

## CHAPTER 3

# A RETURN TO LIFE

## Narratives of Birth and Death in a Southern European Periphery

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### INTRODUCTION

Pà, you know I still see the dead? Each time the reports come on the news of the rescues at sea, I start to weep . . . But today I went back and dived right there . . . On the wreck sitting at the bottom of the sea, there are corals now, there's seaweed, there are fish swimming around. The first time there were just the corpses, but today the sea has transformed everything. I saw the overcoming of death. A return of life, that's it.

—Davide Enia, *Appunti per un Naufragio*

In this passage the Sicilian author Davide Enia quotes Simone, a Lampedusan professional diver, who describes how the sight of the resurgence of marine life on the hull of a sunken migrant boat lying on the seabed just off Tabaccara bay south of his native island helps him to overcome the painful memory of his experience of handling dozens of corpses from the same vessel three years before. After the boat had capsized, in the early hours of 3 October 2013, Simone had assisted the Italian Coast Guard (*Guardia Costiera*) in locating the wreck and had been the first diver to enter the hull, crammed with the bodies of drowned passengers. Sicilian fishers describe going to sea as a rite of passage: Ben-Yehoyada (2017: 111) quotes Hajj, a Tunisian-Mazarese fisherman: 'you who go in [the sea] are absent, and when you go out you are reborn.' While death at sea has always been a reality for Mediterranean fishing communities, it loomed large in the 2010s with the growing intensity of migrant crossings from North Africa, mostly departing

from Libya since the fall of its autocratic leader Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011, and in line with the increasing European restrictions on regular migration channels imposed since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Local fishers now perish less often at sea, but these irregular crossings produce new victims, strangers to the island's fishing community, construed officially as 'migrants' or 'asylum seekers', many of whom are women and children. During the 2010s, gateways into the European Union such as Lampedusa grew synonymous with media representations and political discourses of a 'crisis' of migration in the Mediterranean, characterized as 'archipelagos of melancholia', surrounded by a 'watery grave' (Sarnelli 2015: 150–51). Migrant maritime disasters made a powerful mark on the public imagination in Italy and abroad, especially in Sicily, and most of all among those working in rescue and treatment of passengers saved at sea, and in the handling of the remains of those who died. Often thousands of people were saved at sea by the coast guard in a single week, and after large disasters, such as those that occurred on 3 October 2013 and 19 April 2015, the emergency services must handle the remains of hundreds of victims (ANSA 2016; Marceca, Viviano and Ziniti 2015; Tervonen and Pourquié 2017). Survivors present serious physical and mental health conditions and complications related both to violence experienced on the trail and to the conditions of the crossing (Crepet et al. 2017; Grotti et al. 2008). Yet local people and migrants alike frequently emphasize the way that the passage of time and the succession of seasons and ecological processes can contribute to healing and to a return to life. Based on our interviews and everyday interactions with migrants who have survived the crossing to Lampedusa or Sicily, with local people, and with healthcare staff and personnel in reception centres in small rural communities, we explore the trope of the return to life through kinship, work and reproduction as an expression of a transcultural effort to re-emerge from the shadow of abandonment, violence and death.

## DEATH AND THE REGENERATION OF LIFE

The theme of 'death and the regeneration of life' recalls the classic work of that name by Bloch and Parry (1982), which evokes two sides to the phenomenon we describe here: narratives of the rebirth of migrant personhood can be seen alongside a complementary narrative of social and ecological regeneration in a neglected and impoverished territory. These narratives are linked by the ways in which life exceeds the individual subject: much as death concerns not merely the physiological facts of bodily mortality but also the symbolic and sociological resonances of mortuary practices (Hertz 1960), life involves human and nonhuman agents in multifarious processes

