

Flotsam: Bodies, Trash, and Mediterranean Migrations

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A computer game called *Flotsam* (2019) invites gamers to build urban structures out of the debris that floats in a restricted marine area unconnected to any existing body of water. The name of the town, Krakenton, brings the place into existence, even though it comprises only a ramshackle structure.¹ The starting point for construction is a little lighthouse that works as the nexus for add-on constructions: walkways, sheds, drying racks for wet wood and “nibble fish” (a name used in the game). The challenge is to build frantically while keeping up with distilling water. All of this must be accomplished by three people who, however, are not the focus of the game. They function as mere tools who in turn use other tools in order to build and build and build. The builders’ role is underlined by the fact that they have very few defining physical features as more attention is given to the details of the construction and the debris islands nearby.

As I am not a gamer, I relied on the game’s introduction by KatherineofSky, who named the game iteration I analyzed. She plays the game while offering a voiceover that explains how to achieve specific building goals with the constant encouragement to “get stuff,” namely to accumulate, store and build in order to expand. This emphasis on building over the liquid identity of that gaming space downplays the natural location over which the urban structure needs to be built. The emphasis is on the drifting material: plastic, wood, metal and its function in engendering Krakenton (as KatherineofSky called the town *in fieri*).² While a whale swims around the progressive expansion of the town, the only noise is the constant hammering that accompanies the feverish movement of the three people with whom the game starts. KatherineofSky laments the fact that there are only three individuals and that there is a need for more “new drifters” (which could refer to people or objects) in order to continue building.

Drifting garbage and drifting people are differentiated in this game only by the fact that the avatars move around or swim in order to build, rescue flotsam, and eventually locate other towns so that new drifters can collaborate with the initial meager three builders and build at a faster pace. The goal is to create a new world and assemble garbage into controlled structures so that refuse is not eliminated, but rather is the base upon which a whole urban context is grounded. It is liquid ground, however, and the constructions embody impermanence as it is built by drifters on drifting material. This is a game about ephemeral colonialism (in which appropriating a space can be restarted and reiterated, but also erased) that focuses on occupying a liquid border area. Ephemeral colonialism establishes itself and creates models that disappear and/or modify in their individual iterations, but their example persists and allows for a reformulation of the same. The game, with its possibilities of re-doing and starting again from scratch, establishes a prototype that allows for repetitions that build on experience. It teaches how to perfect the colonial game,

¹ Initially *Flotsam* was a survival simulation game about people stranded in a flooded world. Survival was grounded in the ability to use all the garbage found. The game offers a post-apocalyptic scenario that requires rebuilding a hospitable environment from the detritus left from the collapse of a previous world. The game can be found at <https://youtu.be/yj4Mq8rNn7A>.

² Krakenton is the name that KatherineofSky chooses from a list that the game itself offers. Please see: <https://youtu.be/CvUMiV6e6VI>.

which is a reiterated practice that functions according to well-established parameters whose longevity survives harsh criticism. At the same time, it attempts, with some success, to keep a distance from any cultural association that would directly connect it to what is happening in the waterways of the world.

Starting from a proximity between flotsam as waste and drifters as people opens up a necessary discussion to understanding the Mediterranean world today. The outrage felt by the world at the news of the first deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean has decreased as more and more people have died and the tragedy has become normalized. When toddlers started dying, people reacted strongly to the horror and then normalized the event. Mainly white conservative Europe is now (and I am writing in April 2020) complicit in abandoning refugees and migrants to a terrible fate in order to keep them out of Europe. Shootings against the refugees at the Southern Greek border are just one of the atrocities Europeans are willing to live with in order to keep needy others outside Europe's borders.³ The bodies of the migrants carry the negative connotations assigned to them by discourses that present the other as competition, as carrier of disease, *abject* and therefore expendable. The most reactionary stances could consider the dead bodies of migrants as neutralized threats because migrants and refugees embody a negation of borders and established orders that people in movement undermine (Melgosa 2016). Reducing them to bodies as victims in public discourses enables the performance of a temporary grief that cannot hide the murderous logic of a developed world that steadfastly refuses to create humanitarian corridors.⁴ The Mediterranean has become the crucial point where a collective plays with the inhumane in order to fight the sea's liquidity, its transformative potential, and its role in allowing the relocation of lives. Let us remember that more than twenty thousand people have died crossing that sea since 2014 (Puglia 2020).

