

The Border Spectacle and the Dramaturgy of Hope in Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*¹

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Introduction

Every form of border produces its own spectacle, its own representations. When we speak of the border spectacle, we emphasize the need to be aware of these various moments and forms of production and of the power-knowledge networks that constitute the border regime and give rise to their public image. (Mezzadra, De Genova, Pickles 2015, 68)

These words are taken from “New Keywords: Migration and Borders,” published online in March 2014, the first ‘instalment’ of a collaborative writing project edited by Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles and including seventeen self-defined “activist scholars” (59) committed to producing critical cultural research on the issues of migration and borders.² Their purposefully explicit brand of “militant investigation”—one that “engages with the power asymmetries that make migrants into subjects of migration knowledge production” (64) and fix them into objects of representation deprived of agency—entails a focus on “the identification or creation of spaces of engagement and proximity, sites of shared struggle and precarity” (ibid.).

Building on Cultural Studies’ established tradition of looking at keywords as meaningful and ‘active’ methodological tools for joining the struggle over the interpretation of the past in order to affect the future, these scholars aim primarily “to de-sediment the already petrified and domesticated vocabulary that so pervasively circulates around these by-now already banal fixtures of popular discourse and public debate—‘migration’ and ‘borders’” (56). By restoring the “unsettling dynamism” (ibid.) of these keywords, the New Keywords Collective, as these scholars call themselves, also intends to unleash their full potential for unveiling and problematizing issues which official and media discourses attempt, instead, to sanitize and render opaque.

Taking my cue from their work and from the recent surge of scholarship on these issues,³ and adopting, mainly, critical cultural studies and border studies perspectives, I aim to explore the complexities inherent to the representation of the ‘borderized’ Southern margins of Europe and, in particular, the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa. I shall, first, examine how migrants and the once (stereotypically) idyllic island of Lampedusa have been discursively re-constructed, across the European public sphere, as subjects and

spaces of abjection, waste, expendability, and, according to the occasion, empathetic scopical consumption. In the process, I shall address the increasing de-humanization and criminalization of migrants by institutions and the media that alternatively deploy images of the ‘drowned’ and the ‘saved’⁴ in order to serve both compassionate, self-gratulatory agendas and populist discourses of contamination and invasion.

While providing a critical and ideological scaffolding for my argument, the excerpts from “New Keywords” quoted above are also an appropriate entry key to the short play *Lampedusa* (2015)⁵ by the young British political activist and talented, as well as controversial playwright Anders Lustgarten, whose play will be the main focus of my essay. The play was inspired by the relentless death toll at sea, and in particular by the horrific shipwreck of 3 October 2013 which, with more than 360 victims, reverberated across global headlines, inaugurating the discourse of ‘the Mediterranean-as-cemetery’. *Lampedusa*, as Lustgarten states in the front matter, and takes issue with Europe’s collective responsibility for the enduring tragedy of forced mass migration and dislocations.

A British citizen born to American immigrant parents of Hungarian descent, Lustgarten introduces himself, on web pages and website profiles, as a “long-standing political activist who’s been arrested in four continents” (Mount), and “a veteran of many campaigns against multinational corporations in the developing world, as well as the Occupy movement” (Godwin).

He moved on to writing for the theatre in 2007, inspired by his experience of teaching drama to inmates of San Quentin Prison while he was in Berkeley to do his PhD in Chinese language and politics. As we can read in the “Introduction” to the first volume of his plays, published in 2016, he took up this activity full time for three years in British prisons. His educational training, and his participation in protest movements—ranging from Occupy to ecological resistance, from development banks activism to involvement in the Egyptian revolution⁶—provide a key to his views that the theatre “is an apt form for the age of Occupy,” and that “there is something beautiful about one group of people putting something on that another group of people come to and contribute to” (Godwin). Since its beginning, on 19 March 2011, Lustgarten has been among the most passionate contributors and supporters of Theatre Uncut,⁷ an ongoing collaborative theatrical project originated by a shared commitment to oppose the cuts announced by the Coalition government’s 2010 budget through the production and performance of short plays by “hundreds of theatre-makers joining voices,” and using “theatre’s lifeblood, empathy, to show what these cuts mean” (Price 8) for the people who actually bear their impact. In 2011, Lustgarten was the winner of the first Harold Pinter Playwrights Award, and is currently considered one of the most politically engaged and striking voices of the London radical art scene, someone who, in line with the New Keywords Collective’s notion of ‘militant investigation,’ could himself be

defined a ‘militant’ playwright⁸ and a rightful participant in the fecund and diverse tradition of British political theatre.⁹

