

## Regarding the Pain of Others: Migrant Self-Narration, Participatory Filmmaking, and Academic Collaboration

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In March 2014 we collaborated on a common cultural project, hosting the visit of three filmmakers and activists from Italy—Stefano Liberti, Andrea Segre, and Dagmawi Yimer—to our respective universities in California. This visit was made possible by a generous endowment established by Dr. Victor Vari and his wife, Julia Botto Vari, at Santa Clara University. As the organizer of the symposium funded by the endowment, Valerio Ferme first secured the participation of the three filmmakers, and then contacted a number of colleagues in the summer of 2013 to invite them to avail of the opportunity of bringing the visitors to their campuses as well. Áine O’Healy, Clarissa Clò, and Pasquale Verdicchio embraced the idea immediately, though fully aware that committing to three guest speakers at once (plus two children, since Liberti and Segre were bringing their youngsters along) would be exceptionally challenging, given the limited financial resources available for this type of service-oriented academic event, and would require months of preparation and finalization. Nonetheless, we immediately grasped the cultural, political and pedagogical relevance of the program, and recognized its importance as a reflection of both global trends and local urgencies. The institutions participating in the project were San Diego State University, the University of California, San Diego, Loyola Marymount University, and Santa Clara University. In addition, the San Diego Italian Film Festival became a community partner for one of the events.

We communicated so frequently among ourselves and with our guests, at every step of the process over a period of several months (before, during, and after their visit), that we became a *de facto* working group. This shared experience left us with such a potent mixture of enthusiasm and exultation that we decided to co-author an article in order to discuss its significance in the context of our professional work, to assess its impact on our teaching, and to reflect on what Gayatri Spivak has called “transformative practices relating to some ‘real’ world.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of the journal’s choice of topic for this issue, we felt that the events we highlight demonstrated both the “fixity” and “flexibility” of filmic images. Though filmic images are nominally flexible and mobile, when consumed in closed settings, such as a movie theater or the privacy of the home, they can easily become fetishized and lose their transformative power, especially in the case of images inspired by a desire to promote social dialogue or activism. Images can also be given new capabilities, however, through their de- and re-contextualization in different environments, and through the participatory and interactive engagement of a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies,” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 273. During the course of this writing collaboration, we realized that we were perhaps excessively ambitious in these aims, as we had not planned this article ahead of the events. We had collected no empirical data from our audiences, nor had we conducted systematic interviews with viewers and other participants, the lack of which may limit the scope of some of our conclusions. Nonetheless, we wish to acknowledge the distinctive nature of our contribution. We are well aware that this article is an unusual submission to an academic journal such as *CIS*, which typically approaches scholarship in the way we conventionally think about it. By contrast, our piece is deliberately non-traditional; one could say that it falls into the category of “applied scholarship,” the type of intellectual and practical work that reflects a desire to engage the public sphere directly.

audiences, they can gain in flexibility. A film like *Mare chiuso*,<sup>2</sup> for example, as our subsequent analysis shows, might elicit the immediacy of a shared experience from an audience that includes undocumented migrants from Central America who have experienced harrowing journeys (and multiple rejections) that are similar to those of the documentary's protagonists. Alternately, such a film might require a contextualization that focuses on the struggles endured by previous generations of immigrants to the United States in order to trigger a sympathetic response from audiences who relate the images to the stories passed down by their grandparents about the vicissitudes they suffered before gaining full-fledged citizenship. In these contexts, the role we play as academics, especially in the Humanities, must be reevaluated. Experiences such as ours suggest that the scope of our intellectual intervention extends beyond the production of theoretical and critical work within the confines of our offices, and must also be performed and accounted for publicly. In our specific case, we could not simply function as hosts for the screening of the films under discussion. Rather, we had to "be able to translate for ourselves and others, to make legible the conditions we inhabit,"<sup>3</sup> and mediate the debates provoked by the images on the screen as they moved from their original contexts into new spaces, where they produced sometimes divergent responses from audiences and constituencies other than those originally targeted or intended.

From this point of departure—the shifting context of the image—our contribution prompts a more general questioning of our role as academics, in addition to presenting the critical content of the cultural program itself. This essay addresses the role that collaboration plays not only in organizing events of such magnitude and import, but also in providing pedagogical and scholarly lessons for ourselves as intellectuals and for students who are the recipients of such practices. Our collaboration has led us to consider, among other things, why broader academic exchanges such as ours do not happen more frequently, and to explore the material and intellectual obstacles that render such partnerships rare, not simply in Italian Studies, but in the Humanities in general, across campuses and colleges. Since our work as academics is subject to multiple, often competing constraints, including the demands of teaching, professional advancement, and sometimes solipsistic pursuits, do these pressures prevent us from fulfilling more compelling and meaningful outcomes in the public sphere such as those we achieved by joining our limited resources through synergistic and persistent collaboration? In short, we want to ask: How do we give meaning to our work as scholars, and how do we show its significance for public discourse beyond the boundaries of academia? How can we enable our scholarship to fulfill functional and central roles that engage relevant global public issues in an age when our professional relevance, especially in the Arts and Humanities, is called into question from a number of quarters?<sup>4</sup>

We invited Liberti, Segre, and Yimer to our campuses because we wanted to showcase their films and their activist work. As filmmakers, documentarians, and reporters in a variety of media, and though representing different points of origin, they are driven by motivations that are both personal and political. Their most compelling point of contact is a shared concern with

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<sup>2</sup> *Mare chiuso*, directed by Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti (Rome: ZaLab, 2012), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> David Theo Goldberg, "The Afterlife of the Humanities" (Irvine, CA: University of California Humanities Research Institute, April 2014), <https://humafterlife.uchri.org/> (accessed March 18, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Our efforts, therefore, align with the growing trend in Humanities and Arts scholarship to ensure that our research extends beyond the boundaries of publishing and creative works to engage civics and the public sphere. See, for example, Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990); Mary Campbell and Randy Martin, *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

contemporary human rights abuses linked to Italy's involvement in the control of Mediterranean migration. As academics committed to social justice, we, the authors of this paper, were interested in sharing the filmmakers' richly informative work with our audiences (through a mixture of images, reportage, and first-person accounts), bearing in mind that the communities to which we were presenting these films might relate them to discourses that are broadly present in their own experiences of media consumption and in their day-to-day realities as citizens or residents of California and the United States. Ideally, and perhaps idealistically, we wanted to engage students, colleagues, and local communities in a transnational and cross-continental dialogue on issues that are global, and that are as much about biopolitics and ethics as they are about poetics and aesthetics.