of making (Pitrou 2017). Pitrou's approach to life suggests an interpretation compatible with a Maussian concept of the person, such that the individual person is composed of social relations and processes, evident in initiation rituals marking stages in the life cycle (naming, adulthood), in which death and rebirth are a dominant symbolic theme (Mauss 1985; cf. Van Gennep 1960). Death is not everywhere considered to be a 'matter of an instant', which is a view narrowly associated with a Western concept of the person as a bounded entity (Bloch 1988: 13). Life is reproduced through relations – not only those of kinship and sexuality, but also human–nonhuman relations, as Pitrou suggests. The severing of these relations, through separation and bereavement, can be experienced as a kind of death. Jackson's notion of the 'social death' from which migrants seek to escape is grounded in Spinoza's treatment of life and death as matters of degrees of being alive, rather than as absolute poles (Jackson 2013: 6). He draws on Ricoeur and Levinas to show how a 'quest for life itself' can justify movements across borders, since they place an ethics of living well before the morality of norms.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Pitrou (2017: 20) in taking an ecological view of life 'as the process of creating a relational system between beings', Jackson's modest-sounding concept of the 'wherewithal of life' can be understood with greater force. Our interest here is in narratives of the undoing and remaking of relations between beings, and in their performativity, such that the story of the return to life may indeed itself help people to begin new lives.

The ecological dimension of the themes of death and rebirth was already implicit in the motif of the sacrifice of a sacred king in fertility cults, explored in Frazer's (1922) famous study, and Hocart (1936), Dumézil (1968) and Sahlin (1981) all explored aspects of the relationships between kingship, alterity (the 'stranger king') and fertility or rebirth.<sup>3</sup> Without asserting that the symbolic resonances of migrant reception in southern Italy as a return to life constitute a direct iteration of this ancient theme, we suggest that the formal resemblance is worth noting. Migration journeys described as death and rebirth, and migrant reception described as a return to life for migrants and local communities, together offer a compelling symmetry with the ritual process of death and rebirth and the role of an outsider (Frazer's inquiry begins with the escaped slave in the cult at Nemi) in renewing fertility and prosperity through the performance of a sacrifice. Perhaps this symmetry may offer a window into patterns of human thought and action that defy narrower culturalist or mechanistic explanations. What is certain is that these motifs have a powerful cross-cultural hold on the human imagination.

Migration research has largely eschewed considerations of myth or symbolism, even while emphasizing the theme of life. Border regimes have been described as reducing the possibilities for a life worth living, by confining people to reception or 'detention' centres and rendering them temporarily

immobile (Andersson 2014). Less attention has been paid to the possibilities for life that exist during such times of waiting (Rotter 2015). We focus on particular kinds of reception centres in which the beginnings and ends of life play central roles: centres for migrant maternity and perinatal care, and centres for unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking and women suffering from mental health conditions resulting from trauma. Many of the migrants there described crossing borders as ritual events marking symbolic death and rebirth, and the centres we studied explicitly aim to provide the wherewithal for starting a new life, leaving death behind. They strive towards the form of ethical action constituting a new beginning that Arendt (1958: 178) called 'natality'. Their functioning offers insight into the power of social and cultural notions and emotions related to the beginnings and ends of life, showing how they may attempt to transcend or escape biopolitical regimes of control by offering new possibilities for the regeneration of the relations between living beings.

## BIRTH IN BORDERLANDS

We carried out field research from September 2016 to June 2017 in south-eastern Sicily. Vanessa Grotti studied migrant maternity and perinatal clinics, with contributions from Chiara Quagliariello,<sup>4</sup> who carried out additional fieldwork in Palermo and Lampedusa. They examined small clinics (*poliambulatori*) and larger wards (*maternità*) that assess, treat and follow reproductive care patients at various stages of rescue and reception. Italy's state-funded universal healthcare system provides medical assistance to undocumented or unregistered patients, regardless of their legal status. Within this framework, reproductive care and paediatrics are considered national priorities protected by law, especially for patients deemed 'vulnerable' such as pregnant women and minors. In places where demand for medical assistance to undocumented patients is high, such as urban centres and borderlands, medical assistance to migrants is provided in specialized healthcare centres, with the assistance of interpreters (when funds are available), and the centres are often staffed by doctors and healthcare personnel who have chosen this type of work out of a sense of civic or religious duty. Contracts and work schedules in migrant clinics in peripheral, structurally under-resourced borderlands are often precarious and exhausting. In the case of southern Sicily and Lampedusa, these migrant health centres often function on the emergency model, providing assistance and specialized services around the clock, seven days a week. This is particularly true of the medical services present on board rescue ships and in ports. While nongovernmental organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Save

the Children play a role in the rescue operations, almost all medical care is provided by mostly Sicilian state employees, in public structures. This trend is especially strong in reproductive and maternity care services.

