MIGRATION AND THE MEDITERRANEAN MATRIX

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This article considers the intersection of modern art practices and migration in the contemporary Mediterranean, interrogating understandings of citizenship and cultural belonging in a modernity that is clearly neither univocal nor homogeneous. A series of art works and curatorial practices, often by women, are examined in the light of modern migrations across today’s Mediterranean. These enable the proposal of a critical cut that permits a disassociation from consensual understandings of both modern art and Africa and the implacable historical force of migration that here conjoins the two.

A MIGRATING MODERNITY

In the following pages we intend to consider certain European–African connections, in particular those in modern Italy sustained through art practices that we might conveniently call postcolonial. Why postcolonial? The term is not intended here to merely indicate a chronological stage. Rather, it poses the altogether more unstable configuration of history and knowledge that emerges from an ongoing critical evaluation of the modern world that engendered colonialism on a planetary scale. In other words, the term is deployed here to seek out the other side of modernity, touching those languages, cultures, and lives that, although essential to its formation, have been structurally excluded and denied the authority to tell their tale. This is to consider those modernities, memories, and migrations once set in the periphery that today irrupt at the center, dispelling the very logic that seeks to maintain such distinctions. In this sense, a once marginalized body of water, historically rendered subordinate to the oceanic traffic in commerce, colonization, and war, today becomes pivotal as a laboratory of modernity. Here cultural, civil, and political rights are being forged, contested, and negated along frontiers that seemingly patrol the surfaces and depths of the maritime world. To be caught between them is, at minimum, to be suspended in a limbo as a juridical object without immediate rights, eventually to be rescued and brought into another regime to be recognized as a body or sometimes—and altogether more brutally—to sink below the waves of European control to die.

Present-day migration in the Mediterranean is clearly not simply a socioeconomic phenomenon, the wretched of the earth taking to the sea. It is also an integral part of globalization, of the planetary reach of Occidental history, its political economy, and its exercise of the asymmetrical relations of power that govern the composition of the present. The migrant unsuspectedly reopens that formation, permitting the colonial past to flood into the present, posing a potential reconfiguration of citizenship and established understandings of belonging. We here discover that the racial thinking and racist practices that endorsed the European hierarchization of the world from 1500 onward are part of a history that is still current and affective. The ex-colonial world that takes up residence in the postcolonial heartlands of the Occidental metropolis cannot be confined to a sociological study or considered simply a historical trace of a bygone world. In her presence and history, particular narratives, physical
crossing, and constitution of a multilateral modernity, the migrant ruptures the prevalent manner of accounting for the present. Just as in Michael Haneke’s powerful film *Caché* (2005) on the repressed memory of colonial war and Algeria in present-day bourgeois Paris, the past floods back in from unrecognized sources. It does not pass but rather accumulates, setting patterns for the present.

Art today, more than ever, poses a political interrogation of the status quo. Not only does it historically harbor an aesthetics that displaces common sense with the unsuspected and unexpected, but it also requires that we renegotiate our sense of belonging in a world that clearly precedes and exceeds our grasp. If fundamentalism is the refusal of a poetics that draws us toward the infinite truth of ambiguity and delivers us over to the uncertainties of a disquieting elsewhere, then the ubiquitous hegemony of realism betrays the fundamentalism of vision for which the truth is believed to be transparent, immediate, graspable, conclusive. It is that particular hold on the world, reconfirming the subject in his or her immediate centrality, that postcolonial art rightly seeks to challenge and displace.

The contemporary presence of other views, other perspectives, other maps, not only suggests that history is plural and multidirectional, but also, to follow Walter Benjamin’s suggestion, that it is the site of perpetual translation and interpretation. And it is in the transit of its translations that it becomes possible to trace the slide from history per se to the language of history, to history as language. The language of history, history as language, as ethics and aesthetics, secures the relationship between each of us and the media. As Chris Marker’s film *Sans Soleil* (1982) most powerfully suggests, memories are indivisible from the media that record them. It is the modern-day media, in the form of photographs, film, print archives, television, newspapers, and digital memories, that collates and conserves collective and individual memory for those able to access them. If the very concept of “citizenship,” “identity,” and “belonging” requires an affective and shared sense of the past, then it is the media as memory that has become central to the articulation of modern political and cultural recognition. If languages render the world a “world,” transforming space into the familiar place of “home,” then it is those very same languages that expose the limits and the price of its reasoning. History is not out there; it is in here, inscribed on our tongues, articulated through our bodies, spoken by our lives, inscribed on the screens that simultaneously separate and unite us.