Formerly the site of multiple European and American colonial and imperialist conquests, California is a state that has been traversed and transformed historically and physically by different waves of migration. Given this multifaceted history, it offered each of us, through our respective geographical and cultural sites of belonging, the opportunity to engage with the work of Liberti, Segre, and Yimer from a variety of perspectives and refraction points. The location of two of our institutions in San Diego, close to the U.S./Mexico border and to the migration hotspot of Tijuana, allowed us to engage the trans-border student population of SDSU and a committed group of graduate students and faculty at UCSD. At Loyola Marymount University, audiences included members of the local Ethiopian community, rooted in an earlier wave of migration from the Horn of Africa than the more recent flow of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees fleeing to Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean. The discussion in which this audience participated thus linked diverse and multidirectional experiences of displacement, spanning at least three generations and three continents. Santa Clara, at the center of Silicon Valley, one of the wealthiest zip codes in the United States, offered a different challenge to the organizers. Nonetheless, because the South Bay area is populated by the descendants of large immigrant communities that migrated to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, and because the University's Law School has been at the forefront of defending and protecting undocumented immigrants, the opportunity to engage this community was rich with possibilities. In the end, each of the events stimulated conversations that exceeded our expectations, demonstrating the flexibility that such cinematic images can gain when they are re-contextualized in novel ways.

In our respective programs we screened one or more of the following documentaries with Liberti, Segre, and Yimer in attendance: *A Sud di Lampedusa*, about migrants from sub-Saharan Africa trying to reach Libya to find employment;<sup>5</sup> *Come un uomo sulla terra*, about the difficult journey undertaken by Dagmawi and many of his compatriots from Ethiopia to Italy via Sudan and Libya;<sup>6</sup> *Mare chiuso*, about Italy and the EU pushback policies (known in Italian as *respingimenti*, a term connoting a politics of rejection) following a number of controversial decrees enacted by Berlusconi's government in cahoots with Libya's Muammar Gaddafi;<sup>7</sup> and *Va' pensiero: Storie ambulante*, about two vicious incidents of racism directed at African

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<sup>5</sup> *A Sud di Lampedusa*, directed by Andrea Segre and Stephano Liberti, with Ferruccio Pastore (Rome: ZaLab, 2006), DVD.

<sup>6</sup> *Come un uomo sulla terra*, directed by Andrea Segre and Dagmawi Yimer, with Riccardo Biadene (Rome: ZaLab, 2008), DVD.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Article 10 of Italy's Legislative Decree of July 25, 1998, which is traditionally used to justify the rejection of migrants at the border or in international waters, regardless of whether they are political refugees, thus contravening not only dispositions framed by the Geneva convention on human rights, but Italy's own constitutional mandates.

immigrants in Florence and Milan.<sup>8</sup>

If the topic and scope of our shared project spoke eloquently to issues that have particular resonance in California and in the United States as a whole, both historically and geographically, it was also because it resulted from collaboration among colleagues with diverse academic affiliations. Precisely because we welcomed our guests at both public and private institutions, with different missions and objectives, and drew audiences as varied as newly formed migrant communities and established fourth-generation descendants of earlier migratory waves, we were eager to discover the various kinds of reception that these presentations produced. A theoretical and aesthetic discussion of the films must therefore be accompanied by a reflection on the specificity of location (and the interplay among different locations) and on our pedagogical practices. For instance, what happens when films about the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean travel to the Pacific coast, from the U.S./Mexico border to Silicon Valley? Do they retain the same potency and importance, in a Saidian sense?<sup>9</sup> What are the connotations, identifications, refractions, “*multidirectional*” and “cross-referencing” memories<sup>10</sup> that these images acquire for viewers, especially students, in locations far from the site of their production?

What made our collaboration particularly poignant is that it was itself based, in a sense, on another collaboration. The films we screened were, in fact, already the fruit of thoughtful and deliberate teamwork between and among our guests and others, and they explicitly underscore the indispensability of this type of approach and *modus operandi* in their work. Moreover, at the core of all these visual projects are other collective initiatives: the Archivio delle Memorie Migranti, founded by Alessandro Triulzi and Dagmawi Yimer with the purpose of “*lasciare una traccia*” [“leaving a trace”]<sup>11</sup> in the consciousness of our societies through the practice of migrant “*auto-rappresentazione*” [“self-representation”],<sup>12</sup> and ZaLab, a cultural association founded by Andrea Segre dedicated to the production, distribution, and promotion of social documentaries.<sup>13</sup> In both cases the focus is on the active participation of migrants and other related subjects in telling their own life stories through audiovisual technology.

### Filming Human Rights Abuses in the Mediterranean

The films that were screened during the directors’ visit—all relatively recent productions—represent the difficulties faced by irregular African migrants as they attempt to secure passage to Italy and other European countries in the hope of making a new life there. *A sud di Lampedusa*, *Come un uomo sulla terra*, and *Mare chiuso* explore different aspects of Italy’s “outsourcing” to

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<sup>8</sup> *Va’ pensiero: Storie ambulanti*, directed by Dagmawi Yimer (Rome: Archivio delle Memorie Migranti, 2013), DVD.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, “Travelling Theory Reconsidered,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 436.

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Per un archivio delle memorie migranti,” in *Come un uomo sulla terra*, ed. Marco Carsetti and Alessandro Triulzi (Castel Gandolfo: Infinito Edizioni, 2009), 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> See ZaLab’s webpage, <http://www.zalab.org/chi-siamo/> (accessed April 29, 2016). For a sustained discussion of ZaLab’s work and its film production, see Michela Ardizzoni, “Narratives of Change, Images for Change: Contemporary Social Documentaries in Italy,” *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, 1, no. 3 (2013): 311–26. For Segre’s films in particular see Áine O’Healy, “Witnessing History, Recounting Suffering: The Documentary Project of Andrea Segre,” in *Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative*, ed. Emma Bond, Guido Bonsaver, and Federico Falloppa (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 415–29.

Libya the task of curbing the flow of immigration from Africa. Although the locations, situations and protagonists are different in each, when considered together these films can be seen as a single, loosely-woven narrative, exposing the violent underside of neo-colonial capitalism and Italy's role within it. Structured around the testimony of several African migrants who report their experiences on camera, these participatory documentaries reveal how decisions made by the Italian government with the aim of furthering Italian political and economic interests have had devastating effects on the lives of untold numbers of migrants, and have led to the death of many others.

*A sud di Lampedusa* is a short documentary shot in Niger, where Segre joins Liberti in May 2006 to interview a group of young men from several West African countries travelling to Libya in the hope of finding work.<sup>14</sup> In Niger, the filmmakers also encounter another group of West Africans recently expelled from Libya, where most of them had lived and worked for years. It is gradually revealed that their expulsion was directly linked to a shift in immigration management on the part of the Italian government. Bolstered by funds provided by Italy to assist in curbing trans-Mediterranean migration, the Libyan authorities had undertaken the large-scale arrest, detention and expulsion of non-Libyan nationals already residing in their country.



Niger, April and May 2006, during the filming of *A sud di Lampedusa*. Photo: Andrea Segre.

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<sup>14</sup> For Liberti, participation in the documentary was part of a much larger exploration of contemporary African migrations. His long-term project resulted in the publication of *A sud di Lampedusa: cinque anni di viaggi sulle rotte dei migranti* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 2007).

Relying solely on the testimony of individuals interviewed on screen, the documentary thus reveals the effects of Italy's immigration policies on migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, *A sud di Lampedusa* provides not only a visual reminder of the hardships that West African migrants routinely face on their travels northward, but also evidence of the increasing violence enacted against them by border patrols in North African countries after the local authorities began enforcing the compulsory repatriation pacts established with European countries in exchange for financial and political support.

