



## *Framing Migrant Memories: Lampedusa's Fragmented Archives*

by Alessandra Di Maio

**ABSTRACT:** The small island of Lampedusa, a key destination of the Central Mediterranean Route connecting Africa to Italy, offers a special observatory on the contemporary trans-Mediterranean odyssey of migrants, although often transformed into a “border spectacle.” Upon landing, migrants are stripped of their belongings, as these are impounded by the authorities. Such an act of dispossession is intended to deprive them of their histories, family ties and cultural identity. Photographer Mario Badagliacca has portrayed a selection of these lost and retrieved items in his work *Fragments* (2013). Each object reveals expectations, fears, desires, endurance, but cannot tell a full story. They are fragments of an open-ended narrative that requires to be framed and told, if we wish to gain a better understanding of the Black Mediterranean, its history, and consequences. What remains untold can only be imagined. Writer Maaza Mengiste imagines what lies behind two smudged photographs portrayed by Badagliacca. As always, the force of imagination provides signification, solidarity, and survival in the fractured history of the African Diaspora.

**KEY WORDS:** Lampedusa; Black Mediterranean; Border Spectacle; Mario Badagliacca's *Fragments*; photography and poetry; Maaza Mengiste's “Nepenthe”; African Diaspora; Archives



## A GATE TO EUROPE

For years now, the news has shown us images of boats coming from the North African shores landing in Lampedusa, a small island administratively and politically belonging to Italy but only sixty-one miles away from the Tunisian coastlines. On board are young men and women, asylum seekers and economic migrants who left their homes behind and embarked on an uncertain, dreadful journey, hoping to find work, democracy, a refuge, and generally better life conditions in Europe. Most of them are Africans of different nationalities who have confronted the asperities of the Sahara Desert on jammed lorries before facing what the UN refers to as the Central Mediterranean Route. Regrettably, not all of them reach their destination. Bodies of migrants drowned at sea are found by the Italian Coastguard on regular basis or are accidentally caught in fishermen's nets in the waters surrounding the tiny Sicilian island whose pristine *Isola dei Conigli* has been consistently voted in the past years by TripAdvisor as one of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

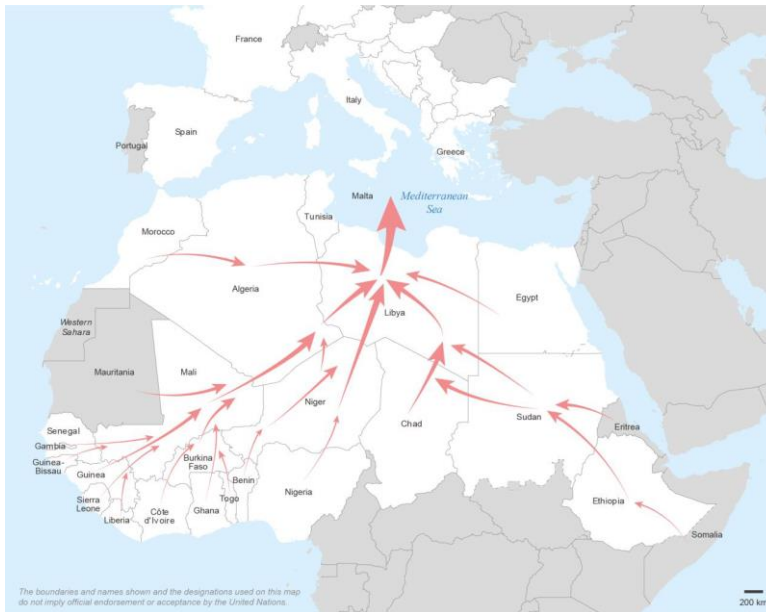


Fig. 1. Central Mediterranean Route (UNHCR. *Central Mediterranean Route: Working on alternatives to dangerous journeys*. October 2017, p. 1, [data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/60349](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/60349). Accessed 27 Feb. 2022).