Here the tired question of the relationship between reality and representation falls apart now that the stability of a unique measure unravels. This is most accentuated when images and imaginations emerge in the transit, transformation, and translation that characterizes the postcolonial present and a migrating modernity (Lusini, 2013, p. 110). For modernity is not a single space in which migration occurs. It, too, migrates. Under the impact of histories and cultures, bodies, and lives that traverse its spaces and languages, it continually proposes an order of mobility. It reveals a multilateral formation. If this thesis is readily accepted in the financial capitals of the planet, together with the insistence on the flexibility of labor and just-in-time global manufacturing, then the whole script turns into a much darker hue when the argument is extended to migrating bodies and their accompanying histories and cultures. Walls are quickly raised, and sophisticated surveillance and border controls put in place to ensure the management of territorial powers, sourcing resources and controlling migrant flows.
What emerges here—whether in artistic representation, sociological and historical analyses, or political justification—can never be brought back to a single place or explanation. Postcolonial art works to denude that particular hold on the world. It seeks to establish a cultural discontinuity, and from there rework what is ultimately the colonial archive and its constitution of the present into another space and temporality. This is to wrench ourselves away from the comforting continuities proposed by a Hegelian historicism of dialectical development and chronological progress. It is to understand, as the Italian feminist art critic Carla Lonzi argued many decades ago, that only a critical relationship to the present permits connections to a past that would otherwise remain unintelligible (Lonzi, 2010). Against the moribund order of time—history—the critical order of contemporary stimuli (for example, those provoked by gender, sexuality, and race) interrupt the neutral pretensions of the former. To recognize and reorder the discourse is insufficient, for it fails to acknowledge the powers (patriarchal, racist) that historically authorized its languages and knowledge. Rather, commencing from the “failure” of history, sociology, and anthropology to fully explain the processes and relations that they apparently understand—the narration that never gets it right and so continually has to be retold—we can tap into another space. If history authorizes certain archives and not others, then the insistence of the “unexpected subject” (Lonzi) fractures time with the proposal of what has been excluded from its disciplinary premises and temporalities: women, non-Whites, migrants, and non-Europeans. This is to nominate histories still to be written, archives still to be recognized. It is to insist on an experimental knowledge, a history in the making that explores the passage between representation and repression as a temporal and epistemological break.

**AFRICA IN EUROPE**

The irruption of unwritten histories suggests we could consider Africa as an archive: not one to be mined and exploited, but rather as one to come—that is, as an unacknowledged but central component in a modernity that tends to exclude its presence in the narrative. If Africa is still presented as being out there, trying to “catch up” with the modern Occidental world, the arts of Africa, their travels and transformations, narrate another story. This is a history that draws us back in time to map a very different set of itineraries crossing the formation of modernity. The point here is not only to disturb accredited historical tools of explanation and to propose another modality of archiving and research; it is also to propose a critical configuration that evidences the presence of Africa in European modernity as much as the more obvious tale of colonial Europe in Africa. Again, this is less about collating the historical evidence of Black Athena or excavating the deep history of mankind’s long march out of the Great Rift Valley toward the rest of the world. It is more about insisting that what we like to call modernity has always depended on planetary coordinates in which Africa was a central element in its realization. This is to contest the externalization and marginalization of the non-European world in the making of modernity as a “white mythology” (Derrida, 1982).

These considerations can clearly be extended to contemporary African art. Here artworks exist along multiple scales that not only and most obviously confute such binary distinctions as the local and the global, but also prove impossible to
be slotted into the categories prepared for their reception: African and authentic. This desire is constantly dissimulated. An artist such as Yinka Shonibane MBE, who insists on his paradoxical historical membership of the British Empire, deliberately reworks the past of Europe in Africa conjoined to the presence of Africa in Europe. Recovering, replaying, and redressing the past in this manner evades simple accommodation or fixed locations. The historical and cultural fluxes proposed by such work cross the art world with histories of complex narratives that speak of multiple belongings. The heterogeneous assemblage of materials and icons in Shonibane’s works—Dutch colonial wax prints, West African couture, British naval heroes, the ancien régime, and Victorianna—queries the cultural construction of a consensual aesthetics. Against the predictable lineage of Occidental art history, an altogether more messy and undisciplined archive spills out of the frame, proposing an extension and supplement that cannot be easily accommodated or incorporated.

