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# *Our lives and bodies matter: memories of violence and strategies of resistance among migrants crossing the Mediterranean*

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the counter-effects of the politics of externalization of European frontiers in Libya through a qualitative analysis of a case study concerning a group of Somali asylum-seekers who, after being held and tortured in Libyan detention centres, managed to cross the Mediterranean and arrived in Italy where they accidentally met and, thus, pressed charges against their torturer. Based on the information provided in the judicial files containing their testimonies, which led to the first recognition by a European court of the unbearable forms of violence suffered by migrants in Libya, this article offers a critical reflection on the implications of migration control enforcement promoted at the EU's borders on the European civil and political community. Moreover, it provides a reflection on the challenges raised for migration studies by survivors' testimonies on the wider implications of subjective experiences and biographical narratives in illuminating emerging domains of social responsibility and political action.

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## Introduction

Since the explosion of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015 and the introduction of increasingly restrictive policies aimed at preventing migrants from crossing European borders, the topic of migration and refugee movements across the Mediterranean has gained high visibility in public debate as well as in the international research agenda (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018; Crawley et al. 2018). Depictions of asylum seekers escaping war and persecution and attempting to find a safe place have been broadly

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circulated in the media and have increasingly nurtured – in addition to the emergence of a civic and social movement for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers (Pries 2018) – a politics of hostility and refusal that has largely shaped the current European migration regime (Ambrosini 2021). From 2015 onward, a rather uniform and stereotypical imagery largely based on governmental and humanitarian accounts has been widely circulating globally (Haile 2020). One recurrent trait of these images, mostly depicting masses of people on the move across borders or stuck under inhumane conditions in camps or reception centres, lies in the desperate conditions in which migrants were entrapped (Eberl et al. 2018). These images – which also draw from victimization, criminalization and othering processes that have largely informed European debate since the late 1990s (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017) – have actually diverted European audiences from focusing on the refugees' agency, resources and strategies that, on the contrary, often resist and counter the dominant accounts (Fontanari 2019). Moreover, they have also contributed to a sort of blindness towards issues related to the actual political responsibilities for this *status quo* and the ethical obligations of a range of actors involved in the management of borders as well as the humanitarian crisis witnessed in Europe. Thus, the hyper-visibility of the refugees' bodies, pain and misfortune has been coupled with an almost complete invisibility of their subjectivity and claims. Furthermore, we should consider the sort of perverse cycle of violence which currently affects migrants' mobility across borders and which might have crucial repercussions in understanding and governing the phenomenon. Media narratives often depict migrants as *personae non gratae* who claim rights that they do not deserve (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), as pure and naked victims of events (Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020) or, in other cases, as simply *lives who do not matter* (Vergès 2017). This indirectly enhances the state of collective indifference seen in European public opinion on the dramatic conditions in which undocumented migration still largely occurs (Basaran 2015; Mainwaring 2019). Reference is made here to the dramatic rise in the number of migrants who drowned in the Mediterranean, the rising campaigns which have led to the criminalization of the solidarity provided by NGOs operating in rescue operations at sea, and, most crucially, the *de facto* endorsement of highly questionable policies aimed at enforcing politics of externalization of European borders, often through violence and human rights abuses. Removed from the sight of Westerners and confined to remote places, these policies are destined to have profound implications also on Europe, both ethical and political.

This article addresses the counter-effects of the politics of externalization of European frontiers in Libya through a qualitative analysis of a case study concerning a group of Somali asylum seekers who, after being held and tortured in Libyan detention centres, managed to cross the Mediterranean and arrived in Italy. Here, after a few weeks, they accidentally met their torturer,

who was then arrested, prosecuted and condemned to a life sentence. The case study analysis is carried out on the basis of the outcome of a public trial held by the Italian authorities which eventually led to the first recognition by a European court of the unbearable forms of violence suffered by migrants in Libya (Trucco 2018, 106–107). Thus, through an analysis of the testimonies provided by the asylum seekers involved, this article aims on the one hand at providing insight on the *technology of terror* put in place in Libyan detention centres as part of the wider policy of migration control enforcement promoted at the borders of Europe, and, on the other, emphasizing how those forms of inhumane treatment and contempt are destined to directly question European audiences, who face increasing difficulties in refusing to recognize their responsibilities. Moreover, this article aims at contributing to a wider reflection on the need to reshape research tools and methods traditionally used in the field of migration studies and emphasizing the role that research in this field might have in consolidating a critical understanding of the phenomenon and its wider implications in terms of emerging domains of social responsibility and political action.