Sicilian health workers frequently raised the theme of the ways in which birth and death are intertwined in the Mediterranean. After Vanessa and Chiara started fieldwork in the health clinics that were created for migrant care in a borderland characterized by high death tolls from maritime disasters, it quickly became noticeable that medical staff were drawing symbolic links between birth and death. Healthcare staff, midwives and rescue personnel pondered the subject of death when talking about birth, as they spoke about the emotional toll and profound satisfaction they felt from their practice, and the feeling of relief and healing they felt when witnessing and assisting a live birth in the midst of suffering and desperation. This theme of life emerging from tragedy was taken up by public figures: in a tweet posted by the then mayor of Lampedusa, Giusi Nicolini, on 4 September 2015, we are told of the triumph of life over death: above a photograph of a newborn baby she writes, 'yesterday evening life and death arrived in #Lampedusa, but the winner was him: born on Motorboat @guardiacostiera #azzurromare.'<sup>5</sup> After rescue operations of extreme tension and drama, in which a handful of emergency workers race against death and grapple with split-second moral dilemmas over whom to save as they struggle to recover scores of drowning victims, the birth of a live and healthy baby on board a rescue ship is described as a moment of collective healing and happiness.

Yet migrant women's experience is not generally characterized by healing or catharsis. If Bloch and Parry highlighted the recurrence of the themes of fertility, sexuality and rebirth in funeral rituals and other mortuary practices, Vanessa's field research seemed to expose the other side of the coin: the way that death and disintegration may be present at the time of birth, but also that choosing death over birth may be necessary to heal broken bodies. Most women seeking reproductive care in southern Sicily and Lampedusa spoke of feeling that their bodies were no longer their own, as a result of the physical and mental abuse they had suffered on their migration trail. In comparison with the equivalent data collected by members of Vanessa's research team in other EU borderlands, such as Greece and Spain, the women who had arrived from Libya had endured considerably greater levels of violent abuse and exploitation. She did not intend to study the subject of the termination of pregnancy in relation to pregnant migrants in EU borderlands, but it soon became evident that due to the particular context of trafficking, violence and assault that women have to endure on the central Mediterranean route, the original scope of her team's research had to open up to integrate wider aspects of reproductive health, and to include unwanted pregnancies and medical conditions such as amenorrhea, as these represent two

prominent areas of medical intervention requiring referral to specialized clinics in regional centres such as Palermo. Chiara found that biomedical staff described their choices for referral and treatment as being a way to help women rebuild their bodies and their senses of self; while they were deeply aware of the limitations of the services provided by the region, for instance the lack of mental health advisors and interpreters, their decision-making was informed by their stated attempts to heal the whole person, including her physical and mental states. The women felt that their potential reproductive forces had been shattered, and their own bodies had become aberrant to themselves. In some cases this was due to physical violence; in others, it was due to having taken or having been forced to take multiple doses of hormonal suppressants that halted their menses, with long-lasting effects. Their ability to give life had been suspended or terminated, disrupting or eliminating an entire life-stage – that of their fertile womanhood. Despite their youth, they felt as if they had become old women, in a brutal distortion of their cosmological role. Indeed they felt that they had become other to themselves – they barely recognized their own humanity. In equating this sensation to death, they evoked a conception of death that is articulated more clearly by certain animist peoples according to Istvan Praet (2013), for whom death is a form of alterity, rather than non-entity: in this sense, when one no longer recognizes oneself, one may consider oneself dead. Such cases demonstrate that the clinics' regenerative aims were often frustrated in practice.

## HEALING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Special reception centres for vulnerable migrants seek to offer relief from the chaos and high tension of the rescue and first reception at sea, and from the immediate aftermath of landing in Italian ports. They provide an opportunity for recovery and healing after traumatic journeys that have usually lasted several years. In Italy, the law allows asylum seekers to take part in 'social integration' programmes and to attend school, and these centres are part of the publicly funded SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which takes a holistic approach to migrant reception, including rehabilitation through counselling and initiatives for social 'inclusion' (a term they prefer to 'integration'). Marc Brightman studied several such centres, situated in quiet country towns in Syracuse province and managed by the social enterprise Passwork under contract with the local authorities. Passwork's director, Sebino Scaglione, told Marc that he sees his objective as being to help the people hosted by his organization to regain personal 'autonomy' by guiding them through administrative processes, helping

