Perfect victims and monstrous invaders: media, borders, and intersectionality in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the reconfiguration of public, political and media discourses on migration to Italy's Southern coasts since the re-making of the Mediterranean border regime, beginning in 2013. Combining our respective anthropological and cultural studies approaches, this article looks at how borders filter and control, and examines the semiotic implications of borders through shared reflections on the tightening of the EU border regime and Italy's political positions on migrants and refugees. In the first section, Pinelli analyses border politics by looking at the shifts in humanitarian and political registers constructed on refugee women since 2010. Drawing on her ethnographic research, Pinelli demonstrates how these discursive registers legitimise the refusal of other migrants and exclude women from recognition as political and historical subjects. In the second section, Giuliani applies cultural and critical visual studies approaches to understand how two opposing media discourses on incoming migrants converge in construing the moral panic against migrants' threats and, consequently, Italy as in need of protection. In bridging these two sections, our aim is to offer a feminist intersectional perspective to understand how sedimented categories of gender, race, sex, and class regulate relations between the receiving State and subjects who are the signers of historical hierarchies of difference (refugees, migrants, women), and to simultaneously explore the processes which construct the receiving 'imagined community' as white, innocent and under siege.

Keywords
Italy's Southern borders, humanitarian discourses, intersectionality, victimisation, moral panic against the invasion

Introduction

In June 2019, the Sea Watch 3 rescued 53 migrants in the Mediterranean. After refusing to dock in Tripoli's port, in accordance with maritime law,[2] the ship's captain decided to head for the Lampedusa port, transgressing the Italian government's political position to prevent the docking of humanitarian boats (and migrants' sea arrivals). The Sea Watch 3 case had significant international political and mediatic resonance, showing an oppositional construct of the white radical activist as both smuggler and 'white saviour' – the *pendant* of the dichotomic representation of migrants as criminals or victims. Nonetheless, to understand the

consent built around the politics of "closed ports" and of narratives supporting border protection and depicting refugees as invaders, we need to trace the evolution of discourses of Europe's bitter migration and asylum politics. The closure of the EU's borders in response to migrant and refugee flows was inaugurated with Acquis Schengen (1985), further strengthened at the beginning of the 1990s, against flows along the Adriatic routes towards the Italian south-east costs, and later following the so-called Arab Spring, when flows were re-directed toward the Central Mediterranean. Over the course of these years, public and political narratives on sea arrivals toward Europe were mainly focused on Lampedusa, depicting it as the symbol of irregular migration to the EU. In the autumn of 2013, when over 400 people died a few hundred meters off Lampedusa's shore, the political and public discourse on migratory Mediterranean routes partially changed. Although the shipwreck of October 2013 was not the first, it identified the Central Mediterranean as the world's deadliest border and birthed a 'new' European migration policy. From October 2013 to November 2014, the Italian government ran a humanitarian and military Search and Rescue (SAR) operation in the Mediterranean, the Mare Nostrum Operation. National public discourse focused on the costs attributed the operation, as well as claims that Mare Nostrum made undocumented border crossing even more attractive to migrants, while the EU warned of "Schengen under pressure" because of consequential dispersion of migrants throughout its territories. These concerns led to the end of Mare Nostrum and facilitated the European project of turning the Mediterranean Sea into a pre-frontier to the EU for migrants and refugees (see Garelli et al. 2018).

This path led to the establishment of the European Agenda on Migration (2015), which strengthened the border monitoring systems – mainly through the development of the military Frontex agency and reinforcing control technologies, such as the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) (Heller and Jones 2014; Gaibazzi et al. 2017). Such a securitarian approach has meant that "national governments and EU institutions can bypass their rule of law and human rights responsibilities" (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019) and has led to a politics of SAR disengagement in the Central Mediterranean. Humanitarian NGOs partially filled the void left in saving migrants at sea. However, the conservative turn in EU institutions and Member States governments (for instance, the closed ports policy declared by the Italian Ministry of Interior in June 2018 or the refusal to let NGO ships conducting SAR operations to enter Italian or Maltese ports), nourished by an increasingly racist public discourse on migration flows which also led to the criminalization of NGOs and other activist organizations that rescue distressed migrants.

