

**‘Il clandestino è l’ebreo di oggi’:
Imprints of the Shoah on Migration to Italy**

by Derek Duncan

Abstract

Drawing on Rey Chow’s notion of entanglement and Michael Rothberg’s work on multidirectional memory, I look at the ways in which certain visual, lexical, and historical representations and tropes operate to create points of connection between the Shoah and contemporary migration to Italy across the Mediterranean. I argue that the deployment of these images is not intended to indicate similarities, or indeed, dissimilarities, between historical events. The network of association which is produced offers a space in which to critically and creatively interrogate past and present, and their possible interconnections. I then analyze in detail the work of novelist, Igiaba Scego, and film-maker, Dagmawi Yimer, to uncover an entanglement bringing together cultural memories of the Shoah, and silenced histories of Italian colonialism to indict political and cultural practices informing responses to death by drowning in the Mediterranean.

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Introduction

Moni Ovadia, the Italian Jewish musician and actor and a prominent public voice against the resurgence of racism in contemporary Italy, commented that ‘the

clandestine migrant is today's Jew' [*'il clandestino è l'ebreo di oggi'*] in a short postface to Marco Rovelli's *Lager italiani*¹.

Rovelli's book is about the experiences of migrants held in Italy's detention centers, and his provocative choice of title makes an immediate link between these centers and Nazi concentration camps. The testimonies contained in Rovelli's book convince him of the validity of the parallel even as he makes clear, as does Rovelli himself, that life in Italy's detention centers is not on any material level like that in the Lager. There is little gain in making comparisons between these experiences in terms of number, scale, or intentionality. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, Ovadia finds a truer parallel in the mechanisms which strip the undocumented migrant of any legal status in ways reminiscent of the logic of the Lager. The migrant becomes "subhuman." Rovelli's achievement is to have taken the reader beyond possible feelings of "indifference" to the human ruination perpetrated by the detention camps, and towards a time when the "shame" of the camps will be properly exposed. The two terms I have highlighted here recall the work of Primo Levi who has provided an indispensable lexis with which to describe and respond to the Shoah. It is difficult for someone familiar with Levi's writing not to register their presence.² So while direct historical equivalence is explicitly denied, this denial is partially disavowed by what I will call the historically textured memory of language. In the course of what follows, I will attempt to track and explicate what I see as a very strong "attraction" between the Shoah and current migration to Europe in terms of how the latter is represented and conceptualized. This attraction is particularly powerful in discourses which aim to contest the dehumanization of the migrant.

I want to avoid interpreting this attraction as a kind of improper equivalence, using instead Rey Chow's notion of "entanglement" as my preferred conceptual tool. For Chow, an "entanglement" does not rely on parallels of similarity, but is more "a figure for meetings that are not necessarily defined by proximity or

¹ Moni Ovadia, "Il nazismo che è in noi," in Marco Rovelli, *Lager italiani* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), 281-83. Two years later, another book was published with the same title referring however to Italian camps for Yugoslav prisoners: Alessandra Kersevan, *Lager italiani. Pulizia etnica e campi di concentramento fascisti per civili jugoslavi 1941-1943* (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2008). The imprecision is resonant of what I will discuss here. (All translations from Italian are my own. I have retained the original Italian in a few cases to highlight a particular word or expression the recurrence of which is in itself significant).

² Rovelli's book contains many lexical reiterations of Levi. For a discussion of the presence of Levi in postcolonial studies more broadly, see Derek Duncan, "The Postcolonial Afterlife of Primo Levi," in *Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative*, eds. Emma Bond, Guido Bonsaver and Federico Faloppa (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 287-301.

affinity.” She asks: “What kinds of entanglements might be conceivable through partition and partiality rather than conjunction and intersection, and through disparity rather than equivalence?”³ By remaining attentive to the difference inherent in the attraction of the Shoah to contemporary representations of migration, I will attempt to follow what she calls “a certain contour of the entangled” in both visual and textual modes of representation. In both media, I will suggest, it is possible to discern a memory of the Shoah but, at least in the examples which I explore here, the mnemonic imprint does not imply the equivalence or even repetition of human catastrophe; it is more to do with the aesthetics and politics of dehumanization and resistance.

The entanglements of language

Since the late 1980s, migration to Italy has been of significant concern to successive Italian governments. The ways in which this concern has been expressed have remained remarkably consistent. This consistency defies fluctuations in number, legal status, country of origin, mode of arrival, and many other variables.⁴ The Italian press has been widely criticized for generating a climate of hostility around these issues and for the prejudicial language it has adopted. The term “*clandestino*” is one of the words considered particularly problematic. In both adjectival and nominative forms, it was the term most frequently used in the press from the late 1980s onwards to designate people who had migrated to Italy without the requisite documents to enter or stay in the country. Federico Faloppa has noted how its constant association with undocumented migration in the press forced a shift in meaning from “hidden” to “illegal.”⁵ Use of the term persisted even after 2008 when the “Charter of Rome,” a protocol which seeks to promote the use of accurate language in reporting migration as well as a sense of social responsibility towards migrants themselves, was put in place. In 2011, the “Association of the Charter of Rome” was set up to encourage the diffusion of these aims amongst journalists and anyone else communicating publicly on these issues which that

³ Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 1-2.

⁴ For excellent introductions to the terms of the debate, see Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: the Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005); Alessandro Del Lago, *Non-persone: l'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2004).

⁵ Federico Faloppa, “Media and Migration: Some Linguistic Reflections,” in *Destination Italy*, 105-123; 118.

Charter had expressed only in very broad terms. In 2009, what was referred to as “*clandestinità*” or “*immigrazione clandestina*” was made a criminal offence thus ensuring the term’s continued currency.⁶ Ovadia was in fact one of a number of prominent intellectuals who signed a petition against the legislation condemning it as the re-introduction of the fascist “Race Laws” promulgated in 1938.⁷

Writing in 2006, Ovadia’s adoption of the term “clandestine” is significant. Arguably, it represented an act of resignification in a discourse that presented migrants to Italy as a national threat. Indeed, not all uses of the term are equally prejudicial, yet neither are they ever neutral. In November 2003, the Catholic weekly *Famiglia Cristiana* dedicated its main feature to “illegal migration” [*immigrazione clandestina*], prompted by the official funeral in Rome of thirteen people from Somalia who died trying to cross the Mediterranean.⁸ Walter Veltroni, the then Mayor, orchestrated the event which took place in the Piazza del Campidoglio attracting a great deal of public and media attention.⁹ *Famiglia Cristiana* adopted a very sympathetic tone and very firmly placed the blame for the deaths on Europe’s inability or unwillingness to assume proper responsibility for what was taking place. In many respects, the magazine’s perspective was at odds with the general hostility to migration expressed in the Italian media at that time. The magazine’s front-cover shows a close-up of a dejected young African man, eyes downcast wearing some kind of waterproof jacket [Fig. 1]. We are invited to read the man who remains unnamed as a survivor of the journey across the Mediterranean. The image seems resolutely contemporary, but the accompanying text suggests a historical parallel. The phrase “If this is a man” [*Se questo è un uomo*] appears in large white capital letters underneath the less prominent “illegal migration” [*Immigrazione clandestina*]. The direct reference to Primo Levi’s first book contextualizes the image in a particular, albeit inconclusive, way. A short

⁶ Analysing responses to what took place in Rosarno in 2010, where African workers clashed with police and local farmers, Gabriela Jacomella, a former journalist with *Il corriere della sera*, notes the prevalence of the term “clandestine” in all sections of the Italian press in spite of the Italian government’s clear statement that most of the workers involved in the uprising were legally resident in the country. Gabriela Jacomella, “The Silence of Migrants: The Underrepresentation of Migrant Voices in the Italian Mainstream Media,” in *Destination Italy*, 149-163; 161.

⁷ “Appello contro il ritorno delle leggi razziali in Europa,” <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/camilleri-tabucchi-maraini-fo-rame-ovadia-scaparro-amelio-appello-contro-il-ritorno-delle-leggi-razziali-in-europa/> (this and all websites accessed 11 September 2016).

