



# Lampedusa and the migrant crisis

## Ethics, representation and history

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- Abstract** The tiny Italian island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean has become notorious in the early twenty-first century through a series of migrant disasters which, until the events of 2015, came to typify the scale and horror of forced migration on a scale not witnessed since the Second World War. This article outlines the background to this story and why Lampedusa became so important in the ‘borderization’ of Europe. It then explores issues of representation, especially within Lampedusa itself, from sources varying from the island’s cemetery to official and alternative sites of heritage (especially the Porto M museum) through to the films, documentaries and plays that have been recently made. Ethical issues are raised including the archaeology of hate speech towards migrants, especially in relation to British Mandate Palestine, and whether there are limits to what can be shown of the horror. Finally, it asks what space there is for the migrant voice to be heard in cultural and political responses to this global crisis.
- Keywords** Palestine; Illegal Immigration; Lampedusa; Hate Speech; Memory and Memorialisation; Holocaust; Migration Crisis.
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## History and background

The politics of the Middle East and power relations have acted as a barrier between Jewish and Palestinian mutual awareness of and sensitivity to refugeedom, whether past or present. As Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg suggest, this need not necessarily be the case. They argue that the ‘Palestinian and Jewish refugees of the Nakba and the Holocaust not only serve as disruptive and alarming reminders of the exclusionary forces of identity politics in Israel/Palestine’.<sup>1</sup> More positively, they are

“also... a challenge to the statist mainstream Palestinian and Israeli politics that view exclusive and separate ethnic nation-states as the ultimate and desired institutional frame within which the political rights of the respective peoples are realised and protected.”<sup>2</sup>

From this inclusive perspective, they suggest that ‘Consequently, one could view the refugee as a herald of alternative and creative forms of politics, ones premised on partnership, cooperation, joint dwelling and integration rather than on segregation, balkanization, separation and ghettoization’.<sup>3</sup> If making such linkages, however desirable, seem unlikely given the dismal politics of the region, it is equally hard to envisage the the stories of Jewish ‘illegal’ immigration to Palestine from 1933 to 1948, most infamously in the case of *Exodus 1947*, being placed alongside more recent narratives of forced migration across the ‘merciless sea’. So far, the exclusive tendencies and partial amnesia associated with its journeying have largely precluded such comparisons. But in the spirit of the challenge (and opportunity) offered by Bashir and Goldberg who note that ‘An empathetic view of the refugee disrupts the validity of the foundations of the political order that created her in the first place and now abandons her to her fate’, this article will explore the possibilities further in relation to historic and contemporary journeys of forced migration across the Mediterranean.

In autumn 2015, cultural historian and literary biographer, Philip Hoare, used the ‘horrors of slavery’, the ‘coffin ships’ of the Irish famine and those transported to Australia by the British as ‘historical parallels’ when powerfully evoking the traumatic journeys of those attempting to cross ‘the Mediterranean in search of a better life’. To him, these extreme examples from the past ‘underline the desperation of the situation’ today. British amnesia of ‘illegal’ Jewish migration to Palestine curtail juxtaposition with contemporary tragedies associated with the ‘sea of despair’ – one which Hoare may well otherwise have added to his list of maritime human misery. Hoare concludes: ‘Slaves and transportees had no choice but to leave. The hungry and dispossessed have a choice, but it is hardly much of one.’<sup>4</sup>

It has been estimated that from 1933 to 1948 108,000 Jewish ‘illegal’ immigrants came to Palestine in 116 vessels.<sup>5</sup> In 2014 alone, double that number of undocumented migrants came

1 Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, ‘Deliberating the Holocaust and the Nakba: disruptive empathy and binationalism in Israel/Palestine’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 16 (1), (2014) 92.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Philip Hoare, ‘Sea of despair’, *Guardian*, 22 April 2015; and idem, 2013. *The Sea Inside* (London: Fourth Estate).

5 Mordechai Naor, *Haapala: Clandestine Immigration 1931-1948* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publishing House, 1987), 105.



Fig. 1: The cemetery of boats, Lampedusa, Photo: Tony Kushner

to Europe by sea, thousands drowning in the Mediterranean attempting to do so. A year later and outside Europe, the crisis of boat people off the Indonesian coast became scandalous, but nothing compared to what would become *the* global migration story of 2015 as will be outlined shortly. Earlier in the twenty first century within the Indian Ocean, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers attempting to reach its shores provoked international criticism with the sinking of the *Palapa* in 2001, a tragedy that was a portent of what was to follow in the new millennium. A small fishing boat, it carried over 400 asylum seekers, mainly Afghans, journeying from Indonesia and attempting to reach Christmas Island, which belongs to Australia. The Australian government was determined that those on board, rescued from the sea by the Norwegian vessel, the *Tampa*, would not enter its territory and after weeks at sea, they were detained in newly created 'off-shore processing centres'. Christmas Island and other places en route, Caroline Moorehead notes in her exploration of modern refugees, *Human Cargo* (2005), were "excised" from Australia for the purposes of migration. Australia had effectively, by a stroke of its pen, shrunk its borders.<sup>6</sup>

Moorehead is one of the few who has been aware of the historical precedent explored in this chapter, stating that this 'Pacific Solution' of relocating refugees 'was not new – the British blockade of Palestine... had refused to let Jewish refugees land and pushed them to Cyprus'.<sup>7</sup> It is significant that even then she dates such policies to the pre- rather than post-war era, reflecting the vague memories associated with this troubled policy. This article will further explore such parallels between journeys out of the Holocaust with contemporary boat migrants with

6 Caroline Moorehead, *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 108.

7 Ibid.



regard to history, memory and representation. It will query whether or not they are ethically appropriate and analytically helpful with regard to the pursuit of a comparative framework and, from that, politico-cultural intervention.

Introducing *Human Cargo*, Caroline Moorehead defines an ‘illegal immigrant’ as a ‘person residing in a foreign country without permission’. As her narrative progresses, incorporating the harrowing personal testimony of refugees who have risked their lives in dangerous sea and land journeys, she returns to that definition. She interrogates it especially in relation to the Australian homeland of her father, Alan. A leading war journalist and writer, best known in Britain for his powerful reports on the liberation of Belsen, he continuously explored the nature of Australianness, a tradition that his daughter was continuing through its treatment of desperate sea migrants. There, such boat people, regardless of their status, were labelled by the Liberal government during the 1990s as ‘illegals’. For Caroline Moorehead

“The use of the word ‘illegals’ suggests criminals, people who have done wrong, terrorists, certainly people not entitled to anything. They are seen as ‘queue jumpers’, stealing the places of the good refugees who have been patiently waiting their turn...”<sup>8</sup>

This process of ‘othering’ through the discourse of ‘illegality’ blatantly replicates that of the official mind and Jewish migration to Palestine during the 1930s and 1940s – the term ‘illegal immigration’ as a legal category was itself coined in 1933/1934 by British civil servants in Whitehall and Jerusalem. The closeness in language reinforces the validity of Judith Butler’s analysis of hate speech and how its sedimentation through repetition ‘gives the name its force’.<sup>9</sup> Initially Britain provided Palestine with its alien legislation, but it was from this quasi-imperial space that the term ‘illegal immigration’ came back to the Metropolis and, from there, to global usage in rhetoric and policy by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

Moorehead’s *Human Cargo* is an important statement about the nature of debates about world asylum seekers which had grown increasingly animated in the early twenty first century. By the time of its publication, the island of Lampedusa had become infamous in this respect, a notoriety that has grown exponentially in the subsequent ten years. Lampedusa, as Moorehead poetically suggests, is ‘where Italy ends and where Africa begins’.<sup>11</sup> Famous (until the recent migrant crisis) only through its connection to the author of *The Leopard*, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (whose ancestors had a long connection to the island, but who himself never visited, residing in Sicily), it is a small, sparsely populated and starkly bare island (a result of misguided nineteenth century deforestation) where fishing and tourism were the mainstays of the economy until the migrant crisis. It had minor military importance in the twentieth century, especially as a postwar NATO base. Within Jewish folklore the island was much celebrated when a British RAF pilot, Sidney Cohen in 1943 allegedly single handedly (and accidentally) achieved the surrender of the Italian garrison there having crash landed – a story which somewhat embellished his role. This feat was then commemorated at the time and subsequently in

8 Ibid, 104.

9 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

10 More generally see Georgina Sinclair and Chris Williams, “‘Home and Away’: The Cross-Fertilisation between “Colonial” and “British” Policing, 1921-85’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35 (2)(2007), 221-38.

11 Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 51.



Fig. 2: One of the Libyan/Tunisian boats carrying migrants, Lampedusa Beach, Photo: Tony Kushner

the *King of Lampedusa*, a play that revived the Yiddish theatre in Britain and beyond to counter the image of the cowardly, unmanly Jew and instead announced the arrival of a new 'type' who would fulfill a similar role in 'liberating' Palestine as a Jewish national home.<sup>12</sup>

Ominously in relation to its later function as a reception then detention camp for migrants in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, Lampedusa had a pre-history, serving as 'a penal colony during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.<sup>13</sup> In this respect it has a similar history to other remote islands as racialised spaces to relocate those deemed as 'matter out of place'. Robben Island, for example, was a penal and leper colony before it became notorious for incarcerating opponents of apartheid. Moreover, Lampedusa's role in the processes of modern migration is not out of place in its history from antiquity onwards. As Stefano, the fisherman hero of Anders Lustgarten's play *Lampedusa* (2015), explains:

"This is where the world began. This was Caesar's highway. Hannibal's road to glory. These were the trading routes of the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, the Ottomans and the Byzantines... We all come from the sea and back to the sea we will go. The Mediterranean gave birth to the world."<sup>14</sup>

12 The fullest account is Katie Power's MA dissertation, University of Southampton, 2015. The play was written by Shmuel Harendorf shortly after the news of the surrender. For the text and commentary see Heather Valencia (ed.), *The King of Lampedusa* (London: Jewish Music Institute, 2003).