them to engage with local communities through cultural activities and community work, and helping them to obtain employment. There are considerable obstacles to all of these objectives: many asylum claims are rejected, and some people spontaneously leave the centres to continue their journeys without waiting for their papers to be processed.<sup>6</sup> The directions of Scaglione's efforts are nonetheless in marked contrast to the kind of 'infantilization' of migrants that occurs at large migrant detention centres (Andersson 2014: 185). Within reception centres, migrants' lives are structured by the physical environment and by the rhythms of daily life. The social life of the centre necessarily reinforces a shared sense of being migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, patients – more precisely, of having a place of asylum or refuge after a perilous journey, at least in a moral sense, if not (yet) officially. Especially in the case of trafficked women, but also for minors (and especially for those who fit into both categories), relations with outsiders are controlled and limited by the centre personnel; yet these personnel try to organize as many activities and outings as they can, and nearly all of the minors attend local schools.

Tomi's<sup>7</sup> story illustrates the experience shared by many. Short and wiry, Tomi describes himself as having a strong personal philosophy of 'getting on in life'. He comes from Guinea, from the Peul community, in Ratoma (a part of Conakry strongly associated with the opposition to the government of President Moussa Dadis Camara). He recounts how the army killed and arrested demonstrators against the government; they came to Ratoma where they beat and raped the women and arrested men and boys.<sup>8</sup> On 9 November 2015, Tomi escaped from prison and left the country; he fled to Mali, then to Libya, where he worked in the construction industry. He had to work twelve hours a day, and at the end of the day, he would never be sure whether the 'Arab'<sup>9</sup> in charge of the work squad would pay wages or threaten him with his gun instead. In Libya he lived in a prison where the prisoners were beaten daily. They received tiny amounts of bread and water to eat and drink. There were even more flagrant forms of slavery, including for sex.<sup>10</sup> In Libya, he said, a Black person cannot move around freely – they risk arrest, imprisonment and extortion<sup>11</sup> – the water is undrinkable and they cannot obtain medical care. One of his companions had malaria and asked to go to hospital; the 'Arab' took him away, and later said that he had brought him to a hospital for people with AIDS or Ebola. The man never returned. Some time later, following a collective beating, Tomi and his companions had the courage to ask what had happened to the ill man. Asking such a question was a challenge to the 'Arab's' authority, and asking it was risking punishment by death, but, Tomi says, 'we were all together, so he wouldn't kill all of us'. The 'Arab' answered that he had taken the man into the desert and killed him. One day the 'Arab' suddenly said, 'I'm going to get rid of you – go and die',

and the next day Tomi was taken to a boat. It was his first time travelling on water; there were some women and children sleeping; when he raised his head and saw water all around, he felt dizzy. A Nigerian had a telephone to call the Italian Coast Guard, but he had exhausted the battery. After a long and frightening time lost at sea, a helicopter flew over them and took an aerial photograph to identify the boat's helmsman. There were 130 people on board, including forty women, some of whom were pregnant. They were saved by Spaniards. Tomi comments that according to Islam, if you die in the water, you are responsible for your own soul.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, many people prefer to die in the water than to stay in Libya.

Since arriving in the south-eastern Sicilian port of Pozzallo a year and a half earlier, Tomi had lived in a reception centre for minors in the small town of Palazzolo Acreide, in the Hyblaeen hills. There, he had to work because he received no pocket money and no clothes; he picked peas, spinach and beans as an undeclared labourer, at a rate of EUR 15 for seven hours. He said that he did not want to work in the countryside again – it is too hard. Here in Florida, he recently passed the examination of the third year of middle school, and he hopes to become a geologist and to travel the world.

