people trying to find safety in Europe and began filming them, spontaneously focusing on the scale of migration, which seemed unprecedented in its numbers and massive in its consequences. What actually happened, as reported in the Production Notes, is that “The huge scale and even greater unknowns of making the film would eventually merge form into function – with the narrative’s liquid structure mirroring for the audience all the sensations of uncertainty, of indefinite time, of swirling limbo that refugees experience”.<sup>4</sup> The very title of the film plays on the metaphor of liquidity, which is complex and ambiguous. Though mostly connected to the enormous scale of the refugee crisis occurring in the Mediterranean Sea, it also evokes the water in general as the borderland where most journeys take place. This borderland may bear different meanings: it is hoped for and positively felt as a place of rebirth, though in practice, and more often, it easily becomes the place of death and a gigantic grave where even the names of the dead travelers are forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Exploiting different

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<sup>3</sup> The quote is drawn from the PRESS KIT of the film, available on the web (Production Notes: p. 9, <http://www.humanflow.com/press-kit/>).

<sup>4</sup> PRESS KIT of the film, available on the web (Production Notes: p. 11, <http://www.humanflow.com/press-kit/>).

<sup>5</sup> A poetic reflection on the need to recover the names of the dead migrant is to be found in Dagmawi Ymer’s short film *Asmat* (2015; available here: <https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/film/co-produzioni/asmat-nomi/>).





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technologies (cameras, iPhones, drones...) and collating images gathered travelling through over 20 countries, Weiwei tries to produce a report – at the same time poetic and documented – of the greatest human displacement in history in recent times, prioritizing the human impact of the crisis. Images of overcrowded boats and barbed-wire fences, endless walks through fields or along railway lines report the numberless legs of the journey, in a stop-and-go that is the erratic rhythm of the migrant’s travelling.

For the viewers of the film as well as for the filmmaker, it is quite evident that the traditional, crystal-clear awareness of the geopolitical nature of borders is in need of radical re-thinking in the light of a world map that has progressively lost stability.

Within this frame, migrants are no longer sure about their destination, they do not know where and when they will arrive, and they spend a very long, painful, often physically and psychologically challenging length of time in transition. Sadly, the transition is seldom completed safely. *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* is one of works focusing on the tragic outcome of the migrants’ seacrossings. The film was released in 2014 and – though being in all respects a debut film – is not the first representational experience of Morgan Knibbe in this field. The film is partly made using sequences from the award-winning short *Shipwreck* (2015), but the purposes, style and articulation of the text are totally different.

The opening sequence of *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* is shot by a drone and shows fragments of a shipwreck where, while the camera bobs along following the oscillation of the boat in a storm, a family tries to survive. At a climactic point the grandfather falls from the boat and drowns. The oscillation between two moments – the child’s voice saying “I don’t want to go to Europe” and the drowned old man wondering “Is this paradise?” – defines the narrative pact with the audience. The story – largely based on events that are tragic and true – is going to be told through the gaze of a wandering spirit. Precisely this gaze transforms what could be



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a document or a testimony into a vision filtered through a very precise interpretation. The specter is 'Purgatorial': he is dead, but not allowed to forget his tragic condition as a living being. He is still wandering in the no-man's land of undocumented migrants. The chosen point of view – that of a wandering specter – shapes a brand-new kind of discourse, combining Knibbe's uncompromising and almost brutal facticity with a poetic angle that smoothly transforms a possible 'reportage' into magical storytelling. A tragedy – the drowning of a victim – is artistically transformed into the opportunity to show the migration journey through a different gaze, perhaps cognitively more useful and functional to the understanding of what it means to be excluded even from the possibility of hope. In a counter-narrative of migratory experiences, Knibbe transforms the Bakhtinian notion of 'outsidedness' often quoted by Polezzi (Polezzi 2012, 354) into literal non-belonging to the land of the living: the profile of a dead narrator illuminates the condition of dire human insecurity experienced by the migrants at sea. This sea – effectively renamed the "Mediterranean seametry" by Hakim Abderrezak (in Cox et al. 2021, 373) – reshapes "the idea of borders as liquid figurations" (Ponzanesi 2011: 67). Often depicted as a porous frontier, it takes an "oxymoronic nature" since in it "liquidity has become synonymous with immobility precipitated by preposterous and rigid policies that have transformed a sea into a cemetery" (Ponzanesi 2011: 67).

