3. The Maghreb Entangled and Ensnared in European Webs

Nets, Knots, Spiders, and Sirens as Symbols of Clandestine Sea-Crossings

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This chapter explores the notion of entanglements with regard to a Maghreb in motion. In particular, it focuses on clandestine migration and shows how scrutiny of this phenomenon can help us ponder the Maghreb's entanglement with itself, the sea it borders, and the continent to the north with which it is connected in various ways (through colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, geopolitics, discourse, representation, language, etc.). Here I contend that contemporary literary and cinematic productions of and about the Maghreb have featured the Mediterranean Sea as an entity that is emblematic of the myriad tensions, interactions, and destructions caused by hegemonic policies in the region. In fact, the state of entanglement often implies that external actors have put an entity into a difficult situation. To this effect, Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński writes, "The economic, political and ideological forces that play across the Mediterranean come from outside and dispose of the region" (24). I argue that writers and filmmakers have used the themes of spiders, sirens, nets, and knots to convey that the Mediterranean is a place where migrants and refugees receive mixed signals and fall prey to deadly snares. They are called to their deaths by the appeal of Europe, which mass media, specific humanitarian actors, and testimonies often paint as a refuge for people fleeing war, persecution, and the aftermath of uprisings such as the Arab Spring. Yet 'Fortress Europe' has been reinforcing its fortifications both on land and at sea, making the maritime passage not only perilous but often deadly.[1]

Today's Maghreb cannot be fully understood without considering the growing number of Maghrebis eager to leave their countries of origin. Disciplines such as political science, sociology, and anthropology – and the

social sciences in general – have, to varying degrees, discussed the Maghreb in relation to migration. In the context of the so-called 'refugee crisis,' their focus on clandestine migration is expanding.[2] As these tragedies continue, scholars in the humanities have begun to follow suit in their research. In order to grasp the Maghreb as part of an increasingly interconnected world, academic investigations must account for clandestine migration because globalization does not involve and impact the entire globe evenly. The rights it grants to citizens of the Global North – such as the right of movement – are labeled 'illegal' for most citizens of the Global South. The Maghreb is part of the Global South, where the freedom to emigrate is extremely limited; yet Spain is visible across the Mediterranean Sea from Morocco. Studies about the Maghreb must therefore acknowledge the desire to reach European shores, for a significant portion of the Maghrebi population lives a short distance away, and many have attempted the crossing. Literature, cinema, and music have dealt with both the desire to leave and the act of departure. These areas of artistic creation have offered a vantage point for looking at crucial questions, such as (failed) clandestine migration and 'leavism,' that have shaped Maghrebi societies. Such art was already becoming more common well before the 'refugee crisis.'[3] Indeed, the dangers and deaths associated with this maritime journey have been a concern for decades now.

Traditionally, artists have conveyed their own societies' outlooks on their fellow-citizens' plights. Film and literature often serve as mirrors to reflect serious matters portrayed in other realms as sub-issues, pre-issues, post-issues, or non-issues. Many writers and directors have created alternative narratives meant to complete or compete with official ones. In order to demonstrate my point that the contemporary Maghreb can be better comprehended through a close study of the notion of motion and especially clandestine migration, I approach the North African region from a multiplicity of angles, including a geopolitical perspective (with attention to the Mediterranean and Europe) and a representational perspective, through aesthetics. My chapter takes a close look at the metaphors of the spider and the net. The former is known to spin its web to tie together a center and a periphery, thus creating a logical, practical, and rational body of micro-networks with both constructive and destructive ends. In this essay I examine a film and a piece of literature. Both predate the Arab Spring and the 'refugee crisis.' The Jasmine Revolution, which set the Arab Spring in motion, began in December 2010, and the 'refugee crisis' gained sudden major media exposure in 2015. In choosing to examine pre-Arab Spring and pre-'refugee crisis' works in order to discuss