From being, as Serenella Iovino calls it, "an *impure* crossroads for happenstances," the Mediterranean has become the location where—not coincidentally—flotsam is made up of inanimate objects and human bodies (Iovino 2017, 331). Specters of forced resident alterity, Iovino points out, haunt our daily news, but do not seem to haunt our daily lives as we continue to live the Mediterranean as a body of water where most of us, at some point or another, spend or could spend our leisure time. We lament the presence of waste that impedes our enjoyment, but we do not protest as much as we could the waste of lives, the wasted lives that are counted but do not, in the end, count.

Following Dominick LaCapra and his work in *Understanding Others* (2018), I am particularly interested in the constructions of concepts of otherness as a category vis-à-vis contemporary transformations and, in particular, conservative regressions that privilege white supremacy and rehabilitate even fascism. In the context of this essay, I see that otherness is a category that includes the Mediterranean as the receptacle for the wasted bodies of others and consequently becomes other itself. In southern Europe, the battle to keep the others at bay is therefore waged within the liquid border that in turn becomes a stage on which otherness is performed and "those who belong" (usually white and therefore privileged) constitute an inhumane body of spectators.

³ A considerable number of articles, both scholarly and journalistic, has been published on this concept. Among the books written for a wider readership, I would like to draw attention to Carr 2016.

⁴ Many NGOs and scholars have called for the institution of humanitarian corridors in order to privilege the preservation of life, for instance: <https://www.ecre.org/humanitarian-corridors-for-vulnerable-refugees-to-italy-opening/>; <https://www.mediterraneanhope.com/2019/06/28/european-humanitarian-corridors-from-libya-interest-from-conte/>; <http://plataformavoluntariado.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/the-third-way.pdf>.

It appears that Europe decided to leave the liquid to waste (dead bodies) and to privilege the (solid) ground, but the ground is quaking because it cannot sustain itself without a form of “impure reciprocity,” as Iovino calls it, “of land and sea, of natives and newcomers” (Iovino 2017, 331). This impure reciprocity is constitutive, a *conditio sine qua non*, of the Mediterranean world. The sea has become a threshold for migrants and refugees as well as the testing ground for contemporary ethics; Iovino suggests that a new moral code should be filtered through the experiences of those she terms “castaways” in her appeal for more “humane environmental ethics” (LaCapra 2018, 337). Hers is a call for a reciprocity that includes solidarity with people in need who are crossing the sea. As part and parcel of her ethics of recovery for the human flotsam forced into the Mediterranean, Iovino also posits a recuperative approach for one of the most polluted basins of water in the world.

In this sense, the bodies lost at sea and the body of water that is the Mediterranean are the starting points for a new way of thinking through the social, the historical, the political and their construction of a natural world in a very specific context. While marine life gets entangled in plastic and abandoned fishing nets, we can imagine the Mediterranean as the location of alternative human entanglements. Following Kathryn Yusoff’s work, the ethico-political register of human life must convey the necessary urgency to move away from privileging only the needs of humans on mainland Europe and start a new focus instead. At its center, one must privilege the vulnerable, whether that means humans in movement or the collective life of a body of water like the Mediterranean. Interconnectedness is already undeniable; requiring that interconnectedness be carefully reconstructed along the lines of care can protect and recuperate the vulnerable in all their forms. This can be accomplished only if the definition of care that has been developed by marginal voices is respected and implemented. It is by paying attention to the voices of the most vulnerable that change can be accomplished. It is necessary to move beyond institutional politics of recognition.