Such art proposes less an object to be analyzed and explained according to the logics and languages of artistic and disciplinary canons (the institution of aesthetics, the history of art) and more a critical dispositif or apparatus with which to think, live, cross, and interrogate a discursive regime (that is, philosophy and history) of an aesthetic that thinks it is able to explain and to render art its object of explanation. In this scene, the past with its memories and archives proposes a diverse archaeology and a different modality for receiving its presence in the present. There is no pure or isolated object or a definitive explanation of the past to be discovered. Rather, there are historical and cultural processes to be acknowledged. This proposes moments of breaks and discontinuities—that is, a working of the past into a new critical configuration. There is no pristine past to be discovered, but rather the tracing of processes where what counts is not the object that is unearthed but rather the processes that constitute both it and the manner of its unearthing. This perhaps most forcefully marks the passage from archaeology to genealogy.

So rather than simply tracing Africa in Italy and Europe, it becomes urgent to think with Africa in these contexts. Here Africa is retrieved from being an object of analysis and research, where neutrality is seemingly guaranteed by the universal pretensions of the social sciences, to becoming an emergent critical space, an ongoing interrogation and interruption (Mbembe, 2008). This requires stepping beyond the colonial division of the world that has considered only Europe in Africa, and never of the constitutive role of Africa in Europe. Beyond these binaries it is to suggest a critical space in which the existing cartographies of power are disassembled and remixed in an economy of signs and sounds that challenge the conceptual confines of Occidental art history and its criticism. This critical deviation is not set in train simply to recognize alternative and subaltern realities. Initially, this may be of utmost importance, but it is a point of departure, not of arrival. To travel further into the question is to register the worlds that have persisted alongside and resisted Occidental modernity from its very inception as part and parcel of its global web. Unrecognized and negated, Africa in Europe, like the Black slave in the history of capitalism or those colonial troops deployed in Europe’s imperial wars, is a constant shadow interrogating the modernity that consigns them to its margins. These are realities whose presence have not simply been repressed and are now belatedly recognized. Today, their historical and cultural centrality to the making of a modernity we consider “ours” forces us to rework the archive that once authorized our history—that is, to
break it open and disseminate its contents in further critical contours and other narratives of the world.

The predominant absence of contemporary African art in Italian museums and galleries (but this observation can certainly be extended to the rest of Europe and North America) is therefore not simply the symptom of a colonial pathology that continues to think of Africa as “down there and back there” and desires only the anthropological authenticity of local African arts and crafts. Rather, it directs us toward a hole in the epistemological fabric that clothes the West, and it is not one that can simply be patched over with threads drawn from existing disciplinary protocols. This would be only a further colonial move. The idea that an artist or curator working in Lagos or Luanda moves and is sustained in the material and immaterial circuits that constitute the modern institutional art world is still rarely considered. Of course, he or she operates within unequal relations of cultural power and recognition: Lagos is not Los Angeles, and Luanda is not London. Still, connections and a potential resonance are undeniably in play. There simply does not exist an exterior. Africa has not only always been part of the historical constitution of modernity, but it is also inside the cultural and aesthetic networks of its modernisms. Once again, this is not simply to register the noted art history narrative of Cubism and Surrealism sampling the continent; it is also about the deeper economy of the circulation and translation of ideas, perspectives, and practices that never move in a single direction or respect rigid center–periphery distinctions.

In this context, where contemporary migration across Mediterranean waters is only the most dramatic and extreme of modernity’s movements, the world, however tightly bound into northern centers of power, unwinds, falls away from a single rhythm or unique orbit. Questions of belonging—both politically and aesthetically, legally and ontologically—cross and confuse each other’s premises. Africa in Europe, as both the destitute and illegal worker and the cosmopolitan curator and artist, is not merely about a simple overturning or historical reversal of Europe in Africa and its once colonial partition and appropriation of the world. The postcolonial, as both a political perspective and historical challenge, draws us into another space. Here, without the security of the old binaries and subordinations to a European will, a contemporary mix confronts us all with constant and open-ended processes of negotiation and renegotiation where neither history nor culture can hide in the presumed securities of objectivity. What—with respect to that past—is precisely a ruined archive leaves us exposed to exploring an extensive and sometimes deadly freedom. Both the modern metropolis and the Mediterranean become laboratories of this multilateral modernity in the making. If historically unrecognized, culturally refused, and politically repressed, it is present-day postcolonial arts that consistently and courageously maintain this emerging horizon, setting the terms of renewal.

