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Passeurs: Narratives of Border Crossing in the Western Alps

Federica Di Blasio

If the migrant is the prominent political figure of our time,¹ the migrant smuggler may be considered their shadowy counterpart. Migrant smuggling is currently one of the most profitable illegal activities in the world, worth billions of dollars, and only second to drug trafficking. In Europe, where the modern “migrant crisis” was particularly critical in the years 2015-16, the European Commission has committed to fighting migrant smuggling, a practice they associate with a variety of threats to European security, from terrorism to money laundering. Despite the European commitment, the smuggling industry has continued to become ever more sophisticated. Moreover, little has been done to address the causes that make smuggling services so popular.²

Official accounts of smuggling activities often work to the detriment of migrants and refugees. One of the most egregious examples of these misleading narratives recently came from Matteo Salvini of the Italian League Party and outgoing Italian Minister of the Interior. He refused entrance to NGO boats (such as *Acquarius*, *Sea Watch*, and *Open Arms*) carrying migrants to ports in Italy, and attacked their credibility, labeling them “taxi services” for human traffickers, treating them as accomplices to criminals.³ Salvini has dramatically oversimplified and distorted the complexity of migration, blurring the categories of profit and non-profit, criminal and humanitarian. He has attributed the criminality of human traffickers to NGOs committed to saving human lives in the Mediterranean, and used the category of “*trafficienti*” as a generalized label for anyone helping migrants to cross borders illegally.

Such blurring begins when we ignore the distinctions between “smuggling” and “trafficking.” According to the International Organization of Migration of the United Nations, “smuggling” involves an active participation in “the illegal entry of a person into a State of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident [...] in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.”⁴ “Trafficking,” by contrast, denotes “the

¹ As argued by Thomas Nail in *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). See also Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

² Significant work has been written on the “military-humanitarian” character of the European approach to illegal migration and migrants’ rescue. See for example Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, “The Humanitarian War against Migrant Smugglers at Sea,” *Antipode* 50 (2018): 685-703, and also id., “Military-humanitarianism,” in *Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration*, ed. Katharyne Mitchell, Reece Jones, and Jennifer L. Fluri (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

³ Salvini has further embittered the working conditions for NGOs with the Decreto Sicurezza Bis, approved on August 9, 2019. On the use of the expression “taxi service” for NGOs by the media, see for example Alessandra Ziniti, “Migranti, la Sea Watch verso Reggio Calabria: primo sbarco dell’era Salvini. Il ministro attacca: ‘No alle Ong che fanno da taxi’,” *La Repubblica*, June 8, 2018, https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/06/08/news/migranti_sea_watch_primo_sbarco_era_salvini-198463374/. See also Roberto Saviano on this matter: “Quando Luigi Di Maio disse che le Ong sono taxi del mare. La polemica con Saviano.” *The Huffington Post*, January 30, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/01/30/quando-luigi-di-maio-disse-che-le-ong-sono-taxi-del-mare-la-polemica-con-saviano_a_23347869/.

⁴ “Migrant Smuggling,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/smuggling-of-migrants.html?ref=menuaside>.

recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability... [also involving third subjects] for the purpose of exploitation.”⁵ Trafficking, in other words, involves the *exploitation* of migrants upon arrival, and an *abuse* of their rights during the crossing. Smuggling includes the pursuit of profit as the agent of illegal border crossing, but with the migrants’ *consent* or *request*.

Not only are these legal differences crucial for a clear understanding of migrants’ experiences during illegal crossings, but they should prompt us to take a closer look at the category of smuggling itself, and the nuances within that category. Professor Andrea Di Nicola and journalist Renato Musumeci describe the efficiency of the smuggling industry into European countries in their book *Confessioni di un trafficante di uomini* (Confessions of a Human Trafficker), first published in Italian in 2014, and since then translated into several languages.⁶ In this collection of interviews with smugglers and traffickers, Di Nicola and Musumeci challenge the assumption that the *scafisti*—boat smugglers operating in the Mediterranean—are exclusively responsible for migrants’ distress and for the increase of illegal migration fluxes. These *scafisti*, Di Nicola and Musumeci argue, have little power over the networks of migrants, whereas the organized businessmen behind the scenes gain large profits that are routinely overlooked by European institutions.⁷

Similarly, Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano have studied human-smuggling networks in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and insist on the ambiguous status of smugglers. Are they criminals or saviors? The answer, Tinti and Reitano suggest, is not at all clear-cut: “It is often the criminals who help the most desperate among us escape the inadequacy and immorality that run through our current international system. It is certainly true that smugglers profit from the desperation of others, but it is also true that in many cases smugglers save lives, create possibilities and redress global inequalities.”⁸ Like Di Nicola and Musumeci, Tinti and Reitano stress the high demand for smuggling services: human-smugglers thrive because their services are sought by desperate people lacking any legal means to cross borders.

In this paper, I am interested in precisely this ambiguity of the human-smuggler’s role, and in particular how this role is manipulated in narratives of illegal migration. I will examine

⁵ “Human Trafficking,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>.

⁶ All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Andrea Di Nicola and Giampaolo Musumeci, *Confessioni di un trafficante di uomini* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2015). Di Nicola and Musumeci’s book will not be discussed in detail in this article because it does not give specific attention to the Western Alps. Nonetheless, some of their interviews are of much value in debunking the idea that every smuggler is a criminal. See for example the interview of Aleksandr, who draws comparisons between himself and Moses, “il primo scafista della storia” (“the first smuggler in history”) (19). Another work published as this article was undergoing copyedits is Maurizio Pagliassotti, *Ancora dodici chilometri: migranti in fuga sulla rotta alpina* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2019). In this book, the author narrates migrants’ crossings at the French-Italian border to challenge the widespread lack of empathy and indignation over their tragic deaths. For more interviews of smugglers on the outskirts of Europe (again questioning the idea of smugglers’ criminality), see the documentary *Mother’s crossing/Passagères clandestines* (dir. Lode Desmet, 2004). See also the director’s personal website, accessed August 12, 2019: <https://www.lodedesmet.com/project-6>.

⁸ Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano, *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2016), 5. Similarly, Glenda Garelli, Alessandra Sciorba, and Martina Tazzioli argue that smuggling has been “produced” by the European border patrolling system. Glenda Garelli, Alessandra Sciorba, and Martina Tazzioli, “Introduction: Mediterranean Movements and the Reconfiguration of the Military-Humanitarian Border in 2015,” *Antipode* 50 (2018): 662-72.

literature, cinema, and essays containing significant representations of smugglers, significant demonstrations of how their role in illegal migration can be perceived. I aim to challenge the oversimplified criminalization of smugglers through a cultural investigation, where migrant smugglers figure as an internal and historical component of the timeline of European culture, rather than an external threat suddenly imposed by the contemporary migratory crisis. To this end, I will focus on the internal borders of Europe, namely the crest of the Western Alps connecting Italy to France and Switzerland. The Western Alps borderlands are of profound importance for the perception of illegal migration in Europe, particularly so from an Italian perspective. The French-Italian border is currently considered the most permeable passage from Italy to Northern Europe.⁹ This is doubly significant since most of the migrants arriving in Italy are French- or English-speakers only interested in passing through Italy to reach countries such as France or the United Kingdom.¹⁰

Furthermore, the narratives of Western Alps crossings are particularly suitable to clarify the misleading terminology used when talking about illegal migration. The Treccani Institute recognizes the French term “*porteur*” as a neologism in the Italian language, recorded since at least 2004 and referring to migrant smugglers.¹¹ Used in the context of illegal migration, *porteur* (from the French verb “*passer*”) replaces its Italian equivalent “*passatore*” (from “*passare*”): a resonant noun in Italian literature since Dante and Tasso, most often in reference to a boatman carrying people across a river. When referring to illegal migration, the Italian *passatore* is also strongly connected to the Italians’ own experience of emigration through the Alps. In the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, we read that a *passatore* is “chi aiuta a espatriare, per lo più assolvendo il compito di guida su valichi alpini di frontiera” (“a person who helps someone expatriate, mostly as a guide across alpine borderlands”).¹² Both in French and Italian, the terms *porteur/passatore* are less derogatory than their synonyms “*contrebandier*”/“*contrabbandiere*.” The former terms—*porteur/passatore*—connote those who *help* migrants cross geographic obstacles (rivers, mountains), and thus contain the semantics of an immigrant experience entirely different than the discourse of politicians like Salvini, an experience in which the *porteur* is not a criminal but a “*guida*” (“guide”)¹³ who offers a precious service.

⁹ Reported by Ligurian activist Maria Paola Rottino during an interview with me on January 12, 2018. On the French-Italian border as representative of the European migration crisis in general, see Chico Arlan and James McAuley, “The French-Italian Border Reveals the Essence of the European Clash on Migration,” *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-french-italian-border-reveals-the-essence-of-the-european-clash-on-migration/2018/06/28/1f26dd78-732f-11e8-bda1-18e53a448a14_story.html.

¹⁰ On migrants’ arrivals to Italy and their nationalities, see UNHCR’s official data, accessed August 12, 2019: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>.

¹¹ “Neologismi,” in the Istituto Treccani, accessed August 12, 2019,

http://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/neologismi/searchNeologismi.jsp?abcd=abcd&pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Osservatorio_della_Lingua_Italiana/OSSERVATORIO DELLA LINGUA ITALIANA ND 015000.xml&lettera=P. Food smugglers across the Alps, particularly in the last century, were also known as “*spalloni*.” See Erminio Ferrari, *Contrabbandieri: uomini e briccole tra Ossola, Ticino e Vallese* (Verbania: Tararà edizioni, 2000).

¹² “*passatòre*,” agg. e sm., in Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 12. (Turin: Unione Tipografico-editrice torinese, 1984). For an anthropological definition of *porteurs* as helpers or mediators, see Salvatore Palidda, “*Porteurs, mediatori e intermediari*,” *La ricerca folklorica* 44 (2001): 77-84.

¹³ Another term applied to human-smugglers and reflecting migrants’ perspective. The Californian reader might be interested to learn that a similar distinction exists between the English words “(migrant) smuggler” and “*coyote*,” the second being the helper or mediator as seen from the migrant (Mexican) perspective. See David Spener, “The Lexicon of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-US Border,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 71-103. The comparison between “*porteur/passatore*” and “*coyote*” is useful also for the terms’

It is by exploring these and other linguistic nuances, and by insisting on political, humanitarian, and environmental values, that the texts I analyze in this article complicate and question the current criminalization of migrant smugglers. These narratives present smugglers, or rather passeurs, as their central figures, and also as protagonists in the history of their borderland. By delving into the ethical responsibilities of smugglers toward migrants, the landscape, and their own communities, these narratives resist the criminal generalization of all those involved in illegal border crossings. Such perspectives are particularly important in the cases of those who commit legal infractions for humanitarian purposes. Finally, these texts also raise provocative questions about the smuggling activity proper, calling into question smugglers' ethical code and their ultimate intentions.