The ‘Border Spectacle’ and the Dramaturgy of Borders

Building on these premises, I shall address the challenges posed by representing and illuminating on stage the contact zone between the ‘citizen’ and the (criminalized) ‘migrant’ against the increasing theatricalization and rhetorical manipulation across multiple public spheres of the symbolic concentration of the EU’s frontier in tiny islands of the Southern Mediterranean that have been purposefully redesigned as “carceral systems of placelessness” (Anderson 354). As, depending on shifting agendas, endless flows of living or dead ‘alien bodies’ are strategically summoned by official and media discourse in order to alternatively mark out the porosity or impermeability of the EU’s borders of affluence, it is increasingly apparent how control over migrant bodies has become a powerful tool for making visible and reinforcing the securitarian principle that “the national community needs protection and regulation like a body” (Papastergiadis qtd. in: Anderson 364). This causes the “national border” to become “like the skin of the community” (ibid.), a symbolic site where imaginaries of national ‘purity’ and menacing contamination are played out.

The analogies between theatre and actual and discursive manoeuvres of borderization, marginalization and criminalization have been compellingly exposed, among others, by Nicholas De Genova, who coined the by-now commonplace expression “border spectacle” (“Spectacles,” “Migrant ‘Illegality’”) to define the governmental performance of acceptance or exclusion of those who count as ‘aliens’ being enacted at the border by state power. It is, in fact, this spectacle that at the same time “produces (illegalized) migration as a category and literally and figuratively renders it visible” (Mezzadra, De Genova, Pickles 2015, 67).

Resuming the theatrical metaphor as a useful interpretive key to understanding migration discourse and border policies, De Genova describes the border as “the exemplary theatre for staging the spectacle of ‘the illegal alien’” (436), while Martina Tazzioli has written extensively about “the scene of rescue” and “the spectacle of migrant invasion” (2). Paolo Cuttitta, too, in an essay meaningfully entitled “Borderizing the Island: Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa ‘Border Play’,” has cogently described the “‘spectacularization’ process (transforming Lampedusa into a theatre),” through which the transformation of the island into “the border par excellence” is discussed in terms of “border play” (Cuttitta 213). Not to mention Lorenzo Rinelli’s lament about the “fascination of the national audience” with “the spectacle of African migrant invasion” (72).

Theatrical lexis, categories, and comparisons underpin many other important critical contributions that map out the different ‘genres’ of the governmental enactment of migration performed on the island stage of Lampedusa. Such are, to mention but a few, Chiara

Brambilla's outstanding body of work on the notion of "borderscape" ("Exploring"; "Il confine"; Brambilla, Laine, Scott, and Bocci), and Evelyne Ritaine's "Lampedusa, 3 Ottobre 2013: Letture politiche della morte" ("Lampedusa, 3 October 2013: Political Readings of Death" [2016], my translation). Analysing the tragedy of 3 October 2013, Ritaine highlights how this event, which entailed an unprecedented visibility of corpses and coffins, marked a divide, a "rupture" in the dominant narrative regarding the island, which "required a work of interpretation aiming to produce new frames of death at the maritime borders of the European Union" (102, my translation). This tragic event, she demonstrates, led to the simultaneous deployment of three representational frames: the frame of the media, which privileged the narrative of the "migrants as corpses" commanding discursive performances of collective mourning and "emotional engagement" (Ibid., my translation); the frame of the institutions, "in which the dead are addressed as problems of public policy," preoccupied with "allotting responsibilities" and authorizing a context of securitization (Ibid., my translation); and the frame "of militant interpretations," triggering and advocating a national (and international) debate for "an ethical and political understanding of the right to migration" (Ibid., my translation).

