

Visualizing Protest: African (Diasporic) Art and Contemporary Mediterranean Crossings

CHERYL FINLEY, Cornell University,
LEIGH RAIFORD, University of California, Berkeley, and
HEIKE RAPHAEL-HERNANDEZ, Würzburg University

For Bisi Silva (1962–2019)

As part of the 2019 Venice Biennale, Swiss artist Christoph Büchel installed *Barca Nostra*, the recovered fishing boat that sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2015, drowning all but twenty-eight of the seven to eleven hundred migrant-refugees on board.¹ The tragedy of Lampedusa, the deadliest known Mediterranean shipwreck, came to represent the growing “migrant crisis” and the boat itself has been sought to be used as specific visual representation on both sides of this politicized humanitarian crisis. In May 2016, a Palermo-based migrant advocacy group proposed to tour the shipwreck across Europe’s borders to symbolize the need for open borders and free mobility for migrant-refugees. The following October, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi suggested bringing the shipwreck to the seat of the European Union in Brussels to force attention to issues of transnational migration. More recently, at the 58th Venice Biennale, Büchel installed the massive, decaying shipwreck along the busy Grand Canal at a major thoroughfare of the Venice Biennale, a site usually reserved for the most decadent cruise ships, as “a collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration.”² *Barca Nostra* is indeed meant to remind viewers of the fraught role of Venice and its Biennale in this issue: the site of the world’s oldest and largest international art exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia*, Venice is also a destination for many migrant-refugees. Not all viewers, however, have been so moved by Büchel’s contribution,

and a number of critics have lambasted *Barca Nostra* as distasteful and exploitative.³ This ongoing debate compels us to ask who has the right to represent such phenomena and what might be the most effective artistic modes of presentation.

Art and politics converge here as well. During the 2010s, issues of transnational migration have received increased attention in public debates among people across the political spectrum. The changes that are taking place at fundamental levels in an increasingly multiethnic and multiracial United States as well as in most European countries have engendered heated debates in the highest political echelons as well as in exchanges between ordinary people about questions of citizenship: who has the right to stay, who should be regarded as a mere temporary guest, who is (un)welcome as a traveler, and who should not be granted even the transitional status of traveler. This change—caused by one of the largest patterns of migration ever seen in human history born out of uneven global distributions of economic resources, of the legacies of colonization, and post–Cold War conditions in many countries of the Eastern Bloc, as well as of the aftermaths of or ongoing violent conflicts such as civil wars, ethnic cleansings, or military operations—is completely redesigning the racial and ethnic map of many countries.⁴

In this essay, we focus on the contemporary Mediterranean crossings of sub-Saharan African migrant–refugees from the shores of Northern Africa to Southern Europe. In the last decade, that is between 2009 and 2019, this specific group has received increased attention in the news media as well as in European political discourse. However, photographs of African migrants crossing the Mediterranean in overloaded small rafts have been circulated by the international media well before this recent explosive media attention. Furthermore, human rights groups have reported on these often deadly crossing attempts. Amnesty International, for example, wrote in 2014 that at least twenty-three thousand people were estimated to have died trying to reach Europe between 2000 and 2014.⁵ In addition, the UN and its High Commissioner for Refugees have tried for years to bring international awareness to the situation of African migrant–refugees in Libya’s camps and these camps’ catastrophic violations of any basic human rights. Academic scholarship, too, has pointed to human rights violations regarding Europe’s massive attempts at securing and reinforcing its southern borders.⁶ Yet, probably the first time that a larger international audience empathetically took real note of this human rights catastrophe was when media reports of the dangerous crossings from Africa to Italy or Spain in April 2015 widely broadcast the shipwrecks of April 13 and April 19 in which four hundred and more than eight hundred people respectively drowned near the Italian island of Lampedusa. These two tragic events amplified international attention, as they were highly publicized in major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.⁷ Now, photos of Africans in small boats or of long rows of corpses in body bags lining Spanish and Italian beaches began to testify that these crossings were about to turn the Mediterranean into one of the biggest mass graves in human history. At the same time, the media also began to publish pictures of migrant–refugees rescued from overloaded boats floating helplessly in and around the Mediterranean.⁸ While the sheer number of this rescued group helped to turn international public sympathy toward migrant–refugees (for 2015 alone, the Italian Coast Guard reported that 152,343 migrants were

brought to Sicily or Lampedusa after being found in the Central Mediterranean), it also brought a wave of hostile stances.⁹

Since then, the number of African migrant–refugees who have actually succeeded in their Mediterranean crossings, thus reaching Europe via Spain or Italy, has increased tremendously. One is able to see their growing presence nowadays in any European city, be it in Spain, Italy, or further north, in France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, for example. Their very presence—recognizable in that their visible racial difference has highlighted the historic monolithic whiteness that marks many of these countries—has caused ongoing discussions about so-called national identities, job competition, and cultural values. Right-wing politicians in the majority of the European Union member countries have used this growing African diaspora as one of their scapegoating arguments for failing national economic conditions. In addition, these crossings of the Mediterranean have generated heated debates about severe human rights violations perpetrated by the European Union, their respective policy makers, and Europe’s cooperation with Libya’s government and its coast guard, altogether turning the Mediterranean into a humanitarian battlefield, as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees statistics for 2018 show. The UNHCR reports, for example, that the mortality rate connected to these Mediterranean crossings reached its peak in 2018 while at the same time the number of actual arrivals in Southern Europe declined.¹⁰ Legal actions, however, have not been taken against these European policy makers and their North African allies, but against a variety of civil rights activists and NGOs that are involved in rescue actions, such as *Sea-Watch*, *Seebrücke*, or *Operation Meditteranea*.¹¹

