

Island Identities in Question: Defining the Borders of Fortress Europe

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SOCI 300: Independent Study on Mediterranean Migration

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May 13, 2016

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Situated between democratic, developed, mostly Christian nations in the north and economically and politically unstable, mostly Islamic ones in the south, the Mediterranean has been a place of conflict for hundreds of years (King 2001:10). Trade of goods, knowledge, and people took place on these waters, through both harmonious and contentious interactions. Despite the occasionally hostile relationship between powers on either side, the Mediterranean as a border was never regulated as much as it is today. 'Fortress Europe' was born out of the 1999 Schengen Agreement that deconstructed the interior borders of Europe, thus allowing for movement without a passport within them, and shifting the involved members' focus to their exterior boundaries. This ability, to move freely, thus needed protection since power comes from the ability to disseminate rights. Although the Fortress is rarely questioned since those who created it are the hegemonic powers, analyzing where their power comes from reveals how arbitrary the lines delineating which people are 'in' and which are 'out.'

The furthest border is located in water, a constantly moving entity. Lampedusa, is a small Italian island in the Mediterranean, halfway between Malta and Tunisia. Not by any action of its own, it is located along the frontier and thus charged with the responsibility to manage the migration flow along the Central Mediterranean Route – to receive and turn away migrants. This foreign assignment misaligns with how the island itself would like to be seen: not as a border but as a gateway into Europe. However, given the necessity of processing and treating the ill, desperate migrants, Lampedusa has honorably taken on this responsibility; as a consequence, the island is in limbo until migration flows shift and the island can return to a self-regulated rhythm.

The Schengen Agreement manages those concrete exterior borders, known as the 'hard core' and beyond this, there are fluid, 'concentric circles' protected by Frontex; the 'Fortress' is made-up of both components. The instability of those circles, however, has led to inconsistent

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management. It is at times over militarized and at others, ignored so as to evade the responsibilities that come with monitoring a common migration route (Deutinger 2014:50). The concept of border ‘management’ itself calls into question the stability and very existence of “borders.” “Borderization,” as coined by sociologist and geographer Paolo Cuttitta, is the tactic of dedicating human and social resources to substantiate the borders (Cuttitta 2014:199). In the EU’s case, this has been most visible through the establishment of detention centers and the increase of border control ships (Cuttitta 2014:203). In his book, *Crimes of Peace*, Maurizio Albahari discusses this tension surrounding the borders. He addresses the fact that boundaries were created to protect and delineate ‘Fortress Europe’ from outsiders but they also serve as a filtration system for “desirable migrants” (2015:87). In order to decide who is not desirable, there needs to be a collective understanding of who is desirable. This relies on the existence of a nation-state; the state being responsible for the nation, thus making the protection of “inalienable human rights” only accessible to *national* citizens. The people outside of these national borders are therefore dehumanized since they lack *human* rights, justifying their marginalization and the very need for those borders (Czajka 2014:155).

Fortress Europe has a history-however, of breaking its southern-most boundaries. Long before 1999, Fernand Braudel described the Mediterranean as “a human unit” (1972). Corsica, Algiers, Greece, and many other nations supplied migrants to mainland Europe and vice versa before the 20th century (Russell 2001:3). In the 1800s, as north to south movement turned into colonization rather than simply trade, Italy felt pressure to participate in the “scramble for Africa” and began to stake its claim over portions of land (Choate 2008:30). Having previously been a part of the ancient Roman Empire, Libya was invaded by Italians who felt they still held rights to the land (Choate 2008:33). This reasoning was flawed. Those who would eventually

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become the Romans evolved from African predecessors thus, according to this Italian logic, European land is actually African property. This demonstrates the hollowness of borders: they are a creation of the hegemonic powers to justify their ownership over land. In the words of Georg Simmel, they are “not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that takes a spatial form” (1908: 467). Italy thought of Libya as their “fourth shore” for only a matter of years in the early 1900s. But once the North African nation gained enough bargaining power from petroleum during the 1970s and later found a defiant leader, Muammar Gaddafi, the “fourth border” disintegrated (Labanca 2010:2). Policy changes and agreements then evolved to establish that the frontier of Fortress Europe was outside of North Africa. Being “flexible, mobile, and multiform”, capable of relocated depending on current international policies, borders are exposed as a scheme to manifest regional power (Cuttitta 2014:198, 212).