13 Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna and Vicente Ruggiero, 'Thinking Lampedusa: border construction, the spectacle of bare life and the productivity of migrants', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43 (3)(2015), 443, note 8.

14 Anders Lustgarten, *Lampedusa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.



Moorehead described Lampedusa in the first years of the twenty first century: ‘Spring and summer, on the long calm days, it is where the refugees arrive almost daily in their battered and crumbling boats, frightened, unsure, expectant.’ More clinically, she added that ‘Experts in asylum matters who study the flows of refugees and their journeys to the north, call it the blue route after the waters of the Mediterranean, and it has become a lucrative source of the estimated \$5 to \$7 billion revenue from the world’s traffic in smuggled people.’<sup>15</sup> Until the tragedies of 2015 which focused on different desperate journeys across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to various Greek islands, no place came to symbolise more the intense human tragedy and drama of modern migration, evoking sentiments of pity, shame and fear in equal measures. Politicians, NGOs, artists and the media, as well as and the islanders and migrants themselves, have confronted and represented the recent and ongoing story of Lampedusa. In 2016, for example, British Guyanese artist, Jason deCaires Taylor, created his work *Raft of Lampedusa* on the seabed off the coast of Lanzarote. According to Taylor, his work was ‘not intended as a tribute or memorial to the many lives lost but as a stark reminder of the collective responsibility of our new global community’. In what is part of the world’s first underwater museum, thirteen passengers drift towards an unknown future on a flimsy inflatable boat.<sup>16</sup> The sculptures are located 3000 nautical miles from and in a different ocean to Lampedusa. Furthermore, its main figure at the bow is cast from Abdel Kader who as a thirteen year old was smuggled from the troubled Western Sahara to Lanzarote at the turn of the twenty first century. But the precise geography referenced in the title of Taylor’s work (paying homage to Gericault’s 1818 painting *The Raft of the Medusa*) reflects the Italian island’s notoriety with regard to the modern migration crisis.<sup>17</sup> As with Palestine and ‘illegal’ immigration, questions of *performativity* have been central in establishing meaning to Lampedusa.

In their 2014 cultural guide for travellers to Sicily, Andrew and Suzanne Edwards contrast its major city Palermo with ‘the remains of a splendid Arab-Norman past with the less happy reflection of ‘modern-day relations with North Africa’ – that of those ‘intent on escaping the harsh realities at home’:

“The most obvious demonstration of these events has been the refugee centre on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, one of the nearest landfalls to Tunisia. Many have risked life and limb, often falling prey in the process to unscrupulous people – traffickers whose last priority is their victims’ safety...”<sup>18</sup>

Also in the realm of the holiday maker, in 2015 TripAdvisor produced a list of the top ten beaches in Europe. The first three were in the Mediterranean with Rabbit Beach, Lampedusa,

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15 Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 51-2.

16 Susan Smillie, ‘Into the Deep’, *Guardian*, 3 February 2016. For an underwater tour of the work and interview with Taylor, see ‘Underwater museum offers stark reminder of refugee crisis’, *PBS NewsHour*, 5 February 2016, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), accessed 21 August 2016. It officially opened to scuba divers on 25 February 2016.

17 Smillie, ‘Into the Deep’. It could be added that the boat in Taylor’s work more resembles the dinghies connected to the journeys from Turkey to the Greek islands rather than the larger vessels which were associated with Lampedusa. Gericault’s Romanticist painting depicted the sinking of a French navy frigate and the ‘abandonment of 147 souls to a hastily built raft from which only 15 survived’. Smillie continues that ‘the painting was seen as an indictment of the French monarchy and political system’.

18 Andrew and Suzanne Edwards, *Sicily: A Literary Guide for Travellers* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 230.



Fig. 3: Rabbit Beach, Photo: Tony Kushner

ranked the highest.<sup>19</sup> As is happening in other parts of the ‘blue route’ – most recently the Greek islands – the misery of migration at its most desperate is coinciding in time and place with the pursuit of tourist pleasure. Affluent Western visitors are witnessing the victims of dictatorship, failed states, civil war, ethnic cleansing, religious intolerance and basic deprivation of life chances. They are thus inadvertently becoming co-presents to those suffering the most extreme problems of the contemporary world. Whilst official Italian tourist information continues to insist that Lampedusa is ‘one of the most-frequented destinations of sun-worshippers, scuba-divers and nature lovers’, in reality this ‘glorious sun-bleached island’ is still firmly associated with human migration in its most basic and deadly form.<sup>20</sup>

Some tourists have understandably resented the intrusion of such reminders of global misery, but many have engaged in acts of kindness and solidarity alongside the work of sympathetic local activists. Most prominent has been the creation of the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), run by Chris and Regina Catrambone after they came across clothing in the sea as they sailed in their yacht away from Lampedusa. Rather than ignore evidence of another migrant death, Chris (an American entrepreneur) and Regina (his Italian wife) decided to devote themselves to saving lives:

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19 *The Metro*, 18 February 2015.

20 Italia Travel Ideas, ‘The Island of Lampedusa’, Italian Tourism Official Website 2015, <http://www.italia.it/en/travel-ideas/the-sea/the-island-of-lampedusa.html>, accessed 19 June 2015.



“Look at me out here cruising on my boat, at the same time people are out there dying. So our heaven is their hell, right? Our paradise is their hell.”<sup>21</sup>

Of Italian immigrant origin, ‘Catrambone saw the migrants as either desperate, entrepreneurial, or both – not too different from his own great-grandfather’. To him, the moral imperative to help was unambiguous:

“If you are against saving lives at sea then you are a bigot and you don’t even belong in our community. If you allow your neighbour to die in your backyard, then you are responsible for that death.”<sup>22</sup>

Catrambone purchased a yacht, the *Phoenix*, sailed across the Atlantic and in ten weeks from August 2014 rescued over 1400 people in the Mediterranean. To him, as with those in Britain and elsewhere during the Nazi era, rather than wait for their governments and international organisations to act, they have shown that individuals can make a critical difference themselves.

There are no definitive figures for those who have died migrating to Europe using the Mediterranean. Using media and NGOs, the monitoring group Fortress Europe argued that between 1993 and 2011, close to 20,000 died en route. Since then the numbers have gone up alarmingly – estimated at 3419 for 2014 and 300 higher for 2015 with the figure likely to be exceeded in 2016.<sup>23</sup> The problem of using such information, however, is that ‘Some places receive more... attention than others because they have developed into “border theatres”’. Of all these, Lampedusa until 2014 was the most prominent example.<sup>24</sup> Without its connection to boat migrants, ‘Lampedusa would be just one of the many minor Italian islands living on fishing and tourism’.<sup>25</sup> Its recent connection to migration began slowly and then transformed the island. At times since the twenty first century, migrants have outnumbered residents (5,800) and an infrastructure involving large scale policing and humanitarian presence has also impacted on the everyday life of Lampedusa.

It is often assumed that desperate migrants have wanted to come to Lampedusa as the closest piece of European land from Africa. Whilst in the early stages of this movement in the 1990s, there was an element of truth in such assumptions, it has not been the case subsequently. Since the early twenty first century, it has been emphasised that migrants ‘did not arrive of their own accord’: they thus did not *choose* Lampedusa, but were directed and diverted there by the Italian authorities as a way of controlling the flows of migration which were both increasing in numbers and diversifying in places of origin.<sup>26</sup>

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21 Giles Tremlett, “If you are against saving lives at sea then you are a bigot”, *Guardian*, 8 July 2015.

22 Ibid.

23 *Guardian*, 2 April 2015; 10m Displacement Tracking Matrix. [2015]. Migration Flows Europe, <http://migration.iom.int/europe>, accessed 27 December 2015.

24 Tara Brian and Frank Laczko(eds), *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2014), 93.

25 Paolo Cuttitta, ‘Borderizing the Island. Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa “Border Play”’, *ACME* 13 (2) (2014), 214.

26 Dines et al, ‘Thinking Lampedusa’, 432-3.



In 2013, close to 15,000 migrants were processed through Lampedusa, most fleeing from Eritrea.<sup>27</sup> The numbers in the early 1990s were much smaller, but in 1996 they merited the construction of an informal reception centre, largely run by local volunteers trained by the Italian Red Cross.<sup>28</sup> Two years later, reflecting the growing anxiety about such migration, this voluntary centre was replaced by an official one near the airport. It accommodated up to 150 people and was surrounded by barbed wire: ‘inmates were forbidden from moving freely around the island. After a period (during which they were given almost no information about asylum procedures) boatpeople were “distributed” by plane to other facilities in Sicily or mainland Italy or deported to Libya.’ In turn, a new detention (rather than reception) centre was constructed which opened in 2007, designed for a up to 800 internees and largely invisible within Lampedusa town, the only settlement beyond a few scattered houses on the island.<sup>29</sup>

Lampedusa had become a ‘border zone’,<sup>30</sup> a place which had ‘essentially become detached from the rest of Italy’.<sup>31</sup> It is, in the words of Alison Mountz, one of many ‘stateless spaces’.<sup>32</sup> The Sicilian Channel had, in effect, ‘become an outer border of the European Union’,<sup>33</sup> and Lampedusa was the focal place/non-place where attempts were made at controlling the flow of unwanted ‘illegal’ migrants. Then on 3 October 2013, ‘the world witnessed the most dramatic human disaster in the Mediterranean Sea since the Second World War’.<sup>34</sup> A small fishing boat left Libya carrying over 500 largely Somali and Eritrean refugees. The vessel caught fire just half a mile from Lampedusa – only 155 survived with the rest drowning. What happened on 3 October 2013 was far from the first instance of

