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Contextualising and storying the Italian hostile environment: Lina Prosa's civil theatre of re-humanisation

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This essay investigates the construction of a hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers in Italy in recent years. Rather than a consistent set of practices, the construction of the Italian hostile environment should be interpreted as a series of uneven responses to increasing migration from the Mediterranean South, and of unsystematic concrete procedures for migration control, developed according to diverse local contexts. These specific hostile environment constructions obfuscate dehumanising practices. In this context, however, forms of civic engagement offer important examples of resistance, which we aim at bringing to the foreground in the first part of this essay. The second part addresses imaginative and artistic responses to the Italian hostile environment by focusing on the stage. In particular, Sicilian playwright Lina Prosa's *The Shipwreck Trilogy* will be taken as case study. Representing immigration from the triple perspective of the sea voyage, the mountain limbo, and the existential "horizontal shipwreck" caused by negligent legislation, the *Trilogy* moves away from explicit humanitarianism or advocacy and consolidated patterns of the "right kind" of refugee story. It celebrates, instead, migrant agency and re-mythologises the figure of the migrant as a bearer of knowledges, aspirations, affects, memories, claims, relationalities, and better stories.

KEYWORDS

nation, resistance, civic engagement, movement, Lampedusa, migration, re-mythologisation

1. Introduction

On 25 September 2022, Italian general elections made Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia the first party in Italy. The conservative coalition led by Meloni—together with Matteo Salvini's Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia—is governing the country at the time when this essay is being completed. Meloni is the first woman leader in the nation's history. Much of the electoral campaign was played on the issue of migration, which in recent decades has increasingly and alarmingly occupied the political scene and inflamed populist rhetoric almost across the world. In the case of Italy, and from a perspective aimed at foregrounding ways in which hostile environment constructions operate, the result of the 2022 Italian elections is worthy of attention and useful. It helps in pursuing the purpose of this essay, which considers the multiplicity and the multidimensional nature of hostile environments while also paying attention to the pragmatic resistant practices that are being implemented by, and in the civil society, literature and in the arts. The increasing prominence, over the last 20 years or so, of exclusionary and

criminalising policies and distorted imaginaries concerning migration to Italy, as well as the dramatic rise in death toll along the Central Mediterranean route, have given a strong impulse to the flourishing of various and ever more coordinated forms of activism. Among these, the theatre has been a major conduit for artistic expressions meant to change society and the country, which is why Lina Prosa's *The Shipwreck Trilogy*¹ (Prosa, 2013a)—a three-part meditation spanning various aspects of the anti-immigratory environment in Italy—has been singled out as a fitting case study to round off the argument of this essay.

Taking as a standpoint that hostile environments are always the result of complex, diverse and multifarious formations, and are produced in line with a given nation's history, culture, and political agendas, the essay starts by investigating the construction of a hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers in Italy in recent years. It goes on to consider the impact of localisation. National specificity, in a country where regional differences are highly enhanced, is, in actual fact, further complicated by local applications and adaptations of hostile environment practices and localised prejudices and concerns. In this light, rather than a consistent set of practices, the construction of the Italian hostile environment should be interpreted as a series of uneven responses to increasing migration from the Mediterranean South, and of unsystematic concrete procedures for migration control, developed according and in response to diverse local contexts. These specific hostile environment constructions produce contrasting local and national applications that obfuscate—and therefore make it difficult to combat—dehumanising and inhumane practices. Against this backdrop, forms of civic engagement offer important examples of resistance, which we aim at bringing to the foreground drawing primarily on the theoretical and methodological projects of cultural studies and postcolonial studies.

Our approach combines cultural studies' careful attention to contexts, conjunctures and power relations, and postcolonial studies' insistence on the intersectionality of marginalisation, subordination and racial discrimination. Both understand resistance as a set of counter-discursive and pragmatic attitudes against forms of oppressive power. A notion of the theatre as an art which, in Lina Prosa's words, is always political, with the playwright being "the guardian of his times" who "nourishes a politics of creation, not a politics of loss, and cultivates writing in favour of revolution" (Prosa, 2020a, p. 52) also informs the second part of this study. Bearing in mind the limited space of the essay, we consider that from the perspectives of cultural and postcolonial studies, a balance of attention between the legal, historical, political frameworks and literary forms is fundamental to an understanding of the implications of the relevant cultural artefacts.

Our methodology is further complicated by Italy's ambiguous, unstable and at times delusional position as a country located at once at the periphery of Europe (and also at the political periphery of the European Union, from the perspective of its low political capital and economic power), and at the centre of the socio-cultural, commercial and historical (contested)

imaginary of "The Mediterranean" (it is not by chance that one of the most famous governmental and EU operations in the Mediterranean was named *Mare Nostrum*, a name evocative of the Roman Empire). These difficulties and antinomies, as well as the strategic concealment of the very hostility of the environment by public discourse and the State, provide a nurturing ground for commitment and struggle, and are addressed in many operational fields and artistic practices flourishing in Italy today. The second part of the essay will consist, mainly, of a discussion of *The Shipwreck Trilogy*, by the Sicilian playwright, director and activist Lina Prosa. Composed of two poetic monologues—*Lampedusa Beach* and *Lampedusa Snow*—and a dramatic dialogue, *Lampedusa Way*, the *Trilogy* gives voice to the aspirations, affects, memories, relationalities and claims to an unimpeded life of their protagonists. The first two plays focus on the experiences of Shauba, an African young woman in the actual act of drowning off the coast of Lampedusa, and her brother Mohamed, frozen to death in an attempt to pass the Alps on foot, defying invisibilisation and confinement by the Italian immigration authorities. The third one, featuring Shauba's adoptive aunt, Mahama, and Mohamed's adoptive uncle, Saif, stranded in Lampedusa in search of their loved ones, provides both an elegy and ironically militant social commentary on the island's heterotopia (Pugliese, 2009) and the current necropolitical drift of global capitalism. While addressing the Mediterranean as a cemetery and a frontier, a space of failed encounters and damaged connectivity, the *Trilogy* highlights how—against the hostile environment of border enforcement and the weaponisation, even, of natural elements—the geographies of migration are being continually re-signified and re-articulated through epic acts of migrant agency and the stories which celebrate them.

2. The Italian hostile environment

In recent decades, the hostile asylum environment has been produced in Italy in ways that record how the regime's construction is itself rooted in the material context of the nation's culture and history. Along this line, it may also be apprehended as a cultural product, which has taken shape according to the Italian way of living and to the specific situations people experience in different moments of their lives as they are determined by, and embedded in precise factual conditions, relations and affects. Official narratives, populist rhetoric, legal norms, media discourse and stereotyped interpretations have produced diverse local applications of hostile environment. Nationwide, this specific environment has developed also in response to Europe and to the European Union's agreements with member countries, and shows the difficulties as well as the achievements that this relationship entails. In order to understand how national history has helped to shape specific constructions of a hostile environment, it may be useful to observe the main lines of immigration to Italy—whose transit is now mostly from northern Africa and eastern Europe—in order both to detect the regime's hostile practices and, in contrast, to assert the value of civic engagement and resistance against overt, hidden, and sneaky forms of hostile environment construction.