The “Mediterranean Passage” (Portelli 282-304; King 1-21), occasionally undertaken in solitary dinghies but predominantly on larger, overcrowded, often decrepit boats controlled by local smugglers and international criminal organizations, has been crossed relentlessly for over thirty years. Libya and Italy, tied by old partnership treaties and a more recent *Memorandum of Understanding* (2017), have played a fundamental role in its formation, as the majority of boats leave from the Libyan northern shores and land in Lampedusa, or, to a minor extent, in other Sicilian and



Southern Italian ports. Since this has been brought to the limelight by the international mass-media, we cannot turn our face away any longer. The CNN has filmed human auctions in Libya (Elbagir *et al.*), while recently Ian Urbina has reported life and death in one of the country's major migrant detention centers for *the New Yorker* (Urbina 2021; Urbina and Galvin 2022). Yet the world keeps looking-on, in despair and indignation in the best cases, or with indifference and even contempt in the worst cases. Europe, NATO, the international community, nobody seems to find—or willing to find, rather—a political solution to this protracted, unashamed violation of human rights taking place in the region that the West considers the cradle of civilization. Memories of the Middle Passage come vigorously to mind. While casualties multiply, physical and psychological abuses of all sorts mark the lives of the people on the move in each leg of the journey—what in the Maghrebi arabophone popular discourse is called *harg*, the 'burning' of the Mediterranean. Stefania Pandolfo explains that in North African Arabic slang, *harg*, like *brûler* in French, means 'infringing the law'. In this context, she clarifies, the term indicates a transgression that has eschatological implications: embarking a hazardous journey means risking one's life, leaving the community behind, facing death (Pandolfo 333). Upon arrival, temporary detention, fingerprinting, and possible repatriation await the survivors—and long quarantines, in the current pandemic era. These are only the initial 'surveillance' steps of a new cycle of distressful ordeals that they must endure. To be sure, this migration system, which I described as the Black Mediterranean (Di Maio 142-163), has been kept thoroughly *illegal* through the years. No quota system, no effective humanitarian corridors have been established. For Fortress Europe, migrants remain illegal strangers, clandestines, invaders. In his 2015 article "The Border Spectacle of Migrant 'Victimisation'," Nicholas De Genova points out:

Migrants only become 'illegal' when legislative or enforcement-based measures render particular migrations or types of migration 'illegal'—or, in other words, illegalise them. From this standpoint, there are not really 'illegal' migrants so much as illegalised migrants. The real origins of such illegalisations are to be found in the deliberations, debates, and decisions of lawmakers. The law that illegalises migrants remains largely invisible, while the spectre of the 'devious and cunning' migrant becomes hyper-visible through mass-media representations of border policing. (De Genova, "Border Spectacle")

De Genova argues that, independently from the specificity of the region, a "spectacle of enforcement at the border" (De Genova, *Working the Boundaries* 242) makes migrants' alleged illegality "spectacularly visible" (De Genova, "Border Spectacle"). Death, detention and deportation of migrants come together as essential components of a "border spectacle" whose main purpose is not necessarily sealing national borders, but rather serving as a reminder of what can happen to people who, despite legal impediments, transgress them. In this sense, expanding on De Genova, Lampedusa becomes not only the site of a "border spectacle" where decisions are made on who can or cannot enter Europe, who can be included or should be excluded. It is also, and especially, the arena where state sovereignty is staged. The "border spectacle," according to De Genova, "works its magic trick of displacing 'illegality' from its point of production—the processes of law-making—to the so-called 'scene of the crime.'" He



concludes, “These dynamics that illegalise migrants and produce the conditions for the exploitation of their labour are what I call their *obscene inclusion*” (De Genova, “Border Spectacle,” my italics).

## BORDER SPECTACLES AND THE SCOPIC REGIME

Lampedusa offers a special observatory on the contemporary trans-Mediterranean odyssey of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean Route. In his 2012 book *Lo spettacolo del confine: Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*, Paolo Cuttitta, drawing from De Genova, explains how the small Mediterranean frontier island has been turned first into a “border space,” and later into a “spectacle” by decades of migratory policies swinging between a rhetoric of securitization and one of humanitarianism. In *Reframing Migration* (2019), Federica Mazzara observes that the securitization and militarization that have transformed the island into a stage for a “border spectacle” have been “fuelled systematically by the media” (Mazzara 10). Mass-media representations of Lampedusa, she contends, entrench, through strategies of stereotyping, public perceptions of migrants as threatening masses rather than individuals with stories, voices, histories, rights—and, I would add, desires. This, she argues, “generates what can be defined a hegemonic ‘scopic regime’,<sup>1</sup> perpetuating a recognition and passive acceptance of certain institutionalized, stereotyped patterns” (Mazzara 10).

