

Introduction
Europe's 'Migration Crisis': Border Deaths
and Human Dignity

In the year 442 BC, a theatre play was staged in Athens. The heroine of the play was a young woman who defied the ruler's will, the law so to say. He had ordered that Polynices should not be buried. The play contained a dialogue between two women. One of them says that she shares the outrage at the ruler's order but that she cannot muster the courage to stage a rebellion against this decision. [The other,] Antigone replies: 'Use that excuse, if you like, but I indeed will go and heap a tomb for my dearest brother'. She does wrong in order to do right. It is our hope that we will listen to the dead seeing as we ignored their screams while they were still alive.¹

In June 2015, the body of a thirty-four-year-old Syrian woman who had perished at sea was exhumed from her grave in Sicily with the permission of her family, and reburied in Berlin. Part of a political demonstration called 'The Dead are Coming', the burial was led by an imam, and was marked by the absence of German politicians, whose names were taped to a row of empty chairs as mourners looked on.² The reburial was the first in a series organised by a Berlin-based art group called the Centre of Political Beauty, which sought to bring the bodies of those who had drowned in the Mediterranean to 'the heart of Europe'.³ Describing border deaths as a result of 'our inaction' and claiming to give the deceased 'the dignity that they deserve', the group stress that it is 'not just about saving their dignity' but also that of European populations.⁴ The Centre of Political Beauty advocates a form of 'aggressive humanism' that must 'hurt provoke and rise in revolt'.⁵ Just as Antigone refused to be swayed by authorities in marking the death of her 'dearest brother' during 442 BC, activists as part of the group seek to 'do wrong in order to do right'. In a situation whereby border deaths across the Mediterranean are perceived to be met with widespread indifference, the group advances a humanist intervention that 'assaults' a form of 'political apathy' which is deemed to be deadly. As such, 'The Dead are Coming' can be understood as nothing less than an insistent

attempt to reaffirm dignity in a situation where it has become lost to both the dead *and* the living.

Border Deaths and Human Dignity

As an activist intervention that contests a situation whereby people regularly die en route to the European Union (EU) without the attention or care that might be expected, 'The Dead are Coming' highlights various concerns that form the focus of this book. First, it highlights the way in which a politics of indifference predominates with regard to the deaths and vulnerabilities of people on the move. This politics of indifference is evident in the knowledge – or more accurately in the *lack* of knowledge – available about the plight of those crossing the Mediterranean during the so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016. There are statistics regarding the number of people dying in the Mediterranean during this period, with a total of 4,054 casualties recorded in 2015, rising to 5,143 in 2016.⁶ Yet this is only part of the picture, since there are of course many people who get into a boat to cross the Mediterranean and disappear along the way. Moreover, the stories behind these statistics are often missing, as is information about the ways in which people on the move are exposed to a range of harms throughout the migratory process. While some deaths are recorded, details about the conditions under which widespread vulnerabilities are formed are often not available. Such partial knowledge of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' can be understood as reflecting a situation in which border deaths and vulnerabilities have become a normality. This book precisely explores the ways in which death and vulnerability are produced and become normalised – regular and accepted – through EU practices of governing migration. Yet it also goes further, to explore the ways in which activist groups *contest* the power dynamics and forms of violence through which death and vulnerability become regular and accepted as such. By assessing the relationship between the interventions of various activist groups and EU practices of governing migration, the book asks: *In what ways do different pro-migration activist interventions contribute to the formation of alternative horizons of solidarity and hope in the midst of a deadly 'Mediterranean migration crisis'?*

'The Dead are Coming' intervention also draws attention to a second concern that forms the focus of this book: the role that the concept of dignity plays within a humanist tradition that appears to be in decline. For activists involved, providing a dignified burial for the dead is 'not just about saving [the deceased's] dignity'. Rather, it forms part of a broader