**Curating Practices and Female Aesthetics in a Postcolonial Mediterranean**

Thinking about the Mediterranean as a theoretical meeting point, involves considering a space where such notions as identity and belonging, cultural memory, heritage, and the sense of community and citizenship assume more fluid and mutable connotations. This is in contrast with the exclusivist and racialized culture of nationalism and the predatory and neocolonial framework on which it is traditionally
constructed. Such a critical wave running over nationalism and neocolonialism today emerges from certain artistic research projects in and around the Mediterranean that concern alternative practices of dwelling and remembering. They evoke living time and space in a “transcultural” manner. I focus here on three projects exploring the question of the memory, history, and belonging, secured in archives that interlace individual and collective biographies and collective histories in historical and geographical terms. This leads to considering the relationship between repressed narratives, unrecognized subjectivities (poor migrants, exiles, refugees), and new forms of citizenship. Ultimately, it elicits consideration of the interconnections between European colonialism and an Afro-European postcoloniality. These trajectories represent overlapping lines of investigation where artistic and curatorial practice, cultural research, and critical analysis are mixed in an emergent interdependency.

**Lampedusa: Porto M**

My first example is that of Porto M: practices of memory, politics and community. Exhibitions with the objects of the migrants. This is an innovative museum project I have explored in my research in the European MeLa* (sic) project that involved rethinking museums and archives in the age of migrations. Here the question of citizenship is strictly connected to the museum as an institution of cultural memory and national identity.

Porto M is both a post-institutional and transnational museum on the island of Lampedusa, dedicated to the archiving and narration of migrations from Africa that in recent decades have left an indelible mark on the island’s life and history. It was developed by the Lampedusa collective, Askavusa (which literally means barefoot) and the artist and musician Giacomo Sferlazzo, on the basis of two previous projects: the Lampedusa Museum of Migrations and the 2013 temporary exhibition, “With the objects of the migrants.” Porto M, like its previous versions, is articulated around found objects—through both individual and collective actions of recovering and collecting—in the boats used by migrants to cross the Mediterranean and then abandoned in the island’s public dump, now known as the cemetery of the boats. The “affective” and desiring curatorial stance practiced by Porto M raises questions of cultural representation and directly interrogates our position as inhabitants of the modern world and our relationship with contemporary Mediterranean migrations. The latter, increasingly at the center of political agendas and cultural debates, are consistently considered almost exclusively in terms of a socioeconomic problem, lived as a personal tragedy. This effectively obfuscates the fundamental historical and cultural dimensions of the question.

Mediterranean migrations clearly need to be understood as part of a wider, transnational history that is not separated out and rendered distant from our everyday life. It is precisely here, as Achille Mbembe pointed out, that colonialism emerges as an open-ended contemporary process, playing a crucial role in the circulation of goods, imaginaries, and people, reiterating an ancient logic of accumulation and exploitation (Mbembe, 2008). The “clandestine” routes that cross Lampedusa display the legal networks established by a colonial inheritance and their contemporary disciplining of the modern world. Within this inheritance the subaltern and the underprivileged (invariably coming from the South and East of the world) can travel only illegally. This further contributes to objectify the migrant; a
The liberal fiction of “intercultural dialogue,” based on this presumed distance from the “other,” negates the structural injustice of asymmetrical relationships of power, together with the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital that has shaped the planetary formation of the modern world. This is a virtually self-evident. Yet few are willing to fully engage with its complex impact and its historical, cultural, and political fallout. Who precisely, in the present political economy of the world, has the power to speak? This immediately recalls the famous and still open question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), almost three decades ago, where she highlights not so much the silence of subalterns (Hindu women, in that case) or their impossibility of speaking, but rather our incapacity and unwillingness to listen to their voices.