In her *Trilogy of the Shipwreck (Trilogia del Naufragio)*, and more in particular in the first play of her work – *Lampedusa Beach* (2003)<sup>6</sup> –, Lina Prosa sets the action precisely on the Southernmost maritime margin of the European Union, showing how the sea works as a sieve

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<sup>6</sup> The first version of the play, dated 2003, was awarded the Premio Nazionale Annalisa Scafi per il teatro civile in 2005 and the Premio Nazionale Anima in 2007. The play was first performed at the Theatre des Bernardines, in Marseilles, on February 5, 2008. Here we are referring to the Italian version published by Editoria & Spettacolo in 2013.



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(Abderrezak in Cox et al. 2021, 383-85) that stops the unwanted migrants and finally embraces their dead bodies. Consequently – Abderrezak adds – the Mediterranean basin becomes a mass grave and a maritime cemetery, or ‘seametry’, in which “migration politics related to the sea rely on a set of contradictions and illogicalities that provoke desperate acts and untimely ends. How does a sea associated with flow and fluidity become the world’s largest maritime cemetery?” (Abderrezak in Cox et al. 2021, 383).

Shauba, the female protagonist is portrayed while drowning after falling from the unseaworthy boat on which she is trying to beach on the shores of Lampedusa. Her maritime crossing is not to be completed, and safety is not to be reached. As one of the displaced persons illegally trying to reach Europe in search of a relative who has disappeared, she is an expendable body, made to dissolve in the liquid sea and soon forgotten. Her companions experiencing the same fate are other dead bodies, poetically represented as “never-seen-before fish” (“pesci mai visti prima”, Prosa 2013, 18). Embraced by the sea, they never made it to the shore, and their hopes, dreams, expectations and even fears are conserved in the extended border of the Mediterranean waters. Their death results from the political priority that is given to border control and rejection, and it neutralizes the major political faultlines that could put the stability of Europe at risk (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021b, 83-86).

If Lina Prosa tells a story that could be true but is in fact developed around imaginary characters, a recent docu-drama, entitled *The Swimmers*, reports on the story of two actual sisters, who leave Syria and travel both by land and by sea to reach salvation when the political situation in their motherland becomes unsafe. Yusra and Sarah Maldini, both professional swimmers, are convinced to quit Syria, where life has become impossible, and to undertake the migratory journey following a hybrid route (by land and by sea). The fact that they are teenagers accounts for their difficulty in anticipating the actual conditions in which the



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multiple frontier-crossing is to be carried out, but it also shows the stubborn resistance of two young girls, who will not give up hope.

The last leg of Yusra's and Sarah's journey is a trans-Mediterranean crossing on a faulty boat whose engine breaks down in the middle of the sea. Precisely at this point the filmic representation reverses the most familiar profile of the migrants. Normally experienced as anonymous figures in the mass movement of displaced people, the undocumented migrants as reported in the media are described as deprived of agency and mere victims. Their plight, though detonating the usual salve of pseudo-solidarities (Gilroy 2000, 6), mostly triggers pity and defines them as passive victims, who have neither the strength nor the tools to change their destiny. Yusra and Sarah seem totally different: precisely when their life is on the line, they overturn their destiny, bravely dive into the water, swim alongside the sinking boat overloaded with refugees and take all of them to a safe shore. The film, directed by Sally El Hosaini and released in 2022, confirms a critical statement made by Parvati Nair, who focuses on hope as "the source of agency in contexts that overwhelmingly disempower and displace individuals and communities" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 412). Nair also reacts to the linguistic and legal distinction that works as a sieve to discriminate those who are to be saved and those who are to be left behind. If Yusra and Sarah succeed in reaching safety in Germany and Yusra fulfils her dream of participating in the Olympics Games in 2016 in Rio, they do so because they finally decide to embark on an illicit journey and are both bold and lucky enough to survive a journey that could not be made in a safer, more comfortable, less risky and more dignified way. In their case, "hope functions as a vital strategy of survival" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 412) at the moment of crossing over to Europe. In doing what they do, they recover their 'agency' and react to the more familiar press identification of refugees as passive 'others', a condition that is not easily reconsidered when they eventually succeed in crossing the wide border of the sea.