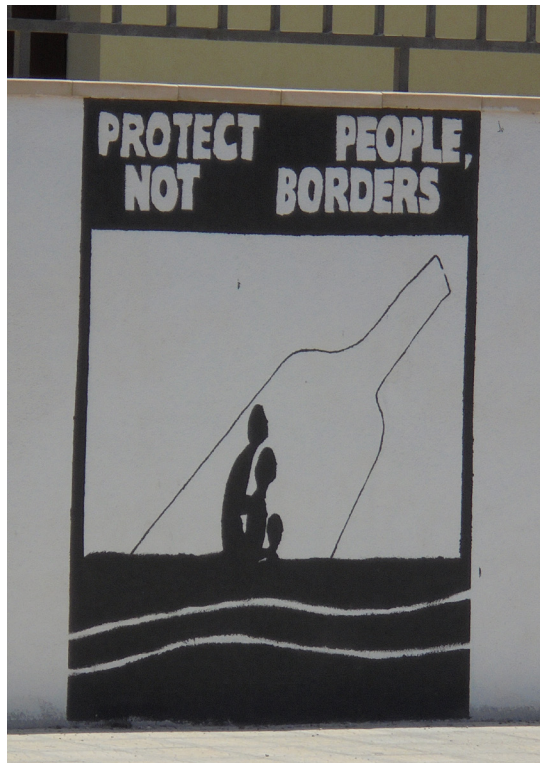


Fig. 4: Mural, Lampedusa Town, Photo: Tony Kushner

27 Zed Nelson, ‘A long way home’, *Guardian*, 22 March 2014.

28 Heidrun Friese, ‘Border Economies: A Nascent Migration Industry Around Lampedusa’, in *Borders, Mobilities and Migrations: Perspectives from the Mediterranean 19-21st Century* edited by Lisa Anteby-Yemini et al (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014), 121.

29 Ibid, 122; author site visit, 6 August 2015. It is above the town and accessible only through a dead end road.

30 Cuttitta, ‘“Borderizing” the Island’, 205.

31 Dines et al, ‘Thinking Lampedusa’, 433.

32 Alison Mountz, *Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 129.

33 Timothy Raeymaekers, ‘Introduction: Europe’s Bleeding Border and the Mediterranean as a Relational Space’, *ACME* 13 (2)(2014), 165.

34 Ibid.



mass migrant death at sea, and it has been surpassed by even greater tragedies thereafter. The response to it, however, marked a rupture: ‘its scale [was] too great for us to ignore’.<sup>35</sup>

The disaster led to an international outcry, led by Pope Francis in what was his first official engagement. He visited Lampedusa where both the survivors and the bodies of some of the dead had been brought. Pope Francis responded that ‘The word disgrace comes to mind. It is a disgrace’. He also urged ‘Let’s unite our efforts so that tragedies like this don’t happen again’.<sup>36</sup> Whilst in 2014, through a variety of governmental and private initiatives, some 170,000 migrants were rescued in the Mediterranean,<sup>37</sup> less than eighteen months after 3 October 2013, several similar sized boats capsized close to Lampedusa, with over 300 migrants feared to have drowned.<sup>38</sup> These, however, were overshadowed by an even larger catastrophe in the spring of 2015. In May 2015, a boat carrying over 800 migrants sank leaving just 28 survivors.<sup>39</sup>

In 2015, over a million migrants have attempted to reach Europe across the Mediterranean. Of these, ‘only’ 150,000 arrived in Italy from Africa, but the danger of this route is emphasised by the numbers continuing to drown in the ‘Blue Desert’. The International Organization of



Fig. 5: Migrants’ and other tombstones, Lampedusa Cemetery, Photo: Tony Kushner

35 ‘Europe’s Immigration Disaster’, ‘Dispatches’, Channel 4 television, 24 June 2014.

36 *Guardian*, 4 October 2013.

37 *Guardian*, 8 April 2015.

38 *Metro*, 12 February 2015.

39 *Guardian*, 23 May 2015.



Fig. 6-8: Migrant tombstones, named and unnamed, Lampedusa Cemetery, Photo: Tony Kushner

Migration estimate that of roughly 3,700 recorded deaths, close to 2,900 have been en route to Italy via Lampedusa/Sicily. In contrast, there have been just over 700 deaths for the 800,000 plus who have attempted to reach Greece.<sup>40</sup>

It is perhaps the comparative ‘safety’ of the sea journeys to the Greek islands that has persuaded some, especially Syrian refugees, to shift from the ‘high-risk, central Mediterranean to the less risky eastern Mediterranean route’ from 2015.<sup>41</sup> At the start of 2016, with European Union attempts to cut off journeys from Turkey to Greece, there are fears (now realised) that the central Mediterranean route will become dominant again. Anticipating this possibility, then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was reported as demanding EU leaders to increase the number of patrol ships in order to turn ‘back boats of refugees as soon as they set off on perilous journeys across the Mediterranean from Libya’.<sup>42</sup>

With reference to the island’s recent, traumatic history, Paolo Cuttitta has referred to the ‘Lampedusa “Border Play”’ and one that has been ‘performed’ from 2004 onwards and which up to 2014 consisted of ‘five acts’.<sup>43</sup> Cuttitta is far from insensitive to the sufferings of the migrants linked to the island, noting that ‘Lampedusa is the place where hundreds of migrants have touched Italian soil only as dead bodies’.<sup>44</sup> He is aware of the dangers of studies that ignore the ‘agency and the subjectivity of migrants’, pointing out in his case study

40 ‘Irregular Migrant, Refugee Arrivals in Europe Top One Million in 2015’, International Organization for Migration, 22 December 2015, in <http://migration.iom.int/Europe>, accessed 27 December 2015.

41 Philippe Fargues, ‘2015: The year we mistook refugees for invaders’, *Migration Policy Centre: Policy Brief 12* (December 2015), 2.

42 Rowena Mason, ‘Cameron wants EU to turn back more refugees’, *Guardian*, 18 March 2016.

43 Cuttitta, ‘“Borderizing” the Island’, 207.

44 *Ibid*, 197.



that alongside the role played by those managing and policing the border, that ‘Lampedusa has... been a place of riots, of self induced injuries, of protests and escapes, during which migrants also happened to join the local population in rallies against the Italian government, as well as to clash with groups of local inhabitants’. More fundamentally, he highlights how ‘each sea crossing testifies the motivation and strength of migrants trying to realize their migratory projects’.<sup>45</sup> His focus, however, is the ‘performance’ of migrant control and the international power politics behind it.

Even with the vastly expanded numbers of boat migrants in 2014 and 2015, those travelling across sea are still in the minority compared to those going across land or flying. But as Cuttitta argues, ‘if the border... is a suitable theatre for the “political spectacle”, the sea border is the ideal stage for political actors to perform the “border play”’.<sup>46</sup> The five acts identified by Cuttitta on Lampedusa consist of ‘toughness’, when from October 2004 to March 2006, roughly 2,200 migrants were returned from the island to Libya. The second ‘act’ was ‘humaneness’ following the success of a more progressive Italian coalition government in April 2006 when the number of such deportations was reduced. The detention centre was reformed and made more open to public scrutiny, but at the same time all efforts were made in cooperation with the Gadhafi regime to stop migrants leaving from Libya. This lasted until late 2008 when a third ‘emergency’ act was started.<sup>47</sup>

The ‘tough border’ was re-established with increased migration and the detention centre soon became overcrowded with over 1800, over double its capacity, housed there by January 2009. Periods of internment increased leading to hunger strikes and an attempt to set fire to the buildings. It was followed by a fourth act – ‘zero immigration’, starting from May 2009 with ‘push-back operations from the high seas’ and the closing of the detention centre. This continued until 2011 when the number of migrants increased rapidly following the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ when thousands of Tunisians left their country. With the detention centre still closed, 4000 migrants were left sleeping on Lampedusa’s streets and their numbers – over 6000, ‘exceeded that of the local population’.<sup>48</sup>

The tragic events of October 2013 and February 2015, with many smaller incidents in-between and following, have added further ‘acts’ to the narrative, but Cuttitta identifies astutely how Lampedusa is used not only to implement controls in a location ‘more “border” than other Italian and European border places’, but also as where this ‘border’ is performed to the outside world, including to would-be migrants.<sup>49</sup> There is a parallel here to *Exodus 1947*, a former pleasure boat carrying 4,500 Jews who were to be returned by sea to Europe having arrived in Haifa. The British and Palestinian authorities wanted to make its journey into a salutary example as well as a specific case of refused entry to ‘illegal’ immigrants. Similarly, in 2016, the Australian immigration authorities have commissioned a multi-million pound film, *The Journey* to put off would-be migrants. A ‘lavish production’, it depicts ‘hopeful asylum seekers [from Afghanistan]

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45 Ibid, 199.