I agree with Mazzara that in the global, media-led discourse on migration, Lampedusa’s migrants are represented as “threatening masses” or, in alternative, as De Genova points out, as “victims”—a narrative, the latter, in my opinion counterpointed by that of the white European “savior,” epitomized by military, aptly named Search&Rescue Operations. Above all, in the public perception, they are represented as “unnamed suffering bodies” (Mazzara 11) whose stories originate in the Mediterranean Passage. In both cases, whether migrants are presented as a threat to Europe’s ‘secure’ status quo, or as victims of tragedies that don’t regard us Europeans closely, they are generally portrayed as indistinct crowds. I agree with Mazzara when she says that this politics of representation: “has fabricated spaces where migrant bodies are de-individualized as human beings” (11). De-humanization, I argue, is the obvious consequence—or rather the intrinsic implication—of such a representation. The “border spectacle” does not allow space for a fully accomplished notion of humanity. The first sign of identity for individuals of any place and time is the act of naming—what’s your name, is the first question we ask when we meet someone for the first time, telling them our name. First names signify individual subjectivity, whereas surnames mark the belonging to a family, a clan, a genealogy. But when migrants are represented in mainstream media, numbers are typically provided, rather than names.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Metz coined the idiom “scopic regime” referring to cinema as distinguished from theatre (Metz 1975). Mazzara uses it in Martin Jay’s definition (1988), implying that vision is always mediated by social and cultural constructions.



If occasionally a first name is provided, it is usually never followed by a family name. Migrants' names remain unspecified, their voices unheard, their life stories unknown. They are, and remain, precisely that: 'migrants'. If the dominant "scopic regime" proposed by the mass-media de-humanize these people, who can offer a 'human'—and 'humanist'—counter-vision and counter-narrative of their history? How can we not lose track of their individuality in this yet collective experience that marks our contemporary times?

## LAGOS-PALERMO

About ten years ago, I had the honor of working with Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka in the preparation of the 2012 edition of the *Lagos Black Heritage Festival* dedicated to Italy and the Black Mediterranean, in particular to Afro-Italian textual, visual and performative narratives. Moving from the convictions that migration is a collective but also an individual act—or a process, rather—affecting and transforming the human soul, and that the human soul is first and foremost the raw material of poetry, Soyinka invited poets from both sides of the Mediterranean to intervene in the public discourse through their verses, in order to reassess a more complete narrative of Afro-Mediterranean migrations. Specifically, invitations reached poets from Nigeria and Italy, both lands famous for their glorious poetic traditions. Soyinka called for sixteen Italian and sixteen Nigerian poets to versify on the theme of migration as they wished, providing no further specification. Erri De Luca, Iolanda Insana, Valerio Magrelli, Cristina Ali Farah, Stefano Benni and several others, including our own Nobel Laureate Dario Fo, responded from the Italian side; J. P. Clark, Chris Abani, Jumoke Verissimo, Odia Ofeimun and many more from different generations and regions responded from Nigeria. The project resulted in a night of poetry-reading at the vibrant Freedom Park in Lagos, and later in the publication of the volume *Migrations/Migrazioni: An Afro-Italian Night of the Poets* (Soyinka et al. 2012) which I personally curated with Soyinka, aided by Jahman Anikulapo for the Nigerian part. Each poem in the volume is accompanied by a color photograph that recaptures and translates visually, as it were, an image in the verses. We curators proceeded through synesthesia, from the aural, to the written, to the visual. We mixed photo-reportage and artistic photographs by renowned and less known photographers from different traditions, in an attempt to show that visual narratives of migration are more complex, prismatic, challenging than those perpetuated by hegemonic media-dominated "border spectacles." Similarly, poetry highlighted the essential 'human' aspect of a historical phenomenon involving us all, too often neglected in favor of statistics, sociological analysis, and reportages. *Migrations/Migrazioni* provided a collective, critical commentary on the "scopic regime" of migration to Europe, offering alternative poetic and visual perspectives.