The Black Atlantic in the Mediterranean

The European Union’s current legal system distinguishes between people arriving via the Mediterranean who enter Europe because they are fleeing from well-documented violence and war in their home countries and those who are seeking reprieve from extreme poverty and a lack of economic opportunities for better futures.¹² The policy has been to readily accept the former while the latter find themselves turned away. Currently, this is the legal fate for the majority of sub-Saharan Africans after they have survived near-death marches through the Sahara, the refugee camps in Libya, and finally the Mediterranean boat crossings; they are excluded from any legal possibilities of staying in any member country of the European Union because they are only “migrants” who are looking for employment opportunities.¹³ In addition to these legal circumstances, many Western European countries also privilege a discourse on ongoing human rights crises for civil war refugees (from Syria, for example) while simultaneously viewing “migrants” from former colonial territories (from Senegal or Gambia, for instance) as merely travelers seeking economic opportunities. Thus the former (“refugees”) receive legally sanctioned financial aid *and* public sympathy (although the same aid and sympathy have now become part of the main causes for a tremendous rise of right-wing attitudes in nearly every country of the EU) while the latter (“migrants”) are regarded as invaders. The irony seems to be lost on many human rights debates that the descendants of those who once had been forced into labor arrangements are now using their agency to

voluntarily offer their labor power to the same political entities that had forced their ancestors into slavery and colonialism, but now reject them. Hence, in this essay we use the term “migrant-refugee” to draw explicit attention to these historical entanglements and uneven, seemingly race-based state policies.

Our aim here is not to diminish the very real suffering in war-torn countries such as Syria. Rather, we want to highlight the ways the presentism of this debate about legal/illegal issues depends on a kind of racialized colonial amnesia that does not see that these economic “migrants” are the product of a long history of slavery and colonialism that has left many with few viable choices. As the colonial immigrant saying goes, oft-repeated by pioneering British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall about Caribbean and African migration to Britain: “We are here because you were there.”

We contend that this contemporary mass migration from African countries must be seen as connected to a longer history of forced migrations over and through the waters of the African diaspora. British scholar Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” can and should be read as one possible theoretical concept for the Black Mediterranean because his book prefigured many of the debates around the transnational, the intercultural, and globalization that have taken place since it was published in 1993. As he has famously written, the ship constitutes an important chronotope in Black Atlantic cultures. Gilroy writes: “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [...]. Ships immediately focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts.”¹⁴ Gilroy’s work in particular has been enormously influential as a model which understands transnational connections as “rooted” in conceptualizations of common racialized experiences and “routed” through a set of cultural and political resources Black people draw upon in their struggles against various and divergent forms of oppression. “Through such practices,” Jacqueline Nassy Brown observes, “differently located blacks transcend national boundaries, creating a mutually accessible, translatable, and inspirational political culture that invite[s] universal participation.”¹⁵

Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” also has important implications for the study of art and art history, as Cheryl Finley’s *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* foregrounds.¹⁶ Artists of the African diaspora have returned continually to the chronotope of the ship and have drawn on this long memory as a means to convey the contemporary crisis. They have done so not only to connect to a longer history of diaspora, but to address the sorts of colonial amnesia that conveniently divides asylum seekers into worthy and unworthy recipients without attention to prior entanglements. Applying Gilroy’s concept to our research, we ask how visual forms enact such a mutually accessible, translatable, and inspirational political culture. In what ways have visual forms functioned as raw material, as ore among, between, and within transnational Black communities? We want to focus on the tensions between “traveler” and “migrant” and “refugee” in the context of African diasporic cultural producers and their differently positioned African diasporic subjects. Paying attention to both form and process, we examine how photographic collaboration between differently positioned African

diasporic subjects might open up and foreclose new understandings of migration and Blackness in the twenty-first century. We are particularly interested in the role photography, film, and installation play in the ways African diasporic subjects dream or fantasize diasporic connection and belonging and the varying layers of collaborations—as utopic desire, as forms of unwanted conscription, as modes of collusion—that frame their work.