46 Ibid, 206.

47 Ibid, 207-8.

48 Ibid, 210-1.

49 Ibid, 212.

who meet tragic fates crossing the Indian Ocean'.<sup>50</sup>

In all these cases, security and economic fears have run alongside humanitarian concern. In the case of the Jewish 'illegal' immigration, the British tried (and largely failed) to impress the world that those embarking on such journeys, and especially the organisers, were doing so at the expense of genuine, legitimate refugees. Today, similar dynamics

are at work with the focus of European and other Western organisations and politicians being on the 'criminal' smugglers and the need to curtail their activities, including the destruction of boats used to carry the migrants. If those used to transport Jewish migrants in and after the Nazi era were larger vessels well beyond their useful life, many of those today are tiny, described as being like the ones 'children used to play with on the beach. They are really just toys'.<sup>51</sup> Returning to Lampedusa, since Cuttitta wrote, the detention centre has become closed to visitors and supporters of the migrants, isolating them from the largely positive response of the islanders to their presence. In a further attempt to render the migrants invisible, the coast guard boats bringing in the migrants and then sending them on to Sicily arrive and depart late at night.<sup>52</sup>

## Representation

Self-consciously, Cuttitta's Lampedusa 'play' provides only a walk-on part for the migrants themselves. Consideration will now be given to their perspectives and performativity, alongside the wider representation (including self-representation) of their experiences and those of the island/islanders as a whole. It will be argued that comparing the situation to the 1930s/40s, there is both change and continuity in how the migrant voice is incorporated. The major limitation then and now is the focus on the journey itself with little attention given to the individual's life before it was undertaken or their prospects thereafter.

Typical in this respect is the substantial investigation: *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration* (2014), published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Within it testimony is sparse and used to highlight a specific perspective. The report closes with



Fig. 9: Inside St.Gerland's Catholic Church, Lampedusa Town,  
Photo: Tony Kushner

50 *Guardian*, 29 March 2016.

51 Montse Sanchez, a human rights worker, quoted in *Guardian*, 3 June 2014.

52 Tony Kushner, discussion with local activist, Paola Larosa, Lampedusa, 5 August 2015.



the words of Kasseh, a 15 year old Ethiopian boy who, with his friends, left a farming community in search of better paid work. After a series of horrendous experiences, where some girls in his group were abducted, Kasseh was eventually reunited with his family in Ethiopia. Rather than ‘journeys of hope’, he reflects that they were ones of disaster:

My only dream now is that somebody may stop these ‘trips’ that are full of pain and suffering for poor people. My only truth now is tell my friends about what happened to me and warn them not to go through what I went.<sup>53</sup>

As an intergovernmental organization, IOM campaigns for ‘humane and orderly migration’ and thus it is not surprising that Kasseh’s testimony should be instrumentalised with this objective in mind as a cautionary tale for those thinking of embarking on a journey that in reality would be chaotic and dangerous. Elsewhere in *Fatal Journeys* it is emphasised that of the 40,000 migrant deaths in transit recorded (and two thirds are not), for as many as one in five the region (let alone the country) of origin is unknown.<sup>54</sup> That so many deaths literally leave no trace in a world of instant communication and constant surveillance reflects the utter obscurity and marginality of so many migrants today. The Mediterranean, in the words of Caroline Moorehead, ‘is not a deserted sea. Its waters are among the busiest in the world, criss-crossed by fishing boats, naval vessels and cruise ships, along with the patrol boats of the various coastguards’<sup>55</sup> Even so, thousands have drowned in it. Against that invisibility is the desire of many NGOs, journalists, campaigners, academics and others to give restore individuality to the migrant.

During the Nazi era, the *Manchester Guardian* was unmatched globally for its daily coverage of the plight of the Jews. Before and after, it was not only Jewish refugees that this newspaper championed, and this empathy and support of the forcibly displaced has continued into the twenty first century. Confronting the crisis of the boat people in the Mediterranean in spring 2015, and the paucity of the European Union’s responses to them, it emphasised the common humanity binding ‘us’ and ‘them’:

A proud father who is fleeing persecution, a mother who wants to give her family a chance – every migrant who risks their lives in the Mediterranean has a story that any European would recognise... [I]n any discussion of what should be done, that particularity is the most important thing to remember.<sup>56</sup>

Effort has been made to record the ‘individual stories of hope and fear’ of those that have survived the nautical disasters, including those from the sinking near Lampedusa in October 2013. One of these was Fanus, an 18 year old Eritrean woman whose story was told in words, photographs and documentary by film maker Zed Nelson.<sup>57</sup> She had paid close to £1000 for the journey that so nearly led to her death. Travelling with her best friend, ‘Like almost every other

53 Brian and Laczko, *Fatal Journeys*, 174-5.

54 Ibid, 15, 24.

55 Caroline Moorehead, ‘Missing in the Mediterranean’, *Intelligent Life Magazine*, May/June 2014.

56 Editorial: ‘A thousand individual stories of hope and fear have been lost. Europe must act’, *Guardian*, 22 April 2015.

57 Zed Nelson, ‘A long way home’, *Guardian*, 22 March 2014; ‘Europe’s Immigration Disaster’, ‘Dispatches’, *Channel 4*, 24 June 2014.



passenger, they had left Eritrea, fleeing the military dictatorship and forced conscription. Fanus had paid smugglers to get her over the border and on through the Sahara to Libya'. The Mediterranean crossing was thus just 'the final leg of a dangerous, expensive journey in search of asylum in Europe'. Her narrative focuses on this and her other failed attempts to escape Eritrea and how 'My parents sold everything they had to raise the money' – in all it cost over £2000.<sup>58</sup>

In Stockholm some six months after her traumatic arrival in Lampedusa, Fanus (her real name was withheld to protect her family), reflected with horror on how she got there from Africa: 'I don't want to look back and remember my journey, nobody should have to go through what we did. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.'<sup>59</sup> But even this truncated account of her life story, with the focus on the Lampedusa disaster and her life as an 'illegal' immigrant after it, is exceptional. Fanus burnt her fingertips so as to avoid police recognition. The wider aim was to avoid return to Italy as place of first arrival under the Dublin Treaty in processing asylum seekers. Others avoided telling the authorities of their journey to Lampedusa for the same reason. Meron Estefanos, an Eritrean activist who has supported those who survived the October 2013 disaster, relates that 'They are afraid if they tell their story, there is a risk they will be sent back to Italy so for that reason people choose not to mention they survived the boat tragedy. They pretend they came a different route'. In speaking out, having reached Sweden 'illegally', Fanus 'decided to take her chances. "If they want to send us back to Italy, we'll tell them Italy did not treat us right, We just have to be honest.'<sup>60</sup> But it is not only this aspect of their life stories that such migrants have performed differently from reality – their places of origin and reasons for leaving have also often been constructed to reflect the reality of European asylum procedures.

From the moment immigration controls were systematically introduced in the late nineteenth century, migrants have shaped both their testimony and their paperwork to improve their chances of gaining entry. The latest manifestation of this 'game' (one that can mean life or death) is migrants performing what they hope will be right narrative for those whose job it is to keep borders as restrictive as possible. As Caroline Moorehead noted in 2005, when covering the life of asylum seekers in the north east of England:

Refugee life is rife with rumour. Among those who wait to be interviewed for refugee status, word circulates about how some nationalities are more likely to get asylum than others, about how some stories are more powerful than others, and some more likely to touch the hearts of the interviewers.

She adds that the 'buying and selling of "good" stories, stories to win asylum, has become common practice in refugee circles, among people terrified that their own real story is not powerful'. She concludes 'How easy, then, how natural, to shape the past in such a way that it provides more hope for a better future'.<sup>61</sup> In the ten years since she published *Human Cargo*, the level of control and culture of disbelief has grown and, alongside it, the self-construction of migrant narratives to resist such tendencies.

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58 Nelson, 'A long way home'.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 136.



Perhaps the most desperate attempt to ‘perform’ refugeedom is the desire to show innocence through the presence of young children on these boats. Abdul Azizi, and 26 other refugees from Afghanistan and Syria boarded a boat from Turkey aiming for Greece. After two hours their engine failed and a Greek coastguard vessel ordered them to return to Turkey. ‘We said the boat had broken down. And we took the babies and held them above our heads, to show that there were children on board. But they didn’t listen’. Their boat was towed towards Turkey and then began to sink:

The women and children were in the [hold] and we went to try and get them... Everything happened so quickly. There was no time to save our children. We had arrived in Europe. We were refugees. But in a flash I had lost my child and my wife.<sup>62</sup>

In this vein, there are even more horrific stories to tell. The three hundred plus victims of the October 2013 Lampedusa disaster included ‘a baby boy still attached to his mother by the umbilical cord’.<sup>63</sup> After 1945, Jewish survivors of the Holocaust performed their persecuted state through adopting, according to frustrated British officials, a ‘Belsen’ pose.<sup>64</sup> In the first decades of the twenty first century, the climate of distrust is such that migrants have to exhibit their children to show they are not a threat to the receiving countries. No children under 12 reached Lampedusa following 3 October 2013. And then, at the beginning of September 2015, the world was shocked by Nilufer Demir’s photograph of three year old Alan Kurdi washed up on the Turkish coast and cradled by a Turkish policeman.<sup>65</sup> If only briefly, the conscience of the world, which Pope Francis had valiently tried but largely failed to call into action in October 2013, was stirred by the death of this child, his brother, Galip, and mother.

In the case of Jewish migration to Palestine during the 1930s/40s, testimony extended only to routes taken, framed within a discourse of either legality/illegality or of organised resistance to British restrictionism. With contemporary boat people, there has been greater sensitivity from the media and NGOs in showing the individuality of the migrants, acknowledging their agency and explaining why they have been forced to break the law to continue their journeys. The concern has been with the present, understandable when for so many it has been and continues to be uncertain. But it reinforces the tendency to treat refugees as people ‘with no history, past experience [and] culture’.<sup>66</sup> Even in respect of the journey itself, the media tend to present simplistic maps of ‘migrants’ routes ‘directly connecting the Mediterranean Sea to sub-Saharan Africa’. As Luca Ciabbari, an ethnographer, concludes from deeper research, ‘what emerges are different seasons and histories of migration, each rooted in specific historical conjunctions, characterized by a different intertwining of social dynamics and different power relationships’.<sup>67</sup>

In much of the literature on refugees and forced migration in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, the work of Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben on *homer sacer* (sacred

62 Testimony in *Guardian*, 3 June 2014.

63 *Guardian*, 11 October 2013.