Later some of the poets, photographers, artists, and curators who had collaborated to the making of the volume met in the city of Palermo, Italy's 2018 Capital of Culture, for the year-long cultural project *ReSignifications: The Black Mediterranean*. The program comprised various initiatives, including a 5-month exhibit at the City's





contemporary art gallery (ZAC) portraying works from over sixty artists from Africa and the Diaspora, a collaboration with the European Nomadic Biennale of Contemporary Art MANIFESTA 12, and an international conference with a strong presence of artists taking place in different symbolic venues, culminating in a boat-trip on the Mediterranean waters. In the meantime, we had published an Italian edition of *Migrazioni/Migrations* (2016), printing the original color photographs in black and white. Across the years, migrations from Africa to Italy had increased in numbers, and in 2016-2017, according to UNHCR records, Nigerians made up the largest national community of Africans arriving in Italy.<sup>2</sup> According to the Italian publishers, black-and-white images suggested a timeless quality that well marked the uninterrupted continuity of the migratory process. *ReSignifications: The Black Mediterranean*, happening in the heart of the Mediterranean, revived the scholarly and artistic research begun with the 2012 Lagos Black Heritage Festival. While investigating the historically and contemporary ways in which black voices are silenced and black bodies are ambiguously imagined in Western-dominated global culture, it offered organizers and participants the occasion to continue to explore how art, poetry and photography remain powerful instruments of resistance in the global era, specifically in the Black Mediterranean discourse.

#### MARIO BADAGLIACCA'S FRAGMENTS

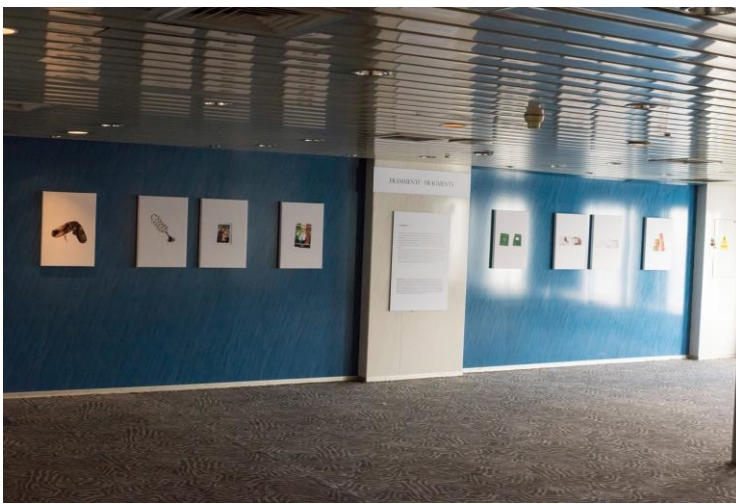


Fig. 2. Badagliacca's *Frammenti* in "Resignifications: The Black Mediterranean" on GNV Boat Atlas, June 2018.

A remarkable occasion to explore the potent symbolic significance of the intersection between visual representations and the written word in that context was offered by the

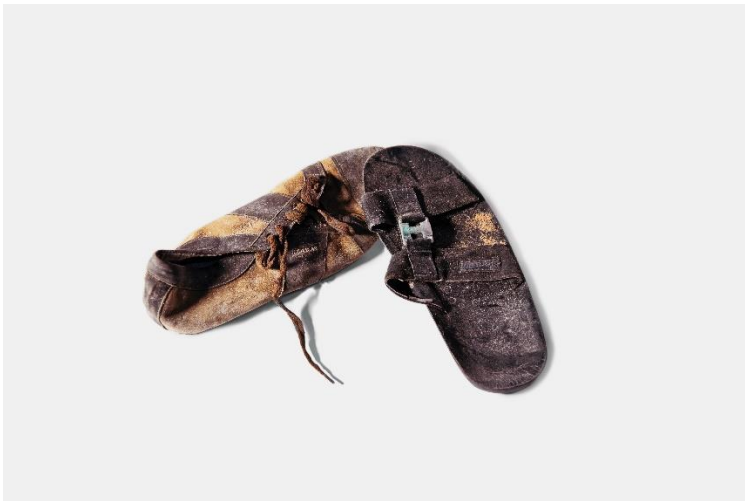
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<sup>2</sup> See the UNHCR online documents: [www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016\\_09\\_UNHCRCountryUpdateItaly-September2016\\_V6.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_09_UNHCRCountryUpdateItaly-September2016_V6.pdf) and: [www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/62023.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/62023.pdf). Accessed 27 Feb. 2022



exhibit *Fragments/Frammenti* by Sicilian photographer Mario Badagliacca.<sup>3</sup> Although the work dates back to 2013, it was installed for the first time in 2018 on the GNV boat Atlas, which, within the initiatives of *ReSignifications: The Black Mediterranean*, brought a hundred artists, performers, writers, intellectuals, journalists, academics and students, mainly from Africa and the Diaspora, on a symbolic voyage on the Mediterranean Sea, a roundtrip boat-ride from Palermo to Naples. While performances and talks took place sequentially, at day and night, Badagliacca's installation accompanied the passengers on their circular journey between the two major cities of the Italian Mediterranean *mezzogiorno*.

