

an international
peer-reviewed journal
ISSN 2041-3254

Women-photographs among the phantoms of the Mediterranean

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5 Oct 2015 • Comment (0) • **Print**

Posted: **Border Struggles [12]** | Commons

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Preface of the preface:

“I’m not”. It’s the 16th of January, 2015. This preface presents some notes that I prepared in May 2014 for the seminar “Mobility Struggles”, coordinated by Irene Peano of the University of Bologna^[1] that I’m publishing for this special issue of *darkmatter*, on “Border Struggles: Epistemologies, Ontologies, Politics”. Some time has passed since May 2014, and I have had a growing sensation that I am contemplating the world while having nothing to say – except questions and doubts – and that I do not know how and where to find a collective dimension to elaborate a discourse and maybe some common practices starting with those questions and doubts. And this sensation grew with the same rapidity that has characterized world events since then. I mention some of them here, beginning from the place in which I live and from my personal sensibility, with my story. A history that for some years has been a story in which engagement in the world, instead of a contemplation, has always been intertwined with my academic work, and the writing that it requires, which on a personal level I considered quite “happy”. It has been an engagement grounded in the non-acceptance of the numerous divisions that dominate our present – between those existences whose desires and necessities of movement are considered legitimated and those existences whose desires and necessities of movement are not.

Certainly, I was aware that something necessarily always remained unsaid, most of all when a lived experience, the life of engagement and non-acceptance of hegemonic violences, needed to be described and written. There were many silences due to the limits of the personal style, but they were also more structural: those silences that are perhaps unavoidable when the emotions of a lived world overflow the translation of a world about which one thinks one is able to write about. The eyes initially attentive and then veiled in a Tunisian garage, almost angrily shouting after my speech in which I communicated to the parents of the Tunisian missing migrants my thoughts after the journey I did in Lampedusa; the tight lips of the fishermen of Lampedusa while they were uttering words about their encounters at sea with the dead bodies of some of the “missing” migrants, and on the appearance of those dead bodies during their nightly nightmares; the desire to escape and come back to the normality of my daily routine – the shower at the hotel, a less aggressive sun, a breath that is not hampered by a sand storm – after only a few minutes spent among the tents of Choucha camps. These are only a few images that evoke the necessity and the inevitability of some of those silences.

Yet, these are different silences in comparison to questions and doubts that cannot be articulated in a discourse, even a fragmentary one, referring to the events of the world since May 2014 and that I list here: IS and the creation of the Caliphate in June 2014; the outbreak of a war waged by an unpredictable “global coalition” in September 2014; Libya and Nigeria burnt away and the declarations of the Caliphates in some areas of their territories; the resistance in Kobane, and the support to the resistance in Kobane by US drones and the air force. As far as I’m concerned, I spent a spring and a summer partly between the Milan’s public gardens at war^[2] and in some Sicilian towns informing refugees of safest ways to reach Northern Europe. They were the refugees thrown ashore by a re-named Mare Nostrum, a military-humanitarian operation deployed by the Italian government in the Mediterranean after the shipwrecks of the 3rd and of the 11th of October 2013. Finally, the attacks in Paris: millions of people in

the streets, and a dominant slogan defining a mass identification, in which everyone feels the need to say what he/she is, starting from what he/she is not: “je suis Charlie”, “je suis Charlie, policier, juif”, “je suis Charlie, juif, flic: je suis la République”, “Reda et Julie sont Charlie”, “Jenny, Teone, H  l  ne sont Charlie. Nous sommes tous Charlie.” This was an effective collective delirium that paved the ground for a hyper-identitarian community. Indeed, in order to feel oneself as belonging to a “we” opposed to a “they” – expelled for their absolute strangeness – one has accepted to identify with “Charlie” with its dubious freedom of expression and provocation; and, beyond that, with France, with a R  publique and with a world redefined starting from a little supermarket of products imported from Israel and for this reason considered “adequate” (Kasher): “Je suis Charlie, je suis policier, je suis hyper Kasher”. Here and there, while through the cover of “Charlie Hebdo” even a Prophet who died many centuries ago is forced to identify himself with “je suis Charlie”; while the communitarian contemporaneity reproduces the gesture of Cartesian modernity, narrowing the being to “being Charlie” (“je pense, donc je suis Charlie” could be read on a placard of the demonstration of the 11th January); here and there, in a first moment quite isolated and shy, some days later more insistent, the positions of those who do not identify with Charlie emerged; positions that have raised doubts about the game of identification that, as with all homologizing identifications, require expulsion and silencing. A game that, as an anonymous writer on the web says, allows the rebirth of a national unity capable of founding itself exclusively on a satirical caricature, offensive against “the others”.^[3]

“I’m not” is actually spoken by a child with whom I have been spending some time; a girl who was born in Italy but who is not Italian since her parents are Moroccans, and to whom I gave a flute that her father asked her not to play. “I’m not” (“Io non sono”): this expression prompted our bewilderment and my attempts of obscure explanations to suggest to her the lack of meaning of her enunciation before understanding that it was only a mistake. She meant the less problematic and more obedient “I don’t play” (“Io non suono”). However, “I’m not” (“Io non sono”) is the only way in which I can publish an already stammering essay, insofar as it is the outcome of a desire of silence that has now become the only dimension of my feeling. “I’m not, I don’t think and I don’t write” because it is meaningless for me to articulate my being, my feeling, my thinking and my writing, which may start from a further but still isolated “not being Charlie.” It is meaningless when we can’t re-elaborate together the fragments of a discourse that touch on the grounds of a possible cohabitation in a time when this has been made impossible by recent events. Those events made us see, through an equally dubious ‘freedom of expression’ on the web, a not-said and not-seen violence that sustained, and still sustains, the “tranquility” of our cohabitation that is now perceived as broken.