*Come un uomo sulla terra*, the most critically acclaimed of the documentaries, centers on the figure of Dagmawi Yimer, who arrived in Rome in 2006 after a year-long journey that had taken him from Addis Ababa, through the hell of Libyan holding centers, to the shores of Lampedusa. After attending a class on video production taught by Segre, Dagmawi embarked on co-directing this documentary about his journey to Italy and the implications of his experience for Italians as a whole. Produced jointly by ZaLab and the Archivio Memorie Migranti, it features Dagmawi as on-screen protagonist, narrator, and occasional videographer. Central to the film are his interviews with eight other Ethiopian immigrants recently arrived in Rome, recounting their circuitous journey through the Sahara and their repeated abuse and imprisonment at the hands of the Libyans. The documentary includes images and visual diagrams that suggest the route, checkpoints, and sites of imprisonment and *respingimento* witnessed by the interviewees. Rendered more poignant by the way in which the oral accounts of the survivors are linked to visual clues about their suffering on the convoluted path to safety, the film gives individual attention to a "lost" generation of East Africans subjected to years of civil war and persecution.



Tighist and Senait. Still from *Come un uomo sulla terra*. Photo: Courtesy of Dagmawi Yimer.

Since the broader political context of the documentary is the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation, signed on August 30, 2008 by Silvio Berlusconi and Muammar Gaddafi, excerpts from television reports relevant to this event are included in its unfolding. With this historic treaty, Italy and Libya officially put the memory of Italy's colonial abuses behind them, and laid out profitable business arrangements for the future. The brief glimpse of the Berlusconi-Gaddafi encounter offered to viewers provides a chilling backdrop to the film's central interviews, in which the traumatized Ethiopians reveal the real human consequences of these neocolonial maneuvers.

*Mare chiuso* focuses on the stories of several men and women from the Horn of Africa who, following Italy's implementation of maritime pushbacks in 2009, were transported back to Libya after the vessels on which they were traveling were intercepted by the Italian Navy. Shot in a refugee camp in Tunisia and in two centers for asylum seekers in southern Italy (*Centri di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo*), the film elicits the direct testimony of Somali and Eritrean migrants who share on camera the horrific experiences they endured before and after their interception by the Italians at sea and their subsequent *refoulement* to Libya. The dire circumstances experienced by these individuals after they were handed over to the Libyan police came to an end, however, with the turmoil of the Arab Spring, enabling some of them to flee to Tunisia and others to re-attempt the hazardous voyage toward European shores.



Behind the scenes of *Mare chiuso*, 2011. Photo: Simone Falso, courtesy of Andrea Segre.



Behind the scenes of *Mare chiuso*, 2011. Photo: Simone Falso.

*Mare chiuso* includes extensive footage shot from the cell phone of one of the Eritrean migrants, which provides a record of the risky voyage he undertook aboard an overcrowded dinghy, right up to the moment of its interception by the Italians. The inclusion of the migrant's own audiovisual record in the very texture of the documentary gives singular force to its overall affective impact.

Also included in the film are excerpts from the hearings of a class-action suit taken to the European Court of Human Rights by twenty-four Eritrean and Somali migrants who, in May 2009, were intercepted at sea by the Italian authorities and pushed back to Libya. The lawyers representing them claimed that by deporting them to Libya, Italy violated the European Convention on Human Rights. At the conclusion of *Mare chiuso*, the viewer learns that the Court has ordered Italy to pay each of the applicants the sum of \$15,000 in compensation for their suffering.

The last film in order of release screened during the directors' trip was Dagmawi Yimer's *Va' pensiero*. An account of two brutal racist attacks against African migrants in Milan and Florence, the film follows the survivors as they attempt to pull their lives back together in the aftermath of the attacks, and use their experience to reach out to Italians while finding a common ground in the fight against the increasingly racist tone of public discourse in Italy. *Va' pensiero* approaches the lives of immigrants in Italy from the point of view of trauma, providing a poignant account of the murder of Diop Mor and Samb Modou and the attempted murder of Moustapha Dieng—Senegalese vendors with legal working permits—in Piazza Dalmazia,

Florence, in 2011. The documentary specifically strives to give name and voice to the two survivors of this incident—Mor Sougou and Cheikh Mbengue—by having them recount their own stories.

The structure of the film is far from accusatory in its address to a society that has shown a general disregard, if not contempt, for its immigrants. Rather, it assumes an educational approach through its deployment of the central figure of Mohamed Ba, the victim of a violent assault in Milan and a *griot*, whose function within the film is to provide the thread that binds together the victims' stories as well as those of other, unknown individuals. *Va' pensiero*'s presentation of the *griot* as the principal narrative agent in the recounting of cultural history and current events makes for an interesting and important choice, since it overlaps with the figure of the *cantastorie* and *cuntastorie* [lit.: singer of stories] of diverse Italian regional cultures. This and other aspects of the film (Ba's work in Italian schools as a cultural educator, and the participation of children of other immigrants shown in the film who are fully bi-cultural and bi-lingual) highlight the link between the humanity of the immigrants and that of their hosts, suggesting yet another instance of "shared signs," kinship, and processes of hybridization that host cultures must at some point recognize as new dimensions of themselves.



Mohamed Ba and his son. Still from *Va' pensiero*. Photo: Courtesy of Dagmawi Yimer.

## From the Mediterranean to the Pacific: The Reception of the Films in Four Californian Universities

### San Diego

The visit of Liberti, Segre and Yimer in California followed a trajectory from south to north, from San Diego to Silicon Valley. In San Diego, the activists visited the University of California, San Diego and San Diego State University. The screening of *A Sud di Lampedusa* and *Va' pensiero* at UCSD, which was introduced and moderated by Pasquale Verdicchio, was intended to attract primarily the audience associated with the San Diego Italian Film Festival. Nonetheless, this event was instrumental in showcasing Yimer's work at the UCSD campus in La Jolla and in recruiting him a year later, in Spring 2015, to deliver the prestigious James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature, an honor awarded annually to leading European intellectuals—an irony that did not escape the filmmaker. This later event will be related in the conclusion of the article. First, we turn to a discussion of the cultural programs that took place in Spring 2014 at San Diego State University, Loyola Marymount University and Santa Clara University.



Screening of *Va' pensiero* at UCSD on March 9, 2014. Photo: Dagmawi Yimer.

SDSU is the largest higher learning institution in San Diego, enrolling about 35,000 students each year. The campus's highly diverse ethnic student population has contributed to its

designation as a Hispanic Serving institution by the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>15</sup> Many students are of the first generation in their families to attend college. Since the University's mission is focused primarily on its region, the student body also includes many students from Mexico who are either bi-national, live in or commute from Tijuana, and who, due to their specific transnational family histories, engage habitually in travel between the two Californias, routinely crossing the busiest border in the world.<sup>16</sup> Their life experience spanning two large metropolitan areas in the United States and Mexico makes them “*transborder citizens*” who personify the border zone's diversity and dynamism.<sup>17</sup> If they are able to perform remarkable linguistic and cultural code-switching in navigating these distinct and utterly unequal realities, their circumstances provide both practical advantages in operating in different national contexts and personal disadvantages, with considerable internal conflict and anxieties about belonging.