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### 3. Islandment with no island

Mariangela Palladino introduces a neologism, 'islandment', to describe the "arrival without an end to the journey; it signifies detention, (...) inhabiting a liminal space in Europe but not quite so, neither geographically nor legally" (Palladino in Cox et al. 2021, 395). In the bureaucracies of reception, initial care and possible integration, arrival is no arrival: getting on shore simply results in another kind of imprisonment. In more ways than one the transformation of the borderline into a borderland re-shapes the very process of migration, which used to be a well-oriented journey towards a specific frontier, clearly drawn on a map. Once crossed, migrants started a new life and triggered the process of becoming new citizens of different nations. What happens today is that they spend a very long time travelling through different countries, crossing multiple frontier lines and not very sure of where they are bound and when they are going to stop. In fact, they pass from being citizens at risk in a country at war to being reshaped as marginal identities stuck in an unwelcoming borderland. In comparison with traditional migrations, there has been an exponential increase of uncertainty as to several aspects of the journey of migration, which does not end when getting ashore. The fluidity somehow implicit in sea-crossing – since "To be at sea is to be not on land. The contrast is implicit, but stark: fluid, fraught with risk, and engulfing as opposed to solid, stable and charted" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 414) – extends to the time spent in various carcereal locations where the hierarchies of belonging are kept in place, so as to demarcate refugees from citizens. The periods of time wasted in waiting have the same liquid imponderability and fluidity as the sea.

At the end of the first leg of their journey as well as when they get to Greece, Yusra and Sarah occupy a "space of waiting" whose duration lengthens and shortens regardless of their choices and acts. In the same way, in the short film by Saeed Mayahy and Miriam Carlsen



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entitled *Game Over* and released in 2022, a group of illegal Afghan boys looking for sanctuary but stuck in Zeytinburnu (Turkey) wait for a chance to leave spending their days in hiding and between shady jobs. Their hope to cross over to Europe fades in time, in a form of ‘islandment’ reinforced by their inability to communicate in a language that is foreign to them.

The younger the migrant, the worse the feeling of being thrown into a ‘liquid’ and unpredictable condition. In the case of children, the barrier between seeing and understanding is even more dangerous and it tends to gain a Janus-like quality. On the one hand, the fate of accompanied and unaccompanied minors easily acquires the flavor of a simply human, and therefore universally understandable tragedy (as happened in the iconic, if tragic, fate of Aylan Kurdi: see Bertacco and Vallorani 2021a, 100-108). On the other, for reasons connected to the very process of growing up, the outcome of a long stay in a borderland – be it a refugee camp, a detention facility or the area around a border – is totally unpredictable. In these cases, the feeling of exclusion is experienced by an identity that is not yet shaped and suffers a long process of anomy marked by repeated relocations and predictably ending in being stuck in a detention centre for illegal migrants and unaccompanied minors.

In his on-going project *The Game*,<sup>7</sup> set in the Balcanic borderland, the photoreporter Mario Badagliacca devotes a chapter to the photographic representations of children in refugee camps, encampments and provisional shelters. Apparently able to adapt to a precarious life, the minors are fully aware of the instability of their condition but they try to stick to commonplace habits. Their playground is tragically desolated, but the games are the same: playing football, laughing at a camera, faking the use of a weapon.<sup>8</sup> Uncertainty, collective

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<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, ‘game’ is a recurring word in the projects concerning the description of the journey of the migrants, both by land and by sea.

<sup>8</sup> The project is available here [https://www.mariobadagliacca.com/the\\_game\\_preface-r9918](https://www.mariobadagliacca.com/the_game_preface-r9918).