The text that I present here with this preface, that I wrote on 16 January 2015, started in turn with a preface dated May 2014. That text tried to reflect on an argument that today is on the agenda and that is flaunted by those who identify themselves with Charlie: freedom of speech, the freedom to tell everything, characterized in particular through the depiction of everything, independently of how much provoking or offensive it could be for the sensibility of someone. Since starting with a preface that says “I’m not, I don’t think, I don’t write” entails the imperative of trying not to fall into the paradox of writing, of thought and of being, at least concerning the present, I only suggest that what I tried to interrogate in May 2014 was also related to the depiction of everything. A way of making us see everything, through which the current forms of power are capable of reconfiguring human beings as “only shipwrecked persons” insofar as they are not legitimate in their desires or in their necessity of movement and present those human beings to “us”, spectators on the shore, looking at them during their shipwreck.

Which freedom is expressed by the freedom of expression when the act of telling everything, unveiling everything, making everything visible, coincides with the gesture of power? This is a power that by appropriating the modalities of disclosure that are customary to the discourses and the images of denunciation anticipates their possibilities to disclose. In which horizon of unfreedom have all of us finally been captured, when the freedom of expression through which we could contemplate how people

die or how people are rescued as humanitarian lives in a “mare nostrum” is a military image?

“I’m not” resounded already in May 2014, I believe, although with a fainter sound than today, as the marker of our incapacity to act, and in part the impossibility of action. But it also resounded as the marker of rethinking “ourselves,” insofar as we don’t want to support freedoms of expression that are too simple, too overloaded with the violence of the freedom of some to detriment of the most elementary freedoms – such as freedom of movement– of others.

(16th January, 2015).

Preface:

Before trying to say something, I would like to start with two preliminary considerations.^[4] The first consideration concerns the feeling of a certain “urgency” in relation to this moment, here, that is in Italy and in Europe: thus, a feeling with respect to the here and now, from which I tried to think this presentation. An urgency regarding what I would indicate as the marker of a general difference, in which all EU member states are implicated, with respect to what migration policies have been–until now–characterized by a politics of closure and porosity at the same time.

Europe is finally barred at some borders, which are the only ones that would allow the arrival of people who are moving because of a war lasting for three years, and moving through hampered journeys as wanted by the EU. It’s enough to report some data to understand this, despite operation “Mare Nostrum.”^[5] Although it represents something new in many aspects, it is not new in relation to the idea that, as said by the mayor of the island of Lampedusa, the European Union has an asylum system that establishes that people can claim asylum only if they come swimming. Here is some data: Syria, a country of 23 million of people, among which 9 million refugees and internally displaced people, some of whom cannot even cross the borders – like the Palestinians at Yarmouk camp^[6] – and only 80,000 Syrians refugees arrived in Europe, thousands more, thousands less, according to the rescues or the ones push-backed on the high-seas.^[7]

The feeling of urgency goes together, for me, with a certain pessimism. To organize pessimism: this is what Walter Benjamin argued in his essay on surrealism, making this necessity a feature of his theory on history and on the present, while in 1940 and some months before committing suicide he was writing his notes on the concept of history.^[8] “To organize pessimism,” even if in my current political engagement – which in the last years I tried to think, say and sometimes even write on migration – I’m not able to find the necessary elements for this capacity of organization to share with others. The feeling of urgency that I refer to, thus, goes together with the feeling of a pessimism without organization, and therefore together with the feeling of a certain discomfort. For this reason, I would like that the reflections that I propose are seen only as interrogations in which, in case some of you have similar feelings, we can engage with together.

The second assumption is related to the first one, and also to some images that I will present here and some others that I will presuppose have been already seen. I articulate this second assumption as follows: usually, faced with death, when one supposes that this concerns a certain collective dimension different from the slow process of personal mourning, people are asked, under certain circumstances, to respect the more or less neutralizing rite – of a one minute of silence. I don’t ask you to do this, but I presuppose a certain silence as a background for my discourse: silence for the dead bodies and the shipwrecked persons; silence for the people alive to whom the access to Europe is denied; silence for those who are bounced between the internal frontiers of Europe if they succeed in crossing its external borders. I presuppose also a silence for a certain “we”, to which you and I in this moment belong, since facing certain events we are, at least for now, capable of producing discourses, or more precisely a proliferation

of visual and linguistic discourses. But we are not able to engage in collective actions adequate to that state of urgency, that I talked about in the beginning. These are the two preliminary assumptions. Now, an assumption concerning the images.

Images

There is no image without “technical mediation”, without a device, but the technical device is conditioned by a power apparatus, as Didi Huberman argues in one of his many texts on the relationships between images and history.^[9] I have chosen some images below in which this consideration is clearly evident for the simple fact that none of us could have produced these images without institutional authorization.

And I choose these images of the shipwreck October 3rd, 2013, because it is the date of a shipwreck that, because hundreds of dead bodies that submerged the Earth due to the proximity of the shipwreck to the land,^[10] represented an element of caesura with respect to the many shipwrecks that take place in the Mediterranean.^[11] I choose those images also because the 3rd of October is the date of a caesura in the circulation of images that power apparatuses had produced and spread in their migration narratives until that time.

Coffins, a sequence of coffins that remained in the hangar of the airport of Lampedusa for some days, in the first set of images. And then, a “real-time shipwreck” on the 11th of October in the video (4) that the Italian Navy put on the web some days later. And finally, the circulation of representations about the shipwreck of the 3rd of October (video 5), published after months and on the occasion of another shipwreck. And it is this video of the dead bodies submerged in the sea that I assume you have seen.^[12] After this series of images I will show instead an image (6) that in Italy is not so well known but that in Tunisia has stood out in public and political life of post-revolutionary Tunisia: it is the image of the women-photographs that I will return to in the conclusion. These are images that belong to two different discursive levels, or at least it is in this way that I choose to show you to try to sketch some reflections.



Image 1





Image 2



Image 3

VIDEO NAUFRAGIO 11 OTTOBRE 2013



Video 4 – ‘real-time shipwreck’

Video 5 – ‘bodies undersea’





Image 6

Let's begin from the first group of images (images 1,2,3, video 4 and video 5)^[13] the coffins, the European institutions with their representatives in front of the coffins, including the highest political representatives of Europe, Italy, Lampedusa and the Italian Prime Minister on his knees; the real-time shipwreck; the dead people undersea.