The analysis that follows is divided into four sections. In the first, by way of an introduction, I will present archival and oral-historical materials to support my characterization of passeur narratives as centered on positive (rather than criminal) figures. In this section I will also briefly consider the well-known 1950 film by Italian director Pietro Germi, *Il cammino della speranza*. In Section 2, I will examine Marco Ferrari's novel *Il vuoto alle spalle* and his portrayal of real-life Alpinist and anti-Fascist Alpine guide Ettore Castiglioni. Through the narrative tools of bio-fiction, this book presents the passeur as a hero of anti-Fascism and a romantic pursuer of freedom. In Section 3, I will consider the representations of passeurs from the 1980s and 1990s by Italian novelist Francesco Biamonti. In particular, I will look at three of his novels: *L'angelo d'Avrigue* (1983), *Vento largo* (1991), and *Le parole, la notte* (1998).¹⁴ Here, references to the professional ethics of traditional passeurs complicate the criminalization of migrant smugglers, despite Biamonti's pessimism on the outlook of Europe. In Section 4 I will focus on contemporary narratives of migration such as the documentary *Io sto con la sposa* by Del Grande, Al Nassiry, and Augugliaro (2014), and the reportage *Passeur* by Raphaël Krafft (2017). These visual and written forms of docu-fiction insist on the humanitarian principles inspiring activists that have served as passeurs, whom it would be wrong to dismiss as criminals. In fact, giving voice to the many humanitarian activists involved in the hospitality care of migrants at the French-Italian border, these contemporary narratives openly oppose the activities of inhumane human-traffickers. As I present these narratives, I will also include photographs that I myself took during a visit to the French-Italian border in the summer of 2017, generously supported by the Center for European and Russian Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Finding traces of passeurs in the landscape has strongly motivated my research. There, historical marks serve as proof of Europe's ancient familiarity with smuggling practices, reminders of a past that can help us to better understand the complex reality of today's "illegal" migrations.

connections to specific borderlands: the Alps and the U.S.-Mexico border, respectively. On smuggling across the U.S.-Mexico border, see David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), and Gabriella E. Sanchez, *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings*. Routledge Studies in Criminal Justice, Borders and Citizenship, 5 (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁴ Geographer Massimo Quaini has studied some of these narratives in a comparative article on Italian borderland literature across the Alps; see his 2005 essay, "Ri/tracciare le geografie dei confini," in *Confini. Costruzioni, Attraversamenti, Rappresentazioni*, ed. Silvia Salvatici (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2005). The essay focuses on *Storia di Tönle* (1978) by Mario Rigoni Stern, *Le parole la notte* by Biamonti, and *Il vuoto alle spalle* (1999) by Marco A. Ferrari. Quaini covers the entire range of the Alps while introducing representations of passeurs as typical figures of the borderlands, and explaining how geopolitics affect the existence of individuals living next to a border.

Passeurs across the Western Alps: Saviors or Criminals?

The Western Alps connecting Switzerland, France, and Italy are a particularly arduous landscape. Climate and altitude make it hard to cross the mountains without the help of experienced guides, especially in the winter. At sea level, along the crests of the Maritime Alps, cliffs descend abruptly into the Mediterranean, making even agriculture difficult.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is because of this particular landscape and the difficulties in patrolling it that migrants keep attempting to cross it when other border passages are unavailable. For the same reasons, passeurs have been a long-established figure in this region.

In her article “La Frontière bafouée: Migrants clandestins et passeurs dans la vallée de la Roya (1920-1940),” Simonetta Tombaccini-Villefranche uses materials from the Maritime-Alps Department’s Archive to reveal how passeurs’ nationalities, means, and motivations have varied across different historical contexts.¹⁶ Smugglers of goods and people have always existed at the border, but it was in the 1920s that the figure of the professional passeur became popular. Locals were the best guides, as they had excellent knowledge of the borderland’s geography, and often held special border passports. Eluding surveillance, taxi drivers from Ventimiglia would bring their clients to the casino in Monaco and never bring them back; shepherds and fishermen would bring migrants to France over land or by sea following their own normal routes. Some passeurs were motivated by political values to help *fuoriusciti*, opponents of the Fascist regime who found refuge in France, where they could continue their propaganda operations.¹⁷ But Fascist military officers themselves could also, paradoxically, serve as passeurs, as sometimes happened during the expulsion of non-Italian Jews persecuted by the Third Reich.¹⁸

Finally, passeurs often came from older generations of immigrants who aimed to help new migrants from their own family or hometown. More sophisticated criminal organizations of smugglers emerged from these forms of remote cooperation. Such organizations would send their agents to poor areas of Italy (Sicily, the Abruzzi, or Calabria) to find clients willing to migrate to France or North America. Oftentimes migrants would sell their entire property only to find out they had been victims of fraud. They would be abandoned before reaching their

¹⁵ On the history of the Alps region, see Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Colin, 1949), 5-30, and Jean-François Bergier, *Pour une histoire des Alpes, Moyen Âge et temps modernes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997). Braudel (p. 19) conveys the porousness of the area, despite the landscape’s harshness: “La montagne méditerranéenne s’ouvre aux routes et l’on marche sur ces routes, aussi escarpée, sinueuses et défoncées qu’elles soient,” (“The Mediterranean mountains [...] are accessible by roads. The roads may be steep, winding, and full of potholes, but they are passable on foot.” Transl. by Siân Reynolds, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, 41). On the history of the French-Italian border see Michele Pellegrini, *Il confine occidentale: dalla langue d’Oc al movimento no TAV* (Boca: Oltre Edizioni, 2014). See also Antonella Arpinio, *Il paesaggio fragile: l’Italia vista dai margini* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016), regarding the borderland’s culture, including the contention over Briga and Tenda, and discussions of works such as Italo Calvino’s short story “L’entrata in guerra” and Christian-Jaque’s 1958 film *La loi c’est la loi*, with Totò and Fernandel.

¹⁶ Simonetta Tombaccini-Villefranche, “La Frontière bafouée: Migrants clandestins et passeurs dans la vallée de la Roya (1920-1940),” *Mémoire et identité de la frontière: Étude des migrations de proximité entre les provinces ligures et les Alpes-Maritimes [Actes des journées de Nice, octobre 1998]*, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 58, no. 1 (1999): 79-95.

¹⁷ As in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Il Conformista* (1970).

¹⁸ On this controversial subject: Paolo Veziano, *Ombre al confine. L’espatrio clandestino degli ebrei stranieri dalla Riviera dei Fiori alla Costa Azzurra 1938-1940* (Saluzzo: Fusta Editore, 2014).

destination or sent to remote areas of the globe.¹⁹ While the first criminal organizations of passeurs were discovered in the 1920s, the media reported similar cases up to the 1960s. Italian journalist Gian Antonio Stella recalls the headlines from a famous case in 1946: “L’odissea dei migranti clandestini. Abbandonati in mezzo alle montagne in preda al gelo, alla neve e alla bufera, 50 siciliani—fra cui alcuni ragazzi—vengono soccorsi, nell’alta Valle d’Aosta, da una pattuglia di carabinieri” (“The odyssey of illegal migrants. Abandoned in the mountains in the Northern Aosta Valley, suffering from extreme weather conditions—ice, snow, and blizzards—50 Sicilians, amongst them teenagers, were rescued by a patrol of Carabinieri”).²⁰ It is this episode that inspired Pietro Germi’s film *Il cammino della speranza* (1950), where a reckless smuggler deceives a group of naïve migrants from a remote village in Sicily.

Il cammino della speranza is a melodramatic account of migration, where the spectator is invited to participate in the migrants’ hopes and delusions.²¹ While the smuggler, Ciccio, had promised to act as *guida* (guide) and deliver the migrants to France, he instead takes their money and runs away to Rome. In this act, the lives of entire families are put at risk of being shattered. The treacherous Ciccio is portrayed as a heartless man who gives clear clues as to his merciless personality before abandoning the migrants: as soon as he arrives in the Sicilian village, he heads to a tavern and looks around to identify the weakest subjects. He offers cigarettes and drinks to seduce his victims. Before attempting his escape, he abuses a dog and is rude to a little child—the same child who, at the end of the film, convinces a French officer in the Alps to let the migrants pass.²² Ciccio’s sin is not that he breaks the law, but that he does not provide the service he is paid for: not criminality, but human fraudulence.

Contemporary investigations of both archives and oral histories do much to complicate the figure of the passeur. In Rocco Potenza’s study “La figura del passeur nell’emigrazione clandestina italiana in Francia del secondo dopoguerra” (“Passeurs in the clandestine migration of Italians to France after World War Two”) the author interviews a man named Aldo, an ex-passeur from Bardonecchia, and describes another named Michele, a Calabrian migrant who managed a smuggling business in Bardonecchia right after World War Two. While the interview with Aldo shows the human side of the profession—the passeur’s fears, motivations, sense of guilt—the story of Michele illustrates how passeurs gained social recognition. A police officer Potenza interviewed in 2007 praised Michele for being a trustworthy, honest man, and confessed that local policemen were aware of his business, but had no means to stop him. Michele is characterized as doing no harm, even helping to channel the fluxes of Southern Italian migrants from the Italian side of the border to France.²³ Other locals from Bardonecchia that Potenza interviews confirm that Michele had the esteem of the entire village.

Similar esteem for passeurs can come from migrants themselves. Historian Renata Brogini has collected World War Two letters and diaries in which Jewish refugees report different experiences

¹⁹ Rocco Potenza, “La figura del passeur nell’emigrazione clandestina italiana in Francia del secondo dopoguerra,” *Altre Italie. Rivista internazionale di studi sulle migrazioni italiane nel mondo* 36-37 (January-December 2008): 100; Tombaccini-Villefranche, “La Frontière bafouée,” 88. For an overview of Italians’ illegal migration after World War Two, see Sandro Rinauro, *Il cammino della speranza. L’emigrazione clandestina degli italiani nel secondo dopoguerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

²⁰ Gian A. Stella, *L’orda: quando gli albanesi eravamo noi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002), 181-82.

²¹ *Il cammino della speranza*, directed by Pietro Germi (1950; Milan: Dolmen Home Video, 2008), DVD.

²² His rudeness is amplified by the fact that the old man with the dog and the child visibly recall De Sica’s films *Umberto D* (1952) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948).