Some art reception discourses have wrestled with the question of whether art is able to inspire individuals toward personal agency. And if empowerment through art is possible, how do artworks craft identities that are at once “rooted” in the “real” of specific places, times, and circumstances, yet also “routed” through fantasy and surreal imagination that unlock from those real temporalities? The German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s concept of the *not-yet* is helpful here.¹⁷ Bloch argues that art that depicts the *not-yet* by providing its recipients with glimpses of the *not-yet-become* is able to inspire people to turn their dreams into *revolutionary forward dreaming*, thus creating *revolutionary willingness*. Basing his theory on the dialectical interaction between the subjective and the objective factor in human history, Bloch reasons that an individual is not just capable of dreaming about the future, but also of getting actively and individually involved in social change through the inspiration of art. According to Bloch, every person is equipped with a subconscious ability to anticipate the future. He calls this ability to envision the future, or to get a glimpse of the *not-yet-become*, the *anticipatory illumination* or the *anticipatory consciousness*. Therefore, art that does not simply depict reality, but creates a new reality, thus invoking the *not-yet*, is not appearance anymore, but *pre-appearance*. Bloch finds pre-appearance in every manifestation of art, be it in architecture, painting, music, dance, theater, film, or literature. For him, all examples of art contain allegories and symbols of the pre-appearance, and these allegories and symbols “are all themselves still fragments, real fragments, through which process streams unclosed and advances dialectically to further fragmentary forms.”¹⁸ Art, therefore, is the medium that allows individuals to try out intellectual productions, or, in other words, art is able to invent visionary fragments of changed communities.¹⁹

Black Studies philosopher Christina Sharpe’s conceptualization of “the wake” and of “wake work” proves crucial here as well. In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, her germinal 2015 meditation on the legacies of slavery and the global conditions of antiblackness, Sharpe writes that “[t]o be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.”²⁰ For descendants of slavery and colonialism whose lives have been marked by the historical experience of having been in the hold of the ship (or of the prison or of a Black womb) and whose life chances have been diminished by the ongoing precariousness of proximity to death, “[l]iving in the wake means living in and with terror ...”; it is “to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship.”²¹ Here, Sharpe expands the chronotope of the ship beyond the Atlantic and invokes it to name the transnational and transhistorical experiences of Black peoples who have been made expendable by racial capitalism. To counter this persistent violence and to insist on Black survival, Sharpe calls for “wake work,” the political, ethical, pedagogical, and, most importantly, *creative practices* Black peoples engage in “to resist, rupture, and disrupt [the] immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially [of black

death].”²² Further, “wake work,” like Bloch’s not-yet, “imagine[s] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, [wake work is a] mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this epitome with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.”²³ We want to consider the artists who follow as engaged in *wake work* that insists on Black survival (and more) in the continued unfolding of the migrant–refugee crisis.

Artistic Interventions

Even before the world took notice, a number of artists of the African diaspora intervened in these public debates by offering counternarratives to often sensational and dehumanizing depictions specifically of Black “migrant” lives. Often on the cutting edge of current events, artists as early as 2007 in this recent contemporary incarnation have considered the Mediterranean crossings, notably among them Isaac Julien of the UK and Romuald Hazoumè of Benin. Isaac Julien’s *Western Union: Small Boats* is the third in a series of works titled *Cast No Shadow* to consider exploration travel, art and cultural tourism, and political migration. Comprised of photographic light boxes featuring striking images of the journey taken by African migrant–refugees leaving the shores of North Africa for Italy, as well as moving images suggesting drowning and capsizing boats, and the choreography of Russell Maliphant, the installation–performance piece seeks to give the viewer–participant an affective sense of movement and uneasiness, in and out of different spaces of contestation. Ideas of desire, beauty, and the dream, all part of the Western notion of tourism and travel, are put off-kilter in Julien’s sublime yet haunting images of longing and fate—a graveyard of colorful capsized boats, a passenger in detention longing for home, the stark whitewashed landscapes—seem unwelcoming. According to Julien, “*Western Union: Small Boats* is also a project about location and dislocation. It is not only about bodies, but also about spaces and who has the right to be in certain spaces. In that sense, it is an exploration of space and the politics of space.”²⁴

Romuald Hazoumè’s *Dream* won the top prize in 2007 at Documenta 12, the international contemporary art exhibition held every five years in Kassel, Germany. Flanked by panoramic photographs of the Beninese shoreline, Hazoumè’s dreamboat is constructed of four hundred and twenty-one painted petroleum canisters, each representing an economic and political refugee who has paid dearly for his or her place on the boat, but whose safe passage from Africa to Europe is not at all guaranteed. Fused together to form one makeshift vessel, the dark plastic canisters are further individuated by painted white crosses, words, and colors. Hanging on either side of the boat, bulbous glass fenders contain corks, photographs, and letters, the kinds of mementos that refugees might carry as they travel far away from home in search of their dreams. The plastic petroleum canisters, used to transport smuggled fuel from oil-rich Nigeria to Benin, are emblems in perpetual motion that permeate everyday Beninese life, as objects of survival, ritual, and even death. Hazoumè’s installation possesses subversive buoyancy that reverberates between the shores of Africa and Europe, kept afloat by the dreams of an ever-aspiring, frequently migrating African diaspora.