Starting from these images I would like to invoke the idea of “not again” that has been produced with these images and the comments that accompanied them, the same level of the more properly linguistic discourses produced by the institutions and not only, after the 3rd of October.

As any other time in which the “never again” refrain has been mobilized, it is also a question of revoking another “never again” that signals the construction of the European collective memory after the II World War extermination of Europe's Jewish and Roma people in concentration and extermination camps. It is as if in the face of the shock – the shock of the Earth submerged by dead people – the present moment can present itself only in the disjointed form of a double time that Benjamin talks about in the thesis *On the Concept of History*. Drawing on Benjamin, Derrida insists on a disjointed form of time in *Spectres of Marx*, a phantom time, a disjointed time, a time “out of joint”, as in *Hamlet*. Derrida indicated such a time as the marker of historical time *after* the end of history or the end of a certain idea of history and, simultaneously, as the marker of a possible time of justice beyond the violence of the law.^[14] Wendy Brown also writes on phantom time, indicating it as a political possibility of our present.^[15] But as far as my analysis is concerned, I am more interested for the moment to draw attention to the automatic evocation of the Shoah. Or, to put it better, I want to draw attention to the automatic evocation of the reaction to the Shoah when the present shows, in relation to a certain violence, a moment of discrepancy in violence's ‘normality’.

Since the 3rd of October 2013 it seems to me that there have been many elements going in this direction, even in the sphere of the visual production. And I will list them on the basis of five points. Firstly, the proliferation of images what I would call impact-images or freeze-images. In this regard, I remember that the Shoah marked a culminating moment in the construction of the visual-impact or of the visual-freezes in the 20th century. Secondly, the way in which institutional power, together with media power, organized its own images by fully unveiling the horror so much so that it produced a total silence. And on this point I would recall the many reflections that have been produced over the last decades on the modalities in which the technical equipment – photography and cinema – have been mobilized by the power

apparatuses of the Allied in the construction of the unveiling of the horror of the Shoah, just in this direction. In this way, ‘untouchable’ images have been produced, images that ethically cannot be commented on and that, not by chance, have been ‘deconstructed’ only years later.^[16] Thirdly, the gesture of the Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, on his knees in front of the coffins, as was with the Chancellor Willy Brandt in December 1970 in front of the monument to resistance in the Warsaw’s ghetto. Then, the presentation of Mare Nostrum operation, through military-humanitarianism, as a revocation of the humanitarian war against Serbia in 1999. In this case, therefore, it was a second-level revocation – a revocation of the revocation – since in order to wage war on Serbia included at that time the remembrance and use of the Shoah. Lastly, the claim to designate the 3rd of October as a Memorial Day; a claim that in this case is not an institutional one but that, rather was made by a committee of persons who used the denomination “3rd October Committee,” a claim embraced by Letta when he was still Prime Minister. And on this point many considerations should be made on the way in which the 27th of January, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops, has been instituted in Italy as the first Memorial Day,^[17] and on the neutralization that during the years it has produced precisely of the event that it celebrates. In addition to these reflections on “never again”, I would like to consider two videos, the “real-time shipwreck” (4) and the “bodies undersea” (5) which I suggest in relation to what Susan Sontag has called an intimacy with the deaths to which the spectator is called.^[18]

In particular, the last video conveys the violence of what had happened and imposes a silence on that violence (and in order not to reproduce such a violence, this is the reason why I decided not to show it but to comment on the operation that made it a public video). Indeed, what could we say in front of those bodies undersea? These images that, by silencing us, silence also any possibility of critical comment, not of what is seen but of how and why it is seen. Yet, as any image, also these are constructed and therefore, after the silence, I try to ask some questions: which kind of gaze is this which, before of our gaze, looks and films? Why do those who have produced that gaze decide at a certain point (after months) to transform it in a collective gaze, a gaze shared also by others that certainly would not see it in the same way? Who are the presupposed others and who are the negated others, or the others not taken into account, in this gesture of sharing?

With “other presupposed individuals”, and “other denied ones” in the choice of sharing the image, I refer to the following consideration: concerning the choice of the Coast Guard and of the newspaper “La Repubblica” of showing one can discuss and having different opinions. But it is evident, however, if one considers how the images owned by the institutions have become of public domain in the context of other deaths that, by showing them, the relatives and the parents of those dead people – as well as their will to show and to make them of public domain – have not been taken into account. This is therefore a kind of gaze that makes the feeling of their relatives unreal; it produces as unreal also the dead people after their deaths, as if for migrants and their life and death, is expected to be less feeling than with other human beings.

I tried for instance to do research on the Costa Concordia shipwreck,^[19] where it seems to me those kinds of images have never been published. Hence, it could be deduced that as far as dead migrants are concerned, the marker of death’s exposure is different in degree, and therefore also in qualitative terms with respect to other dead people. One is a migrant even after death because of being more exposable to the visibility through the image, more subject to becoming phantom and more subject to the gaze of the others. One is as a migrant because is more expropriated by the work of the images as the property of one’s own body, or more subjected to be bodies exclusively owned by the State in comparison to other dead bodies, for whom the State usually establishes a shared belonging between the State and the relatives. To whom does a dead migrant body belong?

Through this group of images, that, I repeat, are possible only as institutional images, “we” can know everything of those who, human beings produced as migrants, succumb to a shipwreck: the way in which

they flounder at sea while the boat is sinking; the way in which they arrive and are disembarked from the military navies some days later in case they survived; the slow procedure of the sample taking of some parts of the bodies for the eventual DNA test; and how those bodies stay under the sea after death, and before being recovered by the divers.