⁸ *Famiglia Cristiana*, November 2, 2003.

⁹ For a very well-informed and detailed contextualization of the sinking and the funeral in relation to Italian government policy, see David Forgacs, “Coasts, Blockades and the Free Movement of People,” in *Italian Mobilities*, eds. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Hom (Routledge: New York, 2016), 175-199; 185-186.

editorial piece asking “If these are men, let us welcome them,” stresses the dehumanizing experience of the crossing and Europe’s failure to provide an adequate response. The reference to Levi invokes a sense of the migrants beleaguered, yet abiding, humanity, and the risks of denying that humanity to both him and the reader. A triangular circuit of empathy is set up through which the (Catholic) reader is invited to understand what to make of the migratory experience. The subtitle of the magazine’s main feature, “the testimonies of the Somali survivors,” reinforces a link with Levi’s own literary and ethical, memorializing project and post-Holocaust paradigm of testimony. What is particularly interesting is how text and image enter into a reinforcing rhetorical knot, a complex metonymic figure of historical transfer.¹⁰



Fig. 1. *Famiglia Cristiana*: the humanitarian gaze
Cover of *Famiglia Cristiana*, n. 44, November 2, 2003.

¹⁰ There are other visual histories connecting representations of beleaguered Africans and Holocaust survivors. T.J. Demos suggests that the origins of this history began in Biafra in 1968 when stark images of starving children evoking a very specific representational memory were used to encourage charitable aid: T.J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 99.

The lapidary reference to *If This Is a Man* indicates the diffusion of Primo Levi's cultural presence and the availability of his work to function as a kind of readily intelligible shorthand. This symbolic capital is even more evident with the title of his final work, *The Drowned and the Saved* [*I sommersi e i salvati*], recurrently used to refer to those who drown in the Mediterranean or indeed survive the crossing.¹¹ The collection of essays *Bibbia e Corano a Lampedusa* illustrates Levi's textually marginal but rhetorically potent presence.¹² The text is a multi-voiced commentary on annotated extracts from the Qur'an and the Bible discovered washed up on Lampedusa. Who actually added the annotations to the texts is not known, but the editors of the volume quite reasonably assume that they offer some insight into the experience of the journey itself; indeed the annotations are seen as a kind of indirect testimony.¹³ The book is dedicated "to the migrants, to the memory of those who *drowned* [*sommersi*] in the Mediterranean, to the people of Lampedusa and Linosa" [my emphasis]. In his wide-ranging introductory essay, Francesco Montenegro, Archbishop of Agrigento, makes specific comparisons to the Jewish exodus from Egypt. He makes an extended reference to the *Book of Lamentations* and the imperative to remember, closing his essay by quoting from "Shemà," the poem/epigraph to *If This Is a Man*. Introducing this quotation, however, he expresses some hesitation in referring to those who drowned as "*sommersi*," wary of creating "inappropriate overlaps."¹⁴ Yet he uses this disavowal to talk about the return of "genocide," which inevitably indexes the systematic racial extermination of the Shoah. The parish priest Stefano Nastasi makes an even more explicit parallel in his intervention suggesting that the situation of the "*sommersi*" "lends itself to analogies and affinities with the twentieth century tragedy of Auschwitz."¹⁵ He also refers to Pope Francis's visit to Lampedusa in July 2013 and the homily where he indicts the "globalization of indifference" and particularly the failure to empathize with the dead demanding

¹¹ As just one example of this, see the comment of Alessandro Triulzi on migrant survivor testimony: the survivors are "in Primo Levi's words, either 'drowned' or 'saved.'" Triulzi's shorthand erases the complexity of Levi's formulation. Alessandro Triulzi, "Hidden Faces, Hidden Histories," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, eds. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103-113; 104.

¹² *Bibbia e Corano a Lampedusa*, eds. Arnaldo Mosca Mondadori, Alfonso Cacciatore and Alessandro Triulzi (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 2014).

¹³ The final section of the volume comprises a series of testimonies of a more direct sort ranging from transcriptions of oral accounts and diaries to academic reflections on practices of memorialization.

¹⁴ Francesco Montenegro, "Una riflessione," in *Bibbia e Corano*, 19-36; 36.

¹⁵ Stefano Nastasi, "Testimonianza," in *Bibbia e Corano*, 37-56; 48.

that they be treated “as if they were white.”¹⁶ The Pope’s reference to the racial politics of the Mediterranean is unusually explicit.¹⁷ Yahya Pallavicini, Iman of the Al-Wahid Mosque in Milan brings the history of Italy’s Jewish community and the history of Nazi/Fascist persecution into this entangled constellation more directly: “our Jewish brothers to whom we offered our support on Wednesday October 16 at the Synagogue in Rome on the anniversary of the rounding up [*rastrellamento*] of Jews in Rome.”¹⁸ Commenting on the annotated sections of the Qur’an recovered from the sea, he remarks on the lexical inseparability of the terms witness/martyr in Arabic.¹⁹

What is significant here is not the deployment of each term or reference in isolation, but rather the combined result of their proximity.²⁰ Their articulation is all the more powerful as almost every contributor to the collection makes explicit reference to the events of 3 October 2013 when more than 360 people, mostly Eritrean, drowned off the coast of Lampedusa after a boat they were travelling on from Libya, caught fire and capsized. The scale of the disaster intensified interest across the political and social spectrum, and significantly, led to a greater preoccupation with issues of representation and commemoration. The island of Lampedusa is formally part of the region of Sicily, although it is closer to Africa, only 70 miles off the coast of Tunisia.²¹ While international attention moved

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁷ See Miguel Mellino, *Cittadinanze postcoloniali: Appartenenza, razza e razzismo in Europa e in Italia* (Rome: Carocci, 2013), 117. For an account of the Pope’s visit and details of the Mass he celebrated, see R. Tina Catania, “Making Immigrants Visible in Lampedusa: Pope Francis, Migration, and the State,” *Italian Studies: Cultural Studies*, 70/4 (2015): 465-486.

¹⁸ Yahya Pallavicini, “Preghiera islamica per i defunti,” in *Bibbia e Corano*, 103-108; 106-107.

¹⁹ Robert Gordon makes the similar point about the origins and proximity of the terms in relation to Christian theology: *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3-4.

²⁰ My work here is heavily indebted to Robert Gordon’s, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), and particularly the chapter “Shared Knowledge,” 109-138, where he charts the ways in which the Holocaust as a point of cultural reference spread in various directions. His comments on how the diffusion of certain images ranging from emaciated bodies to the gate at Auschwitz came to stand as a “shorthand for the entire appalling history, its messages and meanings” (110) have strong parallels with contemporary visual representations of migration. His broader point that so many of the standard ways of representing the Holocaust, both visual and linguistic, became commonplace “as both literal markers of an historical event and flexible and highly recognizable analogies or metaphors” (136) underlies the easy cultural availability of the images and tropes I identify here. Levi’s own name may arguably function as a kind of cultural trope or shorthand. See, for instance, note 34 below.