Broadly speaking, a variety of subjects and conditions contribute to the formation of diverse applications and adaptations

¹ Although published together in 2013, the three parts of *Trilogia del naufragio* (hence on referred to as *The Shipwreck Trilogy*) were written at different times: the first one, *Lampedusa Beach*, in 2003, the second and the third, *Lampedusa Snow* and *Lampedusa Way* in 2013.

of hostile environment regimes. In the Italian case, among the distinguishing features are the confluence and imbrication of different migration flows over a short period of time from the end of the Eighties onwards, and the uneven development of Italian migration management due to legislative gaps, ambiguous procedures, diverse pragmatic applications according to inhomogeneous regional, provincial and city management. Before being a country of immigration, Italy has had a long history of emigration, both intranational and international. In the last two centuries, international emigration from Italy mostly clustered around the country's unification in 1861 and at the end of World War II. On the official public scene, this history has been almost expunged from the national narrative, with the effect that Italian migrants themselves have been erased from the national cultural and political records. It can be argued that a cancellation of memory has made the nation insensitive to migration. Or, more acutely, that the national failure to reconcile with the memory of Italian emigration—a history of poverty, loss, institutional disregard and social inequality—has generated, at institutional and popular levels, an incapacity to reconnect with the traces of past narratives of emigration in the present stories of immigration.

Differently, mass immigration to Italy has a relatively short history. It began to be noticeable with the influx of Albanians at the beginning of the Nineties. Statistics show that they currently constitute one of the most populous communities in Italy, together with the Moroccan, the Romanian and the Senegalese, along with other communities mainly from northern African, eastern European countries, China and the Indian subcontinent. Still unacknowledged in official narratives, other communities have lived part of their lives in Italy. From the last part of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the 2000s, these migrant presences did not generally provoke the establishment of hot spots, detention centres, and containment measures. The process of integration was not organised. The recent systematic construction of institutionalised hostile environments is mostly a response to immigration across the Mediterranean (Gualtieri, 2018; Proglia, 2018; The Black Mediterranean Collective, 2021). In Italy and elsewhere in Europe, the representation and reception of the migrants' presence are largely affected by the nation's history and by ways in which both the State (in legislation and official debate) and civil society (in every form of activism) have dealt with this issue. As concerns Italy, the racial imagination of the migrant refers to the colonial enterprise in Africa in the nineteenth century, in Libya, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, and has broadly produced a stereotyped construction of the migrant as black, poor, uncivilised and, at least in recent times, even terrorist. In addition, how Italy has managed immigration is yet another national specificity. At the State level, no analytical debate has been activated, nor a concerted, planned strategy has been devised and kept stable. Norms have been launched by various governments, hence producing an excess of law-making and an accumulation of often contrasting legal procedures.

A brief summary will help to exemplify the chaotic and destructive impact of incoherent, and at times contradictory politics that affect the whole institutional system at the level of the State and contribute to the construction of diverse regimes of hostility. The Legislative Decree 286/1998 concerning immigration

discipline and the condition of foreigners provided the first organic, yet cautious norm, still in use today. The 2002 Bossi-Fini Law was designed to make previous migration legislation more repressive and to anticipate future State policies of stricter border control. The 2009, 2018, and 2019 Security Packs and the 2017 agreement with Libya aimed at tightening control, while the 2020 Lamorgese Decree attempted to soften some previous security norms, which helped to sustain the ongoing controversial national attitude on migration. This panorama has been recently complicated by the Decree n. 1/2023 "Codice di Condotta delle ONG" [ONG's Conduct Code], implemented on 3 January 2023, issued by the conservative government led by Giorgia Meloni (Dossier XIX Legislatura, 2023; Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2023; Gentilucci, 2023).²

As regards Italy's relationship with Europe, the management of migration flows still shows the country's difficulty in pursuing organic policies. Operation Mare Nostrum was activated by the Italian government from 18 October 2013 until 31 October 2014 in order to search and rescue migrants in the Mediterranean. It was then superseded by the European Union's Frontex's operation, known as Triton, that started on 1 November 2014 with the contrasting aim of protecting borders. In certain ways, Frontex has helped to structure member countries' policies and the implementation of hostile asylum procedures. In addition, the Dublin III Regulation of 2013, determining which EU member state would be responsible for examining applications for asylum, complicated Italy's national and international position. Italy is a step on the Central Mediterranean migrant route; however, it is a transit area where the majority of migrants do not wish to settle. This national weakness is obfuscated in the official narrative, which instead capitalises on the common fear of huge numbers of incoming migrants and on imaginaries of invasion.

The public rhetoric that has accompanied the passing of Decree 1/2023 has drawn on widespread propaganda against NGOs, as culprits for helping illegal immigration in great numbers. Despite the absent debate on illegality, which has never been publicly acknowledged in the form uncovering how "illegalising" procedures are being adopted for immigration control and selection, many scholars, immigration lawyers, investigative journalists and activists have pointed out how the war waged by this government against NGOs is purely demagogical. The Italian conservative leadership has clustered the political debate on immigration around amply exploited populist arguments, which are contested by statistic data. These show that Italy does not manage the majority of migrants arriving in Europe, and that about only 10 percent have been rescued by NGOs in the Mediterranean, while others have arrived via diverse routes. Also, the Italian association for legal studies on migration (*Associazione per gli studi giuridici sull'immigrazione*—ASGI) has pointed out that the decree clashes with national, European and international norms and will not possibly hinder people from fleeing danger nor stop NGOs' actions (Ambrosini, 2023; ASGI, 2023). However, by

² On 5 May 2023, when this essay had already been submitted, the Italian Parliament approved Law 50/2023, which contains the most ambitious project of refugees' and asylum seekers' isolation and detention ever devised in republican Italy. The legislation also aims to simplify and accelerate their expulsion.

obliging NGOs to respect certain technicalities—for example, the obligation to reach as quickly as possible the closest port after a rescue operation—the decree succeeds in making more difficult for them to rescue people in danger and in criminalising solidarity, both within the nation and towards EU member countries.