the situation known as 'the refugee crisis,' attributed to a time frame closer to the present, I reject the assumption that the two periods are distinct. I argue instead that the 'refugee crisis' is the culmination and fresh stigmatization of a long era of clandestine crossings taking place through the same region (the Maghreb) and across the same sea (the Mediterranean). To analyze the 'refugee crisis' in and of itself risks implying that it is an occurrence that did not have its roots in the decades that preceded it, or rather that it is inscribed in a singular moment, whereas in actuality it is a continuation and exacerbation of an ongoing situation. In other words, analyzing the 'refugee crisis' without making a connection with previous decades infers the existence of three independent periods: a pre-'refugee crisis,' the crisis itself, and its aftermath, each historically distinct and detached from the other two periods. My decision to focus on fictional works that were released in 2006 and 2007, before the 'refugee crisis' – while linking them to today's circumstances – is based on the idea that to conceptualize the Maghreb and two entangled phenomena that have much to do with this region, namely the Arab Spring and the 'refugee crisis,' one ought to delve into the period and its productions – including discursive and aesthetic ones – that led to, informed, and presaged these developments.

3.1 Entanglements, Knots, and Whatnot

The co-editors of this volume provide an excellent rationale for their focus on entanglement in relation to the Maghreb. Their decision to scrutinize this concept is crucial for the study of a region interacting with a set of neighboring countries to the north, south, and east that are linguistically, geographically, ethnically, and religiously diverse. In this piece, I am certainly not proposing that the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) be regarded as a homogenous entity, for these three countries have their own disparities and differences (historic, linguistic, economic, political, etc.). Nonetheless, the three Maghrebi states share many commonalities, particularly in the realm of migration. These shared realities allow me to apply my reflections to these countries and their cultural productions. Maghrebi countries have been experiencing similar issues, facing similar obstacles, and coping with similar external political pressures with regard to clandestine migration, which has constituted a societal and political point of contention. Similarly, the three North African states are expected to adopt and apply European anti-immi-

gration policies that have the same objective across the Maghreb and have caused this region to think of itself in peculiar ways. As Ali Bensaâd mentions, clandestine migration is fundamentally reshaping the Maghreb:

> Et au-delà de l'importance de la dimension quantitative de sa présence, le phénomène de l'immigration modifie substantiellement les perspectives des problématiques sociétales et spatiales dans ces traditionnelles terres d'émigration. Il est une nouvelle donne qui interagit fortement avec l'espace et les sociétés du Maghreb (6).
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> And beyond the importance of the quantitative dimension of its presence, the phenomenon of immigration substantially alters the perspectives of societal and spatial issues in these traditional sending countries. It is a new situation that interacts intensely with the space and societies of the Maghreb.[4]

Various datasets support the claim that the Maghreb continues to be subjected to the will of former empires. The fates of Maghrebi citizens remain intrinsically linked to what Europe decides and implements across the Maghreb and the Mediterranean – both of which are used as buffer zones for the sake of Fortress Europe's fight against immigration. Consequently, to fathom the Maghreb's entangled nature, it is necessary to assess the geographical area in association with its surroundings. The countries to the north have imposed neocolonial burdens on their southern neighbors that affect how the Maghreb defies them and defines itself, addresses them and redresses itself.

Imagining and re-imagining are important techniques for mulling over inter-regional, transnational, and global politics. Both literary and visual arts put into imagery realities and transactions that may appear abstract or remote from people's daily lives and concerns. In addition, art provides grids for new and different forms of interpretation. Images can evoke or be symbols of tensions, power relations, and/or sanctions imposed by states. In my analysis of a Moroccan literary work, I will delve into the emblematic functions of spiders, ships, the sea, and the siren – all bearing the name of Toutia in the novel. I then explore the symbolism of knots and nets in a Tunisian film.

Conservative discourses have traditionally depicted societies of the Global South, including the Maghreb, as disinclined to change, stuck in old traditions, with little room to maneuver due to authoritarianism, censorship, and deep-seated beliefs. Although some kinds of changes may appear slow to happen, the Maghreb is a region in motion. Migration is one of the areas that

has propelled the Maghreb in new directions and shaped its latest challenges, faces, and fates. While entanglement implies a knot (it can obstructively tie someone or something up), by the same token it comes with the possibility of a liberation from constraint and confinement because the experience of a state of entanglement – and especially ensnarement, which is connoted exclusively in a negative manner – prompts efforts of undoing what is wrong. Thus, 'entanglement' may be envisaged positively in light of its potential to be a harbinger of catharsis, a bringer of hope, and a bearer of new initiatives. However, here I will focus on the negative sense of the term in order to show ways in which the Maghreb is an ensnared and entangled space inwardly and outwardly. Put differently, the Maghreb is in an uncomfortable position and needs to be untangled, unraveled, unknotted, and unencumbered by unbearable internal systems and unreasonable external pressures. With hindsight, this is one of the lessons that the Arab Spring has taught us.