²³ Potenza, “La figura del passeur,” 7. Veziano’s *Ombre al confine* describes similar cases of collaboration with the police in 1938-40.

with human-smugglers as they cross the border into Switzerland. The luckiest refugees—often helped by family, friends, or anti-Fascist connections—found trustworthy passeurs. Many others were robbed of their belongings or arrested by Swiss border guards. Between these two extremes, many simply report that they received a professional service. A few even voiced appreciation for the passeurs despite being robbed by them, for they had saved their life, after all.²⁴

Being unofficial, by its very nature undocumented, illegal migration is not an easy thing for historians to study. But traces of passeurs do appear among archives, letters, and interviews. Moreover, knowing about the passeurs who operated during much older waves of illegal migration can help us study contemporary cases. For instance, examples show us that it is common for ex-migrants who have acquired a certain knowledge of the borderland to sell their know-how to new migrants, a practice popular among Southern Italians after World War Two, and today common among Maghrebi migrants.²⁵ Moreover, humanitarian sympathies and political inclinations continue to motivate passeurs, whether or not they also seek profit. In recent years, several Europeans have acted as passeurs for humanitarian reasons, and have been prosecuted for so-called “crimes of solidarity.” The most famous case is that of French farmer Cédric Herrou, accused of having helped migrants cross the French-Italian border in the Roya Valley (Fig. 1). Similarly, Lisa Bosia Mirra was prosecuted by Swiss authorities for being active on the Swiss-Italian border.²⁶



Fig. 1. Cédric Herrou on his farm in the Roya Valley and the arrival of new migrants resting on armchairs. Photo: Federica Di Blasio, July 2017.

²⁴ Renata Brogini, *Frontier of Hope: Jews from Italy Seek Refuge in Switzerland, 1943-1945* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 2003), 39-55.

²⁵ Interview with activist Maria Paola Rottino on January 12, 2019. Reading Biamonti, it becomes clear that non-Italian passeurs have been operating across the French-Italian border at least since the 1990s. For recent cases reported in the media, see for example “Clandestini pagano il passeur già richiedente asilo per entrare in Italia,” *Il Gazzettino*, July 19, 2018,

https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/udine/arresto_passeur_gorizia_immigrazione_clandestini-2571201.html.

²⁶ “Court Confirms Guilt of Immigrant-Helping Politician,” *Swiss.info.ch*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/court-confirms-guilt-of-immigrant-helping-politician/43554916>. See also “Aide aux migrants: Les ‘sept de Briançon’ condamnés,” *Le Monde*, December 14, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/12/14/aide-aux-migrants-les-sept-de-briancon-condamnes_5397154_3224.html.

In the following sections I will look at narratives that mirror such ambiguous cases of border crossing. Dating back to World War Two, they showcase mythical passeur-figures coming from common stories of migrant smuggling, stories now embedded in the history and culture of the Western Alps.

The Passeur as Anti-Fascist Hero: *Il vuoto alle spalle: storia di Ettore Castiglioni* by Marco A. Ferrari (1999)

Il vuoto alle spalle: storia di Ettore Castiglioni (1999) is a novel of biographical fiction built around the almost-mythical Ettore Castiglioni (1908-44), archetypical “good” passeur of the anti-Fascist Italian Resistance. The member of a bourgeois family from Milan, Castiglioni was trained as a lawyer but became known for his career as an alpinist and academic. He was a member of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI), an organization dedicated to protecting the alpine environment as well as informing the public about the necessary equipment and best paths to follow over the mountains. Castiglioni was the author of several CAI guidebooks and charted more than two hundred new climbing paths over the Alps. He also climbed the mountains of Patagonia. For his athletic merits, he received a gold medal from Mussolini, despite later becoming an active opponent of the regime. After the armistice of 1943, which sanctioned Italy’s alignment with the United Nations, Castiglioni used his position as climbing instructor at the military school of Aosta to begin helping the Resistance. He became the leader of a group of twelve alpinists who made their living smuggling cheese while also acting as passeurs for anti-Fascists at the Swiss-Italian border. The last queen of the Italian Kingdom, Maria José of Belgium, reported having several meetings with Castiglioni to coordinate anti-Fascist activities.²⁷ On September 26, 1943, Castiglioni helped the academic and future President of the Italian Republic, Luigi Einaudi, to cross the Swiss-Italian border with his wife, Ida.²⁸

In *Vuoto alle spalle*, Ferrari focuses on Castiglioni’s personal experience, presenting the alpinist’s life as an uplifting portrait of a sensitive and idealistic passeur who embraces the values of anti-Fascist Resistance as part of a deeper, romanticized search for absolute freedom. Combining material from Castiglioni’s journals with the tools of biography and fiction, Ferrari’s novel, in the words of David Lodge, “takes a real person and his real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel’s techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography.”²⁹ Ferrari does not disregard the “code” of biography, drawing his narrative from a vast array of pictures, interviews, and journals collected at the *Centro diaristico* in Pieve di Santo Stefano. He likewise gives a frank assessment of the reliability of his sources, warning the reader about the limits of his research, especially when sufficient evidence is missing. But Ferrari’s ultimate goal is to bring Castiglioni’s personality into focus: “Cercavo un indizio, un segno che potesse dare un’espressione viva a quel volto impresso nelle fotografie” (“I was looking for a clue, a sign that would reanimate the face imprinted on those

²⁷ Marco A. Ferrari, *Il vuoto alle spalle. Storia di Ettore Castiglioni* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1999), 180.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-83.

²⁹ David Lodge, *The Year of Henry James or, Timing Is All: The Story of a Novel* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), 8. See also Castiglioni’s journals: Ettore Castiglioni, *Il giorno delle Mésules: diari di un alpinista antifascista* (Milan: Hoepli, 2017). Ferrari’s biographical account of Ettore Castiglioni has also been transformed into a documentary: *Oltre il confine—la storia di Ettore Castiglioni*, by Andrea Azzetti and Federico Massa, accessed August 12, 2019, <http://www.oltreilconfine.com/>.

photos”).³⁰ Castiglioni, in sum, is the object of an “imaginative exploration,” as Lodge puts it.³¹ Ferrari wants his reader to see Castiglioni:

liberarsi nel gioco di certi movimenti lenti, di certi modi gentili che tutti mi avevano descritto. Ettore Castiglioni era un uomo di trentacinque anni, alto e atletico. Aveva il viso scavato, magro, i baffi curati, gli occhi dolci e neri, e passava notti intere al suo pianoforte a mezza coda sulle note di *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* di Claude Debussy.³²

(express himself in the series of slow movements, of gentle manners that everyone had described to me. Ettore Castiglioni was a 35-year-old man, tall and athletic. His face was hollowed, slim; his moustache well-combed; his eyes sweet and dark. He would spend entire nights playing Claude Debussy’s *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* on his baby grand piano.)

Stressing here the tenderness of Castiglioni’s young face and manners (“occhi dolci,” “movimenti lenti,” “modi gentili”) and his artistic sensitivity (his love of Debussy),³³ Ferrari envisions Castiglioni in one brief moment of life: the author condenses the 1920s and 1930s into brief allusions in the prologue, then centers the book’s narrative around the last two years of the alpinist’s life, 1943-44.³⁴ It was in autumn of 1943 that Castiglioni, aged thirty-five, began his activities as an anti-Fascist passeur. June 5, 1944 is the date the story ends, when Castiglioni is found dead in the Forno Glacier, apparently killed by a storm while attempting to cross the Swiss-Italian border, equipped only with a blanket and a pair of slippers.

Not only does Ferrari insist on Castiglioni’s personality and focus on the alpinist’s Resistance work and tragic death, he also stresses Castiglioni’s bond to the anti-Fascist community and his special relationship with the landscape. Ferrari insists on certain key “nodes” in Castiglioni’s life, significant encounters that shaped his ideological and social commitment to the anti-Fascist Resistance in the Alps:

L’ossessione della fuga accomunava ognuno, e ogni fuga, ogni passaggio, disegnava un filo invisibile che andava a intrecciarsi a quello lasciato da altri, fino a formare una grande rete distesa sulle montagne. Ogni nodo era l’incontro di due storie; ogni nodo un contatto, una stretta di mano, una speranza di aiuto.³⁵

³⁰ Ferrari, *Il vuoto alle spalle*, 7.

³¹ Lodge, *The Year of Henry James*, 8.

³² Ferrari, *Il vuoto alle spalle*, 7.

³³ According to Ferrari, music is even more important than alpinism in grasping Castiglioni’s personality: “Anche per questo immagino le sue mani da pianista e non da rocciatore, nonostante alle montagne egli avesse dato il meglio della vita” (“This is also the reason why I imagine his hands as those of a pianist and not of a rock climber, although he gave the best years of his life to the mountains”) (ibid.).

³⁴ In the prologue, we read about the earlier signs of Castiglioni’s anti-Fascism, an affair he had with a married woman, and his climbing experiences in Patagonia.

³⁵ Ibid., 69. To see how Ferrari’s vision of Resistance resonates with his narrative technique, note his use of the image of the “*intreccio*” in a methodological note: “oltre alla sua [Maria José’s] testimonianza, come detto, non abbiamo altre fonti da incrociare” (“as previously stated, we have no other sources to interlink apart from Maria José’s testimonial”) (ibid., 181).

(Everyone shared an obsession for escape; and each escape, each crossing drew an invisible line that would interlace with the lines left by others, creating a huge twine sprawling over the mountain. Each knot was the encounter of two stories; each knot was a connection, a handshake, a wish for help.)

Ferrari presents Castiglioni as part of a dense, interconnected network of anti-Fascists sharing the same hopes and the same human decency. His brief love story with Madame Ranieri and his intimate friendship with Macchietto, another young alpinist, are crucial in shaping Castiglioni's life. But the deepest mark on Castiglioni's soul would be left by his encounters with refugees, which would come to motivate his work as a passeur. The very first scene of the book is Castiglioni's mission to take a Jewish family, the Biers, to Switzerland. Later, Ferrari describes the escape of Einaudi (then a senator and economist) to Switzerland: warned by an ex-student that Fascists were waiting at his house to arrest him, Einaudi was in grave danger of being caught by Germans while in the Alps, and survived in large part due to Castiglioni's actions.³⁶

A September 1943 excerpt from Castiglioni's journal stresses his empathy toward refugees:

Certo che stando a contatto dei profughi si può toccare con mano la gioia che si dà. Li si vede con la faccia stravolta dalla paura e poi, al confine sereni e felici salutarti come un salvatore. Dare la libertà alla gente, aiutarli a fuggire per me adesso è un motivo di vita.³⁷

(Indeed, by being around refugees you can really understand the joy you can give. You see them with their faces distorted by fear and then waving at you as at their savior as they cross the border happy and relieved. To give freedom to people, to help them escape is now my life's mission.)

In the same section, Castiglioni expresses his attachment to the community of alpinists he leads in the Berio Valley, his sense of responsibility to them, his enjoyment in helping them, the mutual respect he feels among his fellow alpinists.³⁸ Working as a passeur, Castiglioni felt he could both serve the general cause of anti-Fascism and at the same time support his group in the valley. To this end, he would allocate the tips given by refugees—up to 2,000 lire at times—to a common fund for the community of alpinists. The fact that this community dissolved once Castiglioni was put in prison suggests how much the community owed to his strong leadership and idealism.

