Oceanic Kinship and Coastal Ecologies: More-than-Human Encounters in Cristina Ali Farah's "A Dhow Crosses the Sea"

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Introductory Remarks: "*Badmar*, crossing the sea"[1]

An illustration by Naï Zakharia that accompanies the online edition of Somali Italian writer Cristina Ali Farah's story, "A Dhow Crosses the Sea," published in 2017 in *Asymptote Journal*, shows a dark-haired woman standing ankle-deep in the sea, eyes averted and gathering up her dark grey dress.[2] The ocean stretches out in front of her to reach a cloud-filled horizon where we can see a ship balancing on the line where water meets sky, either sinking into the waves or lifting into the clouds. The ink and watercolor artwork is set in muted, dim colors, eliciting melancholia and perhaps grief. We cannot see the shoreline: the water encompasses both woman and boat, an artistic choice which evokes detachment and dissolution, but also the unlimited possibilities of the ocean to reach into the world, unfettered by land.

In the twenty-first century, Western media representation of Somalia's connection to water has commonly been limited to two equally violent visual formulae: either the unrelenting portrayal of drowning or dead Somali refugees in the Mediterranean and on its shores during the so-called European migrant "crisis" since 2015, or the proliferation of images and videos throughout the news landscapes of the Global North of the threat posed by Somali pirates capturing ships and taking hostages in apparent disregard of human life and international treaties in the Western Indian Ocean since the early 2000s. Both pirates and refugees have been made into spectacles, and although the reasons and incentives for each differ, such forms of representation ultimately result in a deeply racialized, racist scopic logic of "others" at sea.

The illustration which I describe above is in conversation with, but ultimately an argument against, these stereotypes. Here, a woman calmly looks out at sea, her back half turned away from the searching gaze of the viewer. Indeed, Cristina Ali Farah's story offers an antidote to the deadening, flattening narratives told, and controlled, by the Global North about Somalia's relationship to water, as it grapples with the ecological, ethical dimensions of oceanic and littoral encounters. This article seeks to attend to these encounters by grounding the text in

its geographical context on the East African Indian Ocean coast, by addressing the ecological realities of post/colonial extraction regimes in contemporary Somalia, and by tracing a multitude of routes across the planet vis-a-vis the seafarers and ocean-crossers that populate the story. Ali Farah, as I will show, creates a poetic manifesto for the possibilities of kinship and solidarity across spaces and species in the ways she engages water. Throughout my analysis, I will tangle current approaches to the blue and oceanic humanities (a "reading for water," so to speak)[3] with scholarship on post- and decolonial extraction studies, Black ecology's attention to historical and systemic racial injustices, and a rising interest in the Indian Ocean as it links to the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean.[4]

Ali Farah herself knows quite a bit about traveling between shores. She was born in 1973 in Verona, Italy, to an Italian mother and a Somali father. When she was young, her parents moved to Mogadishu where she grew up. In the early 1990s, at the start of the civil war that would eventually remove Siad Barre from power, Ali Farah once more returned to Italy. Today, she is an acclaimed author of three novels, *Madre Piccola* (2007, translated to English as *Little Mother* in 2011), *Il Comandante del Fiume* (2014, translated into English as *Commander of the River* in 2023) and *Le Stazioni della Lun*a (2021), and works as a poet, playwright, teacher and activist.