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struggle to establish 'moral beauty, political poetry and human greatness while aiming to preserve humanitarianism'.⁷ As Alice von Bieberstein and Erdem Evren emphasise in their analysis of the group, the Centre of Political Beauty attempts to 'salvage and reclaim a liberal ethics of empathy' by mobilising 'the subversive potential of humanism' through a 'kind of action-based art' (2016: 467). Nevertheless, questions arise as to whether engaging dignity through a liberal framework and 'aggressive humanism' is adequate in establishing an alternative to the politics of indifference in which death and vulnerability are normalised. Scholars have pointed to the imperialist inflections of European humanism and liberal humanitarian efforts to extend care to 'the other', thus raising questions about the effectiveness a 'subversive' form of humanism such as that advocated by the Centre of Political Beauty (von Bieberstein and Evren, 2016: 467–468; see also Agier, 2010). Furthermore, if humanism is in decline in 'the heart of Europe', then a question arises as to whether this presents an opportunity to more rigorously refuse a tradition of European humanism that produces victims and that 'raises the spectre of a colonial and patronising "white man's burden"' (von Bieberstein and Evren, 2016: 468–469). Delving into such questions surrounding European humanism and humanitarianism, this book specifically examines the concept of dignity both in terms of its intellectual history and in terms of its contemporary engagement by governing authorities and activists. It asks: *How effective is an appeal to human dignity in challenging the dynamics of power through which death and vulnerability have become regular and accepted?*

Europe's 'Migration Crisis'

The context within which this book has been written is Europe's so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016, in which the Mediterranean became widely perceived as a scene of death and vulnerability on a mass scale. The dynamics from which this scene have emerged are by no means new and by no means over, which is suggestive of the limits of defining the situation as one of 'crisis' (see Squire et al., 2021). Moreover, the Mediterranean is not unique as a site of border deaths and vulnerabilities, with casualties occurring across the world – including the 'heart of Europe' to the north and west of the central Mediterranean region on which this book focuses.⁸ Nevertheless, there is also broader significance to the emergence of the Mediterranean as a scene of death and vulnerability on a mass scale. In her discussion of the 'Black Mediterranean', Alessandra Di Maio (2017) describes how, as an in-between region that acts as a bridge between

continents, the Mediterranean has functioned historically both as a site of cultural exchange and as a site of racial violence (see also Danewid, 2017). Building on this insight, we might interpret the contemporary production of border deaths and vulnerabilities in the region as resonating with colonial dynamics of a longer duration (see also Saucier and Woods, 2014), and as involving attempts to constitute the EU as European and migration as non-European (see De Genova, 2017a; Samaddar, 2016). The normalisation of death and vulnerability in this sense can be understood in terms of what William Walters (2004) refers to as a *domopolitical* governing regime, which seeks to domesticate ‘unruly’ forces that are perceived to threaten the sanctity of home. This book argues that the deaths and vulnerabilities of people on the move across the Mediterranean precisely involve a form of racialised violence that abandons those who are deemed as difficult to domesticate or as not qualifying as ‘fully human’ (see Bernasconi, 2003). By examining the politics of the ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’ in relation to racialised violence, it seeks not only to contribute to debates that unpack the problematic dynamics of crisis politics (e.g. Broom, Clegg and Rethel, 2012; Hodder and Martin, 2009; McAdam, 2014), but also to those surrounding the limits of a form of humanitarianism that rests on a reductive and hierarchical politics of ‘the human’ (e.g. Agier, 2010; Feldman and Ticktin, 2010; Malkii, 1996). It does so specifically by situating the ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’ in relation to a more deep-rooted and immanent destabilisation of what I call a modern European tradition of humanism.

The analysis developed here rests on an appreciation of the importance of exploring the relationship between practices of governing migration and interventions that seek to contest them. I approach ‘unruly’ migratory forces (i.e. forms of precarious migration that are not authorised by states) as conditioned by, but not reducible to, practices that seek to master or domesticate them (Squire, 2011; see also Stierl, 2019). This book focuses specifically on the ways in which pro-migration activists intervene in such governing practices through fighting in solidarity with people on the move (cf. Squire, 2015a). As such, it also contributes to research on solidaristic social movements, as these have emerged within the context of Europe’s so-called migration crisis (e.g. della Porta, 2018). The book does so specifically by exploring the ambiguities of different activist interventions as they attempt to disrupt the power dynamics embedded in a politics of indifference (see also Mazzara, 2019). Such interventions are wide-ranging and are grounded in the lived experiences and personal engagements of people living and dying through the so-called crisis. Yet, rather than providing a