64 See National Archives, CO 537/2373 and 2374, 14 and 22 April 1947.

65 See *Guardian*, 28 December 2015 for the background to why this photograph was taken.

66 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 284.

67 Luca Ciabbari, ‘Dynamics and Representations of Migration Corridors’, *ACME* 13 (2)(2013), 246-262, 259.



man) and the concept of 'bare life' has been utilised and critiqued.<sup>68</sup> Agamben outlines why the refugee represents 'such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state... above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen... they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis'.<sup>69</sup> The concept of 'bare life' with regard to refugees does reflect a reality, the tens of thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean and elsewhere illustrating how even sheer survival can be tenuous. But as many have noted, it can also remove all agency from refugees, and in the case of Lampedusa, this has been and continues to be a powerful factor.

In the detention centres of the island and in its everyday life, the migrants have both resisted and formed alliances with the local inhabitants. In February 2014 this led to the creation of the Charter of Lampedusa which was not 'intended as a draft law' but as the expression 'of an alternative vision' where 'Differences must be considered as assets, a source of new opportunities, and must never be exploited to build barriers'.<sup>70</sup> Such bonds have been celebrated as well as problematised in Emanuele Crialesi's award winning Italian film, *Terraferma* (2011), Anders Lustgarten's play *Lampedusa* (2015) and most recently Gianfranco Rosi's documentary *Fire at Sea* (2016) which won the Golden Bear prize at the Berlin International Film Festival. It is also recognised movingly at an everyday level through the island's cemetery where plots and headstones have been donated locally to bury both named and unnamed migrants washed



Fig. 10: Refugee poster, Lampedusa Town, Photo: Tony Kushner

68 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 126-35.

69 Ibid, 131.

70 Verein Bildung für Alle, 'The Charter of Lampedusa', <http://www.bildung-fuer-alle.ch/political-program-charter-lampedusa>, accessed 22 June 2015.



**Fig. 11: Mimmo Paladino's 'Porta di Lampedusa – Porta D'Europa', Photo: Tony Kushner**

the migrants (who may, or may not still be alive) are included and the overall narrative is to present the issue as a global one rooted in inequality. I will return to Porto M in the conclusion

up on its shores.<sup>71</sup> Going even further, a self-conscious celebration of the bonds between migrants and locals is found in an Italian Amnesty International mural near the beach where many of the boats landed, *Ai sorrisi di chi arriva e di chi accoglie* (the smile of those arriving and those welcoming). It was collectively created in 2013 and attempts to counter the tragic image of victimhood and negative attitudes to migrants widespread in the media.<sup>72</sup> Lampedusa has also acted as a source of identity for those who have found asylum beyond its shores. It has led to groups including 'Lampedusa in Berlin' and 'Lampedusa in Hamburg' using the solidarity of this experience to campaign for better treatment of migrants at all stages of the journey.<sup>73</sup>

Whilst *Terraferma*, *Lampedusa* and *Fire at Sea* are (sympathetic) artistic portrayals by non-migrants, those who have passed through the island or supported them there have made a determined effort at self-representation, including in the form of heritage performance. An alternative museum and archive of Lampedusa, Porto M, has been created on the island itself, made up of fragments of ruined boats and lost belongings of the migrants. The work of an anarchist collective, 'Askavusa' (Barefoot), it highlights the everyday possessions of the migrants. To ensure there is no exploitation, no images of

71 Crialise's film won several prizes at the Venice Film Festival; Tony Kushner, site visit to Lampedusa cemetery, 5 August 2015.

72 It is reproduced on the cover of Alessandra Ballerini, *La Vita Ti Sia Lieve: Storie di migranti e altri esclusi* (Milan: Melampo Editore, 2014 [2013]).

73 Dines et al, 'Thinking Lampedusa', 436.



to this article.<sup>74</sup> On the island this low key but deeply impressive museum superficially complements but also subtly critiques Mimmo Paladino's *Porta di Lampedusa – Porta d'Europa* 2008 memorial situated away from the town and close to the airport runway, designed to be seen by those entering the port of Lampedusa by sea. Paladino's work demands that the door of migration should be kept open, though in terms of scale, its portal is small compared to the large scale monument as a whole, suggesting perhaps a managed, rather than an open border approach. It thus follows more the philosophy of the IOM rather than Askavusa – tellingly a photograph of Paladino's work frames the former's analysis of migrant journeys. *Porta di Lampedusa – Porta D'Europa* is, however, complex. It is deliberately 'an unfinished work' and its ceramic coverings weather and crumble to show both the vulnerability of those involved and the dynamics of a situation changing day by day.<sup>75</sup>

The migrants themselves, in addition to their political interventions, have with their supporters created an online archive to document their experiences in passing through Lampedusa utilising private documents such as diaries as well as films and oral history aided by Italian scholar of African migration, Alessandro Triulzi. They have thus helped to ensure that their voices are preserved and their testimony available not simply through the limitations of media, government and non-governmental organisations.<sup>76</sup> In this respect, one of the most powerful forms of migrant self-representation has been produced through this initiative, Zakaria Mohammed Ali's documentary *To Whom It May Concern* (2012).

Ali, a Somali journalist and political refugee, was briefly interned at the island's detention centre in 2008. Four years later he returns a 'free man' to Lampedusa with his friend and fellow migrant, Mahamed Aman. His film focuses on the traces of the migrant presence on the island. It emphasises the importance of past lives – family life, educational achievements and professional careers – before the journeys were undertaken as well as the dangers and losses (not just death at sea but also status), of those undertaking them. It is thus a memorial to the multi-layered nature of migrant experiences – before, during and after – and how they are affected yet not simply determined by the negativity of immigration procedures. Ultimately *To Whom It May Concern* is a statement about the importance of memory which Ali defines as 'the only bridge which connects human beings to their past'. It highlights, through the Lampedusa detention centre, how Western bureaucracies attempt to erase memory through the violence of destroying paperwork (whether family photographs, certificates or diplomas) confirming who the individuals were before they made the journeys across desert and sea. By returning to Lampedusa, Zakaria and Mahamed illustrate how they have not been defined by their detention and the desire to render them 'illegal'.<sup>77</sup> If *Exodus 1947* was performed both at the time and subsequently as an epic narrative, it is already clear that Lampedusa has become a part of a global story, and one which the migrants themselves, in spite of their ongoing marginality, are playing a key role emphasising their common humanity.

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74 Tony Kushner, site visit to Porto M and discussion with the Askavusa collective, Lampedusa, 6 August 2015.

75 Tony Kushner, site visit, 5 August 2015; 'The port of Lampedusa, an unfinished work', accessed 2 August 2015.

76 Material available through Archivio delle memorie migranti, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net).

77 Zakaria Mohammed Ali, *To Whom It May Concern* (Archivio Memorie Migranti, 2012).



## Porto M and the politics of memory

Why the island is called ‘Lampedusa’ is unclear. Greek origins are suggested with three possible connections – ‘rock’, ‘beacon’ and ‘crab’. All three in combination provide a neat summary of its complex past and present. The island has been a military base for various empires and it has continued this fortress role as a border for the European Union. It has also been a place of local welcome to newcomers escaping danger and a place of livelihood for its fishermen. Population movements in and out of the island, forced (including slavery inflicted on Lampedusa by Barbary Pirates) and voluntary are integral to its remote history, a part of and apart from Europe and physically closer to north Africa (a geography and geology reflected in its architecture). The boat people and the treatment of them, including deportation and return, as well as empathy towards them, are part of a deep history and not alien to it, a point highlighted in Rosi’s *Fire at Sea*.

In the politics of performativity involving both *Exodus 1947* and contemporary boat people, history matters. On one level, they share a common bureaucratic past and the construction of the ‘illegal immigrant’ or more crudely and commonly today, the ‘illegals’. The ahistorical tendency in migration studies has led to the missing of this connection and the origins of ‘Migrant “Illegality”’, which are dated much more recently, for example to American treatment of Mexicans and others and only from the 1970s.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the label of ‘illegality’ has become mainstream, used in everyday discourse to deny the common humanity of migrants. Such racist tendencies have not disappeared.

In April 2015, Katie Hopkins, columnist in Britain’s best selling newspaper, *The Sun*, penned an article with the headline: ‘Rescue Boats? I’d use gunships to stop illegal migrants. Make no mistake these migrants are like cockroaches.’ Her Biblical discourse did not stop there, referring to British towns as ‘festering sores, plagued by swarms of migrants and asylum seekers’.<sup>79</sup> Despite an online petition exceeding 200,000 to have her sacked and criticism from Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner, that she had utilised language ‘reminiscent of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda’ and the Rwandan genocide, Hopkins remained in post.<sup>80</sup> The reason why became apparent a few months later.

Revealingly, her hate discourse was regarded as acceptable by both the newspaper itself and Prime Minister, David Cameron. On 24 July 2015, *The Sun*’s front page was devoted to a story from Calais and how ‘Illegals swarm into Britain on empty Channel freight wagons’ with an editorial criticising Cameron for inaction.<sup>81</sup> Less than a week later the Prime Minister responded on national news, performing prejudice to the allegedly hostile public by referring to ‘a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain’.<sup>82</sup> The acting leader of the Labour Party replied that Cameron should ‘remember he is talking about people and not insects’.<sup>83</sup> As radical Church of England minister, Giles Fraser, added,

78 Nicholas De Genova, 2002. ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, 419-447.

79 *The Sun*, 17 April 2015.

80 *The Guardian*, 20 and 24 April 2015.

81 *The Sun*, 24 July 2015.