Restrictive laws have elicited political resistance from opposing sides according to ideological interests, ethical concerns and civil society's activism, thus complicating the national political panorama and the ways in which Italy is responding to migration. Broadly speaking, selfish, arrogant, pretentious, and hateful political speech produces segregation and division, and rests on greed and social antagonism. As Jacqueline Rose recalled in a recent lecture "What is a Subject? Politics and Psyche After Stuart Hall," Stuart Hall reached out to some of the most anguished political and cultural realities of our current times. As late as in the Eighties, when he was observing the tensions developing in British society, he had foreseen the changes and the dilemmas that the expansion of global capitalism would bring about (Rose, 2023). Hall's words are evoked in an interview with Bill Schwarz, which is worth quoting at length:

"This is one side of the globalisation project. It is throwing people across boundaries, drawing cultures contradictorily together, [...] people are displaced from their homes, forced across boundaries—living in transit camps, stowing away in the back of lorries or underneath aeroplanes, putting themselves in life-long debt to people traffickers in order to get somewhere else, to get out, to find a new life. This is globalisation too, the dark side, the globalisation from below. In this aspect of globalisation, everything is free to move—investment, capital, images, and messages: only labour must stay put. The great majority of people are not supposed to move, they are supposed to stay where they are and accept low wages, and become part of the world economy in that limited way. Otherwise, how could the new international division of labour work? [...] 'Economic migrants' are just people who want a better life. They are also people displaced by poverty, famine, disease and civil war. This is the other face—the underside, the underlife, of so-called global society." (Hall, 2007, p. 150)

Since Stuart Hall's insightful analysis, many scholars have examined the distribution of violence and hostility internal and external to the nation-state, the exploitation of migrant labour, and the working of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003, 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020). In Italy in recent years, different actions have been activated by local administrations and civil society. Some of them have promoted attempts to actively deconstruct hostility regimes both at the institutional level and in the civil society, by associations and private individuals. Practices of voluntary organisations and civic activism against the criminalisation of solidarity demonstrate the presence of committed local networks and the quality of resistance, however discontinuous and often frustrated by bureaucratic entanglements and incoherent norms. It is however worth pursuing a line of investigation which observes how in everyday life concrete actions are rising and practices of welcoming, solidarity and integration are challenging the everchanging construction and articulation of hostile environments.

3. Resistance and activism in civil society in Italy

In order to provide a clear frame for the case studies that will be analysed, Mezzadra's (2020) essay "Abolitionist vistas of the human: Border struggles, migration and freedom of movement" is useful for two main reasons, which centre on the migrants' subjectivity and its reverberations on host societies. By engaging with the issue of "the human" through the emphasis on "the relevance of the stubbornness of migrants challenging [maritime border regime in the Mediterranean] and [on] forms of border activism and the practice of solidarity they embody" (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 424), Mezzadra makes a crucial point about the subjectivity of migrants and their essential participation in the struggle for mobility. While this observation, which this essay completely endorses, helps Mezzadra to argue in favour of the freedom of movement as a political project, it also underlines how solidarity should be understood and implemented outside the project of conventional humanitarianism. As Mezzadra argues, the temporal continuity and structural organisation of such a project reproduces a state of emergency that supports a constantly unequal imbalance between those who give and those who receive help. A reinvention of solidarity is necessary, he claims, not only for a new class politics for migrant workers' rights inspired by a critical understanding of freedom of movement, but also and concertedly for "the forging of a politics of freedom of movement. [...] Such a politics should rely on migrants' practices and should aim at building coalitions among heterogeneous actors, acknowledging that even beyond solidarity with migrants and refugees a society that affirms freedom of movement is a free society" (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 436).

An additional element in Mezzadra's analysis is useful in order to understand how a collective power may be articulated, which combines "border activism and resistance with broader social and political engagement" (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 437), namely, "the gathering of bodies" (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 434), the materiality of the struggle, "of passions and affects (of pain as well as joy), of yearning, and of the multifarious embodied experiences of life that at the end of the day are constitutive of the human" (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 431). We have quoted extensively from Mezzadra's argument because it provides the lens through which the following actions should be interpreted and understood. They are meaningful in so far as they tend to constitute a collective power with a collective endeavour that extends beyond the specific locale of presented cases and becomes exemplary both in the host society and internationally (Stierl, 2019).

Case studies are from Italy and quite recent in time. They are embedded in the hostile environment which has been described and also document the struggle that is being collectively organised both within institutions and in civil society. In the field of the administration of justice, with the collaboration of Maurizio Veglio—immigration lawyer and member of Turin bar association—we present two examples: the first concerns the ongoing battle by ASGI regarding the current condition of Tunisian asylum seekers in Italy; the second reports on a decision taken by Renato Saccone when he was Prefect in Turin between 2016 and 2018.

As Veglio observes, Tunisian asylum seekers in Italy are undergoing serious risks of detention and deportation (ASGI,

2020) at the time when this essay is being completed. They have been targeted as a group since Luigi Di Maio, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed a repatriation agreement in 2020 with Tunisia, which was reputed a safe country. As a consequence, the possibility of application for asylum was weakened and to provide evidence of danger became very difficult. The agreement was slow in activation but is now fully operative. Most Tunisians who presently succeed in reaching Italy receive notification of expulsion. However, at present Tunisians are the most numerous group in *centri per il rimpatrio* (CPR) [detention centres], where the majority of migrants end up. The collaboration between Italy and Tunisia established by the agreement allows swift procedures of identification, which are promptly carried out at the Consulate in Palermo and are followed by immediate repatriation. ASGI is thoroughly committed to contesting this massive operation, also on the ground that the agreement has never been made public nor ratified by the Parliament, as it should be according to art. 80 of the Italian Constitution. Interestingly, however, it is implemented and works perfectly: Tunisians are easily exposed to the expulsion decree and, in some cases, to detention in *centri per il rimpatrio* waiting for deportation. This tragedy, as Maurizio Veglio claims, has recently widened: numbers have risen enormously and times for deportation have drastically reduced. It is an efficient mechanism at high cost for Italian defence and with major risk of error, because it is up to the State to determine if conditions of discrimination and danger—especially for children, women, LGBTQ+ and minorities—may justify repatriation or asylum. ASGI's commitment is strenuous due to the huge number of people involved in the struggle. And while there is no clear outcome of this action yet, the collaborative endeavour with the affected Tunisian communities is relevant. The case also illustrates the meandering articulation of norms and the legal quibbles, which keep the hostile environment solid and efficient.³

Differently, the following example focuses on the action taken by one person in his position as Prefect. It illustrates how a space of manoeuvre may be carved amidst the tangle of legal stratifications, thus producing an exemplary solution, which, however, may not have further applications. Renato Saccone, now Prefect in Milan, was on duty in Turin when Matteo Salvini was Interior Minister. As Veglio states, when in Turin, Saccone established a practice for asylum seekers who had received double rejection of their application: a first rejection by the territorial commission and a second one by the tribunal, according to the regular procedure.

3 The all-important initiatives and actions undertaken by ASGI are well-known to members of the Italian legal community and sectors of civil society. Publications and reports are available open access on the association website (<https://en.asgi.it/>). However, in-depth research on its vision, aims and practices, as well as on its campaigns and achievements, would greatly contribute to an understanding of viable strategies of civil resistance. Besides providing asylum seekers with free legal assistance, ASGI's relentless struggle entails a far-reaching commitment to fighting misinformation and activating effective praxis in civil society. Such was the case, to mention but one recent example, in the mobilisation of public opinion in the circumstance of the suicide of Moussa Balde, a detainee at the *centro per il rimpatrio* of Turin (23 May 2021). See: <https://en.asgi.it/black-book-on-pre-removal-detention-centre-eu-denies-the-human/>.