Badagliacca's collection portrays some of the objects left behind by migrants landing in Lampedusa. All men, women and children arriving in the island that has served in the past decades as a "Gate to Europe"—the reference is to Mimmo Paladino's eponymous monument in Lampedusa—must surrender their personal belongings upon landing, as the vessels and everything in them are impounded by the authorities. In other words, they are forced to leave behind the material memories that have accompanied them during the journey. Some are personal items—letters, diaries, photographs, clothing items such as gowns or an odd pair of shoes, or even body-care products, including a shaving brush, hair grease, and a henna eye liner; means of physical or spiritual nourishment, for example baby-bottles, pacifiers, flasks, food items, but also sacred texts such as the Koran and the Bible; essential survival tools, including a life-vests, a snorkel, and medicines; whereas others anticipate the fulfilment of the 'Italian dream'—a backpack of the 'Azzurri' soccer team, an Arabic-Italian dictionary portraying the leaning Tower of Pisa on the cover, etc.



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<sup>3</sup> The full project appears on the photographer's website:  
[www.mariobadagliacca.com/frammenti\\_2013-r8112](http://www.mariobadagliacca.com/frammenti_2013-r8112) Accessed 27 Feb. 2022.



Fig. 3-5. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

Such an act of dispossession, at the same time real and symbolic, inevitably intends to deprive migrants of their histories, family ties, and cultural and individual identities. In the past years, the volunteers of the Lampedusa's *Askavusa* collective have rescued some of these objects, eventually discarded in the island's so-called "boat cemetery"—portrayed by Badagliacca in a previous project, "Grooving Lampedusa"<sup>4</sup> (2012). A selection is now displayed in *Porto M*, a small archival museum founded on the island by the collective in February 2014 as a testimony to the traumatic experience of the Mediterranean border and the role played by Lampedusa in the migration chessboard. Badagliacca, a documentarist who considers photography an essential instrumental of social research, explains that when he was sent from the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* to Lampedusa for a photo-reportage documenting

<sup>4</sup> Photographic project: [www.mariobadagliacca.com/grooving\\_lampedusa\\_2012-r8153](http://www.mariobadagliacca.com/grooving_lampedusa_2012-r8153); video installation: [www.mariobadagliacca.com/grooving\\_lampedusa\\_2012-r8153](http://www.mariobadagliacca.com/grooving_lampedusa_2012-r8153). Accessed 27 Feb. 2022





migration<sup>5</sup>, while visiting *Askavusa's* spaces he came across dozens of boxes filled with abandoned items, some of them in poor conditions: broken shoes, clothes, cigarette packets, crosses, compasses, toiletries, Bibles, Korans, diaries, and personal letters.

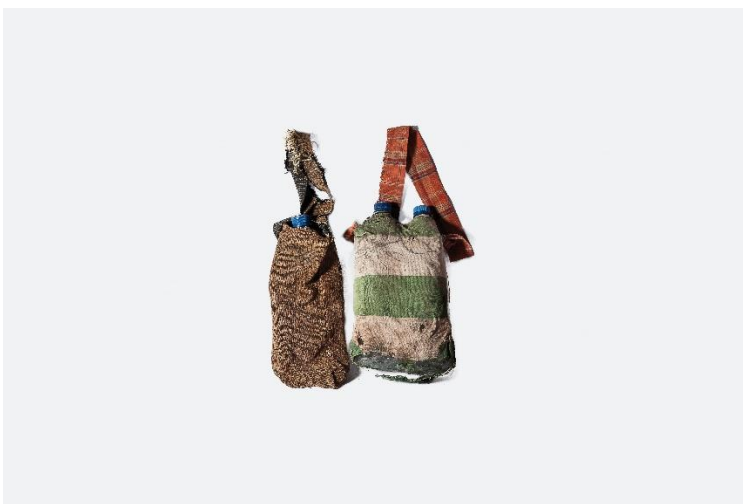


Fig. 6-7. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

A founding member of the Rome-based *Archivio delle Memorie Migranti (Migrant Memories Archive)*, directed by historian of Africa Sandro Triulzi, Badagliacca realized, in his words, that “All these fragments of migrant lives help trace the different subjectivities of their owners, their faces, voices, stories and journeys. They reveal individual expectations, fears, desires, and a common need for survival” (*Frammenti*). As Nicoletta Vallorani argues, in *Fragments* Badagliacca turns lost and eventually retrieved objects into photographic subjects that tell their owners’ life stories by reconstructing