My discussion on care starts from Achille Mbembe’s observations that our society is a “society of enmity” that “count[s] whatever is not oneself for nothing” and that bodies are locations of power struggles established by aggressive politics (Mbembe 2019, 8). It is a conservative regression, as LaCapra identified, that wants to interrupt the constant—at least that which is felt as constant—interpellation to take the other’s needs into consideration. The other is felt as a “burden,” a sort of dead weight, that is seen as “overwhelming” (ibid., 12). Mbembe imagines an individual voicing the question: “Would it not be better for my life to stop being linked to its presence, as much as its [presence is] to mine?” (ibid., 12). The answer to this question leads to the reinsertion of a pattern of colonial relations that dominate the way in which we relate to the world—a tangible, conservative regression. Mbembe goes back to Frantz Fanon’s articulation of the concept of care because the psychiatrist and political philosopher “regarded the gesture of care as a practice of resymbolization, the stake of which is the possibility of reciprocity and mutuality” (ibid., 20). That is, care connects to a process or re-signification of the world around us and turns humans into moral and ethical agents that reject necropolitics grounded in violence, separations, death and above all, orchestrated separations from the other(s)—the traditional rhetoric of “us” and “them.”

The separation between victims and perpetrators could become less clear-cut in my descriptions, however. It is necessary to step away from facile dichotomies that are unhelpful in imagining an alternative to the status quo. Changes in an ethico-political order that involves otherness and places it at the center of a discussion must be grounded in the act of privileging care as the center of decaying western democracies. This cannot be an exclusively humanist care,

nor can it be directed only toward traditional national polities. In a radical sense, care must be an all-encompassing concept exercised in everyday life. It must include the animate and the inanimate in recuperative practices, be grounded in careful attention paid to others, and attempt to repair the harm done by the abuses that have been the norm. Recuperative practices start from a politics of recognition of the consequences of processes of slow violence that have become structural and have been taking place for a long time (Davies 2019, 1-19). Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence, that is gradual damage "whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries" (Nixon 2013, 9), reframes the necessity of care for the human and the inhuman as an act of taking responsibility for the damage caused and of working assiduously to counter it. In doing so, we need to recognize that most of that damage has been caused by a small percentage of the world population, even if such an uncomfortable truth leads us back to uncomfortable dichotomies.

At the center of recuperative politics, care materializes as the necessity of a commitment to understanding the other and the process by which an entity becomes other. I do think that we have become too comfortable with the normalization of the sacrificial other. By this I mean if an entity is considered to be other, then we expect and accept that that entity will suffer, and that said entity could or will be eliminated. Our affective involvement in outrage has become too sterile, transient and inconsequential. It will remain so if not applied to actually rethinking democracy as a system of care that is practiced in the daily exercise of change in politics. Therefore, affective politics need to play a major role in rethinking the future as it relates to political care, especially regarding what is economically unrewarding, at least in the short run: refugees as a liability, the environment moving outside the status of the exploited, freedom not based on the oppression of others whether they are human or not.

The ethics of care emerge from extensive work in feminist philosophy that aimed at revising models of social relations and focusing on equality and caring in order to develop a more peaceful pattern of civic kinship. In particular, Joan Tronto focuses on the theorization of shared power in undermining what she calls "privileged irresponsibility," which has allowed the wealthiest to delegate the duties of care (Zembylas, Bozalek and Shefer, 2014). Often, privileged women have delegated care to underprivileged and underpaid female others (the often-migrant *badanti* in Italy) who care but are not cared for. Nel Noddings has discussed the theoretical meaning of two phrasal verbs that acquire thought-provoking meaning for this discussion. One example is "caring for" someone or something, and another is "caring about," which involves the nurturing of concepts and purpose in the pursuit of a particular objective (Noddings 1986). Within the Italian context, feminist thinkers such as Adriana Cavarero, Lea Melandri and Luisa Muraro have theorized care in discussions that focus on the role of narratives to care for the self and for others' experiences; on love as a path to reimagining care beyond traditional patterns of behavior; and on the need to enact maternal care beyond the familial sphere as a model for a new symbolic order. Harmonizing care with a commitment to caring about injustice positions any practitioner and theorist of care at the center of a rethinking of political and ethical stances that sustain democracy and the people and environments that participate in it.⁵

Applying these observations to the transformation of the context that is the Mediterranean area involves looking at it as a potentially recuperative space, a "formation" whose malleable