Throughout the book, Ferrari insists on Castiglioni's special relationship with the landscape, and how this influenced his activity as a passeur. On close analysis, Castiglioni's relationship with the landscape is twofold: first, it is a connection to the Alps specifically and the older generations of passeurs whose knowledge Castiglioni inherited; second, it is a devotion to mountains and wild nature in general, a devotion that might have had bearing on Castiglioni's mysterious death.

³⁶ Ibid., 77-83.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ “Ora soltanto le contingenze materiali mi prendono; mi occupo solo di questi ragazzi: soltanto in queste amicizie posso ancora ricevere delle soddisfazioni, rinunciando a me stesso e a quanto è stata fino ad adesso la mia vita intellettuale per dedicarmi interamente al bene della comunità e dei compagni” (“I am now solely interested in pragmatic contingencies; I only take care of these young men: only these friendships still give me satisfaction. I gave up myself and my intellectual life, for the sake of the community and of my companions”) (ibid., 69).

Castiglioni's network included people like the Italian politicians Federico Chabod and Paolo Alfonso Farinet. It was through Farinet that Castiglioni gained access to a "patrimonio di astuzie e conoscenze," a "storehouse of knowledge" that generations of "passatori" and "contrabbandieri" from the valley had accumulated: how to see in the dark, how to deal with animals, how to act with customs officers.³⁹ The Fenêtre Durand, a pass connecting Switzerland and Italy, had served as a secret passage since ancient times, with many generations of fugitives—including John Calvin in 1536—being guided across it by many generations of passeurs. The tricks Castiglioni learned through Farinet gave his group a massive advantage over Fascist and Nazi troops, who were not as familiar with the territory.⁴⁰ Ferrari stresses the importance of this heritage in Castiglioni's activity as a passeur, here representing Castiglioni's thoughts in indirect speech:

A chi in quei giorni chiedeva aiuto, lui poteva aprire le porte della pace e offrire deliberatamente la vita. Lui che aveva speso un'intera esistenza fuggendo verso le montagne, ora poteva a sua volta aiutare a fuggire attraverso quei territori dei quali era diventato poco a poco una sorte di custode riconosciuto.⁴¹

(During those days, he could open the door to peace and deliberately offer life to those asking for help. He had spent his entire existence fleeing towards the mountains; now that he had slowly become their official custodian, so to speak, it was his turn to help others escape across those places.)

In his anti-Fascist community, Castiglioni figures as the "custodian" of the Alps. A symbol of his strong connection with the Alpine community is the old farm where he spends a night with his friend, Berio Valley resident Emilio Macchietto. The episode connects the two men not only to each other but also to past generations of mountaineers who stayed in the homestead: inside is an old stove dating to 1903, blankets, graffiti, and other traces of prior users.⁴²

While such episodes serve to connect Castiglioni to other passeurs, his bond with the mountains more generally led him to detach from other people. This detachment prompts Ferrari to ponder the details of Castiglioni's death, questioning why he decided to run away from the Swiss officers who arrested him, why an alpinist of his talent and experience would attempt to cross the border without proper clothing or equipment.

Ferrari uses both fact and imagination to recreate the last hours of Castiglioni's life. The evidence shows that Castiglioni was arrested in Switzerland—using a false passport—and was detained in a hotel room while waiting to be transferred to prison the following day. That was

³⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44-46.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² "Il fuoco adesso aveva preso. Crepitava tra le strette pareti di ghisa su cui era incisa una data: 1903. La casera però era ben più antica della stufa, l'avevano costruita i vecchi montanari, quelli che il secolo prima avevano fatto contrabbando con i muli da soma inseguiti dalle regie guardie di frontiera [...] Nella stanza si avvertiva un leggero odore di muffa e, in qualche modo, anche la lontana presenza di tutti gli uomini che lassù avevano abitato le notti. Erano negli oggetti, nelle coperte, in alcune scritte sui muri, nell'aria" ("The fire was lit now. It crackled among the narrow cast iron walls on which a carving marked the date 1903. The cabin was much older than the stove; it was built by old mountaineers from the previous century, smuggling on their mules and chased by royal armies [...] In the room was a slight smell of mold and, somehow, the far presence of all the men who had lived up there at night. They were in the objects left behind, the blankets, the graffiti, the air") (ibid., 39-40).

March 11, 1944, the snowy night that Castiglioni attempted to escape. Ferrari looks at the plausible explanations for Castiglioni's actions: Was he involved in a secret mission, something important enough to justify the crossing? Did something cause him to panic after being arrested? Ferrari does not insist on one theory, but instead focuses on the deeper meaning of alpinism to Castiglioni, and how that dedication might have pushed him to opt, perhaps under duress, to attempt such an impossible escape. For Castiglioni, being in the mountains was a search for the sublime, a way to establish an exclusive connection with *physis*: losing oneself in the immensity of nature, feeling dominated by its forces rather than trying to dominate them.⁴³

According to Ferrari, the central principle of Castiglioni's philosophy of alpinism was that nothing that happens in nature is wrong, an idea that echoes a 1783 essay on nature written by Georg Christoph Tobler but attributed to one of Castiglioni's favorite authors, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "Sie hat mich hereingestellt, sie wird mich auch herausführen. Ich vertraue mich ihr."⁴⁴ ("She [Nature] has placed me here, she will lead me away. I trust myself to her").⁴⁵ Perhaps in his attempt to escape, Castiglioni chose nature's omnipotence—wild, inhuman, immense—over the walls of a prison.⁴⁶

The Salon at the Edge of the Abyss: The Passeur as a Witness in the Novels of Francesco Biamonti

Political idealism is not the only feature of a good passeur. The traditions of the profession have existed in Europe's internal borderlands for centuries, across many different political landscapes. In his novels, Ligurian writer Francesco Biamonti explores these traditions and the professional ethics of the passeur. Introduced to Italian readers by Italo Calvino in 1983, Biamonti is known especially for four novels: *L'angelo d'Avrigue* (1983), *Vento largo* (1991), *Attesa sul mare* (1994), and *Le parole la notte* (1998). Giorgio Bertone describes these novels as four variations of the same motif—"una formula fissa e tenuta come una nota" ("a fixed formula, held like a musical note")—involving themes such as death, pain, light, landscape, borderland, and feminine beauty.⁴⁷ In these works, the figure of the passeur is varied but with certain consistent traits.⁴⁸ While only one of the novels, *Vento largo*, is explicitly focused on the life of a passeur—a troubled man named Vari—, two of the other novels contain passeurs or significant traces of passeurs. In *Angelo d'Avrigue*, I will look at a short episode about a secondary character where a

⁴³ Here Ferrari quotes an excerpt on Patagonia from Castiglioni's journal: "Non essere più nulla di tutto quello che si è stati: gettarsi a terra soli, supini, impotenti. Allora ci si accorge che tutto quel dominio non era che un'illusione [...] Solo così, in uno stato di annientamento totale, abbandonati inerti nell'immensità..." ("Stop being everything one was before: throw oneself to the ground alone, supine, powerless. Then realize that that feeling of power was nothing but an illusion. Only in this way, in a state of total obliteration, inertly abandoned in the immensity...") (ibid., 196-97).

⁴⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Georg Christoph Tobler, *Die Natur: Fragment Aus Dem Tiefurter Journal* (Munich-Pullach: Stangl, 1923), 30.

⁴⁵ On the legacy and translation of this ode, see Henry F. Fullenwider, "The Goethean Fragment *Die Natur* in English," *Translation Comparative Literature Studies* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 170-77.

⁴⁶ Ferrari, *Il vuoto alle spalle*, 199.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Bertone, *Il confine del paesaggio. Lettura di Francesco Biamonti* (Novara: Interlinea, 2006), 8. Biamonti's style is unique enough to have become a literary mode, influencing other narratives on the French-Italian and the Swiss-Italian borderlands, for example Erminio Ferrari, *Passavano di là* (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 2002); id., *Fransè* (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 2005); Davide Longo, *Il Mangiatore di pietre* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2016).

⁴⁸ French "passeur" used in the original texts in Italian.

passeur appears. In *Le parole la notte*, I will show how the *absence* of passeurs points back to Vari, and is foreseen by Vari's sense of alienation and ethical crisis.

Although set in the contemporary world, Biamonti's novels establish an eloquent dialogue with the borderlands of both past and future—eloquent, but most times deceitful. On the one hand, they are a dissonant follow-up to the heroic narratives of illegal migration during World War Two. Longing for a past that is gone, Biamonti's passeur, Vari, is overwhelmed by the moral decadence that surrounds him. He feels lost and quits his profession, seeing new passeurs appear who show no signs of any relationship with the landscape nor any ethical commitment to the migrants they transport. In portraying Vari's crisis, Biamonti also anticipates the anxieties and debates that arose at the peak of the modern refugee crisis. Challenging the perception that this crisis suddenly “exploded” in 2015, Biamonti's novels portray illegal migration as a continuous phenomenon and suggest that its recent increase has been predictable, at least since the 1990s.

In Biamonti's view, illegal migrations are not the cause of the European crisis but the result of it. He derides the indifference of Europeans who “sembrano vivere in un salotto sull'abisso” (“seem to live in a living room at the edge of the abyss”), locked in their self-absorption, refusing to see the “popoli della notte e della fame” (“peoples of the night and hunger”) (refugees), to have pity on them, to address cases of unpunished violence against them.⁴⁹ Although his character, Vari, feels unable to make a difference in a world marked by such cynicism, he does not totally give up his attachment to the passeur tradition. Vari renounces the will to play an active role in history, but at the same time continues performing discrete but meaningful acts of solidarity toward the migrants, which in some measure reconnects him to the ethics of ancient Ligurian passeurs.

Before delving deeper into Biamonti's passeurs, I should pause to stress the geographic specificity of the French-Italian borderland in these novels, a precision of place to which Biamonti confers abstract and metaphysical depth. Loosely inspired by the crime novel genre, Biamonti's novels mix poetry and prose to narrate the life of disconnected individuals.⁵⁰ His characters face threats and uncertainties, living and working as they do in the borderlands, and this precarious state points to their greater existential and historical liminality. They suffer from alienation and isolation, and yet this dismay anchors their lives to the fate of a specific place—the French-Italian border—and its history.⁵¹ For them, a simple olive tree is a channel to Liguria's ancient civilization of farmers. A particular wind—the Mistral—is a constant reminder of their orientation between the Côte d'Azur and Liguria. A fire in the distance signals the

⁴⁹ Francesco Biamonti, *Scritti e parlati* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 97.