82 Cameron to ITV television news, 30 July 2015 reported favourably in *Daily Mail*, 31 July 2015.

83 Harriet Harman quoted in *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015.

the refugees of the Bible are never described in such language: ‘the only reference to swarm in Exodus is the “swarm of flies”’, adding ‘Little wonder people felt insulted by that.’<sup>84</sup> Migrants responded similarly: Berekat, a young Eritrean in the Calais camp, asked of Britain’s political leaders, ‘Why are you closing the door? We’re not animals, barbarians’.<sup>85</sup>

At the same time, David Cameron pledged £50 million pounds of government funding for the memorial and educational work of his Holocaust Commission which emphasises the need to learn the ‘lessons of the Holocaust’. It would seem that no connection is made by Cameron to the restrictionism that Jewish refugees faced in the Nazi era and his inflammatory outburst against recent asylum seekers. But there is still a linkage, even if Cameron failed to have the self-awareness to realise it: in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, hate language to describe migrants as illegal and inhuman continues the persecution and misery from which they fled. In the words of a Sudanese asylum seeker in Britain interviewed by the BBC: ‘There I was attacked by bullets and here by words’. He explicitly had in mind the Prime Minister’s insect/swarm analogy.<sup>86</sup> As a fitting coda, David Cameron spearheaded the campaign to keep Britain in the European Union. His failure to do so (which ended his term as Prime Minister) reflected the importance of popular anti-migrant sentiment that he himself and the British press had done so much to forment.



Fig. 12: Outside Porto M, Photo: Tony Kushner

84 Giles Fraser, ‘A church in the wild’, *The Guardian*, 5 August 2015.

85 Quoted by Matthew Taylor and Josh Halliday, ‘It’s easier if you say we’re bad, not human’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015.

86 Sudanese asylum seeker interviewed on BBC television Breakfast News, 12 November 2015.



Fig. 13: Porto M, Photo: Tony Kushner

David Cameron has been at the forefront of promoting ‘British values’ and the Learning Centre of his Holocaust Commission will be part of this enterprise. Certainly part of modern British history has been a strong strain of xenophobia tinged with many different forms of racism. Indeed, Hopkins, *The Sun* and Cameron have their historical precedents. In 1903, the leading anti-alien, William Evans-Gordon, quoted with approval the Bishop of Stepney who blamed the

poverty of East London on ‘foreigners coming in like an army of locusts’.<sup>87</sup> Two years later, as the Aliens Bill was being fiercely debated, Robert Sherard, a journalist obsessed with the threat posed by the Jewish white slave trade to British manhood, warned readers of *The Standard* about the diseased and useless Jewish immigrants who ‘swarm over to England’.<sup>88</sup>

The British case is important for no other country possesses such a strong belief in its own tolerance and decency - past and present. In this respect, the rebuke of the Prime Minister and Home Secretary for fuelling ‘a xenophobic climate in Britain’, by Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe’s human rights commissioner, is especially pertinent. Muiznieks criticised the language of these leading politicians, especially Cameron’s use of the term ‘illegal immigrant’ with its connotations of criminality. ‘People are not illegal’, he noted, their ‘legal status may be irregular, but that does not render them beyond humanity’.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, Booker Prize author, Richard Flanagan, when visiting Syrian refugees in Lebanese, Serbian and Greek camps, and on the move at the Croatian border, concludes ‘It felt like history and I suppose it was history and is history, and you realise why anyone who has experienced history hates it so’.<sup>90</sup>

### Flanagan admonishes

“Refugees are not like you and me. They are you and me. That terrible river of the wretched and the damned flowing through Europe is my family. And there is no time in the future in which they might be helped. The only time we have is now.”<sup>91</sup>

87 William Evans Gordon, *The Alien Immigrant* (London: Heinemann, 1903), 12.

88 ‘The Home of the Alien’, *The Standard*, 5 January 1905.

89 Alan Travis, ‘Human rights official attacks PM’s rhetoric on migrants’, *Guardian*, 24 March 2016.

90 Richard Flanagan, ‘Old Testament in its stories, epic in its scale: this is the great exodus of our age’, *Guardian*, 5 March 2016.

91 Ibid.

Much of what follows is based on the author's visit to Lampedusa in summer 2015 and it follows Flanagan in the quest to ask how the migrant crisis fits into 'history'. Whilst I am no way a trained ethnographer, I have studied those who are (past and present), especially within the grassroots social anthropology organisation, Mass Observation (1937-1951 and 1981 onwards).<sup>92</sup> I was thus conscious of the dilemmas faced when confronting a different world – whether geographically or experientially – and the need for self-reflexivity. In this respect, the choice of place and timing of my visit needs some explanation. Colin Richmond, the maverick English medievalist (and observer as early as the 1950s of Polish responses to the Holocaust) has insisted that the historian understand where it happened and the 'necessity of "being there"'.<sup>93</sup>

The problem with migration, and especially modern migration, is which 'there' to focus on. From the late twentieth century, a growing number of (often high quality) journalistic accounts following particular migrants in their journeys across land and water from all corners of the globe have been published.<sup>94</sup> Such work is important in showing the risks taken by migrants and the complexity and length (temporal and physical) of the routes towards a hoped for better life and freedom. At their best, this literature gives individuality to the migrants and allows



**Fig. 14: Local fishing boats used to rescue migrants, Lampedusa Beach,  
Photo: Tony Kushner**

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92 Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

93 Colin Richmond, *Doing History* (Woodbridge: Colin Richmond, 2012), 214.

94 One of the earliest and best is Jeremy Harding, *The Uninvited: Refugees at the Rich Man's Gate* (London: Profile, 2000).



space for their life stories and aspirations to be considered. In contrast, my scholarly approach has been as a micro-historian and especially in exploring particular places and how different levels of their past compete for attention – or, in the words of the late historical geographer, Doreen Massey, ‘The identity of places is very much bound up with the histories which are told of them, how those *histories* are told, and which history turns out to be dominant’.<sup>95</sup> Rather than parochial, as Massey crucially adds, ‘the local is always a product in part of “global” forces’.<sup>96</sup>

So why choose to focus on Lampedusa? When the island started to gain prominence in discussion about migration it immediately had resonance through my doctoral research carried out in the 1980s. This was through the Yiddish play *The King of Lampedusa* referred to early in this article. Perhaps through its unusual name and uncertain geography, in this play the ‘natives’ of Lampedusa are imagined somehow as ‘uncivilised’ black Africans, owing more to the nightmare world of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* rather than the reality of a small Italian military base in the middle of the Mediterranean.<sup>97</sup> Whilst my interest in *The King of Lampedusa* was why Jews and others in Britain were so emotionally engaged in it, I was at least aware that it was a real place with some strategic military importance during the Second World War.

With the major migrant tragedies of the early twenty first century and especially those of 2011 and 2013 linked to the island, my interest intensified and were strengthened further when introduced to Alessandro Triulzi, as noted, instrumental in creating an archive of the recent migrants, many of whom passed through Lampedusa. I was determined to visit, but the questions remained of how and when. With its fishing industry in relative decline, tourism has become the main source of income for Lampedusa with its beautiful beaches and opportunities to snorkel in search of exotic fish, and to observe the turtles which visit the island each year to lay their eggs on the beach. Yet even with a new EU funded airport, and a ferry service, it is not a straightforward place to visit – there are only occasional flights from either Sicily or Rome and the ferry journey is a long one. In short, it takes a little more effort to visit than other migrant points of arrival in Europe.

Patrick Kingsley is the *Guardian’s* ‘inaugural migrant correspondent’ and was named in Britain ‘Foreign Affairs Journalist of the Year’ in 2015. In *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe’s Refugee Crisis*, Kingsley notes that ‘Lesvos, the island most affected [in 2015], has become the Greek Lampedusa’.<sup>98</sup> From Britain, it would have been much easier for me to ‘be there’ in Lesvos, Kos or any of the other Aegean islands where the hundreds of thousands of migrants had landed than in Lampedusa – or, even closer to home, the refugee camps at Calais and Dunkirk. There were reasons I decided against the Greek islands or northern France. Whilst I have worked with refugees and asylum seekers, I possess no medical, linguistic or logistic skills which would have made my presence beneficial for the thousands upon thousands of migrants who had just arrived, often in a state of physical and mental distress and confusion. And – rightly or wrongly – whilst aware of the importance of bearing witness to one of the largest man made disasters since the Second World War, I was anxious to avoid any form of voyeurism.

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95 Doreen Massey, ‘Places and Their Past’, *History Workshop Journal* 39 (spring 1995), 186.

96 Ibid, 183.

97 Valencia (ed.), *The King of Lampedusa*.

98 Patrick Kingsley, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe’s Refugee Crisis* (London: Guardian/Faber & Faber, 2016), 177.



In Lampedusa, the situation by 2015 was different – the island was still of crucial importance in policing migration, but it had also become largely invisible in terms of the everyday life of the island. Lampedusa was certainly not ‘history’ in this respect – around the time of my visit there, and to the port of Catania in Sicily where I stayed before and after, there were migrant disasters where the dead, dying and survivors were brought to both places. It was still very different to several years earlier when the drowned bodies were brought to the beaches and thousands of migrants were sleeping in Lampedusa’s streets. Moreover, Lampedusa was no longer so prominent in the news. It seemed that with attention focused elsewhere,<sup>99</sup> this was a good time to visit and observe.

In terms of preparation, I had one or two contacts with local activists given to me by Alessandro Triulzi, but had a sense of the island only through official reports, autobiographical writing, documentaries, testimonies, and fictionalised versions of the migrant crisis there in film and theatre. Whilst this is perhaps not good textbook ethnographical practice, I had to some extent deliberately under-prepared a fraction in order to discover afresh how the migrant crisis was impacting on the topography of the island without too much familiarity. The island is small enough to stumble around, finding things – or not.