Many people told us of how they had escaped death by drowning only to spend months in overcrowded first-stage reception centres in Italy, far from urban centres, where they were fed badly and were denied the meagre allowance they were due: most felt lost, disorientated and not yet ready to make their own way.<sup>13</sup> Almost all of them were between the ages of 15 and 25. The social inclusion initiatives can take many forms: in 2017 the young men at the SPRAR in Florida chose to clean the municipal cemetery, as an act of commemoration for those who had died at sea. At Carnival they acted as a human cordon, donning fluorescent jackets and holding a rope to protect the crowd of onlookers from straying into the path of the procession. In the summer of 2017, Marc took part in a ceramic art project in several of the reception centres, together with two local artists, to produce a collective work to be displayed permanently in the town centre – tellingly, this project celebrating migrant reception as urban renewal was not fully realized, despite having the support of the mayor, and instead culminated in a temporary exhibition. During the same summer, the boys in the centre for minors in Canicattini Bagni, who attend the local middle school, participated in a production of Aeschylus's play *The Suppliants* at the annual European youth theatre festival in Palazzolo Acreide. According to the abilities and experience of the individuals concerned, the SPRAR organizes paid work experience or apprenticeship programmes, sometimes leading to employment contracts. These small successes are enabled by a belief, continually reaffirmed by the centre's staff, and, more waveringly, by its inhabitants, in the possibility of a return to life.





**Figure 3.1.** The cast of *The Suppliants* at the Akrai Greek theatre in Palazzo Acreide. © Marc Brightman.

In these small rural towns where most young people of working age go to seek employment elsewhere (in the city, in northern Italy or in Northern Europe), those sympathetic to the work of refugee hospitality regard the refugees as a resource for the community, a potential source of new vitality, as the mayor of Canicattini Bagni, Paolo Amenta, enthusiastically told Marc to explain his support for Passwork. The programme most symbolic of this vision is the collaboration between the SPRAR and Arcolaio, an NGO that cultivates and gathers aromatic herbs (rosemary [*Rosmarinus officinalis*], wild sage [*Salvia triloba*, better for essential oils], domestic sage [*Salvia officinalis*], parsley [*Petroselinum crispum*] and wild fennel [*Foeniculum vulgare*]) in the Hyblaeen hills. At first it used labour as a form of rehabilitation for newly released prisoners, and it subsequently included refugees. The herbs are sold through a solidarity network, and the essential oils are being sold to the cosmetics company Lush, through the British NGO Gaia Education. One participant in this programme, Ali, found his vocation, and went into partnership with Mario, a former schoolteacher and IT engineer, to create a small farm on permaculture and agroecology principles, producing saffron and olives in addition to the aromatic herbs. Ali's case is a good example of the 'autonomy' that Sebino strives to obtain for his wards.

Few of the teenagers and young men and women in these reception centres, and fewer still in the perinatal clinics, have clear ambitions or visions for the paths ahead of them, and they find their way tentatively, improvising and taking opportunities as they arise. Some sink into depression and will not discuss their futures. But most young migrants in Sicily take extraordinary care of their appearance, spending what little money they have on new, colourful shoes and clothing – their bright colours stand out like a new skin, symbolizing new life, the new start that they hope to make.<sup>14</sup> Others request that their old travelling clothes be destroyed, to help them forget. The importance of this change of clothes should not be underestimated – other authors have noted the way that clothes can create connections between biological and social selves (Basu and Coleman 2008) or express personhood (Küchler and Miller 2005), but in this case the act of donning new clothes expresses a metamorphosis of the kind we are used to encountering in native Amazonia, where cosmological mobility is accompanied by the changing of ‘skin’ (in the Trio language, ‘skin’ and ‘clothes’ are known by the same word); even more than this, it suggests a social transformation evoking the symbolic rebirth characteristic of initiation rituals; yet in the absence of formal organization, ritual ideology or explicit articulation of the ritual aspects of this transformation, we can only compare these symbolic elements.

Some migrants in the reception centres in Sicily do gradually start new lives. One woman, living in the sanctuary for refugee women with psychological trauma in Canicattini, succeeded in becoming an apprentice pastry chef in the Corsino pastry shop of Palazzolo Acreide, awarded the prize of best pastry shop in Sicily and listed in the prestigious *Gambero Rosso* restaurant guide. But the promise of a new life can be illusory: Sebino and his colleagues worried about another woman who was clinging to a possible job opportunity as a hairdresser in Turin. Far away in Piedmont, they suspected that she might once again fall into the hands of her traffickers, to be coerced once more into prostitution; yet they had conflicting feelings because they were at the same time keen to support her in her desire to become autonomous and begin a new life with her infant son. These two examples also illustrate that Sicily can be more than a mere stage on migrant journeys with destinations in large metropolitan cities or in Northern Europe, as is commonly imagined. Very few of the people we met had a clear idea of their destination, and those who did want to travel north usually hoped to join family members. Some people would travel as far as Scandinavia, before coming, or returning, to Syracuse (Passwork 2015). Others would be glad to go anywhere they were offered a job; others still chose to settle and start their new lives in Syracuse or in the Hyblaeen hills.

