

Naming the Unknown, Witnessing the Unseen: Mediterranean Ecocriticism and Modes of Representing Migrant Others

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Abstract

In continuity with the theoretical explorations of Mediterranean Ecocriticism, this essay deals with modes of representation of "migrant others." Often de-personified and reduced to statistical data, these "invisible" migrants are in fact parts of a larger ecology, where the fates of humans and nonhumans are interlaced, prompting deep ethical questions. Such invisibility is challenged by the many artists, writers, filmmakers, and thinkers that bring the migrant question to the center stage of their work, suggesting that the only response to the dehumanization of migrants is the humanization of nonhumans caught in the same predicaments of borders and violence. The essay includes an analysis of Jason deCaires Taylor's submarine artworks and of the documentary *Asmat*, "Names," by director Dagmawi Yimer.

Keywords: Mediterranean ecocriticism, migrants, artistic representation.

Resumen

En continuidad con las exploraciones teóricas de la ecocrítica mediterránea, este ensayo explora los modos de representación de los "otros migrantes". A menudo despersonalizados y reducidos a datos estadísticos, estos migrantes "invisibles" forman de hecho parte de una ecología más amplia, en la que se entrelazan los destinos de seres humanos y no humanos, planteando profundas cuestiones éticas. Esa invisibilidad es cuestionada por numerosos artistas, escritores, cineastas y pensadores que presentan la cuestión de los migrantes en el centro de su trabajo, sugiriendo que la única respuesta a la deshumanización de los migrantes es la humanización de los seres no humanos atrapados en los mismos problemas generados por la violencia y las fronteras. El ensayo incluye un análisis de las obras de arte submarino de Jason deCaires Taylor y del documental *Asmat*, "Nombres", del director Dagmawi Yimer.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica mediterránea, migrantes, representación artística.

In submarine silence, their eyes closed, a group of thirteen people navigate, packed on a raft. Corals and undersea organisms grow on their bodies, caught in the same territorial suspension of a motionless journey toward an undefined future. Not far from them, more human bodies are braided together, circularly heaped as if by the swirling

force of strong oceanic currents. Caressing the waves from below, these sculpted figures, each one with their individual face, mark a presence that is neither only human nor totally marine. Schools of fish, seagrass, and microplastic float with them, in a geography whose coordinates and painful matter are regulated elsewhere, through systems of power that absorb human life and ecologies.



The Raft of Lampedusa, Lanzarote, Spain

Fig. 1, Jason deCaires Taylor, *The Raft of Lampedusa*, Lanzarote, Spain (Source: The Artist's Website, used by permission)



Human Gyre, Lanzarote, Spain

Fig. 2. Jason deCaires Taylor, *Human Gyre*, Lanzarote, Spain (Source: The Artist's Website, used by permission)

Titled *The Raft of Lampedusa* and *Human Gyre*, these powerfully ecopoetic compositions are two underwater sculptures by the British artist Jason deCaires Taylor. Sites where political discourse and coral reef can grow together thanks to human creativity and non-toxic materials, deCaires Taylor's creations denounce the inhumanity of global migratory politics and the drifting practices of modernity. As we read on the artist's website, "the underwater context allow[s] an atmosphere of otherworldly reflection." "Otherworldly" is a powerful word. The worlds in which we live, in fact, are composite—they are *other* to one another and in themselves. However, if otherness is a founding category of this multiverse, the "other"—whether or not a human other—is oftentimes suppressed or made invisible, materially or symbolically left to drown in the interstices of a modernity that awaits decolonization.

In deciding to open our four-handed piece with these densely evocative artworks, our aim is that of pointing to the directions, emerging topics, and potentialities for "otherworldly reflection" that "thinking with the Mediterranean" (Chambers and Cariello) can disclose for ecocriticism. Like deCaires Taylor with his artworks, in fact, we believe that an ecocritical immersion in the Mediterranean can produce a "sea change" in our perspectives and discourses, prompting representations of phenomena and natures that challenge our understanding of the world's coordinates (Verdicchio, "Migration, Environment, Representation").