²¹ There is now a very substantial bibliography on Lampedusa. See, for example, Joseph Pugliese, “Crisis Heterotopias and Border Zones of the Dead,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 23/5 (2009): 663-79; Paolo Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine: Lampedusa tra produzione*

during 2015 to focus primarily on migration from Syria through Turkey and Greece, Lampedusa had previously been seen as the main point of entry into Europe for migrants setting out from the North African coast.²² The history of this migration route is very complex, and numbers have fluctuated according to international circumstance and pressure. The countries of origin of those crossing the Mediterranean have varied in the twenty-five or so years since migration has become a palpably mass experience. While many boats have taken their passengers directly to Lampedusa, more have been directed there by coastal patrols. A migrant holding center based on the island has changed in status and function over the years according to the number of people disembarking on the island. Whoever survives the crossing is usually transported quickly to Sicily or the mainland; typically, there is little contact between the islanders and the migrants. With a permanent population of a little more than 6,000, Lampedusa has had to accommodate a huge array of governmental and non-governmental agencies whose presence on the island has created tensions over scarce resources. Concern for those who survive the crossing has always been mixed with a sense of grief for the dead and missing. The artist, Mimmo Paladino, erected the five meter high “Porta a Lampedusa” in 2008 to remember those who had lost their lives.²³ The association of the island with the catastrophe of migration across the Mediterranean has transnational significance. Groups such as “Lampedusa in Hamburg” use the island’s name to mobilize politically around migration issues.²⁴ The sinking of 3 October had such potency that the date has been adopted as a day on which to commemorate all those who have died crossing the Mediterranean.²⁵

e messa in scena della frontiera (Milan: Mimesis, 2012); “Special Thematic Section: The Mediterranean Migration Frontier,” *ACME: An international e-journal for critical geographies*, 13/2 (2014), <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/issue/view/77>; Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna, and Vincenzo Ruggiero, “Thinking Lampedusa: Border Construction, the Spectacle of Bare Life and the Productivity of Migrants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38/3 (2014): 430-45; “Special issue: Reimagining Europe’s Borderlands: the social and cultural impact of undocumented migrants on Lampedusa,” *Italian Studies: Cultural Studies*, 70.4 (2015). This body of work reflects a significant diversity of emphasis, in part due to disciplinary difference, but also due to the shifting geopolitical forces which envelop the island.

²² The number of migrants landing in Lampedusa has again increased in the wake of the agreement of March 2016 restricting migration from Turkey to the EU.

²³ For details of the project see <http://www.amaniforafrica.it/cosa-facciamo/la-porta-di-lampedusa>.

²⁴ See <http://lampedusa-hamburg.info>. I am indebted to Jacopo Colombini for my understanding of “Lampedusa” as a transnational signifier.

²⁵ In terms of sheer numbers, the shipwrecks of April 2015 exceeded those of 3 October 2013, but the symbolic capital of that date has made it a recurring and stable point in the discursive constellation I refer to. The Missing Migrants Project maintains on-going statistical information

Cultural Memory?

Before taking my investigation any further, some thought needs to be given to the term “memory” itself, for it is not clear to me that this term conveys an appropriate sense of the traces and echoes of the Shoah I identify. “Memory” as a category of cultural reference, let alone of critical analysis, is notoriously broad. Astrid Erll’s preliminary definition as “an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts” gives an indication of memory’s reach not just with respect to its complex temporality, but also to the diverse locations of its production, communication, and consumption.²⁶ Contemporary understandings of memory extend far beyond the actual capacity of witnesses of a particular event to recall, memorialize, or commemorate it either individually or as a collective.²⁷ Digital modes of communication have intensified debates around questions of memory and historical representation. The availability of these representations does not necessarily ensure their preservation nor guarantee their veracity even beyond the usual vagaries of subjective recall. Liberal distribution of images and texts complicates questions about the possession of memory, and also about who might legitimately claim to be affected by the pressures of the past. The processes of subjective identification may lay claim to, and in turn be moulded by, events which have not been experienced directly.

I referred briefly in my introduction to “the historically textured memory of language” which I see as something akin to what Michael Rothberg has called, in reference to the work of Aimé Césaire, a “multidirectional rhetorical constellation,” a configuration of meaning which invites quite separate historical events to work to illuminate each other without ever falling prey to redundancies of comparison or precedence.²⁸ Rothberg’s influential concept of

on lives lost in the process of migration: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int>.

²⁶ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7. Erll’s work is particularly relevant for this article given her emphasis on “the increasingly globalizing pressures and constellations of cultural memory” (27).

²⁷ The bibliography in this area is substantial. See for instance Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of*

“multidirectional memory” was developed through a series of close analyses of memories of French colonialism and the Holocaust as he sought to move beyond the competitive logic which often besets memory work and sidestep sterile and antagonistic debates on history versus memory. He aspired instead to “an ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness and working through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics.”²⁹ In discussing the evocation of the Shoah as a point of reference for representations of contemporary migration to Italy, I hope to retain a sense of Rothberg’s ethical ambition. I also want to prioritize three aspects of his analysis which seem particularly helpful:

1. His adoption of Walter Benjamin’s notion of “constellation” which offers “an image of encounter in which different temporalities collide and in which movement and stasis are held in tension.”
2. His insistence that memory operates beyond the borders of the nation to generate what he calls a “transnational encounter.”
3. An abiding interest in the narrative form of multidirectional memory: “what narrative forms correspond to and express the work of intercultural remembrance and what the effects of those narrative forms are.”³⁰

Constellations of multidirectional memory do not produce either synthesis or resolution; they do not stick to conventional spatial and temporal boundaries and their expression may also take on unexpected shapes. Rothberg concludes his book on a note of undecidable complication: “understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing of memories in the force field of public space. The only way forward is through their entanglement.”³¹ Like Chow, Rothberg does not aim to “disentangle” the intersections of different cultural memories but rather to work “through” them, investigating their “partial overlaps,” or to pick up on the echo of another expression, their “inappropriate overlaps.”

Before exploring in some depth two extended representational entanglements, I set out some “partial overlaps” or, what Chow has called “scenes of entanglement”

Decolonization, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 77. For an interesting take on the potential conflict and competition of other traumatic pasts in relation to the Holocaust, see Sissy Helff, “Memories of Migration: Tracing the Past Through Movement in Film,” *African and Black Diaspora*, 8/1 (2015): 1-14.

²⁹ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 44; 133; 137.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 313.

where the Shoah and migration touch. Their detail maps the contours of its wider cultural discourse.

At the Berlin Film Festival in 2016, the Golden Bear for Best Film was won by Gianfranco Rosi's documentary *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*). The film was shot on Lampedusa and shows the separate lives of migrants and islanders sharing the same space. In the run-up to the film's screening in Berlin, Rosi's parallel between the current refugee crisis and the Holocaust was very widely quoted in the press. In an interview given to the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, he is more specific in his analogy as he recalls boarding a vessel with a team of coastguards and discovering that those on the boat were dead. Unsure if he should film the scene, the coastguard tells him: "It has to be done. It would be like standing outside a gas chamber during the **Holocaust** and not filming anything because its too disturbing" (emphasis in the original).³² Rosi's work and his commentary on it raise ethical questions about the aesthetics of film and its testimonial function.

The term "Lager" is widely used in Italy to refer to the Shoah.³³ In a piece published in October 2015, the highly-regarded journalist Flore Murard-Yovanvitch deploys the term to talk about conditions in Libyan "concentration camps" where many of those hoping to cross to Italy have been held. In the same article she adopts the near synonyms "extermination" and "genocide" to underline the determining role of racial difference in governmental management of the crossing.³⁴

In December 2013, an inmate in the migrant detention center on Lampedusa managed to film scenes of naked migrants being forcibly showered and disinfected.³⁵ It emerged that those subjected to this treatment included some of

³² Arianna Finos, "Berlino, applausi per 'Fuocoammare': 'Raccontiamo l'Olocausto di oggi'," http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2016/02/13/news/berlino_applausi_per_fuocoammare_-133340575/.

³³ For a detailed analysis of this and other terms see Robert S.C. Gordon, "From Olocausto to Shoah: Naming Genocide in 21st-century Italy," *Modern Languages Open* (2015), <http://www.modernlanguagesopen.org/index.php/mlo/article/view/75>. Often associated with Levi himself, the term "Lager" had earlier been widely used by activists in ANED. Guri Schwarz very usefully reminded me of this in a private note. The term's ongoing association with Levi underlines the degree to which his name functions as a kind of cultural shorthand for a much more variegated and densely populated field of activity.

³⁴ Flore Murard-Yovanvitch, "I nuovi lager. L'incubo dei migranti nei campi di concentramento libici," <http://www.huffingtonpost.it/flore-murardyovanovitch/...8354772.html>.