This article starts with a premise that briefly outlines the coordinates of the epistemological and ethical turn in migration research that, in times of anti-migrant politics, has driven social scientists to further enhance their reflectivity and to consider more closely the political implications of their research. Then, it provides an outline of the sources used for the analysis, consisting in a collection of judicial files, their limits as well as their opportunities, especially for researchers interested in grasping subjective experiences and biographical narratives. The next part discusses the main results of the research, and the final paragraph contains some concluding remarks addressing, in particular, the wider implications of this case-study analysis for social theory and practice *in* and *beyond* migration research.

### **Premise: a shifting scenario for research**

During the past few years, social research in the field of migration has increasingly shown a growing awareness of the need to refocus analytical perspectives and priorities, if it does not want to risk becoming useless in terms of policy implications (Amelina 2020). In particular, researchers engaged in the field of undocumented migration, especially across the Mediterranean, who had been mostly focussing on routes, strategies and methods followed by migrants in order to get to Europe, since the explosion of the so-called “refugee crisis” have been increasingly driven to reshape their research agenda. This has been mostly due to a number of heterogeneous political and social factors that have had a strong impact on current transnational migration dynamics and, most crucially, on the biographies and experiences of the people involved, i.e. migrant women and men. These factors span from the previously mentioned

enhancement, often through highly questionable methods in terms of human rights, of border militarization strategies outside and inside the European Union, to the strong impact – especially on transit countries – of flows of migrants looking for alternative (often more dangerous) routes, as well as the increasing professionalization of the so-called *industry of illegal entry* with the crucial role played by transnational criminal networks, and the retreat of European countries and institutions from rescuing operations in the Mediterranean sea. All this has contributed to an overall further deterioration of the conditions in which undocumented migratory processes and experiences occur (McMahon and Sigona 2016). In this context, the emphasis goes particularly on the strong political instability of countries such as Libya, one of the crucial places in the geopolitics of the European externalization regime. This country is haunted by a ten-year-long civil war and by intensifying levels of violence that have led to chaos where militias, terrorist groups, armed networks, smugglers and traffickers flourish. This has caused growing infringement of migrants and asylum seekers' rights and unprecedented humanitarian consequences in terms of human lives, as regularly denounced by several international observers (Amnesty International 2017a, 2017b, 2021). Thus, researchers have been confronting a significant increase in traumatic memories reported by migrants arriving in Europe in the past few years (Horsti 2019), after having suffered countless forms of abuse, violence and humiliation especially in Libyan detention centres. Therefore, while initially being selected as research participants for their (undocumented) *migratory experience*, they ended up being more properly identified as *victims of torture*, given the changed conditions in which that experience had occurred. This required researchers involved in fieldwork with them to strongly reshape their research focus and analysis, as well as to exercise further methodological reflexivity aimed at grasping the multifaceted and complex scenario and the experiences they were confronted with. In particular, a new sensitivity has arisen concerning the need to adopt conceptual tools and research methods that can facilitate the emergence of subjective experiences and biographical accounts which put the actual experiences of the actors involved at their core. The notion of reflexivity here refers not only to a critical appraisal of familiar, essentialised and still deeply rooted Eurocentric research strategies and conceptions (Malkki 1992; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), often more inclined to talk *about* migrants, without giving them any chance to express themselves *on their own*. More crucially, it refers to the need to design and promote cognitive practices that go beyond the simple reproduction of the narrow narratives which have framed global migration in public debate so far (Dahinden 2016; Anderson 2019). This means, *inter alia*, recognizing the role played by individual and subjective conditions, experiences, resources and constraints in shedding light on the complex web of intersections existing between *micro* (individual) and *macro* (social and political) dimensions. Finally, within this framework, reflexivity is also conceived as an emotional, embodied *and*

cognitive process which triggers a self-reflection on the side of the researcher in terms of her engagement, identification and attachment with the world and individuals involved in the research, since her presumed “neutrality” and “objectivity”, when confronted with trauma and such serious forms of violence and abuse, is necessarily destined to fall apart (Gray 2008; Holmes 2010; Ahmed, [2004] 2014). This, as it will be argued, might have significant implications in theoretical, methodological and ethical terms. The investigation of changing migration realities in times of anti-migrant politics and the widespread indifference shown by European audiences to the heavy human and political costs being paid, in exchange for supposedly safer borders not only requires accurate concepts, tools and strategies which may be able to grasp contemporary dynamics, enhance migrants’ narratives and, thus, avoid stereotypical representations. This investigation actually requires a further epistemological and ethical step that, while illustrating complex social dynamics, is not afraid to address and question the politics of knowledge production that informs research in this field and thus illuminate emerging domains of social responsibility and political action.