Together with other contemporary Somali Italian writers such as Carla Macoggi, Igiaba Scego, Sirad Salad Hassan and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Ali Farah probes the intersections of Somali and Italian identity formations, intervening into Italy's political and cultural canon and bringing to light the legacies of the country's colonial activities in Eastern Africa.[5] In addition to her work as a fictional storyteller, Ali Farah collects oral histories by interviewing migrants and refugees about their experiences of flight and arrival. In an auto/ethnographic piece titled "Words that Build the Soul," Ali Farah relates her experiences of working on a project about memory with a group of young Somali refugees attending the *Asinitas* Italian-language school in Rome: "Day One. Our word of the day is *avventura*. […] A risky undertaking but attractive for what it promises of the unknown […]. It seems that a corresponding term in Somali doesn't exist. […] We continue looking. Some suggest *dalmar*, the crossing of countries, and also *badmar*, crossing the sea" ("Words").[6] Connecting the word "adventure" to different experiences of migration rattles Western perceptions of migration from the Global South: thinking of crossing lands and waters as adventure means escaping rigid frames of how migration is conceived by contemporary Eurocentric standpoints – from right-wing positions as threatening, uncontrollable waves or from well-meaning leftist perspectives as the arrival of broken, suffering refugee-subjects – but instead to render migration as enterprising, audacious, bold. Going on an adventure

means to tell stories, and to open up a space of possibility and futurity: "Adventure is: something unique and special, an unexpected occurrence" ("Words"). By conducting conversations such as this one (and by transcribing, mediating and archiving them), Ali Farah tends to the precarious state of building a life out of loss and ruins, a life that happens during and after crossing lands and oceans: "Abubakar recalls that after having crossed the sea, after his *adventure*, he dreamed of resting, of 'taking a break from extreme exhaustion.' Sometimes it's harder to live with peace than with adventure" ("Words").

Just like Ali Farah's work as an oral historian is dedicated to the vulnerabilities and strengths of (im)possible adventures, her story "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" addresses different kinds of futures and communities emerging from such crossings. It achieves this by centering *badmar*, the crossing of the sea, and by engaging with the ecological and socio-communal environments of different interlinked bodies of water: the Indian Ocean, the Black Mediterranean and, at least to some extent, the Black Atlantic. Somali migrant-refugees, pirates and coastal fishermen all take on the adventure of the ocean, and, in the course of Ali Farah's narration, join voices to tell tales about human migration, naturescapes and more-than-human encounters in loosely connected and partly overlapping vignettes.[7] By connecting contemporary ecological vulnerabilities to the harmful legacies of colonial extractive projects, and by bringing to light how the failing ecosystem of Somalia's coast is contingent on the country's historical entanglements with other nations, the multi-modal text of "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" activates a collective narrative of oceanic kinship that takes into account not only simple one-way routes from Somalia to Italy, but instead a global web of criss-crossed relations between humans, animals and nature.

Dhows and Pirates: Indian Ocean Genealogies

"A Dhow Crosses the Sea" begins the first of its five sections with an unnamed narrator, living in Europe – more specifically Italy, as we will learn later. Yet, the story's first movement is to journey across the ocean towards Somalia and to Eyl, a coastal town in the Nugal region, a reversal of the *badmar* one might expect in a story about Somali migration:

> When my grandma died it'd been many years since I'd seen her, so I didn't cry when she died in Eyl, where she'd always lived. Rather, I was surprised, because the same night, that of her death, I'd dreamed of her. It was the first time since I moved to Europe that my grandma had appeared in my dreams. Actually you could say that she hadn't appeared to me at all; I had conjured her up the very night of her death. ("Dhow")

The narrator's recollection of her grandmother creates a generational framework which links together East Africa and Europe across the waters. The initial distance ("many years, "I didn't cry", "the first time since") is immediately closed as the narrator leans into the bond, and lets herself be drawn into her memories, towed across the ocean to another shore: "So I called to her and saw the ocean I'd seen as a child" ("Dhow"). This childhood ocean is mediated by her grandmother – "the sea swirled around her even though she hated the sea" – and then historically and geographically expanded to tell a story about the political and ecological realities of the Indian Ocean: this first crossing enables us to travel through Somalia's past, taking up different vantage points and positions from which emerge complex relationships between sea and land.

