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Contentious Crossings: Struggles and Alliances for Freedom of Movement across the Mediterranean Sea

We are drawn to borders, not because they are signs or elements of the impossible but because they are places of passage and transformation. Relationship depends on the mutual influence of identities, be they individual or collective, and requires each identity to be distinct and independent. Relationship does not mean confusion or dilution. I can change by exchanging with the Other and still not lose or distort myself. That is why we need borders, not as places to stop at, but as the point at which we may exercise that right of free passage from the same to the Other; savour the wonder of here and there.

—Edouard Glissant, *Drawing Lines in the Sand*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*,
November 2006

A Closing Sea

The Mediterranean Sea is closing down. Once again, Europe has managed to outsource the task of border control, and the human rights violations that always accompany it, to its neighbors. The few NGOs that still strive to conduct search-and-rescue operations are criminalized and the precarious passengers they take onboard are denied disembarkation. With each group of illegalized migrants that is intercepted and pulled back to Libya or Turkey, or left stranded at sea for days, we get closer to the end of a sequence of turbulence that began in 2011. It was then, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, that migrants succeeded in prying open the previously tightly sealed liquid frontier.

The South Atlantic Quarterly 118:3, July 2019
DOI 10.1215/00382876-7616200 © 2019 Duke University Press

The Mediterranean has long been the terrain of a *mobility conflict*, in which European (empire-)states' efforts to impose a regime of highly selective and unequal mobility clash with a freedom to move that is continuously seized by migrants from the global South. This regime of uneven mobility has emerged in tandem with European imperial expansion and the consequent transformation of the Mediterranean into a "colonial sea" (Borutta and Gekas 2012; Clancy-Smith 2011). Illegal migration over sea only became a structural and highly politicized phenomenon, however, at the end of the 1980s. Only then, in conjunction with the consolidation of freedom of movement within the EU through the Schengen Agreement, did officials begin increasingly denying citizens of the global South visas (Düvell 2008). With the Europeanization of migration policies, a truly European "color line" was institutionalized, as the populations who were excluded from accessing European territory were marked out along a matrix of race and class. However, the perpetuation of the systemic conditions underpinning migrants' movements toward Europe—the need for migrant labor, global inequalities, and existing migrant networks, as well as the illegalization of certain forms of migration—has displaced its operation into an increasingly clandestine form, in particular by crossing the sea on overcrowded vessels (De Genova 2013). In an attempt to control the Mediterranean, which represents the extremities of European space and has been transformed into a vast frontier zone, European coastal states, joined by Frontex (the European border management agency) and a growing range of international military operations, have deployed a vast array of militarized bordering practices and techniques to contain and channel migrants' movements. Crucially, since the early 2000s, the EU has increasingly outsourced border control to authoritarian regimes in North Africa so that they contain the migrants seeking to travel from their shores, a task which they perform in exchange for funding, military equipment, and advantages in other forms of political and economic cooperation with Europe (see Schwartz and Stierl's contribution in this issue). These policies have never more than temporarily succeeded in stemming migrants' crossings. For every route that got sealed off, several new ones—often longer and more dangerous—were opened. Migrants paid a heavy price for their persistence: more than thirty thousand migrant deaths at sea have been recorded since the end of the 1980s, turning the Mediterranean into a liquid grave.¹ Those who arrived safely on EU territory faced precarious legal conditions, relegated to the limbo of the asylum-seeking process or being made to join an illegalized labor force, included through their very exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012).

Through these combined measures, the EU seemed to have succeeded in sealing off each of the main routes along its external border by 2009, temporarily pacifying a major fault line of the world system. Given the activity on the Mediterranean at the time, it would seem as though a major fault line of the world system had been stabilized. However, it was only the calm before the storm. The “delayed defiance” of the Arab uprisings, which constituted a moment of rebellion against “domestic tyranny and globalized disempowerment alike, now jointly challenged beyond the entrapment of postcolonial ideologies” (Dabashi 2012: 18–19), opened a sequence of unprecedented defiance against the European border regime itself.