### Sources and methods

Doing qualitative research in the field of undocumented migration has always confronted researchers with problems in accessing the field. These are mostly related to the juridical status of *irregular* migrants who travel along less visible circuits, considered *illegal* in several countries, obliged to hide themselves, if not kept inside reception centres that are not easily accessible to outsiders (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). All this has been recently worsened by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and related limitations in terms of freedom of movement and social and physical distancing. More conventional qualitative methods – mostly based on in-depth interviews – have suddenly become difficult due to the various lockdown measures issued since March 2020 (Kara and Khoo 2020). Moreover, these complications have been coupled with organizational problems in adopting alternative strategies, such as online interviewing, given the poor access to technical facilities and Wi-Fi connections for most potential interviewees. Therefore, most researchers usually involved in fieldwork with refugees and asylum seekers have been obliged to reconceive their research agenda and methodologies. In this case, given the goals of my ongoing research, which during the past fifteen years has aimed at collecting biographical memories related to individual experiences of undocumented mobility across the Mediterranean toward Italy (Massari 2017), in attempting to continue my field research I was confronted with a dilemma: either suspend the project until the end of lockdowns or resort to alternative methods and/or sources. In the end, I chose the second option, partially abandoning

the biographical methods based on interviews used in the past and bringing new sources, such as judicial files, into the analysis.

This choice to reshape my research agenda due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic actually drove me to orient my attention toward a totally novel field that has started to acquire increasing visibility since 2017, as reflected in the press, especially in Italy, a crucial country in the geopolitics of undocumented migration routes toward Europe. This was the year when, for the first time, a European tribunal – i.e. the Court of Milan – officially recognized the unbearable conditions and ignominious treatment migrants are exposed to in Libyan detention centres, through a path-breaking sentence destined to become a landmark in international level (CAM 2017).<sup>1</sup> Since then, a number of scholars, NGOs and lawyers involved in migration issues have been particularly active in providing support, at different levels, to migrants arriving in Italy through similar paths and experiences, as confirmed by the activities carried out by the major association representing Italian migration lawyers – ASGI – which provides free legal support to most of them (Veglio 2018). The judicial file used for my analysis, which was made available to me by the witnesses' lawyers, mostly refers to the testimonies provided by 17 Somali asylum seekers who arrived in Italy between 2015 and 2016 through the Central Mediterranean route.<sup>2</sup> These accounts, while aimed at providing evidences in the framework of a criminal case, proved to be a promising source for grasping migrants' narratives and experiences as well, thanks to the detailed information provided on the individual paths, strategies and resources activated during their migration.

These new sources, however, while comparable with the accounts collected during biographical narrative interviews I had carried out in the past, in terms of profundity and denseness of the information reported (Massari 2017), clearly required the exercise of a certain amount of cautiousness from the researcher's side. They were not part of a *voluntary* and *direct* encounter between a researcher and a research participant, but were produced within a specific formal legal framework and constraints; they were reported in writing and, most crucially, they served a specific purpose, i.e. collecting evidence which might eventually lead to a criminal sentence. With this word of caution in mind, my main goal was to see whether they could contribute to providing a suitable pool of information which, combined with other sources based on my previous research in this field, might concur in developing less conventional narratives on the phenomenon (and people) under investigation.

### **The case-study**

The set of judicial files collected for providing a wider framework for the case-study analysis were all originated by a very specific similar event. Migrants,

mostly coming from Eastern Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea) and Sub-Saharan countries (especially Cameroun and Ghana), after arriving in Italy through Libya, either met, often by chance, or were required by law enforcement officials to recognize, the individuals responsible for the acts of violence and torture they suffered in Libyan detention centres where they had been imprisoned.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, due to a number of accidental events, *victims* and *perpetrators* ended up in the same country or had the chance to meet in the same place, albeit in very different circumstances: i.e. a diverse social, political and legal framework (a democratic society based on the rule of law) and a very significant change in power positions and relations (no longer subjugated but in a condition to claim their rights).

The specific case study addressed in this analysis refers to the information collected within the first and most important investigation carried out in Italy, which concerned a group of seventeen Somali asylum seekers, mostly hosted in a reception centre close to the central railway station in Milan and in few other asylum seekers' facilities in the same region – i.e. Como – or in Palermo (CAM 2017; CAAM 2019). The reconstruction of this case gives close attention to two main phases of the migrants' experience, the first relating to their migration from their country of origin to Libya, and especially their imprisonment in Libyan detention centres, and the second focussing on their arrival in Italy and the circumstances that led to the criminal investigation which arose when they accidentally met, in Milan, the man responsible for the torture they had suffered.