Through these images, we should say, their bodies belong to “us”, and since the 3rd of October exponentially, as if the same power that makes them die would like to share with “us” a part of its responsibility. Through these images, we could say, their bodies belong to us and belong more to “us” than to their relatives who have been produced as migrants regarding to their feelings. The relatives, indeed, have been made to “migrate” from the usual sharing of the dead body with the State becoming anonymous, for “us” and for the State, regarding to the “co-belonging” of their bodies and of their persons with the dead bodies of their sons, brothers, sisters, wives and husbands. Those relatives have been de-institutionalized with respect to the usual institutionalization of familiar relationships. This is a movement of subtraction – of the body of one’s own relative and of one’s own being co-implicated by the State in the body of one’s own relative in case he/she died – that is evident in the case of images that have been produced by power’s gaze; and that is less evident and more subterranean, as usually after migrants’ death few people interrogate the possibility to establish that the dead body is the body of one’s own relative.

In this regard, and only in parenthesis: in the attempt to identify what the investigators have designated with the nickname of “unknown one”, concerning the murder of Yara Gambirasio, 18,000 DNA exchanges^[20] have been made over the years; as far as the shipwrecks of the 3rd and of the 11th of October are concerned, in order to do the same exchange, also in the case of a visual identification the institutional machine will start up very slowly. Then, it is useless to try to imagine how many DNA profiles and exchanges have been made before the 3rd of October 2013, during the years when the Mediterranean has been transformed in a maritime cemetery as by now we all know.^[21]

Therefore, I return to the above suggesting that the shared use of the ‘gaze of migration policies’ after the 3rd of October 2013 make the bodies of that shipwreck and the shipwrecked persons of the 11th of October, those who died and the few who survived,^[22] more “ours” than theirs and their relatives’. They are more ours as bodies-images, subjected to that contemporaneous effect of reproducibility, exposability and expropriability that any image entails. They are more ours as phantoms, following Derrida’s suggestion according to whom the phantom is a “Who”, it is not a simulacrum in general, it has a sort of body, but without property, without the right of a “real” or “personal” property.^[23] They are more ours as phantoms, similar in their phantom-ness to the other human beings who are produced as migrants by the politics of government and border control through a work within the physicality of their bodies in the direction of a subtraction of it. The technologies through which migration policies act in their pretension of hampering people’s movements, indeed have something of primary. Actually, although they work in a different way according to the technical means that are deployed from time to time, they do not tend to produce physicality, but rather they produce absence of it. I would say, they produce *phantom-ness*.^[24]

However, I insist on the phantoms of the images that I illustrated above. They are more “ours”, and so what do we do with them? In which way is their phantom-ness, but more generally the phantom-ness of the human beings produced as migrants by migration policies, related to the absence of a common sense, as I would call it, about collective responsibility? As far as dead people in the Mediterranean are concerned, such an absence of common sense about a collective responsibility adds to the usual omission of the individuation of someone’s guilt.

Before trying to answer, or better before trying to ask other questions about “collective responsibility”, for now I focus on “individual responsibility”. In the case of the images that the institutional gaze has reproduced in the public sphere after the 3rd of October, the individual responsibility is a shared one. This

is an individual responsibility, one in which, through a work of construction of our visual horizon, the gaze of institutional power — as productive of bodies that have migrated from their corporal dimension, productive of “species of being but without property”^[25] — has decided to put us.

Also in this case I take some reflections by Benjamin, filtered through their revision by Derrida. Derrida proposes in this case another figure of the spectre starting from the police “without figure” and “without form” (*gestaltlos*) that Benjamin indicated as the sign of a police that “makes the law” in his essay on violence.^[26] According to Derrida – who was writing at the time when Schengen was still on a trial stage – the figure of the spectre is embodied in this case “in a frontier police, but even in a police without borders”^[27] and for this reason without responsibility.

For the production of deaths in the Mediterranean there is neither on the power’s side nor on the side of the common sense in relation to power, any sign of responsibility. Does this have to do with something similar? Does the absence of a sign of responsibility have something do with the absence of limits, of form and of shape? Does it have to do with the phantom-ness of a body that, as far as police it could be, is not someone’s body, and therefore is nobody’s body?

And again: how are “we” implicated in this responsibility or in this lack of responsibility? How are we implicated in this odd responsibility? This is an odd responsibility because is in part still individual – as it could be eventually individuated, imputable, in case that it would be possible to attribute a characteristic feature to its shapeless body. But it is a responsibility that is in part already collective, due to the sharing of gazes on death that I tried to illustrate. What are our possibilities of opposition, our abilities of action to prevent being captured into the *police phantom body* – that is, the police without borders mentioned by Derrida – that produces the phantom-ness of living and dead migrants? Are we aware of this capture? Have we been able to react? Or is it a subterranean capture, that happens unbeknown to us and that makes us phantoms of ourselves, unaware of being like that? Does this unawareness leave us in the illusion of thinking of ourselves only as spectators in the face of those deaths – perhaps good spectators with feelings of shame and rage that might be translated into action?

Now, the other interrogation concerns what I have called, following Arendt, “collective responsibility” but without having defined it. I will define it drawing on Arendt, since she gives us a definition that allows me to ask some questions that force us to think towards a collective reflection on the residual space of political agency.

In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt traces a partitioning line between guilt – which is always individual – and collective responsibility. Arendt writes:

This kind of responsibility in my opinion is always political, whether it appears in the older form, when a whole community takes it upon itself to be responsible for whatever one of its members has done, or whether a community is being held responsible for what has been done in its name [...] We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange one community for another and hence one kind of responsibility for another. It is true that the twentieth century has created a category of men who were truly outcasts, belonging to no internationally recognizable community whatever; the refugees and stateless people, who indeed cannot be held politically responsible for anything. Politically, regardless of their group or individual character, they are the absolutely innocent ones; and it is precisely this absolute innocence that condemns them to a position outside, as it were, of mankind as a whole [...] This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.^[28]

Therefore, there is something that affects deeply the subject that involves it together with others, in a plural dimension, and that does not depend on that singular subject but on its condition as inhabitant of the world. Or better, there is something that depends on a subject's condition of belonging to a community and more broadly to the human community. From these assumptions it follows Arendt's notion of absolute innocence of the stateless, already present in her massive work on totalitarianism,^[29] and the place that she allocates to them: "outside" the human community, that is simultaneously "outside" the possibility of action. However, keeping aside the problematic issue of the limbus of inaction in which Arendt leaves, and in part certainly abandons the stateless people,^[30] I would like to dwell exclusively upon those subjects who, because they are not "outside" the human community, would be capable of action according to her.