What surprised me most was that there were no migrants in the town of Lampedusa at all – it confirmed the latest stage in the ‘Lampedusa play’ in which they are all totally confined to the detention centre and therefore away from the tourist gaze. The detention centre itself is not signposted and when I eventually found it above and away from the town, I was greeted by an Italian soldier who pointed a gun at me when I attempted to take photographs. Until the summer of 2015, the pro-migrant campaigners in the island had free access to the detention centre and could provide basic goods and, more importantly, moral support and advice. When I visited, that possibility had been removed.

Britain also has detention centres for asylum seekers and they are also largely ‘hidden’: Haslar is one of the



Fig. 15: Tourist advertisement cards, Montage: Tony Kushner

99 Whilst this is a crude indicator, a search of the Nexis international news database gives 1055 ‘hits’ for Lampedusa in July 2014 and a fall of roughly 35 percent to 647 a year later.



largest and is fifteen miles from my home in Hampshire. The case of Lampedusa, however, was more alarming – first, because it is now utterly inaccessible to visitors and second because of the immediacy of the migrant journeys and the processing it represents. It was not simply the pointing of a gun directly at me that made this ‘visit’ to the detention centre alienating and frankly frightening. There was a glimpse of a group of migrants close to the gates of the detention centre but this was the only one in the whole of my visit to Lampedusa. Moreover, none of the sites most obviously connected to the migrant crisis is especially visible and/or accessible as will become apparent. And yet everywhere the enormity of what happened/is continuing to happen is there in the streets – whether in pro-asylum graffiti, murals and posters. I was, however, looking for such reminders of what has happened and continues to happen to migrants there. Whether the ‘average’ holidaymaker to Lampedusa (most are Italian) is aware or wants to be aware is another matter – a theme explored explicitly in Crialesse’s *Terraferma*. The dominant narrative presented to the visitor consists of food, beaches, fishing trips and turtles.

A sense of difference and otherness was something that I was very aware of in my visit, and Lampedusa continues to haunt me (hence this article as a process of coming to terms with it). First, the island has a strange landscape beyond its beaches and small towns. In effect, the land was accidentally made into a near-desert through deliberate deforestation in the mid-nineteenth century. Attempts are being made to reintroduce more vegetation and wildlife but it remains largely and strikingly barren. On one level it reflects a man made ecological disaster of sheer destruction and extermination. On another, it has a unique beauty of its own.

In terms of its architecture, there are only fragments of its early pre-history and history



Fig. 16: Pots and pans, Porto M, Photo: Tony Kushner



Fig. 17: Korans and Bibles, Porto M, Photo: Tony Kushner

before the twentieth century surviving, but the low buildings of its streets and the houses outside the town are more North African than European, reflecting an on-going influence from its many centuries of Muslim/Arab presence. Add this peculiarity of space to a basic infrastructure where most get around its roads either by scooter or primitive jeeps and there is a surreal feel to the island which seems lost in time and place. The toy-like nature of its transport alongside the remoteness and utter curiosity reminded me of architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis's Italian fantasy village, Portmerion, on the coast of North Wales. Williams-Ellis was deeply influenced by the world of the Mediterranean and Portmerion was his postmodern tribute to it. It is best known as the setting for the cult series *The Prisoner* which continues to baffle critics decades after it was first shown in the psychedelic years of the late 1960s. The difference is that for those in *The Prisoner* no one can leave the village, whereas for the migrants of Lampedusa, there is no chance ultimately that they can stay. 'Big Brother', whether someone unknown force of the secret service in one case, or international policing of migration on another, imposes these restraints on human freedom to move.

Finally, I was reliant on others translating from Italian in my days on the island. Whilst leading to some frustrations, it also allowed me to meet others who could speak some English and through this was able to access their attitudes to the island and the migrant crisis, as well as those I was informally interviewing. It also was a reminder that I was an outside observer. On the one hand, I was able to bring insight through some expertise in modern migration and place, in addition to being concerned with the ethics of representation involving the Holocaust and



**Fig. 18: Toiletries and everyday objects, Porto M,  
Photo: Tony Kushner**

other traumatic histories. On the other, it would have been fundamentally wrong to believe I could possibly fully understand in a short visit the everyday dynamics of Lampedusa – an island which has been subject to continuous and often abrupt change throughout its many thousands of years of human habitation, now into the twenty first century.

Undoubtedly, one of the most powerful moments of my visit was to the island's informal and alternative museum of migration. Porto M in its deliberately understated way, emphasises this commonality yet also the political responsibility demanded by Flanagan that connects 'us' (the visitor) – to 'them' (the migrants). The museum has no text and lets the objects speak for themselves. Francesca, one of the collective, insists 'definitely without labels. We can't speak for the migrants'.<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, their very ordinariness needs no introduction. The exterior and interior

are lined with fragments of the migrant boats that have arrived or been towed into the port of Lampedusa where Porto M is located, their pastel shades providing an aesthetic beauty that initially disguises the loss of life they represent.

Although the port is small and everything within walking distance, Porto M is tucked into a quiet corner and is less prominent within the tourist gaze – even neighbouring restaurants seemed unaware of its existence. It contrasts, for example, to the main and popular tourist beach of Lampedusa town where until recently the 'graveyard of boats' were stacked high on the other side of the harbourside road.<sup>101</sup> These boats are now reduced to a handful, their Arabic writing (they were originally from Libya and Tunisia) the only hint of their previous role. Otherwise, they could easily be mistaken for abandoned local fishing boats.

The removal of most of this 'graveyard' was, it seems, a deliberate move from the island authorities which, whilst not denying evidence of the migrant crisis in which Lampedusa became so central, does not want it to dominate to the detriment of a tourist trade that has yet to fully develop (its EU funded re-built airport, for example, is substantial but limited at present to several somewhat unreliable flights a day to Sicily and mainland Italy). Most of the boats were removed to a wasteland in the middle of the island, including their contents. From there

<sup>100</sup> Eithne Nightingale, 'Lovely Lampedusa and PortoM, M for Mediterranean, Migration, Memory or Militarisation?', *Chirps from around the world*, 13 June 2015, <https://eithnenightingale.wordpress.com/tag/lampedusa>, accessed 30 July 2016.

<sup>101</sup> See Christian Sinibaldi's 2008 photographs 'Boat Cemetery [sic]' which vividly portray the number and crumbling nature of these vessels.



Fig. 19: Amnesty mural, Photo: Eithne Nightingale

until 2013 the Askavusa collective have rescued some of the contents as well as the fragments of boats that now frame Porto M.<sup>102</sup>

That not all the boats have been removed, however, is a reflection that the local involvement in rescuing and helping migrants has been a key part of Lampedusa's recent history. Again, the visitor is given no help in identifying them as such, but alongside the larger vessels are several small local fishing boats which were used to rescue migrants – the bravery and decency of the people involved is hauntingly evoked in Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*:

[The fishermen Stefano and Salvatore] travel back in the breaking dawn. Grey turning orange turning blue. Five live bodies and fifty-seven dead ones. Nobody says a word, each ocean-deep in their own thoughts.<sup>103</sup>

It is a reflection of the self-contained world of Holocaust studies and the ahistorical tendency in migration studies that there is no linkage made between past and present with these small craft and their sailors. But are they not linked in a special maritime history to the Danish fishing boats used to ferry Jews to safety in Sweden during autumn 1943 which have become iconic in Holocaust representation (on display in Israel, America and Denmark itself)?

The semi-managed, semi-anonymous presence of these abandoned boats in the port is mirrored in the semi-official heritage centre in the main (only) shopping street in Lampedusa

102 On the history of Askavusa and Porto M, see Arnoldo Mondadori, Alfonso Cacciatore and Alessandro Triulzi (eds), *Bibba e Corano a Lampedusa* (Milan: Editrice La Scuola, 2014), 133-46.

103 Lustgarten, *Lampedusa*, 30.



**Fig. 20: The view from Porto M, Photo: Tony Kushner**

ceived needs of the tourist economy might lead to a process of deliberate forgetting of the migrant presence – rather than placing it as an integral part of a longer history of Lampedusa. Indeed, its geography has meant that it has been shaped by human movement (forced and voluntary) from pre-history onwards, making the twenty first century crisis less exceptional, if no less horrifying.