All the Somali migrants who are the protagonists of this case were detained in Bani Walid and Sabratha centres between early 2015 and August 2016, after having reached Libya en route to Europe. They had left Somalia between October 2013 and July 2016 (most of them in 2015) due to the general deterioration of the overall economic and political situation in the country after the long years of civil war and the ongoing condition of strong instability and violence exacerbated by the actions of the Islamic insurgent group Al-Shabaab that, since the early 2000s, seeks to establish an Islamic state in Somalia (CAM 2017, 24). Several migrants actually mentioned to the court specific events that had led to the decision to leave their country, recounting the acts of violence and terror that they or their relatives had been facing (i.e. kidnappings, terrorist attacks, injuries, homicides) and the strong condition of danger they were forced to deal with (CAM 2017, 24–25). The sources available do not provide full details on the migratory path followed by each migrant before arriving in Libya,<sup>4</sup> however, most migrants reported that the travel was organized through the services provided by people called “organizers” who, in transit countries such as Ethiopia, Yemen or Sudan, had offered to accompany them across borders, either in exchange for sums of money which ranged between 1,500 and 4,800 US dollars, or without mentioning the exact amount which



was then made explicit once they arrived in Libya (CAM 2017, 28). Payments were always made through the informal value transfer system known as *Hawala*, which does not foresee cash movement or wire transfers through banks, but it is based on honour and the services provided by a wide range of interconnected brokers (CAM 2017). Most migrants, finally, reported that once arrived in Libya, they had been firstly gathered in other camps where they had been requested to pay the amount of money needed to cover the expenses for the first part of their journey and, once having paid, they had been moved to Bani Walid centre, where they were forced to pay the remaining part, before continuing their trip to Sabratha, situated along the Libyan coast and, thus, closer to the embarkation point toward Europe (CAM 2017, 29–30).

Most of the pages comprising the judicial file contain a detailed description of the abuse, torture and unbearable conditions of pain suffered by this group of Somali migrants, especially in the Bani Walid detention centre. The accounts and very vivid descriptions provided bring to mind the stories of others survived the main massacres in the history of the twentieth century. I will deliberately not recount the details of the specific acts of violence perpetrated against this group of Somali men and women, since several media reports and statements made by international organizations and NGOs active in this field have already provided descriptions of the well-known forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence suffered by migrants detained in similar places.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, my choice was based on an approach to research which critically questions ongoing and recurrent forms of trivialization of migrants' misfortune and pain which tend to oppressively identify them as mere victims, while underestimating their actual resources in terms of resistance and disobedience. I would like, however, to refer to the overall organization of that very precise *technology of terror* that the group of torturers – composed by the main defendant in this criminal investigation, i.e. *Ismail*, a Somali who was the right-hand man of the chief of the camp, Kalifa (also called Ali Bur), and his group of mostly Libyan attendants – had put in place especially in the Bani Walid camp (CAM 2017, 45). Here, migrants were kept for weeks or even several months, detained in a sort of hangar containing more than 500 people, without any possibility to escape given the presence of several armed guardians and a high surrounding wall, simply waiting for their relatives to send the money required for their ransom (CAM 2017, 31–32). Acts of violence and abuse were committed on a daily basis, at any hour of the day and the night, without a specific reason, sometimes merely because the people detained had violated the rule of silence. People were usually beaten with sticks, plastic pipes, metal bars, often in front of other prisoners, and while Ismail was beating somebody, he often used to laugh, to smoke or to speak at the telephone (CAM 2017, 55). Sometimes, while the people were bleeding and imploring him to

stop, or were obliged to stay in humiliating positions, he used to take some pictures with his smartphone, to be sent to the prisoners' relatives as a method for convincing them to pay additional money for their release (CAM 2017, 52). The Libyan attendants – among which some testimonies reported there were also men from Chad (CAM 2017, 49–50) – simply used to obey Ismail's orders, to accompany him around, and to control those male prisoners who were usually brought outside the camp, during the day, in order to work in the construction of other hangars (CAM 2017, 49). None of them, according to the testimonies, showed any pity toward the prisoners.

Beside these daily forms of abuse, the camp of Bani Walid foresaw a specific separate space, a sort of torture room called *Amalia* (CAM 2017, 44, 56–57), where some migrants were kept for hours, experiencing intolerable forms of violence. In this room, Ismail and the other torturers could release their most shocking, appalling and perverse instincts. Women, unfortunately, were among the preferred victims, especially during the night, in some cases even teenagers, as some of the witnesses were at the time of their detention in Bani Walid (two of them were between 16 and 17 years old) (CAM 2017, 63–67). Nobody was even allowed to provide any help or aid to the people who were beaten or found themselves in extremely serious health conditions, after hours spent in the torture room (CAM 2017, 59). As reported by one of the testimonies, “we didn't have any strength, because he had firearms, he could kill us, he could shoot us, he could beat us, we could not contrast him” (CAAM 2019, 24). During these atrocious situations, as confirmed by other testimonies, Ismail obsessively and sadistically used to repeat that he was “neither Somali nor Muslim” but simply their “master”, their “God”, that he “could kill them how and when” he liked and that even in Europe he would have always been “above them” (CAM 2017, 51–55).