By toppling or destabilizing the authoritarian regimes in North Africa that had served as the pillars of Europe’s policy of externalized border control, these popular uprisings (and the foreign military interventions that accompanied them in the case of Libya) also made the European border regime vacillate. In Tunisia, migrants took advantage of the power vacuum to seize the freedom to move, which the Ben Ali regime had denied them in tandem with the EU (see Bellingeri’s essay in this issue). The counterrevolutionary turmoil that spread in Libya and Syria further triggered large-scale population movements across the region. The arrival of illegalized migrants on European shores, and their onward movement across European space in contravention of the Dublin regime, according to which the first country of arrival should be responsible for processing asylum requests, became another major source of European conflict and disintegration after several years of “debt crisis” and punitive austerity policies. The processes and contexts connected by migrants’ unruly movements since 2011 reveal the contours of a *Mediterranean Spring*, with uprisings against authoritarianism and neoliberalism spilling over the sea’s southern and northern shores, and brought closer by migrants’ transgressive crossings of the liquid frontier. “If it happens,” the Observatorio Metropolitano of Madrid wrote in 2011, “the European revolution will have begun in North Africa” (quoted in Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 308).

Migrants’ capacity to overcome European borders peaked in 2015, when Syrians crossed the Aegean to Greek shores and marched across European territory toward more wealthy states such as Germany and Sweden. This peak, however, also signaled the beginning of a violent rollback. In the name of preserving the neoliberal peace in Europe against further infighting and preventing the further rise of the far-right that has threatened “extreme center” governments in several states, EU institutions and member states desperately attempted to re-impose policies to control migrants

trajectories. These policies reached far beyond the Mediterranean frontier, subjecting those already within EU territory to new regimes of control. In the process, the EU once again banked on the authoritarian regimes in the Mediterranean's southern shores that had survived the revolutionary turmoil. Just as revolution and migration went hand in hand—as Marta Bellingeri underlines in her contribution in this issue—so have the political order and borders of the counterrevolutionary restoration. As we write at the end of 2018, Mediterranean crossings are overall at their lowest since 2013.

Resisting Solidarities

It is not only migrants, however, who are being expelled from the sea. The sequence that began in 2011 also saw activists hailing from different political traditions transform the peripheral space of the sea into a central space of political struggle, inventing new strategies and tactics to contest the violence of borders and support migrants' in their unruly mobility and struggles. We have attempted to sustain and be part of that process in the context of a project called "Forensic Oceanography."² In collaboration with a wide network of NGOs, lawyers, scientists, journalists, and activists, we have produced maps, videos, visualizations, and human rights reports that attempt to document and challenge the ongoing death of migrants at sea.³ By forging new tools for the documentation of violations, we have sought to support human rights NGOs that have fought through strategic litigation to block violent state practices; the underground solidarity networks of No Border activists, which have been extended across the sea through civilian emergency phone lines such as the Alarm Phone (see Schwartz and Stierl's essay in this issue); and European citizens and humanitarian organizations, which have deployed an unprecedented rescue flotilla. Notably, European citizens have had no monopoly over solidarity at sea, as the activities of Tunisian fishermen described by Bellingeri demonstrate. However, in order to impose the roll-back of the border regime, European states have criminalized solidarity both at sea and on land. At this moment, only a handful of rescue NGO boats are still able to continue their rescue activities at sea, leaving a free hand to the operations of violent containment through outsourced border control.⁴

As a result of these trends, the illegalized migrants who nevertheless continue to attempt crossing the sea face an ever greater risk of dying. Those who succeed in landing on European shores continue to be used by the far right to channel the deep resentment of populations in post-crisis Europe, and to translate its exclusionary drive into electoral gain. The rise of the

far-right, in turn, has created a climate in which a growing number of racist attacks have been perpetrated with impunity. Meanwhile, the level of precarization and exploitation experienced by migrants is only heightened. These hard times demand multiple forms of resistance, which are being courageously enacted by migrants and activists alike across Europe. We have only to think of the *Diciotti* standoff in the heat of the summer of 2018, when more than one hundred fifty migrants who were denied disembarkation from an Italian coast guard ship in the Sicilian port of Catania mustered the courage to go on a hunger strike to protest their captivity, even after spending months and even years in detention in Libya (Brodie 2018). They were encouraged by the cries of thousands of Sicilian activists who gathered in the port in solidarity, until they were eventually released. We are also inspired by the launch of a new disobedient rescue operation, *Mediterranea*, initiated by a left-leaning platform in Italy, which has explicitly formulated its project as an act of defiance toward Italy's far-right government (Hardt and Mezzadra 2018). Several other exemplary practices and initiatives are evoked in the contributions gathered here.