One image that often comes to mind when thinking about entanglement is that of a section of hair that has formed knots and must be worked through in intricate ways to undo the annoying (de)formation. Hair on one's head has no negative implications until it becomes untamable, at which point it creates an inconvenience. When it is caught in a multitude of knots, disheveled hair takes the form of a net. Likewise, a net or a fence, whose rope or wire are knotted and twisted, prevent flow and passage. Barbed wire in particular, frequently used in military operations, expresses the tensions that have led to its implementation and the intentions of those who have placed it there. In the context of the Maghreb – especially in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa – barbed wire is put in place to bar people from leaving. These two enclaves have been the site of tragic incidents in which migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, have been shot at as they tried to climb over the barbed wire-lined barrier, tearing their skin in the attempt. (Over time, consecutive Spanish governments have removed and replaced the barbed wire. Following criticism, there have been talks about removing it again and increasing the height of the walls by more than a third and equipping the borders with newer technologies such as facial recognition). This wall, among many others being erected these days, reminds us that borders are highly policed and militarized, and that the Global North has gone to war against Global South migrants, migration, refugees, and refugeeism.

The Mediterranean Sea is the reflection and gauge of what is at stake in and around the Maghreb. Furthermore, in both its symbolic and real-world manifestations, it is an equivocal presence – both benevolent and malevolent.

I will demonstrate this by probing the notions of duality and duplicity in Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir* (*Leaving Tangier*) through the trope of the spider, as well as Mohsen Melliti's film *Io, l'altro* (*I, the Other*) through the image of the net. These two constructions relate to the concept of a matrix. 'Matrix,' from the Latin *mater*, can mean 'womb,' 'mother plant,' or 'mother animal.' In this chapter I am concerned with the idea of a murderous matrix, in other words, of a mother figure that does not feed her children but rather consumes them. In the discussed works, the sea lures migrant-hopefuls and then engulfs them. The mother is the m/other (Mediterranean/Other, i.e., the Mediterranean that treats its own as Other and commits the act of murder). This recalls autoimmune diseases that lead the immune system to treat integral parts of the self as evil foreign bodies to be attacked and destroyed – at the expense of the self as a whole. In French, three homonyms, i.e., *la mer/la mère/l'amère* (the sea/the mother/the bitter one) all relate to the iconic figure of Medea. *Io, l'altro*'s Mediterranean is an illustrative example of a 'bitter' mother who devours her two sons. Indeed, the small boat on which the two fishermen are shown from the first few scenes until the end of the film is called *Medea*. The name is written in Latin and Arabic script, evoking the northern and southern shores of the sea and hinting at the names of its passengers, Giuseppe and Yousef, Italian and Arabic versions of 'Joseph.' This boat is the stage of a Hellenic tragedy, sailing upon what one might denominate 'the Medea-terranean,' in an entangled multicultural fiction based on a real-life occurrence portraying interpersonal and interregional conflicts. The two men consider themselves brothers. The Italian, Giuseppe, warns the Tunisian, Yousef, not to throw the Black female migrant, whom they have caught in their net, back into the sea. Yousef disobeys and Giuseppe kills him – swayed mainly by a radio report and conversations via VHF marine transmitter that make him suspect that his alter ego (*l'altro*) is a terrorist. Remorse gnaws at the murderer in the immensity of the sea in which he is adrift. His fate is unknown at the end of the film, but it looks grim, for Yousef has sabotaged the radio to prevent Giuseppe from informing the coast guard of their updated coordinates. Before the final act, a war of words is waged, starting off with ethnic bias and culminating in racist slurs uttered chiefly by Giuseppe. This reveals an animosity against migrants that has persisted long after they have settled in the 'host' country and are integrated in their new society.