⁵ In particular, Adriana Cavarero's work on horrorism brings care to the fore. For her, the terms that have been used to describe violence have never originated with the victims, that is, those who are vulnerable and defenseless. A new recuperative vocabulary is therefore necessary to define the necropolitics of today. See Cavarero 2011.

future can be shaped by ethics grounded in a type of care that rejects any reduction of animate and inanimate beings to mere flotsam. Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff's work on geosocial formations and the Anthropocene calls to mind Gilles Deleuze's observations on new formations that do not replicate old structures of oppression and exploitation. "When a new formation appears," Deleuze declares, "it never comes all at once, in a single phrase or act of creation, but emerges like a series of 'building blocks,' with gaps, traces and reactivations of former elements that survive under the new rules" (Clark and Yusoff 2017, 10). Clark and Yusoff embrace this idea of "organizational logic" through which "the pre-existent gives rise to the new" and supplies us with a logic according to which the future of the Mediterranean can be re-organized (ibid., 10). They suggest that "theorizing a dynamic planet [. . .] tends to be as much a matter of working with an inheritance as it is of tangling with the novel and the emergent" (ibid., 11).

Clark and Yusoff's attention to geosocial formations engenders new politics and the construction of social worlds that call for more than just human entanglements (ibid., 15). New entanglements should place an emphasis on the theory and practice of care. Bruno Latour has eloquently discussed the role of the collective in the comprehension and restructuring of systems and their inherent links. It is particularly useful in this discussion on migration and the Mediterranean to utilize his observations on being deprived of ground. On the one hand, we have migrants who are "kept out," beyond borders that deprive them of new lands where they can exercise their human rights to a different life. On the other, people have developed arbitrary rights to the ownership of land that have engendered rhetorical and practical strategies to defend it from what are perceived to be invading hordes. "Migrations, explosions of inequalities," writes Latour, "and New Climatic Regime: *these are one and the same threat*" (Latour 2018, 9, italics in the original). He underscores that while borders are being reinforced, "the New Climatic Regime has been sweeping across all our borders for a long time" (ibid., 10). The question is how to reassure those who are attempting to gain new ground, land somewhere else, and those who purport to defend the presumed ownership of that ground. While hanging on for dear life to a patch of land, the latter group, the locals, also proclaim their right to a global dimension by taking for granted their right to move in the name of a privileged cosmopolitanism and by reinscribing their bodies in that global dimension. Such a group also demands the right over local and global resources, trying to exclude others from accessing them. Whether we are talking about the natural environment or the political bodies within which we live, Latour argues, "there are not organisms on one side and the environment on the other, but a coproduction by both. *Agencies* are redistributed" (ibid., 77). Consequently, actions coming from all sides impact us globally as we are all agents that cannot be excluded from influencing the political and environmental contexts connected with human and inhuman life.

Latour observes that while the local fulfills the function of reassuring (and therefore enables such strong possessiveness), we must move beyond the contradictions that modernization has created and find a way to reconcile "*attaching oneself* to the soil on the one hand, [and] *becoming attached to the world* on the other" (ibid., 92, italics in the original). This act of globalizing the local relies on the truth that "the ground, the soil [. . .] cannot be appropriated. One belongs to it; it belongs to no one" (ibid., 92). In order to privilege that truth, Latour invites us to "*generate alternative descriptions*" of the dwellings one inhabits (ibid., 94). It is not just "our" survival that should be the focus of such descriptions, but also those "dwelling place[s]" on which "other terrestrials also depend" (ibid., 95). Moving away from proprietary affective attachment to the soil as home for only a select few, a new description of the soil on which we

dwelling requires an alternative affective charge grounded in care that does not change or is contained by borders.

Geosocial futures are inflected by people's ability to revise their descriptions of their daily relationships with the local and the global, and such descriptions must take into consideration the catastrophic consequences of hoarding the soil, creating a new genocide of the others who are too often simplistically defined as invading outsiders. That is what is happening today in the Mediterranean. Geosocial futures also depend on the recognition of what Yusoff calls the "exposure of the human to the catastrophic forces [. . .] at play in the universe" (Clark and Yusoff 2017, 13-14). She also adds that the West has been too complacent, focusing on "agency and intentions" as belonging "only to the? human domain" (ibid., 14).