Instead of the dreamboat proposed by Hazoumè, Alexis Peskine's multimedia installation *The Raft of Medusa: Le Retour de la Vague* (2016) takes on French painter Théodore Géricault's famed history painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819) that hangs in the Louvre. First exhibited on the two-hundredth anniversary of the tragic shipwreck of *The Medusa* from France to Senegal that inspired Géricault's painting, Peskine's *The Raft of Medusa* was one of the stand-out installations of the twelfth edition of the Dak'Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art that took place in Dakar, Senegal in 2016 and was curated by Simon Njami. Growing up in Paris in the 1980s, the Franco-Russian-Afro-Brazilian artist was captivated by Géricault's dark and dramatic painting of human misery and despair on the *Medusa's* faltering raft at sea when he first encountered it in the skylit *Salle Mollien* of the Louvre. Reflecting the immense historical and stylistic pull of the original painting in size and feeling, Peskine's multimedia work depicts two contemporary Senegalese: a young man and a young woman—who is holding a little blond child in her arms—in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, alongside halved and upended traditional Senegalese pirogues. As symbolic as these small boats are to depictions of Senegal's fishing lifestyle, on the one hand, and as tools of migration, on the other, so are images referring to French colonialism, notably the Eiffel Tower, which the artist cleverly uses as the actual tower in the background, seeing it in ways tourists would take photographs of the site, as well as the small Eiffel Tower figurines of which tourists can buy five for one Euro. By referring to these small souvenirs and their often illegal vendors, Peskine points to the economic and social misery these vendors are exposed to; however, he also uses these small towers as regal golden headdresses for both figures, and by doing so, he showcases fundamental icons of Western identity: The golden headpiece worn by the Black man has turned into the crown of thorns that the now African Jesus is wearing while “dying for all our sins” whereas the Black woman wears her crown as queen with pride and dignity. Peskine explains, “I wanted to create a body of work around this theme and to talk about migrants; talk about colonialism. Media generally talks about migrants without talking about the reasons.”²⁵ An astute observer of contemporary life and history, Peskine's work critiques the history of slavery and colonialism as well as the contemporary racism and inequality of the migration crisis. His insertion of pushcarts refers to the menial jobs that migrants frequently have to perform while one video loop suggests the exploitation of Black female bodies and the labor Black women historically have performed in nurturing the children of colonialism if not directly contributing to the health and wealth of the colonies themselves (at the expense of their own children). Peskine's title also takes into account the ancient Greek myth to consider the representation of Africa historically and in the media today. “Medusa was Africa to me on a second read,” Peskine explains, “[w]e always talk about her as a monster, it's kind of the way the media portrays Africa—not necessarily as a monster but as something negative.”²⁶ In revisiting Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* on its two-hundredth anniversary, Peskine makes claim to its (art) historical legacy in a monumental feat of *symbolic possession of the past*²⁷—claiming the icons and images of the past in addressing the perilous present—crowning African kings and queens while recognizing that the seaborne voyages—from France to Senegal and from the coast of North Africa to Europe—are one and the same story, indeed part of the same narrative.



Figure 1. *REJECTED 02/12* (Photographie © Sophie Bachelier, 2019; video still from *REJECTED*, 12 videos © Sophie Bachelier & Djibril Diallo, 57th Venice Biennale 2017, Venice, Italy, Tunisian Pavilion, *The Absence of Paths*, May 13th–November 26th, 2017, by permission of the artists).

Some of the same concerns that Peskine’s *Raft of the Medusa* brought forward in Dakar continued to be addressed by artists at the following Venice Biennale. Despite the claim that the 2017 Venice Biennale was backing away from the forthright politics of artistic director Okwui Enwezor’s 2015 *All the World’s Futures*, it was clear that the global migration crisis in general and the Mediterranean crisis in particular were of concern for many artists and national pavilions. Several countries deliberately chose African and African diasporic artists to be their country’s representative to address this crisis as well as to point a finger at the depressingly low number of Black artists in the 57th Venice Biennale. One insightful critique penned by art critic M. Neelika Jayawardane of this seeming backlash put it plainly: “If it were not for the handful of African national pavilions, the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale would have looked mostly like a Europe that had closed its borders. Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, Zimbabwe were the only representatives of Africa in the Biennale.”²⁸

The Tunisian Pavilion took the issue articulated by Jayawardane to task with their multisited pop-up style series of three immigration kiosks strategically positioned in and around the Arsenale under the collective title, *The Absence of Paths*. Curated by Lina Lazaar, this was the first Tunisian pavilion since 1958, and the lack of Tunisian participation at Venice for nearly sixty years amplifies the inherent and recurrent difficulties of obtaining visas and crossing borders for many residents of African nations, especially to Europe and North America. So why not face this issue head on with a performance-based agenda, involving aspiring migrants who issue “freesas” to anyone who lines up at a kiosk? These “free visas,” physical travel documents issued at the pavilion symbolically enabled the issuant to move freely throughout the Biennale (a microcosm of the world of nations), around the city of Venice, and perhaps even beyond its borders.



Figure 2. (top) *REJECTED* (Photographie © Sophie Bachelier, 2019; video still from *REJECTED*, 12 videos © Sophie Bachelier & Djibril Diallo, 57th Venice Biennale 2017, Venice, Italy, Tunisian Pavilion, *The Absence of Paths*, May 13th–November 26th, 2017, courtesy of and by permission of the artists).

Figure 3. (bottom) *REJECTED 10/12* (Photographie © Sophie Bachelier, 2019; video still from *REJECTED*, 12 videos © Sophie Bachelier & Djibril Diallo, 57th Venice Biennale 2017, Venice, Italy, Tunisian Pavilion, *The Absence of Paths*, May 13th–November 26th, 2017, courtesy of and by permission of the artists).