3.2 The Spider in Literature as a Metaphor for an Entangled Maghreb

In this section and the next, I am interested in the following nexus: politics/ethics and poetics/aesthetics, and in why and how the latter dyad comments upon the former. Since the 1990s, a growing body of works focusing on the maritime journey has emerged in various languages. I begin with a piece of what I have called 'illiterature,' namely literary productions that tackle the attempted clandestine crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.[5] I attribute this coinage 'illiterature' to three main common traits:

- The sub-genre often includes one or more characters who are 'ill' before, during or after the (envisaged) passage;
- It is almost exclusively dominated by male writers (in French, *il* is the masculine personal pronoun); and
- Plots portray the Global South as an island (*île* in French) where individuals must be confined, just as convicts and political threats were in the past exiled; in short, banished to islands. With respect to this line of conduct, in 2018 Denmark announced its plan to deport unwanted asylum-seekers to an island off its coast.[6]

Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun is known for addressing topics that are of utmost importance and yet often taboo in his society. From sexual misery, gender identity, and homosexuality to racism, Islamophobia, and homophobia, Ben Jelloun has crafted imaginative writing deeply inspired by real-life issues. Since the turn of the century, clandestine migration has been one of the Maghreb's most embarrassing societal concerns. This was demonstrated (by omission) in the fact that for quite some time the subject was addressed only marginally by news outlets. Its coverage has since grown exponentially. The migratory phenomenon gave rise to a set of terms that have become commonplace in Arabic (and now European languages as well). That lexicon is a staple in the academic, literary, cinematic, and musical language of the region and beyond. It includes the terms *hrig* and *harga* (clandestine migration), *harrag* (male clandestine migrant), *harraga* (female clandestine migrant), and *harragas* (clandestine migrants). In the following pages, I too will call real-life individuals and characters in literary and cinematic productions who cross the Mediterranean *harragas*. This Arabic appellation is commonly translated as those who 'burn' (cross) borders. In the context of this essay, they cross

the sea.[7] To this day, clandestine migration remains one of the region's most pressing issues – dealt with at the societal, political, economic, linguistic, and aesthetic levels. Therefore, it is no surprise that from the outset Ben Jelloun decided to provide his predominantly Western audience with details of the push and pull factors that are at the crux of these migratory movements.

Today's literary productions recounting the sea passage and those that predate the 'refugee crisis' are all part of this category of illiterature. Consequently, when I refer to migrants in works of fiction that were published prior to 2011, my statements also apply to current refugees. Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir* (2006; *Leaving Tangier*, 2009) is an early example of illiterature.[8] It tells the story of Azz El Arab, who emigrates to Spain with the help of his lover Miguel, with whom he finds himself stuck and questioning his identity, not only sexual but also personal. This questioning is symbolized by the name he goes by, which attests to a cutting of his selfhood, his manhood, and his Arabness, since the shortened version, Azel – close to Gazelle, a female nickname Miguel uses – is devoid of the 'Arab' that constitutes the other half of his name, leaving him with a sobriquet that in fact does not mean anything, given that *el* is the definite article that must be placed before a noun. Here the noun is missing, and this absence results in Azz El Arab no longer embodying what his name means, defined by the protagonist himself as: "La fierté, la gloire des Arabes! Je suis la crème des Arabes! Celui qui est précieux, cher et bon…" ("The pride, the glory of the Arabs! It means I'm the best, someone precious, beloved and good…") (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 49 and *Leaving* 43).

The title of the book's 2009 English edition, *Leaving Tangier*, is a loose translation, but its two constitutive keywords reflect (transforming) Moroccan identities, (new) Maghrebi sociological realities, and (contested) Mediterranean geopolitics. Indeed, the two-word title encompasses what is at the heart of clandestine migration and in the minds of migrant-hopefuls. It denotes the fact that Tangier was at the time of publication (and still is today) a departure hub for *harragas*. The title also contains a crucial verb, 'to leave,' which is the literal translation of *partir* and has been qualified as an obsession by many writers and scholars alike (e.g., Ben Jelloun, Salim Jay; and Michel Peraldi and Ahlame Rahmi).[9] Thus, right from the cover of the book, featuring the silhouettes of strangers sitting on a wall, likely looking across the sea to the Spanish coast, the reader gathers that leave-taking is the main motif in the text and is a cherished dream in the lives of the characters and in the minds of many Maghrebi citizens. In a passage from *Leaving Tangier*, it is posited that *partir* might be even conceived as a goal and a job:[10]

> Que veux-tu faire plus tard?
> — Partir.
> — Partir? Mais ce n'est pas un métier!
> (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 98).