There is here a subtle movement that withdraws the single individual from his/her place, where he/she is called into question as belonging to the human community: a confusion in the singularities, or better a confusion of pronouns between the first singular person pronoun and the first plural person one. There is a collective responsibility since there is an "Iwe", and it is ultimately this "Iwe" that constitutes the human community. The *price* to pay in order to stay in the human community is that of a responsibility that allows us to be singular beings and simultaneously, if not superfluous, at least in a confusion in the mutual intertwining between I and the others. Beyond this there is the real line of superfluity, of the absolute innocence without action. There, however, another place opens up, that one surrounded by barbed wire or, again with Arendt's words, the place of another world.

Any subject has a place, its specific place within the human community is completely different from the place of the camp, since its place is already the place of the other and the place of the other is already its place. In this sense, Judith Butler's attempt towards an ontology, an ethics and a politics of "vulnerability" meets Arendt's thought also on this point. In one of Butler's most recent talks, given on the occasion of the Adorno Prize, she re-proposes a moral interrogation of Arendt's thought in relation to our present. And, situating herself in a quite critical position regarding to the Arendtian division between public and private life, Butler's answer to the question "how to live a good life in a bad life?" is grounded on the recognition of a form of social life in which everyone's life implicates the life of the other.^[31] For this reason – since we are always co-implicated, because, following other suggestions given by Butler in other texts, we can never account for ourselves if not by implicating the others – even the ethical question on our life, a good life, cannot but articulate with the political question on the others' lives, and on the present forms through powers administrate human lives in a differential way. It is the political distribution of the mourning that Butler has chosen to examine the border line between lives that matter and lives that do not matter in the political condition of our contemporaneity. To give an account of ourselves, or better

to account for ourselves, of our own lives, of the way or the form of our life – a bad or a good life, a true or a false life, a just or an unjust life – also means to account or to give an account for the others. And also in this case it's a question of price. "To which price is every one of us produced as subject?" This is, indeed, how Butler reformulates Foucault's question of the critical attitude that he indicates in the art of not being governed "quite too much", "like that and at that cost".^[32]

Therefore, it is a question of price, where the "I" encounters the others and blurs with them. A question of price: the price of the collective responsibility in Arendt; the price of a subject produced as worthy of mourning at the expense of more precarious lives, of unrecognizable and dis-produced subjects in Butler. A question of price that, most of all in Arendt, marks also the boundary line between the possibility of action and the space of the "outside", where the subject not belonging to any community is also out of the action. What does it mean this price and how are we paying it in our present? What is it and how does it become a political action, insofar as following Arendt it is precisely because the blurred "*Iwe*" subjects pay such a price that they can act and, thus, belong to the human community? However, what does it happen to these blurred subjects, I and others, "*Iwe*", that are inside the human community when the collective responsibility, that is the price they should pay for their common belonging to the humankind, does not affect the subjects? Or to put it better – since it could appear quite inadequate and arrogant to establish what is the collective feeling of a given community in a certain moment – what happens to these subjects who are inside the human community when they don't pay the price that they should pay? Where do they stay? What is their place? What does the human community become to the extent that it is formed by subjects that don't pay the price that they should pay in order to be part of it?

Or again, leaving partially aside Arendt, and coming back to that underground movement that I tried to describe and through which a shapeless apparatus of power captures us in its "absence" of responsibility – making us share its gaze, giving us dead bodies in the form of images: what happens to that "we", "*Iwe*", that at this point is quite blurred with that apparatus? In which way does this movement of capture erode both our collective responsibility and our ability to act and, lastly, the place where we stay, all elements that Arendt suggests are inextricably intertwined together?

What about "us", as subjects dragged elsewhere from the "*Iwe*" capable of action, and, instead, as unaware producers, together with power, of the phantom quality of the others? How can we do something with these bodies that belong to us more than they belong to their relatives? How can we account for and give account of them, if our ability to act is eroded by our becoming phantoms to ourselves in that unaware movement of capture in which we are dragged by a mere gaze?

Can we oppose, in the will to resist to capture by and the complicity with that phantom police apparatus, to that gaze that it delivers us? Can we oppose that by switching the screens off, interrupting our ability of watching? Or can we oppose it by enacting and performing another gaze, a counter-gaze, by choosing of becoming producers or spectators uniquely of this gaze that would pretend to deliver us in a different way the subjects who have been produced as phantoms by power? In fact, this is a gaze that, like that power, will deliver us images, tales and discourses about them, risking a contribution in blocking even more in that bog of the phantom-ness that is an effect of power. While the first option is completely unfeasible, the second is the way undertaken by many of those who try to resist the movement of capture, in a quite compulsive way. There are images, images and images that are produced: video images, photo images, narrative images. Flash about what happens, between a border and another, between a detention centre and another, between a push-back and another, between a field of tomatoes and another, articulating our residual possibilities of action in terms of production of spectacle. *An art of migrations*, more or less of a good quality, through which we are convinced that the counter-narrative is implicit of our narrating, and that counter-narrative is always also an articulation of action and resistance, besides being an articulation of discourse.