In addition to the “free visa” performance at the kiosks, which lasted the six-month run of the Biennale, artists at the Tunisian pavilion contributed poetry, music, spoken word, and video works such as *REJECTED*, Sophie Bachelier & Djibril Diallo’s twelve-part series of one-minute video portraits filmed in the Choucha Refugee Camp in Tunisia.²⁹ In *REJECTED*, the artists’ durational portraits of UNHCR refugee camp residents show the despair of migrant-refugees who have been left behind, stranded in makeshift camps. With the backdrop of sand and a distant sea, the dream of migration and relocation is only a shore away, made all the more desperate by the wafting sounds of shore, sea, and fraught human interaction. The images offered in this series of short, yet poignant, one-minute clips become all the more memorable through the artists’ clever use of durational photography to instill the image as well as its sonic counterpart in the mind of the viewer. Indeed, with their very calm, very tranquil atmosphere, these video portraits allow or perhaps even force the viewer to look at the people, at fellow human beings, who are looking into the camera, and all the while, the viewer can only hear the sound of the sea’s waves, the same waves that might one day take away their lives. Bachelier and Diallo afford their subjects the affirming form of the portrait while also refusing its static, frozen nature: The people depicted in these images are still moving, even if only slowly and their mobility contained. The stranded refugees of *REJECTED* occupy a liminal space of the migration crisis at multiple borders, and the use of durational photography and video hint at the overall inertia of a seemingly solvable manmade crisis.

Likewise honoring the thousands of Africans who have died while trying to reach Europe, Cuba selected Afro-Cuban performance artist Carlos Martiel as a contributor to their country’s entry to the Venice Biennale in 2017.³⁰ In *Mediterraneo*, Martiel climbed into a glass container that was slowly filling with ice water until near capacity, thus putting him at risk of drowning. This component lasted about twenty minutes; at that point, the artist signaled that he needed to be let out of the container. While he was in the container, the audience that had gathered around him took plenty of pictures—after all, they as art tourists, were watching a performance that was part of the Biennale. Yet, many members of this art tourist audience might not even have been aware that they were part of the artist’s performance. With this act, as he has stated, he wanted to connect to the drowning of Black bodies in the contemporary Mediterranean. By taking pictures of his near-drowning act, the audience, wittingly or unwittingly, turned into the privileged citizens of countries that “watch” the human catastrophe that is taking place right in front of their eyes, yet then have the privilege to choose to turn around and walk away to other, equally “entertaining” parts of the Biennale. With his act, Martiel connects to as well as continues a tradition that Daphne Brooks has observed in her scholarship about African diasporic performance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Brooks argues that “a diverse array of political activists, stage performers, and writers utilized their work to interrogate the ironies of black identity formation ... these figures invoked multiple performance strategies, performative ideologies, and new popular cultural technologies to counterintuitively articulate and redeploy the discourse of socio-political alienation.”³¹ Using Elin Diamond’s Brechtian concept of “looking at being looked at ness,” Brooks claims that these performers turned their “horrific historical memory of moving through oceanic space” into a critical form, thus “calling

attention to the hypervisibility and cultural construction of blackness in transatlantic culture,” and intervening “in the spectacular and systemic representational abjection of black peoples.”³² With Brooks’ theory applied to this performance, the act of taking pictures assumes a different importance: Without taking pictures himself, the artist uses photography to critique the spectacular gaze that does indeed see a Black man drowning, but the act of seeing lasts only long enough for the short duration of the spectacle.

Passage (2017) by Mohau Modisakeng, part of South Africa’s contribution to the 2017 Biennale,³³ is a three-channel video projection that considers the reverberating effects of slavery on the fracturing of African identity and the enduring and continuing effects of colonialism on the African continent and beyond. In addition, his work also pays tribute to the *SS Mendi*, a passenger ship that sunk off the Isle of Wight in 1917 transporting men who were serving in the South African Native Labour Corps during WW1. In each of the three projections, the viewer is confronted with a character: a woman with a hawk perched on her arm, a young man in a trilby hat, or a woman wrapped in a Basotho blanket. Each is filmed from a bird’s-eye view and the perspective presents each figure as doubly framed by the iconic shape of the boat and the reverberating, undulating water. From their positions in the boat, each figure begins by lying motionless and then starts to perform a series of functions until being completely overcome, subsumed by water until the boat slowly sinks and eventually disappears. The motion of the water—its constant ebb and flow—suggests the life-affirming and deadly potential of water while symbolizing the countless people who have arrived and departed from South Africa in trade—via the slave trade, spice trade, indentured servitude, and other forms of labor in the Cape Colony from 1652 to the present. With no other visible reference point such as the sight of land, the sky, or an embarkation/destination point, Modisakeng’s *Passage (2017)* sets his figures adrift at sea, and the video loop presented in the work remarks upon the tenuous nature of colonialism’s demise—that to undo it does not simply mean to play history in reverse.