> "What do you want to do later on?"
> "Leave."
> "Leave? But that's not a profession!"
> (Ben Jelloun, *Leaving* 92).

The pull factor in this story is symbolized by an entity (the sea seen as a seductive siren) that *harragas* call 'Toutia.' The Moroccan vernacular has traditionally incorporated constructions that are essentially French but have been Arabicized through intonation, pronunciation, and appropriation. Toutia may be read as one of these. In fact, in the last chapter of the novel – the fortieth (a highly symbolic number in the Islamic tradition) – the reader learns that in addition to representing the sea, Toutia happens to be the name of a boat and is believed to be the name of the captain's wife. All in all, Toutia is an allegory, a legend, a myth, a muse, a character, a belief, an obsession, an arachnid; in sum, something one cannot fully grasp but that grabs one's body, mind, and imagination. In the very first chapter, the narrator remarks that it is "un mot qui ne veut rien dire" ("a word that means nothing") (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 12 and *Leaving* 4). Not to be taken at face value, this statement is a logical – albeit equivocal – signifier for the *harragas* in that

> […] mais entre eux ils savent que c'est l'araignée tantôt dévoreuse de chair humaine, tantôt bienfaitrice parce que transformée en une voix leur apprenant que cette nuit n'est pas la bonne et qu'il faut remettre le voyage à une autre fois (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 12).

> […] but to them she is a spider that can feast on human flesh yet will sometimes warn them, in the guise of a beneficent voice, that tonight is not the night, that they must put off their voyage for a while (Ben Jelloun, *Leaving* 4).

Right from the start, Toutia is charged with coded meaning that begs to be unpacked. It could be a rewriting of the French phrase 'Tout y a,' equivalent to 'Everything's there.' Ben Jelloun is known for having Arabicized French prose and syntax in his oeuvre, and this Franco-Arabic coinage may be another example. Since Toutia is both a provider and a predator, both tempting and

repulsing, this neologism could imply that everything can be seen in the sea: fish, refuse, and rejected (refused) bodies. This appellation could also be suggesting that everything the *harraga* hope for is on the other continent. The narrator mentions that along with the good, and in order to keep the unwanted Other away from the good, there exists the ultra-sophisticated SIVE system (Sistema Integrado de Vigilencia Exterior), put in place on the Spanish coasts to curb clandestine migration from Morocco:

> L'article racontait que l'Espagne venait très récemment d'installer le long de ses plages un système de surveillance électronique, avec infrarouge, armes automatiques, ultrason, ultra tout… (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 41).
>
> The article was explaining that Spain had recently installed an electronic surveillance system along its beaches, with infrared and ultrasound equipment, ultra everything, along with automatic weapons… (Ben Jelloun, *Leaving* 34).

These technological and physical weapons stretch across sea and land to make the task of *harragas* even more difficult.

Both agent and auxiliary, Toutia lures the *harragas* and "les fait dormir" ("lulls them to sleep"), and like a muse, she inspires writers to tell the stories of the departed (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 13 and *Leaving* 5). Toutia is not simply a siren calling *harragas* to dive into her womb. She is also the siren that calls our attention and signals a state of emergency – a pain to soothe, a problem to solve, people to save. Toutia's actions-to-come are laid out in the first few pages, where in front of her, migrant-hopefuls sit in a café, their tea attracting bees that drown in the sweet drink. The bee is of course associated with honey, whose color is that of the coveted Eldorado – etymologically, 'that which is golden.' 'Honey,' or *'asl* in Arabic, is very similar to 'Azel.' As for *miel*, ('honey' in French), it is phonetically close to 'Miguel' (Azel's lover). One might think of 'Miguel' also as a close vocable to *mygale* (tarantula). As pointed out above, Miguel refers to his partner as 'Gazelle' (or *ghazāl* in Arabic). It is as if the guttural sound at the beginning of his name, transliterated by the apostrophe, were unpronounceable for Miguel, who in doing so transforms his lover's name and his gender. In addition, the Spanish man feminizes Azel via the suffix '-elle.' The entangled nature of names, bynames, nicknames, cognomens, and misnomers alludes to the alluring and illusory nature of Eldorado and the two-faced Miguel/Mygale playing the same dual role as Toutia, an imagined arachnid pulling the African antelope, the epitome of grace and innocence and