It is also important to stress that if the border is a defining aspect of this southern region, it is also one of the most mystified. While Tijuana maintains its reputation as, at best, an illicit recreational park for U.S. college students or, at worst, a crime-ridden shantytown, many San Diegans have never visited it out of fear or misunderstanding.<sup>18</sup> The discrepancy, therefore, between discussions about local transborder culture and active factual information about the topic, even in an urban and cosmopolitan campus like SDSU, is rather stark, and makes the possibility of average American students knowing anything about Mediterranean migration even more slim.

Because of these demographic and geopolitical characteristics, the visit of Liberti, Segre, and Yimer seemed pertinent and compelling, especially in light of the appalling shipwreck that had occurred off the coast of Lampedusa in October 2013, one of many foreseeable tragedies in the relentless flow of migrants from Africa, which was later memorialized by Dagmawi Yimer in *Asmat*,<sup>19</sup> the short film he presented at UCSD's Binder lecture. Titled “Mediterranean Passages: Filming Migration and Human Rights,” the SDSU event, organized by Clarissa Clò on behalf of the Italian Studies Program and the Department of European Studies, included the screening of *Come un uomo sulla terra* and *Mare chiuso* to a primarily undergraduate audience of about 200 students. The event was co-sponsored with instructional grants from the College of Arts and Letters and the Division of Undergraduate Studies' Common Experience, an Academic Engagement Program whose theme that year was “Water.”<sup>20</sup> The screening of the films, which

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<sup>15</sup> “More than half of SDSU students are students of color, including 30 percent who are Hispanic” (Gina Jacobs, “U.S. News Ranks SDSU among Best in Nation,” *SDSU: News Center*, September 12, 2012, [http://newscenter.sdsu.edu/sdsu\\_newscenter/news\\_story.aspx?sid=73799](http://newscenter.sdsu.edu/sdsu_newscenter/news_story.aspx?sid=73799) (accessed April 28, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> See “San Diego–Tijuana,” *Wikipedia*, last updated October 28, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Diego–Tijuana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Diego–Tijuana) (accessed April 29, 2016). Some estimates indicate that about 300,000 people cross the San Diego-Tijuana border each day (“San Ysidro Port of Entry,” *Wikipedia*, last updated November 2, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Ysidro\\_Port\\_of\\_Entry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Ysidro_Port_of_Entry) [accessed April 29, 2016]), others that about 60 million crossings occur each year (Néstor García Canclini, quoted in Fiamma Montezemolo, René Peralta, and Heriberto, *Here is Tijuana!* [London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006], 8).

<sup>17</sup> Norma Iglesias-Prieto, “El Otro Lado de la Línea/The Other Side of the Line,” in *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text, at the Edge of Place*, ed. Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, and Douglas Richardson (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 144.

<sup>18</sup> “According to Richard F. Gonzalez, United States Consul General in Tijuana, 67% of the inhabitants of Southern California have never visited Tijuana, ‘mainly because of negative information about the city’” (Montezemolo, Peralta, and Heriberto, *Here is Tijuana!*, 32).

<sup>19</sup> *Asmat*, directed by Dagmawi Yimer (Rome: Archivio Memorie Migranti, 2015), <https://vimeo.com/114343040> (accessed April 30, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> See “Division of Undergraduate Studies Academic Engagement Programs: Experience Water,” [http://commonexperience.sdsu.edu/dus/commonexperience/mediterranean\\_passages.aspx](http://commonexperience.sdsu.edu/dus/commonexperience/mediterranean_passages.aspx) (accessed April 30, 2016).

took place in the Aztec Student Union Theatre on March 11, 2014, was purposely scheduled during two separate class times at 12:30 and at 2:00, respectively, to maximize attendance. In addition to students from lower- to upper-division courses that incorporated the films and their discussions directly into the curricula for the semester (e.g. Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced classes in Italian, “Italian Migrant Cultures,” “Introduction to European Studies,” and “Contemporary Europe”), several other colleagues had been invited with their students from the departments of History, Political Science, Film, Ethnic Studies, and from other local institutions, such as the University of San Diego and San Diego City College. All events were free and open to the general public. Especially noteworthy was the presence of a group of high school students of Italian from Chula Vista, a city south of San Diego, who stayed for the entire duration of the program.



Stefano Liberti, Andrea Segre and Clarissa Clò during the introductory remarks at SDSU, March 11, 2014.  
Photo: Dagmawi Yimer.



Clarissa Clò during the discussion at SDSU, March 11, 2014. Photo: Dagmawi Yimer.

The audience was particularly receptive to Dagmawi Yimer's harrowing experience traversing the Sahara Desert, his being imprisoned and sold several times before he managed to board a makeshift boat bound for Italy, and his eventual rescue by the Italian Coast Guard, as narrated in *Come un uomo sulla terra*. As expected, very few in the audience had ever heard of these issues, let alone put a face to them. Students were stunned at the blatant violation of human rights he experienced, and asked if Italian and EU policies had changed since the film was made. While Yimer announced that his first priority in making the film was to ensure that migrants' human rights be respected, Segre explained that even when the majority of these travelers are asylum seekers, European states have a vested interest in identifying them instead as "illegal" migrants, so as not to be responsible for their protection. Under these circumstances the only option available to those seeking refugee status is to reach "democratic" Western countries by way of life-threatening journeys rife with violence and abuse.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the discussion, the speakers made an effort to relate the content of both films not only to their location in the Mediterranean and to Italian and European policies, but also to general trans-historical and global trends regarding human mobility and migrant flows that apply to other geographical realities, from the Middle East to Latin America, to the Pacific and to the U.S./Mexico border. Rather than simply calling into question or exposing flawed Italian and European governmental practices, and spectacularizing the suffering of migrants, the screenings and the discussions that followed at SDSU were intended to encourage a comparative perspective on migration worldwide, by pointing out how the specificities in a particular location of global neoliberal and neocapitalist dynamics are also reproduced, albeit differently, everywhere else.<sup>22</sup>

Students' responses to the films indicated that they had grasped their significance beyond the geopolitical area in which they were made. In fact, many understood the political implications of the event in light of immigration debates in the United States and in their own Southwestern region, which were refracted back to them through images of other places and "contact zones"<sup>23</sup> in a process of circuitous mirroring and collective multidirectional memory with the "potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as can be claimed for the Mediterranean, "from consideration of Tijuana as a border city we are pushed into thinking the whole world as a multiplicity of border zones, traversed by legislation, enforcement, and bureaucracy, and then complicated by the unaccountable histories and cultures embodied in the migrancy of unauthorized bodies and cultures."<sup>25</sup> Still, students admitted that they would have probably never watched these films on their own, and were grateful to have had the opportunity to meet the directors in person, especially Yimer, whom one defined academically as a "primary source." Questions of a personal and intimate nature were indeed directed to Yimer, inquiring about his national identifications and allegiances, asking about his

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<sup>21</sup> A similar argument about the moral implications of this "death by policy" practice on the part of European nations can be found in Maurizio Albahari's "Death and the Moral State: Making Borders and Sovereignty at the Southern Edges of Europe" (Working Paper 136, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2006, <http://ccis.ucsd.edu/files/wp136.pdf> [accessed May 6, 2016]), 19.