In this perspective, Porto M’s innovative project can be considered an example of how to think and practice new paradigms of historical and cultural narration of migration and identity, beyond hegemonic cultural and political discourses and as an alternative to official archives and institutional museums. In this regard, the exhibition, “With the objects of the migrants,” from which the project has been developed, is emblematic. Here, the possibility of practicing a new sense of memory, community, and polity, as the subtitle of Porto M indicates, is inscribed in the curation of the objects left or lost by the migrants, with the attempt to provide an account of their passage and simultaneously interrogate our position. In the exhibition, each object was the trace of a shipwreck, each object was a material and, at the same time, a narrative reminder of transit, migration, and survival. Each object was a ruin and, at the same time, a possibility. There were objects of repair and refreshment, such as a packet of couscous, a rusting teapot, a life-jacket, blankets and medicines, the Qur’an and the Bible, along with personal objects such as plastic sandals, toothbrushes, and ruined photos, all neatly displayed on a wooden platform in the middle of the room. On the opposite wall, tattered pages of handwritten diaries or letters were shown in glass cases. This generates a direct dialogue with the objects beneath the wall and a set of resonances with the historical and geographical nature of the island itself. The languages displayed in the writings, from Arabic to Bengali, testify to the varied belonging of the migrants and to the global routes of contemporary Mediterranean crossings.

What persists in these salvaged objects is the violent interval or suspension that marks their passage from everyday life (and death) to the quayside building in the port of Lampedusa. On the edge and beyond the boundaries of institutional legitimacy and its representations, the temporary exhibition housed on this dusty island in the seas of Tunisia refuses to lend itself easily to the fetishization of art. Indeed, this exhibition propels us into planetary processes and spatialities where the work of art as a finite item can be reconsidered as a long-term and open-ended project (Bishop, 2012). Here the spectators are not to be conceived as viewers, but rather as participants who actively produce and share meanings in an emergent political and cultural perspective. Displaying a critical passage from objects to processes (Clifford, 2013), the exhibition and Porto M delegate the time and space of narration to the interrogative presence of the objects and their affective powers. As the collective explained on the project’s website: the objects, all the objects, maintain and release energy. The whole matter is
energy, vibration, movement, and is modified, affected, undone by the energy that traverses and transforms it perpetually, from the inside and outside. We are ourselves part of this infinite movement.

Objects recreate themselves, both on a cultural and affective level, each time somebody is before them as a spectator, a scholar, a manipulator. Everything is in a constant state of transformation, the objects too, despite all the efforts we make to archive and fix them through repair, protections, and then giving them precise, often unsustainable, values.

Objects speak a silent language, which is open to different, even contrasting meanings. We are not saying that studying, identifying, re-nominating the objects is wrong; we do not know what is wrong or right...we are just searching for the ways that brought us to that dump.  

Rejecting the museum logic of plenitude and objectifying conservation, and subverting the humanitarian stereotypes of clandestinity, fragility, and necessity, produced by the dominant representations of migration, Porto M transforms the objects of the migrants into producers of a shared memory and an alternative sociality that evokes the traces of a different community and humanity. The waste materials are reconfigured into assemblages of art and memory that come to question our idea of an exclusive and legitimate European citizenship (Figure 1). Askavusa’s project proposes a post-museum space that bypasses the self-referential “exhibitionary complex” (Bennett, 1988). It promotes critical and affective strategies of remembering whereby the sensorial bodies of visitors are transposed into a porous political space, a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991).

Here different histories, together with the unwinding of the singular understanding of citizenships, render our understandings otherwise via an interrogation of ourselves. We are insistently reminded that “the precariousness of the migrant is also ours,” as we come to share with her an “uprooted geography” (Chambers, 2008, p. 17). Here, the unexpected, the inhospitable, the unarchivable come to blur the neat nationalist confines of our conceptions of history, belonging, and citizenship and poses a radical challenge to the existing languages and practices of the museum. From a disciplining, conservative, and boundary-drawing apparatus, the museum is transformed into an unstable entity that exceeds its white walls (Curti, 2012). It opens out onto the possibility of a “postcolonial museum” (Chambers et al., 2014) where a European heritage is reworked and narrated anew in light of the untameable presence of subaltern voices and repressed histories, emerging from the tangible traces of a rarely recognized colonial past.