Taking Italy's Southern borders as a vantage point to observe these dynamics, this article explores the reconfiguration of public, political and media discourses on migration in relation to Southern European coasts since 2013. Over the years, we have repeatedly

shared reflections on the consequences of the tightening of EU and Italy politics on migrant and refugee arrivals. Comparing our respective research on EU border regimes – a lengthy ethnography on Southern Italy landing zones and a critical discourse analysis of iconographies and mainstream visual discourses on sea borders – we have become more convinced of the need to look at the borders as political and discursive *dispositifs*, foregrounding a perspective bringing us together – that of feminist intersectional perspective.

Combining anthropology and cultural studies, this article looks at how borders filter and control, resulting in semiotic implications in terms of the outcome of the interplay of hegemonic representations of borders in public discourse, laws, policies, as well as mainstream media. In addition, a feminist intersectional perspective allows us to understand how sedimented categories of gender, race, sex, and class regulate the relations between the receiving State and subjects who are "the privileged signers" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 21) of historical hierarchies of difference. Simultaneously, it allows us to explore the processes which construct the receiving 'imagined community' as white, innocent and under siege.

In the first section, Pinelli analyses border politics by looking at the shifts in the humanitarian and political registers constructed on refugee women since 2010 (See: 2019). Drawing on her ethnographic research, she seeks to show how these discursive registers legitimise the refusal of other migrants and exclude women from recognition as political and historical subjects. In the second section, Giuliani uses cultural and critical visual studies approaches to understand how two opposing media discourses on incoming migrants converge in construing the moral panic against migrants' threats and, consequently, Italy as in need of protection.

1. The political value of the bodies in the border regimes

Since 2010, asylum politics in Italy and Europe have undergone considerable change. Although both the Mediterranean and the regions of origin and transit of migrants to Europe have experienced dramatic evolutions (Bradeloup and Pliez 2011; Ciabarri 2014; Gaibazzi et al. 2017), European response has been to strengthen border externalisation policy (mainly through cooperation agreements with countries of transit and origin), and patrolling activities in the Mediterranean. In this geopolitical context, Italy has played a central role in achieving EU aims (such as the establishment of hotspots areas) in managing agreements with Libya, and for national political choices which, especially since 2017 (with the renewal of the Italy-Libya agreement), have been trying to manage migrations through offshore asylum and "closed ports" policies.

Through research which began in 2010 and was carried out mainly in the Sicilian coasts' landing zones and within refugee camps, I could closely observe this political

scenario and explore the long-term effects of the EU's and Italian borders, and humanitarian policies on refugees, especially women. One of my main focuses was on the nexus between gendered violence and forced migration by collecting refugee women's testimonies and exploring processes of reconstruction of their subjectivities after experiences of vulnerabilities and abuses. This outlook allowed for considerations of violence as a condition perpetuated and reinforced throughout the entire migration trajectory, in which arrival contexts play a key role in producing further social and institutional abuse. Part of this work has focused on border policies to explore how they produce enduring suffering and how humanitarian/political languages code wounds and wounded subjectivity when subjectivity represents the perfect image of the culturalised woman from the Global South to be saved or emancipated. These perspectives on the impact of border policies and on imaginaries embodied by humanitarian language (and reproduced by care practices) together with the empirical knowledge of the asylum contexts (refugee camps, landing zones, legal and assistance paths involving refugees) have allowed me to capture the gap between the realities of research sites and public and political discourses on sea arrivals.

Therefore, I analyse public discourses from the point of view of the political and humanitarian registers constructed on the refugee women's landings. Over the last ten years, these registers have oscillated between visibility and invisibility regimes. Here, I identify three temporal passages: women invisibility; the exposure of female figures as icons of suffering; the reduction, if not the cancellation, of the humanitarian imperative 'women and children must be saved'. In their chronology, these registers have always been co-present. Nevertheless, they overlapped in ways which make migrant women's bodies the filters which exclude them from recognition as historical subjects and justify the non-admittance of other migrants. In this section, I read border policies and the narratives accompanying them through the humanitarian and political imaginaries – which simultaneously save and exclude – constructed on refugee women. In a European context of severe violations of the right to asylum and protection, at best, women are admitted to the national territory in their "ahistorical splendour" (Mohanty 1984, 352).