The ultimate goal of Ismail and the overall system of terror put in place in the Bani Walid camp was to ensure that migrants could pay the amount of money needed for their ransom: that was the only condition that would secure their release, as the torturer used to repeat to them. He had a copy-book where on a daily basis he wrote the names of the migrants who had paid and were, then, allowed to move to the other camp close to the coast, in Sabratha, the nearest to the embarkation point toward Italy, while all those who still had to pay were beaten and even killed and/or brought to work outside (CAM 2017, 51–52).

According to information reported in the judicial file, both the Bani Walid and Sabratha camps were managed by the same boss, i.e. the Somali man called Kalifa, who was also considered the chief of other camps situated in different parts of the country, as reported by some of the Somali migrants who had been detained there before arriving to Bani Walid.<sup>6</sup> This, according to the prosecutors, seems to confirm the presence of a single criminal

organization that could supervise most of the operations related to buying and selling Somali migrants travelling across Libya and headed to Europe, as well as their embarkation and journey across the Mediterranean (CAM 2017, 43).

Most of the Somali migrants detained in the Bani Walid camp, in the end, thanks to the money paid by their relatives and friends to the criminal organization led by Kalifa, managed to buy their freedom and were allowed to be moved to Sabratha in order to wait for the right moment to embark. One migrant, Abduli, even managed to flee, while working outside Bani Walid camp, while an old Somali woman called Lulu made her jailers feel pity because of her age, just few days before the Sabratha centre was dismantled since nobody was there anymore, and convinced them to let her go without paying (CAM 2017, 36–42). Even Ismail, who moved to Sabratha together with several migrants detained in Bani Walid, in late August 2016 decided to leave Libya – apparently because of conflicts that arose with his boss Kalifa – disguising himself among the migrants crossing the Mediterranean in an overcrowded boat.

As stated before, all the Somali migrants who are the protagonists of this case arrived in Italy in spring and summer 2016, crossing the sea along the Central Mediterranean route. After being intercepted by the Italian coast guard or other agencies, most migrants disembarked either in Sicilian or Calabrian ports and, from there, moved to reception centres situated in several Italian regions. A large group of them ended up in Milan in the reception centre located close to the central railway station. Ismail, on the other hand, disembarked in the port of Trapani and was sent to a reception facility in Piedmont, in Northern Italy; after arriving there, he disappeared and eventually, in late September 2016, moved to Milan as well.

The second part of this case analysis addresses what happened to this group of migrants once they arrived in Italy and, most crucially, the circumstances that led to the encounter with their torturer and the beginning of the judicial investigation which led him to be condemned to a life sentence. In order to understand the specific circumstances that led the Italian authorities to start a court trial concerning facts and events which had occurred far away from the national territory, i.e. in Libya, it is important to keep in mind that in early autumn 2016, both the group of Somali asylum seekers who had been detained in Bani Walid centre and Ismail ended up in Milan. They accidentally met on 26 September 2016 in the afternoon, in a garden in front of the reception centre where a large majority of Somali asylum seekers was hosted. The judicial file provides a vivid account of this encounter, through the words of the two policemen who collected the first statements. The scene that they faced that afternoon was made of a group of five young Somali men and women engaged in a heated argument with a young man, apparently a co-national, who they called Ismail. It is not clear

whether somebody from the reception centre or from the migrants' group had expressly called for help, but at a certain point, a police car passed by the area, stopped and two officers approached the group, convinced that a fight had broken out among the migrants. Surprisingly enough, when the group of Somali people saw the two policemen, instead of stopping the discussion, they tried to attract their attention. Two from the group went towards the policemen, insisting that they had to follow them. But nobody could speak a shared language – migrants spoke few words in English, but the policemen did not – so it was not easy to understand what was going on. Hence, two of the Somali men, given the circumstances and the lack of any mutual understanding, unexpectedly, decided to make the only gesture that could potentially need no explication: they took off their clothes and showed the two astonished policemen the still very visible wounds that they had on their skin (CAM 2017, 7–8). Their body language and gestures were more eloquent than any words. They attempted to convey, through non-verbal means, the message that the man their other companions had secured and were holding at the wall was the one responsible for their wounds. This was also confirmed by two employees of the reception centre who, attracted by the loud voices, went out of the centre and made the two policemen understand that the Somali migrants were attempting to communicate that they had been tortured and that man was their torturer (CAAM 2019, 16–17).