There was evidence that asylum seekers in this group had waited about 4 years for their responses, during which they had settled in and established their lives in Italy: work, education, networks and community relationships. Because their stay was regular, even though on a temporary residence permit, Saccone established that active integration in the host society should be acknowledged. If no impediment or criminal record was registered, they could file another application and have permit to stay on the basis of humanitarian protection, social inclusion in the host society. The lawyer's decision underlined the migrants' pragmatic use of the time and space available to them. In fact, the period of limbo and suspension involved in waiting for the asylum application to be rejected proved advantageous in establishing useful relationships and attachments. Saccone's determination was useful and shows responsible participation from all sides in favour of collective good and social inclusion. This example underlines how legal validation is needed—as Saccone and the institutions involved were able to implement—in order to fight against the hostile environment. In this case, the right to the migrants' inclusion was made evident by their contribution to the society. Therefore, their permission to stay gave them a legitimate, political right. In the opposite directions there are trends in motion that obstruct inclusion and support push backs. These examples show how detailed, competent, focused and accurate any collective action needs to be in order to face, combat and hopefully dismantle hostile environments and the mechanisms that contribute to their construction, perpetration, diffusion and reproduction.

Other examples may be quoted in order to illustrate how collective power has been slowly gaining strength against hostility regimes. Among them, one will suffice. It was activated in a peripheral provincial area, geographically quite distant from Turin, in the town of Cesena, in 2016. When infection by tiger mosquitos was raging, Claudio Venturelli—an entomologist expert in mosquitoes who works in the Public Health Department of AUSL Romagna—started a local action called “Door to door project. A network against tiger mosquitos,” together with the local health unit, the city municipality, volunteer migrant associations, and social services, in order to fight infection spreading through education. The project addressed volunteers and was based on the collaboration between one Italian citizen under the care of social services and one asylum seeker invited among attendees to Italian language courses. They would work in pairs, visit houses in a test area, and teach simple behavioural rules and techniques to prevent the spreading of infection. They would return to the houses after a period of time to answer questions and check progress. The project was so successful that it was exported in other areas and municipalities, and included in a regional plan. It activated forms of communication and understanding among common people of different age, social status and cultural formation, who found themselves in the condition of, and willing to work together for one simple, concerted and useful objective (Venturelli and Karabas, 2018). Such a collaboration was also based on building reciprocal trust, which was mainly achieved through talking, getting to know each other, exchanging bits of life experience and stories. We have quoted this example to focus on simple everyday actions that may have significant impact on ways in which a society may try to free itself from prejudice and hostility: in Mezzadra's words, a free society “where happiness and wealth are easier to fulfil than in a

society huddled in fear behind the walls with militarised defenses.” (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 436).

Acts of solidarity for, and on behalf of migrants are linked to activism in that the work of allies may help to enable self-directed forms of organisation. There are not many examples of such self-organisation, because refugees and asylum seekers are limited in their actions precisely by the precariousness of their position, yet they share a common objective with their supporters. As Etienne Balibar claims in “What we owe to the Sans-papiers,” the responsibility for the struggle has to fall also to citizens, not exclusively but to a quite large degree. There are difficulties for actual forms of collective self-organisation by asylum seekers and refugees, but they mark the crucial space between political, legal and cultural action: the space of praxis. One interesting example of a self-organised collective programme of integration, initially based on territorial and architectural regeneration, is the *Centro Internazionale di Quartiere* (CIQ) Cascina Casottello in Milan. Founded in 2013 and run by Senegalese-born Modou Gueye, located in a farmhouse in the outskirts of Milan, the CIQ Cascina Casottello was born as a meeting place for newcomers and the local community. Through crowdfunding it has expanded to include a restaurant, a concert hall, areas for outdoor and indoor activities for children, workshops, book launches, artistic and educational projects. CIQ invites public participation and voluntary work. It also offers fiscal consultancy and services to help members of the community with aspects of immigration bureaucracy and everyday administration. Thriving with initiatives and events throughout the year, CIQ Cascina Casottello has established itself as a reference point and cultural hub for the whole community.⁴

In conclusion to this section, aimed at illustrating examples of good practices in Italy against hostile environment constructions, our final thought is on exchanging life stories as one of the most powerful ways of building the collective power, which is crucial to combat hostility. In “Miracles in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Refugees as ‘Vanguard,’” Horst and Lysaker (2019) use their field work in Oslo in order to examine the connection between civil-political engagement and the life stories of migrants. They argue that, insofar as refugees’ displacement makes them face a new beginning, the condition of a new natality offers them the possibility of miracle and hope through action and speech. While miracle and hope relate to imagining and working for better futures, action and speech refer to ways in which a space of appearance may be carved through “an intersubjective practice where individual real-life experiences acquire meaning for both the teller and the listener” (Horst and Lysaker, 2019, p. 6). The refugees’ political action, therefore, in Horst and Lysaker’s argument based on Hannah Arendt’s reflections, becomes inspiring in dark times and politically incisive, both in deeds and in words, through storytelling.

This perspective is useful in order to focus on the subjectivity of refugees as determining actors in societies, and to underline the radical act of listening as weapon against hostility. Taking this line, refugee tales operate in both directions as forms of empowerment and of sharing, both for the migrants and for the host societies. In *Refugee Tales IV* (Herd and Pincus, 2021), the stories “The Delivery Person’s Tale (2021)” and “The Teenager’s Tale (2021)” were

collected in Italy and offer testimonies from inside the conditions of migration and detention in Italy. Collecting stories also animates the projects *Archivio delle Memorie Migranti/Archive of Migrant Memories*⁵ and *Stories in transit/Storie in transito*⁶ (Warner and Castagna, 2018), both based in Italy; however, they reach out to a wider, concerned audience who is willing to be part of a committed community of activists. A theoretical as well as pragmatic inspiration comes from Italian philosopher Cavarero’s (2021) concept of “surging democracy,” which, on Hannah Arendt’s elaborations, underlines the generative and creative function of a new democracy based on a plurality of bodies: a structure that comes together in a participatory, non-violent, horizontal articulation of different voices. That is to say, “surging democracy” is made of a “pluriphony” of voices, Cavarero argues, each of them unique and original, in a plural relational configuration. Cavarero invites a rethinking of happiness, which a new democracy—as the outcome of numerous rebirths in a public, communal, shared space of interaction—may help to restore. For this aim, storytelling and listening to life stories open up a vital terrain of action.