The shipwreck of 3 October 2013, accompanied by endless television footage and still photographs of hundreds of coffins (mostly containing unidentified bodies) displayed in rows, had an essential role in making visible the death toll taking place in the Mediterranean (according to UNRC data, probably more than 40,000 deaths since the year 2000, and counting). It also inaugurated, as mentioned above, the new 'institutional' discursive frame of "the politics of counting," in relation to which Martina Tazzioli has exposed how an emphasis on the "humanitarian task" performed by the armed forces helps to conceal the increasing militarization and monitoring of the Southern Mediterranean, as well as "the implicit and unquestioned consideration of migrants as shipwrecked lives" (Tazzioli 3) which is so relevant to Lustgarten's vision in the play.

Migrant deaths have long been an urgent focus in theatrical performances, where "many repressed dimensions," such as "violence, otherness and body," are allowed to "crop out" (Giudice and Giubilaro 80). The 'politics of counting'—compounded, as it were, by the decision to provide graphic testimonies of the mutilations and dismemberment suffered by the drowned—is forcefully enacted, to cite but one Italian example, in Marco Martinelli's *Noise in the Waters* (*Rumore di acque*, 2010). Loosely drawing on neo-slave narratives and poems,¹⁰ and embracing a counter-discursive canon that challenges enumeration as a form of objectification and bureaucratic annihilation of the bodies that *do not* 'matter,' *Noise in the Waters* is set on an unnamed Mediterranean island (one is inclined, of course, to think of an infernal double of Lampedusa). In a shocking and harrowing monologue, the General, whose terms of engagement are to count, record and classify the masses of bodies drifting to the island, performs the act of counting almost mechanically, accepting to be, as Claudia

Gualtieri points out, “only a gear in the mechanism of empire, a bureaucrat” (119), perfectly attuned to a “system of power” where “nobody seems to be responsible” (ibid.).

Lampedusa by Anders Lustgarten

Even though Lustgarten’s approach follows a partly diverging perspective, premised on outrage but opening up to empathy and hope, *Lampedusa*, which was avowedly inspired by the shipwreck of 3 October 2013, also puts on centre stage the dead migrant body and the enactment of a counter-discursive ‘scene of rescue.’ These concerns inform one of the two poignantly entangled monologues making up the play.

The first one is by Stefano, a former Lampedusan fisherman who, following the depletion of the Mediterranean and the policies of austerity precipitated by the neoliberal management of the global financial crisis, has been obliged to accept a precarious job helping to rescue the bodies of refugees adrift in the sea. In this way, he has himself become an accomplice, as it were, in the work of securitization and ‘purification’ of the island stage. Through the erasure of the abject bodies of dead migrants, he contributes, in fact, to sanitize and preserve the “heterotopic matrix” (Pugliese 664) of Lampedusa as both a holiday resort and a cemetery, “two incompatible orders of space-time” which “fold silently, invisibly, one into the other yet never breach their respective borders” (674). Lustgarten renders this horrid paradox literally visible on stage by having Stefano recount, just hours after the 3 October shipwreck and in the space of a few lines, how the previous year “the users of TripAdvisor voted Rabbit Beach had ranked first in TripAdvisor Travellers’ Choice of the best beaches in the world.”

After being befriended by Modibo, a Malian refugee with a temporary leave who is anything but helpless and humbled and repeatedly invites him to have coffee, Stefano is progressively awakened, in a Levinasian sense, to his own “response-ability” (Eskin 29) as an individual. Amidst the moral vacuum endorsed by institutions, he defiantly puts out to sea in a storm in the hope of saving Aminata, Modibo’s wife who is expected to be crossing the Mediterranean in order to reach him at that very time. As a result of Stefano’s reclamation of his own agency and his decision to act, she will be one of only three shipwrecked survivors. In the last scene, the couple are celebrating their reunion, while Stefano, who is one of the guests, acknowledges that their infectious hope has begun to contaminate his own self-pity and pessimism.