## Discussion

The information gathered in the judicial files used for the analysis of this case and, most crucially, the traumatic accounts provided by the witnesses in the courtroom, had a strong impact on my research outlook. This was not related to the disclosure of unknown information concerning dramatic events in Libyan detention centres – which is unfortunately very well known at the international level. Nor was my reaction related to being *directly* confronted with those pieces of information, as might happen during an interview: in previous research experiences related to Euro-Mediterranean forms of mobility (Massari 2015, 2017), several opportunities arose to deal with similar stories during interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, even though none was reported in such a detailed way. The differences existing in the overall “quality” of these types of account – a *testimony* in front of a court and an *interview* with a researcher – can be ascribed to the different aim that they serve, and in the case of a judicial testimony, they are mostly oriented towards providing evidence on specific accusations or crimes, thus justifying a large quantity of details. In my previous research, however, I made a conscious decision not to publish the most dramatic details of the experiences told by the migrants interviewed. This was related to my

adherence to a more comprehensive epistemological and ethical stance which highly values the so-called *right to opacity* of research participants. According to post-colonial intellectual Édouard Glissant, this is a right not to be fully understood, and, at the same time, the right not to completely understand the other ([1990] 1997), which does not mean being “obscure”, but to avoid, in his words, simply “reducing” them (Glissant, [1990] 1997, 191). Therefore, this right refers to the need to avoid forcing our interlocutors to stick to the “preconceived transparency of universal models” (Glissant, [1990] 1997, 193) and to reduce them “to a truth he [or she] would not have generated on his [or her] own” (Glissant, [1990] 1997, 4). The option to be silent or remain vague, during an interview, concerning the most dramatic events which actually characterized their migratory experience, is often interpreted by researchers as the less risky choice taken by the interviewees in terms of possible re-traumatization. This option, however, is also the outcome of a specific and more subtle claim: the need to avoid, from a psychological perspective, remembering and, thus, interrupt a path that is often barely undertaken by survivors toward healing from the most painful scars that still affect their lives (Massari 2017). Finally, the choice not to reduce my interlocutors to a role as mere victims was linked to a criticism toward the rather stereotypical imagery often conveyed by the stories of tragedy and desperation associated with asylum seekers in Libya (but also elsewhere), mentioned above, and the sort of voyeurism that the exposure to the *pain of the others* might sometimes provoke in distant audiences (Sontag 2003).

In my case, the most significant effect triggered by accessing these sources involved an urgent need to reshape my methodological reflexivity as a researcher. This implied, including within my framework – in addition to the strong emotions provoked by exposure to those accounts and the acknowledgment of the lived and embodied experiences of pain suffered by the Somali asylum seekers – the subtler political and social implications of their acts and claims. I refer, in particular, to the fact that by accusing and delivering their torturer to the law, these men and women had completely subverted mainstream representations that often tend to stress their status as passive victims. The judicial files provide repeated evidence of this *subversion* which might be noted, for example, in how the news concerning the arrival of Ismail in Italy was spread all over the Somali diaspora in Europe by some migrants who ended up in the same boat with him. Shafici, for example, told the judges that he had already been informed, by other Somali migrants who were already in Germany and had travelled in the same boat, that Ismail had arrived in Italy with them in late August 2016. Since then, this man, who was hosted in Milan, had been going to the reception centre close to the station on a daily basis in order to see whether he could find his torturer, given the fact that the centre was used

as one of the main reception hubs where Somali migrants were usually sent (CAM 2017, 18). News of Ismail's arrival in Italy was also spread by the Somali diaspora on Facebook, as confirmed by other witnesses (CAM 2017, 22), while the same social network was used, after Ismail's arrest, by unknown people related to him in order to blackmail and threaten the Somali asylum seekers who had reported him to the Italian authorities (CAM 2017, 22–23). But none of them withdrew their accusations.

Moreover, analysing this case led me to reflect more systematically on the fact that these individual experiences and the condition of survivors to that *spectacle* of horror taking place along the European borders actually shed a disquieting light on macro-social phenomena which strongly question the shroud of hypocrisy which still covers European public debate on the policies implemented in Libya by the European Union and, most crucially, by the Italian government.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am referring to the regression in human rights standards and the disregard of the EU's declared values and principles that the policy of externalizing borders is producing. Furthermore, through the recognition of survivors' testimonies within a judicial case, the *historical evidence* of the conditions of abuse existing in Libyan detention centres and the *juridical truth* – as reflected in the final sentence issued by the court of Milan – for the first time converged, leading to a clear identification of victims and perpetrators (Veglio 2018). Finally, their biographical paths – from Somalia to Europe through Libya – as well as their testimonies in front of an Italian court emphasize how what occurs at the borders of Europe, in terms of human rights violations and systematic forms of de-humanization, is inexorably destined to strike back on *our* social and political community, which should feel unavoidably affected.