<sup>22</sup> The videotaped discussion of the films screened at SDSU, curated by the staff of the Language Acquisition Research Center (LARC) on campus, is available at [http://italian.sdsu.edu/events/mediterranean\\_passages.html](http://italian.sdsu.edu/events/mediterranean_passages.html) (accessed April 29, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Iain Chambers, "A Line in the Sand," in *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, ed. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), XIII.

current situation and projects, and especially thanking him for sharing his painful experience with them. While some identified with him, despite obvious differences, pointing out their difficult move from Mexico to the United States, others were simultaneously shocked and moved by the images and stories of the films. One was even inspired to contemplate a career as a human rights advocate.



Perla Ortiz, Adrián Gutiérrez, Clarissa Clò, Stefano Liberti, Andrea Segre, Holly Puccino, Dagmawi Yimer, Andrea Hiley, and Rosamaria Carrara Ruggeri in front of the Aztec Student Union theatre, SDSU, March 11, 2014.  
Photo: Clarissa Clò.

Beyond the political significance of the documentaries and the discussion of migration policies that make it abundantly clear which lives are expendable, the films' ability to communicate the basic humanity of all people was what most fully engaged the audience and made an impact on students. Indeed it was precisely at the affective level that the larger collaborative public project proved most valuable. As it also occurred at many screenings of these films in Italy, the audience in San Diego reacted strongly, feeling outraged at the circumstances presented to them. Rather than simply dismissing their responses as "false

consciousness,” we should consider the “reparative possibilities”<sup>26</sup> that these narratives may enable for the subjects on camera as much as for the Western viewers who are called to witness and asked to become accountable. We should not underestimate the epistemic epiphanies that can accompany feelings and emotions, traumatic or otherwise. In this sense, our collaborative cultural program was akin to Anne Cvetkovich’s “public feelings” project that strives to “create conjunctions between academia, activism, and art”<sup>27</sup> by focusing on the role of affects, positive and negative, in historical perspective and everyday life, as well as on their relevance in studying the legacies of systemic processes from slavery to colonialism to migration.<sup>28</sup> Along with Cvetkovich, we believe that we need “new forms of personal voice in academic work,”<sup>29</sup> for example, by acknowledging our intellectual and emotional investments and by embracing the challenge of collaborative enterprises.

## Los Angeles

The three filmmakers arrived at Loyola Marymount University immediately following their stay in San Diego, and the program organized around their visit was advertised as “Cinema, Migration, Activism: The Films of Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer and Stefano Liberti.” Loyola Marymount is a Jesuit institution, with a declared commitment to the promotion of social justice. Though tuition costs are extremely high, scholarships and tuition remission are available to many, and the student body reflects at least to some degree the ethnic and cultural diversity of Los Angeles as a whole. The commitment to social justice translates institutionally in various ways, including the sponsoring of service-driven initiatives and study abroad programs that aim to involve students in attempts to alleviate the effects of poverty and distress both in the United States and the global south. Loyola Marymount University is also committed to a less widely advertised program that provides scholarships to undocumented US immigrants, enabling them to complete their undergraduate studies without undue financial stress. Service-oriented, consciousness-raising presentations, screenings, and lectures are commonly held on campus. The frequency of such events may explain some of the “compassion fatigue” that one is likely to encounter when attempting to attract audiences for visiting speakers presenting material about traumatic circumstances in far-flung locations.

Academically, the visit of the filmmakers coincided with a course offered by Áine O’Healy on Comparative Cultures, an upper-division requirement in the major in Modern Languages and Literatures. Since raising funds for visiting speakers is a challenging task at LMU, aligning the visit of Segre, Liberti and Yimer with a course in session provided some pedagogical justification and the promise of student participation, factors that strengthened the appeal for support, especially at the departmental level. In light of the filmmakers’ visit, the curriculum for this particular iteration of Comparative Cultures focused entirely on the literature and cinema of Italian immigration, so that by the time Segre, Liberti and Yimer showed up in person, students in the class were familiar with the sociopolitical context and postcolonial implications of the issues addressed in their films. Furthermore, because this was a course dedicated to audiovisual representations of contemporary immigration to Italy more generally, the screenings scheduled to

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<sup>26</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 146.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Cvetkovich, “Public Feelings,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 459.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

coincide with the filmmakers' visit included not only the two documentaries on the challenging journey of migrants heading from the Horn of Africa to Italy via Libya (*Come un uomo sulla terra* and *Mare chiuso*), but also *Io sono Li*,<sup>30</sup> Segre's first feature film, which focuses on the figure of a young female immigrant from China who is subjected to an implacable regime of indentured labor and debt repayment by her Chinese employers in Italy.

The participation of students from other programs and departments across the university was also vigorously sought out. Following appeals for support, financial contributions of various levels were pledged by the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Film and Television, the College of Communications and Fine Arts, the Department of History, the Department of African American Studies, the Department of Women's Studies, and the European Studies Program. The Marymount Institute for Faith, Culture, and the Arts, which has a history of supporting similar initiatives on campus, provided the most generous financial contribution.

From the beginning, the visit of the filmmakers to LMU was conceptualized as a public event, bearing in mind that Los Angeles is home to the largest diasporic community of Ethiopians in the United States after Washington D.C. Among Los Angeles's ethnically designated neighborhoods is a small stretch of the Fairfax district called Little Ethiopia, famous for its excellent Ethiopian restaurants, though the majority of Ethiopian-Americans living in Los Angeles are scattered around the metropolitan area. At LMU this community is well represented. Among the undergraduate population there has been a steady flow of first- and second-generation Ethiopian-Americans, as well as more recent arrivals, including students who completed their high school education at the *liceo italiano* in Addis Ababa. Furthermore, a major contributor to the intellectual life of the university is the exiled Ethiopian journalist and publisher Elias Wondimu, who has directed Tsehai Press from his office at the Marymount Institute on the LMU campus since 2008, and who has spearheaded the organization of several important cultural events relating to various African histories and diasporas. For these reasons it seemed crucial to bring Yimer's work into dialogue with his emigrant or exiled compatriots living in Southern California, whose histories of displacement, resettlement, and political engagement were shaped by different exigencies.

The screening of *Come un uomo sulla terra* was thus envisioned as the high point of the filmmakers' visit, and it was scheduled at an evening hour to facilitate the attendance of the general public. In the planning and promotion of this specific event Elias Wondimu was especially helpful, spreading the word among the Ethiopian community and among groups with strong interest in various facets of Africa, its political histories, and its far-flung diasporas.

Segre's feature film *Io sono Li* was screened in the early afternoon and was attended mostly by students enrolled in the Comparative Cultures course, who responded enthusiastically to its visually suggestive setting and affectively resonant narrative. *Mare chiuso* was screened immediately afterwards, followed by a lively discussion with Liberti and Segre. Despite the intense publicity campaign, this screening drew only a modest turnout. Those participating were mostly LMU students enrolled in Italian courses, though there was also a welcome sprinkling of graduate students and faculty from LMU as well as from other nearby institutions (the University of Southern California, the University of California, Santa Barbara, the University of California, Riverside, and UCLA).