Conversant with "blue humanities" (Mentz, "Blue Cultural Studies") and the "oceanic turn" (Alaimo, DeLoughrey), "Mediterranean Ecocriticism" first appeared in a special issue of *Ecozon@* in 2013. It incorporated themes and concepts from postcolonial and Mediterranean studies, and developed from the same intellectual atmosphere that had produced material ecocriticism (which also first appeared in *Ecozon@* in 2012).¹ The underlying idea was less to add another flag to the chart of ecocriticism than to reconsider the material imagination of this Southern "sea in the middle of the land." The goal was to reflect on the conceptual landscape that a "Mediterranean thinking" could contribute to ecocriticism, starting with the "in-betweenness" of the geographical entity itself: "a contested land-space that can be specified by a watershed, a climate, a zone of cultivation of certain plant species, or the countries that define its borders; but also a sea, a crossing" (Past, "Mediterranean Ecocriticism" 368).

Faced with this complexity, Mediterranean ecocriticism was an articulation of two major points: 1. The ontological concept of hybridity, a multilayered and protracted *métissage* of natures, climates, biomes, geopolitics, languages, and cultural traditions; and 2. The ethical reframing of the "other"—all the "others" whose bodies are exposed to the power of life-threatening elements, international regulations, and the "necropolitics" (Mbembe) of new colonialisms and violent border regimens.² An important factor of the

¹ See *Ecozon@* 4.2, special topic issue on *Mediterranean Ecocriticism* guest-edited by Serenella Iovino. On material ecocriticism's "programmatic articles" in *Ecozon@* see Iovino and Oppermann, and Iovino, "Steps to a Material Ecocriticism."

² On the questions of border, and on Lampedusa as an "iconic site within a wider geography of border control" see Mezzadra and Neilson, "Lampedusa."

discourse was the necessity to also debunk romanticized visions inevitably leading to new kinds of Orientalism (“Mediterraneanism”), and to reorient the ecocritical imagination toward the amphibian mode of a “synecdoche” of land and sea (Westphal; Cassano), deconstructing the primate of terrestrial discourse (Mentz, *At the Bottom*).

Since the publication of that special issue, the conversation on Mediterranean ecocriticism, especially in connection with Italian Studies, has been enriched by important contributions, such as those by Elena Past (“Mediterranean Ecocriticism,” *Italian Ecocinema*), Pasquale Verdicchio (“This Nostrum,” “Migration, Environment, Representation”), and Massimo Lollini (“The Wisdom”). Increasingly, however, the issue of migrations has taken center stage in this horizon.³ By definition a nodal point in the ecology of migrations across land and sea for both human and nonhuman beings, the Mediterranean emerges indeed as the biopolitical proscenium for the tragic aspects of these displacements, embodied by people from Africa, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries who, fleeing conflicts, poverty, oppression, and environmental emergencies in their homelands, try to relocate their lives in new spaces. A huge number of these people, however, will never arrive in these “new spaces,” either because they will die during the journey, or because they will never escape the “geography of border control” which is at the same time “a geography of violence and abjection where the ‘human’ is continuously tested, worked upon and reframed” (Mezzadra and Neilson, “Lampedusa” 229).

In a time when ecocriticism is hardly imaginable without reference to matters of environmental justice, postcolonial studies, elemental materialism, more-than-human biopolitics, trans-corporeality, and trans-locality, these issues demand to be conceptualized, in order to embrace wider ecological perspectives. Reading human migrants and their life parables in conjunction with the fates of nonhuman beings could provide this discourse with very useful keys and categories. This has been proposed by Serpil Oppermann in her introduction to the *ISLE* special issue on “Migrant Ecologies.” Expanding on Donna Haraway’s iconic statement, “Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (“Anthropocene, Capitalocene” 160), Oppermann reminded us that “becoming refugee is almost inevitable for the nonhuman whose life is irretrievably altered and survival is contingent on migrating.” Speaking of migrants, she asserted, means to consider not only human subjects, but also “the stories of nonhuman animals caught in the same crises,” such as the gazelles at the Turkish-Syrian border or the penguins in Manly, Australia (Oppermann 4-5). The ecology of migrations, Oppermann concluded, is about “multispecies communities” which depend closely on the chains of “interrelated economic and political activities that trigger environmental changes” (5).

This predicament of politics, environments, and living beings is the necessary key to every discourse on migration, whether the focus falls on humans or other species. Yet, to see the subjects of this predicament and the links between them is not always easy. The main reason for this is that the political discourse on migration is, in many cases, instrumental to reinforcing the exclusionary practices and policies at work in Europe as

³ See *ISLE* special issue on “Migrant Ecologies in an (Un)Bordered World.” For the issue of migration in film studies, see O’Healy.

well as in the rest of the world. Here, too, the fate of nonhumans and that of people is characterized by a shared invisibility—an invisibility that often involves issues related to climate change and ecological crises. Breaking the silence on the human component, therefore, can draw more attention to the wider ecological dimension of this discourse.