comprehensive review of different interventions, I explore selected cases that shed light on the ways in which alternative horizons of solidarity and hope have emerged in the central Mediterranean. Indeed, such interventions also extend beyond the EU, enabling appreciation of the ways in which solidarity movements operate across locations. Focusing on the central Mediterranean and on groups originating within the EU (Italy and Malta) in particular is thus not to understate the significance of mobilisations elsewhere. Rather, it is to delve more deeply into border struggles that emerge within a distinct context, in order to consider their broader potential in challenging a domopolitics in which death and vulnerability become regular and accepted. The cases under examination have been chosen in order to reflect some of the different types of activism in the region, as well as to maximise potential for an appreciation of the ways in which diverse groups challenge the policy mechanisms and dynamics of power that are integral to the formation of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' as such. The analysis is not exhaustive but focuses on the main research questions introduced.

Multiple methods have been deployed in undertaking research for this book. The analysis is grounded in an interrogation of the EU policy framework, specifically the European Agenda on Migration, which was launched by the European Commission during May 2015 in response to what was perceived as the emergent 'crisis' in the Mediterranean. The 2015 agenda is not radically new, but draws together policy mechanisms at various levels as part of a comprehensive framework by which to address migration (see Squire et al., 2021). The book focuses on the governing practices that have been developed and extended as part of this framework, specifically by paying attention both to the policy mechanisms and to the dynamics of power and violence that these involve. Such an analysis rests not only on a textual examination of various policy documents and additional reports, but also on meetings with various policy makers and practitioners and visits to sites where people on the move experience the effects of policies first-hand. In addition, my analysis of activist interventions has emerged from more sustained fieldwork undertaken across Italy and Malta over a three-year period from 2015–2018, including substantive periods spent on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa. This has involved a series of site visits comprised of observations and in-depth qualitative interviews, both with a range of activists and with people on the move, whose lived experiences and personal engagements shed light on practices of governing migration as well as on the significance of different interventions that contest such practices.⁹ A practice-based approach is engaged here as a means to advance a form of research that goes beyond

a textual/nontextual or discursive/material divide (see also Squire, 2014, 2015a). I draw inspiration from the work of the feminist posthumanist scholar Karen Barad, who emphasises the inseparability of various material and discursive elements and explores materialdiscursive configurations of the world in its 'open-ended becoming' (2003: 821). Grounded in debates surrounding 'new materialist' political methodologies (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010), the book engages what I call a 'materialdiscursive' analysis of the entwinement of social forces (mechanisms and narratives of migration management) with physical or material forces (climatic or environmental elements). It does so specifically in order to explore the critical potential of various activist interventions in creating alternative horizons of solidarity and hope, beyond the violence of a modern European tradition of humanism.

Intervening 'Crisis Politics'

This book aims to unpack the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis in relation to what it calls the normalisation of death and vulnerability, whereby those who seek to cross the Mediterranean Sea by boat are either left to perish en route, or are rescued only to arrive to the EU as casualties and survivors. It seeks to develop a conceptually-orientated analysis of the governing practices through which death and vulnerability are rendered normal and/or become accepted as the norm, while also deepening these conceptual insights through an analysis of various pro-migration activist interventions that contest such processes of normalisation along with the policy mechanisms and dynamics of power and violence that they involve. The book rejects assumptions that in 2015–2016 the EU faced a 'migration crisis' that was neither predictable nor irresolvable. Instead, it seeks to show how increased border deaths, along with increased arrivals of people experiencing extreme vulnerabilities, are foreseeable outcomes of contemporary practices of governing migration. Many pro-migration activist contestations of the EU's response to the so-called crisis are grounded precisely in an observation of the harms produced by EU governing practices. The book considers how an exploration of these interventions enables critical understanding of the limits as well as of the endurance of an approach that seeks in various ways to domesticate people on the move who are deemed to be 'unruly'. Moreover, it seeks to shed light on how such interventions might advance in order to most effectively advance towards alternative horizons of solidarity and hope.