The stability of Italy’s southern border has become increasing important within the last 20 years with increased south to north migration (King 2001:4). Many factors can impact shifting migration routes. Communication channels between family members and friends have intensified thanks to improved communication technology. Thus, those who have migrated previously continue to encourage chain-migration by communicating stories of their new lives to those back home. On a state scale, the need for larger and cheaper labor demands immigrant workers and where the state is malfunctioning or repressive, individuals are more inclined to leave their homes and fill that demand (Hoerder 2002:17). Both of these scenarios have been present within the last 20 years; Italy experiencing a slowing but still progressive industrialization and North Africa evolving with the Arab Spring (Albahari 2015:142). Being fueled by humans’ success and failure, migration systems are intrinsically unstable. As “self-regulating processes in the framework of macrolevel constraints and...flexible enough to react to

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individual interests, regional fluctuations in supply and demand, and the larger economic cycles” (Hoerder 2015:17), migration systems challenge the necessity of borders. Ironically, that is also why they are maintained: to prevent movement into a nation whose primary goal is to preserve their national identity and the rights that accompany it. Nonetheless, as border control “...in one area intensifies, human smuggling routes move elsewhere in search of entry points with less policing” thus relocating the border since boundaries are not based on mobility but rather international politics (Mountz 2013:178-179).

Thus, the location of Fortress Europe’s most contentious border, while currently in Greece, was previously in Lampedusa and originally in the Canary Islands. The rhetoric used to describe the Canaries as a tool for migrants to enter Europe is almost identical to that for its predecessor, Lampedusa. The islands were described as being “in the open expanse of the Atlantic, very near the African continent” and as having been “a crossroads for colonists, merchants, conquistadors and sailors. [Although,] In recent decades, these islands have become the site of intense temporary and permanent internal and international immigration thanks to the archipelago's pleasant climate, its economic vitality and the fact that it forms part of Europe's political borders” (Esteban 2007:89). These words can just as accurately be used to discuss the Italian island off the Tunisian coast. Similarly, the migrants reaching the Canaries experienced a similar pre-boat journey across Sub-Saharan Africa to reach its northern coast (Esteban 2007:89). Therefore, except for the 2011 Arab Spring that pushed thousands of Syrians to flee, migrants themselves have not drastically changed during the past two decades: their routes have. Reacting to increased border control methods, migrants have found new ways to enter Europe. This corroborates Dr. Pietro Bartolo’s argument that the solution to the “migration crisis” is to create a humanitarian corridor. This would involve safe and regulated Mediterranean movement

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and assistance provided in home nations where hopes of finding a better life abroad begin (P. Bartolo, interview with Mediterranean Migration Mosaic, March 10, 2016).

Tensions have risen over how Frontex can maintain Fortress Europe's liquid borders. One of the recent methods Italy has used for border control in the Mediterranean Sea is deterrence through militarization (Mountz 2013:178). This is one "solution" that "capitalize[s] on powerful states' geopolitical fields of influence and are designed to keep people who have been displaced closer to their regions of origin," therefore preventing the arrival of asylum seekers (Mountz 2013:177). One successful, yet short-term, method of border and migration management could be seen on Lampedusa. The 'Lampedusa model,' focuses on efficiency. To facilitate the process of migrant redistribution to Sicily or mainland Italy, the island worked to streamline identification and holding (Albahari 2015:142). They did this through "bilateral agreements with Tunisia and Libya, curbing arrivals especially from the former country; pushback operations; Libyan detention of third-country nationals; short-term detention in Lampedusa; and immediate repatriation or deportation" (Albahari 2015:142). Unfortunately, methods such as these do not have any long-term impact. They are just as impermanent as the borders they are protecting. Furthermore, by doing nothing to ameliorate the situations sparking migration-such as the oppressive and corrupt administration in supposedly "democratic" Gambia-Europe only guarantees that the influx will continue. In 2011, the 'Lampedusa model' failed, as the Tunisian migrants overwhelmed the island and outnumbered the natives. Incapable of handling such a large amount of people, the detention centers were overcrowded, decreasing the program's efficiency and eventually leading the migrants to riot (Khlaifia and Others v. Italy 2015).