The Entangled Politics of Freedom of Movement: Beyond “Us” vs. “Them”?

In this moment of violent roll-back, which hardens the expressions of state borders and social boundaries alike, we are convinced that forms of immediate resistance should be accompanied by renewed strategic thinking and geared toward a broader horizon of transformation. *How do we define and even prefigure our political horizon in the present political conjuncture? How can we create the alliances to advance toward it? Under what conditions can migration struggles become the engine of a broader project of political transformation operating across different forms of boundaries?* These are some of the questions that concern us most at present, and which we share with many of our fellow researchers and activists, including those we have brought together for this section of *Against the Day*.

The urgent need to resist state violence is often foregrounded in the migrant solidarity movement, and for good reason. But as a result, alternatives to the current exclusionary migration regime are too often left rather undefined and simply regarded as the absence of state-sanctioned violence imposed through border controls. The focus on state borders and policies in turn risks occluding the role borders play as a political technology used to govern and hierarchize racialized populations and labor, and leaving the sys-

tem of domination and exploitation in which borders are embedded unchallenged (Walia 2013). Abolishing state borders or border control would be insufficient to enable migrants' full exercise of their freedom to move and to pursue life aspirations as long as their bodies continue to be channeled toward capitalist regimes of exploitation and encountered the disseminated social boundaries of race and gender. Furthermore, the focus on state borders risks reinforcing the split between different subject positions (such as citizen vs. illegal migrant), thus making even more difficult the possibility of seeing commonalities and forging alliances across those divisions. As a contribution to working through the difficulties—in terms of not only practical realization but also ambivalences, even antinomies—entailed by forging an alternative horizon, we have begun to reflect, with our colleague Maurice Stierl, on what we call the *politics of freedom of movement* (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2019).

While certainly not discarding the focus on state violence—the effects of which are all too perceptible—this approach involves taking as its starting point the multiform constraints encountered by migrants along their entire trajectories, from their countries of origin to their elusive destinations, so as to point to each one of these as a potential site of struggle. As the contributions gathered here allow us to see, the struggle towards freedom of movement starts with the unauthorized movement of migrants and demands that one seek to contest, block, and undermine *all* the bordering practices that are deployed in the aim of governing not only migrants' movements, but also their very existence.⁵ In addition, from this perspective, border struggles are inevitably articulated in terms of a broad range of practices and demands on other levels, which might not always appear directly related to the practices and demands surrounding migration and borders. These include anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist struggles, the environmental justice movement, struggles directed against uneven development and neoliberalism to counteract the undoing of social citizenship, and those based on the forging of new alliances, such as those between migrant and non-migrant workers for better labor conditions. The need to weave these entangled struggles together resonates with the intersectional politics pioneered by black feminists that emerged out of the realization that the forms of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality “weren't separate in our bodies,” as Angela Davis (2016: 19) put it, and, as such, could not be separated in terms of struggles. But it is also increasingly necessary to interweave these struggles due to the proliferation and heterogeneization of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) that create more and more divisions between varieties

of “us” and “them,” pitting people against each other and precluding the emergence of broad oppositional movements. Weaving these multiple struggles together is essential both to enabling migrants’ *movement*, in a kinetic sense, and to building a broad political *movement* seeking to achieve progressive change in the field of migration and beyond.⁶