Conclusion

Through engagement with these artists, we are interested in how the medium of photography itself is at once necessary but also limited in its capacity to represent the contemporary phenomenon of African migration to Europe via the Mediterranean. However, while photography, broadly understood, remains central to these artists’ visual conceptualization of both the African diaspora and its migration, serving as a fundamental tool to document the movements of Black peoples and Black bodies across the globe and across time, the work of the above-discussed artists does not adhere to traditional notions or practices of photography, especially as employed within a documentary tradition. These artists are compelling specifically for their desire to employ photography to represent a global crisis beyond the framework of photojournalism and reportage, the mode of photography perhaps most often mobilized to convey these stories. If documentary purports to make “the unseen visible,” representing those who cannot represent themselves, and seeking empathy

and action from its viewers, these artists understand themselves as connected to vulnerable communities and subjects.

But photography has its limits and thus these artists situate the medium as part of a range of media within installations that attempt to immerse viewers in the experience of migration. Further, photography that engages performativity, myth, and fabulism suggests both the timelessness of these stories of risk and peril for the possibility of a better life; and the assertion of Black freedom and imagination in the face of precariousness and disposability. However, within the rarefied spaces of the biennials (and some gallery exhibitions), these difficult histories and their provocative representations remain somewhat limited in their reach. The removed context of the Biennale in which most viewers arrive as privileged travelers potentially engenders a political engagement that lends itself to self-congratulation rather than sustained awareness, action, or policy reform. And yet, these installations help us imagine new possibilities for the relationship between photography and migration.

One of the challenges of photography as a mode of visualizing human rights and people in crisis is that it often necessarily entails visualizing the human. That is, we must recognize that those subjects pictured within the photographic frame fit within the often taken for granted, yet unevenly applied, category of “the human.” Many of the artists considered here, at once depend upon photography’s “truth-telling” capacity while working to address its limits. It is not simply then that photography can alert us to human rights violations, documenting violence and atrocity, inequity and injustice, impelling us to feel and to act in the tradition of documentary photography and photojournalism. But photography can also alert us to the ways that we are disciplined to see, recognize, and acknowledge the humanity of some photographic subjects and ignore, deny, and refuse the humanity of other subjects.

Notes

Our work for this essay comes as the result of a joint two-year research fellowship granted by the American Council of Learned Societies for 2015–2017. The grant enabled us to travel to several international art exhibitions such as Dak’Art 2016 (Dakar, Senegal), the Venice Biennales 2015 and 2017 (Venice, Italy), and *documenta 12*, 2017 (Kassel, Germany). We would like to thank the ACLS and their staff members for this opportunity and their continued support throughout the entire grant period. Likewise, we would like to thank the Volkswagenstiftung; with their very generous support, we were able to host a four-day international symposium in 2014 at the castle of Herrenhausen in Hannover, Germany. The gathering in Hannover provided us with the opportunity to develop the original idea for our ACLC research project.

¹ La Biennale de Venezia 2019, artist Christoph Büchel, Switzerland, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/partecipants/christoph-büchel>.

² Büchel, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/partecipants/christoph-büchel>.

³ For a detailed overview of this critique, see Francesca Soliman, “In the Name of Art? The Commercialization of Migrant Deaths,” guest post, *Border Criminologies*, June 4, 2019, Blog: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/06/name-art>.

⁴ For more information and current data, see the website of the UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unhcr.org/data.html>.

⁵ For further information, see Amnesty International, “Fortress Europe: Facts and Figures,” July 9, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR05/003/2014/en/>.

⁶ See, for example, Paolo Cuttitta, “Borderizing the Island: Setting the Narratives of the Lampedusa Border Play,” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 13, no. 2 (2014): 196–219; Gregory Feldman, *The Migration Apparatus. Security, Labor, and Policymaking in the European Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Paolo Cuttitta, “Humanitarianism and Migration in the Mediterranean Borderscape. The Italian-North African Border Between Sea Patrols and Integration Measures,” in *Borderscapes: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*, eds. Chiara Brambilla, Jussie Laine, James W. Scott, and Gianluca Bocchi (London: Routledge, 2017), 131–140.

⁷ See, for example, Alessandra Bonomolo and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “UN Says 800 Migrants Dead in Boat Disaster as Italy Launches Rescue of Two More Vessels,” *Guardian*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/italy-pm-matteo-renzi-migrant-shipwreck-crisis-srebrenica-massacre>.

⁸ See, for example, Elaine Burroughs, “Deconstruction of the Migration ‘Crisis’ and Representations of Migration by Boat in the UK News Media,” in *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, eds. Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 115–136; see also, Marco Binotto and Marco Bruno, “Media Discourses of the Rescue and Landing of Migration by Boat in the Italian News Media,” in *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, eds. Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 137–156.

⁹ Guardia Costiera, “Attività SAR nel Mediterraneo Centrale connesse al Fenomeno Migratorio (anno 2016),” <https://www.guardiacostiera.gov.it/attivita/Documents/attivita-sar-immigrazione-2016/rapporto-sull-attivita-sar-nel-mediterraneo-centrale-anno-2016.pdf>.

¹⁰ See UNHCR, *Emergencies 2018, Europe*, <https://www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html>.