The grandmother lives in the mountains close to the coast: "She showed me the road to climb to Eyl Dawaad, hidden in the valleys, a short distance from the Eyl Badey coast from which pirates sail nowadays" ("Dhow"). We learn about what the ocean has taken from her, and the reasons why she has withdrawn to "[h]er village, upriver, [which] had nothing to do with the sea" ("Dhow"). Her husband had traded on the Indian Ocean with his dhow, a traditional sailing vessel common in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea which lends the story its name. While on one of his adventures at sea, he had been shipwrecked:

> She swung her arms and sang a song that everyone knows: *doon bad mareysa, badda doon baa mareysa, mayddi bay sittaa, mayddi iyo malmal bay sittaa*, a dhow crosses the sea, a dhow crosses the sea, carrying incense and myrrh, carrying incense and myrrh. Vessels loaded with skins and animals set off from Eyl Badey, only to return filled with dates and rice. Her husband was a young merchant who perished at sea when my grandma was expecting her firstborn daughter. ("Dhow")[8]

The ocean appears as a place of abundance, of promising trading routes and the profitable exchange of goods, but also as a place of death and danger. The dhow, long recognized as an icon of voyaging across the Indian Ocean (Dua), epitomizes a watery trade system that linked East Africa to multiple other coastlines and continents from the thirteenth century onwards. The ocean composes a vital space of encounters between Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East—crossings which were historically comprised of both free and forced migration, of both voluntary trade and slavery (Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 7). As Isabel Hofmeyr argues, "the Indian Ocean – home to the world's oldest transoceanic long-distance trading system – folds together old diasporas […] with a range of Western imperial formations, including those of Portugal, Holland, Britain, and the United States" ("Universalizing" 722). As a thoroughly worldly space, then, the Indian Ocean

> obliges us to extend our axes of investigation. [...] At every turn the Indian Ocean complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms. (722)

The longue durée of the Indian Ocean world consolidates centuries of "dense trade networks and kinship ties" (Dua 52) outside of European hegemony: the ocean trade in "A Dhow Crosses the Sea," with its evocation of "vessels loaded with skins and animals [that] set off from Eyl Badey" and return "filled with dates and rice" ("Dhow") mirrors the historical "range of lateral networks that fall within the Third World or Global South […] working beyond the templates of the nation-state" (Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea" 584). By centering her narrator's ancestors as deeply affected by such cross-oceanic adventures (prosperous and deadly both), Ali Farah proposes an understanding of the Indian Ocean world far beyond and long before current contemporary Eurocentric frames of reference, and instead attends to movements across the sea as bound to multiple South-South relationalities, inextricable from the lived realities of Somalia's coastal inhabitants.

The grandmother's home evokes also a more recent, equally entangled history: that of Somalia's pirates. Eyl was one of the main hubs from where Somali bandit-fishermen set sail. Contrary to Western belief in the unprompted criminality and senseless violence of the pirates, however, Somali piracy grew out of the collapse of the Somali government and the way foreign nations took advantage of the country's struggles: once the country was no longer protected by its own or by foreign (colonial) laws, international fishing vessels began to conduct illegal fishing in Somali territorial waters. As Awet T. Weldemichael has shown in his landmark study on piracy in Somalia,

> illegal fishing happened routinely in broad daylight and at night, in proximities close to and far offshore. At least since the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s, IUU [illegal, unregulated and unreported] fishers plundered the country's marine resources. Foreign dhows from the region, and industrial-scale fishing vessels from distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) especially took advantage of the deep coastal waters to fish in traditional preserves of local artisanal fishermen. (2)

This overfishing directly affected the marine environment, depleting local fish stocks and endangering the "livelihoods of coastal communities" (2). Without a functioning, regulating government that could face such a threat, the local Somali fishermen "took the defense of their fishing grounds into their own hands and directly, though not always successfully, confronted illegal foreign fishing vessels" (2). Using small boats, the fishermen would sometimes hold foreign vessels for lucrative ransom; these small-scale activities would grow

into a larger criminal system in a region badly affected by poverty and government corruption. What began as legitimate local environmental activism, an "environmentalism of the poor" (Guha and Martínez Alier) against the unlawful extraction of resources, "took a life of [its] own and became the epic, predatory enterprise of ransom piracy of the twenty-first century" (Weldemichael 2).