³⁵ In much attenuated form, the footage recalls the photographs taken secretly in Auschwitz and discussed in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Again the point is not to compare two historical instances, but rather to reflect critically on the production, dissemination, and reception

the survivors of the 3 October shipwreck. The footage was broadcast on Raiz, an Italian state television channel. The images were generally seen as reminiscent of concentration camps and the practice loudly condemned by politicians from all sides. Giusi Nicolini, the high profile mayor of Lampedusa was forthright: "It's what they did in the Lager."³⁶

In September 2015, Czech officials used felt-tip pens to inscribe identification numbers on the arms of arriving migrants. Although the aim was to record rather than obliterate their identity,³⁷ the perception that this procedure imitated too closely the tattooing of prisoners by the Nazis led to international outcry and condemnation. Elie Wiesel berated the practice and the growing feeling of intolerance towards migrants but affirmed "This is not the Shoah" reiterating the view that: "The Shoah is not comparable to any other crime in the history of mankind."³⁸ Shaul Bassi, the Jewish Italian postcolonial critic, has commented on a similar incident in Catania where migrants who had been "saved" by a British warship were seen to have identification numbers written on their hands. Like Wiesel, Bassi explicitly expresses his mistrust of facile analogies, but reflects on why certain people "are easily forgettable and reduced to having no identities. Perhaps black bodies are easier to write about than white ones, because we are used to representing them en masse with no identity or name, to seeing them as one suffering body not as individual subjects with a particular identity."³⁹

Two one-day conferences organized by the Italian Senate's Human Rights Committee under the title "A Moral Lesson: The Sin of Indifference. Europe, the Shoah, the disaster in the Mediterranean" in the early summer of 2015 are a further point of reference for Bassi.⁴⁰ The first event was held in Rome in the Palazzo Giustiniani, the seat of the Senate, while the second was held in Milan at Binario

of visual documents and their complex temporalities.

³⁶ "Cie Lampedusa, il video-shock del Tg2 indigna e scuote le coscienze," http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/immigrazione/2013/12/17/news/cie_lampedusa-73848222/; for responses to the footage which is now accessible on Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1c48pYG4yU>. The incident is analysed by Dines et al. "Thinking Lampedusa," 435.

³⁷ I would like to thank one of the anonymous readers of this article for reminding me of the different aims of what seems a similar practice. This difference underlines, however, the power of the visual to entangle quite distinct instances.

³⁸ Andrea Tarquini interview with Elie Wiesel, <http://www.repubblica.it/...122109689/>.

³⁹ Valeria Brigida, "Migranti, Catania, gli sbarchi, e i numeri," <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/...1769346/>.

⁴⁰ Gad Lerner, "Il peccato dell'indifferenza. L'Europa, la Shoah, la strage nel Mediterraneo," <http://www.gadlerner.it/2015/09/29/il-peccato-dellindifferenza-leuropa-la-shoah-la-strage-nel-mediterraneo>.

21, the city's memorial to the Shoah, located in the main railway station. In his opening address, the President of the Senate, Pietro Grassi reiterated the idea of the Shoah as a "unique event," even though the stated aim of the debate was specifically to explore the validity and value of making comparisons between the Shoah and the current situation in the Mediterranean. The conferences were inspired by an article written in 2009 by the journalist Gad Lerner where he gave his conditional approval to a piece in the Catholic daily *L'avvenire* comparing the two historical episodes. Lerner had argued that using the Shoah to provoke the reader to reflect on what was going on today constituted a "good use" of history. Lerner's argument was that the general feeling of "indifference" or willful ignorance which allowed the Shoah to happen might also be detected in attitudes towards people dying in the Mediterranean. This sense of indifference was the focus of Lerner's intervention in 2015. He specifically mentions fascist Race Laws and invokes the term "genocide" to demand a robust response to the deaths occurring off Italy's shores. "Indifferenza" is inscribed in large letters at the entrance to Binario 21.

In January 2015, on Holocaust Memorial Day, the *Istituto centrale per i beni sonori e audiovisivi* (Central Institute for Sound and Audiovisual Collections) hosted a commemorative event in Rome, "Push back and memory: from the Shoah to today." The event aimed to draw on the historical memory of the Shoah to create and promote an awareness of the inadequacy of responses to the current situation in the Mediterranean. Various groups representing people who had crossed the Mediterranean were involved including the "Truth and Justice Committee for the new Desaparecidos" named after Argentina's "disappeared" politicizing death in the Mediterranean through transnational association.⁴¹ Comparisons between the Shoah and migration are often interwoven with other references. The most frequently invoked parallel is the Middle Passage in which millions of black Africans died in the forced Atlantic crossing. Writing in October 2015, in memory of the sinking two years before, the commentator, Vittorio Vandelli conflates all three: "Migrant's Holocaust, the modern Middle Passage: do we really care?"⁴² He also references the Italian experience of Ellis Island as a means

⁴¹ See: <http://www.icbsa.it/index.php?it/792/respingimenti-e-memoria-dalla-shoah-ad-oggi>.

⁴² Vittorio Vandelli, "Migrants' Holocaust, the modern middle passage: do we really care?," <http://www.vittorio-vandelli.com/migrants-holocaust/>. As I have noted elsewhere, an entanglement with the Middle Passage has also been made in academic literature. By way of example see Cristina Lombardi Diop, "Ghosts of Memories, Spirits of Ancestors: Slavery, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic," in *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*, eds. Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (Routledge: New York, 2008), 162-180.

of rendering the migrants' aspirations and motivations intelligible to the Italian public.

These are only a few examples of the figurative associations drawing the Mediterranean crossing into networks of entanglement for which cultural memories of the Shoah provide an indispensable lexis. In what follows I will read two extended examples of this "rhetorical constellation" examining the work of Igiaba Scego, a contemporary novelist and journalist who writes on the memory of Italian colonialism, and Dagmawi Yimer, a film-maker whose experience of crossing the Mediterranean is strongly imprinted on his work. Their historically informed and politically urgent work is also intimately biographical.

Igiaba Scego: entanglements of place

Igiaba Scego is one of Italy's most prolific and high-profile writers, an active and well-established presence in the press and on social media. Her work interrogates postcolonial Italy and the absence of a robustly conscious and critical memory of the colonial past.⁴³ Her last three books have focussed on Rome, and in different ways are excavations of that colonial past which Scego reveals as always effectively present even when ostensibly invisible.⁴⁴ The first two books combine personal anecdote and historical reflection in different measure while the most recent volume is a work of historical fiction. Yet as I will show, the articulation of this colonial memory has a very particular and convoluted chronology and form across Scego's output; it has in effect its own microhistory of entanglement which alights on a memory of the Shoah after multiple detours which are themselves retrospectively illuminated by it.⁴⁵

The scene of Scego's entanglement is set in *La mia casa è dove sono* (My House Is Where I Am). This extended autobiographical essay is an exploration of Scego's affective attachment to Rome and to Mogadishu, the two cities which form her emotional landscape. She devotes one chapter to the Axum stela which had stood

⁴³ For an excellent introduction to Scego's earlier work see Piera Carroli, "Oltre Babilonia? Postcolonial Female Trajectories towards Nomadic Subjectivity," *Italian Studies*, 65/2 (2010): 204-218.

⁴⁴ Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010); *Roma negata: Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (Rome: Ediesse, 2014); *Adua* (Florence: Giunti, 2015).

⁴⁵ For a complex sense of Rome as the scene of Holocaust entanglement, see Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 86-108.

in Piazza Porta Capena since 1937, booty from Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia two years before. After years of protracted negotiation and logistical difficulties, the stele had been returned to Axum in 2005, and nothing had been placed in the square to fill the gap it left: "There is nothing in that spot today. A void."⁴⁶ Scego goes on to recount her family's own colonial history which she intertwines with the symbolism of that now empty space. Her chapter concludes with the wish that the space might one day be filled: "Every time I pass Porta Capena Square I am afraid of what might be forgotten. In that square there used to be a stele, now there is nothing, It would be great one day to have a monument to the victims of Italian colonialism."⁴⁷ Scego herself begins this work of commemoration as she interweaves the biographies of her grandfather and uncle with that history of colonial violence. She wonders about her grandfather's relationship to colonial Italy and his role as an interpreter close to Rodolfo Graziani, responsible for the forced internment of thousands of nomads in Libya in the early 1920s as well as the use of chemical weapons outlawed by the League of Nations in the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. In her account of the violence of Italy's colonial presence, she adopts a lexis which both anticipates the Shoah, but which invites her reader to infer a pre-history to the Nazi genocide. She uses the term "Lager" to describe the camps where the Italians had incarcerated and slaughtered the Libyan nomads, adding that these same "concentration camps" were set up in Ethiopia in the mid-1930s.⁴⁸ While a historical parallel is not bluntly stated, the "partial overlap" of memories created by a shared lexis invites connections to be made across historical difference.