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<sup>30</sup> *Io sono Li*, directed by Andrea Segre (Padova: Jolefilm, 2011), DVD.



Áine O’Healy, Stefano Liberti, and Andrea Segre during the screening of *Mare chiuso* at LMU.  
Photo: Dagmawi Yimer.

*Mare chiuso* provoked a strong reaction from everyone in the audience. Although most viewers were previously unaware of the subject it explored (the maritime pushbacks of 2009), they responded with deep interest, thanks to the vividly engaging encounters with the survivors presented on screen. With Segre and Liberti in attendance to provide contextual clarification, a rich picture emerged of the circumstances under which *Mare chiuso* was shot. Several viewers observed the remarkable degree of agency that the film accords to the migrants, who, in the process of witnessing, recording, and disseminating an account of the maritime pushbacks, effectively become contemporary historians. Issues of perspective and framing in relation to such accounts also became part of the discussion, thanks to the contribution of Alicia Partnoy, an LMU faculty member and survivor of Argentina’s brutal “dirty war,” an expert on testimonial writing, and the author of *The Little School*, a memoir of her own experiences of imprisonment as one of her country’s 30,000 *desaparecidos*.<sup>31</sup>

It was in this context that discussion arose regarding the ethics of depicting or speaking for the “other” by filmmakers, artists or writers who are culturally at some distance from the situations they describe, an issue that has been the focus of debate among feminist and

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<sup>31</sup> Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*, trans. Lois Athey and Sandra Braunstein (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998).

postcolonial theorists for the past several years.<sup>32</sup> Conscientious filmmakers attempting to represent those who are ethnically, racially or economically different are aware of the necessity to perceive, respect, and “translate” the other’s differences while avoiding the pitfalls of erasure, disavowal or distortion. The main error to be avoided—and one that is witnessed throughout the history of representational practices, especially in anthropological work—lies in the mechanism of constructing the other simply in terms of the self, that is, as the opposite of the self, a process that paradoxically conflates the other with the self-same. Keenly aware of these challenges, Segre spoke of his own effort to develop a process of participatory filmmaking that empowers the subjects of his documentaries as co-authors in their own right.

The screening of *Come un uomo sulla terra* was attended by a much larger audience than these earlier events. Thanks to the publicity generated by Elias Wondimu, many, if not the majority, of the attendees were immigrants from Africa, and a large percentage of these were Ethiopian. Students were also present, as well as a handful of faculty. At the conclusion of the screening, Yimer, Segre, and Wondimu presided over an intense discussion that lasted more than an hour. This was a particularly moving experience for Yimer, as he had never before addressed an audience consisting of such a large number of his own countrymen.

Most Ethiopians in the audience seemed unaware of Italy’s indirect complicity in the abuse of Ethiopian migrants at the hands of the Libyan authorities just a few years earlier. They were aware, however, of the much more recent incidents of abuse committed against Ethiopian migrants in both Israel and Saudi Arabia, so the film had immediate resonance and urgency for them. They also understood the compelling circumstances that drive thousands of young people to abandon their native country, risking mortal danger to seek a new life elsewhere. A large number of these Ethiopians had left home to escape the effects of an earlier government—the brutal left-wing dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which took thousands of lives in the years preceding its eventual overthrow in 1991. Though belonging to an older generation than Yimer, and having pursued a migratory trajectory that took them through very different experiences and locations, they were certainly familiar with the risks and deprivations of exile.

For those members of the audience unfamiliar with recent Ethiopian political history, the reasons that Dagmawi left his country were not entirely clear. Much of the initial discussion was spent sorting out some basic misunderstandings. In fact, the government that came to power in Ethiopia in the 1990s had been touted around the world as a genuine democracy. Its charismatic leader, Meles Zenawi, who became President in 1995, enjoyed widespread support in the international community and was embraced as an ally of the West in the so-called War on Terror. Yimer, however, described to the LMU audience the hidden face of this supposedly exemplary administration, which consolidated its power by reinforcing ethnic divisions within the nation, pitting groups of citizens against each other, and harshly suppressing all opposition to its policies. Knowing that he could not live in a country that accorded value and opportunity to individuals based on the ethnicity attributed to them, Dagmawi decided to flee. The title of *Come un uomo sulla terra*, he explained, obliquely refers to his rejection of the importance assigned to distinct ethnic identities, and his subsequent decision to describe himself—simply and oppositionally—as “a man on earth.” As Elias Wondimu also explained, the encouragement of

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Nancy N. Chen and Trinh Minh-ha, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82–91; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

ethnic divisions as a way of consolidating power and control was originally a colonial tactic, practiced first by the Italians when they sought to dominate Eritrea at the end of the 19th century, alienating its people from other communities occupying the larger region of Ethiopia/Abyssinia. Here too, one can discern the effects of Italy's shaping of the regions it dominated in its relatively short history of conquest, occupation, and attempts at colonization.



Elias Wondimu, Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer and Áine O'Healy during the discussion of *Come un uomo sulla terra* at LMU. Photo: Stefano Liberti.



Discussion of *Come un uomo sulla terra* at LMU. Photo: Stefano Liberti.

One of the most interesting aspects of Dagmawi's visit to LMU was precisely the opportunity it gave him to establish meaningful contact with the Ethiopian diaspora in North America. After his experience in Los Angeles and Santa Clara, he had planned to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet his mother, whom he had been unable to see for over a decade because of his inability, until 2014, to secure a visa to travel outside the European Union. Thanks to the contacts set up by Elias Wondimu at LMU, Yimer, while in Washington, was invited to give a presentation at the International Conference of Ethiopian Women in the Diaspora, allowing him to share his work with an even larger African audience than those who had attended the event in Los Angeles. He has subsequently been in discussion with Wondimu and others about the possibility of subtitling *Come un uomo sulla terra* in Amharic, so that it can be seen by a wider swath of Ethiopians both at home and abroad.

The visit of the three filmmakers to Loyola Marymount University continued to generate discussion among students in the weeks that followed, particularly among those enrolled in the Comparative Cultures class. Though their warm response to the encounter with the filmmakers and their films was gratifying, one must be wary of drawing too simple a connection between expressions of heartfelt compassion and the likelihood of personal transformation achieved through identifying with scenarios of human distress. In the classroom debates that followed these events at LMU, it became imperative to examine and reframe the students' initial responses to the documentaries, challenging their tendency toward "compassion-producing identification"<sup>33</sup> by prompting them to explore in critical terms the affective mechanisms at play in their own reception of these films. It is all too easy for viewers to feel edified by a spontaneous outpouring of sadness and pity for the sufferings depicted on screen. Such sentiments, however, run the risk of short-circuiting a meaningful consideration of broader political issues and specifically of the structural inequalities underlying the circumstances in question. In the process of becoming critically self-aware viewers and readers, students must begin to assess their conditioning by popular psychological notions of empowerment<sup>34</sup> and to question the fantasies of rescue sometimes unwittingly triggered by the discourses of humanitarian intervention promoted by the American neoliberal society in which they live and reinforced by the academic institutions in which they study and we work. In fact, one of the most urgent aspects of teaching films about contemporary human mobility is to raise critical awareness of the emotional responses elicited by images of what Luc Boltanski calls "distant suffering"<sup>35</sup> and to contextualize these representations within a wider discussion of global relations of power.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, "How Real Is the Reality in the Documentary Film?," *History and Theory* 36 (1997): 83. Godmilow, an American documentary filmmaker, writes critically about filmmakers that aim primarily to elicit feelings rather than promote intellectual engagement.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the pedagogical challenges presented by the discourses of empowerment espoused by U.S. students in the film studies classroom, see Aga Skrodzka, "Disempowering Knowledge: How to Teach Not to Help," *Teaching Transnational Cinema*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett (New York: Routledge 2016), 236–55.