⁵⁰ “Biamonti [...] non crede del tutto alla storia che sta raccontando, ne ignora i particolari, trascura i fondamenti psicologici, trascura la trama, si attarda in digressioni senza sbocco, rinuncia all'azione per la contemplazione. Con le sue stesse pretese di giallista, [...] Biamonti è un Simenon distratto che solo al principio e alla fine si ricorda d'un filo che non sbrogia mai nel corso della storia” (“Biamonti [...] does not entirely believe in the story he is telling. He ignores the details, overlooks the plot, dwells in dead-end digressions, trades action over contemplation. With his own claims as a thriller writer, [...] Biamonti is a clumsy Simenon who only at the beginning and at the end of the story is mindful of a thread that he never really unravels throughout the narrative”). (Giorgio Ficara, “Prefazione,” in Francesco Biamonti, *Le parole la notte* [Turin: Einaudi, 1998], x-xi).

⁵¹ “Biamonti è un narratore che, se usa la suggestione, la poesia, dolce e negativa, del paesaggio, non evade dalla storia e vi resta anzi con impegno e pensosità dentro” (“Biamonti is a narrator who uses suggestion and the poetry of landscape—at the same time sweet and negative—without evading history. Rather, he stays in history with commitment and thoughtfulness.”) (Vittorio Coletti, *Francesco Biamonti: Le parole, il silenzio* [Genoa: Il Melangolo, 2003], 14).

passage of refugees, mostly from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, across the French-Italian border (this in the 1980s and 1990s).⁵²

Starting in Biamonti's first novel, *L'angelo d'Avrigue*, the figure of the passeur is associated with a particular cliff called the Death Pass, one of the deadliest passages at the French-Italian border (Fig. 2). Situated on the Giraude promontory above the French-Italian motorway, the Death Pass connects Grimaldi—the peripheral area of Ventimiglia—to the French town of Menton. Going down the cliff on the French side is the most difficult part of this trail, the historical point of passage for migrants of many groups and nationalities: Italian, Jewish, Kurd, Yugoslav, Maghrebi, Sudanese, and others. Contemporary sources report more than 250 people having died while attempting to traverse it; yet the trail is still frequently used today.⁵³



Fig. 2. The A10 / A8 motorways connecting Genoa (left) to Aix-en-Provence (right). The Death Path circumnavigates the promontory above the tunnel. Photo: Federica Di Blasio, July 2017.

In *L'angelo d'Avrigue*, Biamonti uses the Death Pass as the setting for the death of Jean-Pierre, a young man of the small community of Avrigue. The protagonist, an old sailor named Gregorio, soon gets involved in the mystery of Jean-Pierre's death. In a bar in Avrigue, he meets a woman speaking French with a thick accent, who wishes to see the Death Pass. Her husband had fallen to his death there many years before, after a fraudulent passeur had abandoned them at the

⁵² See for example Biamonti, *Le parole la notte*, 3, 23-24; id., Francesco Biamonti, *Vento largo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), 85. On the importance of natural elements in what the author calls a “non-anthropological landscape,” see Ivan Bonnin's “Biamonti e il Ponente ligure: un paesaggio di frontiera,” *Paideutika: Quaderni di formazione e cultura* 29, no. 15 (2019): 116-18.

⁵³ Stella, *L'orda*, 170. The last Italian migrant to die falling from this cliff was Mario Trambusti, a Florentine baker who attempted to cross the pass in 1962. To date, the most recent fatal accident is that of an unidentified African migrant found dead on the French side of the cliff on March 21, 2017. Statistics on the pass are also reported in Enzo Barnabà and Viviana Trentin, *Il passo della morte. Storie e immagini di passaggio lungo la frontiera tra Italia e Francia* (Modena: Infinito Edizioni, 2019), 41.

border—a scenario similar to that of Jean-Pierre’s death. The woman reports that a barbed-wire fence was obstructing the pass, causing her husband to be pulled down to his death by the weight of his luggage. Gregorio, listening to the story, blames both the passeur—“una guida disonesta” (“a dishonest guide”)—and the machinery of government (probably the Savoy Dynasty, he says), which put the gate on the cliff.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Gregorio refuses to take the lady—who we learn is Polish—to the Pass, and she leaves Avrigue bitterly, having failed both to commemorate her late husband and to pursue the connection that had been sparked with Gregorio.⁵⁵ The motif of the passeur taking Polish migrants to the border is repeated, with variation, in *Vento largo*. In a 1994 interview, Biamonti recalled an encounter with refugees from his own childhood, and suggested that *Vento largo* came out of a feeling of sympathy he felt in that moment.⁵⁶ Elsewhere he states that the novel is about pity: “pietà... senza fare del miserabilismo o del pietismo [...] pietà per le cose che scompaiono, che si offuscano, per questo angelo della distruzione che sta passando” (“pity... without turning it into miserabilism or pietism [...] pity for the things that disappear and darken, as this angel of destruction passes by”).⁵⁷ But unlike the story of the Polish widow in *L’angelo d’Avrigue*, the point of view is shifted from the migrants to the passeur himself in *Vento largo*. Vari is an occasional passeur mourning the recent loss of his friend Andrea, the official passeur of his town. Andrea’s death triggers Vari’s reflections on the past, and his contemplation of the profession of passeur more generally. Vari recalls that he had taken a Polish migrant to the Passo Cornaio once. He remembers the migrant praying in Polish, French, and Italian to share the prayer with his escort (Biamonti reports the French and Italian parts of the prayer, and hints that the migrant was probably guilty of a crime).⁵⁸ This showcases Biamonti’s technique of playing with consistency and variation: the story of a passeur and a Polish migrant is recounted in different novels, but with its narrative details changed, once in favor of the migrant and once in favor of the passeur. Biamonti presents crime as the symptom of a generalized metaphysical and ethical crisis hitting the modern world, eroding Western values. He portrays both Europeans and non-Europeans committing all manner of crimes, and both Europeans and migrants as lonely and lost individuals.⁵⁹

As a traditional figure of Liguria’s borderland, Biamonti’s passeur has a deep bond with the territory and its history. In *Vento largo*, it is the death of the elder passeur Andrea that triggers Vari’s reckoning with his past, his ethical crisis, and his decision to return to the profession. He and Andrea had belonged to the same generation of passeurs, coming from the Ligurian interior and committed to a code of values: “Ne abbiamo fatto del cammino insieme, —pensava salendo, —ne abbiamo conosciuti nomadi e viandanti. Eravamo due passeurs onesti, lui di mestiere io a tempo perso. Non abbiamo mai lasciato nessuno di qua del confine” (“We walked a long way together,—he thought as he was going up,—we met so many nomads and wayfarers. We were

⁵⁴ Francesco Biamonti, *L’angelo di Avrigue* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶ Interview with Luigi Vaccari, “Il coltivatore di mimosa,” *L’informazione*, August 21, 1994, 19.

⁵⁷ Biamonti, *Scritti e parlati*, 79. The angel is a clear reference to Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History.

⁵⁸ Biamonti, *Vento largo*, 100.

⁵⁹ “Che i clandestini si nascondano per passare la frontiera, è normale, non sarebbero clandestini. Ma in Biamonti la differenza tra i clandestini e gli altri non è enorme. Ognuno segue il suo cammino, ma non va da nessuna parte. Ciascuno porta con sé i propri confini” (“It is not surprising that illegal migrants hide to cross the border, this is what makes them “illegal.” But in Biamonti, there is not such a great difference between the illegal migrants, and the others. Everyone proceeds on their own path, but without going anywhere. Everyone carries their own borders within themselves”) Bjorn Larsson, “Francesco Biamonti—scrittore ligure o scrittore del mondo?” in *Sentieri liguri per viaggiatori nordici: studi interculturali sulla Liguria*, ed. Paola Polito (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2008), 152.

two honest smugglers; he did it professionally, whereas for me it was a pastime. We never left anyone on this side of the border”).⁶⁰ Right after Andrea’s death, Vari takes charge of two migrants—a Bulgarian man and a Romanian woman—proving himself to still be as honest and trustworthy as he thought Andrea to be. He does not ask for extra money, as the couple had already paid Andrea before his death, and he delivers them safely into France and gives them his address so that they can contact him after their arrival.

Part of Vari’s decision to take on the migrant couple is his distrust of newer passeurs. The distinction between “good” and “bad” passeurs is quite simple for Vari: inland passeurs like him are trustworthy (“passeur di montagna” [“mountain smuggler”], he is at one point called), while the “new” passeurs coming from the coast are not (“sulla costa, molto infidi” [“from the coast, very insidious”]).⁶¹ This opposition between “old” and “new” is generalized in Biamonti:⁶² throughout his work he laments the end of Ligurian agricultural civilization and the social desolation deriving from *speculazione edilizia*, depopulation, and illicit trafficking. Nobody has replaced “the old civilization of the olive tree,” and Vari alone (“l’ultimo testimone di una vita che se ne andava” [“the last witness of a life that was gone”]) is left to contemplate what has been lost.⁶³ Vari’s attachment to specific olive trees borders on feelings of fraternal affection for them, a kind of empathy, respect, and pity: “So tutto a memoria. Conosco ogni albero dal fruscio, so che luce prende. Li rivedo uno a uno, sento pietà per loro” (“I know everything by heart. I know each tree by its rustle, I know what kind of light it takes. I see them in my mind one by one, I feel pity for them”).⁶⁴ But Vari’s attachment to the land is doubled by a mistrust for what comes from the sea:

Pensava al mare da cui venivano le cose e al mare verso cui andavano. Pensava ai narcotrafficienti che volevano impossessarsi di quel vecchio rudere e lottizzare tutta la punta con le sue agavi e i suoi scogli. Tutto il territorio era minacciato dai nuovi costruttori. “Che ne sarà un giorno dei miei ulivi con la loro purezza francescana? Dei loro licheni, delle loro muffe? Lavorano notte e giorno, sotto il sole e sotto le stelle per agggiungere la terra al cielo.”⁶⁵

(He was thinking about the sea from which things come and the sea towards which things go. He was thinking about the drug smugglers who were hoping to take possession of those old ruins and divide up the cliff with all its agaves and rocks. The entire land was threatened by the new developers. “What will happen to my olive trees with their Franciscan purity? To their lichens and molds? They work night and day, below the sun and the stars, to subjugate the land to the sky.)

⁶⁰ Biamonti, *Vento largo*, 3-4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶³ Biamonti, *Vento largo*, 12. “Qui da noi, sulla costa ligure occidentale, è morta la civiltà dell’ulivo... Terra deturpata, notti rumorose e sfruttamento del turismo d’estate, molti furti, qualche omicidio. D’inverno, bivacchi intorno a qualche fuoco sulle strade” (“Where we live, on the Western Ligurian coast, the olive tree civilization is dead... A disfigured land, noisy nights and tourist exploitation in the summer, many thefts, some murders. In winter, bivouacs around some fires on the street”) (Biamonti, *Scritti e parlati*, 137-38).

