



Force Fields between Libya and Italy: Camps, Air Power and Baroque Geopolitics Challenging the Geography of the Mediterranean

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Abstract

From 1911 to 2011, the Mediterranean space between Libya and Italy has been the scenario of crucial historical events: the colonial war and the anti-colonial resistance, the decolonization, the rise of Gaddafi's regime, his banishment and rehabilitation, finally his fall and the securitization of the Mediterranean passage. Through an historical ethnography of the postcolonial pact between Libya and Italy (oil-for-borders), with a particular focus on the role of migration management, on the relationship between internal borders and aerial spaces and on the colonial genealogy of humanitarian camps, I would suggest that the current grammars of exclusion and of subversion within the Mediterranean do not respond to any binary (neo)colonial logic. Many different subjectivities are fragmenting and relocating borders and the Mediterranean appears as a multi-crossed political space able to shape the relation between the countries that lie on its shores as well as the representation of the past.

Keywords

Colonization - Border - Camp - Drones - Migration

(Neo)colonial wars and postcolonial perspectives

From 1911 to 2011 the Mediterranean was the scenario of major processes of colonization and decolonization; nevertheless, Italy still seems to consider Libya as a sort of colony. After the downfall of Gaddafi's regime, Italy continued to claim a leading role in the international community's plan to bring stability to the country, fallen into political chaos since the military intervention of 2011, still tormented by civil war and secessionist trends. Over the past years, Libya has almost been disintegrated: two separate conflicting parliaments and governments, two parallel armies, police and security structures emerged. On December 2015, the UN Security Council voted and unanimously approved Resolution 2259 to end the civil war; under its auspices, on January 2016, a new government was created (the Government of National Accord) led by Fayeze Sarraj, with the aim of restoring the unity of the country, steering it out of armed conflict and reuniting the split sovereign institutions. As Sarraj seems unable to rule without the support of the Western countries, Libya is likely to be "stabilized"

again thanks to a new military intervention of the international community. As various other nations, Italy has never hidden its designs on the Libyan treasure, one of the largest oil and gas reserves on the planet (European Council 2016; Proglione 2016; Negri 2016).

On 14 February 2016, Angelo Panebianco, the renowned Italian columnist of *Il Corriere*, in regard to the possibility of a military intervention to support Libyans against the rise of the Islamic State in their territory, reiterated that political unification could be achieved only through cannons and that Italy should have a leading role, due to the historical relations between the two countries (Panebianco 2016). A month later, Italian Minister of Defence Roberta Pinotti said that under no conditions would Italy accept a military intervention in Libya without a request by a legitimate government: support from Italy in military training or surveillance of sensible targets but also in other kinds of operations, such as raids against the enemy positions, nevertheless, could not be excluded (Valentino 2016). The Minister's efforts to prepare the public opinion to a new war on the other side of the Mediterranean seemed to respond to Panebianco's concerns; more broadly speaking, her declarations were totally consistent with several and long-term attempts by the Italian governments to re-legitimize a kind of colonial relationship with Libya. Many scholars have pointed out clear evidence of neocolonialist attitudes among Italian politicians, together with signs of removal of the colonial past from national consciousness. However, if we look back at the relationship between Italy and Libya – particularly at the centrality gained by migration issues since the end of the Nineties – we could reject the idea that colonial relations can be re-established *tout court*. Even the idea of the “colonial memory repression”, one of the main topics of Italian post-colonial studies, has exhausted its heuristic role, as it focuses on the former colonizer's processes of construction of the past and does not take into account the role of the former colonized and other subjectivities in reformulating, moving, breaking up and replacing the old colonial conflict.