¹¹ For more, especially current, information, see, for example, Seebrücke, 2019, <https://seebruecke.org/>, or SeaWatch, 2019, <https://sea-watch.org/>. For more information about the absence of European political involvement in rescue missions and rhetorical attempts to justify absence as ethical international politics, see Paolo Cuttitta, “Repoliticization Through Search and Rescue? Humanitarian NGOs and Migration Management in the Central Mediterranean,” *Geopolitics* 23 (2018): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1344834>; see also Giuseppe

Campesi, "Italy and the Militarisation of Euro-Mediterranean Border Control Policies," in *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, ed. Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018): 51–74.

¹² For a detailed discussion, see Paolo Cuttitta, "Delocalization, Humanitarianism and Human Rights: The Mediterranean Humanitarian Border between Exclusion and Inclusion," *Antipode* 50, no. 3 (2018): 783–803; see also Sandro Mezzadra and Maurice Stierl, "The Mediterranean Battlefield of Migration," *Open Democracy Net*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/mediterranean-battlefield-migration/>; Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, "The Humanitarian Battlefield in the Mediterranean Sea: Moving Beyond Rescuing and Letting Die," University of Oxford, Faculty of Law, Centre for Border and Criminology, April 2019, Blog: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/04/humanitarian>.

¹³ A look at the statistics the UN Refugee Agency provides for the year 2016 underlines our point about the majority of sub-Saharan countries whose citizens do not receive "refugee" status because they supposedly lack the grounds for political asylum in their home countries. High acceptance countries were, for example, Syria (99.9% accepted), Iraq (72% accepted), Eritrea (99.9% accepted), and Somalia (76% accepted) while the following were mainly countries with high rejection rates, such as Nigeria (94% rejected), Senegal (96% rejected), Gambia (94% rejected), and Cameroon (78% rejected). For more information, see <http://www.unhcr.org/> and specifically their report, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016," <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5943e8a34/global-trends-forced-displacement-2016.html?query=2016%20refugee%20status%20syria%20iraq%20gambia>.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 4. See also S. A. Smythe, "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of the Imagination," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, no. 286 (Spring 2018), <https://merip.org/2018/10/the-black-mediterranean-and-the-politics-of-the-imagination/>.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Diaspora and Desire: Gendering 'Black America' in Black Liverpool," in *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, eds. Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 75.

¹⁶ Cheryl Finley, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ For detailed information, see Heike Raphael-Hernandez, Chapter 1: "The Construction of a Concrete Utopian Aesthetic: Concrete Utopian Thoughts in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*," *The Utopian Aesthetics of Three African American Women (Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Julie Dash): The Principle of Hope* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 13–32.

¹⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 220.

¹⁹ Bloch's ultimate goal is the human society in which subject and object no longer face each other as strangers. Virginio Marzocchi emphasizes that although Bloch usually uses the terms "individual," "self-realization," and "subject," he does not have the limited individual's own small desires in mind (See Virginio Marzocchi, "Utopie als 'Novum' und 'letzte Wiederholung' bei Ernst Bloch," in *Ernst Bloch. Text und Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold [München: edition text + kritik, 1985], 198). Bloch emphasizes repeatedly that he does not talk about an egocentric hope that has in mind only private gains and advantages. For his theory, he deals with the hope that wants to change the world. Bloch's individual realizes that his or her own future is inseparably connected to the fate of society at large. For one of several contemporary applications of Bloch's not-yet to the study of African diasporic art and literature, one can turn to Darieck Scott who uses Bloch's theory for his investigation into Black transatlantic history and the comic book; here Scott asks: "How and in what ways might a deliberately shaped unreality (fantasy) un-realize the devaluation of blackness or the power of antiblack racism? How might such fantasy make visible, even as an evanescence, black power or black triumph, or, in the visual realm, black beauty? How can the histories of the Black Atlantic that produce the meaning of blackness and the regimes for seeing black bodies be fantasized differently?" (Darieck Scott, "The Not-Yet Justice League: Fantasy, Redress, and Transatlantic Black History on the Comic Book Page," in *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora and Visual Culture*, eds. Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017], 331).

²⁰ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 14–15.

²¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15, 16.

²² Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

²³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

²⁴ Isaac Julien, "I am Putting the Fire Underneath People: Isaac Julien in conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska," *Obieg*, June 18, 2009, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/english/12332>.

²⁵ Allyn Gaestal, "Alexis Peskine," *Nataal*, 2016, <http://nataal.com/alexis-peskine>.

²⁶ Gaestal, "Peskine," 2016.

²⁷ Finley, *Committed to Memory*, 9. See also, Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 112–29.

²⁸ M. Neelika Jayawardane, "Black Presences at the Venice Biennale," *Aljazeera, Opinion/Arts & Culture*, 20 May 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/05/black-presences-venice-biennale-170519093056710.html>.

²⁹ Sophie Bachelier & Djibril Diallo, *REJECTED*, a series of one-minute videos, 2017, <http://www.theabsenceofpaths.com/commission/rejected-7-12>. See also, <http://www.sophiebachelier.com/films.php>.

³⁰ La Biennale di Venezia, 2017, Cuba, Carlos Martiel, <http://u-in-u.com/en/venice-biennale/2017/fast-tour/cuba/>.

³¹ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom: 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

³² Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 5.