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unhappiness, and deprivation becomes a state of being, precipitating the desire for change into hopeless immobility. What happens in fact is that the time spent in the middle ground between war and salvation is marked by a drive towards the reshaping of one's own identity and in some cases, one's own body. The story told by Chris Cleave in his *The Other Hand* (2008), though fictional, successfully reports on the condition of unaccompanied minors when locked in detention centres in the land where they had hoped to find safety. At the very beginning of the novel, the young protagonist has finally succeeded in reaching England, but she is now locked up in a centre on the outskirts of London. Her desire to eventually become free to move around as she wants produces the dream of magically becoming "a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human triumph. This is called, globalisation. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound can leap the turnstiles, and dodge the tackles of those big men with their uniform caps, and jump straight into a waiting airport taxi. Where to, sir? Western Civilisation, my good man, and make it snappy" (Cleave 2009, 1-3). Before that, and much more practically, she had to "reshape" her female body as that of a boy, to reduce the risk of suffering sexual assaults (Cleave 2009, 7-11). Frozen in a condition of inbetweenness actually producing the "discontinuous state of being" mentioned by Edward Said (Said 1984, 137-49), she inhabits her time/space of waiting by imagining endless ways of becoming 'same' rather than going on being 'other'. Thus the increasing fluidity of the very notion of border finds its apt correlative in the various places of containment aimed at receiving wave after wave of refugees. In borderland areas – be they near the Balcanic frontier, in Northern France or on a boat lost in the Mediterranean Sea – the migrants are likely to spend long periods of time simply waiting to become citizens of another country after leaving their own birthplace. In fact, they go through a transformative process,



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though the final outcome of this process does not comply with their original purpose: they are made into objects, corpses, sub-human beings, undesirable creatures, and so on and so forth.

In his essay “Europe as border”, Ètienne Balibar points out the intrinsic ambiguity of the very notion of border:

Every border has a *double meaning*, local and global: it is a “line” (more or less accepted, stable, permeable, visible, thick or thin) separating territories which, by virtue of its drawing, become “foreign”; and it is a “partition” or “distribution” of the World space, which reflects the regime of meaning and power under which the World is represented as a “unity” of different “parts”. (Balibar 2004, 13)

The border, hence, tends to become really dis-located, if not ubiquitous (Balibar 2004, 16). The dynamics of migratory flows, exponentially increasing all over the world produces an impact on what Mezzadra and Neilson define the “heterogenization of borders” (Mezzadra e Neilson 2013, 3) potentiating the already existing deep instability of the traditional geopolitical borders, actually made into a biopolitical device that happens to be essential in distinguishing and separating the locals and the aliens, the national and the foreigner. In the current journey of migration, in the different forms it takes, the line has evolved into a new entity: no longer a device located in space and whose crossing is a matter of minutes, but a geopolitically and symbolically uncertain space. As Mezzadra and Neilson state, there’s “No clear-cut division between the inside and the outside” (Mezzadra e Neilson 2013, viii) of a nation, in the same way as the distinction between being saved but never ‘made legal’ and being rejected right from the beginning is becoming more and more blurred. Border zones, as Mignolo defines them (Mignolo 2000, 236), are configured as extended spatial units, located outside the politically normative space, in the land of nowhere. In these areas, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the national and the foreigner. They may become the locus of metamorphosis, or the





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purgatory space hosting migrants for nobody knows how long or a gigantic grave. In no case do they correspond to the tight, clear-cut line that used to be understood as a border. The wider the border, the harder the process of relocation and restoration of what, according to Said, is “left behind forever” (Said 1984, 137). What has been changing together with the complexification of geographical margins and territorial edges, is the idea that sudden change and equally sudden salvation is possible, while the idea of a neverending process of transition that will produce no forms of stability starts being integrated. This loss starts being told, and the telling is the beginning of awareness. “Telling stories – states Valeria Luiselli, – does not solve anything, does not reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable” (Luiselli and Davis 2017, 69).

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### **Bio-bibliographical note**

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