## KINSHIP, REBIRTH AND PERSONHOOD

However they may begin, the journeys that migrants make along the central Mediterranean route have the effect of blurring any possible distinction between refugees and economic migrants – by the time they reach Italy, most migrants have lost nearly everything, have suffered torture and bereavement and cannot go back. Social death, at least in the case of the central Mediterranean route, does not necessarily occur at the migrant's place of origin; instead, while it may begin there, it is drawn out and gradually completed during the course of the journey itself. Before arriving in reception centres, migrants have left their homes, their kin, their countries, gradually shedding layers of sociality as they went. There is an important reason that these refugees' personhood is so powerfully defined by their deadly crossings: each of them has become socially alone, without kin. At each stage of their journeys they were separated from familiar relations. First they left their homes and immediate families, and then, as they moved from one form of bondage to another along the migration trail, they were separated repeatedly from companions, and lost most of their possessions. But beyond this, going back to their first departures, we discovered that many of these young people left their homes because of problems with kinship. Many girls fled because they were being forced to marry: for instance, one girl, Mina, from Nigeria, was from a Catholic family and fell in love with a Muslim man from Senegal; her parents opposed the marriage, and the couple eloped, first to Burkina Faso, and then to Libya. Another Nigerian girl, Hope, discovered when she finished school that her education had been paid for by a friend of her father, in exchange for her as his third wife. Many boys left after falling out with fathers or uncles, such as Sam, from Guinea, who left after being mistreated by his uncle, with whom he was sent to live in the city when his father was killed in political violence. The breakdown of family relations, often intertwined with political turmoil and violence more conventionally associated with refugee narratives, has repercussions for these young people following their arrival in Europe, because it reduces the possibility for them to reconnect with their kin using social media.

Family reunifications after the trail are often complicated. For instance, Blessing, from Nigeria, was living in Libya with her 9-year-old son. She decided that it had become too dangerous to stay there, but only managed to find passage to Italy for him. She sent him ahead alone. It took her four years to find a way to follow him, and when she arrived, she found that he had been taken in by a Sicilian foster family in Florida. He had adopted a new identity through family life and school, and at first he wanted nothing to do with his biological mother. Blessing, traumatized by her journey and by her break with her son, was taken in by the sanctuary for vulnerable women

migrants, where, over time, she was able gradually to rebuild a relationship with her son.

Migrants rebuild social relations in the idiom of kinship and processual consanguinity, even from within reception centres. The teenage boys and girls in these centres call each other brothers and sisters, in a fraternity they say was forged through the experiences of suffering that they have shared (cf. Weston 1991). Yet this solidarity, expressed as kinship, may in fact be a symptom of trauma, or a temporary coping mechanism, rather than a way of overcoming social death. The psychologist working at one of the centres we studied reflected on an Eritrean girl's description of being in a prison camp in Libya, where she and all of the prisoners were forced to kneel in a space barely large enough to contain them; they were so close together they could not move. When they were fed, the guards threw bread into the space. Those fortunate enough to catch some pieces of bread never tried to take as much as possible for themselves, but instead, the pieces were divided up so that everybody received a share, however small. One day the same girl, in the reception centre, started an argument with some other girls over a sandwich, which she was determined to have for herself. How was it possible that here, where there was plenty to eat for everyone, the girls would fight over food, when in Libya they had shared their scarce rations equally? The psychologist hypothesized that, during the ordeal of camp life, individual identities become submerged, allowing the formation of a single body of people; when a person becomes well again, the individual re-emerges, sometimes leading to conflicts and disputes. Her interpretation is consistent with analyses of migrants' political protests as important expressions of their personhood and agency, in contrast to the dehumanizing (albeit well-intentioned) accounts of their suffering (Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram 2016). However, rather than undermining the processual kinship relations that have been forged through suffering, we suspect that this re-emergence of the individual allows for the strengthening of particular ties and the breaking of others – a heterogenization of the ties of relatedness characteristic of vital processes.