<sup>35</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham D. Burchell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> A fuller discussion of these issues, inspired in part by the experience of teaching various documentaries by Liberti, Biadene, Segre, and Yimer, is found in Áine O'Healy, "'Grateful to be an American': The Challenges of Teaching Transnational Documentaries," in *Teaching Transnational Cinema*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak and Bruce Bennett (New York: Routledge, 2016), 202–15.

## Santa Clara

The directors' trip concluded at Santa Clara University. Of the universities we targeted during the visit, Santa Clara presented the least obvious opportunity for an engaged, activist discussion. First, SCU is situated in one of the wealthiest areas of the United States, in the middle of Silicon Valley. Members of the surrounding communities are traditionally older and upper class, and often have well-established roots in the area. Though they tend to embrace progressive cultural stances, they are emotionally and politically quite distant from the concerns discussed by directors like Liberti, Segre, and Yimer. The University itself, like Loyola Marymount, is a very selective Jesuit institution, but its student population tends to be more affluent, and geographically attracts mostly Catholic students from all over the country. Conversely, because the visit was sponsored by a large endowment to promote Italian Studies at the University and in the community, fundraising and local involvement were not prerequisites for the event in Santa Clara.

That said, in planning the event, Valerio Ferme realized that the area, with its large Italian-American heritage population, and the school's history of social engagement, offered ample opportunities for successful dialogue and participation, while being in accordance with the donors' goal of promoting Italian Studies events in the Bay Area. The South Bay was, at the beginning of the 20th century, and still today in the areas closer to the southern extensions of the lower bay, a region that has always thrived on immigration. Between the 19th and the 20th century, the area became the focus of immigration for a number of Italian, Slavic, and Mexican communities (most of them employed in agriculture).<sup>37</sup> The University itself was founded by Italian Jesuits with the goal of instructing the children of Catholic immigrants to the region following the population influx that had started during the Gold Rush and continued unabated in the years that followed. Many of the current inhabitants of the South Bay are third- or fourth-generation descendants of these original immigrants, and many have strong ties to their past. Additionally, the need for agricultural farmhands that extends from San Jose to the areas of Watsonville to the south, and the San Joaquin Valley to the east, has made the locality a magnet for new waves of migrants, especially those who move northward in search of work from the Mexico/California border. More importantly, however, the University has positioned itself as one of the most socially progressive institutions of higher learning in California and the Western United States, in particular through its law school. The Katharine and George Alexander Community Law Center has been at the forefront of promoting and advocating human rights for both regular and undocumented immigrants, and the University itself came into the spotlight five years ago (and drew the ire of socially and politically conservative ideologues) for being the first in the country to promote a scholarship program that anonymously provided tuition benefits for undocumented immigrants.<sup>38</sup> The parallel between the great waves of migration during the previous century and those currently being experienced in California; the connections between Italy as emigrant nation in the past and immigrant country in the current geopolitical

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<sup>37</sup> On the Italian experience in California, see the recent documentary by Gianfranco Norelli and Suma Kurien, *Finding the Motherlode: Italian Immigrants in California* (New York: Eurus Productions, 2013), DVD.

<sup>38</sup> On this topic, see Kurt Wagner, "25 undocumented immigrants find a home – and free college education – at Santa Clara University," *USA Today College*, September 24, 2011, <http://college.usatoday.com/2011/09/24/25-undocumented-immigrants-find-a-home-at-santa-clara-university/> (accessed August 21, 2016).

restructuring of the Mediterranean;<sup>39</sup> and, finally, the social activism of the directors and the corresponding activism of the organizer and the University itself, merged into a confluence of opposites that could generate a consciousness-raising opportunity for students and members of the community alike.

With this in mind, Valerio Ferme, following the original iteration of the Vari Symposium over two days, chose to structure the event on the topic “Italy: Migrations, Then and Now,” focused on the parallels between emigration from Italy in the 19th and 20th centuries and the current waves of migration into Italy and the United States. On the first night, the symposium screened *Mare chiuso* by Segre and Liberti. To make the topic of immigration more present to an audience of students and community members who might be distant to the currency of migrant struggles, Valerio Ferme gave an introductory presentation that focused on the often violent and deadly treatment of Italian immigrants to the United States between 1880 and 1920, titled: “Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses... with Some Exceptions: Italian Immigration Eugenics in 20th-Century U.S. Immigration Policies.” The idea was to show that many of the reactionary responses currently taking place in the United States and Italy to the presence of (so-called illegal) migrants in these countries simply rehash behaviors (including lynching) that Italian immigrants in particular were subject to when they first came to the United States. After the screening of *Mare chiuso*, the directors, accompanied by Dagmawi Yimer and Valerio Ferme, responded for over an hour to questions posed by an engaged audience of over 80 faculty, local community members, and students. In particular, students in the audience asked questions about the filmmaking processes that led to the completed work of Segre and Liberti; while community members, often of Italian-American descent, chose to explore the legal ramifications for international law of the decision by the European Commission on Human Rights to sentence Italy to a violation of Europe’s Convention on Human Rights.

The following day, the three directors discussed their work with the Italian language and culture classes of faculty members Evelyn Ferraro and Marie Bertola as part of the pedagogical mission that is also one of the goals of the Vari Symposium. Here, Liberti, Yimer, and especially Segre, challenged the students to address these topics not only from the standpoint of an evening and classroom discussion, but by raising their commitment from the level of interested bystanders to that of participant activists in their own communities. The group later reconvened for a smaller, more intimate discussion centered around School of Law Professor Lynette Parker’s poignant presentation on “Migration and Globalization: Legal Issues in Present Day Migrations across Land and Sea,” and on the viewing of an excerpt from Segre and Yimer’s documentary *Come un uomo sulla terra*. Parker’s presentation on the history of human rights violations by the United States as it pertains to Haiti was shocking not only to members of the audience, but to the filmmakers themselves. Referring back to decisions enacted by the Immigration and Naturalization Services in the 1970s and 1980s, whereby Haitian refugees escaping the dictatorial regime of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier were turned away at sea; but also to how similar “boat people” aiming for the American shores from Fidel Castro’s Cuba were welcomed and quickly naturalized,<sup>40</sup> Parker highlighted the ongoing issue of migration and