Returning to Porto M, the careful, artistic re-crafting of the smashed up fragments of the boats (which contrasts with the rough display of the other artefacts) deliberately puts to the forefront the scale of the disasters that led to their creation. The fabric of the building and its location are central to its success but so are the everyday items on display made up literally of flotsam and jetsam. Toothpaste, toothbrushes, razors, cooking oil, feeding bottles for babies and children's clothes, and toys are prominent. These are items which are common to all parts of the world, regardless of local custom. Pots and pans and packets of dried food and cooking oil reflect basic human requirements to cook for oneself. The fishing nets of water bottles reflect an even more basic requirement, appallingly not enough for so many that would die of thirst.<sup>107</sup>

Sea damaged Korans and Bibles reveal a glimpse into spiritual life and an indication of what 'non-essential' items were taken amongst the handful that space would allow. The ubiquitous

town – Archivio Storico Lampedusa. Its approach is to present a long term history of the island from its once impressive Bronze Age burial chambers through to today.<sup>104</sup> The twenty first century migration crisis is not denied, but it is illustrated through Paladino's monumental sculpture rather than more direct representation of the human misery witnessed by the islanders and experienced by the tens of thousands who have been channelled through Lampedusa or been washed up on its shores. In this setting of exquisitely reproduced historic maps of the island, there is a space for a panel on *The King of Lampedusa* which becomes a light-hearted and unchallenging way of telling the story of the Second World War and the fall of fascism.<sup>105</sup> That the islands and islanders rich and varied past should not be lost through exclusive focus on the contemporary migrant crisis is understandable.<sup>106</sup>

There is a danger, however, that the per-

104 Antonio Taranto, *Breve Histoire De Lampedusa* (Lampedusa: Archivio Storico Lampedusa, 2015).

105 Author visit, 6 August 2015.

106 Author discussion with manager of Archivio Storico Lampedusa, 6 August 2015.

107 Author visit, 6 August 2015.

mobile phones and phone cards reflect their crucial role for modern migrants in keeping in touch with home and also attempts to develop new networks beyond (and more recently for locations through GPS in 'smart' phones). Only cassette players, cassettes and VHS videos reflect a now redundant technology in the West. There are bits of navigational aids and ship's equipment which show the simple nature of the vessels undertaking such dangerous journeys across the unpredictable Mediterranean and



Fig. 21: Tourist Information Centre, Lampedusa Town, Photo: Tony Kushner

what has become the symbol of these epic journeys – the lifejacket and the lifebelt (the uselessness of many reflecting the unscrupulous nature of the smugglers and the reality of market forces). Close to the entrance is a mobile of shoes – trainers and everyday footwear emphasising the ordinariness of those who once walked in them.<sup>108</sup>

Annalisa of the collective emphasises that 'Each object is uploaded with energy of the past. They tell many different stories but also one simple story'.<sup>109</sup> Yet her fellow collective member, Giacomo, warns that 'People pay almost too much attention to them. They talk about the object instead of listening to it. Emotion is important but so is reflection and understanding'.<sup>110</sup> They have resisted overly professionalising for this reason, rejecting the idea of a catalogue and cataloguing: 'when archivists started putting them in plastic bags and numbering them, the objects seemed like corpses'.<sup>111</sup> Similar objects adorn Paladino's memorial – shoes and pots, for example, roughly sculptured. Inevitably they lack the immediate power of the original items in Porto M to evoke a human connection but nonetheless they query his monolith, if only visible close up.

What is absent in Porto M and, as outlined earlier, this is a self-consciously so, is any object or document that can be connected to a particular person – there are no letters, diaries, official paperwork and especially photographs on display. For the organisers, this is out of respect and to preserve the dignity of those who cannot give permission for the items to be put in the public sphere.<sup>112</sup> It is not known for example, who are in the surviving photographs. In addition, the legal documents might conceivably put survivors of the boats at risk in asylum claims. In thin-

108 Ibid.

109 Nightingale, 2015, 'Lovely Lampedusa'

110 Ibid.

111 Giacomo, in Nightingale, 2015, 'Lovely Lampedusa'

112 Interview with the author, 6 August 2015.



king so carefully about what, and what not to display, there is a sensitivity and reflexivity here which is lacking in many Holocaust exhibitions which present the victims (often in a naked and/or distressed state immediately before or after murder), without thought for the ethical implications of such representation.

Porto M is a migration museum like no other. It has not the polish of those in Europe or settler communities across the world. But it is also free of the redemptive message that many possess which tend to glorify migrant receiving nations in their acceptance and ultimate assimilation. In Lampedusa town itself this is only perhaps to be found in the tourist information centre where wooden crosses made of the boats' fragments are sold with a Christocentric message almost as if they were relics from the Passion itself: 'Take it with you as a sign of the resurrection that comes from pain'.<sup>113</sup>

Porto M is identified from the outside by a small plastic inflatable globe that hangs outside its boatwood door. Its flimsy nature is a fitting tribute to the message of the exhibition – a world that is unstable, liable to implode but ultimately mutually dependent and requiring a shift in attitudes and behaviour to survive. In its understated manner – in spite of or perhaps better because of its limited budget – Porto M captures the power politics behind the migrant crisis. This is, after all, a *man made* and not a *natural* disaster. It is locally rooted – the visitor need only look through its door to see the Mediterranean and the human misery that has happened at its doorstep – yet globally focused in its ethical gaze. It is a singular achievement within and way beyond the migrant museum. There remains, however, a tension with regard to the absence of the individual migrant in Porto M: or rather the insistence of the Askavusa collective not to personalise (beyond the everyday nature of the lost items forcing the visitor to understand that these belonged to an ordinary people) necessitates a dialogue of how the migrant presence is dealt with. Rather than a particular critique of Porto M, it reflects a wider tendency in the growing artistic and cultural responses to the global crisis in which Lampedusa became symbolic: migrants, at best, are seen, but not heard.

The islanders of Lampedusa have made space in their crowded cemetery for the migrants who were washed up on its shores or whose bodies were rescued in local boats. Apart from the generosity and inclusivity of such actions, all effort has been made to provide as much detail as possible about the deceased. Where there is no name, at least gender, possible place of origin and age, and the particular maritime tragedy they were part of are included in these simple but deeply moving acts of memory for the 'unknown migrant'. They are personal but also the first act of historicisation of a mass movement that in so many cases leaves not a trace. The graves are not separated out in the cemetery but intermingled with those of the locals. Given the role of the local boatmen in saving migrants and rescuing bodies of the drowned or suffocated, it seems appropriate that they are situated amongst the most prominent tombstones of the cemetery which commemorate the deceased's fishing triumphs in words and photographs.<sup>114</sup>

There are, of course, no images of these migrants before their death which singles them out from the other recent burials in the cemetery. But the attempt to provide as much informa-

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113 Author visit, 4 August 2015. This is not to minimise the importance of the local Catholic church in helping the migrants and the key role of the Pope himself in bringing to the world's attention the scale of the migrant crisis as represented by Lampedusa.

114 Author visit, 5 August 2015.





tion as possible and to restore some sense of individuality contrasts with the dominant artistic confrontation with the migrant presence as represented by Lampedusa. Only in Lustgarten's play are the migrants given agency. With just two actors, the words of the migrant Modibo are reported by the fisherman Stefano, but it is ultimately the former that restore the latter's faith in humanity after the death he has confronted in the Mediterranean, night after night.

In *Fire At Sea* the focus, as with *Terraferma*, is on everyday life on Lampedusa. Rosi's documentary shows how in very recent years the life of the islanders has become separated from that of the migrants who are rescued by the coastguard vessels and then immediately transferred to the detention centre. Only the local doctor has everyday contact, his testimony detailing his daily contact with the dying and seriously ill provides a powerful humanitarian bond. More happily we watch as he carries out an ultrasound examination of an African expecting a baby – with no midwives on the island, today there are only migrant births on Lampedusa. But we do not know the name of this woman, her background and the circumstances of her pregnancy. In *Terraferma* a young migrant gives birth in a private home in Lampedusa, and we are at least made aware of the trauma that led to her pregnancy and the householder who is sheltering her reluctantly is forced to recognise the motherhood they have in common. Finally she accepts that the migrant has a name and a history.

From the Lampedusa doctor's surgery, Rosi takes us on a coastguard/navy rescue of a migrant ship and we watch as most of those on board this pathetic vessel are saved. We also witness those that have already died from dehydration or fume inhalation from journeying the twenty first version of 'steerage' as the doctor perspicaciously perceives it, summoning up also the memory of the slave ships. The witnessing does not stop there – we see the last moments of those for whom rescue came a fraction too late. There is humour in *Fire at Sea* as we encounter the hypochondria of a young boy, Samuele who encounters the always patient and so decent doctor. But Rosi insists that we connect the everyday of Samuele (who is too prone to seasickness to follow his father in a fishing expedition) with the 'normality' of plucking dead or nearly dead bodies from the sea. It remains that we begin to piece together the family dynamics of Samuele but do not learn the names or background of any of the migrants we encounter in the film, whether on the ship, in the surgery or the detention centre.

In the first days of liberation, the victim's bodies in Belsen and other concentration camps were presented to the outside world to prove the evils of Nazism. It took many years to reconstitute their lives before the Holocaust or to imagine, for the survivors, that they would have a meaningful life after it. In the twenty first century, our collective horror at the dead migrant body, most powerfully illustrated in the case of three year old Alan Kurdi in September 2015, can shock the complacent into action. But until we can see the victims as fully human with all the frailties, contradictions and difficulties that requires, focusing on death and suffering alone is not enough to ensure long term solutions to the problem of migration and the global inequality that underpins it – or of supporting the migrants to rebuild their lives beyond initial rescue. Hate speech and the concept of migrant illegality have, as outlined in this article, a long history – bureaucratically and socially – illustrated by the ease with which prejudice has re-established itself in Europe after the initial surge of sympathy following the Kurdi family tragedy.

Giacomo of Askavusa states that for their collective project the 'M' stands for memory. 'We choose what we remember and what we forget. We want to actively engage with memory as



a political act.’<sup>115</sup> With this imperative in mind, I want to end with the words of the migrants themselves who have passed through this remarkable island or have undertaken similar traumatic journeys. First, with the universalism proclaimed in the Charter of Lampedusa that ‘As human beings we all inhabit the Earth as a shared space [demanding] global freedom for all [and recognising that] the history of humanity is a history of migration.’ It adds poignantly that there must be ‘No Illegalisation of people. Migration is not a crime.’<sup>116</sup> And second with the voice of the individual migrant, Kenyan born Somali refugee, Warsan Shire in *Home*:

“no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark...  
you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land...  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages...  
unless the miles travelled  
means something more than journey.”<sup>117</sup>

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115 Nightingale, 2015, ‘Lovely Lampedusa’.

116 The Charter of Lampedusa.

117 Warsan Shire, ‘Home’, edited by Alessandro Triulzi and Robert McKenzie (eds). *Long Journey: African Migrants on the Road* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), xi.