The first part of the book explores EU policy as it developed from 2015–2016. It draws attention to the various actors that a politics of crisis involves, as well as to the multiple conflicts to which such politics give rise. Focusing on the dynamics of power and violence that are embedded within longer-standing EU governing practices and which are further intensified through a form of crisis politics, Part I considers how the normalisation of death and vulnerability can be understood as connected to a modern European tradition of humanism that seeks mastery over various unruly forces. The analysis shows how contemporary practices of governing migration often abandon people on the move to the environmental forces of the Mediterranean Sea, and to a form of *biophysical violence* that operates directly on the biological formation of migrating bodies. It also shows how such violence is grounded in processes of constituting people on the move as 'less than human', while exposing them to conditions of *ultra-precarity* or to the risk of multiple harms without recourse to rights. By engaging the concept of *abandonment* as a social as well as a physical form of death or 'annihilation', Part I relates the 'crisis' of 2015–2016 to Europe's longer-standing colonial legacies, whereby the drive to constitute the EU as European and migration as non-European reflects what we might call a 'postcolonial present' (cf. Bhambra, 2016; see also Hage, 2016; Squire et al., 2021). It shows how crisis politics legitimise and further intensify processes of abandonment across the security and humanitarian domains through mechanisms of prevention, rescue and containment. Rather than a 'Mediterranean migration crisis', Part I concludes, the situation in 2015–2016 can be understood as nothing less than the breakdown of a modern European form of humanism itself, which cannot endure the biophysical violence and ultra-precarity with which it is implicated.

The second part of the book shifts attention from the mobilisation of dignity by governing authorities to its mobilisation by allies of people on the move. It explores three pro-migration activist interventions that emerge in the context of the so-called crisis and focuses attention on the alternative politics and enactments of dignity that they involve. Choosing interventions that directly contest mechanisms of prevention, rescue and containment, respectively, Part II examines the humanitarian corridors initiative in Italy, the Sea-Watch search and rescue operation in the central Mediterranean and grave dressing on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Each chapter considers how the intervention in question contests the power dynamics that expose people on the move to biophysical violence and ultra-precarity. The analysis also explores the effectiveness of each

intervention's diverse appeals to human dignity by considering how the concept is differentially understood and practiced in each case, in relation to a politics of welcome or hospitality, a politics of witness and a politics of responsibility, respectively. While drawing attention to the ambiguities of each intervention, Part II also emphasises the criticality of all three in contesting the policy mechanisms and dynamics of power and violence through which death and vulnerability become regular and accepted. It shows how pro-migration activist interventions provide alternatives to a politics that is embedded in a divisive fear of unruly forces, collectively contributing to the formation of an alternative horizon of solidarity and hope in the midst of a deadly 'Mediterranean migration crisis'.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 begins by creating critical distance from the framing of the situation in the Mediterranean during 2015–2016 as a 'migration crisis'. It unpacks this framing of crisis along various lines: as a crisis of the Schengen Area, as a crisis of solidarity, as a crisis of sovereignty, as a crisis of values or social cohesion, as a crisis of security, as a humanitarian crisis and as a crisis of international protection. In so doing, the chapter draws attention to the multiple ways in which the crisis has been constituted as such and highlights how these reflect distinctive political concerns and diverse governing authorities rather than an uncontested reality. By contrast to an approach that questions the specific way in which the crisis is framed, however, the chapter goes on to question a politics of crisis more fundamentally. It draws on scholarship that interrogates the framing of crisis narratives as well as a form of governing through crisis, to highlight the ways in which crisis politics detract from an understanding of the foreseeable and preventable dimensions of situation in the Mediterranean in 2015–2016. In so doing, Chapter 1 concludes that the emergence of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' reflects the production of death and vulnerability across both the security and humanitarian domains, whereby people are abandoned in the face of concerns to maintain the security of home. This, it suggests, might be understood as nothing less than a continued attempt to re/colonise the Mediterranean in a context marked by longer European histories of colonial violence.