The second plotline is voiced by Denise, a British-Chinese student in Political Science who is struggling to pay her University fees thanks to a precarious job as a debt collector for a payday loan company in Leeds. Anticipating, although very schematically, aspects of current British lives on the edge of poverty that would come centre stage in 2016 when Ken Loach’s beautifully nuanced *I, Daniel Blake* was

awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, Denise is also waging a war against the institutions on behalf of her disabled mother, who keeps being denied public allowance as a consequence of stricter disability assessment norms. Denise, too, is embittered by circumstances, until she is befriended by Carolina, one of the persons she visits in order to collect a payment. A Portuguese single mother with her child, the woman breaks through Denise's cynicism by means of her own empathetic and resilient optimism.¹¹ On the eve of her final, decisive interview, Denise's mother dies, in a plot twist which, again, resonates with the ending of Loach's film and the experiences of ever increasing numbers of underprivileged elderly Britons. Carolina invites her to share her apartment. Touched by such an act of kindness, Denise, in the last scenes, grants an old woman a week's respite and gives up the job she has grown to hate. She, too, feels ready for hope.

The existential parables that Lustgarten draws for his protagonists explicitly prioritize empathy and hope. At the same time, the plot deliberately inscribes their metamorphoses within an ameliorative frame of resistance through a newly achieved engagement with community. Stefano's decision to put out to sea to rescue the living, rather than just sticking to retrieving the dead, is prompted by an increasing acceptance of the 'alien' and recognition of a common bond following personal contact with a single, empathetic individual. Also Denise's rebellion, which again takes place as a result of an individual encounter, is precipitated by an act of kindness, which reawakens her to the emotional rewards of human solidarity and transforms her legitimate, but nihilistic rage into a meaningful act of 'militant' hope: a kind of hope that, by embracing connection as a moral value, paves the way for a return of agency and opposes the atomizing and socially disruptive scripts of neoliberal governmentality.

The recurrence and dramatic consistency of this scheme inclines me to add one more coordinate on the theoretical and interpretive map of the play. I intend to draw attention, in particular, to the way that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Declaration* identifies "the indebted, the mediatized, the securitized, and the represented," as "the primary subjective figures" (Hardt and Negri 8) of the current neoliberal conjuncture.

The hegemony of finance and the banks has produced the indebted. Control over information and communication networks has created the mediatized. The security regime and the generalized state of exception have constructed a figure prey to fear and yearning for protection—the securitized. And the corruption of democracy has forged a strange, depoliticized figure, the represented. These subjective figures constitute the social terrain on which—and against which—movements of resistance and rebellion must act. (14)

One of *Lampedusa*'s most original and striking characteristics consists, in actual fact, in juxtaposing so explicitly—and hence forcefully indicting—the genocidal immigration politics of the European Union in the Mediterranean and its simultaneous enforcement of a cruel culture of austerity within its boundaries. The effect of this conjuncture, as Etienne Balibar (5) suggests, is the partitioning along fault-lines of class and race of both alien and member populations into

privileged, ‘authorized’ communities, and abject groups who are then reduced “to strategies of survival” (Hardt and Negri 14) through an endless process of internal bordering and stigmatization.

Mediatization and securitization are also essential elements propping up Lustgarten’s play. Not only do they determine the creation and dissemination of the border spectacle of Lampedusa, but they also regulate the right to live and die—or at least to be recognized as citizens and human beings—of people on both shores of the Mediterranean as well as in London, while at the same time camouflaging necropolitical practices and logics between the populist folds of hegemonic narratives. Interestingly, visual surveillance and control, which are constitutive features of the externalized border of Lampedusa, are mentioned also by Denise in Leeds in connection to the tightening up of the disability assessment process, during the course of which officials in search of the slightest pretext for denying benefits rely on “hidden cameras” (Lustgarten 16) in order to scrutinize the applicants’ reactions at leisure.