The so-called “affective turn” has allowed scholars to introduce affects, emotions and embodied experiences as current research topics (Gray 2008). Emotions, however, as Sara Ahmed argues, cannot be seen only as psychological states but also as (relational) social and cultural practices which are destined to shape our object of study ([2004] 2014, 9). This refers to the feelings of pain, compassion and sadness, on the one hand, or discomfort, disbelief, shame and rage, on the other, that events and stories such as those mentioned above inevitably provoke. The nature of the relationship between the researcher and her object/subject of study has *affective* dimensions that might have very significant implications for their research (Gray 2008). If affectivity is “a way of apprehending the world” (Ahmed, [2004] 2014, 7) and, we can add, a way of apprehending the stories of *others*, attending to emotions and the work of emotions itself must be a crucial aspect of our method, especially when dealing with living experiences of pain, such as those addressed in these pages.

In our case, the information reported in the judicial file also allowed the analysis to focus on the embodied forms of knowledge – such as those

epitomized by the scarfs and wounds still visible on the bodies of these people, as well as those destined to remain invisible – which actually compose a large portion of the statements made in court which led to the life sentence against the main perpetrator, Ismail. Bodies are the place where emotions mostly circulate, and, in our case, they also become the place where wounds – no longer a private and lonely experience – become public, enter the public sphere and, most crucially, enter politics, since they open up the possibility and need of restoration, repair, healing and recovery (Ahmed, [2004] 2014, 191). The court trial allowed survivors to be believed and their suffering recognized, while the perpetrator was condemned to serve a life sentence and give compensation to the victims.

Thus, a crucial outcome of the exercise in terms of methodological reflexivity that I started carrying out during the analysis of this case might consist in a wider understanding of reflexivity itself as an *emotional, embodied* and *cognitive* process (Holmes 2010), which necessarily drives us beyond the very narrow narratives which have framed migration so far in the public debate, often torn between discourses focussing on securitization, humanitarianization, economization or integration (Amelina 2020). Being open to being affected, from a scholarly perspective, by what these stories report and what these stories tell us about their protagonists but, even more crucially, about the wider political and social context which allowed and legitimized all this, requires us to consider *what counts* as knowledge about the world but, more importantly, the question of what this knowledge is being produced for (Gray 2008). The wounds on the bodies of the Somali refugees who met their torturer in Milan speak of a past of violence experienced in Libya – an apparently far and remote place – that remains open in the present: here, in Europe, among ourselves. Their *social distance* – according to Simmel's well-known lesson – produced by their ethnicity, class, gender and status, is coupled with a *physical proximity* – they are not in a far and remote place anymore – and with the strong visibility of the violence suffered elsewhere, whose wounds are still visible among ourselves. Hence, those past acts of violence inflicted in Libya are destined to become the obscure substance of our current *shame*, as Europeans, and, more generally, as a civil and political community which is increasingly called upon to question the economic, social and political factors responsible for such suffering and existing forms of exclusion and subjugation.

### Concluding remarks

The analysis of this case, as well as the reflexive use of research strategies and tools developed in the field of migration studies, shed light on an emerging need – which is starting to be widely felt within academia and beyond – to attempt to look for different ways and tools with which to explore these

topics. The aim is to de-migranticize migration research, given its wider implications for political and social theory (Dahinden 2016; Anderson 2019). While on the one hand, this means challenging and going beyond the study of migration and refugees as *separate* fields of research, on the other de-migranticizing implies looking at theories, concepts and practices that can sustain the development of alternative narratives aimed at consolidating a critical knowledge which can illuminate emerging domains of social responsibility and political action. While reading the testimonies of the Somali asylum seekers in Milan, our memory inevitably goes to other accounts concerning the most terrible massacres and traumas that emerged during the twentieth century and so-called “testimonial culture” (Ahmed and Stacey 2001; Alexander et al. 2004), where narratives of pain, violence and loss have proliferated. Here, the risk of fetishizing suffering and/or reproducing dominant power structures (especially in the process of knowledge production and circulation) might be very concrete (De Genova 2013). Victimhood, unfortunately, is often commodified in the current market for suffering (Kleinman, Veena, and Lock 1997), where pain is over-represented and turned into a form of media spectacle (Ahmed, [2004] 2014). On the other hand, however, the legacy of post-colonial dynamics and structural inequalities also operates through an apparently opposite mechanism, that is, through forgetting or generalized indifference toward the *distant suffering of others* (Boltanski, [1999] 2004) and what happens on the other side of the Mediterranean as well as across European borders. Hence, researchers are destined to struggle between contrasting forces and opposite trends that strongly shape their research practices and choices. One crucial issue, however, consists in finding a way to promote a *different, wider, less essentialised* cognitive framework where these narratives can be accommodated, along with the forms of resistance and struggle these lives and bodies carry with themselves.