4. The emergence of immigration literature in Italian

Almost hand in hand with the renewed awareness that Italy was becoming a country of immigration—and following the Law 39/1990 (known as the Martelli Law) which allowed a number of undocumented *de facto* immigrants to get long term permits—the early Nineties recorded both the emergence of what soon came to be labelled “Italian migration literature,” or “migrant literature in Italian,” and a spreading interest by academics, publishers, journalists and civil society in the literary production of migrant authors who had chosen to build “a place of belonging” (Warner, 2017, p. 150) in the Italian language. Some of their writings, mostly by francophone migrants, were achieved at first through the linguistic mediation of Italian co-authors. This was the case with two Senegalese-born authors whose debut books are conventionally considered to have marked the perceived beginning of “migrant literature” in Italy: Pap Kouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*, written with Oreste Pivetta, published in 1990 (Khouma and Pivetta, 1990) and translated into English (Khouma, 2010) with the title *I was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris and Milan*, and Saidou Moussa Ba’s *La promessa di Hamadi* (“Hamadi’s Promise”), co-authored with Alessandro Micheletti (Micheletti and Moussa Ba, 1991). While these now canonical works were largely based on their authors’ first-hand experiences of what could already be sensed as living as undocumented migrants in a hostile environment, they were powerful expressions, at once, of their determination to take up “aesthetic”—as opposed to merely documentary—responsibility for the telling of illegalised migrants’ life stories and claiming their right to a language that “establishes belonging/where a person dwells” (Herd, 2016, p. v). In an essay on the emergence of “Black Italy,” Di Maio (2009) addresses another important thread

⁴ Website: <https://www.ciqmilano.it/>.

⁵ <https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/>

⁶ <http://www.storiesintransit.org/>

of immigration literature in Italian voiced mostly by second-generation Italian women authors born to parents coming from Italy's former colonies and zones of occupation in the Horn of Africa. Among them, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, of Somali descent, and Italian-Ethiopian Gabriella Ghermandi have distinguished themselves not only for their works, but also for their public engagement in opening up a debate on the continuing impact of Italy's involvement in colonialism and its current necropolitical re-production in terms of anti-immigration legislation and callous cross-Mediterranean agreements.

Over the last two decades, the study fields of “postcolonial Italy,” “new literatures in Italian,” “Afro-Italian literature”—and, on a more intersectional level, the literary analyses inhabiting the theoretical terrain of the “Black Mediterranean” (Chambers, 2008; Sarnelli, 2015; S/Murare il Mediterraneo-Un/Walling the Mediterranean Research Group, 2016; Di Maio, 2021; Giuliani, 2021; The Black Mediterranean Collective, 2021)—have grown to represent a thriving and attractive ideological battleground and aesthetic background, with promising reverberations across university curricula and the national debate about Italianness and citizenship. The vastness of these topics prevents even a cursory discussion of this literature. It seems important, however, to acknowledge the rich, militant poetics and diverse body of works engaged in reconnecting the interrupted space of the “middle sea” and returning it to imaginaries of healed connectivity and hospitality. The choice of exploring an Italian insider's artistic perspective on the tragic waste of human lives at sea and the deliberate regimes of invisibilisation, immobilisation and systemic dehumanisation of people seeking refuge in Europe is indexed to the purpose of addressing resistant texts avowedly engaged in winning over the hearts and minds of Italian public opinion and affective audiences and, hopefully, building new imaginaries of conviviality and respect.

5. Representing deaths in the Mediterranean

Italian artists, journalists, writers and playwrights have been addressing the discourse of the Mediterranean as cemetery and of the “exceptional” symbolic status of Lampedusa (in its dual sense as a *state of exception* and a *locus* of rescue and hospitality) well before the consequences of the Arab Spring in 2011 and, later, of the appalling shipwreck of 3 October 2013 in which over 360 lives were lost, had provided the Italian government and media with a set of alternative narrative frames and discursive templates to stage and popularise specific anti-immigration agendas. Migrant deaths at sea and shipwrecks had been a rather common experience throughout the 1990s, with local communities and fishermen often taking part in rescue operations or in bringing bodies back on shore. Most often, discussion of these “smaller-scale” tragedies did not transcend the local level, as they did not enjoy the newsworthiness accompanying great numbers, finding temporary resonance only when the results of ethnographic work carried out among Sicilian coastal communities managed to reach the press or under exceptional circumstances. One such case was the foundering of a motorboat carrying 283 people coming mostly from Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan during transshipment onto a smaller vessel, which took place off the coast of Portopalo di Capo Passero in the

early morning of 26 December 1996. News of the shipwreck had been given by some survivors reaching Greece a few days later, but, as the drowned bodies could not be found, their claim was not believed. Objects and human remains had indeed been recovered by local fishermen, who had avoided reporting to the authorities in order to evade official investigations and a halt to their fishing activities. Rumours and personal testimonies, however, had been commonplace in the area since the event, and came to be part of an independent inquiry carried out by *La Repubblica* journalist Giovanni Maria Bellu after being contacted on behalf of a local fisherman, Salvatore Lupo, whose report to the Italian Maritime Authority in 2001 had not been deemed credible. Bellu's findings were brought to the attention of the public in June 2001 in a series of articles on whose grounds an official inquiry was started, eventually interrupted on evidence that the shipwreck had taken place outside Italian territorial waters. In 2004 Bellu authored a testimonial novel about the so called “ghost shipwreck,” *Ifantasmì di Portopalo* (“The Ghosts of Portopalo”; Bellu, 2004), which inspired two theatrical adaptations: *La nave fantasma* (“The Ghost Ship”), co-authored by Bellu with Renato Sarti and Bebo Storti, which debuted in December that year, and *Portopalo—Nomi su tombe senza corpi* (“Portopalo: Names on graves without bodies”) by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, first performed in 2006. In 2016 Bellu's novel was made into a successful eponymous TV movie, directed by Alessandro Angelini and produced by Rai Fiction, Picomedia e Iblafilm under the patronage of the Sicilia Film Commission and UNHCR.

More generally, writers, activists and artists living in Sicily repeatedly listened to witnesses' accounts of migrant bodies being found at sea or washed up on shore, including crude descriptions of the state of the remains and the shock caused by such encounters. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that novels, plays, and movies about the indignities and deadly toll of migration across the Mediterranean have long preceded the spate of national and international artistic productions which, since 2013, have followed the increased borderisation and spectacularisation of Sicily's islands and coasts as Europe's southern frontier. Of the works predating the representational and discursive turning point marked by the 3 October shipwreck, it is worth noting how most of them shy away from overemphasising the trope of “the Gothic Mediterranean” (Sarnelli, 2015), even as they are obviously receptive of the rich corpus of postcolonial poetic and fictional elaborations on the literature in English of the Black Atlantic and the Caribbean. The motif of the drowned bodies became more conspicuous after the media framing of the Lampedusa shipwreck transformed the “drowned migrants” into “bodies,” an “exhibition of death [that] exposes the human drama to everyone's gaze and constitutes the violence of the event” (Ritaine, 2016, p. 102; our translation). A remarkable exception is *Rumore di Acque*, (*Noise in the Waters*), by Martinelli (2010) and Martinelli and Simpson (2011). In the form of a fiercely sarcastic monologue, it features a shabby and at times devilish General/bureaucrat, the only inhabitant of an off-the-map small island somewhere in the Southern Mediterranean which one is tempted to identify with Lampedusa. His duty, which he reports to the “Minister of Hell”—a pun inspired by the similarity, in Italian, of the words “Interno” (Internal Affairs) and “Inferno” (Hell), is to count the often unrecognisable bodies of the drowned, distinguished through semi-illegible numbers and notes he has to make out. But although the text is crowded with corpses, and at times the General tries to concoct stereotypical life stories for