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<sup>5</sup> The photo-reportage appears in Attilio Bolzoni’s article “Che cosa resta di un viaggio della speranza” (Bolzoni 34).



specific private worlds that cannot be reduced by any means to the mere count of numbers proposed by the official records. Through its photographic representation, each portrayed object becomes a “talisman, an Aladdin’s lamp” capable of evoking and re-creating a world that is never really left behind and calls for re-invention (Vallorani 144).



Fig. 8. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

Badagliacca portrayed a selection of the objects he came across by using macro lenses, obtaining a high definition of details that became clearly noticeable when the photographs were printed on cm 40 x 60 canvas for the boat exhibit. The sharpness offered by the inkjet-printed canvas, in contrast with the simple white frames, made the images almost tridimensional, tangible. They seemed to invite the viewers to engage with them, imagine their owners, and ask questions. Whose stories do these objects tell? What is the historical narrative they inscribe? What do they tell us about the people who carried them, possibly cling to them, while crossing the desert, the sea? How do these people’s private belongings reflect their own personal experiences and inflect the shared practice of migration? What do they add to the history of African migrations? How do they contribute to the fragmented, centuries-old archives of the African diaspora? Finally, can they provide cues to fill the gaps of what remains untold? Veruska Cantelli explains,

Badagliacca’s *Fragments* is not just a part of an effort to mark communal tragedy, the memory of an undistinguished multitude to ease our own sense of discomfort and desire for closure. In each object we are compelled to see the evidence of a state of mind – not our own. [...] We find a glimpse of the quotidian, the reassuring gestures of handling things. [...] In their absences, they allow us to imagine bodies, their story, a relation of attachment, the coexistence of a silent pact charged with home, continuity, longing, communality, becoming and violence, chaos, panic, haste, anxiety, uncertainty, dispersion” (Cantelli 29).



By mapping what Cantelli calls “a geography of dispersion,” Badagliacca’s *Fragments* “frame memory. We depend on them to retrieve steps to rescue forgotten journeys” (Cantelli 29). Each fragment assumes meaning in its intrinsic dislocation, and through relation to the others in photographic representation. By selecting and “framing” migrants’ fragments, Badagliacca offers a possible narrative of the Black Mediterranean migration. In traditional continental thinking—*pensée continentale*, based on the notions of home, roots, unity, and genealogy—fragmentation means loss of meaning. But in archipelagic thinking—Edouard Glissant’s *pensée archipelique* (1997)—home is replaced by displacement, roots by rhizomes, genealogy by nomadism, and fragmentation entails *creation of meaning*. Looking back at the Middle Passage from his 20th century Caribbean standpoint, the Martiniquan poet argues that only fragments can survive the abyss. The “abyssal subject,” he contends, exists in fragments, their identity is constructed in relation. “The Sea is History,” echoes St. Lucian Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott in one of his best-known poems—a theme that crosses his entire poetic production. In his study on Glissant and the Middle Passage, John Drabinsky argues: “Memory, history, futurity, and subjectivity are displaced by abyss, and yet this displacement remains open to the movement of creation. Traces of the painful past, then made fecund, move across space time, creating a place in which rhizomatic, nomadic subjectivity finds home amid the wakes of trauma” (Drabinsky 139).