In this regard, academic research and practice cannot be simply conceived as a “technical business” (Gray 2008, 949) that produces comprehensive reports that limit themselves to validating the survivors’ realities, but should aim at producing more adequate knowledge claims. A self-reflective, emotional, embodied approach should also aim at clearly indicating the crossroads existing between individual destinies, subjective experiences and social, political and historical processes. At that crossroad, where refugees’ narratives and witnesses’ testimonies converge, our research can make a difference when it discloses how the bodies and words of the survivors – yesterday no less than today – provide resistance toward that state of amnesia that seems to have overwhelmed European audiences. The gesture which brought the Somali men to show the scars still visible on their bodies, as evidence of the torture suffered in Libya, is an apparently *silent* act that actually unravels, in all its drama, a *loud* refusal to surrender. By that gesture, they recall us that “Our lives matter! We will not allow you to



forget!" (Vergès 2017) and, in this way, they denounce an economy of violence (in Libya as well as elsewhere) that cannot be ignored.

Thus, studies in the field of (undocumented) migration today are, more than ever, called upon to go beyond traditional schemes and conceptions. In that regard, asylum seekers and refugees' accounts, while revealing abominable and still vivid forms of violence and pain occurring far away, actually demand an understanding which attempts to critically address their embeddedness into *our* society. Europe shares a historic and moral responsibility for the political, economic and human crises occurring on the other side of the Mediterranean, that was part of its colonies in the past. As researchers involved in this field, we are strongly called into question. As emphasized by Boaventura de Sousa Santos with reference to experiences of injustice and oppression suffered by various social groups in the South as well as the North, in order to overcome this "new fatalism", we should contrast neoliberalism's capacity to separate "the occurrence of suffering from the feeling of injustice behind it" (Santos 2018, 93–94). Addressing the root causes of injustice, in our case, means understanding the large-scale transformations occurring in the regulation of borders and mobilities in Europe and elsewhere as well as the legacy of that "coloniality of power" which still saturates contemporary immigration policy and practice (Anderson 2019). Reference is here made to the ones that still allow different ethical and human rights standards between the two sides of the Mediterranean. Therefore, if on the one hand our work can aim at fostering a more inclusive and ethically oriented politics of migrants and refugees' voices, on the other, we must bear in mind that this has very strong implications also for *us*, as researchers and citizens. Recognizing refugees' live and struggles (and deaths) as a fundamental part of our political community and engaging in a politics of knowledge production which interrogates us in our time, both imply overcoming indifference and resignation through a radically different sense of *recognition* of migrants' claims and right to justice which could be the basis for building up a wider sense of shared *responsibility* as Europeans and citizens.

## Notes

1. From 2017 to 2020, the main sentences issued by Italian courts in this field were: Corte d'Assise of Milan, October 2017, confirmed in March 2019 by the Corte d'Assise d'Appello of Milan (concerning the detention centres of Bani Walid and Sabratha in Libya); Corte d'Assise of Agrigento, June 2018 (concerning the detention centre of Sabratha); and Tribunale di Messina, May 2020 (concerning the detention centre of Zawya in Libya).
2. This article is related to the Horizon2020 project *ITHACA* (grant agreement No 101004539) whose research protocols received the ethical approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan on 13th July 2021 (Opinion nr

69/21). This analysis, however, is mostly based on secondary information and data reported in judicial files issued by several Italian courts which were made publicly available on ASGI's web page, where a data bank on Italian jurisprudence in the field of immigration law is regularly updated. For further information see: <https://www.asgi.it/giurisprudenza/>.

3. The Libyan migrant-detention system was composed, at the end of 2020, of 34 detention centres, 20 of which – at least nominally – fall under the authority of the Department for Combating Illegal Immigration (DCIM): see <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/libya-dcs-reform/>. Their number, however, is difficult to track (Amnesty International 2021, 16). Most of them operate adjacent to military sites and are secured by militias active in the armed conflict which makes their management highly problematic, given the countless forms of abuse and violence being recorded and their involvement in human smuggling or trafficking networks.
4. The judicial file only mentions the countries crossed during their trip: i.e. Ethiopia and/or Sudan, sometimes through Yemen, and, then, Libya (CAM 2017, 26). In only one case a migrant had reached Libya through Kenya, Uganda and Sudan.
5. See inter alia Amnesty International (2017a, 2017b).
6. Some migrants recalled three other camps called Kalifa 1, 2 and 3 where they had been detained before being brought to Bani Walid (CAM 2017, 48).
7. Reference is here made to the highly questionable international and bilateral initiatives implemented in Libya since the early 2000s by both the EU and the Italian government aimed at supporting the country in the management of migration, the operations of the Libyan Coast Guard and the enforcement of border management and security. Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation along the central Mediterranean border has further deteriorated due to emergency legislation enacted by EU member states, the withdrawal of rescue operations and recurrent pushbacks and detention measures (Stierl and Dadusc 2022).

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