I would propose to recast, from a postcolonial perspective, the aforementioned narratives: on the one side, I would suggest, current biopolitical devices of population management can be dated back to the Mediterranean colonial past; on the other side, new forms of political and social resistance are continuously emerging within the same Mediterranean space. It would be worth, in this sense, to look at «border as method» (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), which means to take a critical perspective on borders, not described only as means of oppression, exploitation and securitization, but rather as complex social institutions (Vila 2000), marked by a tension between reinforcement and crossing practices, that «manifests itself in border struggles» (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 9-13). In other words, I am addressing «the conflictual determination of the border» (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 13), in order to point out that the current

grammars of exclusion and subversion in the Mediterranean space do not respond to any binary (neo)colonial logic (North/South; colonizers/colonized; dominants/subalterns). Rather, the area between Italy and Libya represents a “borderscape” where practices, performances and discourses «instrumentally use the border to affix a dominant spatiality, temporality, and political agency» and then to challenge its meaning «between belonging and non-belonging» (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007, xx-xxi). My aim is to emphasize to what extent migration, war and colonial rule have shaped the edges of a space – both historical and geographical, imaginary and empirical – while, at the same time, continuously challenging them. In the following paragraphs, I will focus, first, on the postcolonial pact between Libya and Italy, dealing in particular with the conflictual construction of the past and the role of migration management; I will then address the relationship between internal borders and aerial spaces, to point out the relocation of the colonial border and the fragmentation of the juridical European space.

Oil for border

After the Second World War and the British Military Administration, the Kingdom of Libya obtained from Italy the payment of 2.750.000 Libyan lire, as a contribution to the economic reconstruction of the country, in exchange of the guarantee to protect the resident Italian citizens' estates. As soon as he came to power in 1969, Muammar Gaddafi disavowed the agreement and ordered the expulsion of the Italian former colonizers and their descendants as well as the confiscation of their goods. Despite this act of vengeance and the country's reputation as a “rogue state”, Italy has always been Libya's main trading partner while Gaddafi continued to ask for a “grand gesture” to overcome the wounds of the colonial past. In 1998, for the first time, an Italian government apologized for the «suffering caused to the Libyan people as a result of the Italian colonization» and declared its intent to «remove as far as possible its effects and to overcome and forget the past». (Dini and Mountasser 1998). Concretely, Italy committed to build infrastructures; to implement development projects; to clear landmines left behind during WWII and to build a specialized medical centre for people wounded by mines; finally to return «all manuscripts, artefacts, documents, monuments and archaeological objects stolen by Italy, during and after the colonization» (Dini and Mountasser 1998). By virtue of the application of the joint statement, the Great Jamahiriya would have had no more grounds for dispute or controversy concerning the past. In 1999, Massimo D'Alema was the first Western Prime Minister to visit Libya after the suspension of sanctions by the UN, thus vouching for the rehabilitation of Gaddafi and his new position against terrorism. D'Alema also returned the Venus of Leptis Magna to Libya, subtracted by fascist governor Italo Balbo and then donated to Goering, and paid tribute to the monument to the Libyans killed

in the first Italian-Turkish War. On 15 February 2006, Italian Minister Roberto Calderoli was shown on Italian television wearing a T-shirt on which the Danish cartoons satirizing Mohammed and the Islamic religion were printed. Two days later, in Benghazi an angry crowd protested outside the Italian Consulate: the Libyan police reacted by firing on demonstrators, killing 11 people. On that occasion, Gaddafi declared that it was the lack of compensation by Italy for victims and damages caused by the colonial domination to unleash the wrath of his people. After eight years of negotiations and meetings, finally in 2008 Rome and Tripoli signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that would become the legal framework for a special and privileged bilateral cooperation. The Treaty referred to the «deep bonds of friendship between the two peoples» and their common intention to strengthen peace and security in the Mediterranean region. In order to close down the «painful chapter of the past», Italy undertook to implement infrastructure projects in Libya for an amount of 5 billion US dollars in 20 years to be entrusted to Italian companies. Cooperation in other domains, from the scientific and cultural fields to energy and defence, was also foreseen and an Italian-Libyan Friendship Day, to be celebrated on August 30, was established. Gaddafi landed in Italy for his first State visit on 10 June 2009; on the lapel of his military uniform he had attached a picture of Omar al-Mukhtar, hero of the anti-Italian resistance. During the Arab League summit in Sirte, in 2010, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi greeted Libyan leader Gaddafi kissing his hand, an image picked up by media around the world that caused accusations against the Italian government of submitting to a dictatorial regime.