In *Roma negata: percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (Rome Denied: Postcolonial Paths in the City), Scego more explicitly pursues the traces which Italy's colonial past has left on the urban fabric. The book starts however with another point of entanglement as Scego returns to Piazza Porta Capena. The emptiness left in the square by the removal of the Axum stele had been filled subsequently by a memorial to the events in New York of 11 September 2001. In 2009, two Roman columns were placed in the square to remember those who died. While the words of Gianni Alemanno, the then mayor of Rome, suggested to Scego the wish to commemorate victims of any kind of political violence, for her, the ongoing absence of any kind of monument to those who died in Italy's colonies clearly shows that "not every memory... is treated the same."⁴⁹ As a resonant example of

⁴⁶ Scego, *La mia casa*, 71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁹ Scego, *Roma negata*, 16.

this, Scego cites the fact that the Italian media remained silent about the historical link between Italy and Eritrea in their reports on the shipwreck of 3 October 2013. There was no acknowledgement that most of these people came from a former Italian colony. The “memorial pact” between Italy and the US, sealed by the columns in the square, has no postcolonial parallel.

3 October 2013 stands at the heart of Scego’s text, yet it is the particular tenor of Italy’s response to this loss of life that motivates her critical reflection on colonial memory which is the book’s true subject.⁵⁰ The scale of lives lost on that day provoked immediate and very public expressions of sympathy and condolence in the media from across the political spectrum. An initial proposal for a state funeral was quickly abandoned and those who died were buried in various cemeteries in Sicily. The survivors, still at that point mainly on Lampedusa, were not invited to take part; neither were they awarded the Italian citizenship conferred on those who perished.⁵¹ Government ministers as well as representatives of Afwerki’s repressive Eritrean government attended the official commemoration ceremony held in Agrigento, boycotted by the city’s mayor as well as by the mayor of Lampedusa. No memorial to the dead has ever been erected which Scego feels “would let Italy reflect and the Eritrean regime come to terms with its cruelty.”⁵² In contrast, Scego recounts an alternative funeral ceremony which took place outside Montecitorio, the Italian parliament. The funeral was part of a public protest against political responses to deaths in the Mediterranean. The crowd comprised of Italian activists and Eritreans from across Europe. Scego describes the two coffins carried in the procession: a large coffin inscribed with the number 369 and a smaller one to remember the children who had died in the crossing. An actress, playing the role of a drowned girl, recites in Tigrinya the suffering of the dead. Scego hears this voice as a call not to be forgotten: “the Eritreans took their funeral back.”⁵³

Taking possession of the management of death reverses the subordinate role afforded to postcolonial subjects in the domain of necro-politics.⁵⁴ Rosi Bradotti

⁵⁰ For a very full and nuanced analysis of the commemorations after October 3 see Gianluca Gatta, “Lampedusa, 3 ottobre 2013. Vita, morte, nazione e politica nella gestione delle migrazioni,” *Studi culturali*, 112 (2014): 323-332.

⁵¹ The affective burden of this exclusion is conveyed in a letter to the Italian people written by one of the survivors denied permission to travel to his brother’s funeral in Agrigento: “Lettera di Zerit, biologo marino: Al popolo italiano,” in *Bibbia e Corano*, 193-196.

⁵² Scego, *Roma negata*, 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁴ The term “necro-politics” is drawn from the work of Achille Mbembe who extends the idea of the “camp” to produce an analysis of the neocolonial management of demographic movement and

argues that the state's entitlement to manage death as well as life means that the loss of those who do not survive the journey across the Mediterranean is the consequence of a rigorous logic of national defence which depends on the dispensability of certain human lives. Theorizing this "disposable humanity" in terms of Agamben's "*homo sacer*," Braidotti invites her reader to infer the shadow presence of the Shoah in her reminder of the centrality of the camp to modern regimes of state power.⁵⁵ The Holocaust is barely mentioned in her book yet affirmative postcolonial responses to the inhumanity of racial categorizations inform her argument. The proximity of the Shoah and colonialism is evocatively suggested by a photograph given to Scego by the Italian Jewish writer, Giacometta Limentani. The photo, taken in 1937, shows Limentani as a ten-year old standing beside three *ascari*, indigenous soldiers from East Africa serving in the Italian army. The African troops were in Rome on the occasion of the first anniversary of Mussolini's declaration of Empire. Looking at the image, Scego is moved by its unbearable poignancy: "In that picture were four people who very soon would suffer the consequences of those awful race laws."⁵⁶ The text's memory of the past makes necro-politics of contemporary Italy palpable. Recalling the murder of two Senegalese men in Florence by a sympathizer of the racist far-right, Scego relates this to the growth of neofascism across Europe concluding: "the possibility of a holocaust isn't so remote."⁵⁷

The penultimate chapter of her book deals with a recent memorialization of Italy's fascist, colonial, and anti-semitic past. In 2012, the small town of Affile built a memorial to Rodolfo Graziani. Graziani had been nominated Viceroy of Ethiopia after the declaration of empire and the most brutal excesses of the Italian presence in East Africa are attributed to him. The monument, paid for by municipal funding, was controversial, receiving coverage in the international press. Graziani also had his advocates, locally and further afield, clearly demonstrating the unresolved nature of Italian colonial memory.⁵⁸ In a radio interview, Scego

death. His influential essay cited by Braidotti is: "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, 15/1 (2003): 11-40.

⁵⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 127.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 115. Gordon makes the point that from the late 1980s, there was an increased tendency to see the introduction of the Race Laws in 1938, rather than the Nazi deportations of 1943, as the starting point of the Holocaust in Italy. By anticipating the start date, Italians themselves become more tightly entangled in the narration and network of events: Gordon, *Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 101-102.

⁵⁷ Scego, *Roma negata*, 23.

⁵⁸ An extreme instance of this support is offered by the 'Associazione Culturale Maresciallo d'Italia Rodolfo Graziani,' <http://www.rodolfograziani.it>. The breadth of the organization's ambition and activities need to be studied as an alternative articulation of counter-memory in their own

entangles Graziani in the events of October 1943 in Rome and the rounding up [*rastrellamento*] of the city's Jewish population.⁵⁹ On 7 October, Graziani, at that point Minister of Defence in Mussolini's Republic of Salò, ordered the disbanding of the Carabinieri, Italy's military police, which had become hostile to the regime. Over 2000 were deported to camps in Germany. It is widely believed that his action facilitated the mass deportation.⁶⁰ Acutely attentive to the lexical legacy of the Shoah, Scego had earlier contested the comments of Matteo Salvini, the virulently anti-immigration right-wing politician, who advocated the "*rastrellamento*" of migrants in Milan 2010, in the wake of, what he perceived as, civil disorder.⁶¹ Although Salvini swiftly retracted the term, Scego returns the word inexorably to October 1943 insisting that the memory of the "*rastrellamento*" and of what it then led to, still inhere in the term, and demand to be justly remembered.

In *Adua*, Limentani's photograph is credited in the Acknowledgments as a source of the novel's inspiration, and the unbearably poignant anticipation of what was still an unimagined catastrophe. Scego translates the image into a subplot in the novel. When Zoppe, a Somali translator working in Rome under Fascism, is arrested and is being beaten in prison, he recalls the white Jewish family with whom he had made friends. Davide, Rebecca, and their young daughter Manuela only ever appear in the novel as a kind of memory or fantasy. In particular, he is haunted by Rebecca's growing anxieties about the rising anti-semitism. After he returns to Africa, she appears to him one final time, anxious and unconvinced by her husband's increasingly desperate patriotic claims: "He never stops talking about his father who died at Vittorio Veneto, or his uncle Nathan's gold medal."⁶² There is also a fleeting mention of the proposal to relocate Italy's Jewish population to the Empire.⁶³ At this point, she disappears never to return.

right.