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For the island, this was detrimental. News of riots and poor conditions in the detention center fueled the media, which thrives on controversy. The result was pervasive “social alarm and xenophobic reactions in an otherwise serene and pacific population” (Sciortino 2010:95), therefore contributing to the outsiders’ misconception of the island as a place of conflict. No longer is Lampedusa a quiet, tourist destination known for its simplicity and iconic Rabbit Beach (*Spiaggia dei Conigli*). It is an entry point and border. It is the port of Europe, traditionally used for the trade of goods and money but now, for people (Clancy-Smith 2011:75). The formation of borders is dependent on the systems of migration and trade. The island of Lampedusa, being situated such that it provides unsafe, sinking migrant boats with a convenient landing point and for European patrol ships, a launching point, the island has become a borderland. Lampedusa’s ‘border’ and ‘port of Europe’ (Albahari 2015:190) status has created a conflict for its inhabitants because the intrinsically transient aspect of those two things has called into question the island’s identity. But as the mayor of Lampedusa, Guisi Nicolini, argues, the island is not a border, it is a port of entry placing a heavy focus on the ‘entry’ component despite the area’s history of deterrence (G. Nicolini, interview with Med. Mig. Mosaic. March 10, 2016). The media portrays this space as one of constant conflict and chaos whereas the pervasive feeling on the island is one of anticipation: whether that is for the next wave of tourists or migrants. As a documentarian, I wanted to demonstrate this dichotomy and analyze Lampedusa’s existence as a temporary space.

Visiting the island, there was a feeling of emptiness. It was mid-March and the tourist season did not begin until July so the commercial industry was just beginning to prepare for the influx of northern Italians. While there were construction sites performing cosmetic repairs around the island, there were few other industrial sounds. In fact, the wind and waves rivaled, and at times drowned out, the cars and other artificial noise. This made the ocean feel close,

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daunting, infringing even. We were its guests. Furthermore, the developed part fills just a small corner of the mostly barren island. As a consequence, I felt like I did not belong there. Or rather, I could not stay there. There are, however, people who live on the island their whole lives. As depicted in Gianfranco Rosi's docu-narrative, *Fuocoammare*, the islanders also live in limbo: waiting for the next wave of tourists, migrants, and fishing season. The eerie quiet and pervasive gray tones on the harbor, in the protagonist, Samuele's, home, and expansive rock cliffs paint the island as lethargic and lost (Rosi 2016). This was more inline with my perception of the island than other fiction films about Lampedusa I had seen. When migrants do arrive on the island, brought there by Frontex search and rescue operation ships, like they had just days before our (research team's) arrival, their disembarkation is hurried. For health reasons, it is crucial to get the individuals off the boat as quickly as possible. Dr. Pietro Bartolo examines every single one of the migrants, which, during the most recent disembarkation, took him two days (P. Bartolo, interview with Med. Mig. Mosaic, March 10, 2016). After this, the migrants are documented, identified and then held in the island's detainment center.

Isolated from the native population, migrants are hidden. Their presence on the island would go unnoticed were it not for their periodic free hours after meals during which the migrants are allowed to venture outside the center's walls. Walking in groups of three or four, these men floated through the streets, swimming in too big, bright blue windbreakers that billowed in the sea breeze. Other than the occasional "hello" or "ciao" shared between themselves and the natives, these men were silent; speaking not even to one another since they likely came from a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds. They hardly left any footprint on the island. Their ephemeral aura contributed to Lampedusa's feeling of being stuck somewhere in-

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between. It was this feeling that I hoped to capture and share in my film for it was not what I expected, having seen contrary representations in the media.

As someone trying to understand the migration ‘crisis’ it was frustrating to discover that many of the preconceptions and beliefs I had about its impact on Lampedusa were different. The general understanding of Lampedusa as a borderland, while inarguable due to its location, is largely due to it being “*indicated* by the authorities” and, therefore, by the media spotlight as such (Cuttitta 2014: 206, 212). Pressured into ‘performing’ the border, Lampedusa has been thrown into a role foreign even to itself, inconsistently directed by the regulations politicians hundreds of miles away decide (Cuttitta 2014:206). These directions even shape mainstream productions. Films such as *Terraferma* present the island as being dominated by lively chaos created by tourists and migrants simultaneously (Crialesi 2011). While the movie uses visuals to show the duality of the island, being a place of reception for two vastly different populations, these were still active shots. The most memorable of these visualizations of the parallel narratives are the two scenes involving boats off the coast. During the first one, is it nighttime and there is an atmosphere of danger. Launching themselves desperately off the boat, migrant bodies plummet through the air and plunge into the dark, ominous water. Not long afterwards, we again see a boat floating in the water however its daytime and pleasant beach music plays in the background. Bathing suit clad, white bodies then toss themselves happily into the sea. I witnessed neither gleeful tourists nor desperate migrants racing against time for their lives. Bothered by this, I felt the island deserved another representation, portraying how the island’s existence seems to stagnate without outside stimuli: what is the island when it isn’t a border? Further fueling this feeling was my appreciation for Rosi’s, *Fuocammare* (2016). Despite not speaking Italian, the primary language spoken in the film, the visuals held power. I saw the film