The use of the colonial past as political blackmail was not an isolated initiative of the Libyan leader. Trying to debunk the Western obsession with Gaddafi, it would be worth rather to look at this history also from the point of view of Libyan people. According to historian Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, the 1969 revolution was not «an anomaly» as in Western journalists' view, «but firmly rooted» in the hinterland society «with their pan-Islamic culture, kinship autonomous organizations, fear of the central state, and mistrust of the West based on bitter colonial experience under Italy» (Ahmida 2005, 72-4). Gaddafi just rearticulated those popular feelings, turning the memory of the anticolonial resistance into a revolutionary “down-to-earth” ideology and building the Jamahiriyya [state of the masses] as a populist modern state (Ahmida 2005, 72-4). As a consequence of the resentment over the colonial period, Italy was often forced to politically support its former colony, in order to safeguard its economic interests.

If being a *rentier* state did actually enable Libya to raise the stake, at the same time we could be emphasised the way the Treaty of Friendship subverted the classical theories of colonialism. On the one hand, the Treaty seemed just to confirm the colonial division of roles between dispensers of technology and capital and land owners and

unskilled labour providers; on the other hand, for the first time, this division of roles appeared as the consequence of a conscious stance by the former colony concerning the counterpart of the exchange (Capussotti 2009). The new era of “friendship and cooperation” was based on the power to negotiate from both parts in the frame of a radically changed geopolitical scenario. The postcolonial pact achieved by the Libyan *rais* in the Nineties was, ultimately, an oil-for-compensation-and-border pact: the Italian apologies were exchanged with the safeguard of the Italian economic interests and Libya’s involvement in border surveillance. As a space of transit for migration flows originating in different areas of Africa and Middle East, Libya could establish a new kind of relation with the EU, not based on mere allegiance to its dictates, but rather on the power to negotiate foreign investments. The country’s involvement in the EU migration management demonstrates the complexity of the postcolonial border, externalized and dispersed everywhere (Balibar 2003), also affecting in multiple ways the same European juridical space it aims to protect, turning it into a fragmented space (Ong 2013) where the clear boundaries of the colonial world (Fanon 2007) blur and become hypertrophic.

After the so-called Arab Springs, the Berlusconi government declared the state of emergency in order to manage the exceptional flow of citizens from North Africa. This was only the last step of a process of “surmediatization” of the sea passage of migrants transiting in North Africa that «feed the actuality with spectacular and tragic images» while «the strong natural and symbolic opacity of the obstacles (the largest desert in the world and the sea) gives the impression of an inexorable wave» of a «migratory pressure which always draws farther in the South of the world and always projects farther to the North» (Bensaâd 2011, my translation). In the global present, we are used to dealing with images of displaced populations, mostly migrants and refugees, forced to leave their countries and homes. The obsessive representation of these people in mediatic and political discourse has the (intended) effect of giving the impression of a “surplus humanity”, an inexorable displacement without any solution but their internment in a sort of camp (Rahola 2003).

If many scholars have recently stressed the fact that the camp-form – both in its 20th century version of concentration or prison camps and in the most recent model of the refugee camp, humanitarian camp or identification camp – has its roots in the colonial era (Picker and Pasquetti 2015; Rahola 2001), I would like to address the specific Mediterranean genealogy of a security device, to use Foucault’s words, extensively used in the European migration system. To start we can consider that in the joint statement of 1998, as *sine qua non* condition to overcome the colonial past, Libya asked for Italy’s cooperation in the search for Libyan deportees and a «material and moral» recognition for their descendants and for the Libyan people. The statement referred to one of the bloodiest episodes of Italian colonialism, occurred during the

conquest of Tripoli in 1911, when Italian troops were captured and killed in Sciarra Sciat by the Turkish-Libyan forces; the Italian commanders responded with a series of massacres of Libyans civilians and with the deportation to the penal colonies of Tremiti, Ustica, Ponza and Favignana of the thousands of Libyans who escaped death in the harsh retaliation (Del Boca 1988, 109-15). Many deportees died during the trip or because of cholera and other epidemic diseases in the caverns near the sea where they were placed. A few survivors could return home in 1913 (Salerno 2005 113-20; Malgeri and Hasan Sury 2005). In the last phase of the occupation of Libya, the campaign of “pacification” carried out in Cyrenaica against the anti-colonialist forces – what an historian called the «blackest page of Italian colonialism» (Salerno 2005, my translation) – the Egyptian border was closed with a 10 meter-wide grid to prevent the passage of supplies while almost the entire population of the so-called “rebel” zones was transferred to concentration camps, in order to dismantle any liaison or support between fighters (Bono 1991).