The experimental curatorial project conducted in Lampedusa transforms the archive itself from dead matter into living questions. The local cultural memory becomes permeable and elastic, reconnected to other places and times: Are the boats filled up with poor migrants crossing the Mediterranean so distant from the slave ships traveling from Africa to the Americas? Are the “clandestine” immigrants imprisoned in the Italian CIE (center for identification and expulsion), or employed in the illegal organization of exploited underpaid agricultural laborers so different from the Africans employed in the colonial plantations? Is the imperialist economy of the First World so unconnected from the poverty and insecurities of the Third World? It is by now clear that through this interlacing between past and present, proximity and distance, a new historical thalassology emerges (Horden, 2006).
allows us to rethink the Mediterranean in terms of complexity and variability as a critical problematic, a laboratory of a contested modernity. Here art and its experimental, affective, participative, political practices erupts into history, interrupting the totalizing and exclusivist maps of the world, propelling us into the living archives of postcoloniality.

**The Matri-Archive**

*The Matri-Archive of the Mediterranean. Graphics and Matters (M.A.M.)* is inspired by a multiple, complex, and plural vision of the Mediterranean, where the archive is understood as a mobile site of dwelling, belonging, and narration, while simultaneously offering the spaces for creative and political intervention. This project involves a group of researchers, including this author, from the University of Naples “L’Orientale.”4 It consists in a web platform dedicated to the archiving and dissemination of contemporary aesthetics and languages, that is, “graphics and matters”: the signs and traces of expression—visual arts, plastic arts, photography, graphics, dance, music, land-art, bio-art—produced by female artists in the Mediterranean. This digital archive is the technical and operational result of an investigation of the archive from a cultural and postcolonial studies perspective. It implicitly recalls Stuart Hall’s definition of the “post-museum” (Hall, 2001) and Jacques Derrida’s concept of a new technological *chora* (Derrida, 1995), as they are inscribed in archiving practices. It produces a virtual meeting space of those multiple stories, memories, places, and subjectivities that tend to be repressed and silenced by official archives. The archive is here articulated and developed in the interchange between the connotations of a gender (Matri) and a geography (the Mediterranean).

The interpretative assumption of the project is that today the archival vocation is inseparable from a “mal d’Afrique,” and a “mal d’archive,” from the colonizing and systematic appropriation and cataloguing of the world. Is the passion for archiving in order to remember or to forget? The archive, its desire and its compulsions, is always linked to an *archè* (Carotenuto, 2012), to the architecture of principles and place consigned to a patriarchal lineage. The selection of texts, signs, memories, documents, and materials is operated by male guardians working in the interests of patriarchal institutions intended to safeguard memory from other memories. The existing form of the archive is male, patriarchal, and patrilineal: the hereditary of what repeats safeguard and archive an existing order, power, and tradition.

The question that gives birth to the *Matriarchive* resounds with difference. What occurs when, opposed to the patri-archive, an archive is instituted and devoted to women, to those who have been—and are still—excluded by the selectivity of the male archive? What changes if, and when, the archive practices a transmission of knowledge in a feminine lineage? If the rulers and archons become “woman,” the Matriarchic offers the accumulation-dissemination of a female knowledge. *The Matriarchive of the Mediterranean* is then a new, potential, virtual archive of a maternal, liquid, migrant, natural, technical, material memory, preserved and transmitted in the contemporary conjuncture in the aesthetics and performances of Mediterranean female artists. As such, it poses these and many more questions and issues, connecting them to four privileged archiving themes: the Matriarchs, *la Mer*, the Matrix, the Matter.

The space-time of the interventions in the *Matriarchive* is vast and immemorial. It can extend to the mythological and contemporary
figurations of the Mediterranean women, the Matriarchs, which look back to the Myth, and forward to today’s myths. They are terrifying and enchanting Medusas, young Koras and Persephones, tragic Antigones showing another sense of existence through their claims for a right to asylum and burial that would change the destiny of the entire world. These feminine figurations rewrite a female genealogy and puissance (Cixous, 1976) that emerges from the maternal Mediterranean waters (the sea is also la Mer, the mother), tormented by hostility, wars, and failures, in order to liberate their chants of life. The contemporary sea of migration, while marked by the innumerable signs of death, shipwrecks, dispersions, missed arrivals, and infinite exiles, is, at the same time, marked by the many signs of life constituted in the creative passion that affirms the movement, the freedom, the experimentation, the courage, the journey, the rhythms, visions, dances, and figurations of the inventive re-elaborations of art.