some of them, indexed to mainstream imaginaries of migration, no real empathy is developed, neither is the motif of “the Gothic” gruesomely exploited. In fact, fish are perfect culprits: “no respect for the law, these fish/no respect for anyone/[...] damn you/you keep me/me/from doing my work/of lining them up of giving a name/[...] At least let me count them first, hey? (Martinelli and Simpson, 2011, p. 30)”. And, finally, the invocation: “Be a little more humane,/sharks!” (Martinelli and Simpson, 2011, p. 30). By denouncing the imperial and neo-colonial biopolitical mechanisms of “ordering life and death through the enumeration of bodies in transit: those of the colonised and those of the migrants” (Gualtieri, 2014, p. 112), *Noise in the Waters* prophetically anticipates “the politics of counting” as “a mapping practice in which numbers proliferate while remaining approximate” (Tazzioli, 2015, p. 4), which would later frame the official narrative of the 3 October 2013 shipwreck. According to “a postcolonial reading of texts as political discourses,” at the same time the play transfers on the audience “the responsibility of dissent” and “the ethical duty of adopting an acute, inquiring, and disputing perspective” (Gualtieri, 2014, p. 123).

6. The Shipwreck Trilogy

6.1. The trilogy on stage

Lampedusa Beach, the first instalment of Prosa’s *Trilogy*, predates the spectacularisation of Lampedusa as a site of “crisis,” seeing the light as early as 2003, although it was first performed in 2007, in Le Mans, Marseille and Aix en Provence under the direction of Marie Vassière. Translated into French by Jean-Paul Manganaro (Prosa, 2012), the play was later shortlisted by the Comédie Française’s Bureau de Lecteurs for a public reading, following which a jury of spectators selected it for performance at the Studio-Théâtre in Paris, where it debuted in 2013 under the direction of Christian Benedetti. In her introduction to *Trilogia del Naufragio*, Prosa (2013a, p. 10) gives an account of how such popular selection process and “the complicity of the audience” revived her determination to continue in her project of “militant writing”: “It is the confirmation that, in spite of everything, *poetry* wins. [...] the authorisation to dare. To go further” (italics in the original). The second instalment, *Lampedusa Snow*, came to light at the end of 2012, and Prosa records how the decision to write *Lampedusa Way*, in 2013, was also inspired by encounters with French audiences and in accord with Muriel Mayette-Holtz, actress, director and, from 2006 to 2014, General Administrator of the Comédie Française. Finally, the *Trilogy* debuted in its entirety on 31 January 2014 at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in Paris. During the seasons 2014–2016 the Italian version of the *Trilogy*, directed by the author herself, was staged at the Teatro Biondo in Palermo and Piccolo Teatro di Milano over the period 2015–2017, and in 2016–2018 in Lampedusa as part of the International Festival “Lampedusa Amore,” where we attended the island première of *Lampedusa Beach* on 8 July 2016 as Prosa’s guests. In the same year the *Trilogy* was staged in Johannesburg by the Market Theatre Laboratory under the direction of Raissa Brighi and was awarded South Africa’s Kopanong Arts and Social Justice Prize. Still in 2016, Prosa (2020b) wrote *Ritratto di naufrago numero zero/Appendice alla “Trilogia del Naufragio”* (“Portrait of castaway number zero/An

appendix to the ‘Shipwreck Trilogy’”), which was performed at Taormina’s Teatro Antico. Highlighting complicity and individual responsibility, the play further complicates Prosa’s (2020a, p. 54) meditation on forced migration, the exclusionary solidification of the Mediterranean and the very meaning of human floundering in what she has called “this time of shipwreck”. At the end of 2019, this text, with *Lampedusa Beach* and *Lampedusa Snow*, became part of a project directed by Philippe Sireuil, Prosa herself and Simone Audemars and titled *La mer dans la gorge* (“The sea in the throat”), that debuted in Brussels in October 2021 after the long pause for the COVID-19 pandemic. Against the intersectional impact of pandemic and migration, “[d]eveloping the shipwreck metaphor *vis-à-vis* the failures and new global experiences, where the human body no longer counts, means speaking poetically of those who are still moving forward, of those who have not lost the need to do so, in a motionless, paralysed, sick world, withdrawn into itself” (Dossier de presse, 2021, p. 5; our translation). *Ritratto di naufrago numero zero* was published in 2020 as part of the volume *Pagina zero* (“Page zero”), collecting four other works—*Formula 1*, *Il buio sulle radici*, *Gorki del Friuli*, inspired by Giulio Regeni, and *Ulisse Artico* (“Arctic Ulysses”). The last one puts to the test the Mediterranean founding myth of Ulysses (a defining trope of Prosa’s migration imaginaries and re-mythologisation of mobility) by transferring it to an Arctic Sea where, against the general meltdown caused by environmental exploitation and global warming, Ithaca is nowhere to be found: “The contemporary Odyssey lacks precisely Ithaca, the place of return, the direction in which to orient the journey. The essential metaphor, spanning all ages” (Prosa, 2020b, p. 9).

Pressures of space prevent offering a complete bibliography of the author’s rich dramatic output and critical notes, written admittedly from her own positionality as a Sicilian woman born under the shade of Segesta’s Greek theatre and focusing, mainly, on reinterpretations of the status of the feminine through the lenses of ancient Greek drama and myth. Nor is it possible to provide a step-by-step account of the *Trilogy*’s productions and circulation, let alone the spate of translations into several European languages (Prosa, 2020b, p. 203–211).⁷ The information given above is, however, deemed to be relevant to highlight the structural convergence, in Prosa’s plays, not only of aesthetics and politics, but also of an expansive conception of myth embracing multiple places and temporalities, an inspiring collaboration across cultures and languages, an intersectional take on Italianness, feminism and cosmopolitanism, and the ability to engage international audiences in an enduring project of deborderisation and decolonisation of discourses, practices and rights through the civil outrage and poetic enchantment of her word.

6.2. *Lampedusa Beach*: an intersectional reading

Among the reasons that make the *Lampedusa* plays outstanding for our analysis, a series of defining characteristics of Prosa’s praxis and poetics are strikingly consonant with current

⁷ An English version of *Lampedusa Beach* by Nerina Cocchi and Allison Grimaldi Donahue is available at <https://theamericanreader.com/Lampedusa-beach/>.

concerns about the increasing securitisation of the world and the almost systemic weaponisation of geography to the advantage of globalised biopolitical practices of human expendability and differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Even more relevant is the playwright's ability to foreground fundamental questions of resistance and recognition that succeed in joining the contingent and the universal, the ordinary and the exceptional, the literal and the figurative, action and reflection, justice and beauty, desire and dissent against a wider canvas of urgent ethical interpellations. Some of these features are encapsulated in Prosa's comments on the inalienable drivers of her dramaturgy: the primacy of the body, the elaboration of a "feminine" perspective and diction that far from being vulnerable holds the power to actualise myth, an unrelenting commitment to a vision of the stage as a space of utopia and productive critique, and an active engagement with context. Other major foci are the responsibility of the playwright in resonating "the wars of today, the cries from the massacres, the tragic sea crossings, the harmful combination of fear and exploitation, the renewed conflict between solidarity, welcoming and border control" (Prosa, 2020a, p. 48), and the theatre's unique ability to create agendas and communities for change.