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before having been to Lampedusa myself thus, other than the horrific images of human suffering and death, one of the most striking aspects of the film for me was the silence. There were no non-diegetic sounds. If no one was speaking, there was no sound other than those of the setting. This matched my personal experience with the island. Upon reflection, I realized this was why I had to make a documentary: documentaries have the “privilege” of being able to replace the audience’s fictitious preconceptions, with reality (Bonsaver 2011:304).

While Rosi’s film consisted of many techniques I wanted to replicate in my own documentary, there were some I did not. The most substantial way in which I planned to deviate from Rosi was to gather footage rather than direct it. His film is more accurately categorized as a docu-narrative because some scenes were staged. Those scenes can be categorized as “approximations” which Stella Bruzzi defines as “works whose aim is to approximate reality and all its ramifications, rather than more straightforwardly to represent it. What ‘approximations offer is the mise-en-scène of fact and history” (Bruzzi 2013:44). Samuele, the protagonist, said there were interactions between the director and himself that were unplanned but became a part of the film because Rosi thought they would be useful (S.Pucillo, interview with Med. Mig. Mosaic. March 10, 2016). When the director gave his star direction, however, Samuele’s performances maintained the feeling of being organic, as documentaries should. Rosi used historically accurate information regarding Samuele’s behaviors to create a ‘real’ character exploitable for the film’s agenda. In doing so, the film became “performative” (Nichols 2010:32) thus losing some of the authenticity intrinsic in documentary filmmaking. I wanted to honor that value as much as possible while still making an argument, thus I chose to make an “observational” (Nichols 2010:32) documentary. This is most apparent in the absence of a voice-over narrator; a technique Rosi used flawlessly in his film. Like him, I relied on the visuals and

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their juxtaposition with the testimonies of Dr. Pietro Bartolo and Mayor Guisi Nicolini as well as quotes from prominent authors in the migration literature to make my argument that the reality of the island does not always coincide with its depiction in the media. Furthermore, the public's understanding of Lampedusa as an area of transit has confused the island's identity and thus it struggles to be both a solid landmass, home to around 6,000, at the same time as it is a temporary vacation and detention center.

Given the unpredictability of migration flows and the constantly changing policies regarding entry and border control, no one can predict where migrant networks will move to next. This, in part, is what has allowed for migration networks to be as successful as they have been. Smugglers and desperate individuals will always find a way to evade border control. Thus, it is futile trying to maintain impermeable borders. The creation of a humanitarian corridor would help islands like Lampedusa find an identity through their consistent dedication to the reception of migrants. To Dr. Bartolo, making the corridor would be "simple":

Very well, before there were 130 miles to arrive in Lampedusa, and therefore in Europe, because Lampedusa is Europe, no? [The migrants, n.d.r.] want to go to Europe, but Lampedusa is Europe. There were 130 miles. Now, we moved 110 miles closer, so only 20 miles remain...we should go there and pick them up there...through Tunisia, because we have a good relationship with Tunisia. Tunisia is next to Libya, if we make them cross over to Tunisia we can pick them up there. That's it. It's very simple. (2016)

Since the island's politicians like mayor Guisi Nicolini have already begun to change their mentality regarding reception to one of welcoming rather than deterring, dedicating the purpose of the island to facilitating migration permanently rather than sporadically might be a shorter

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ideological leap than imagined. Accomplishing this however relies on a shared understanding of how harmful being defined as a border by outside forces is to both those in and outside them. Because the media is based off of sensationalism and popularity, I believe documentaries are instead the best medium through which to convey this message. Since audiences watch them with the expectation of being shown real footage, of being told someone's real life stories (Nichols 2010:10), they have the power to challenge misconceptions, thus creating a better informed population equipped to take on real world issues.

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Documentary URL

Borders: Creating Lampedusa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-Dlc_xoBAE