An innovative approach bridging the intersectional feminist approach to political anthropology allows us to understand the political game played on refugee women's bodies to legitimise exclusion regimes and delegitimise the recognition of migrants as social and political subjects worthy of rights and protection. Such a theoretical and methodological stance allows me to make the racialisation of migration policies visible, and to highlight how these policies perpetuate gender, sexual, class, and culture hierarchies, producing protracted vulnerability and long-lasting suffering. Feminist and gendered approaches to forced migration analyses not only refer to specific gendered experiences but rather consider how institutions, policies, or humanitarian practices have sedimented gender, ethnic, racial, and

other hierarchies and how these axes are reconfigured (e.g. Stoler 1992) in the present. My intention is to show how imaginaries of gender, race and culture regulate the levels of recognition of the refugees in terms of historical and political subjectivity (Pinelli 2021). In other words, what is considered admissible of that subject, and what is considered inadmissible in the sphere of recognition?

A look back

In 2010, I began to engage the reconstruction of memories of violence from women arriving in Italy through the Central Mediterranean route following a period of time in Libyan detention camps. In the context of asylum migration, refugee women's stories often reflect the vicissitudes of contexts of origin and transit. Specifically, these women's bodies showed the effects of national and European migration and border policies. The 2007 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya (renewed in 2017) provisioned a joint-management of Libyan frontiers in efforts to discourage migrants' departure toward Italian coasts. This agreement had harmful repercussions for migrants due to the conditions, permanence, and exposure to violence faced in Libyan detention camps (Human Rights Watch 2009; 2019). However, once landing on Italy's shores, refugee women spent two-three years in one of Italy's 12 refugee camps. These camps, located in southern rural areas and often over-populated, lacked suitable spaces for women, children, or families. As scholarly research and international reports have documented, refugees waited one-two years for their asylum requests to be evaluated, living in distressing social and material conditions and institutional abandonment.

Although the disparate conditions of the camps were far from invisible, public discourse focused on Lampedusa landings while the experiences of violence and the social conditions lived by refugees in the reception system remained silenced. Little attention was given to the multiple forms of violence that women endured, especially concerning the political nature of intimate-sexual violence (depending on the geopolitical scenario), including the consequences that this lack of recognition might have on asylum requests.

Following the October 2013 shipwrecks,[3] the code of compassion started to characterise the mediatic and public narratives of refugees arriving from the Central Mediterranean route. The images of women (along with that of children, that Ticktin defines as "the trope of innocence", 2017), historically represented as icons of suffering (Kapur 2002; Kozol 1988; Malkki 1996), had a prominent role.

There was a fast transition from invisibility to overexposure of images of suffering and rescued migrants in Mediterranean waters. Undoubtedly, the use of humanitarian language and the will of Western States and non-governmental actors to depict themselves as those who save aching bodies, played central roles. The gap lies between, on the one hand, a

hypervisibility of suffering and sometimes death, with women exhibited as an emblem of humanitarian compassion, and made into victims without history, and, on the other, the invisibility of the protracted suffering and institutional violence that refugees continued to experience after their arrival. In other words, this exposed suffering was doomed to disappear once it left the media stage and transformed into policy. Women were doomed to disappear when they became real lives of pain and struggle, subjects to be recognised in terms of the story they bear.

Much of the research carried out during and after the Mare Nostrum Operation documented how the subsequent European SAR operations launched an emergency and improvised humanitarian plan on national territories that saw abused women, alone or with children, pregnant and sometimes minors abandoned in their suffering and left without care. Although showing signs of abuse and vulnerability, some women waited months to receive gynaecological and psychological assistance and similar time periods to access their first asylum interviews (Pasquero and Palladino 2017).

A central topic in this discussion concerns the over representation of the drama and pain filtered by an impotent female canon, which results in an archetypal portrayal of sacredness, suspended in time and history. For instance, between 2014-2016, international photography awards were assigned to portraits of veiled and suffering women, often with children, in Italian or Greek landing zones. Here the veil is not so much a religious symbol in the strict sense, but – as Ratna Kapur (2002) or Wendy Kozol (1988) have highlighted – that of a general sacredness (of women in a dimension of sacredness; mother with child, veiled woman, woman/Madonna) who is considered as admittable to the receiving community because of the bearer of a de-historicised impotence. As Liisa Malkki has already emphasised, these images of women (especially, of "womenandchildren", Enloe 1993, 165) that are retracted as painful and submissive, become conventional icons to narrate asylum and humanitarian campaigns, sentimental tropes capable to "address the very heart of our humanity" (Malkki 1996, 387).

There is, on that basis, a shared idea of seeing women – in conditions of poverty and in need of help – as a weakness and vulnerability imaginary. The point is what makes these images acceptable and reassuring is their perceived impotence; subjects that are harmless to the national order of things (Malkki 1996) and not disturbing the public sphere due to their lack of social and political power.