A major theme in *Lampedusa Beach* is "the right to the body," to which is attached the right to mobility: "if the body *exists*, there is solidarity, equality, freedom..." (Prosa, 2020a, p. 52). The protagonist's monologue, pronounced during the actual experience of descending into the abyss and facing her own end, may be described as an embodied narrative, which, through a syncopated kind of diction (Caserta, 2022, p. 49), conveys an almost physical apprehension of what it feels like to be approaching death: surprise, horror, fear, a raising awareness of one's own (female) body (Shauba has menstruation; the shipwreck occurs while she is being raped by the traffickers) being progressively undone by the water and giving room to the memories and desires that sustained her decision to cross the Mediterranean in search of a different life. In this way, Prosa establishes Shauba's right to occupy a legitimate place in the cemeterial narrative of the Mediterranean, to which, yet, she contributes a tale of fullness, projectuality and hope. Her storytelling not only survives the dissolution of her body, becoming timeless poetry, but in the process of shedding her own affects, dreams and desires, Shauba also becomes a figure of resistance and affirmative engagement.

Aware of Italy's colonial and neo-colonial responsibilities, and a witness to the damages of unrestrained globalisation, she denounces the slow violence of global capitalism: turning "the Capitalist" into a more-than-human figure of power, Shauba remembers how her sponsor, Mahama, "explains everything with CCappittallissmm./She says that since CCappittallissmm arrived in Affrica/one day you eat one day you don't./Survival depends on the kindness of Cappittallisstt" (Prosa, 2013b).

The more she approaches her death, the more she becomes a figure of agency, first by addressing the Italian president, in her mind, with a proposal that effectively redraws the blocked geography of the Mediterranean and reopens "the middle sea" to its once mythical connectivity: "Dear Italian Prime Minister/take away the water between Italy and Affrica... [..]/Take away the water and you'll see that deep down Italy and Africa are/united" (Prosa, 2013b). Even more powerfully, believing, in her increasing

confusion, that she has landed in Lampedusa, Shauba pleads for political asylum with the "Lieutenant in the barracks of Lampedusa Beach." On imagining his astonishment at the meaninglessness of asking for political asylum at the point of death, she makes a gesture of absolute resistance, claiming: "I think of it differently, *I disagree.*/For those who think differently, one place is not the other/like all of those who must beg for bread" (Prosa, 2013b, our italics). In the closing scene, she imagines urging the officer to reclaim his own agency too and take in her request of asylum (Prosa, 2013b). Then, opening up a subversive—mutual and decolonial—reverse scenario, she exhorts him to submit an asylum claim in Africa: "Write...write.../I can tell you what to say: I, Lieutenant under the orders of Lampedusa Beach,/with Shauba, on her deathbed, as my witness,/ask political asylum to the Head of the Afffrican State [...]/I declare myself a refugee on the grounds/that I think differently from seven people who are just like me..." (Prosa, 2013b).

Her "underwater odyssey" transforms Shauba into "a mythical creature, like "the heroes on the routes of Ulysses' journey" (Prosa, 2016; our translation).

6.3. *Lampedusa Snow* and *Lampedusa Way*: staging the hostile environment

By positing a female migrant as protagonist, *Lampedusa Beach* also deconstructs the "myth" of male predominance in migration flows. *Lampedusa Snow* evens the score, taking Shauba's brother, Mohamed, as protagonist of a monologue inspired by a newspaper article published in *La Repubblica* (Berizzi, 2011) in August 2011. It reported the case of about a hundred male asylum-seekers from different Sub-Saharan countries, arrived in Lampedusa from Libya and temporarily resettled in a secluded hotel off the Montecampione ski area at 1,800 m of altitude (Freda, 2018, p. 161–162). They had been there for months, waiting for their cases to be processed. Prosa (2013a, p. 11) was so struck at the cruelty and incongruity of that particular provision that she decided to turn a spotlight on those migrants' experience of "vertical shipwreck [...], upwards".⁸ The first lines of Mohamed's mythical monologue show him trying to come to terms with a new kind of elemental frontier, snow, by eating which he believes, in a kind of "animist ceremony," he "can be integrated more easily in the country of arrival" (D'Antonio, 2019, p. 10). But the cold repels him, makes him feel helpless and out of place: "I stand like an African at the door of an entrance/that doesn't exist" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 46). An electronic engineer, "therefore with greater expectations towards the west, but more exposed to loneliness in the European production system" (Prosa, 2015), Mohamed prepares for the Mediterranean crossing and the leap into the unknown of his journey by learning to swim, and carries with him token objects of his familiarity with the Italian way of life, which, he hopes, will facilitate intercultural encounter and acceptance. Forced to plunge off the boat to avoid the Coast Guard, he is stripped by the sea, and reduced to a mere (black) body, without identity nor substance. While *Lampedusa Beach* prioritises the female body, with a single

⁸ All the translations from *Lampedusa Snow* and *Lampedusa Way* are ours.

unspecified allusion to Shauba's skin colour (Prosa, 2013b), the snowy Alpine environment where Mohammed is transferred after landing in Lampedusa and claiming asylum enhances the otherness of the migrant through a visual game of black and white: "It snows on three points:/on me, a black African,/on the Orobian Alps,/on the ruin of substance./Is there an error?" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 45). In the scruffy lodge where he is confined, Mohamed experiences the full weight of the death-in-life slow violence of waiting and institutional neglect: "What shall I do if another day comes?/Nothing to do, except doing the same things again./I move the chair from right to left,/and from left to right. [...]" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 52). As the monologue unfolds other systemic characteristics of immigration hostile environments are given prominence: social isolation, lack of news about asylum cases, preconditioned food, inappropriate clothing provided by disorganised and patronising voluntary associations, negligent medical assistance, staggering cold. And, above all, social deprivation, immobilisation, invisibility.