There is a strong temptation for researchers to represent the migrant as a suffering subject. Once they have shed relations of kinship, many friendships and possessions, and been housed in a structure that frames them as objects of care and charity, it is difficult to see beyond their individual plight. But in yielding to this temptation, as Heath Cabot (2016) has argued, what ethnographers or advocates portray are little more than ghosts – absent presences – in which the subjects in question may scarcely even recognize themselves. Such representations neglect other dimensions of the social worlds of migration, reducing diverse moral and cultural subjectivities to positions of (instrumentalized) oppressor or oppressed under regimes of governmentality (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016). This no doubt tells part of the story. But

we are not convinced that control, discipline or governmentality are the principal motive forces behind migrant reception, or that the provision of universal healthcare for migrant patients or the operation of small reception centres for migrants can only be analysed through this lens. At the very least, the border regime itself is a diverse system, and in its margins there lie new possibilities for life (cf. Tsing 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Narratives of suffering tend to treat subjects as isolated individuals. Instead, kinship resurfaces at every opportunity, not only among migrants themselves: often local families become guardians, foster parents or adoptive parents for migrant children, and while it is easy to argue for why children have a need for parents, it is worth thinking about the motivations of Sicilians and other Italians who want to care for them. All that we can be sure of is that they see migrant children without kin, they recognize their need for kin and they feel impelled to reciprocate by satisfying this need – but, as with acts of grace as defined by Julian Pitt-Rivers, these acts of becoming guardians or fosterers, or of adoption, also transcend reciprocity (Pitt-Rivers 2012; Grotti and Brightman 2019).

We have seen that migrants in reception centres call each other brothers and sisters, and it is not unusual for notional consanguinity to be a way of bypassing or neutralizing alterity, creatively transforming kinship to ensure social reproduction (Grotti 2012). Similarly, Vilaça (2010) has shown how the Wari' readily adopted Protestant Christianity because it made it possible for them to bypass the danger and ambivalence of affinal relations by calling each other brothers and sisters, helping them to maintain their social cohesion in a time of severe social trauma and crisis. But the ethnography of Amazonia demonstrates that while consanguineal relationships may be desirable and reassuring, they are ultimately sterile (Henley 2001). In the case that we are discussing this is true for migrants as well as for local communities. We are referring here not to the cases of guardianship, fostering and adoption, but rather more broadly to Sicilian communities that have themselves been gradually left sterile through decades of abandonment through emigration. The land itself has been abandoned by farmers, and projects such as that of Arcolaio seek to regenerate it. Migrants, as objects of hospitality, are stranger-guests, and as Pitt-Rivers (2012: 504; cf. Grotti and Brightman 2019) writes, 'the status of guest . . . stands midway between that of hostile stranger and that of community member'. This midway status, in terms of kinship, evokes affinity and thus the potential for the creation of new life in the form of social reproduction.

Finally, it is through time that relations of alterity can be turned into relations of affinity or kinship: by physical proximity in the materiality of a landscape, sustained interaction or shared substance through commensality. For migrants in Sicilian migrant reception centres and clinics are not merely subjected to the medical or institutional gaze, and the time of waiting there is not just reduced to an endless liminal state of disciplining suspension. On the contrary, as these migrants wait, they weave new webs of consanguinity and affinity, hoping to be reborn as new social persons, and sometimes succeeding. In their relationship with the other – with local inhabitants, and with reception and medical personnel – the memory of suffering and bereavement produces a cathartic effect, which, as Cabot (2016: 655) argues, ‘may incite a transformation of the relationship between self and other, demanding a different vision of how the body politic is constituted’, that is, a ‘vision of tragedy which centres on the power of encounter, indeterminacy, and potentially also transformation: in other words, possibility.’<sup>15</sup> Death, as Bloch and Parry (1982) suggested, can lead the living to act to create or reconfigure social order.