As Susan Sontag argued, the "admissible images" (or rather, the images capable of making some stories admissible) are those that are deprived of the historical dimensions, conveying a general or abstract message, and therefore obscured of their most important political value, that is questioning history and the public gaze over it. More recently, referring to refugees' images circulating in Europe, Miriam Ticktin has described how "the innocence"

– intended as a category able to filter which typologies of refugees can garner compassion – does not restrict itself to being a moral classification (2017, 577), but also expresses a precise political function.

To exceed the humanitarian

If this political function is seen in the way in which the perfect victim (the "ahistorical splendour") is admitted excluding the social and political subject, it becomes even more visible in the third passage of this narrative. By the end of the Mare Nostrum Operation and with the European forces' entry in the Central Mediterranean, Italy became the scene of deep criminalisation of humanitarian NGOs engaging to fill the void of migrants' search and rescue operations.

Feminist historians dealing with history of political asylum highlight how the moral imperative "women and children first" was a mainstream international humanitarian rhetoric since post-World War II (see Salvatici 2019), and, still, in the present such imperative assigns women a role of "humanitarian exception" (Ticktin 2017). This exceptionality deprives women bodies (those who are excluded by political recognition) of any historical value and, at the same time, means that the modern Western State depicts itself as that who protects the victim (the perfect a-historical icon of vulnerability). What must be emphasised is the sexual codification of this exceptionality. In her studies on the nexus between political violence and gender memory, Ronit Lentin has reframed the concept of *homo sacer* and coined the gendered term *femina sacra* (2006) to show how this sexualised and culturalised figure, that is recognised only in terms of "bare life," serves to the play of sovereign power.

In 2018, the Italian government's right-wing turn made harbour closure and the block of migration by sea its political promise. Several migrant boats were abandoned off the Mediterranean, including those carrying women and children. Such events and the discursive shift concerning the "humanitarian exceptionality" show the erosion of the moral imperative on women and the clear responsibility of the State to risk the lives of those who do not belong to the nation. At the same time, both the former Ministry of Interior and the Italian government moved this exceptionality further; possibly, 'only women and children' would have been saved. On the one hand, the codification of women refugee bodies' as general victims suspended from the history emerged strengthened; on the other, what we must question is the fierce filter women were assigned to justify the non-admittance on the national territory of the rest of the migrant population (companions, husbands, or everyone considered as not deserving to be saved).

Reason of State-migrations-insecurity

As early as 1990, Teresa de Lauretis wrote that women's bodies are the material site on which power relations are inscribed. However, she continues, 'women's bodies' are not a homogeneous, neutral, and undifferentiated category. Female bodies show the signs of history and its inequalities. These signs also become, in this sense, the primary place to observe the functioning of sedimented hierarchies of gender, race, and culture and how they are reconfigured in the present.

If a radical feminist perspective intertwined with refugee women studies allows to see how the hierarchies of gender, race, and global economic inequality still play a fundamental role in the construction of their wounds, this perspective is also a vantage point to explore the treatment refugees receive in the arrival context, and in the ways which the racial/sexual/economic *dispositifs* are put into place by the border (e.g. Rigo 2019). From their privileged position, receiving (European, in this case) States regulate the admission regimes of those considered not to belong to their territory or risky bodies (Aradau 2008) to the purity of the nation.

Yet, receiving States should guarantee protection and safety for those who turn up to their borders in vulnerable conditions. If the classical meaning of the State's security refers to what it does to guarantee security of its population, the most critical perspectives have questioned security and State concepts, as well as the practices through which State bodies achieve their aims. In this frame, the feminist approach to the nexus of State-security took a step forward. Rather than just criticising security from the State's standpoint and looking at the practices it puts into place to secure 'its' population, this perspective reframes security altogether, centring those who are excluded from protection, and therefore exposed to profound insecurity and risk by the State.

While public rhetoric is often an echo of a 'reason of State', proclaiming the necessity to secure national borders and its populations from the stranger, the feminist reading has inverted the terms of the nexus security-migration showing how government and control policies on human mobility push migrant and refugee's populations toward violence and unsafe situations. In her research on refugees arriving by the Central (Libya-Channel of Sicily) and Eastern (toward Greece) Mediterranean routes, Jane Freedman writes that the studies on "the experiences of women" shed light "on the ways in which contemporary European and national migration policies impact on their security" (2016, 570) and "on the failure of EU countries to offer real protection" (580) to those fleeing from conflict, violence, and persecutions. In this regard, we could use the expression "migration-insecurity" (Marchand 2008) to allow for the emergence of the responsibility of receiving countries in engendering other forms of risk and abuse in the name of the nation's security.