Given the massive use of “detention camps” for defeating the anti-colonial resistance, it is remarkable that the landmark rapprochement between Italy and Libya was reached in the same year of promulgation of the so-called *Turco-Napolitano Act*, the law that established, for the first time in Italy, the use of detention centres for the administrative crime of “illegal” immigration. The fact the two events were somehow connected is proved by the agreement between the two countries signed in 2000, which identified the battle against “illegal migration” as a priority (Accordo Italia Libia 2003). Only a few years later, the *Bossi-Fini Act* (2002) confirmed the possibility of the expulsion of “irregular” migrants (possibly escorted to the border) and their internment in Centri di Permanenza Temporanea [Temporary Detention Centres] for up to sixty days. In order to implement the law, the Accordo Italia-Libia was ratified in 2003, so ensuring the total closure of the Libyan illegal immigration routes and providing various «forms of technical cooperation between the two countries» (Accordo Italia-Libia 2003), among which the financial contribution for the construction of detention centres in Libya, for technical equipment and for the charter flights for the repatriation of illegal immigrants stranded in the North African country (*La Repubblica* 2003). In 2004, after the withdrawal of the EU embargo on Libya, the Italian Parliament provided the possibility for the Ministry of the Interior to finance the construction, in third countries, of «structures aimed to contrast irregular migration flows of population toward the Italian territory» (Law 271/2004), without any reference to the respect for the minimum standards of detention or for the principles of the Geneva Convention. Even before the Treaty, therefore, the cooperation between the two countries in this field was causing tragic effects: the details were revealed only in the spring of 2005 in the report by the European Commission Technical Commission, which ascertained that since 2003 Italy had financed detention

camps for illegal immigrants in Libya along with a program of charter flights for their repatriation to their home countries, including those, such as Eritrea, ruled by notoriously illiberal and repressive regimes. The report mentioned arbitrary arrests and detentions, overcrowded camps with insufficient food, mass expulsions, lack of the minimum guarantees of defence (European Commission 2005; *La Repubblica* 2006). Only three years later a new Treaty would be signed in order to build a control system of the Libyan borders, to be entrusted to Italian companies with the necessary technology skills, along with regional and bilateral agreements with the countries of origin of migration flows.

Beyond analogies and differences between the confinement of colonial populations that marks the whole history of the Western expansion and the proliferation of migrant detention centres, it is worth focussing on anti-colonial resistance and migrants struggles as counter-conducts against the established order but also as symptoms of its crisis. It is well known, for example, that in order to crush the Libyan rebels in the Thirties, the fascist General Graziani made use of traditional military actions at first. Since these actions failed in their purpose, he forced the nomadic population of the highland to move their settlements but, again, did not manage to completely defeat the Libyans' anti-colonial feelings. As a final and definitive action, he ordered the construction of concentration camps (Salerno 2005, 90) and was finally able to achieve his goal. Just like Graziani's colonial military efforts and the Libyans' anti-colonial struggle, the EU attempts to reaffirm a continuously challenged border system and the multiple, ever-changing strategies of the migrants to cross the border and overcome surveillance should be considered in the light of the above mentioned "border as method" perspective. I would emphasize, ultimately, «the conflictual determination of the border» (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 13) and the fact that, just like the management of colonized populations, the postcolonial devices of biopolitical control address more the migrants' self-determination than the number of people coming to Europe, more the struggle than the mobility.

Bombs and Drones in the Mediterranean Sky

Despite Peter Sloterdijk's belief, the historical transition from war to terrorism didn't happen on European soil in 1915 (Sloterdijk 2009), but rather in the colonial space, specifically during the first war of conquest of Libya, in the autumn 1911, when the war flights and rudimental aerial bombardment in history were carried out by the Italian army. This sad Italian record opened the way to a new kind of imagination of the colony: from that point on, Libya would represent a test field for the Italian Air Force, what Guernica represented for Nazi aviation (Salerno 2005, 59-61). In 1917, incendiary bombs were launched on the barley camps of the rebel populations of