Is it really like that? I'm not convinced about that, and for many reasons, but I would leave this question

and for now turn to those women-photographs evoked in the title of my presentation (image 6 above). These women-photographs don't give account, nor account for, but rather demand account about the others. These women-photographs demand account about their sons who left in the aftermath of the revolution. Their sons were young and less young Tunisians, mainly men, who were part of that movement through which the Tunisian migrants have enacted the freedom they had already taken with the revolution, by revolutionizing the European space itself, that space endlessly redrawn by migration policies as a space for bridling people's movements.^[33]

By moving across the spaces troubled by practices of revolution and by practices of freedom of movement, the mothers, the fathers, the sisters and in some cases the wives of the 'missing' migrants continue, for years, to demand that someone gives an account of the 'missing'. They do that without self-organizing as a group but meeting necessarily in groups in the streets of Tunis or in front of the most involved institutional places: the Tunisian Minister of Immigration, the Italian embassy and the EU delegation in Tunis. This is an unusual form of political action, almost an obsessive one that has made talking of it in different ways: newspaper articles, stories and articles written by social movements, films, photographs, documentaries, artistic installations. For this reason it has run the risk of becoming a sort of "counter-spectacle" or the place of election of a "counter-spectacle" of the spectacle and of the spectacularization that are necessary to legitimize migration policies. This unusual form of political action more than articulating with the traditional forms of antiracist politics, has clashed with them.

However, I only evoke here this "scene", that unsettles the impossible borders between aesthetics, ethics and politics. This is a dissonant scene, even in relation to the practices – more or less customary, or more or less experimental – of women collectives, without suggesting any consideration about the tangles and the questions that it conveys. I evoke that in a different way in comparison to what I thought and wrote about them while I was part of their movement.^[34] Indeed, at that time I was part of the feminist collective "le Ventincinqueundici" that, together with them and for about two years, conceived part of our and their initiatives between the two shores of the Mediterranean.^[35] Now I evoke that scene in a way that is necessarily different from that time because our collective broke up due to the debate on the opportunity or not for a women collective based on this shore of the Mediterranean, to go on to chase after their dissonance. In that way, we left those women with their photographs to the time of their obsession. And, therefore, we came back to our unavoidable assonance, with all those who over the years -while those women and men were still appearing in the streets of Tunis in-between the interstices of the photographs of their sons – came close to them through the distance of a snapshot, of a video-sequence or of a tale capturing them in the present of their obsession, to take them elsewhere, in the less disturbing present times of a contemplation. Therefore, I do that with the same pessimism that is incapable of finding elements for organizing itself, the same pessimism I talked about in the beginning. However, I'm convinced that the practices of action of these women, as well as their obsession, have something to teach us about possibilities to subtract ourselves from the movement of capture that I talked about and find the interstitial space of necessity and urgency of action.

Moreover, I evoke the scene of these women-photographs and choose it as the title of these notes because I still see in them – in their visibility and invisibility, in their being in the streets, in the public space, appearing and disappearing behind the photographs of their sons, obsessively accounting for them – the point we need to reflect on starting from our condition of *impasse*. We have to reflect, starting from their visibility in the dim light, in a way that neither gives an account of itself, nor accounts for the others, but that demands about them, in a disruptive way up against the tradition of visibility through which in a certain tradition the political has been conceived. I continue to find some suggestions to reflect on our condition of *impasse* in these women-photographs and families-photographs, that are present through others' presence, that blur the positions of their own physicality bringing around their sons. This is a condition of *impasse* in which all of us have been since the gaze of power gave us those dead bodies of phantom human beings, that are more ours than their relatives', especially of bodies "without property,

without right to property, real or personal.”^[36] These are phantoms, in front of which it is not possible to return to one’s own, to the illusion of the real or of the personal. Rather, perhaps we should try to find a clue in that movement of women-photographs and families-photographs who in part have been able to twist against powers – obsessing them – the phantom-ness of their sons, appearing in the interstices of their photographs, acting by demanding accounts exclusively about them.

Notes

1. “Mobily Struggles: interdisciplinary seminar series on mobility control, its limits and opponents”, University of Bologna, February-May 2014, coordinated by Irene Peano in collaboration with the module “Frontiers of Citizenship” by Sandro Mezzadra. [↑]

2. In 2014, especially during the spring and summer, many of the Eritrean and Syrian refugees who arrived in Milan after being rescued by the military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, attempted to move to Northern Europe. The Milan rail station and a place near a public garden have become the places where they temporarily stayed to organize their journeys that were ‘clandestine’ but at the same time completely visible, crossing the borders traced by the Dublin III regulation. Those two places in the city have become the visible theatre of a dictatorship –the Eritrean one – and of its unliveable dimension, as well as of the Syrian war. But also in other Italian cities, and mostly in some cities in Sicily, it was possible to witness to the sudden appearance of the war with the arrival of hundreds of refugees in search of a train or a bus ticket in order to reach Milan and then continue their journey towards Europe. [↑]

3. The article, anonymous not by chance, can be read at the following link: <http://www.arresturimages.net/articles/2015-01-08/Je-ne-suis-pas-Charlie-Et-croyez-moi-je-suis-aussi-triste-que-vous-id7366>. [↑]

4. As I have already indicated above, this is a text that has been prepared for a seminar held at the University of Bologna and for this reason I preferred to maintain the same interlocutory style of that presentation. Only the footnotes—some of which are explanatory for non-Italian readers for whom it could be difficult to understand some of my references to media common sense—have been added for the publication, and the initial preface, written in January 2015. [↑]

5. Mare Nostrum is the ‘military and humanitarian’ operation managed by the Italian Navy in a wide area of the Mediterranean – from the Italian coasts up to few miles to the Libyan and Tunisian ones - promoted by the Italian government after the shipwrecks of the 3rd and of the 11th October that happened, respectively, very close to the island of Lampedusa and in the Maltese Search and Rescue zone (SAR).

The operation started on the 18th of October 2013 and finished the 1st of November 2014

(<http://www.marina.difesa.it/cosa-facciamo/operazioni-concluse/Pagine/mare-nostrum.aspx>),

replaced by the European operation “Triton”, coordinated by the Frontex agency

(<http://frontex.europa.eu/feature-stories/operation-triton-winter-developments-qXDamY9>). For a

detailed and attentive reconstruction of the different stages of that operation see the blog by Fulvio

Vassallo Paleologo, “Diritti e frontiere”, <http://dirittiefrontiere.blogspot.it/>. For an analysis of the

operation, M. Tazzioli, *Mare Nostrum beyond the sea*, <http://www.scielo.br>

[/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1980-85852015000100061&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1980-85852015000100061&lng=en&nrm=iso). [↑]

6. The UN has repeatedly called attention to the condition of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk and to the impossibility to send humanitarian aid there. In February 2014 a group of young Palestinians circulated this video on youtube:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JFCvLAJPns>.