a symbol of femininity, into his world/web for the best and the worst. Miguel is both beneficent and maleficent, and he warns Azel "apprends ceci, je suis loin d'être un ange!" ("make no mistake: I am no angel!") (Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 117 and *Leaving* 111). The magnificent, gilded existence that he embodies with his lush and luxurious life as a rich art-dealer is Azel's dream come true and golden prison. More importantly, the phonetic association between Miguel and the French word for tarantula (*mygale*) recalls a net, which is constructed of various hair-like threads and is woven like a web.

3.3 Nets in Cinema as Harbingers of the 'Refugee Crisis'-to-Come

The following films, to list just a few, have tackled the topic of trans-Mediterranean clandestine crossings: Merzak Allouache's *Harragas*, Nabil Ayouch's *Mektoub*, Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea*, Chus Guttiérrez's *Retorno a Hansala*, Leïla Kilani's *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs,* Nadir Moknèche's *Goodbye Morocco*, and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare*. Maghrebi filmmakers often contribute their art to provide an alternative mode of inquiry into their home countries. While not necessarily or entirely sociological in their approach, a striking number of these works have been inspired by their societies' collective facts and individual fates. For many decades now, films have been linking the Maghreb to issues of authorized migration and to a lesser extent clandestine migration, which has become more of a focus in recent years. Their implication is that, as a region, the Maghreb is not isolated at all, but is replete with experiences, exchanges, and challenges that derive from its peoples' physical movements and their determined project to move freely. Clandestine migration across the Maghreb (through the arrival of sub-Saharan Africans on their way to Europe) is a relatively new theme in Maghrebi film. This cinema has embraced this emerging reality in order to show that today's Maghreb is at the center of what used to be considered a regional concern but has – since the Arab Spring and the 'refugee crisis' – become a global 'problem.' The 'refugee crisis' (tightly linked to the Arab Spring) is a historical moment that has changed the state of affairs in North Africa. Nonetheless, due to the international attention on the eastern Mediterranean, the bulk of recent films about clandestine maritime crossings have been made by Mashreqis (individuals hailing from the eastern part of the Arab world, in places such as Syria and Lebanon) and by Europeans turning the lens of their cameras towards countries such as

Turkey and Syria. These films often feature characters from sub-Saharan Africa transiting through Libya and neighboring countries.

In the face of the unprecedented human migrations of late, the historical appellations for the Mediterranean Sea, *Mittelmeer*, *al-baḥr al-abyaḍ al-mutawassiṭ*, *La Grande Bleue*, *Mare Nostrum*, etc., continue to find currency and help bring understanding about the Maghreb. Some of these names aim to support the claims of an arguably shared space. At any rate, none of them convey the tragic dimension of this sea. The aforementioned concept of the matrix fits this profile. 'Mediterranean Matrix' contains the seductive idea that the sea is a nurturing body, providing goods and food like a mother nourishing her offspring. It also designates a network that links together all the children of a unique and united region. However, in light of contemporary tragic events in the Mediterranean; in the presence of decades of prolific literary, cultural, and artistic productions all centering around the notion of a homicidal sea; and finally, in the wake of ongoing pressures on Maghrebi governments to make the waters a clandestine migration-free zone, the matrix ceases to fulfill its nurturing nature and instead fits more and more the profile of a 'Mare Mortis,' a liquid body filling with murdered bodies. Its weapon is a network of anti-immigration policies, police, and practices that turn innocent lives propelled by their dreams into lifeless fish caught in nets. The image of the net espouses the form of the web that a spider spins, and the net symbolizes a federated European network where each participating state helps create a mesh to screen unwelcome *harragas* in the Mediterranean. One could argue that, like Toutia, the net, too, has a double function: its goal is to sieve (clandestine migrants) and save (refugees) – although more and more asylum-seekers are being left to die in the presence of European ships and humanitarian organizations that are forbidden by authorities to lend a helping hand.