Tripolitania. Between 1924 and 1926, planes were used to indiscriminately bomb the oases not controlled by the Italian troops, sometimes with mustard gas: in their «precise and systematic plan» to separate the civilian population from the rebels, the Italian military commanders carefully analysed the number of victims, the immediate effects of chemical death, but also the delayed effects on those who were touched by gases (Salerno 2005, 64). In Cyrenaica in less than one year, between November 1929 and May 1930, the Italian Air Force launched 43.500 tons of bombs (Salerno 2005, 71). It is no surprise that among the films ordered by the fascist regime to celebrate the Italian colonial “adventure” and the proclamation of the Empire, the one with the highest approval from critics and audiences was *Luciano Serra Pilota*, a movie dedicated to an air force pilot who volunteers for the colonial campaign in East Africa where he is wounded and then killed, not before undertaking heroic actions in the enemy territory, such as saving a train attacked by the Abyssinians. In the film, all the themes of the fascist propaganda appear, in particular heroism and the Italian way to modernity, perfectly embodied by the air force.

A century after the first raid on the Libyan population, the Italian Minister of Defence granted seven Italian military bases and eight aircrafts to the NATO forces. Italy’s role in that campaign would be clarified in November 2012 at the House of the Aviator in Rome. During the presentation of a publication by the air force dedicated to the 2011 Libya Mission, the intense activity of the Italian Tornados in the Odyssey Dawn operation was described in detail: in seven months, 1.900 sorties, more than 7.300 flying hours, 456 bombing missions (*Huffington Post* 2012).

Over the years, within the Mediterranean space between Italy and Libya, aircraft and aerial technology has been used even outside the strictly military domain. As recently as in August 2014, an Italian Navy ship, the *San Giusto*, intercepted a boat adrift 40 miles off the coast of Libya. The boat identification occurred through a drone, equipped with an electro-optical and infrared sensor that allows, in real time, to extend the capability of the ship to see beyond the limit of its sensors, both on sea and on land. The *San Giusto* was the first unit of the Italian Navy to employ an unmanned aerial vehicle in Search And Rescue operations. A correspondent for the Italian broadcaster TG2, was on board during the first operations and was able to film the aid given to the migrants by the crew, in particular the rescue of a 20-day-old baby and his parents who were on the boat, perfectly fitting the rules of the «spectacle of the border» (De Genova 2013). The video also reports the images recorded a few hours before by the drone that intercepted the boat: the people aboard show no reaction, because, as the captain of the *San Giusto* reveals to the journalists, «they cannot know they are seen» (TG2 2014). When Italy was still acting out the role of the guarantor of Libya in front of the international community, the need to end the embargo was presented as the only possibility to supply the North African country with the technical

tools for a more effective contrast to illegal immigration, such as helicopters and airplanes to control the borders of the desert (*La Repubblica* 2004). In the aftermath of an umpteenth shipwreck off the island of Lampedusa, when hundreds of people lost their lives, Italy launched a brand-new operation, *Mare Nostrum*, born «to face the ongoing humanitarian emergency in the Stretto di Sicilia, due to the exceptional flux of migrants» (Ministero della Difesa - Marina Militare 2014). In the same year, for the first time the Italian and Libyan Ministers of Foreign Affairs foresaw the use of Italian unmanned aerial vehicles for supporting local authorities in the surveillance of the southern Libyan border (Ministero della Difesa 2013).

The *Mare Nostrum* operation, with the use of aerial reconnaissance to search the sea for suspect vessels and monitor activity in the Libyan ports (Brady 2014) is part of the increasing attempts by the EU member states to invest resources in deploying the most up-to-date technologies to stop undesired migrants (Marin and Krajčiková 2015; Pugliese 2013). Drones represent, at the same time, the last stage of the rise of air forces in Europe, connected, on the one hand, to the emergence of a bio-political power aimed to ensure national security, on the other, to a necropolitics that denies the very humanity of the enemy, above all if colonized (Adey 2010; Mbembe 2003). In the first half of the 19th century, the colonial populations that were considered “rebels” were the main target of the aviation, a military technology aimed to prepare the ground for war, to protect national interests and the security of the border (Caplan 2013a). In air power, to win means to have the enemy constantly in sight. The technology that since WWI combined camera/machine/weapon gave birth to a lethal techno-science and to a radically different “logistics of perception”, where the representation of the object is more important than the object itself, while the physical presence and the direct vision of the war were substituted by a vicarious experience of the battlefield mediated by its video or photographic images (Virilio 1989; 2005). Aviation in colonial warfare and aircrafts and drones in border management share the same logistics of perception.