⁵⁹ "Beautiful Minds" in compagnia in Igiaba Scego, 'Broadcast July 5, 2013, <http://www.radiocafoscari.it/archivio/beautiful/beautiful130705.mp3>.

⁶⁰ For an account of events of that day see Anna Maria Casavola, *7 ottobre 1943: la deportazione dei Carabinieri nei Lager nazisti* (Rome: Studium, 2008).

⁶¹ Igiaba Scego, "Il peso della parola," <http://www.unita.it/commenti/igiabascego/il-peso-delle-parole-1.49013>.

⁶² Scego, *Adua*, 85.

⁶³ For a discussion of the plan to resettle Jews in Ethiopia, see Richard Pankhurst, "Plans for Mass Jewish Settlement in Ethiopia (1936-1943)," *Ethiopia Observer* 15 (2005): 235-245. Also available at <https://tezetaethiopia.wordpress.com/2005/04/20/plans-for-mass-jewish-settlement-in-ethiopia-1936-1943br-smallby-richarch-pankhurst/>.

Zoppe's memory of the Limentani family occurs at a moment of extreme physical violence and unjust incarceration. His daughter, Adua, is the novel's other main character. Her name and the book's title recall the battle of 1896 when Ethiopian troops defeated the invading Italian army. Part of Mussolini's plan to conquer Ethiopia was to avenge that defeat. In fact, Adua became a fairly popular girl's name in Italy as a result. Scego's Adua occupies an ambiguous space in postcolonial Italy; an aspiring actress she ends up in soft porn films in predictable Black Venus roles. The novel's layered temporality alternating between the colonial voice of Zoppe and the postcolonial perspective of his daughter is made strikingly contemporary through her marriage to Ahmed, or Titanic as she calls him, a much younger Somali man who had survived the crossing to Lampedusa. As a result, the Jewish family which befriends Zoppe in the 1930s is entangled in the same "rhetorical constellation" which captures Ahmed some 80 years later.

Dagmawi Yimer: audio-visual entanglements

In *Adua*, Scego translates the photograph given to her by Limentani into a family of ghosts which haunts Zoppe, the colonial subject in Rome. Her translation of the familiar lexis of the Shoah into the register of the postcolonial is destabilizing, or multidirectional, in that no single historical event or experience is given priority. For Scego, language is a site of memory, and indeed a practice of commemoration or memorialization, but also of hurt and damage. At the end of Scego's novel, Ahmed leaves Adua, offering her a digital camera as a parting gift: "Now you can film what you like, and talk about yourself any way you want."⁶⁴ Adua, who had been cynically exploited as a black actress, is now in possession of the technology of visual representation and self-narration. The novel ends at this point, but a very similar intersection of self-representation and digital technology informs Dagmawi Yimer's work as he like Scego follows through the entanglements of Italian colonial memory and contemporary migration with the Shoah, albeit in a different medium and modality.

Dagmawi Yimer arrived in Italy in July 2006, rescued by Italian coastguards after the boat he was travelling on across the Mediterranean sank. Born in Addis Abeba, Dagmawi left Ethiopia for political reasons and spent months crossing the Sahara desert to reach Libya and get to Europe.⁶⁵ After enrolling on a video filmmaking

⁶⁴ Scego, *Adua*, 174.

⁶⁵ For a full account of the journey, see Dagmawi Yimer, "Da Addis Abeba a Lampedusa: Cronaca

course in Rome, he has gone on to produce a number of short and full-length documentary films. His first long film, *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008) co-directed with Andrea Segre and Riccardo Biadene, exposed the brutality of Libya's treatment of migrants and the EU's complicity in that brutality. He also appeared in front of the camera recounting his own experience and recalling explicitly Italy's colonial links with Ethiopia. In his later *Soltanto il mare* (2010), Dagmawi returns to Lampedusa to meet the island's residents and, in a particularly charged scene, thanks the coastguards who rescued him.⁶⁶ The film self-consciously includes shots of Dagmawi filming, underlining the authorial source of the camera's gaze. It also includes news footage taken of his arrival on Lampedusa, at that point an unknown and unnamed face amongst so many others, part of an aesthetic of anonymous migrant dejection, reminiscent of that shown on *Famiglia Cristiana*'s cover page. The inclusion of the news footage does more than simply recall Dagmawi's arrival in Italy, which in itself would be of little more than curiosity value. Its potency lies in the fact that it registers the measure of Dagmawi's transformation, not merely as a migrant who has successfully assimilated, but as one who now is able to take charge of the medium of visual representation. In a fascinating biographical essay, the Ethiopian American writer, Maaza Mengiste describes Dagmawi as someone "who tells his story freely, but cannot seem to speak it without a subdued voice, as if the terror has left a permanent scar."⁶⁷ Dagmawi's impairment, she suggests, has been offset by his work as a film-maker: "Using his camera as a voice, Dagmawi Yimer is now helping others share what had once been unspeakable."⁶⁸

di un viaggio," in *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici. Attraversamenti di memorie, identità e confini nel Corno d'Africa*, eds. Uoldilul Chelati Dirar, Silvana Palma, Alessandro Triulzi Alessandro Volterra (Rome: Carocci, 2011), 335-352.

⁶⁶ For more detailed analysis of Dagmawi's career to date especially in relation to *Soltanto il mare*, see Simona Wright, "Lampedusa's Gaze: Messages from the Outpost of Europe," *Italica*, 91/9 (2014): 775-802; Federica Mazzara, "Spaces of Visibility for the Migrants of Lampedusa: The Counter Narrative of the Aesthetic Discourse," *Italian Studies: Cultural Studies*, 70/4 (2015): 449-464; Aine O'Healy, "Imagining Lampedusa," in *Italian Mobilities*, eds. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Hom (Routledge: New York, 2016), 152-173.

⁶⁷ Maaza Meghiste, "The Madonna of the Sea," <http://granta.com/the-madonna-of-the-sea/>.

⁶⁸ Underpinning my discussion of Dagmawi's commitment to testimony and his ethical reluctance to rely on the representation of the human body as evidence are the debates around Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985): see Sue Vice, *Shoah* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). An increasing interest in the transnational and transversal dimensions of visual representation of the Shoah is seen in work such as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture in the New Millennium* eds. Axel Bangert, Robert S.C. Gordon, Libby Saxton (Oxford: Legenda, 2013).

The attempt to find a language for experience which exceeds the limits of language has been an ongoing challenge in the representation of the Shoah. Yet equally as compelling has been the ethical imperative to find ways of bearing witness to the experience of it. In a short essay in the volume accompanying *Come un uomo sulla terra* in which he describes how he kept a diary assiduously during his journey from Ethiopia, Dagmawi reflects on his ethical commitment to witnessing:

Apart from my wish to leave a testimony, I thought that there was a great moral obligation to speak about what we had experienced: reveal the truth of what happened to try to save anyone still undergoing all that violence and discrimination.⁶⁹

Dagmawi's sense of duty to the past is matched by a commitment to future memory in ways which invite comparison to Primo Levi's sense of duty and purpose. The determination to bear witness has been a constant in his work along with an attentiveness to the risks inherent in representation. In late 2015, he was invited to direct a short film by "Redani – Network of the Black African Diaspora in Italy" as part of their initiative against the use of morally exploitative images of African children by NGOs in their fund-raising campaigns.⁷⁰ This campaign critiques the effects of images not dissimilar to the one on the cover of *Famiglia Cristiana*. For Dagmawi, the duty of testimony also demands discretion. In an article published in the Italian daily, *La Repubblica*, in early May 2015, shortly after the catastrophic shipwrecks in which more than 1,000 are estimated to have lost their lives Dagmawi expresses an unwillingness to attempt an account of his journey's full horror: "My duty is to remember those who drowned. Out of respect there is only one part of our journey which I won't talk about. The final part. The sea." He recollects in great detail the hardships of the journey by land, undertaken in impossibly cramped conditions. He concludes the story by remembering those who had already lost their lives at sea and also their names whose meanings ironically seemed to have promised a better future. Saying these

⁶⁹ Dagmawi Yimer, 'Il mio diario non è scomparso', in *Come un uomo sulla terra*, eds. Marco Carsetti and Alessandro Triulzi (Rome: Infinito, 2009), 103-105. The essays in the volume contain italicized references throughout to "sommersi" as well as to the Middle Passage and Guantanamo.