⁶⁴ Biamonti, *Vento largo*, 69.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

The durability and Franciscan purity of olive trees make them a symbol of resistance and stoicism for Vari. The sea, on the other hand, is described as the element of movement and change. Matteo Meschiari notes how this contrast between land and sea is important for the cosmogony developed in Biamonti's narrative, and for its extension to the dichotomy between males and females.⁶⁶ In *Vento largo*, Vari and his lover, Sabèl, embody the mutual exclusivity of land and sea: he is the "land-man" holding on to "le sue terrazze" ("his terraces"), while she takes to the sea when she ends up hiding in an island monastery (most likely the island of Saint-Honorat).⁶⁷ Anchored as such to land and sea, Vari and Sabèl symbolize contrasting images of stability and instability: while Vari's stubbornness and attachment to the land recall the resilience of olive trees, Sabèl disappears into the sea looking for change.

Sabèl's association with change and instability, furthermore, comes not only with her retreat to the island, but also from her family origins: she is the daughter of Andrea, the same elder passeur that Vari recalls as a representative of an ancient world of firm values and trustworthiness. But Sabèl's own account of her father is not as positive. Talking with one of her fellow workers, Sabèl reveals that her father exploited her, that he had once attempted suicide, that he only began working as a passeur because he was a sailor and owned no land (again connecting the sea to instability and unreliability).⁶⁸ Other memories are unpleasant and confusing: Sabèl recalls seeing her mother undressing in front of a passing migrant (giving no further explanation),⁶⁹ and she states how difficult it was to deal with migrants themselves, their moodiness, their impatience, the anxiety in their souls.⁷⁰ Such "hurtful" memories question the passeur's halo of professional nobility, all the while reinforcing Biamonti's dichotomy of stability (land, trees) and instability (waves, sailors, migrants).

Despite these complications, Vari remains committed to stability. He refuses to cooperate with drug dealers because he wants to "stare fermo su certi principi" ("hold on to some principles").⁷¹ In a world where change is fast and fluid, where shadows constantly shift, he remains connected to the fixity of the olive tree:

- Un marinaio parla a un'onda, tutto è instabile, è attento alle sfumature. Lei si aggrappa a ciò che è fermo.
 - Ci sono tante ombre vaganti. Ma accanto a quest'albero diventano leggere.⁷²
- (– A sailor talks to a wave, everything is unstable, he pays attention to the nuances. You hold on what is still.
 – There are many wandering shadows. But next to this tree, they become light.)

It is through this very polarization of the stable and the unstable that *Vento largo* dramatizes the passeur's ethical crisis. Vari is caught between the duties he believes to be part of the profession, and the fact that he finds the passeur's life a lonely burden, a "lavoro ingrato" ("ungrateful job"),

⁶⁶ Matteo Meschiari, *Terra Sapiens: Antropologie del paesaggio* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2010), 228-29.

⁶⁷ Biamonti, *Vento largo*, 78.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95, 101-02.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 101-02.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 95, 101-02.

⁷¹ Ibid., 36.

⁷² Ibid., 163.

a “brutto mestiere” (“ugly profession”).⁷³ This tension that Biamonti’s characters embody is what led Bertone to describe him as a novelist of the two types of “border,” the “*confine*” and the “*frontiera*”: the first a line delimiting properties, the second a boundary that implies mobility and porosity.⁷⁴ What interests Biamonti is the individual who stands “sul confine” (“on the border”),⁷⁵ or more precisely the perils of the “uomo di confine che ha perso il senso della frontiera” (“the border man who has lost his sense of the frontier”).⁷⁶ This image symbolizes Vari’s dismissal of his profession and foreshadows the passeur’s disappearance from Biamonti’s next novel, *Le parole la notte*, and that novel’s protagonist, Leonardo.

Leonardo’s hometown is not on the “old roads” crossed by passeurs, but along a different path that migrants often take by mistake. Leonardo’s practice is to offer no assistance as they continue their crossing, but to allow them to rest, giving them protection of his olive trees, a duty he sees as a form of worship, a sacrament of reverence for life:

- Bonsoir, – disse.
- Bonsoir, – disse Leonardo. E accostò a un muretto il suo bastone. A quella mano disarmata l’altro sorrise. Lieve. Ma vi tremava tutta la mestizia del mondo.
- Se cercate il confine, è più in là nell’altra valle.
- Non possiamo restare? Siamo stanchi.
- Finché volete. Gli ulivi sono fatti per proteggere.
- Gli ulivi non sono Dio, – l’altro disse.
- Non sono Dio, d’accordo, ma è quanto qui c’è di meglio, disse Leonardo. Augurò la buona notte e se ne andò in casa.⁷⁷

(– Bonsoir, – he said.

(– Bonsoir, – Leonardo said. And he put his cane close to a little wall. The other one smiled at that unarmed hand. Softly. But in his smile shook the sorrow of the entire world.

- If you are looking for the border, it is further away, in the other valley.
 - Can’t we rest? We are tired.
 - As long as you wish. The olive trees are meant to protect.
 - The olive trees are not God, – the other said.
 - They are not God, true. But they are the best you can find here. – Leonardo said.
- He wished them goodnight and went back home.)

In a novel filled with violence, olive trees are the only form of stability that Leonardo can offer to the migrants. But not even a shelter will always save them from the dangers of the outside world: when Astra, a European woman, hides a Kurdish man and his daughter in her house, she is later kidnapped and he is attacked by unknown parties.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid., 48, 106.

⁷⁴ Bertone, *Il confine del paesaggio*, 13-33.

⁷⁵ See title of Bertone’s first chapter on Biamonti, 13.

⁷⁶ Bertone, *Il confine del paesaggio*, 25.

⁷⁷ Biamonti, *Le parole la notte*, 24.

⁷⁸ Ibid., ch. 21.

The “uomo sul confine” (“man on the border”) here is no longer the passeur observing a decadent world from a liminal point of view, but the non-passeur who limits himself to private acts of solidarity. Indecisive about trusting the migrants or not, Leonardo nevertheless has pity for them and shows it through small yet meaningful gestures of non-hostility. He carries a gun, but he is attentive to the migrants’ weaknesses and fears, to their smiles.⁷⁹ Leonardo’s attitude toward the migrants is surprising to other characters, since he was once shot in the leg and could not find the person responsible. The accident happened while the border was heavily crossed by migrants and their passeurs, all of them foreign and unknown to the protagonist and his circle. Later in the novel, we learn that the bullet did not come from any of these individuals but rather from the gun of a neighbor who had lost his mind over the death of his son. This detail can be read through a symbolic lens, as a warning about the future of Europe and its potential decline. It suggests, that is, that Europe should not fear enemies from the outside, but rather look within for the causes to its problems. Leonardo, for his part, acts in the name of a cautious solidarity, embarks on no heroic mission beyond practicing respect for other people’s lives.⁸⁰ But is this enough? Indeed, Leonardo’s small acts of solidarity are contrasted with the *absence* of “the old” passeurs in *Le parole la notte*. As Tullio Pagano writes, “Biamonti’s narrative should be studied not only for what it describes, but also for what it leaves out of the field of vision.”⁸¹ Pagano goes on to say that there is a political and ethical stance in Biamonti’s characters’ choices to remain attached to their liminal positions. In the case of Leonardo, his attitude is not so much welcoming toward migrants as it is critical of his own society:

Il passeur dei miei libri è un asociale che in fondo ama l’umanità. Non riconosce l’autorità dello Stato, si mette fuori legge ma ha un suo codice d’onore profondamente umano. Non ha mai barato, mai lasciato nessuno al di qua del confine. Non ha mai estorto denaro ingiustamente. Protegge fin che può le schiere di emigranti. Mentre i passeur di adesso in genere sono dei lestofanti: senza moralità, senza eticità. Infatti t’abbandonano prima del confine. Dicono: “Lì è il confine, aggiustatevi.” Lo fanno solo per il denaro. Sono i procuratori della catena dei fuorilegge della droga. Non hanno più una visione anarchica e libertaria del mondo. Sono prodotti della civiltà del consumo.⁸²

(The passeur in my books is an antisocial who nevertheless loves humanity. He does not recognize the authority of the State, he puts himself outside the law and yet he has his honor code, which is deeply humane. He has never cheated, never left anyone on his side of the border. He has never extorted money unfairly. He protects crowds of migrants as much as he can. While today the passeurs are

⁷⁹ Ibid., 70; “Chissà come appaiono a lui queste terre, chissà da quanto tempo non mangia” (“Who knows how these lands look to him, who knows when he last ate”) (ibid., 113).

⁸⁰ “— Un po’ di solidarietà, ma con prudenza. Lascio vivere.

— Sei armato?

— Fino ai denti” (ibid., 34).

⁸¹ Tullio Pagano, *The Making and Unmaking of Mediterranean Landscape in Italian Literature: The Case of Liguria* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 159-67. A similar take on contemporary Europe’s moral decadence can be found in the film *Happy End*, directed by Michael Haneke (2017; Amsterdam: Cinéart, 2018), DVD.

⁸² Francesco Biamonti, interview by Fulvio Lantieri, *Il Secolo XIX*, May 20, 1985.

nothing more than cheaters: with no morals, no ethics. Indeed, they abandon you before crossing the border. They say: “Here’s the border, now it’s up to you.” They only do it for the money. They extend the outlaw chain of drug trafficking. They lack an anarchic and liberal vision of the world. They are the product of a consumerist society.)

Ultimately, Biamonti’s narratives of illegal migration and passeurs lament the loss of the political values of anarchism and liberalism. The elder passeur cannot but disappear from a world that no longer responds to his ethical principles (respect for life, solidarity with the downtrodden). Leonardo is what Vari would have eventually become if he had the freedom to choose his path. Despite freely choosing to not work as a passeur, Leonardo nevertheless asserts the need for an ethical code in the modern world. Rather than taking revolutionary steps on his own, he opts for a private, silent, and stubborn act of dissent. Biamonti here stands for the individual’s right to protect one’s moral integrity over the collective choice of forgetting oneself by forgetting others. If Biamonti is not revolutionary in honoring the idealism of the past against the difficulty of taking action in the present, he nonetheless makes clear statements about the passeur’s ethical commitment to the profession. Even if the voice Biamonti takes up is that of an ancient world which cannot find the means to change the present, he is nevertheless firm in his commitment to this voice, in his esteem for the passeur’s traditions along Europe’s internal borderlands. He anticipates the dilemmas and moods of the most current narratives, some of which will be highlighted in my remaining analysis of passeurs who revive their political engagement and activism.