Echoing Hardt and Negri’s view that “[d]ebt wields a moral power whose primary weapons are responsibility and guilt [...]. You are responsible for your debts and guilty for the difficulties they create in your life” (15), Denise, in the first part of the play, is represented as acting mercilessly towards the people who fail to repay their loan. “If you can’t afford to pay a loan back, don’t take it out,” she tells one of them, in a one-liner that imitates and mocks David Cameron’s rhetoric of austerity and self-discipline as markers of morality.¹²

Along the same line, Denise is ironical about the characteristics of the new precariat, striking an analogy between precaritized workers and prisons, both seen as “a growth industry” (Lustgarten 6): those who do not conform are beyond the pale of modernity. In another embittered passage, which sounds prophetic in the aftermath of Brexit, she highlights the sharp economic divide marking out different parts of the United Kingdom; if inner London is, in point of fact, the most affluent city in Europe, the country also hosts, according to a report, nine out of ten of the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Europe. And, lamenting that—represented by Farage, who embodies the “matchless bitterness of the affluent” (ibid.)—even middle-class people feel free to voice their most racist prejudices, she ideally enrolls herself among an alternative, but ever increasing group of would-be migrants in counter-flow, willing to leave her country because of “The hatred and the bitterness and the rage. The misplaced, thick, ignorant rage” (11). These feelings also resonate in Stefano’s complaint for the extinction of traditional working-class figures such as fishermen and his understanding of those who blame it all on the migrants, being exacerbated by the ever-increasing precarization of work which forces them to eventually accept the job “no one else will take” (12).

They recur, again, in a suggestive passage that ironically disrupts the usual pattern of migration flows, in which Stefano projects the nightmare of a kind of Erasmus Programme community in reverse onto a hopeless future. In his words, the exploitation of undocumented migrants who, under the current neoliberal conjuncture, are

deliberately made ‘illegal’ through the spectacle of the border is mirrored by the continuous reproduction of the precariat and the underclass as endless reservoirs of cheap labour.¹³

And do the migrants not understand Europe is fucked? And Italy is double-fucked? And the south of Italy is triple-fucked? My younger brother, much smarter than me, degree in biochemistry (I think), and he had to go to London to find work... as a Chef. He says the sous-chef is a biologist from Spain and the kitchen porter is a geneticist from Greece, and in their free time between courses they work on a cure on cancer.
Its’ a joke.
They don’t get any free time. (9)

Clearly, both Stefano and Denise consider themselves as belonging, also, to Hardt and Negri’s category of the ‘mis-represented.’

Interestingly, the young people in the excerpt are all from Southern Europe, and possibly anticipate the much-discussed, and feared, two-speed European Union model which is generally deemed to have got the green light in the Rome Declaration of 25 March 2017: a model which may be said itself to consist in a practice of ‘economic borderization,’ protecting the healthy national body of the ‘virtuous’ from the infectious influence of the undeserving ‘indebted.’ Lustgarten’s standpoint is clearly stated in his “Introduction” to *Lampedusa*,¹⁴ where this theme is explicitly indexed to a deliberate policy of deterrence indifferent to the loss of human lives that are deemed to be expendable.

This imaginative and ethical appropriation—this reclamation, even – of the Southern borderscape of Lampedusa in order to reposition it within the ethical battleground of British political drama and the wider continuum of globalized strategic and economic interests, represents in itself a challenge to the neoliberal borderization of Europe and its public opinion. Lustgarten’s daring act of ‘unbordering’ is put in sharp relief also by his explicit indictment of the British government for “leading the way in ending Mare Nostrum” and backing its low-funded substitute, operation Triton, which he defines as “an official policy” (Ibid.),¹⁵ deliberately meant to deter prospective migrants by strategically deploying the spectacle of migrant deaths.

It is also worth noting how the play defiantly strikes a daring simile between the marginalization of Lampedusa’s local economy and the ghettoization of the poor in Leeds by embracing under the same squalid, carceral logics the “swamped” and rundown refugee centre and the dilapidated flat where Denise’s mother and the defaulting tenants she visits are trying to carry on vis-à-vis the neglect of the state. And while—following in the steps of an increasing number of playwrights, artists and documentarists¹⁶—Lustgarten provocatively hinges the main architecture of his play on the disturbing foregrounding of the dead bodies of migrants, he is careful to complicate the politics of *Lampedusa* by exhibiting the ageing and disabled body of the elderly poor in European cities within the same theatrical time-space.