Mohsen Melliti is a Tunisian director based in Italy who has taken on the topic of clandestine migration in innovative ways, playing with ambiguity, ambivalence, duplicity, and duality. For *Io, l'altro*'s cast, Melliti hired two Italian actors to play the Sicilian and Tunisian protagonists. Yousef is believed to be a terrorist involved in the 2004 Madrid attacks that took place at the Antocha train station, causing the deaths of 191 people. Weaving religious subtexts into his work, Melliti addresses terrorism, xenophobia, islamophobia, and mass media. He also explores 'fake news' – about fifteen years before this term was popularized.[11] The two business partners and friends try to catch fish, which are becoming scarce in the sea. One night, they fish a dead East African female migrant out of the water, catching her in their net some-

where between Sicily and Tunisia, most likely in the vicinity of Lampedusa, several years before this island became one of the symbols of the 'refugee crisis.' Deceptively simple, the tragedy allows the filmmaker to subtly comment on macropolitics with reference to the Italian colonial era and to tackle maritime necropolitics in a neocolonial area. Through the North-South binary, Melliti is able to savvily announce toxic and unbalanced Africa-Europe power relationships and denounce the state-sponsored abuses of what I dub the 'necropolice' in the necropolis – an underwater site of corpses in a deadly sea. He shows that long-standing dynamics, as well as the past, present, and future identity and history of two distant lands, play out thousands of miles away from the Horn of Africa (where the dead female stranger comes from), right in the Mediterranean Sea which both separates and connects a former colony and its colonizer. And what is true for Italy-The Horn of Africa holds true for Italy-Tunisia. Indeed, *Io, l'altro* (2007) not only flashes back to the past of Italian Somaliland, but also simultaneously and presciently flashes forward to the Jasmine Revolution.[12] In the first days of social unrest in their country, on a single night thousands of Tunisians went to sea and attempted to reach Lampedusa, taking advantage of the slackening of controls by the Tunisian customs officers due to the protests.

One of the film's points is that if Italian society is not yet ready to identify African migrants as coming from a shared past, it will continue to endorse the policies of politicians like Matteo Salvini and extremist parties that exclude today's refugees. Meanwhile, the figure of the African migrant is welcomed in Melliti's film and identified by Yousef as a *harraga*. As a former *harrag* himself, he hypothesizes that she must have been the victim of a smugglers' habit of throwing women overboard first if spotted by the coast guard, in order to stand a better chance at outmaneuvering the authorities with a lightened boatload. Ironically, in spite of his denunciation of this practice, he throws her body overboard, in part for fear of the consequences of hosting an 'illegal' migrant. As more and more big catch (humans) replaces the small fry (actual fish) in the Mediterranean and at a time of uncertain politics, Yousef fears that his fragile status as a resident in Europe might suffer and that his previous condition as a clandestine migrant might land him in trouble. Melliti's own country of origin offered the world a first-rate example supporting the argument that issues in the Maghreb have repercussions in the Mediterranean and beyond.

The lives of migrants and their remains are brought to our attention and to the surface of the sea for the world to behold. As they resurface, questions and

concerns are raised. Some of these are post- and neo-colonial patterns and matters left unresolved at the margin of Europe and its former colonies. Now, personified by dead brown and black bodies, evaded questions, concerns, and patterns knock on the closed gates of Europe's fortress. This fortress is surrounded by a moat to keep the Other at bay. Death fills the moat that no longer protects the fortress but infects and haunts it. Until it is able to remember (memorialize and honor the memory of the dead) and re-member (piece their bodies together and bring justice to the situation), it will have no peace. It so happens that *mawt* in Arabic – pronounced in colloquial Maghrebi Arabic like the English *moat* – means 'death.' *Io, l'altro* posits that the sea is a moat where death, or *mawt*, takes place. So does a scene from Chus Gutiérrez's *Retorno a Hansala*. In this Spanish film, just a few meters away from the shore, an individual drowns, kidnapped by the call of Eldorado that did not fulfill its promise of a promised land – a firm land where firm laws rule, represented by the sight of the safe sand ahead. The camera plunges downward to reveal the bed of sand at the bottom of the sea toward which the individual is slowly heading. This scene of drowning in the opening credits of *Retorno a Hansala* illustrates the idea that the war against the unwelcome Other is waged well outside Fortress Europe, into the sea that surrounds it and beyond.