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<sup>39</sup> With regard to the impact that the geopolitical changes in the Mediterranean area have had on migration, see the recent book by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme, *Italy and the Mediterranean: Words, Sounds, Images of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> On the differential treatment reserved to Haitian immigrants, see: AAME (The African-American Migration Experience), “Haitian Immigration,” <http://www.inmotionaame.org/print.cfm;jsessionid=f830516401439438101564?migration=12&bhcp=1> (accessed August 15, 2015).

naturalization into the United States, which differentiates heavily according to classist and ethnic provenance in making its border decisions.<sup>41</sup> The smaller group then compared governmental responses by the United States to the Haitian 1980s crisis to the current migrant crisis from Central and South America, and to Italy's and Western Europe's obstructionist policies in the Mediterranean, underscoring the parallels and the similarly negative ways in which Western powers have dealt with migration from perspectives that are influenced by cultural and racial factors more than they are by legal precedent or international treaties. While smaller in audience numbers, the second night was greatly successful, relying both on heartfelt personal migration memories shared by members of the audience, and on the deeper exploration of legal and political motives underscoring the plight of migrants as represented in the directors' work and the work of lawyers such as Parker, who have dedicated their lives to improving the status of migrants as they arrive in destination countries.



Dagmawi Yimer, Valerio Ferme, Stefano Liberti, and Andrea Segre at Santa Clara University.  
Photo: Sergio Lopez.

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<sup>41</sup> One cannot help but infer similarities with the hateful rhetoric against Muslim immigrants in this current election season.



Valerio Ferme, Stefano Liberti, Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer, and Lynette Parker at SCU.  
Photo: Sergio Lopez.

### **San Diego, One Year Later**

The success of Dagmawi Yimer's first visit to UC San Diego, along with his firsthand experience as a refugee, and his interests in U.S./Mexico border issues, facilitated his invitation as Binder Lecturer for the academic year 2015. In May 2015, Yimer presented his talk, "Names and Bodies, Tales from the Other Side of the Sea" to a capacity audience at the UCSD Faculty Club Atkinson Pavilion. Yimer's own summary of his talk was as follows:

In July 2006, after a long journey across Sudan and Libya, I crossed the Mediterranean Sea on a shaky migrant boat and landed at Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost frontier facing the African coast. My talk is a personal recounting of the gruesome conditions endured by migrants as they journey across desert and sea, and what they have to endure in order to reach that other shore of an unattainable land of freedom. I intend to open with a question "Are we making history or are we simply running to an already scheduled appointment?" and I will stress the relevance of a colonial past in marking the destiny of present immigrants from the Horn of Africa to Libya and Italy. The account is an evocative travel narrative that recalls the memory of countless black Africans piled together and forced to undergo untenable conditions of violence that define

the forms of what is essentially a twenty-first-century slave trade. The journey came back to me with unbearable strength while filming *Asmat* (Tigrigna for *Names*) to honor the names of 368 men, women and children (360 of whom from Eritrea) who lost their lives as they tried to call ashore for help during a fire as their boat neared the island of Lampedusa. I will end with a screening of the commemorative film.<sup>42</sup>



Dagmawi Yimer during his keynote address at UCSD.  
Photo: Pasquale Verdicchio.

Premiered at UCSD, the short commemorative documentary *Asmat*, honoring what, with the more recent incidents and deaths, has become a small fraction of the total loss of lives, expands the work of *Va' pensiero* in that it again seeks to “recognize” those unknown victims whose

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<sup>42</sup> See <http://literature.ucsd.edu/news-events/files-current-events/BinderFlyer-DagmawiYimer.pdf>.

names are rarely mentioned in the press or by officialdom. As they remain unspoken and unheard by Italians and Europeans, these names make it much too easy to disregard the plight of the lives they stand for. One possible answer to Yimer’s question, “Are we making history?” could be that we are at last witnessing a time in history that demands a reviewing of the colonial past and the responsibilities that remain unacknowledged or unregarded. When attempts to de-humanize entire populations fall back on the same old hierarchies of power and show little imagination regarding what the realities of the wider world are today, we may find it impossible to see a different future. Yimer and others like him point the cameras at themselves and their fellow travellers to ask us to “ri-guardare,” to see anew and to have regard—as Franco Cassano might say<sup>43</sup>—for those whose names might be different from ours but whose faces mirror our own humanity.



Screening of *Asmat* at UCSD. Photo: Pasquale Verdicchio.

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<sup>43</sup> Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Bari: Laterza, 2005), 6.

## Conclusion

In the end, our collaborative project, and this co-authored piece, made apparent the difficulty and complexity of translating our own theoretical principles into real pedagogical alternatives. Academia values “certain kinds of practices as important work—work that in effect constitutes a person’s primary academic identity—and other kinds as necessary but lacking personal or institutional significance once completed.”<sup>44</sup> Against the “agonistic individualism”<sup>45</sup> often perpetrated in the academy, we affirm the necessity to join forces and practice a politics of shared resources and responsibilities in order to enable meaningful conversations with our students and our intellectual communities about the ever more unequal world we inhabit and in which we participate.

Despite the relative success of our events, we remain aware of the incommensurability between authorial experience and intention, and between our own academic investments and audience reception, over which we have, after all, limited control. Our concerns also involve the danger of inadvertently turning humanitarian crises such as those depicted in the films made by our visitors into a spectacle for which the audience’s witnessing during the screening constitutes the only form of response. For in such situations, the empathy of the moment can complacently replace any further discussion of our own implication in these tragedies as Western citizens from countries whose liberal policies in fact exclude the very racialized subjects represented on screen. As much as we are proponents of “the flexibility of images” and of the visions they may inspire, we acknowledge the image’s unwitting and persistent “fixity,” which often dangerously corresponds to an entrapment within our own working and living conditions. As Aga Skrodzka reminds us, “knowledge-transfer within the global educational context is sensitive to neocolonial relations of power. Educators and students are often transnational subjects with specific disempowerment/re-empowerment histories.”<sup>46</sup>

If, indeed, “today’s complex directionalities of human capital on the move (i.e., brain drain and brain gain flows) have an impact upon educational structures, pedagogical approaches, and classroom affect,”<sup>47</sup> we wish to ask what Italian Studies can offer to contemporary discussions, both from a presentist and a historical perspective, and how our field might intersect productively with other disciplines and initiatives on our campuses, and with those at different universities, in ways that illuminate or give renewed vigor to common concerns.<sup>48</sup> We also wonder what other joint projects we might envision that will make our intellectual work relevant to the preparation of the coming generations not only for careers in neocolonial and neocapitalist societies, but also for the pursuit of what it means to be fully human on earth through a variety of means, including an ethics and a poetics of shareable values and participatory collaborations. We hope that this essay is the beginning of a broader discussion within our field of study and within the profession.

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<sup>44</sup> Lisa Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford, “Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship,” *PMLA* 116, no. 2 (2001): 357.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>46</sup> Skrodzka, “Disempowering Knowledge,” 241.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, the important contribution that Italian Studies can offer to postcolonial questions and vice-versa as discussed by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, “The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto,” *Italian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2014): 425–33.

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