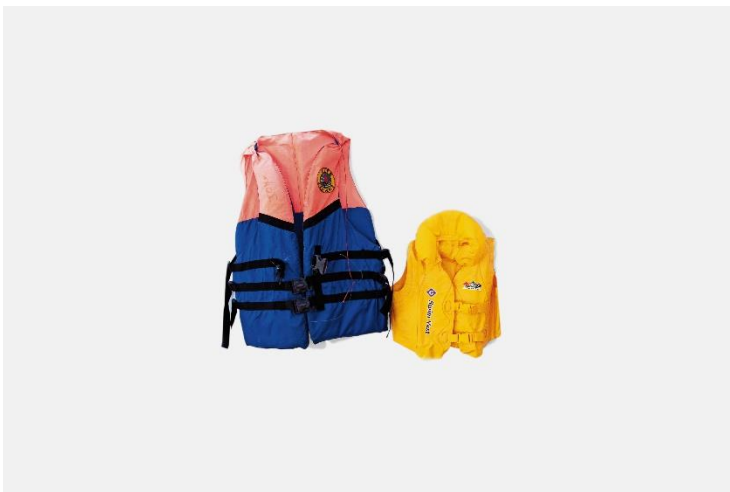


Fig. 9. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

The history of the Mediterranean Passage grafts upon that of the Middle Passage. Each fragment in Badagliacca’s work signifies an individual life story, while their unfinished totality reveals a history—that of the Black Mediterranean—which is to be inscribed in that of the African diaspora. Situated in the “accumulated violence against black people globally” (Saucier & Woods 55), the experience of the Black Mediterranean constitutes only the last chapters of the on-going history of the “wake” acknowledged/formulated by Christina Sharpe (2016). “History mock. History strikes



again!", reiterates Soyinka in his 2019 long poem *A Humanist Ode to Chibok, Leah (Ode laica a Chibok e Leah* 20; 54; 56). In the third section, "Mirage-Salvation!", Soyinka, mastermind and eventually 'captain' of what he dubbed the 2018 Palermo-Naples "Grand Voyage," offers his vision of the Black Mediterranean:

Hope gathers, polyglot  
On the beaches of Tripoli. Dreams of salvation.  
A craft invisibly labeled Sink-or-Swim  
Proves redundant – the wait was long ended.  
Hyenas have swooped, famished flags aloft  
Fanged and rampant. Night descends. The wavering  
Lampedusa shore lights turn will o'wisp  
For many – they failed the attestation test –  
Like others before – and thousands more to follow.  
(Soyinka, *Ode laica* 48)

Fragment as a form mirrors the unfinished process of migration. The heuristic question of fragments is by nature enigmatic, incomplete. As such, it calls for creation. In the works of many contemporary writers, especially from the African Diaspora, remains, or traces, guide their understanding of the world, bringing about writing as a creative act. Literature will thus originate out of interruption, forgetting, misunderstanding, displacement, broken order or plain disorder.



Fig. 10. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

Authors will search their memory to find an original and unique trace of the fractured experience of the Diaspora, trying to bring it back to life despite its resistance. In Manthia Diawara's documentary, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, Glissant says, "On the slave-ship we lost our languages, all familiar objects, songs, everything. We lost everything. All we had left was traces. That's why I believe that our literature is a literature of traces" (Glissant in Diawara 2010).



## MAAZA MENGISTE'S "NEPENTHE"

The displaced objects of the Black Mediterranean portrayed by Badagliacca have prodded Ethiopian-American writer Maaza Mengiste to imagine who are the subjects behind them, how to make sense of the life stories they reveal. Mengiste was familiar with Badagliacca's collection before it was ever printed and wrote what she defines a "poem," composed in prose, as a creative 'corollary' to one of the photographer's fragments—the portrait of two smudged, partially erased photographs. Mengiste is not new to the using of photographs as a method of literary inspiration. The main character of her historical novel *The Shadow King* (2019) is built around a photograph of an Ethiopian woman she found in a flea market in Rome when she was conducting researching for her book, set at the times of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia: "I don't know who she is, but when I discovered this photo, I knew I'd found a visual representation of my character Hirut." She further explains, "I wanted to explore the world of the visible and also the world of the invisible through photographs. The official archives that I was looking at in different places in Italy were helpful in some ways, but I quickly realized that in order for me to find history that had not been censored by the Fascists, I needed to become inventive" (Mengiste in Mhute 2020).