Borders, Representations, and Perspectives

The Mediterranean's ecosystems and geopolitical situation make it a dramatic meeting point of environmental decline and migration in all its multifaceted manifestations. As a territory that is “full of refugees, human and not, without refuge,” it offers a declining set of potential refuges that require a shift in perspective, in order to understand not only the causes of migrations in these areas, but also how we might begin to manage their outcomes. It is extremely important to draw attention to the nonhumans who live trapped within the borders of violence and control that define the maps of migrations, inside and beyond the Mediterranean. At the same time, however, the hostility of such “necropolitics,” and the tensions over mobility and border-crossing derive from the ways these “masses of dispossessed people, profoundly heterogeneous in their composition, heading towards Europe” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 230) are seen and represented. Guilty of “challenging [Europe] to account for its imperial past” (230), migrants are located in a “geography of violence and abjection” (229). In this at once biopolitical and perceptual sphere, migrants are not only often de-humanized, as the example of the “Calais jungle” clearly suggests. They are also de-individualized, transformed into statistical data or bargaining chips for transnational agreements, and deprived of the borders of their own subjectivity.

Other borders are at stake here. In their recent *La questione mediterranea* (2019), Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello emphasize the importance of acknowledging that “Mediterranean migrations extend borders and border conflicts within Europe. The traces of (national, institutional, ethnic, and other kinds of) frontiers forcing people to mass migration are now displaced within Europe, where they are more visible than ever” (34; our translation). Viewing the Mediterranean in this manner, via the perspective of maps traced out by migrant routes, forces us to update our images of Europe's relationship with the world. The collapsing of borders which is resulting from human migrations suggests a parallel collapsing of ecosystems, and the nonhuman migrations that these engender in turn. Perhaps, however, while we redraw international borders, and gain a different comprehension of their historical effects and intentions, we continue to lack a modality for grasping migrating entities, individually or as part of a larger community of loosely related individuals. Again, our struggle is with modes of representation, of understanding and communicating that which the bodies of migrating beings suggest in their act of migration, but cannot themselves express. The stories conveyed by these bodies are lost in the nameless data of deaths, signposted as stains on maps that identify the locations and numbers of migrants who have perished in the Mediterranean.

The need to re-individualize these people, while at the same time stressing their mutual belonging with the “otherworldly” marine environment, itself caught in the ecology of migrations, is at the core of the compositions by Jason deCaires Taylor described at the beginning of this article. The migrant *other* in his artworks is not only a necessary interlocutor. He or she also has a face: a singular, recognizable individuality. Building a bridge between Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics and contemporary biopolitics, deCaires Taylor invites us to behold “*le visage d’autrui*” as an embodied, specific, and affective subjectivity—offering a key to unlock the abstractions that shape the geographies of power.

The elemental immersion of these artworks, shaped by waters, other animals, and polluting substances, is also a metaphor for an ecological gyre that envelops everything, from climate to life. Therefore, individuality here is not synonymous with “particularity,” but denotes the concreteness of these presences, which are at the same time unique beings and universal symbols.

Another meaningful ethical-artistic response to this challenge is *Asmat*, by Ethiopian filmmaker and activist Dagmawi Yimer. With its apparently simple title (“Names”), the short film, dedicated to the “memory of all sea victims,” carries the date “Lampedusa, 3 October 2013”—a day that marks what at the time was the single most numerous drowning incident of migrants in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean in order to reach Europe (Yimer 2014). *Asmat*, however, is something more than a simple commemoration (Verdicchio 2018). Yimer’s film emphasizes the invisibility of people whose deaths seem only a momentary distraction, a soon forgotten addition to the statistics, within the swirl of world events. The drowned become part of a submerged and unknown mass that slides out of our collective consciousness, sometimes even displaced by other refugee crises deemed more important according to national interests and international relationships. Hardly ever spoken of outside of Europe, the Mediterranean migrations from the African continent receded even further when the world turned its attention to a Middle Eastern influx of refugees into Northern Europe. The hauntingly beautiful images of Yimer’s film find effective support in the visual representation of names in Amharic script, very likely those of the drowned, rising from the sea-bottom, accompanied by their recitation, to fill the screen. It is a challenge to anonymity that, by its process of naming, consolidates the victims within our frames of conceptual knowledge even as it declares difference. Like deCaires Taylor’s insistence on giving the victims of shipwrecks individual faces, Yimer’s assignation of names to unknowns who remain unseen requires us to shift toward a different sort of epistemology, one based on the acknowledgement and initiation of an unconventional relationship with the invisible. (Leaping to a nonhuman parallel, another filmic scene comes to mind: in Paolo Sorrentino’s *The Great Beauty* (2014), “the Saint” (Giusi Merli)—a Mother Teresa-like nun—meets a group of migrating flamingos on the protagonist’s rooftop at dawn. After a moment of mystical intimacy with the birds, she reveals that she knows each of their