3.4 Nets that Work and Networks that Don't: Walls and Wars All Around

Entanglements cause predicaments, suggesting that an entity (the Mediterranean Sea) once enjoyed a state of relative normalcy before it went awry (too many threads tied together, too many nations mired in policy knots, too many people caught in police nets, etc.). In other words, before entanglement there was order. But what was the order of things in and out of the Maghreb, and how to remedy the current disorder? Policies are implemented for nations to work together, but because nations on either side of the Mediterranean do not enjoy the same benefits and have disparate constituencies with varying rights, the network does not work. Bilateral networks (involving states on both sides of the sea) cannot work in the long run when they operate with inequitable power relations. Instead of fulfilling the promise of what 'relations' entail, namely 'connections,' they create a disconnect, widening the gaps between people and broadening the Mediterranean border. Conversely,

nets work. Military ships that patrol the sea to catch unwanted *harragas* are efficient and deadly.

Today's so-called 'global village' is a gated community. Surveillance systems using nets and walls, forming knots and waging wars, have turned one of the world's oldest matrices into one of the largest marine cemeteries, a seametery. The sieve-like structures created by the European Union serve as a grid in order to surveil (always) and rescue (sometimes) the Global South *harragas* escaping wars, poverty, and uprisings. The re-membering and remembrance of the drowned and their memories require memorials for alternative discourses to compete with and challenge those who caused their disappearance. The novel and film discussed here are examples of such memorials. Along with other contemporary representatives of Maghrebi literature and cinema, they offer a different sort of grid for comprehending how those who are confined like criminals under house arrest in a collective home – the Maghreb – are undergoing the consequences of the massive wall-ification of the Western world and the divisive war-ification against migration in, through, and around the Maghreb.

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Filmography

Retorno a Hansala. Directed by Chus Gutiérrez, 2008.

Io, l'altro. Directed by Mohsen Melliti, 2007.

Notes

1 For more information about the European Union's double actions as an entity that saves and sieves refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, see Abderrezak, "The Mediterranean Sieve".

2 As I explain in "The Mediterranean Sieve, Spring and Seametery" the use of '(Europe's) refugee crisis,' is problematic. In that essay, I propose the appellation 'refugees' crisis' as an attempt to rectify the focus imbedded in the widespread naming, which is in fact a misnomer, for it suggests that Europe bears the burden of refugeeism, whereas it is in fact certain countries in the Middle East and refugees themselves that do so. For simplicity's sake, here I use the common expression in single quotation marks.

3 I examine a few of these fictions and provide a definition and illustration of leavism in *Ex-Centric Migrations*.

4 Translations of quotes are mine unless otherwise noted.

5 See Abderrezak, *Ex-Centric Migrations*.

6 Brinda Mehta provides a compelling study of the small body of illiterature written by women in her chapter "Gender the Straits: Border Violence in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Lamiae El Amrani's *Tormenta de especias* (*A Torrent of Spices*)."

7 For an explanation as to why 'harragas' seems to be the most appropriate term to refer to migrants and refugees and to avoid unfortunate misnomers, see Abderrezak "The Mediterranean Sieve".

8 Among earlier publications are Mahi Binebine's *Cannibales* (*Welcome to Paradise*) and Youssouf Amine Elalamy's *Les Clandestins* (*Sea Drinkers*), published in 1999 and 2001 respectively. Their English translations appeared in 2004 for the former and in 2008 for the latter.

9 See Ben Jelloun, *Partir* 52; Jay 7; Peraldi and Rahmi 67.

10 In *Tu ne traverseras pas le détroit* Salim Jay turns the verb *partir* into a rallying cry, the ultimate dream : "Seulement un vertige en construction dans nos têtes. Un virage à négocier dans nos nerfs, une entaille à creuser. Partir!" (23) ('Only a vertigo building up in our heads. A curve to negotiate in our nerves, a cut to dig. Leave!').

11 This expression appears on page 141 of Linda Coverdale's English translation of *Partir*.

12 Áine O'Healy provides an excellent analysis of the film as well as a valid argument in terms of Italy's past resurfacing in the Mediter-

ranean through the figure of the Black female stranger/foreigner. For Italian postcolonial debates and lack thereof in society and discourse, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's co-edited volume, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity.*