Then, it also happened to me to meet and chat with Palestinian women from Yarmouk camp who crossed the Syrian borders with extreme difficulty. I met them at the rail station of Milan, where Syrian refugees rescued at sea were directed and where they were used to organize their stumbled journey towards some Northern European countries. [↑]

7. For updated data on the condition of the Syrian population (both refugees and internally displaced people) see <http://www.unhcr.org/54aa91d89.html>. [↑]
8. Benjamin suggested the possibility of organizing pessimism as the result of the necessity to discover a “radically, absolutely imaginative space” within the space of political action; a space that could, however, not remain a space “measured in a contemplative way”. W. Benjamin, (1929) *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol 2, 1927-1934*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [↑]
9. G. Didi-Huberman, *Peuples Exposés, peuples Figurants, L’oeil de l’Histoire*, 4, Paris, Minuit 2012. [↑]
10. The shipwreck of the 3rd of October 2013 happened very close to the Island of Rabbits in Lampedusa. In the days after the shipwreck, the operations for recovering the dead bodies succeeded in finding 366 people, whose remains were placed on the docks of the harbour of Lampedusa. About 20 people, according to the testimonies of the survivors, would be instead missing. The migrants came mainly from Eritrea. A few days later, the 11th of October, about 260 people – all Syrians and many of them were children – died due to the delay in the rescue operations by Malta and Italy. For more on the dynamics of the shipwreck, reconstructed through the testimonies of the survivors, see the journalist Fabrizio Gatti’s investigations: <http://gatti.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2014/01/24/italia-e-malta-litigano-sul-naufragio/> and the video “*Sorry for not drowning*”, <http://www.storiemigranti.org/spip.php?article1069>. [↑]
11. For an analysis of migrants’ shipwrecks in the Mediterranean within the horizon of necropolitics of the European Union see G. Garelli, *Postcards from a Mediterranean Solid Sea: The Depths of “Migration Management” at the Blue Frontier* (2013), in Thomas Simpson (ed), *Noise in the Waters (A Play by Marco Martinelli)*, New York City, Bordighera Press, pp. 123-133. To see how shipwrecks are “made happen” in the Mediterranean, see the reconstruction of the story of the boat left adrift despite having been seen by many war vessels which were operating in the area in March (C. Heller, L. Pezzani, “Left-To-Die Boat” Case, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fo_ltd_sar_addendum.pdf). The project WatchTheMed, (<http://watchthemed.net/index.php/main>) monitors the Mediterranean as it is crossed by migrants’ boats and the operations of control and rescue at sea by single states and by European agencies. [↑]
12. The video that the Italian newspaper “LaRepubblica” circulated on the web on the 15th of May 2014 was made during the days immediately after the 3rd of October 2013 during the operations for recovering the bodies, can be found at: http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/05/15/news/morte_migranti-86184959/. [↑]
13. Here the link in sequence: 1) <https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQk0YPehayvjxq2YdcHcqNZ2Ljs6v5uI4thy69tKJD7fHiu928g2Q> 2) http://i.res.24o.it/images2010/SoleOnLine5/_Immagini/Notizie/Italia/2013/10/bare-lampedusa258x258.jpg?uuid=5231dc7e-2deb-11e3-bf64-2297e6554531 3) http://images2.corriereobjects.it/methode_image/2013/10/09/Interni/Foto%20Gallery/14645b13689ebbd652ae50732879985e_MGzoom.jpg?v=20131009185927 4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tX46-ILM1xE>. As far as the image number 6 is concerned, it is instead one of the many photographs published by the association *La terre pour tous*, that gathers some of the families of the missing Tunisian migrants. The president of the association is Imed Soltani (facebook page: جمعية الأرض للجميع-Association la terre pour tous). [↑]
14. See W. Benjamin (2009) *Thesis on the Concept of History*, New York: Classic Books, and J. Derrida (2006) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, New York: Routledge. [↑]

15. W. Brown, *Politics out of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. [↑]

16. On this point sees G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Minuit, Paris 2003 and *Remontages du temps subi*, Minuit, Paris 2010. [↑]

17. The Remembrance Day— “the day to remember the Shoah (the extermination of the Jewish people), racial laws, the Italian persecution of the Jewish citizens, the Italians who had been deported, their imprisonment, their deaths, and the day to remember also those who, from different sides, opposed the project of extermination and by risking their life saved other lives and protected persecuted people”, as text of law that sets it, was established in Italy in July 2000, fixing the 27th of January as the commemorative day. In November 2005 that day was indicated as a commemorative date also by a UN resolution. Without dwelling too much on the ways in which on the 27th of January is celebrated yearly in Italy, I only highlight that the text of law mandating such “collective memorial” establishes at the same time a “collective oblivion” since it misses to quotes among the events to remember the persecution and the extermination of the roma people. [↑]

18. S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003: http://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Sontag_Susan_2003_Regarding_the_Pain_of_Others.pdf. [↑]

19. The Costa Concordia shipwreck happened nearby the Island of the Lily (Isola del Giglio) on the 13th January 2012, due to a mistake on the part of the commander that made the navy crash against a cliff. The shipwreck, in which 32 passengers and crew died, had huge media coverage in Italy during those days and even in the following months and years, both for the trial of the captain of the navy and for the difficult operations of rescue and pull of the navy towards the harbour of Genova. [↑]