individual names.⁴ Stressing the singularity of these living beings, this act, too, challenges the anonymity of all migrants.)

In its shifts, rejections, abandonment of territories, and dangers of death, the parable of all these lives also suggests a movement toward *rarefaction* and *extinction*. While these words are usually reserved for nonhuman species only, they imply a similarity of fate and unrecognized loss in this situation. While we might understand the first term as the diminishment of the migrants' status as humans physically, materially, and in relation to our ethical response to their plight, *extinction* refers to the literal disappearance of individuals in large numbers. Yet, behind each and every one of these "numbers," there is a singularity, a face—and a destroyed potential, a future that will not happen. This is a common feature in every loss. Emphasizing this aspect, Deborah Bird Rose writes: "extinctions are the result of many, many individual deaths, each one of which matters, and many of which may have no future at all, ever" (145). Trying to braid together lost names and bodies, *Asmat* asks its viewers to consider how we might respond to the representation of the apparently incorporeal identities and voices, the sometimes partially visible countenances or portions of bodies, and veiled forms that give shape to the names as they rise to the surface. The fact that faces remain covered is symbolic of the impossibility of ever fully retrieving these drowned singularities and all the prospective life they carried in themselves: with the loss of their names and faces, their future is also lost. They are beings that will "have no future at all, ever."



Fig. 3 "Il mio riscatto..." still from Asmat (used by permission of D. Yimer)

⁴ On Sorrentino's ecocinema, see Past, "Thinking."



Fig. 4 “Names” still from *Asmat* (used by permission of D. Yimer)

Translating individual faces and names into universal figures of loss, deCaires Taylor's sculptures and Dagmawi Yimer's *Asmat* are two examples of how art can transform the violence suffered by single people into a narrative of extinction. As with nonhuman extinctions, the real challenge is to find ways to visualize the magnitude of the loss, this is something that cannot be left to the flat idiom of statistical data. As Rose's words point out, what is lost is something more than single, countable, individuals. In his book on extinction Thom van Dooren calls “flight ways” the multitude of unpredictable possibilities that every living being “ties together” in the layers of time it carries in itself: “not ‘the past’ and ‘the future’ as abstract temporal horizons, but real embodied generations—ancestors and descendants—in rich but imperfect relationship of inheritance, nourishment, and care” (27-29). All these deaths—nonhuman as well as human—unmake futures.

Possible futures materialize in the lives and predicaments of those who arrive safely. “Flight ways” emerge from the migrants' adaptive capabilities in societies that see them as imposing invaders, forcing them to abandon their most intimate cultural traits, and expecting total assimilation. However, the legion of beings who perish on their migratory journey are not empty spots on a chart, but “a veritable garden of ghosts” (Gan et al., G65): a territory in which losses, like scars in our landscapes, remind us of the painful genealogies of our present and of how these will determine our own “flight ways.” Their invisibility is challenged by the many artists, writers, filmmakers, and thinkers that bring the migrant question to center stage of their work, suggesting that, perhaps, the only response to the dehumanization of migrants is the humanization of nonhumans caught in the same predicaments of borders and violence.

By showing how human and nonhuman natures and the singularity of the beings of which they are made up challenge the “necropolitics” of colonialisms and violent regimens, artists such as deCaires Taylor and Yimer invite us to “think with the

Mediterranean.” Their work is a prompt to see the ghosts and the multiple natures of the drowned and surviving migrants, reintroducing their concrete presence not only in our oceans, but also in our ecologies of mind.

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