Here the images—fixed or in motion—offered by one of the many mothers of the Matriarchive, the French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira in her work devoted to the Mediterranean Sea, are strongly evocative. Abandoned ships, rusting carcasses, harbors, marine paths set one-way directions, exiles without return. In performative celebrations of “lighthouses,” they illuminate in this liquid space that contains both life and death an unavoidable journey by recording the colonial-postcolonial traces of memory, transforming them into signs for the future. Like a “lighthouse” à la Sedira, the Matriarchive proposes to “gather” and assemble the feminine graphics of an archaic and ancient intelligence, which is at the same time, modern (but a modernity “different” from the canonical Western male lineage), contemporary, experiential, composed of infinite forms and multiple directions.

The artworks hosted in this alternative female archive are conceived as a “boundary event” (Minh-ha, 2005), that is, a process of differentiation and a practice of memory that reminds us of the question of borders and belonging, the expropriation and reappropriation of space. They reflect the feminist politics of location of the self (Rich, 1985), where subjectivity is thought of as embodied and historical, immanent, yet mutable and multiform, and is here evoked through a poetics of border-crossing and translation. This political and philosophical proposal also invests the idea of a matrix in creative and critical ways. The main connotations of the feminine have been historically identified with Mother Nature and the mother tongue: the natural and the original in a binary opposition to the technical, the artificial, the material. Contrasting these dialectics of Occidental thought, the Matriarchive claims the power of a Matrix who interrogates herself about the origin and the belonging of femininity to “Mother Nature,” This translates into the care of the natural elements as a space of creative encounters and transformation, where the “Mother Tongue” is disseminated—that loved, desired, yet never fully possessed tongue (Derrida, 1998). Here, in her infinite and inventive contaminations, in encounters with the techné, the languages and techniques of contemporary performances a corporeal, carnal, sensorial aesthetics is sustained and emphasized by technological experimentations. A different form of archive is produced for registering and remembering the body’s poetic gesture; and even a diverse law of gravity is elaborated, as, for example, in Isabel Rocamora’s videos (Piccirillo, 2012). Veiled dancers in the desert, together with the constant transformative movement of sand and wind, escape the weight of the bodily, poetically affirming a subtraction,
a suspension, a refusal of the constraints that patriarchal society has imposed on the female body.

The encounter between the techné and the body marks an active female deconstruction of the fundamental oppositions of Occidental thought and the archive that celebrates it: nature as opposed to the technological, origins opposed to the future. This generates a passion of the Mediterranean Matriarchive for the material, for Matter. It becomes a “platform” for the interaction and processual analyses of the “questions” that constellate an archive of female difference that interrogate the materials that, more than ever, require the invention of alternative and sustainable practices of conservation and recycling of women’s cultural and artistic heritage in the Mediterranean. A feminist theoretical debate on the relationship between culture and nature (Grosz, 2005; Haraway, 2007; Barad, 2012; Preciado, 2013) leads to bio-art/land-art/eco-art where the use, reuse, and recycling of waste materials promotes artistic experimentations and the border-crossings (of disciplines, geographies, materials, bodies, species). These interrogate the relationship between culture and nature, humanity and animality, chemistry and artifice, technology and ecology. They register the molecular contamination of reality and the queerness and alterity residing at the heart of Mother Nature. In this sense, the project’s aim is that of curating the artworks of the women who contaminate the disciplines of art and humanism with those of science and technology. This leads to exploring the possibility of a creative recycling of approaches, methodologies, ideas, and matters. Bodies and practices of knowledge are opened up to alternative modes of inhabiting present and future times and spaces.

**OVERSEAS AND CRITICAL WONDER**

The last example I will consider here is directly connected to the Matri-Archive and the postcolonial Mediterranean. It is *Il paese delle terre d’Oltremare*, the country of the Overseas territories. This is an artistic and research project elaborated by the Neapolitan artist Alessandra Cianelli, in collaboration with Beatrice Ferrara, two of the “matriarchs” who have nurtured the archive I have just discussed. This project, constantly in progress, opens up the (post)colonial archive of Italy in a journey of critical wonder and astonishment. Like Alice in Wonderland, we discover the subverted exotic desire for discovery, now assumed as a research methodology with its “fabulous powers” able to “open hidden, disappeared, or never existing lands” (Cianelli, 2014a, p. 1).