The combination of a totalizing system of border surveillance – as a hypermodern and mobile panopticon, the drone can see without being seen – and the possibility of experiencing the battle from above have huge implications on the elaboration of new imaginary geographies of the Mediterranean with all its political and anthropological consequences. In early 20th century Europe, the poor level of preparation of airmen and the lack of technology of their vehicles showed in the total uncertainty of the bombings, which created panic in civilians and arbitrary casualties. That same effect was then sought in aerial war (Caplan 2013a) and nowadays pursued by the use of drones in the new world order warfare, deliberately aimed at breaking the morale of civilians in order to achieve a more rapid victory. It has been observed that, compared to conventional war, the use of drones seeks to respond to the asymmetric threat

posed by small mobile groups of non-state actors, with small flexible units, human or preferably unmanned, according to the logic of the targeted attack. The war paradigm is no longer a duel between two fighters but rather a hunter who stalks a prey whose aim is to run away and hide (Chamayou 2013; Crawford 2008). As in the classical frame of governmental power (Foucault 2009), the need is no longer to punish the enemy, but instead to defend society.

If using drones in border surveillance is apparently aimed at different goals, nevertheless the so called Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean, unifying military and humanitarian targets – what Didier Fassin (2012, 135) called the oxymoron of «compassionate repression» – seems to pursue a similar logic. Even more in recent times, border surveillance takes the Manichean, moral approach typical of anti-terrorism police operations: not fighting the enemy (i.e. Islamist terrorism) but identifying every potential threat, above all if coming from the sea, or even defeating the threat in the location where it originates. The latter point demonstrates the need to involve North African countries in this postcolonial hunt. The increasing use of aerial border surveillance, then, promotes a binary representation between military and non-military, citizens and non-citizens, targets and non-, now part of a widespread view of the Mediterranean, in particular from the Northern shore, that goes along with the effects of desensitization affecting those who command drones (Chamayou 2013) but also the general public (Dal Lago 2012). The fact of being inexorably involved in a paranoid representation of border violations, thanks to the aerial images of the Mediterranean transmitted by the media, makes ordinary people feel like guards and, at the same time, less touched by the human stories of migrants. Aerial border surveillance, then, portrays the entire Mediterranean as a potentially unbounded virtual battlefield.

A final implication concerns the enemy/victim/prey, the people who attempt to cross the Mediterranean, whether migrants or refugees; just as the human targets of the recent wars, they have no means to fight death coming from above, unless through a kind of *camouflage* (Caplan 2014). The frequent shipwrecks question the idea of an absolute visibility in contrast to the constitutive elusiveness and opacity of the “unauthorized” migratory movements. Rather, the Mediterranean appears as a discontinuous assemblage of moments and spaces of (in)visibility, due to the limits of the surveillance tools but also to an unequal distribution of the value of the lives the humanitarian policies aim to take charge of: migrants are always subject to the irregular rhythms of mobility management, which sometimes becomes blind and lets people die, other times exercises a firm hold on their bodies (Tazzioli 2015). Despite the huge apparatus aimed at gathering and analyzing data, the practices of border crossing make it virtually impossible to keep a constant view and record of the changing migratory routes. Along with their ability to take advantage of the media and

to invert the sense of the camp from site of dehumanization to space of political claiming, the camouflage of the migrant routes determines, ultimately, an intermittent governmentality while representing another example of border struggle.

Conclusion

Just as the “civilization mission” is not an ex-post legitimation of colonial domination, but rather the discursive device that makes the conquest possible, so Libya’s requests for compensation represent the discursive frame through which the country recasts its image as forefront of border surveillance. That means that the Mediterranean is a complex postcolonial space, the effects of which reverberate on territories far beyond the two shores. It has been observed, in this regard, that the Sahara is nowadays re-emerging from the state of latency to which it was reduced during colonization and that it is renewing its transit function, also with temporal effects of reactivation of seemingly lost pre-colonial memories and practices. The word “*abd*”, for example, once used in the Arab-Muslim world to indicate servants, slaves *and* the black race, is now in Libya «almost sole identifier of Africa migrants» (Bensaâd 2011, my translation). The Mediterranean crossing is «a dramatic metonymy» that stands for the complexities typical of modern migration; the same consistency of the sea, its «liquid and slippery substance, with no obvious limits and rigid boundaries», holds a «polysemic function of barrier and transit area and feeds attitudes of power supported by the moral panic that modern migration spreads on the North Coast» (Chambers 2012, my translation).