Historical studies on post-World War II emphasise how displaced people force to rethink "consolidated political categories (citizenship, rights, nation-State, political community) and to reframe concepts as space and border" (Salvatici 2004, 5). Bringing this reflection into the present – and addressing it from the specific perspective of refugee women's experiences– unveils how the erosion of the political and social meanings of asylum increasingly affects people's bodies and experiences to a deep extent, causing a progressive loss of "collective consciousness" (7) in front of asylum legal institution. If "security practices attempt to eliminate, expel or modify the abject other that appears as an intrusion into the political order" (Aradau 2008, 108), it calls into question how the supposed protection extended to refugee women exposes them to risks before and after their entry to European soil, and how they reduction to risky bodies for the nation legitimises other migrants' exclusion.

2. Sieged by external enemies: the intermediation of moral panic and the construction of Italians' victimisation

The intermediality of the Italian public discourses and iconographies of disembarkation – which are produced and reproduced by news media, photojournalism, social media but also cinema and TV series – produces standardised patterns of interpretation which, as many journalists I interviewed online stress (Angela Azzaro, 30 June 2020; Veronica Fernandes, 14 April 2021; Francesca Berardi, 25 June 2020; Asmae Dachan, 17 February 2021), are extremely polarised and oscillate between securitarian anxiety and humanitarian compassion. In other words, except for very few online and written newspapers (*Huffington post*, *Internazionale*, *Avvenire*, *Redattore Sociale*), the Italian mainstream media oscillates between criminalisation and victimisation of people on the move. In particular, since the first Giuseppe Conte government, when Lega (a populist, right-wing and xenophobic, if not openly racist, party) was leading the Ministry of Home Affairs (2018-2019), securitarian discourses and iconographies couple migration to the West and terrorism, creating associations between the two. With the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, fears of migrants as invasive and carriers of chaos and terrorism are also associated with fears of catastrophe, as if migrants and asylum seekers were the main factor of contagion.[4] The convergence of these fears contribute to a moral panic, meaning in line with Stuart Hall (1978), the reaction of a given society to a perceived threat that is seen as subverting its moral foundations identified with specific race, gender, sexuality, religion and class power relations. In these securitarian narratives, migrants and asylum seekers are seen as threatening not only the life standards of European citizens and societies, but also to their social and cultural norms, and racial standards.[5] On the contrary, hegemonic humanitarian discourses, as Pinelli has shown in her ethnographic work, couple a paternalistic approach and a description of migrants and

asylum seekers – identified primarily as "womenandchildren" (Enloe 1993) essentially as victims that must be "rescued."[6] In both cases, mainstream public discourses, whether humanitarian or securitarian, imply not only that the Outside, from where migrants and refugees flee, is inherently ridden with monstrous wars, terrorism, famine, HR violations and pandemics, but also that the people in motion bring their catastrophic conditions into the safe space of the Italian imagined community.

The two main figures that emerge from these discourses, respectively, are the figure of the 'white saviour' and that of the 'defender of the nation'. The first figure corresponds to that of the hero who saves and protects refugees and migrants (according to the "hegemonic humanitarian" rhetoric) which in Italian media has associated to figures like See Watch 3's captain, Carola Rackete;[7] the second figure is that of the nemetic other hero, whose goal is to prevent chaos to enter the space of the alleged white nation, according to a securitarian rhetoric which is particularly embodied by Matteo Salvini, Leader of Lega and former Minister of Home Affairs (2018-2019).[8] Despite being products of different syntaxes and producing quite a different impact on people on the move in terms of rescuing and assistance, these two constructions often appear in the same discourse that combines Italians' benevolence and the need for border closure. In both humanitarian State and securitarian discourses, borders not only identify who belongs to the national imagined community, but also construe the latter as an innocent community that is constantly at siege, threatened by what is Outside, that is what is inherently monstrous, criminal, and deadly.