The shock effect of some of these traumatic descriptions, always filtered through the lens of Stefano's expanding sense of sympathy and exhaustion, are clearly meant to induce the audience to embark on a path of civil and emotional redemption. At the same time, conveying an embodied impression of how it actually feels to touch the corpses of the drowned (Lustgarten 4) serves to contrast the invisibility and obliteration of the humanity of the dead, and incarnate the criminality and horror hidden under the politics of rescue and the discursive spectacle of the humanitarian border.¹⁷

In another passage, the bodies are described as "warped, rotted, bloated to three times their natural size, twisted into fantastical and disgusting shapes" (3), a description which is consonant also with the haunting iconography of powerful visual art works and installations, such as the impressive "End of Dreams,"¹⁸ by Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, directed in the waters of Pizzo Calabro in 2014, which highlight the issue of de-humanization. Forty-eight figures, "evocative of human shapes and wrapped in concrete canvas" so as to resemble "body bags" (Welch) were submerged and exposed to the pull and erosion of the sea, before being retrieved in order to be shown in museums and exhibitions. Interestingly, as Rhiannon Welch refers, a violent storm caused several of these sculptures to be disanchored and lost, becoming an even more apt memorial of the ongoing tragedy being perpetrated in the Mediterranean. "Less than half of the original sculptures were recovered, and the remaining thirty or so, like the human bodies they were meant to memorialize, likely lie in obscurity somewhere on the sea floor" (Ibid.).¹⁹ Most often, however, *Lampedusa* chooses to focus on the unnaturalness of these deaths, affecting mostly young men and children (Lustgarten 4), and celebrates the bonds of pity and solidarity that are bound to leave a mark upon the rescuers, moved, at times, to the point of attempting to wake up the dead.

Many reviewers have singled out the causal and poetical intermingling of Lampedusa and Britain as one of the major strengths of the play, showing also how this concept is enacted in terms of staging, performance and direction. Particularly effective, in this sense, are Sergio Lo Gatto's and Dorothea Marcus's reviews of *Lampedusa*'s German premiere in Bochum in March 2016. Against the surface of "a sea-background surmounted by a huge pile of discarded clothes, the two protagonists straddle in their boots, picking up garments that are meant to metaphorically evoke the bodies of those who are dying in the Mediterranean" (Marcus, my translation). And, "[e]ven though their paths never actually cross," Lo Gatto recounts, "the two of them share a repertoire of desperate gestures, splashing in the water, picking up the floating rags and even kissing each other." Trapped within "a well-lit but immobile space" (Ibid.), which is evocative of the ethical and political paralysis affecting no less the island and the soul of Europe than the lives and consciences of the protagonists and, possibly, of the audience, the actors manage to create a powerful, gripping sense of dramatic urgency and shared empathetic involvement.

It has also been noted how Lustgarten's play differs radically from other forms of political theatre, such as, for instance, verbatim. While this genre relies on authenticity and constructs the audience as a tribunal, called to evaluate and judge ethically, the protagonists of *Lampedusa* most often attempt to establish eye-contact with individual spectators. Sorting them out and keeping them under their flashlight, as if to stress individual complicity and responsibility, the protagonists intend, rather, to materialize shame and to shock them into catharsis through empathy and a passionate appeal to renewed agency. The audience is required to identify with Stefano and share his empathetic horror and burgeoning 'response-ability' in imagining the "rotten fingers of the drowned clutching at my neck. Grey faces of the long dead staring up from the seabed. [...]. Staring at me as if somehow I've betrayed them" (21).

This scene is, again, resonant with the experience of the ghostly which is a common trope in the literary tradition of writing about slavery, and reminds us of Avery Gordon's words about the aims and modalities of haunting, "a way of knowing" that "draws us affectively, sometimes against our will [...], into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a *transformative recognition*" (Gordon 8, my italics).