If we posit, as Mbembe suggests, that "a 'human's specificity' is not to belong to any particular place, since this human (which is a compound of other living [and inanimate] beings and other species, belongs to all places together)," then we can think of the human as a formation whose main role is to mediate in the world (Mbembe 2019, 134). A notion of humans as formations whose main role is to be intermediaries or facilitators in the ecosphere requires humans to familiarize themselves with what Mbembe calls the "ethics of the passerby" (ibid., 138). The passerby is a formation because it exists in a "place" engendered through the "experience of encountering others" (ibid., 138). Such an individual rejects the simplistic bond with one location, as they are able to pass "from one place to another [which] also means weaving with each one of them a twofold relation of solidarity and detachment" (ibid., 141). The ethics of the passerby involve a commitment to any temporary dwelling and dweller as well as the renunciation of claims of ownership over any territorial specificity. The passerby is ethically bound to the idea of passing, of temporariness, even in the act of inhabiting one place for a long time, even a lifetime. Being a passerby in place does not preclude the possibility of privileging being "present" and at the same time "distant," "of solidarity and detachment, but never indifference" (ibid., 145). This constitutes for Mbembe "the ethics of the passerby" practiced on the animate and the inanimate, the human and the inhuman (ibid., 145). The ethical passerby recognizes that the human is not the only center of human worlds and has the responsibility to "tread lightly upon the earth" (Bennett 2004, 365-66).⁶

Even if we insisted on claiming the centrality of the human, we would have to come to terms with embodiments of otherness that flow "around and through humans" (ibid., 348). In her discussion of the concept of "thing-power," Jane Bennett explores materiality and materialism in order to move away from an emphasis on human agency. She focuses on entities that are not humans but are still actants (a term she borrows from Bruno Latour) and able to express a certain "*material recalcitrance*," meaning that they do not "yield readily to human understanding or control" (ibid., 348; Latour 2004, 237). Things therefore mean more than what human interpretation can assign to them, and according to Bennett, "there is an existence peculiar to a thing, that is irreducible to the thing's imbrication with human subjectivity" (Bennett 2004, 248). In the game *Flotsam*, flotsam itself exists in order to serve the avatars' agency in building and transforming what is around them according to an overly codified plan that moves in one direction: create a town, expand, invade and colonize. There is a fundamental hierarchical structure in the game that presupposes that the avatars' plans would give meaning to the landscape they end up dominating over, the "assemblages" that flotsam could create. It would be

⁶ The passerby also highlights Etienne Balibar's (2012) problematic relationship between duties and rights, liberty and equality, that is, democracy and citizenship. Citizenship even in democracy takes borders for granted and supports rigid separations.

an assemblage that does not immediately yield to human use because of a certain, to quote Bennett again, “*material recalcitrance*.” The ghost of the whale that appears and disappears in the game bears witness to the impossibility of total objectification that deprives these objects of their power. It embodies the apparent uselessness of things that instead, according to Bennett, have power, “command attention,” and “exudes a kind of dignity” (ibid., 350). For Bennett, the affective turn that appeared in philosophy and the social sciences inspired her to explore “an ‘affect’ not specific to human bodies” and that belongs to matter which is “vibrant” (Bennett 2010, xii). Following Spinoza, Bennett reminds us that “affect . . . refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness” (ibid., xii). Thing-power becomes detectable in the way objects are part of assemblages that express something beyond the reduction to being mere trash, which comes as the result of a “sheer volume of products, and the necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, [which] devalues the thing,” and deprives it of dignity (Bennett 2004, 350). What we are looking for is a thing and an assemblage, that is, how and in what way a thing intermingles with others, its location in relation to the “others” (ibid., 351).