⁷⁰ For details of the campaign and to access the video see <http://ancheleimmaginiuccidono.org>. Barbie Zelizer has written of the "repeated aesthetic" through which images not of the Shoah recall the Shoah by virtue of their closeness to "the familiar Holocaust aesthetic." The potential loss of specificity in repetition is the corrosive underside of cultural "shorthand": *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 221.

names aloud has an incantatory force: “Although the bodies they belonged to are no longer here, those names still exist on account of the fact that they have been spoken aloud”⁷¹

The attention to naming as a mode of commemorative representation recalls the Shoah Victims’ Names Recovery Project, one of the core activities of Yad Vashem. It is also central to the work of the Holocaust Memorial Trust which encourages naming as a potent strategy for countering the anonymity of numbers.⁷² In Dagmawi’s work, names are ghosts. Their commemorative power is celebrated in *ASMAT: nomi per tutte le vittime in mare* (*ASMAT: Names in Memory of All the Victims of the Sea*), the seventeen-minute film he directed to remember those who died on 3 October.⁷³ The piece was commissioned by the “Comitato 3 ottobre,” an NGO set up with the specific aim of having that date declared an official day of remembrance and welcome. In a short commentary on the film, Dagmawi writes:

The film’s images create a space for these names without bodies. Names laden with meaning even if their meaning is difficult to grasp completely. We are obliged to count them all, name them one by one so that we might comprehend how many names have been severed from their bodies, in a single day in the Mediterranean.⁷⁴

The film explores precisely this separation of body and name through aesthetic choices which represent the unrecoverable corporeal loss of the not-to-be-forgotten dead. These choices not only represent their absence and mourn their loss, but also present an alternative aesthetic to the spectacularization of the abject African body familiar from standard media representations. The first half of the film is a mixture of animation and footage of the sea and seabed which may disorientate the spectator as the moving handheld camera doesn’t allow for any

⁷¹ Dagmawi Yimer, “Mediterraneo,” *La Repubblica*, May 3, 2015.

⁷² See <http://hmd.org.uk/page/names-people-murdered>. Shaul Bassi’s comments on the iniquity of using numbers to identify migrants are accompanied by the call to collect individual names and stories as a counter.

⁷³ Both Italian and English versions of the film are accessible on Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/114343040>; <https://vimeo.com/114849871>. For a reading of the film which places it in the “rhetorical constellation” of Albanian migration to Italy in the 1990s and practices of commemoration around the sinking of the *Kater I Rades* in 1997, see Daniele Salerno, “Stragi del mare e politiche del lutto sul confine mediterraneo,” in *Il colore della nazione*, ed. Gaia Giuliani (Milan: Mondadori: 2015), 123-139.

⁷⁴ The full text is available at <https://vimeo.com/114849871>.

single angle of vision. The opening sequence showing calm water painted in a bright blue hue and the dark outline of an island in the distance is accompanied by a woman's voice humming and singing. There is an abrupt cut to underwater scenes and choppy waves. The camera pans in on a stylized drawing of a boat with a jump cut to a close-up of the blackness of the hold. The camera again pans across watercolour paintings of people, embracing or with arms outstretched attempting to swim to the surface.⁷⁵ A further cut takes the spectator to a drawing of a broken boat on the sea floor. A slow animated sequence of people standing with the upper half of their bodies covered with shrouds is followed by actual footage of the same. The soundtrack to this sequence alternates between the sound of gently lapping waves and the music of a single instrument which accompanies the female voice. She commands the spectator to listen to the collective "cry" of the migrant. Her singing merges into a ferocious spoken indictment of the culpability of African leaders and the indifference of European politicians, proud of the values of Western civilization. The use of the second person plural "voi" form gives way to a more tender invocation of the island of Lampedusa itself, a beacon of hope for those crossing from Africa. The families of the dead are exhorted to call out their names in remembrance. Before the female narrator begins the work of reciting each name, she speaks a few lines over animated images of the shrouds denouncing the longevity of what is often portrayed as an exceptional moment of crisis. Two points in particular are forcefully made. "We are more visible dead than alive" indicts a culture of reception fixated on those who never reach European soil [*Fig. 2*]. As mentioned above, Italian citizenship was conferred on those who drowned on 3 October while the survivors were interned. The reminder – "we existed even before October 3rd" – similarly critiques a cultural and political response unable to acknowledge the life both of the dead and of those who survived. This disavowal is integral to Braidotti's "necro-politics."

⁷⁵ The artwork is by Luca Serasini and is taken from an unfinished graphic novel produced in commemoration of October 3, <http://www.lucaserasini.it/migrantes>. The images recall graphic underwater footage shot on the sunken boat. Now widely available online, the footage clearly shows images of the dead including that of a couple locked in an embrace https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XP6jsW9NNI. Serasini cites also the underwater sculptures of Jason deCaires Taylor as a source of inspiration <http://www.underwatersculpture.com/sculptures/overview/>. The underwater sculpture park he created off the coast of Grenada contains figures which evoke memories of the Middle Passage although the artist is reluctant to pin his work to a single referent.



Fig. 2: ASMAT: the visibility of the dead (detail)

Dagmawi Yimer, ASMAT - Names in Memory of All the Victims of the Sea

<https://vimeo.com/114343040>



Fig. 3: ASMAT: names (detail)

Dagmawi Yimer, ASMAT - Names in Memory of All the Victims of the Sea

<https://vimeo.com/114343040>

Dagmawi's decision not to rely on photographic representations of either the living or the dead is an incisive intervention in contemporary practices of

photojournalism and film-making.⁷⁶ The second half of the film is taken up by the recitation of the names of all those who died on that day. Many of the names are accompanied by the literal translation of their meaning. In addition to hearing the names, the spectator sees them hurtle directly towards her; the Tigrinya script adding to the unfamiliarity of the experience [Fig. 3]. The recitation of the names is a deliberate strategy to remember those who died and to displace that memory from mere statistical enumeration. Translating the meaning of each name deepens the existential and cultural roots of each life. Judith Butler ponders the relevance of the name in her discussion of the ethical parameters of the Abu Ghraib images of abused Iraqi prisoners.⁷⁷ The names of the perpetrators of the abuse became familiar in the media, but Butler makes the point that those of the victims were withheld:

Do we lament the lack of names? Yes and no. They are, and are not, ours to know. We might think that the norms of humanization require the name and the face, but perhaps the “face” works on us precisely through or as its shroud, in and through the means by which it is subsequently obscured. In this sense, the face and name are not ours to know, and affirming this cognitive limit is a way of affirming the humanity that has escaped the control of the photograph.⁷⁸

Butler makes the point that in this particular instance the photographer is wholly complicit in the scene. A different complicity entangles the Turkish photographer Nilufer Demir whose images of the Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, who drowned on 2

⁷⁶ Dagmawi’s work may be productively aligned with that of the contemporary artists focussing on postcolonial Africa analysed by Demos in *Return to the Postcolony*. These artists share a similar engagement with, and critique of, the image as document. Demos also works with the notion of “entanglement”; his understanding of the concept is drawn from Achille Mbembe with its emphasis on temporality and subjectivity. Demos’s conclusion is worth quoting at length as it offers a potentially provocative placement of both Dagmawi and Scego in terms of their artistic practice: “the postcolony shows itself as a temporal entanglement comprised of continuities and discontinuities, overlapping histories and unacknowledged presences. One major accomplishment of the art considered [in *Return to the Postcolony*] is that it proposes aesthetic meditations that pursue these historical linkages and interlinked geographies to critical ends,” 158-59. Demos develops the notion of “entanglement” mapped out in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁷⁷ As Gordon has noted, Agamben’s argument that the camp has been central to modernity is foundational to how both Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are understood. Questions of visibility are also common to both: Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 138.