³³ Mohau Modisakeng, (*Passage 2017*), <http://www.mohaumodisakengstudio.com/passage-2017>.

Selected Bibliography

Amnesty International. “Fortress Europe: Facts and Figures.” 9 July 2014.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR05/003/2014/en/>.

Bachelier, Sophie, and Djibril Diallo. *REJECTED*. Venice Biennale 2017. Venice, Italy. Tunisian Pavilion. *The Absence of Paths*. <http://www.theabsenceofpaths.com/commission/rejected-7-12>.

Bachelier, Sophie. “Films.” <http://www.sophiebachelier.com/films.php>.

Binotto, Marco, and Marco Bruno. “Media Discourses of the Rescue and Landing of Migration by Boat in the Italian News Media.” In *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, edited by Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams, 137–156. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986.

Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent. Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom: 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Brown, Jacqueline Nassy. “Diaspora and Desire: Gendering ‘Black America’ in Black Liverpool.” In *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, edited by Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, 73–92. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Burroughs, Elaine. “Deconstruction of the Migration ‘Crisis’ and Representations of Migration by Boat in the UK News Media.” In *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, edited by Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams, 115–136. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Campesi, Giuseppe. “Italy and the Militarisation of Euro-Mediterranean Border Control Policies.” In *Contemporary Boat Migration: Data, Geopolitics, and Discourse*, edited by Elaine Burroughs and Kira Williams, 51–74. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

- Cuttitta, Paolo. "Borderizing the Island: Setting the Narratives of the Lampedusa Border Play." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 13, no. 2 (2014): 196–219. <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1004>.
- . "Humanitarianism and Migration in the Mediterranean Borderscape. The Italian-North African Border between Sea Patrols and Integration Measures." In *Borderscapes: Imaginations and Practices of Border Making*, edited by Chiara Brambilla, Jussie Laine, James W. Scott, and Gianluca Bocchi, 131–140. London: Routledge, 2017.
- . "Repoliticization through Search and Rescue? Humanitarian NGOs and Migration Management in the Central Mediterranean." *Geopolitics* 23 (2018): 1–29. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2017.1344834>.
- . "Delocalization, Humanitarianism and Human Rights: The Mediterranean Humanitarian Border between Exclusion and Inclusion." *Antipode* 50, no. 3 (2018): 783–803. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/anti.12337>.
- Feldman, Gregory. *The Migration Apparatus. Security, Labor, and Policymaking in the European Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Finley, Cheryl. *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Gaestel, Allyn. "Alexis Peskine." *Naatal*. 2016. <http://naatal.com/alexis-peskine>.
- Garelli, Glenda, and Martina Tazzioli. "The Humanitarian Battlefield in the Mediterranean Sea: Moving Beyond Rescuing and Letting Die." University of Oxford, Faculty of Law, Centre for Border and Criminology, Blog. April 2019. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centre-border-criminologies/blog/2019/04/humanitarian>.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Guardia Costiera. "Attività SAR nel Mediterraneo Centrale connesse al Fenomeno Migratorio. 2016." <http://www.guardiacostiera.gov.it/attivita/Documents/attivita-sar-immigrazione-2016/rapporto-sull-attivita-sar-nel-mediterraneo-centrale-anno-2016.pdf>.
- Jayawardane, M. Neelika. "Black Presences at the Venice Biennale." *Aljazeera, Opinion/Arts & Culture*. 20 May 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/05/black-presences-venice-biennale-170519093056710.html>.
- Julien, Isaac. "I am Putting the Fire Underneath People: Isaac Julien in conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska." *Obieg*, June 18, 2009. <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/english/12332>.
- Marzocchi, Virginio. "Utopie als 'Novum' und 'letzte Wiederholung' bei Ernst Bloch." In *Ernst Bloch. Text und Kritik*, edited by Heinz Ludwig Arnold, 194–207. München: edition text + kritik, 1985.

- Mezzadra, Sandro, and Maurice Stierl. "The Mediterranean Battlefield of Migration." *Open Democracy Net*. April 12, 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/mediterranean-battlefield-migration/>.
- Modisakeng, Mohau. *Passage (2017)*. Venice Biennale 2017. <http://www.mohaumodisakengstudio.com/passage-2017>.
- Raiford, Leigh. "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory." *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 112–29.
- Raphael-Hernandez, Heike. *The Utopian Aesthetics of Three African American Women (Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Julie Dash): The Principle of Hope*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.
- Scott, Darieck. "The Not-Yet Justice League: Fantasy, Redress, and Transatlantic Black History on the Comic Book Page." In *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora and Visual Culture*, edited by Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez, 329–348. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.
- Smythe, S. A. "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of the Imagination." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, no. 286 (Spring 2018): web. <https://merip.org/2018/10/the-black-mediterranean-and-the-politics-of-the-imagination/>.
- SeaWatch. 2019. <https://sea-watch.org/>.
- Seebrücke. 2019. <https://seebruecke.org/>.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Soliman, Francesca. "In the Name of Art? The Commercialization of Migrant Deaths." Guest post. *Border Criminologies*. Blog. Faculty of Law, Oxford University. June 4, 2019. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/06/name-art>.
- UN Refugee Agency. <https://www.unhcr.org/data.html>.