Bennett’s assemblages that contain thing-power, that is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,” and Yusoff’s formations that do not replicate old structures of oppression and exploitation seem to me the key to opening up new interpretations and creating a new understanding and meaning of the body of water that is the Mediterranean as well as the bodies that float within it, that is, human flotsam (Bennett 2010, 6). We need to move beyond a hierarchy that establishes the bodies of migrants and refugees as nothing more than the result of a normalized phenomenon; they are things, objects and therefore powerless nothings, ultimately invisible and drowned in the liquidity of a matter that does not matter. If nothing can be reduced to powerless entities and thing-power animates such entities, what we create is a permeability between the animate and the inanimate. In relations between “bodies” of “things,” there are no “passive objects” and “active subjects,” as they forge alliances. The floating bodies are not just dead: they are part of assemblages that are able to mean, to effect and to affect. Bennett pushes the discussion on thing-power toward recognizing that it has “a kind of agency,” as all “things are spun together in a dense web” in which actants “do something, that is produce effect” (Bennett 2004, 354-55).

“Nonhuman vitality” demands, therefore, to “appear on the ethical radar screen” even as bodies as flotsam claim recognition of their vitality and the vitality of the things with which they coexist. They resist with recalcitrance being diminished and made nonexistent, that is, a negation of suffering in what and who is considered other (ibid., 361). Respect for human others and inanimate others, that is care for them, belongs to an ethics of kinship that does not reduce but rather recognizes human complexity as part of the intricate assemblage of lives connected to all forms of otherness, animate and inanimate. Otherwise, “the danger of reducing subjects to ‘mere objects’ is . . . materialism in which things are always already on their way to becoming trash” or unknowable “victims” (ibid., 362).

One particular assemblage constituted by a body and a thing that appears to be a clear example of thing-power is connected to the body of the Mediterranean. On January 17, 2019, the daily *Corriere della sera* published an article about the unknown body of a fourteen-year-old from Mali who had drowned during an attempt to cross the Mediterranean from Libya four years prior (Tebano 2019). His body spent one year in the sea and was then moved into a container, a light sack that a medical examiner, Cristina Cattaneo, opened in order to attempt to give an identity to the bones of this particular individual. One thousand people died in the shipwreck that took the life of this boy, and 528 of them were identified by the doctor. Objects speak when

bodies are deprived of that ability. They demand our care. The doctor had found “things” sewn into the lining of clothes: money that had lost its value as currency, but could indicate the point of origin of the migrant; personal documents that were often illegible; a little sack containing some soil from the place a person had left behind; a library card; a blood donor card; and in the case of the fourteen year-old boy, a school report card—a *bulletin scolaire* as the boy was from Mali. His good grades were still legible. This assemblage of objects affected the humanity of those inanimate bodies and gave them an echo in the press and in people’s imagination. The well-known cartoonist Makkox depicted the boy, whose name we do not know, as sitting at the bottom of the sea, holding his report card. A shark and an octopus play the role of witnesses to his good grades: “Wow, all As,” says the shark, “A rare pearl [of a boy],” adds the octopus.⁷ Objects here are actants; they do something as they tell a story that they actively engender. They are ripples in a pond able to create effects that are a vortex of signification, which can erase the separation between the human body and the things. They offer interpretative keys to what otherwise is lost, erased and also demand that we question the separation between what is human and what is non-human.

David Wiesner’s picture book *Flotsam* (2006) tells the story of a nameless boy (the pictures are unaccompanied by any text) who is swept up by a wave while playing on the beach. The wave then uprushes him back onto the sand along with a shell-encrusted, old-fashioned underwater camera that still contains a roll of film. Once developed, the film shows that the camera has been taking pictures on its journey under and across the ocean. The camera uncovers a fantastic submerged world or unexpected aggregation and acts as both witness and participant. The film also contains pictures of the other young people who have previously found the camera and snapped pictures of themselves. The result is a transnational collection of portraits that negate the existence of borders, or any kind of separation between the world on land, the underwater world and the imaginary world that the narrator has created. The transparency of the camera lens is the filter through which worlds are not separated but rather aggregated, and they all demand attention and care. The object is not a barrier, but a conduit that is an actant, a camera’s thing-power. As it is a book for children, Wiesner’s *Flotsam* does not shy away from a happy ending, and shows the boy handing back the camera to the ocean waves in order to allow it to continue transgressing the limitations established by human agency.