Over the course of a century, several human fluxes have crossed the stretch of sea between Italy and Libya, sometimes in the opposite direction from contemporary migration routes. In 1911, the troops, preceded by adventures and businessmen, crossed the sea in the conquest of Libya. A few days after the military occupation, the Libyan deportees were conducted from Tripoli to the Italian detention islands. Other “rebels” followed over the years of the military campaign in Cyrenaica. Their deportation left room for the Italian settlers summoned by Italo Balbo for the agricultural improvement of the “Fourth Shore”. In the Forties, at the outbreak of the war, the Italian settlers’ children sailed the sea to reach the Fascist Youth summer camps in Italy: many of them would return only after six years or more, some on makeshift boats, as “irregular immigrants” in a country which they did not belong to anymore. When Libya obtained the independence, most Italians remained, except for the peasants of the “colonization villages” who decided to leave. For thousands of Italians who came back to the Motherland, newcomers arrived in Libya attracted by the oil industry: the old settlers called them “the imported”. In October 1970, a new migration from the South had the taste of revenge: 20.000 “Italians of Libya” were forced to flee the country as refugees. After their departure, Italian technicians and entrepreneurs continued to migrate toward the former “sand box”, now a

Mecca of black gold. Migrants who are crossing from Libya to Europe today are, therefore, only the last protagonists of a multifaceted history, every phase of which has had its own diasporas and displacements, engraving imaginary furrows on the sea and demonstrating that post-colonial time is a permanent transition, overlapping different temporalities, striated juridical spaces, multiple sovereignties and hierarchized citizenships, all of them built in a space of conflict.

Within the complex historical relationship between the North and the South shore of the Mediterranean, several practices of crossing, conflicts, insurgencies against forms of racialization and capitalist accumulation demonstrate that different subaltern subjectivities have always tried not to be reduced to “bare life”, acting relentlessly on the colonial and neo-colonial sovereign power of neoliberal migration management. Within that history, the border represents a set of «practices and discourses that “spread” into the whole of society» (Paasi 1999, 670), because it affects even those who feel more as hunters than prey. That is exactly what Caplan (2013b) defines as postcolonial war: a war that seems far away – because it is seen and fought from above, an effect multiplied by the media coverage of the contrast against irregular migration or because it appears encapsulated in oases like the detention camps or centres – that affects every aspect of our life, just like the toxic effects on gender of the militarization of borders spreading all over society (Mohanty 2015). In this war, many subjectivities overlap and take on shifting roles: to speak of border struggle is not to indulge in a naïf image of the heroic figure of the migrant able to overcome former colonial relations. I would suggest, instead, to consider the Mediterranean in the frame of those baroque economies that mark the effects of neoliberalism from below, i.e. the proliferation of different styles of life able to reorganize the notions of freedom, interest and compliance, to elaborate a new kind of collective rationality and affectivity and to negotiate benefits in a context of dispossession through dynamics that blend forms of intensive exploitation and new social unrest (Gago 2014).

In this perspective I have tried to draw the colonial roots of “camps” and other forms of confinement, but also of the complex processes which are changing European spaces and Mediterranean countries in the face of the ever-increasing pressure from the edge of the Empire. Without underestimating the imbalance of forces between the two shores of the Mediterranean, to speak of neocolonialism tout court, as well as of memory repression, means to erase the very idea of an ability to resist and re-articulate the terms of the relationship by the “overseas”. The Mediterranean is no longer a space of conquest the relations between nations lying on the two shores, but rather a multi-crossed political space able to shape those relations through conflict, new forms of exploitation but also processes of resistance that continuously challenge the representation of the past thanks to those subjectivities that are reformulating new imaginary geographies.

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