Far from a crisis that could not be predicted and that cannot be resolved, the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis of 2015–2016 can be understood as a foreseeable result of the production of death and vulnerability, whereby those who escape across the Mediterranean Sea

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by boat are either left to perish en route or are rescued only to arrive to the EU as casualties and survivors. Chapter 2 builds on the analysis in Chapter 1 in order to develop further understanding of this process, specifically by exploring the policy mechanisms and power dynamics through which death and vulnerability are rendered normal. It examines EU policy in terms of different mechanisms of prevention, rescue and containment, to highlight the ways in which instruments that monitor, filter and channel migration expose people on the move to various harms without recourse to rights. Showing how such harms are perpetuated across both the security and humanitarian domains, Chapter 2 draws on works that analyse the co-constitution of border security and humanitarianism to emphasise the ways in which a form of humanitarian government is implicated in a politics that seeks to secure home. However, it also draws attention to the limits of an approach that overlooks the importance of humanitarian *politics*, which involves more far-reaching contestations over what it means to be human. Highlighting the challenges that are posed to a humanitarian politics where the Mediterranean Sea itself plays a crucial role in EU practices of governing migration, the chapter concludes by showing how different dynamics of power become blurred through a form of biophysical violence that operates directly on the biological functions of migrating bodies.

It is in a context marked by the toleration of biophysical violence that an appeal to the dignity of people on the move has been mobilised with particular potency. Chapter 3 shifts from an analysis of the governing practices through which death and vulnerability are produced and normalised, to an exploration of the ways in which such practices are grounded in processes of dehumanisation. Specifically, it considers the ways in which pervasive processes of animalisation, as well as the pervasiveness of death and vulnerability, relate to contemporary and longer-standing debates surrounding human dignity. Chapter 3 considers the potential of human dignity as a critical conceptual framework for contestations over what it means to be human, while also reflecting on the ways in which the concept's mobilisation by various governing authorities further marks the toleration of biophysical violence and perpetuates the normalisation of death and vulnerability. Situating the concept within a specific modern European tradition of humanism, the chapter shows how human dignity invokes a longer-standing tension between the hierarchical differentiation of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' people on the one hand, and the universal levelling of all people as equal on the other. By exploring the ways in which such tensions play out through racialised practices of governing migration

that dehumanise people on the move, the chapter highlights the ongoing significance of a modern European tradition of humanism to conceptions of dignity mobilised by various authorities during the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis. Concluding Part I of the book by drawing attention to the failure of governing practices to fully master various unruly social and physical forces, Chapter 3 suggests that the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis might be understood as nothing less than a breakdown of modern European humanism itself.

The first pro-migration activist intervention that is examined in Part II of the book is the Corridoi Umanitari (humanitarian corridors) programme in Italy. This involves the opening of legal routes to the EU for people stranded in regions neighbouring zones of conflict and violence, who are otherwise prevented from finding a safe route due to the preventative policy mechanisms discussed in Part I of the book. Chapter 4 draws on research carried out in Lampedusa, Turin and Rome in order to show how this intervention is important in challenging the dynamics of power and violence that are embedded in practices of governing migration that produce death and vulnerability. By providing safe passage and a route out of a situation of 'living death', the Corridoi Umanitari programme importantly invokes dignity in motion while extending the concept and practice of vulnerability beyond that of formal resettlement programmes. As such, the intervention rejects the ultra-precarity that people experience along the migratory journey and challenges the violent excesses of a preventative policy agenda that seeks to maintain the security of home. Going further, it also rejects the ultra-precarity that people experience on arrival to the EU, through enacting a politics of welcome towards those who are part of the programme. Nevertheless, the chapter also shows that in reaffirming the importance of preventative controls from a security perspective the Corridoi Umanitari programme remains partially bound to the divisive politics of fear that its activities on the ground seek to contest. Yet rather than reflecting the inevitable limitations of hospitality, Chapter 4 argues that this reflects contested conceptions of what it means to welcome new arrivals; contestations that are cast in a new light when considering how a politics of welcome are increasingly enacted by beneficiaries of the programme themselves.

Chapter 5 turns to a second pro-migration activist intervention, the Sea-Watch initiative, which is a German-based association operating search and rescue in the central Mediterranean between Libya and Italy/Malta. By situating the intervention in relation to existing mechanisms of rescue charted in Part I of the book, the chapter shows how Sea-Watch is