Both narratives, humanitarian and securitarian, have repercussions in terms of gendered patterns of criminalisation/victimisation. As Pinelli argues, the expression "womenandchildren" – coined in contexts of war or disaster – is used by both humanitarian and securitarian media and institutional discourses to sustain the figure of the white saviour together with a description of "womenandchildren" as powerless and integrable (that is, less dangerous) individuals, simultaneous to discourses about the social dangerousness and political radicalisation of migrants and refugee men. A distinction that, nevertheless, is evaporating once the disciplining *dispositifs* of the border regime are those applied to containment and detention on Italian territory.

Borders as semiotic dispositifs reproducing race

Throughout the research I have undertaken with the project "(De)Othering", databases on national and international media were collected and analysed where border control, forced mobility, detention, and repatriation are always presented as uncontested and aimed at national security. The language used is one of an alleged "war at the frontier"; one structured by terms like defence, national security, militarised border, and soldiers, which transforms a political issue into one of national and European security (see Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2016).

Building on the notion of "border regime" (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010), in my work I propose to use "border semiotic regimes" or the semiotic power of borders (2021) to understand, as implicated by public discourse on bordering as for national defence, the idea that as a receiving society, Italy is forced into a state of siege by a never-ending, barbarian invasion (Jones 2016).

I argue that Italy's borders, and more visibly Lampedusa's shore, which are the most mediatised, are used as semiotic *dispositifs* to construe the Italian national community as innocent and sieged by an "alleged external enemy" – a "they" which is construed through specific intersectional "figures of race" (Giuliani 2015, 1).

By "figures of race" I mean images which transnationally sediment over time and crystallise some of the meanings assigned to bodies — which are gendered and racialised in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As such, these figures pose material effects on people, ultimately establishing privileges for some, while excluding others from resources and rights, generating processes of subalternation and necropolitics, and exposing racialised groups to vulnerability, violence, and death.

Specific "figures of race" are deployed in the rendition of the hyper-mediatised Italian borders as separating the Here from the Out There (Giuliani 2021). This view, helped by the perception of the Mediterranean as a natural-occurring border, does not allow for a critique of the artificiality of borders while obscuring the violence of its operations. Moreover, in line with both Pinelli's research findings and the 23 interviews that I conducted, both securitarian and humanitarian public discourses and iconographies of boat landings tend to a massification, de-politicisation, and silencing of both the so-called 'objective causes' of mobility and the lived experiences of migrants and asylum seekers.

In this context, the adducted immorality of people in mobility towards Italy is connected to the idea that what migrants are aspiring to when travelling across the Mediterranean and landing in Italy/Europe is something they do not have the right to. The construction of migrants (and to a lesser extent also refugees, as Pinelli confirms) as "monsters" inoculating chaos into the Italian and European "internal order" is the result of the constant rehearsal of the rhetoric of the "risky body" (Aradau 2004) covered with a moral panic that transforms 'risky bodies' into moral danger (Giuliani 2021).

According to interviewees, since the mid-1980s, monstrified "figures of race" used in Italian discourses on migrations and more recently in mainstream media representations of risky bodies disembarking in Lampedusa, have been rearticulated and differentially applied according to what was interpreted in public discourse to be the principal threat to national identity, wellbeing and security. Today, according to Marcello Maneri, who studied the evolution of Italian public discourse on race over the last 35 years (1998; 2019), and other interviewees, what I have called the semiotic power of borders in assigning racist meanings

to humans on the move is overwhelmingly intended to legitimise the ontological distinction between the 'true' refugee, who is seen as an innocent victim, and the migrant, who is seen as a profiteer, treacherous, deceiving and fraudulent. This binary also opposes the "valuable ones" – "the highly educated and skilled" in Angela Merkel's words (2015) - from Brown men who belong to less privileged classes that are acritically considered more akin to engage in international terrorism, or from Black and Brown men, who are often compared to cannibals and rapists in Italian newspapers (Santos et al. 2019). In line with this posture, as confirmed by my discussion with the Afro-Italian documentary director Medhin Paolos, Italian mainstream media's ostensive covering of the 'innocent' refugees' death, like that of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child found dead on a beach in Bodrum in 2015, oscillates between a pornography of suffering and death and an operation of conscious cleansing that obscured the enduring violence of the border. Once interviewed online (21 July 2020), Angelica Pesarini – a scholar from NYU in Florence - recalled the picture of a black woman being rescued by a Coast Guard patrol off the shore of Lampedusa: centre and far-right mainstream media pointed out her polished nails, rather than her terrified gaze when pulled out of waters, questioning her 'objective reasons' to 'invade' Italy.[9] Notably, humanitarian voices rose in opposition and pointed at the woman's terror, but no reporter connected her terror to the violence of the border regime. This picture and the mainstream reaction to it exemplify, in my view, what is the cause of moral panic and white anxiety in today's Italy: the idea of a mass of racialised people who reclaim their "right to escape" the objective causes of their vulnerability, unhappiness, suffering and despair (Mezzadra 2004), and in doing so to be treated as equal, ultimately subverting the semiotic power of the border that makes them into subalterns (Giuliani 2017).