20. The murder of Yara Gambirasio, a 13 years old girl, happened in November 2010 in a village in the province of Bergamo. It is one of the most followed cases of crime in recent years and one that continues to raise the attention of the Italian media for its many vicissitudes: the disappearance of the girl in November 2010; the first imputation to a Moroccan migrant and his immediate apprehension while he was on a ferry traveling to Morocco; the racist reactions that the hypothesis of his guiltiness has provoked with the attempt, on the part of the Northern League, a right wing party, to use his apprehension instrumentally against all migrants; his release, upon being judged external to the events, and the years of investigation starting from the DNA traces found on the clothes of the victim. This is the reason why I reference this episode, i.e., the huge amount of DNA traces that were taken from the inhabitants of the area where the girl was killed in order to identify who was responsible for her death. The DNA traces found on her clothes, in fact, belonged to a dead person (Giuseppe Guerinoni) and did not correspond to the DNA of the man’s son and daughter. Hence the hypothesis that Giuseppe Guerinoni had an illegitimate child, whom the investigators named “the unknown one.” From this also the elaboration of many more genetic profiles in the surrounding area followed. Then, in June 2014 a suspect convict was arrested exactly for the proximity of his DNA to the traces of DNA found on the victim’s clothes. [↑]

21. After the shipwreck of the 6th September 2012, which happened near the rock of Lampione, close to the island of Lampedusa, together with *Association la terre pour tous* and with an Italian lawyer I’ve been engaged in following the procedures in the identification of the victims, demanding Italy and Tunisia to make the exchange between the genetic profiles of the bodies recovered from the sea and the genetic profiles of the relatives in Tunisia. It is unproductive to say that the exchange has not happened, yet. Instead, I want to remark that during the investigations and the meetings with the authorities in charge of that, I’ve often been told that it was the first time that such a request has been made and that just for this reason there were no established procedures to follow but that they would have to “invent” new practices. On the issue of how corpses were handled upon being found at sea after the shipwrecks that started to happen in the Sicily Channel in the Nineties, I carried out an inquiry in 2005, researching Offices of Vital Statistics and visiting the many cemeteries across which these corpses were scattered (see: Rosa, pura

contraddizione in F. Sossi, *Storie migranti. Viaggio tra i nuovi confini, Deriveapprodi*, Roma 2005). In the past few years some projects focused on indexing deaths—see in particular “Fortress Europe,” Gabriele Del Grande’s blog (<http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>), the list published by UNITED for Intercultural Action, <http://unitedagainstrefugeedeaths.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Listofdeaths22394June15.pdf>, and the list *The Migrants Files* (<https://www.detective.io/detective/the-migrants-files/>). At present, the project of a data base coordinated by Tamara Last and Thomas Spijkerboer, Univeristy of Amsterdam (*Tracking Deaths in the Mediterranean*, <http://thomasspijkerboer.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Tracking-Deaths-in-the-Mediterranean.pdf>) is undergoing. [↑]

22. Obviously, not even the migrants who survived have been asked their opinion about the publication of the images of the shipwreck. Indeed, I met in Milan some of the survivals of the shipwreck of the 11th October 2013 with whom, as collective of women Leventicinqueundici, we decided to make a video, while the news about the delay of Italy and Malta in the rescue operations was at that time not public, yet. (<http://leventicinqueundici.noblogs.org/?p=1647>). The Italian Navy, instead, had already published the video of the shipwreck, and for this reason we watched it with them, who didn’t know about it; and by watching it they recognized themselves. [↑]

23. J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 56. [↑]

24. On this point, see two of my articles: F. Sossi, *Migrations and militant research? Some brief considerations*, “Postcolonial Studies”, 16, 2013, pp. 269-278; e *Struggles in Migration: The Phantoms of the Truth*, in *Spaces in Migration. Postcards of a Revolution* (edit by G. Garelli, F. Sossi, M. Tazzioli), Pavementbooks, London 2013. [↑]

25. This is again the sentence through which Derrida defines the phantom. J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*. op. [↑]

26. W. Benjamin, *On the Critique of Violence*, in *Reflections*. [↑]

27. See J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, New York: Routledge. [↑]

28. H. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, edit by J. Kohn, Schocken Books, New York 2003. (147-149; 157-158). [↑]

29. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951-1966), *Harvest Book*, 1973. [↑]

30. A different indication on the possibilities of “action” by the stateless people, starting precisely from a critical use of Arendt’s theory is that developed by Judith Butler. Butler, G. Ch. Spivak, *Who sings the nation-state?*, Seagull Books 2007. [↑]

31. J. Butler, *Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?* (2012) in *Radical Philosophy*. Adorno Prize Lecture, September 11, 2012. Published Nov/Dec 2012 (<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/can-one-lead-a-good-life-in-a-bad-life/>). [↑]

32. Concerning Butler’s reformulation see J. Butler, *New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality, An Interview with Judith Butler by Vikki Bell*, *Theory, Culture & Society* 2010 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 27 (1): 130–152; *Vulnerability and Resistance, Interview with Judith Butler by Federica Sossi and Martina Tazzioli*, in *Materiali foucaultiani*, (2) 4, (http://www.materialifoucaultiani.org/images/03_butler_en.pdf). Foucault’s questions are instead formulated *What is critique?* (1978) in M. Foucault, *The politics of truth*, *Semiotexte*, 1997, pp. 41-82. [↑]

33. Concerning the freedom of movement as one of the ways in which the Tunisian revolution was enacted, see *Spaces in Migration. Postcards of a Révolution* (edit by G. Garelli, F. Sossi, M. Tazzioli,

Pavementbooks, London 2013). See also M. Tazzioli , *Spaces of Governmentality. Autonomous Migration and the Arab Uprisings*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2015. [↑]

34. Beyond the articles already cited, see F. Sossi, *Inseguendo le leggi di Faten*, in F. Sossi, ed. *Spazi in migrazione. Cartoline di una rivoluzione*, and F. Sossi, *Migrazione e narrazioni*, in S. Mezzadra and M. Ricciardi, eds. (2013) *Movimenti indisciplinati*, Ombre Corte: Verona, pp. 211-235. [↑]

35. Some of the initiatives and of the documents produced during the campaign “From one shore to the other: lives that matter” can be found at: http://leventicinqueundici.noblogs.org/?page_id=354. [↑]

36. This is again the definition of ‘phantom’ given by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, p. 56. [↑]

Tags: Europe, migration

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