In this special section of *SAQ*, we have brought together researchers and activists to account for and reflect upon some of the most inspiring struggles against the European border regime. Each contribution offers unique insights into a complex and changing field of struggle. They illustrate the ambivalences activists must navigate and the alliances they are building to forge movements fit for the present conjuncture. Importantly, each essay adopts a reflexive stance on the difficulties and limits of activists’ respective practices, not to lament them, but to sharpen their positioning. While not all contributions engage with activism at sea, they are all connected to the Mediterranean, which has remained the main front line where the migratory movements of the populations of the global South have faced off with the restrictive policies of European states. The Alarm Phone project (Schwarz and Stierl) exemplifies the vivacity of the forms of struggle as well as solidarity with migrants crossing the sea. The intense crossings in the western Mediterranean—between Morocco and Spain—that the project has supported shows that despite the current roll-back, the liquid frontier is far from pacified. However, each of the articles also ventures onto firm land, connecting migration and borders to broader emancipatory struggles—such as the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East (Bellingeri), but also regimes of exploitation—as in the role of housing and welfare for asylum seekers in the reproduction of precaritized migrant labor in southern Italy (Brodie). Importantly, they underline the intersection of the violence of state borders with that of the social boundaries of gender—as in the case of trafficked women in Italy (Rigo and De Masi) and race—as exemplified by the mobilization of black communities across Europe against the resurgent forms of slavery in Libya (Gabriell).

Our own work has mainly focused on the crossing of the sea by illegalized migrants as a fundamental space-time of violence but also of subjective transformation. The Mediterranean is a space of transition through which women and men with complex life stories are turned into “migrants” to be treated as victims or exploited as a dequalified labor force. Crossing the sea is also a collective experience which forges new bonds and identities, to which the hundreds of videos taken during the maritime crossing and then posted

on social media (especially by North African youth) attest. In these, we can see and hear collective defiance and hopeful trepidation expressed in songs and jokes. These many “*Mediterranean Passages*” (Portelli 1999) carry a distinct echo of the process of subjection and subjectification that characterized another infamous maritime passage, that of transatlantic slavery. As Hortense Spillers (1987: 72, quoted in Mawani, forthcoming) has noted, “those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity. . . . [They were] thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that ‘exposed’ their destinies to an unknown course.” This passage should not be understood merely as a phase in a longer voyage, but rather “as a concept—the structuring link between expropriation in one geographic setting and exploitation in another” (Rediker, Pybus, and Christopher 2007: 2). While the differences with contemporary migration across the Mediterranean are many, we draw inspiration from the important perspectives on the “Black Atlantic” in underlining the centrality of the maritime crossing. At the same time, we emphasize the multiplicity of other moments of violence and transformation that precede, follow, and exceed the maritime crossing, so as to point to many sites of struggle. What the contributions in this issue underline is that if the state borders and social boundaries that striate both land and sea and shape migrants’ entire trajectories are deeply intertwined, then the struggle for freedom of movement must also involve a multiplicity of *contentious crossings*. In this sense, the multiple crossings that characterize migrants’ contemporary trajectories and struggles, enacted both through individual practices and collective movements, seem to us essential. Taking them as point of departure, we may give flesh and meaning to the politics of freedom of movement but also undo the boundaries in our subjectivities and struggles that are policed through border enforcement. It is not only “migrants” who need to cross borders, but those who seek to act in solidarity with them. As with the feminist struggles carried out by Non Una di Meno (see Rigo and De Masi in this issue),⁷ which considers migrant trafficking as yet another manifestation of male violence against women, Italian and migrant alike, through crossings, we “forge transversal relations across a multiplicity of borders” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 308) from which *common struggles* emerge. It is perhaps through these multiple crossings that the borders that have become the tools and sites of lethal mobility conflicts can cease to be a “sign or elements of the impossible” and become more fully, in the words of Edouard Glissant, spaces of “passage and transformation.”

Notes

- 1 See the list of migrant deaths at the European borders established by UNITED for Intercultural Action: <http://unitedagainstredeaths.eu/about-the-campaign/about-the-united-list-of-deaths/>.
- 2 For an overview, see Hinger 2018.
- 3 See for instance: <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>.
- 4 For the connection between the criminalization of NGOs and outsourced border control see our *Mare Clausum* report (Heller and Pezzani 2018).
- 5 This vision, as we acknowledge more fully in the article quoted above, is of course deeply indebted to several traditions of thought and practice, including the Autonomy of Migration (Mezzadra 2004) and No Border perspectives (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009).
- 6 The polysemy of the term *movement* has been underlined by Angela Mitropoulos and Brett Neilson (2006).
- 7 For more on Non Una di Meno, see Montanelli 2018.

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