Nonhuman vitality emerges from a particular event that took place in August 1991 in the Mediterranean. It places a thing and its power at the center of a story that Daniele Vicari narrated in his documentary *La nave dolce* (The Sweet Ship, 2012). Vicari’s work gives back agency to the almost twenty thousand Albanians who boarded a ship, bound for Italy, in Durrës in order to escape their collapsing country. Interviews with protagonists of the escape dominate the narrative and reveal the poignant connection between a specific aggregate made of human bodies and the body of the ship, the *Vlora*, that carried such an enormous human cargo. Built as a cargo ship in 1960 in Ancona, bought in 1961 by a Chinese-Albanian company, the *Vlora* sailed under the Albanian flag. In August 1991, the rusty *Vlora* was in the port of Durrës awaiting repairs to its non-functioning main engines. It had come back from Cuba with a load of sugar, hence the title of Vicari’s documentary. On the 7th of that month, people took over the vessel, filling it to capacity, covering the body of the ship with thousands of human bodies so that only its rusty sides were visible. The body of the ship became united with the body of the people: its wounded condition paralleled the condition of the humans who were escaping harsh circumstances in Albania. The humans and the “thing” shared precariousness, a journey toward an unknown port.

⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2399654419841063>

Relying on auxiliary motors, without radar, the ship lost its cooling tubes due to the excess weight of people who, like the ship, had little water and “fuel” to sustain them. The port of Brindisi, Apulia, rejected the vessel and its cargo, which eventually ended up in Bari. Here the ship started shedding: one could say unfolding itself and its cargo as passengers began to jump from the ship into the water to reach the port. In the footage of their landing, the human bodies resembled pieces of the ship that dropped into the water; in the process, because of the height of the jump, they lost their clothes. They remained naked entities in the water and became connections between the ship and the Mediterranean Sea that had sustained their voyage. This divestment? engendered an assemblage connecting the human and the non-human, eloquently revealing not the individual body as an independent agent, but the aggregation of many “things” acting together and expressing the dramatic moment. The dock that the refugees reached was caked in coal dust as a ship had recently unloaded its cargo and cleaning had not yet taken place. Things as actants create effects. In this case the coal dust transformed human bodies into unrecognizable hellish objects in movement: objects from the sea and the land destined to experience additional degradation in the location where they would be transported. The central Italian government decided to move the new arrivals to the local soccer stadium. As objects, stadiums, employed during times of dictatorship in Latin American countries, evoke the phantoms of repression and murder. Bari’s stadium became a kind of hell in which the Albanian refugees were locked with little food and water under the August sun. Packed back onto ships, ferries, and military and civilian airplanes, the “bodies” were repatriated, about sixteen thousand of them. In expulsions, the human has no agency but “it” remains an actant effecting and affecting in dramatic ways.

“Humans,” writes Bennett, “are always in competition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections or an *ecology*” (Bennett 2004, 365, italics in the original). Human agency has devoted too much attention to the construction of borders that interfere with that ecology, thus preventing the creation of new formations and aggregates that can have a recuperative valence. In addition, it has created the belief that it can control and domesticate thing-power. Recently, we have dramatically learned that this is not so. The limitation of human agency, with its questionable ethico-political inflection in the world, has become especially visible during the COVID-19 crisis that has highlighted humans’ inability to confront the catastrophes that nature has in store for us. As stated in the introduction to the volume *The Oneness Hypothesis*, stepping outside the boundaries of our focused selves “[provides] ways to imagine and achieve, a more expansive conception of the self—a self that is seen as intimately connected with other people, creatures, and things in ways that conduce to their greater happiness, advantage, and well-being” (Ivanhoe et al. 2018, 1-2). At this juncture, thinking about what it means to be human has to be negotiated through the intrinsic connections with every other world agent, whether animate or inanimate. Trying to understand the other through the lens of care necessitates placing an emphasis on collective life in the specificity of the local and the global. Our focus and care must be placed on understanding and nurturing interconnectedness at those thresholds where the human meets the inhuman and, often, the inhumane.

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