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 95.

September 2015, resonated across the world. The most widely reproduced picture showed the boy being carried away by a rescue worker, his lifeless body shielded from the camera's gaze.⁷⁹ The campaigning Italian journalist Fabrizio Gatti responded by making available on his blog hosted by the major Italian journal *L'Espresso*, images taken by a Libyan journalist shown with no narrative discretion the bodies of children who had drowned off the coast of Zuwara in late August 2015 when two boats capsized.⁸⁰ Alan Kurdi's name became a cultural shorthand for the war in Syria while the children on the beach in Zuwara remain largely unknown and unnamed. In a roundtable discussion at the United Nations in May 2016, Maaza Mengiste spoke about the "deception" generated by Alan Kurdi's image which moved those who saw it, but did nothing to register the physical damage and emotional horror caused to those dying, named or unnamed, in such conditions. Yet naming matters:

If your body cannot be named then it is just a corpse. It is a corpse that is less than human, it is a thing. While this thing waits to be claimed, you will become something else in this world: you will be called Missing. There is no ritual for mourning the unclaimed. There is no paying of respects for unmarked graves. While your body is thrown into a shallow grave and marked with a number, the you that is attached to a name, the you that now lacks a body, will have simply disappeared from this earth. You will become one of the disappeared, "*gli scomparsi*." You were here and now you are not.⁸¹

Mengiste implicitly returns us to Butler's "ungrievable lives" and to the aftermath of 3 October, yet she asserts her conviction that the dead must be humanized by returning directly to Primo Levi and his determination to communicate beyond the horror he experienced. She refers specifically to *The Drowned and the Saved*, and the chapter, "The Grey Zone" where Levi explores the necessity and the risk

⁷⁹ Igiaba Scego contrasts the wide distribution of images of the horrific massacre at the university campus in Garissa with the discretion shown to victims of comparable events in the West: "Nessuno si è sognato di fotografare quei corpi senza vita oltraggiati dalle pallottole. E anche se qualcuno lo avesse fatto sarebbe stato giustamente linciato sui giornali," <http://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2015/04/05/garissa-campus-kenya-massacro-non-volevo-vedere-quella-foto>. The conscious choice of the term 'lynching' used in reference to the US adds to the rhetorical constellation of affect. Just as black bodies are less identifiable than white one, they are also subject to different regimes of representation: "Death is rarely seen in ragged human remains unless they are foreign": John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 129.

⁸⁰ Available at: <http://gatti.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it>.

⁸¹ The text of Mengiste's talk can be found at <http://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/primolevi-at-the-un/>.

of understanding the world's tangled complexity. For Levi does indeed talk about "entanglement" – what he refers to as a "*groviglio*" – and how it threatens to render the world unintelligible. Menghiste endorses his determination to work through the entanglement, a commitment inherent to the projects of Scego and Dagmawi.

Ethical entanglements

As I noted earlier, both Rothberg and Chow are deeply engaged in tracing the forms of entanglement that memory assumes. Paul Gilroy does similar work in his study of the Black Atlantic, a study which ends on a compellingly entangled reading of Levi and Toni Morrison:

How are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes which though they may be traceable back to one distant location, have been changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement through networks of communication and cultural exchange?⁸²

The traceable displacement I want to end on underlines the ethical purchase of the entanglements proposed by Igiaba Scego and Dagmawi Yimer and relates to its staging in one particular site. When Levi returned to Auschwitz in 1965, he was taken aback at, and essentially unmoved by, the site which had been turned into a monument, a museum, "something static, tidied up, meddled with."⁸³ On the other hand, a visit to Birkenau, where he had never previously been, produced an "feeling of violent anguish." Totally unreconstructed, the site remained devoid of any trace of aesthetic intervention or improvement. Since its inception, Binario 21, the memorial in Milan station, has functioned as a very active space of commemoration, not only to the Shoah but to other instances of mass slaughter. The site has also given space to the testimonial voices of the marginalized and persecuted. Yet a different form of intervention took place there between June and November 2015, when *Binario 21* offered overnight accommodation to

⁸² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Yale University Press, 1993), 80.

⁸³ Primo Levi, "Appendice," to *Se questo è un uomo*, in *Opere*, ed. Marco Belpoliti, (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), I, 170-201; 184-185. For an extended discussion of Levi's attitudes to, and engagement with, Holocaust museums see Nancy Harrowitz, "Primo Levi and Holocaust Tourism," in *Primo Levi: The Austere Humanist*, ed. Joseph Farrell, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 203-214.

approximately 5,000 refugees, mostly just passing through Milan, as they travelled onwards to a destination in northern Europe. Working with the City of Milan authorities, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic charitable body, as well as a large number of volunteers, *Binario 21* became a site of action in, and on, the present. It provided migrants with shelter, food, and clothing, and put on a range of cultural activities including the gathering of testimonies from those eager to pass on their stories. One of these activities required everyone to trace the outline of their hand on a large piece of paper and write their name on it [Fig. 4]. This corporeal and graphic act of self-inscription, of presence, defies the presumed anonymity of the migrant. The symbolism of the hand gestures towards the resignification of the forced finger printing introduced by the Italian government to identify and process migrants.⁸⁴

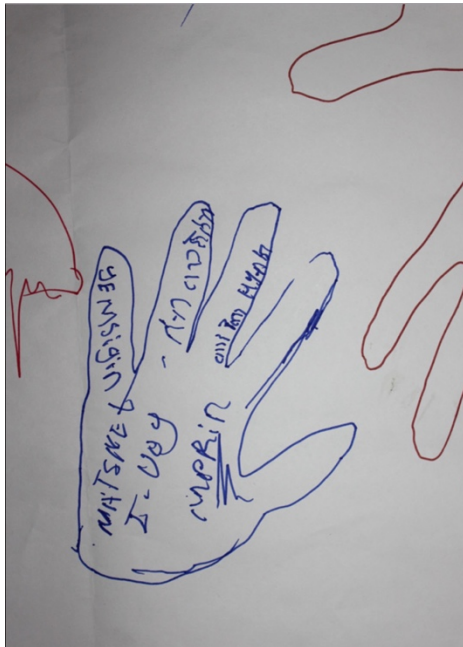


Fig.4: *Binario 21: self-inscription*

Anna Chiara Cimoli and Stefano Pasta have suggested that the activities in the

⁸⁴ Proposals for compulsory finger-printing have been controversial. One of their most vocal opponents has been the Italian Jewish intellectual Amos Luzzatto. In 2008, for example, he explicitly denounced the initiative to finger-print all Roma children as “ethnic profiling,” a return to the racism of his childhood. Italy he claimed is a nation “which has lost its memory”: Amos Luzzatto, “C’è un segno razzista timbrati ed esclusi come noi ebrei,” <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/06/26/luzzatto-un-segno-razzista-timbrati-ed.html?ref=search>. The entanglements of visual, bodily, and mnemonic inscription are integral to my argument here.

Memorial represent a “new chapter in civic positioning,” a particular “entanglement” in which the still very new space of *Binario 21* negotiates in relation to the pressures of the present day, but with a clear memory of the past.⁸⁵ Reflecting on the ambiguities of the representational strategies of Christian Boltanski, who has used documents such as photographs to complicate rather than confirm matters of historical record, Brett Ashley Kaplan focuses on the determining potency of affect rather than fact.⁸⁶ The networks of entanglement worked through by Scego and Dagmawi are held in critical counterpoint by the intensity of an intensely felt past. The Shoah haunts Scego’s postcolonial perspective, and ghosts Dagmawi’s strategy of testimony: through their work both contribute to the contemporary modality of civic engagement practiced at *Binario 21* through their production of historically textured memories.

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url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=384

⁸⁵ Anna Chiara Cimoli and Stefano Pasta, “Il ciclo di vita della memoria: I profughi al Memoriale della Shoah di Milano: rappresentazione, rotte, cartografie possibili,” *Roots/Routes: Research on Visual Cultures*, 6/21 (2016), <http://www.roots-routes.org/?p=16228>.

⁸⁶ Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure and the Holocaust*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 108.