Transformative recognition is, indeed, the key to both Stefano's and Denise's personal ordeals of self-redemption, and is meant, hopefully, to affect also the audience. The horror felt by Stefano only comes to be mitigated when he succeeds in associating the ghostly faces of the drowned—Levinasian faces²⁰ one might venture—with the familiar and friendly face of Modibo, the Malian refugee who refuses being defined by victimhood, wilfully choosing to be something other than a mere survivor. It is exactly by performing and making visible the empathetic bonds which make us human, as Giudice and Giubilaro (86) suggest, that "artist interventions" can "provoke a crack that is also an opening" and "affirm the possibility of different forms of narration" and alternative imaginaries.

One cannot avoid addressing, at this point, what strikes as a silenced grey zone and a conspicuous absence in Lustgarten's play: its double-monologue structure prevents both the alienated poor and, much more critically, the ethnic other from coming fully into life and speaking up their own claims, feelings and desires, turning the spotlight, in this way, on the vexed issue of the subaltern's right to agency and self-representation. This absence has been noted, for one, by Letizia Alterno (2016). While praising Lustgarten's strategic attempt to reach out to new audiences and spread awareness of the genocidal politics being obfuscated by the populist noise of official discourse, she notes the playwright's failure to flesh out and empower the figures of Modibo and Aminata, who are summoned as haunting embodiments, instead, of the moral interpellation that refugees and migrants any refugee and migrant should signify to each of us. In a thoughtfully nuanced way, and focusing, mostly, on the generic elements of refugee theatre, Agnes Woolley, too, explores the formal and ethical impasse posed to most "theatrical engagements with

asylum” (Woolley 384) by the testimony-like structure which is a preferred characteristic of this kind of performance, most often based on verbatim. In particular, she points out how *Lampedusa*, while refusing the documentary format, suffers all the same from a similar representational bias, moulding introspective monologue and an imaginative rewriting of issues-based testimony into a perfect tool “for the purposes of advocacy” (383).

But advocacy, innervated with empathy and brought to life through impassioned activism, is the life beat of Lustgarten’s poetics, whose aim is clearly to conquer and change the hearts and minds of the willing in the morally bankrupt, anaesthetized affluent North. In this light, his silhouette presentation of the refugees, while certainly problematic in postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, should not be received as simplistic or offensive, but avowedly strategic. For, as Lustgarten declares in the introduction to his *Plays*, “I don’t want to win awards. I want to cause trouble. Hope is the best way to do that” (Lustgarten ix).

Conclusion: Political Theatre for the “Age of Occupy”

As one might infer from the plot and as some reviewers have lamented, Lustgarten’s play is not shy of juxtaposing plain political arguments and blueprints, and compellingly poetical and brutally shocking passages. This format, which embraces “[t]he drowning and the terror. The hope and the futures” (Lustgarten14), is consistent with Lustgarten’s view of the theatre as a means for reviving hope, one that is not afraid of the risks posed by exemplary tales and parables. Aminata’s rescue, in the end, is presented as neither sentimental nor optimistic, but is meant to signify, first and foremost, the survival of hope, a survival which is made explicit in the final scene of the play:

They’ve given us joy. And hope. They’ve brought us the thing we have nothing of.
And I thank them for that.
They don’t know what’ll happen. If either of them will get to stay long-term. But they’re here, in this moment, alive and living. And that is all you can ask for.
I defy you to see the joy in Modibo’s and Aminata’s faces and not feel hope.
I defy you. (33)

While this somewhat hasty ending may, and indeed does, occasionally sound a bit overemotional and oversimplified, the perspective is radically altered if one remembers how Lustgarten’s professed aim is to open up a serious debate about “what kind of society” (Introduction, n.p.) the British want to be. Even more importantly, as he writes in a *Guardian* article, Lustgarten calls for that “return of agency, of individual and collective power to act,” which to him represents the best form of resistance to the aura of inevitability conveyed by the official and cultural scripts of the supremacy of the market, and to our own surrender to the mood “that we are basically powerless to change the way we live” (13 Sept. 2015). Against all this,

he goes on to celebrate the power of action, no matter how limited in scope or strength, as a viable means for every individual to claim his or her own agency by “connecting with others and making a difference” (ibid.). And, he again insists in a recent interview, the human ability to connect with compassion and hope “is more than optimistic. It’s absolutely essential” (Lustgarten 26 November 2016).