Contemporary Narratives of the Refugee Crisis: *Io sto con la sposa* by Gabriele del Grande, Antonio Augugliaro and Khaled Soliman al-Nassiry, and *Passeur* by Raphaël Krafft

I will conclude this study of the passeur figure in the Western Alps by looking at two films on the contemporary refugee crisis: the Italian documentary *Io sto con la sposa* by Gabriele Del Grande, Antonio Augugliaro and Khaled Soliman al-Nassiry (2014), and the reportage *Passeur* by French journalist Raphaël Krafft (2017). Despite the differences in medium and language, these films share a radical activism and deep concern for the refugee crisis in Europe. In both cases, the creators of the works become passeurs themselves, thus claiming the right to civil disobedience and the right to act in solidarity with migrants. While Biamonti describes the isolation of the fictionalized idealist passeur and laments the impossibility of his taking part in the contemporary unfolding of history, Del Grande’s and Krafft’s films report real political actions undertaken by their creators. They assert not only the possibility of working as a principled passeur today, but the very *necessity* that modern passeurs come forward in order to express the higher form of civility aspired to by European Law and Europe’s member states. Celebrating freedom in the form of the right to mobility, these films work to establish a strong connection with the past, overcoming the gap lamented by Biamonti and using this continuity to inspire new, engaging forms of heroism.

Io sto con la sposa is the product of a fundraising campaign launched by Del Grande, Augugliaro, and Al-Nassiry: with the contributions of 2,451 donors, they reached a budget of 98,151 euros and succeeded in presenting the film at the 71st edition of the Film Festival in

Venice.⁸³ *Io sto con la sposa* documents a real act of political dissent, where a group of European activists becomes the cortège of a fake marriage between Syrian-German activist Tasnid Fared and Syrian asylum-seeker Abdallah Sallam. In addition to the Europeans, another four asylum-seekers attend the wedding: Ahmad Abed and Mona Al Ghabra, former dissident opponents of the Syrian regime, and Alaa al-din Bjeremi and his young son, a rapper called MC Manar. The wedding acts as camouflage and misdirection, allowing the migrants to avoid police attention and ultimately reach Sweden, where they request political asylum.

Throughout the film, we learn about the Syrian diaspora caused by the civil war that Del Grande himself witnessed, working there as a journalist. The work thus superimposes two narratives: that of the migrants' past lives and hopes for the future, and that of the journey they undertake together from Milan to Stockholm.⁸⁴ As Del Grande explains, the vision of the film is a new "aesthetics of the border," which humanizes the migrants without necessarily transforming them into victims and objects of pity.⁸⁵ While the film narrates the horrors of war and the Syrians' emotions and memories as they escape to Europe, it also challenges the presumption that these people are not able to be happy or celebrate, to live their lives to the fullest. Although they are the protagonists of the film, with their own hopes and desires on open display, the Syrian asylum-seekers are put on equal footing with the European activists who decide to share the risks of the journey to Sweden.⁸⁶ In this way, the film narrates a new "we," celebrating the beauty of humanity and the strength of an antiracist, transnational, and robust solidarity. The film is multilingual and involves a diverse crew, all of whom cross the major borders of Europe: from Italy to France, from France to Germany, passing through Luxembourg, from Germany to Denmark, and from Denmark to Sweden. This border-crossing journey defines the structure of the film, which is divided into four chapters corresponding to the four days of the trip.

One border in particular is prominent in *Io sto con la sposa*: the French-Italian border. Not only is this the first border crossed, but its history gains an important role in the ideological stance of this film. After choosing the wedding dress and getting haircuts, the asylum-seekers meet the other members of the group in a private house in Milan. There, Al-Nassiry and Del Grande introduce themselves and explain the rationale behind their project. They have a map in front of them that lays out the first leg of their journey from Milan to Marseille, where Del Grande explains that they will pass through "il vecchio confine" ("the old border"). He continues: "Sulla montagna, c'è il vecchio passaggio che usavano gli italiani quando ancora viaggiavano senza passaporto. Cinquant'anni fa, eravamo noi gli emigranti illegali in Francia. Sulla montagna c'è ancora il sentiero" ("On the mountain, there is the trail that Italians would use when they still traveled without a passport. Fifty years ago, we were the illegal migrants in France. On the mountain, the trail still exists").⁸⁷ The "passaggio" that Del Grande refers to is the Death Pass above Ventimiglia. It will take them two or three hours to cross the border. They reach the French side through a hole

⁸³ Gabriele Del Grande, Antonio Augugliaro, and Khaled al-Nassiry, *Io sto con la sposa* DVD booklet (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015), 11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 9. To contextualize the film in the genre of European transnational cinema of migration, see Sandra Ponzanesi, "Of Shipwrecks and Weddings: Borders and Mobilities in Europe," *Transnational Cinemas* 7, no. 2 (2016): 151-67.

⁸⁶ Though they were not prosecuted after the film was released, the European guides of the undocumented asylum seekers risked fifteen years in jail and a 15,000-euro fine (Del Grande, Augugliaro, and Al-Nassiry, *Io sto con la sposa* DVD booklet, 15).

⁸⁷ Gabriele Del Grande, Antonio Augugliaro, and Khaled al-Nassiry, *Io sto con la sposa* (2014; Rome: Cineama), DVD, 06:00-07:30.

in the barbed wire dividing the two countries, an image so evocative that it was chosen to promote the film (Fig. 3). For Del Grande, the clouded history of the French-Italian border and illegal Italian immigration to France is important for the self-identification process in which his act of solidarity is grounded. While he identifies with the migrants, comparing their journey to the illegal migrations of Italians fifty years prior, both he and Al-Nassiry make it clear that they strongly oppose the deeds of untrustworthy passeurs who trick migrants, abandoning them in remote areas of the Alps after receiving their money. This form of fraud is so common that it is in fact what motivated them to make this film in the first place: in this way, Del Grande and Al-Nassiry’s condemnation of opportunist passeurs at times resembles Biamonti’s critique and Pietro Germi’s fiction of naïve migrants cheated by their guide.⁸⁸



Fig. 3. The bride and the groom cross the French-Italian border on the Death Pass.
Source: <http://www.iostoconlasposa.com/>, accessed August 12, 2019.

Ultimately, however, *Io sto con la sposa* remains light on this point, presenting the contrast between “good” and “bad” passeurs in a playful fashion. The wedding attendants treat their mission with a certain amusement, albeit mixed with determination. When the young boy, Manar, starts reasoning about the best ways to elude border controls, he is teased for talking like

⁸⁸ “Alla fine vivi qui, vedi gente che conosci, gente del tuo paese. Arrivano nel paese dove vivi tu, provano a raggiungere la Svezia. Ed ecco aperta la strada ai contrabbandieri, che sono trafficanti alla fine. Alcune persone le hanno abbandonate sulle Alpi dicendo loro: ‘Ecco la Svezia.’ Sul serio. Quando arrivano alla frontiera con l’Austria, o li arrestano o li rimandano indietro. In Francia è la stessa cosa. La nostra idea è venuta da qui” (“In the end you live here, you see people you know, people coming from your own country. They arrive in the country where you live, trying to reach Sweden. That’s how the smugglers, or rather real traffickers, find their way in. They abandoned some people on the Alps by saying to them: ‘Here is Sweden.’ Seriously. When they arrive at the Austrian-Italian border, they are either arrested by the police or sent back to Italy. In France it’s the same thing. Our idea came from there.) (Al-Nassiry in *Io sto con la sposa*, 05:04).

a “contrabbandiere” (“smuggler”).⁸⁹ The soundtrack at times resembles the music of a road trip film, celebrating freedom and mobility, occasionally mournful and introspective, but always stressing movement and energy. At each successful border crossing, the migrants themselves sing to celebrate.

The majority of the film’s camera shots are from inside a moving car, and the frequent presence of maps emphasizes Europe as a space to cross. Yet, the film also pays attention to the landscape that makes each borderland unique. When the group gets ready to cross the French-Italian border, they stop at a place called “Case Gina”: the ruins of several old houses abandoned in 1944, which passeurs have used since then to conceal migrants (Fig. 4). The location of these ruins overlooking the sea, along with the trash and graffiti that migrants have left there, make the site a monument to illegal border crossing and a landmark of the French-Italian borderland. The graffiti, in particular, is a heterogeneous assemblage of texts—prayers, obscene drawings, love messages—written in many languages over many waves of migration, at least since the 1990s. In Fig. 5, a picture I took during my visit in July 2017, one can see the curse “mort au passeur” (“death to the passeur”) repeated twice among several messages in Arabic. Locals say that these curses were directed at a pedophile passeur operating in the area many years ago. Some of the messages in Arabic were written by the “wedding party” of *Io sto con la sposa* itself: in the documentary, the camera lingers on the graffiti, abandoned clothes and shoes strewn across the floor, while Mona and Alaa write their names on the wall. Abdallah Sallam then joins in, recording some of the names (top right of Fig. 5) of the over 250 Syrians who lost their lives in a shipwreck on October 11, 2013 (a shipwreck Sallam himself miraculously survived). The sequence intensifies when he also writes a sentence that one of Tasnim Fared’s best friends, who died in Syria, used to write on the wall in college: “if you have to live, then live free, otherwise, you will die still as trees.”⁹⁰

The stillness and stability of trees, which for Biamonti represent an idealized past that characters cling to, is here a negative image that represents limitation, the *lack* of free movement. For the liberation of movement is the core theme of this film. When one of the European guides questions Mona about her wish to live in Sweden, she replies that she is doing it for her children, so that they can go wherever they want instead of being confined to one place: so that they can enjoy the freedom of movement.⁹¹ As the crew and refugees travel the final leg, crossing the sea by plane to Copenhagen, the camera alternates between panoramas of the ocean and sky and shots of a plane.⁹² In this scene Tasnim Fared—who earlier wrote “the sky is for everybody / no borders” on a wall at Case Gina—sings a melancholy song, the lyrics about a flying bird. As “contrabbandieri umanitari,” (“humanitarian smugglers”) Del Grande and Al-Nassiry’s purpose is to prove that the only way to stop the slaughters in the Mediterranean Sea is to offer legal alternatives of mobility to people escaping from war.⁹³ In the film, the refugees and the camera

⁸⁹ Said ironically by Del Grande himself, referring to the subterfuge: “Noi però non siamo contrabbandieri, stiamo facendo un matrimonio! O no?” (ibid., 44:38).

⁹⁰ Ibid., 22:48.

⁹¹ Ibid., 1:16:01.

⁹² Ibid., 1:15:12.

⁹³ “Se noi stessi, da cittadini europei, ci siamo trasformati per una settimana in contrabbandieri umanitari, è proprio per dire che l’unico modo per fermare le stragi in mare è dare un’alternativa legale di mobilità a quelle centoduecentomila persone l’anno” (“If we ourselves, as European citizens, have become humanitarian smugglers, it is precisely to say that the only way to stop the slaughters at sea is to offer a legal alternative of mobility to those one- or two hundred thousand people who need it every year) (Del Grande, Augugliaro, and Al-Nassiry, *Io sto con la sposa* DVD booklet, 12).

crew itself are only able to cross the Death Pass with the help of locals who know the terrain. The film gives special recognition to three individuals: Daniel Delministro, Florence Beaumel, and Enzo Barnabà.⁹⁴ Barnabà, as it happens, is also an important figure in Krafft's book, *Passeur*.⁹⁵



Fig. 4. Case Gina seen from the outside. Photo: Federica Di Blasio, July 2017.