In more securitarian narratives, to delegitimise the autonomous search of a better life, this same "right to escape" is constantly belittled, ridiculed, and taken as if it was a caprice of people whose conditions do not justify their 'invasion'.[10] In more humanitarian narratives, the focus is on suffering, misery and death. As the result of these converging iconographies, the image of the rightful migrant is only that of a person who has lost everything, the pristine figure of the perfect victim that does not wear nail polish.

As Maneri and Andrea Pogliano, who study mainstream media representation of migrants in Italy (Maneri 2019; Gariglio et al. 2010), have outlined in the online interviews I conducted (respectively on 30 September 2020 and 17 June 2020), criminalisation as much as victimisation in Italian mainstream media and public discourse not only contributes to the mystification and monstrification of individuals whose rendition as such helps to sustain the picture of Europe as a "community at siege," but also obscures the operation of a multi-tiered system of exploitation that reproduces racialised power relations. In doing so, they contribute to the image of Italy and Europe as innocent and isolated.

In other words, mainstream media and public discourses contribute to the semiotic operation of bordering, depicting Italy as detached from the Mediterranean and the Global South and attached to the right part of the world that must be defended. In their discourses, Italy becomes an innocent 'victim' that must be kept isolated against Chaos structuring those places Out There to which Italy itself, as one the 'places of civilisation', bores no connection.

Against the traitors of the nation, in defence of whiteness

Although the Out There is primarily identified with the former colonised world, the opposition between a safe Here and a systemically unsafe Out There does not coincide with the geographical distinction between the Global North and South or between former colonial metropoles and their peripheries; places, people, communities, and alternative (that is non-extractivist/no-border) epistemologies in the so-called Global North have been undermined or criminalised in order to perpetuate both value-extraction and a narrative of isolation 'from the rest'. As highlighted by my research at "(De)Othering" and recent studies by Tazzioli (2018), no-border grassroots solidarity at sea, at the northern frontier with France, Switzerland, Austria, and Slovenia and in many smaller and bigger cities across Italy are considered illegal by law, and their criminalisation is supported by both right wing and moderate political and media discourses which imply that to welcome the 'enemy' is a betrayal against the nation.[11]

From a critical viewpoint, in challenging the representation of humans in mobility as enemies, grassroots solidarity undoes the semiotic power of borders. It subverts ideas of people on the move as inherently violent, filled with rage and terrorism, immoral and dangerous. Therefore, it questions the representation of the Italian "imagined community" as unaccountable, isolated, and innocent because it is besieged, and as a benevolent agent of protection.

Against 'traitors' and 'criminals', national cohesion is invoked through images that today associate boat landings, convicted migrants rioting, and migrants gathering at European internal borders during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although since the outburst of the pandemic media attention has mostly shifted away from disembarkations, moral panic was reproduced by the far-right as well as moderate narratives against "the visible as well as the invisible enemy" that comes from the Out There and threatens the white "imagined community" of the Italian 'we'.[12] In this context, the mediatised operations of the 'bordering' of the Italian sea coast, Sicily and Lampedusa in particular – a bordering that has been increasingly militarised through the deployment of the national army and the police and, recently, Frontex agents – has the semiotic power of confirming time and again Italy's national and Europe's regional identities, keeping the Italian "imagined community" safely attached to Europe and distanced from the Mediterranean.[13]