It is hard, having come to this point, not to feel, once more, a resonance with Ken Loach’s statement on being awarded the Palme d’Or: “We must say that another world is possible and necessary” (Shoard and Smith). It strikes me as particularly apt to convey the gist and infectious power of what I have tried to describe, throughout this essay, as Lustgarten’s poetics of ‘militant hope.’

Notes

1. This article is a slightly modified version of a book chapter in the volume *Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands* (2017), edited by Cecile Sandten, Claudia Gualtieri, Roberto Pedretti and Eike Kronshage, Trier: WVT, 219-236.

2. A second ‘instalment,’ named “Europe / Crisis: New Keywords of ‘the Crisis’ in and of ‘Europe’,” and coordinated by Nicholas De Genova and Martina Tazzioli, was published in March 2016.

3. Such as, among others, Balibar (2009; 2016), Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), Mezzadra, De Genova, and Pickles (2015), van Houtum (2010), Mazzara (2015), Rinelli (2015), and Tazzioli (2015).

4. I borrow this expression, which is inspired by Primo Levi (1986), from Basaran (2015), who applies it to the plight of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.

5. The play’s premiere took place at London’s Soho Theatre on 8 April 2014.

6. See Lustgarten (2016: ix).

7. On Theatre Uncut, see their website: <http://www.theatreuncut.com> and Brennan et al. (2011).

8. For an updated bibliography of Lustgarten’s works, all of which focus on politically sensitive issues, and an author’s statement about his poetics, see Lustgarten (2016). His latest play to date, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (2017), centered on the political potential of both art and compassion, had its acclaimed world premiere in the Swan Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, London, on 24 November 2016.

9. For a state of the art survey of political theatre in Britain, see, among others: Howe Kritzer (2008), Jeffers (2012), Zaroulia and Hager (2015), Adiseshiah and LePage (2016), and Angelaki (2017).

10. See, among others, David Dabydeen's *Turner* (1994) and Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (2007).

11. Just like Modibo in relation to Stefano, Carolina offers Denise a cup of tea, and then invites her to dine at her home, being taught, in exchange, how to negotiate extensions of her payments.

12. With the onset, in 2008, of what is generally known as 'the global financial crisis,' the discourse of austerity came to occupy the centre ground of Conservative propaganda. It was particularly prominent during the October 2009 Conservative Party Conference, and even more so in the run-up to the 2010 elections. "The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity," Cameron announced in his 2009 leader's speech, inaugurating a leitmotiv that would stay with him until the end of his premiership in 2016.

13. On this issue, see Featherstone (2013).

14. The text was posted also on the Global Justice website on 25 April 2015:
<http://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2015/apr/20/drowned-bodies-mediterranean-and-europe%E2%80%99s-responsibility>.

15. This viewpoint, and the ambiguous necropolitical use of dramatic TV footage of the drowned, is referred to by Stefano, in the play, as mouthed by Modibo who is staring at the corpses lined on the beach.

16. Narrowing the field to works concerning Lampedusa, mention should be made, at least, of internationally renowned artists such as the playwrights Lina Prosa, Marco Paolini, Ascanio Celestini, Marco Baliani and Lella Costa, documentarists Andrea Segre, Stefano Liberti, and Dagmawi Yimer, film-makers Emanuele Crialese and Gianfranco Rosi, whose *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea) won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016, becoming a beacon for the advocates of humanitarian approaches to the migrant crisis. On their productions, see, among others: Ardizzoni (2013), Wright (2014), Mazzara (2015), Rinelli (2015), Kushner (2016), Oboe (2016), Palladino and Gjergji (2016), Ponzanesi (2016a; 2016b), and Zagaria (2016).

17. See Walters (2011), Mezzadra, De Genova, and Pickles (2015: 68), and Tazzioli (2015).

18. See the artist's website: <https://www.nbsl.info/end-of-dreams-image>.

19. On "End of Dreams," see also Ritaine (2016: 110).

20. See Levinas (1961).

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