The project aims at “discovering,” gathering, and interlacing sounds, images, objects, words, and memories linked to the stories of the Italian colonial overseas territories beyond the Mediterranean, Cyrenaica (Libya) and the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea), known under Fascism as AOI (Italian Oriental Africa). In particular, the work is based on research in Naples in what can be considered as its most emblematic colonial institution: the Triennial Exhibition of the Overseas Territories held at the Exhibition Centre (Mostra d’Oltremare) in Naples in May 1940. Here the Fascist architecture, the “exotic” animal and botanical presences in the Exhibition, as well as a seemingly inaccessible institutional archive, are all that remains of the colonial past of the city and the central role it played in that enterprise. During the culminating years of the Imperial period, Naples was the port from which the colonial ships sailed, as well as being the seat of “L’Orientale” University, where colonial functionaries were formed. As the first capital of the
South to be colonized by northern Italy and the House of Savoy, Naples subsequently became the seat of the Ministry of the Colonies and, in its turn, the northern capital of the southern territories conquered in Africa, thus concluding a vicious colonialist circle of subordination and integration. With the collapse of Fascism and its ideological disgrace, this failed project and its history has been deeply buried in the collective and individual unconscious.

It is in the shadow of these colonial ruins that Cianelli moves, recalling the “neo-futurist and phanta-exotic imaginary” (Cianelli, 2014a, p. 2), which had nurtured the colonial project and the Neapolitan Overseas Exhibition. To this she adds her personal insights, family memories, and fantasies. The artist’s investigation engages in the relationship between her family and colonial history. It commences from interrogating the familiarity of some words whose meaning seems to have been forgotten. Their survival resides only in their sound, and their resignification is hidden in the emotive and sensorial memory of the body that “registered” or experienced it. The words transformed into sound suddenly reveal their hidden and forgotten meaning. Thus Cianelli’s

**Figure 1.** Detail of the exhibition “Con gli oggetti dei migranti” (“With the Objects of the Migrants”), Lampedusa, July 19, 2013. Photo by Celeste Ianniciello.
video, *Parole che (si) nascondono*, words that hide that are hidden (2012), is a “minimal attempt” as the artist herself says, at providing an account of the Italian colonial presence in Africa, of its persistence in the cultural and political unconscious of contemporary Italy, and of its reverberations in a personal history. It is a composite artwork based on two videos: *Sulle spalle* (On the shoulders) and *Ambaradam*, both produced within the *Il paese delle terre d’Oltremare* project. The first video, which is also hosted on the *Matri-Archive* website, revolves around the repressed memory of the artist’s grandfather, enrolled by the Fascist army in the war for the defense of the colonized territories in Cyrenaica, and who died in 1940 during a British bombing. It is a story extracted from family memories, where fascist censorship ends by overlapping and invading personal narrations and existence. Beyond the violence of the silence imposed by (his)story, the artist makes this story live again through female voices: she consigns the narration to her mother who reads the letters written by her father during the war. The second video, *Ambaradam*, like the first one, follows the meaning of the words concealed under the sound, mixing reality and fiction, familiar and unfamiliar, innocence and guilt, play and war, joy and sorrow. In Italian, the word “ambaradan” is generally used to indicate confusion, turmoil, or chaos. It can also recall a magic formula, or a doggerel often sung by children. The meaning of this apparently playful sound reveals a terrible event linked to the Italian epoch.
in the Horn of African. The Ambaradâm is an Ethiopian mountain that was the bloody theater of the Italian colonial campaign when Ethiopia was annexed to the Fascist empire in 1936. The African name has acquired common use in Italian to indicate chaos, but the historical meaning it unconsciously evokes has been removed, forgotten, and concealed (Cianelli, 2014b, p. 165).

The Mediterranean once again reveals a meeting place of words and memories lost between its shores, suspended between its lives, proposing a location of historical awakening and reenactment, a space of critical cuts and desiring encounters, of past ruins and future challenges:

This is the land where I search for an external legitimisation of my internal journey. The broken roots, my mother, a secret, a place, the abandonment, the exclusion; being out of place, on the border, being a threshold and an opening. This is the way you learn Nostalgia and Betrayal: backwards, forwards, fleeting around time. I, me, present and cutting backwards and forwards in order to catch past and future, like two birds with one stone. (Cianelli, 2014b, p. 166)

NOTES

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in this article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/rcin.

1 http://www.yinkashonibarembe.com/home/.
2 www.mela-project.polimi.it.
3 http://askavusa.wordpress.com/con-gli-oggetti/.
4 www.matriarchiviomediterraneo.org.
5 www.ilpaesedelleterredoltremare.wordpress.com.

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