Fig. 11. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

Mengiste recurs to a similar inventiveness in imagining the story behind her chosen photograph of Badagliacca's *Fragments*. Her piece "Nepenthe" (2018) explores the traumatic experience of migration, as well as its epic nature, concluding with an autobiographical reference. Nepenthe, in Greek literature and mythology, is a drug 'chasing away sorrow'—as the etymology of the term reveals—through oblivion. It is first mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*, where it is used by Helen to ease the pain caused by the disruption of her family, community, and homeland. The reference to this fictional, *ante litteram* anti-depressant in the title confers to Mengiste's story a mythical





dimension, granting it a timeless quality that well signifies the ordeal of displacement in any space and time:

Maybe we know too much. That is the problem that plagued Medea. When Cassandra crossed the placid sea, she knew it was Iphigenia who glanced up, past the waves, and smiled. Kidus Giorgi slayed the dragon but we can still burn in fire. (Mengiste, "Nepenthe")

By bridging in her reading of Badagliacca's work the heroines of the great epics of the Mediterranean—Medea, Cassandra, Iphigenia—with Ethiopia's largely venerated patron saint George who heroically killed the legendary dragon putting an end to human sacrifices, Mengiste suggests the heroic nature of the million people who have crossed the Mediterranean, several of them from Ethiopia and other regions of the Horn of Africa—significantly, the principal stage of *Africa Orientale Italiana's* colonial enterprise. By so doing, she combines history and myth, legend and chronicle. At the same time, through her poem she shares a fragment of her own story of displacement, hinting at a trace of her family history, opting for a matrilinear genealogy marked by a destiny of exile.

My grandmother warned me. She said, our dreams will bury us then weep. I call out to her now, she who is also named Maaza, she who stands at the shore's edge, muted by time. (Mengiste, "Nepenthe")

Overall, Badagliacca's photograph offers Mengiste an occasion to reflect on the writing of the African Diaspora, on its challenges and traumas, and to speculate on how its latest Mediterranean chapter can be narrated, represented, reconstructed.

One day we will find a language for this. A way to fit it all in the mouth than swallow into the folds of history. There will no longer be the torn photograph, the rusted spoon, the broken cigarettes, the woman's body floating in a sinking boat. That child, face down in the sand, will disappear. Remembering itself, the sea will no longer speak for the sky. Blue will simply turn back to blue. [...] I don't want to die in a language I cannot understand (Mengiste, "Nepenthe")

Mengiste's interpretation of Badagliacca's documentary work reveals the power of imagination as an empowering act of resistance. In the face of partial official records, based on cold statistics, imagination can fill the gap of the fragmented archive of the Black Mediterranean, challenging issues of origins, absence and belonging, providing sense, solidarity, and survival.

## CONCLUSION: THE IN-THE-MAKING ARCHIVES OF THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

Much remains untold in the on-going history of the African diaspora. While the history of the slave-trade, of the Middle Passage has been variously addressed and at least partially reconstructed, that of the Mediterranean Passage is still nebulous, opaque, unfinished. Badagliacca's *Fragments* represent the partiality of an open-ended story



whose signification requires continuous contextualization and new forms of framing. Cantelli concludes, "As photographs of crowded boats flood the media, projecting an undifferentiated understanding of experience, these [Badagliacca's] fragments propose the arduous journey of undoing accumulation, a thrust toward listening" (29). Badagliacca's portraits offer a choral story made of personal, intimate voices and material memories that can hopefully offer a counter-narrative, albeit fragmented, to the Border Spectacle offered by the media. It is a story that needs to be told, and passed on.

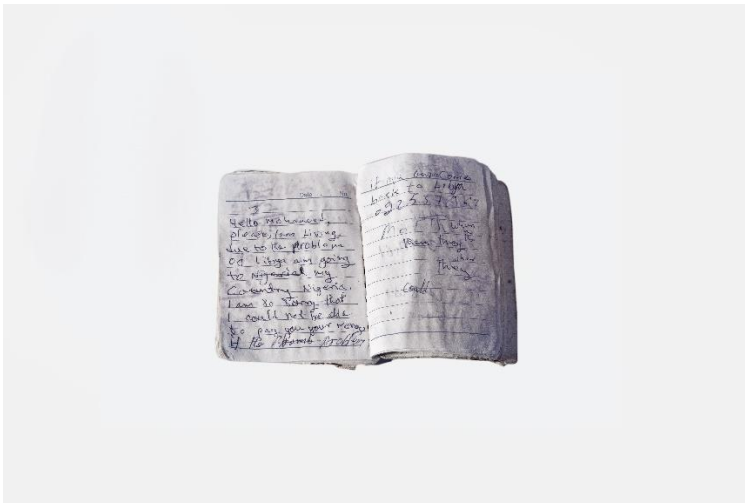


Fig. 12. Mario Badagliacca, *Frammenti*, 2013.

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