As with Shauba, in *Lampedusa Snow* Prosa puts centre stage the migrant's body beyond the angle of racialisation, denouncing, on the one hand, its reduction to bare life on the part of the host country, but celebrating it, on the other, as the universal and prime locus of rights, justice, and poetry, from where every process of re-mythologisation and redress must begin. Mohamed's unequal struggle for survival with the snow and cold is conveyed through the filter of his body's sensations and affects. And it is the enervating confinement and progressive giving in of his body and hopes that trigger his dreams and imagined dialogues with Saif, whose role is analogous to that of Mahama. One of these recurring dreams is illuminating about the nexus among resocialisation, restoration of visibility, and storytelling. It is a dream of crowds climbing to him from downvalley and sitting around him in a circle "to listen to the story of Africa,/and I begin:/once upon a time there was Mohamed, [...]" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 55). Every time, the dream stops when one of the bystanders leaves the circle and tells him about Hannibal, crossing the Alps with his elephants, only one animal managing to survive. Hollowed out by a continuous state of uprootedness, suspension, and ceaseless waiting, Mohamed decides to take an old Alpino's advice to embrace "revolution" and seek for shelter in another valley: "go up, as high as you can, there's the passage to another valley, trust your intuition... if there's a snowstorm, don't be afraid, it's like a storm at sea..." (Prosa, 2013a, p. 65). Singing the Italian partisan song "Bella Ciao" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 63), like a "mountain Ulysses" (Prosa, 2015) Mohamed undertakes an epic journey in the snow until he is overwhelmed by cold and fatigue. Like Shauba, before dying, and imagining he has reached the entrance to the new valley, he makes his request: "I stop here. On the top of Italy./I am applying for political asylum./Do I have wars behind me?/I have elephants behind me,/who have made many wars" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 71). His last words are spent in pronouncing his own name: "Mohamed! Mohamed!/I keep myself company./Reality ends. Unreality begins./My name comes back to my ears like the echo of a people./How many people!" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 71; our emphasis). Echoing Shauba's statement to the Lieutenant of Lampedusa Beach, "we are innumerable," *Lampedusa Snow* also ends on a prophecy of unimpeded arrival and the poetic fulfillment of the right of appearance of its protagonist. A final caption, however, informs that the head of the rescuers, who had

found in the man's pockets his asylum request and a combined suicide note and love letter by a donor left in a jacket Mohamed had been given by a charity, perverts the migrant's mythical retelling of his own life into a lazy and misleading simplification, in tune with the mainstream discourse on migration: "It is an African refugee who killed himself for love" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 72). This "ironic ending" underlines "the inability of the country's authorities to welcome and recognise the traces of contemporary migrants, to accept their otherness and therefore to write a story that saves them from oblivion" (D'Antonio, 2019, p. 16).

Far from being unusual, the attempts of "mountain 'runaway' migrants" (Tazzioli, 2020) to cross the Alps have a long, though almost invisible history, and the dispersal and confinement of asylum-seekers in isolated mountain locations is a consolidated practice, which has come to the attention of the public with the recent spectacularisation of border tensions between Italy and France. Since the 2010s, many scholars have addressed the borderisation and militarisation of mountain frontiers that force migrants to risk dangerous routes, highlighting how the weaponisation of border geographies has deliberately exploited natural elements and topography to enhance frontierisation.

Hospitality, in the sense of opening social and ethical boundaries, is denied also in the last play of the *Trilogy*. *Lampedusa Way*, in Prosa's words, is "a horizontal shipwreck, because it's really an existential one. It's the situation of someone who doesn't know where to go." Mahama and Saif, looking for Shauba and Mohamed in Lampedusa, are stuck into limbo: "They wait and they wait. They're waiting to talk to 'the Capitalist,' because they think he's the only one who knows everyone's destiny, and therefore the only one able to give them information about their whereabouts. This meeting obviously never happens." And when their visas expire "they make the existential decision to stay illegally. At this point there's no turning back and they inch closer to undocumented status. *Lampedusa Way* is this voyage, this choice, even though within the context of the *Trilogy*, it's the conclusion" (Prosa, in Meinen, 2016). The two elderly protagonists exchange memories about their protégés and pay homage to their hopes and courage while providing, at the same time, an estranged but perceptive portrayal of Lampedusa's hostile environment. Aware that "the Capitalist" will not turn up, before going underground Mahama and Saif write a petition to "the Ambassador" that, becoming illegalised, they will not be able to deliver: "Mister Ambassador, Head of everyone who is Abroad. [...] The traces of Noah's Ark have been found, albeit on a mountain. Is it so difficult to know what happened to two poor young Africans? [...] Look for them as if they were your children. And if you have no children, look for them as if you were looking for your mother" (Prosa, 2013a, p. 99; 100). It is tempting to find a resonance with the lament of the former mayor of Lampedusa, Giusi Nicolini, speaking up to the government in the aftermath of the 3 October shipwreck: "So, if these dead are ours alone, then I want to receive condolence telegrams after each drowned person is delivered to me. As if they had white skin, as if they were our children drowned on vacation" (Nicolini and Bellingreri, 2013; our translation).

By giving central stage to multiple and defiant imaginative acts of "border struggle" (Mezzadra, 2020), the *Trilogy* embodies both the utopian and the mythicising function that Prosa (2020a,

p. 54) attributes to the theatre. In an essay titled “How and Why to Give Space to Utopia in Times of Shipwreck? The Responsibility of the Playwright,” Prosa describes migrants as “the last heralds of utopia” and identifies dramaturgy as the site where justice can be done outside the courts, and the tools to spread it “from utopian pulpits” (Prosa, 2020a, p. 57). The theatre, again, “serves to perceive emotionally what is happening around us and to perceive it in a critical function. [...] So that others can also enter this dimension,” while the playwright, in turn, is “the guardian of his times” (Prosa, 2020a, p. 52). Against the entrenched politics of immobilisation and closure that have transformed Lampedusa into a global metaphor, Prosa’s polyphony of networked stories does not only restore a name and a voice to the multitude whose existence and rights have been erased. By reconnecting its protagonists’ tales with storytelling and dramatic traditions encompassing the multiple histories and cultural perspectives of the Mediterranean region, *The Shipwreck Trilogy* also records the way trans-Mediterranean mobility has irreversibly changed the meaning of “Europe” (Prosa, 2016, p. 181; our translation) and exploded the untenability of its frontiers. Prosa’s question comes to be indexed, in this light, to a communal effort by the playwright and its audiences—and, by extension, the bearers of stories and storytellers and their listeners—to not only enable stories to travel, but also enabling and welcoming the movement they describe through respectful listening and retelling.

At the moment this essay was being completed (at the end of February 2023), news of another horrendous shipwreck off the coasts of Calabria near Steccato di Cutro was again saturating the discourse of politicians and the media. Against the recurring government slogan that departures must be stopped, a final quote from Lina Prosa seems to provide an appropriate conclusion, as it brings together civic engagement and the redemptive and memorialising power of the creative word. As Prosa put it, “with Shauba I wanted to disseminate the Mediterranean ‘sea-cemetery’ with names, as a kind of

inscription on an immense tombstone, impossible to fix, to celebrate. It is precisely the miracle of poetry that breaks down borders, brings the body back to the centre of its ‘mythical’ journey. It buries the anonymous and the innocent. It reopens the path to Ithaca, to see her again” (Prosa, 2016, p. 182; our translation).

Author contributions

CG is the author of Sections 1–4. LDM is the author of Sections 5, 6. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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