If migrants’ descriptions of their own journeys in terms of death and rebirth frame them as rites of passage, meanwhile in the marginalized places of Sicily, where people feel abandoned by the Italian state, migrant reception actors associate migrants’ efforts to return to life with the possibility of social and ecological renewal: strangers and ‘devalued outsiders’ (though hardly kings) representing hopes of restoring the land’s prosperity. This view echoes the utilitarian arguments of economists who suggest that young migrants are necessary to correct the demographic deficit due to low birth rates in Europe, especially in Italy (Bagavos 2022). To be sure, the compassion that many ordinary people show to migrants in borderland ‘hotspots’ like Sicily and Lampedusa starkly contrasts with widespread political expressions of fear, resentment and prejudice, and the calls for migrants to be allowed to revitalize the economy stoke the incendiary narrative of replacement theory (Shatz et al. 2022). As Henri-Georges Clouzot (1949) powerfully illustrates in the post-war film *Retour à la vie*, the return to life can be traumatic, messy and prone to failure, challenging the optimism of utopian visions of resurgence. But the will to live persists, and with it the narrative of return.

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## NOTES

This chapter is based on research carried out by Vanessa Grotti as part of her ERC Starting Grant project ‘EU Border Care’ (grant no. 638259) and by Marc Brightman with the support of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship and a EURIAS fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Bologna. Initial ideas and versions of this chapter were presented in 2017 at the ‘(Un)Making Lives’ workshop held at the European University Institute, and in 2018 at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting and at seminars in the departments of anthropology at UCL and the University of Edinburgh. We would like to thank all participants for their comments and suggestions, and especially wish to thank Chiara Quagliariello for her contribution to some of the data presented for Lampedusa and Sicily. We are indebted to the local authorities, healthcare and social workers, activists and regional employees, patients, migrants and students who agreed to engage with the research in Sicily and Lampedusa. This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Nick Allen, whose ideas were an early source of inspiration.

1. Arrivals in Lampedusa began to significantly decrease from 2017 due to Italian and EU policy measures to contain migration from the African continent, especially through cooperation with the Libyan authorities.
2. This ‘quest for life’ can also be seen as a sort of resistance, and an assertion of legitimacy; cf. Krause, this volume.
3. Allen (2007: 192) writes that the ‘fourth function’ that he identifies in Indo-European myth ‘is defined as covering what is other, outside, or beyond relative to the three “classical” functions [identified by Dumézil], and its positive aspect covers sovereigns, kings, founders, and creators, while its negative aspect covers enemies, slaves, demons, and other devalued outsiders’. Greater attention has been paid to kingship as this ‘positive aspect’ of the fourth function, and rather less to the symbolic dimensions of ‘devalued outsiders’.
4. A postdoctoral fellow on Grotti’s ERC research project ‘EU Border Care’.
5. Giusi Nicolini (@giusi\_nicolini), 2015, ‘Ieri sera a #Lampedusa sono arrivate vita e morte, ma ha vinto lui: nato su Motovedetta @guardiacostiera #azzurromare’, Twitter, 4 September, retrieved 21 November 2023 from [https://twitter.com/giusi\\_nicolini/status/639700710033092608](https://twitter.com/giusi_nicolini/status/639700710033092608). In fact the baby was a girl.
6. Problems connected to documentation can continue even into the next generation; see Tuckett, this volume.

7. We use pseudonyms for persons (except public figures) throughout.
8. These events are discussed in a UNHCHR report (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2014).
9. Tomi uses the term ‘Arab’ to designate a member of Libya’s majority Arabized Berber population.
10. The extent to which rape has become a weapon of terror in Libya has yet to be properly understood; the investigative journalist Cécile Allegra (2017) offers a first appraisal.
11. The form this generally takes is that the prisoner is forced to contact their family members and is tortured; they must ask their family to send money to end the torture.
12. We have found no evidence that this is part of Islamic doctrine, but this by no means diminishes the emotional consequences of holding such a belief.
13. Rather than being a clear matter of (in)competence in either case (Mahmud, this volume), the emergency response in Italian borderlands suggests very high technical competence, whereas in first-stage reception centres it is difficult to disentangle accusations of mismanagement from the problems arising from insufficient resources.
14. As Edmondo de Amicis described (1996), Italian emigrants in the nineteenth century did the same thing.
15. There is a kind of scholarly myth of origin of Greek tragedy, which suggests that it arose out of Dionysian rituals ‘connected with the circling year, the mysteries of death and rebirth, alternating joy and sorrow’ (Kitto 1960: 3), whose doubtful basis in historical fact does not prevent the association from persisting.

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