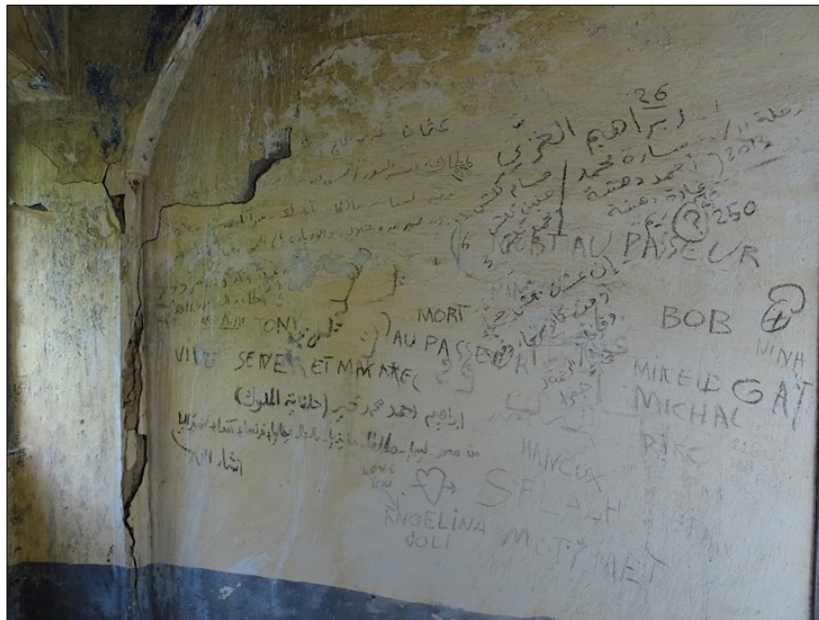


Fig. 5. Graffiti in Case Gina. Photo: Federica Di Blasio, July 2017.

⁹⁴ See Delministro, “Appuntamento al caffè ‘I sognatori,’” *Doppiozero*, July 2, 2014, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/io-sto-con-la-sposa/appuntamento-al-caffe-i-sognatori>.

⁹⁵ Barnabà writes about this experience in *Il passo della morte*. Barnabà is also the co-author with Serge Latouche of *Sortilegi: racconti africani* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), a collection of short stories, and *Aigues-Mortes: il massacro degli italiani* (Modena: Infinito edizioni, 2015).

Like Del Grande, Krafft is a European citizen and journalist who gets involved in the migrants' plight and decides to act in response to the injustice of European laws by becoming a passeur himself. In his reportage, he integrates his notes on the dismantlement of refugee camps in Paris and Ventimiglia with his encounters with Barnabà and Hubert Jourdan. Barnabà and Jourdan are Krafft's contacts and hosts on the two sides of the border. Beyond this, they are moral exemplars against whom Krafft measures himself and takes inspiration for his own work: a writer and historian, Barnabà is an old militant of the Communist Party and a migrant from Sicily, whereas Jourdan is a spiritualist-philanthropist and a connoisseur of Middle-Eastern and Eastern cultures.

As in *Io sto con la sposa*, Krafft advocates a universal right to mobility and calls on France to respect the international laws that it agreed to along with other European countries.⁹⁶ France's failure to do this is, in Krafft's view, an affront to French ideals, leading him to a self-examination as a human being and French citizen: "La France est un mensonge. Moi, je le sais. J'étais pourtant presque chauvin au départ de notre course" ("France is a lie. Me? I know that. Yet I was basically a chauvinist at the beginning of the race").⁹⁷ This damaged image of French and European "honor"⁹⁸ pushes Krafft to stop simply being an observer of injustice, to take action. Krafft's relationship with Barnabà is particularly relevant in this regard, because while he dismisses some of Barnabà's attitudes as paternalistic, he himself is in search of a paternal figure in Barnabà:

Je me sens comme un enfant de retour de l'école avec une mauvaise note à annoncer. J'ai été lâche. Pendant le trajet de la gare à chez lui, j'ai fomenté non seulement le projet de rattraper une faute, mais aussi de marquer une rupture avec ma conduite passée: je n'ai toujours été qu'un observateur, engagé parfois, et je suis toujours parvenu à refréner mes colères face aux injustices dont j'ai été le témoin. Ce soir, il n'est pas question de colère. Il s'agit plutôt d'un déshonneur, d'une honte. Honte de mon pays qui agit contrairement aux valeurs que ses écoles m'ont inculquées. Il me semble que désobéir est, dans ce cas de figure, la plus juste des façons d'agir.⁹⁹

("I feel like a little boy coming back from school with a bad grade to report. I was a coward. On my way from the train station to his place, not only was I figuring out how to fix the damage, but also how to break away from my past behavior: I have always been no more than an observer, sometimes engaged, and I have always managed to rein in my anger in the face of injustice. Tonight, it's not a question of anger. It's rather about dishonor and shame. Shame for my country that acts against the values that their schools have imprinted on me. It seems to me that disobedience is, in this case, the best plan of action.")

⁹⁶ "Je lui explique que la situation ici est aussi injuste qu'absurde: tout le monde non seulement mérite, mais a le droit, de passer. C'est inscrit dans les lois françaises et les traités que la France a ratifiés" ("I explain to him that the situation here is as unfair as it is absurd. Not only does everyone deserve to pass, but they also have the right to do it. It's established by the French law and the international laws that France has ratified") (Raphaël Krafft, *Passeur* [Paris: Buchet / Chastel, 2017], 114).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

Barnabà comes to play this parental role for Krafft when the latter feels dishonored and ashamed at the condition of refugee families who are prevented from entering France. Barnabà's guidance is important in triggering Krafft's emotional involvement: he is moved in particular by a Kurdish-Iraqi father of a one-year-old girl and a two-year-old girl, the three of them sleeping on the street after being refused entry into France. Empathizing with the Kurdish man's protective attitude, Krafft decides to plan the crossing through the Alps and take them to France. The Kurdish family will eventually reach Paris by their own means, but Krafft does not give up his plan and instead crosses the border with two Sudanese young men named "Satellite" and Adeel. Krafft's gesture is as symbolic as the landscape he chooses for the crossing: Col Fenestre, where a memorial plaque recalls the flight of Jewish refugees during World War II, many of them fleeing Saint-Martin-Vésubie to escape the German occupation of 1943:

Par ce col, en septembre 1943,
Des centaines de juifs de toute l'Europe
Cherchèrent souvent en vain
À se sauver de la persécution antisémite.
Toi qui passes libre
Souviens-toi que cela est arrivé
Chaque fois que tu tolères que tout autre
Ne jouisse pas de tes mêmes droits.¹⁰⁰

("Through this passage, in September 1943, / hundreds of Jews from all Europe / tried—often in vain—to escape from anti-Semitic persecution. / You, who walk freely, / remember that this happened, / when you tolerate that other people / are deprived of the rights that you enjoy.")

Like the graffiti in Case Gina, the memorial plaque on Col Fenestre is important in drawing connections with past cases of immigration. Krafft recalls previous refugee groups to suggest how the need to migrate is a central facet of human history: migrations involving different peoples have been occurring for many different reasons over the centuries.¹⁰¹ In both *Io sto con la sposa* and *Passeur*, the narrative ends with an update of the migrants' status and their asylum requests. While they could not intervene in these legal processes, the authors of both works have delivered powerful political statements toward the defense of migrants' rights, where the passeur stands as a figure of humanitarian engagement and political activism. These narratives do not present exceptional individuals—like Castiglioni—but rather highlight the exceptionality of gestures of fellowship between humans, connecting these gestures to a larger history of human solidarity.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 155.

¹⁰¹ "Dans cette dernière partie de la marche, nous foulons des dalles millénaires. Elles sont polies, patinées. Par les marcheurs de Saint-Jacques et du Caïre de la Madone de Fenestre, les porteurs de sel de Hyères et de Camargue, les contrebandiers, les antifascistes italiens venus trouver refuge en France, les juifs d'Europe centrale et de l'est fuyant les pogroms, juifs autrichiens, l'Anschluss, juifs étrangers d'Italie fuyant les lois raciales, juifs de Saint-Martin-Vésubie et tant d'autres persécutés. Nous ne sommes que de passage" ("In this last leg of the trip, we march on stones thousands of years old. They are smooth, polished. By those walking the Saint-Jacques trail and Le Caïre from Madone de Fenestre, by the salt carriers of Hyères and Camargue, the smugglers, the Italian antifascists who came to France to find shelter, the Jews of Central Europe and the East escaping from the pogroms, the Austrian Jews, the Anschluss, the foreign Jews of Italy escaping from the racial laws, the Jews of Saint-Martin-Vésubie and many other persecuted people. We are only passing through") (ibid., 153-54).

Advocating for a collective participation in the support of refugees, Del Grande and Krafft's narratives overcome the impasse of Biamonti's passeur, who is aware of the political and social decadence around him but incapable of radical action. These contemporary narratives thus represent a new stage in the management of migrations in Europe, where, because of the media, average citizens have become aware of the hardships and tragedies of refugees that twenty years earlier only a few people, such as Biamonti, were able to represent.

Conclusions

I began this article with the hypothesis that in narratives of illegal migration, the passeurs' reliability toward migrants is their ultimate moral test, rather than their status as criminals. Indeed, the texts I have looked at show a much more nuanced and complex picture of smugglers than we find in populist political discourses, where no distinction is made between NGOs, "humanitarian smugglers," and human traffickers.

The narratives of Ferrari, Biamonti, Del Grande, and Krafft present a range of representations of passeurs, from uplifting and idealized to problematic: from custodians of the borderland's culture and landscape to professionals who offer a service to paying clients, from fraudulent abusers to modern activists involved in a larger cause. In these narratives one does not find a simple apology for illegal practices, but rather an insistence on the ethical binaries that keep recurring in moments of migrant crisis: the anti-Fascists and Fascists in Ferrari; the lineal passeurs of the mountains and the unreliable passeurs from the sea in Biamonti; the actual "contrabbandieri" and the "contrabbandieri umanitari" in Del Grande; European honor and European dishonor in Krafft. Giving depth to these different *personae*, and to the importance of passeurs' presence in the borderlands over different historical eras, these texts pay particular attention to the ways in which smugglers perform or fail to perform their services, satisfy or betray migrants' hopes and expectations. Not only do these texts show how migrant smuggling has long been a tradition in internal borderlands of Europe, particularly during World War Two, they also point to the need for contemporary European authors to reconnect with both the professional and anti-Fascist tradition of passeurs, as they witness the unfolding of the current migrant crisis.