Conclusion

This article combined our anthropological and cultural studies research with an intersectional stance, in order to articulate an in-depth analysis of public and political representations of migrants and asylum seekers landing on the Southern shores of Italy. Through an approach that retraces the history of institutional and media narratives about Mediterranean border-crossing, our analysis focused on the outcomes of the operation of the discursive invisibilisation and hypervisibilisation of migrants and asylum seekers as serving specific narratives. Exploring three chronological passages (women invisibility; the exposure of female figures as icons of suffering; the reduction of the humanitarian imperative 'women and children must be saved') that took place since 2010, the first section, by Barbara Pinelli, focused on how the humanitarian/securitarian grammars built on refugee women's bodies function as the filters to both exclude those women from recognition as historical subjects and justify the non-admittance of other migrants. By analysing the way in which securitarian anxiety and humanitarian compassion have been rearticulated since 2013, the second section, by Gaia Giuliani, focused on how constructions of Italy as a white nation "under siege," threatened by an alleged invasion, are inseparable from those of Italy as an innocent, benevolent and de-responsibilised saviour of the 'poor' migrant/refugee. In so doing, this article engaged in a deconstruction of the semiotic power of discourses on the border, aiming at restoring the accountability of both institutions and mainstream media for the suffering and death of migrants and refugees. It also engages in showing how, if the securitarian discourses build their legitimization in the name of national borders protection, the humanitarian grammar partly disguises the impact of the EU borders machine and its consequences on the migrants' lives and bodies.

In the belief that intersectionality is a radical approach, able to read historical legacies of oppression and their present reconfigurations, we applied intersectionality to grasp the discursive and material violence of gendered and racialised constructions structuring institutional and media discourses on migrants and asylum seekers, and to unveil how in this context, the compassionate and securitarian discourses are entangled and mutually reconfiguring.

Notes

[1] Gaia Giuliani's analysis is an output of the project "(De)Othering: Deconstructing Risk and Otherness: hegemonic scripts and counter-narratives on migrants/refugees and 'internal Others' in Portuguese and European mediascapes" (Reference: POCI-01-0145- FEDER-029997).

[2] See https://fortune.com/2019/07/01/shes-31-a-ships-captain-and-she-just-torpedoed-italys-relationship-with-eu-partners-2/. Accessed July 7, 2021.

[3] I have already described both these passages and the geopolitical changes in Pinelli 2018, 2021.

[4] See https://voxnews.info/2020/11/18/terroristi-tunisini-sui-il-governo-ha-ignorato-lallarme-dei-servizi-segreti/; https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/l-ombra-terrorismo-gli-sbarchi-clandestini-sicilia-AETHEUZB; https://www.iltempo.it/attualita/2021/03/04/news/sbarchi-migranti-2021-lampedusa-sicilia-luciana-lamorgese-coronavirus-26419712/. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[5] See https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2021/04/15/news/migranti-invadono-italia-allarme-frontex-agenzia-europea-frontiere-covid-26897425/. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[6] See https://www.globalist.it/politics/2019/08/19/richard-gere-carola-rackete-e-un-angelo-e-salvini-un-baby-trump-2045270.html. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[7] See https://ilmanifesto.it/la-liberta-di-carola-rackete/. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[8] See https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/capitana-contro-capitano-braccio-ferro-rackete-salvini-1717195.html; https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/07/02/viva-la-capitana-abbasso-il-capitano/5292435/. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[9] See https://www.ilsecoloxix.it/italia/2018/07/23/news/josefa-naufraga-ma-con-lo-smalto-sulle-unghie-l-odio-via-web-non-ha-limiti-1.30533359. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[10] See https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/i-folli-sbarchi-lampedusa-arrivano-persino-gatto-1931084.html; https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/pacchia-dei-migranti-buoni-spesa-anche-chi-ha-gi-vitto-e-1855478.html; https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/pretese-degli-immigrati-clandestini-dateci-lavoro-e-casa-1881859.html. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[11] See https://www.nicolaporro.it/ecco-la-prova-del-legame-tra-scafisti-e-ong/; https://www.lasicilia.it/news/cronaca/189743/scarcerati-i-pescatori-tunisini-accusati-di-avere-trainato-un-barcone-di-migranti.html; https://www.ilpost.it/davidedeluca/2013/10/07/chi-salva-i-migranti-rischia-la-galera/; https://www.corriere.it/cronache/21_marzo_14/migranti-lamorgese-ha-bloccato-piu-navi-ong-salvini-bfccb68c-8432-11eb-ae38-084646f2f8da.shtml. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[12] See https://www.open.online/2020/08/03/coronavirus-immigrazione-conte-zaia/; https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/politica/24320348/giorgia-meloni-immigrati-coronavirus-ipocrisia-conte-quattro-mosse-letali.html. Accessed August 13, 2021.

[13] See https://www.lasicilia.it/news/covid-19/370750/covid-salvini-mette-di-mezzo-i-migranti-i-siciliani-non-possono-uscire-loro-possono-entrare.html. Accessed August 13, 2021.

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