Ali Farah, in her story, pays tribute to the complex causes and effects of the country's struggle, a consequence of years of civil war, which, in turn, had been fuelled by the destruction of administrative, social and cultural infrastructures by European colonizers and the political vacuum left behind by this destruction: "In Eyl, which was just a village, they say that luxurious cars are driven around these days and that men show gold coins between their teeth" ("Dhow").[9] Piracy, which emerged from the vital need to defend the coastal environment and its ecological wealth from colonial and neo-colonial extractive projects, evolved into a network of profit, crime and dependencies ("luxurious cars", "gold coins") with national and international players implicated at every step along the way, replacing more traditional ways of accumulating wealth via Indian Ocean trade and migration. As Kelsey McFaul argues, such a nuanced portrayal "reframes conversations around contemporary maritime piracy away from a teleological temporality of barbarism and progress, nativism and civilization, and from an uncritical account of nation-state failure" (35). In combining stories of historical dhow trade routes across the Indian Ocean with other, more recent oceanic endeavours, Ali Farah draws on multiple, interlocking dependencies that impact Somalia's economic and ecological realities today.

"The ocean seethed like molten lead": Toxic Coastal Ecologies and More-Than-Human Solidarity

Somali "pirates" set sail not only because of the illegal overfishing I touch on above, but also because foreign nations have been dumping their hazardous, toxic waste along the Somali coastlines for years, a fact that has been confirmed by different United Nations inquiries and external, independent experts (S/2008/769 UN Somalia Monitoring Group Report, para. 125 and S/2010/91 UN Somalia Monitoring Group Report, para. 127; see also Menkhaus; Tharoor). This has led to the destruction of the coastal ecosystem, and, ultimately, to environmental catastrophe. Weldemichael posits that "waste dumping took place secretly in remote overland and maritime spaces, often under the cover of darkness" (2; see also Greenpeace; MacKenzie; S/2008/769 UN Somalia Monitoring Group Report; Qayad). Such dumping was "perpetrated by corporate actors with the active or passive complicity of states – in their home countries and/or countries serving as staging and landing bases closer to their target dumping and

fishing grounds" (Weldemichael 23). In 1997, Greenpeace circulated a landmark investigation which uncovered Swiss and Italian companies (and possibly the Italian mafia) as instigators and intermediaries for the transport of hazardous, sometimes nuclear, waste from Europe to regions in Somalia (Milton). When the civil war erupted in the early 1990s, European exporters adjusted contracts with local clan warlords, who insisted on guns and ammunition as payment to allow the dumping to go on. Colonial extraction politics and neo-colonial waste dumping by Western waste-brokers, which destroy previously healthy and rich ecosystems and make whole regions unliveable, constitute a form of environmental racism and violation of human rights which disproportionally affect already marginalized communities (Okafor-Yarwood and Adewumi).

What we can see at work here are "complex, multiscalar (unequal) power dynamics" (Caminero-Santangelo 239) that contingently shape both global ecosystems and local ecologies. As Simone M. Müller argues, "in (post)colonial settings, indigenous communities were – and still are – disproportionately burdened from toxic exposure […]. And, within the affected communities, inequality persists. Some bodies are more vulnerable to toxic exposure than others" (445). These vulnerabilities find expression in "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" in poignant examinations of the real-life effects of occupation, war and colonialism on Somalia's littoral environments and oceanic ecosystems. Indeed, the description of Eyl and the pirates swiftly and elegantly moves readers into a section which attends to the pervasive repercussions of toxic waste dumping:

> They also say the coastline is infected and that children are born without mouths.
>
> The coast's ecology had been distressed for some time. Its natural wealth destroyed, its equilibrium broken. You could get stained with tar walking across the sand, or get cut by an aluminum sheet. ("Dhow")

A disease has affected human and more-than-human communities. Being born without a mouth means to have no voice as the mouth signifies language, identity and the transmission of stories and knowledge: aside from the metaphorical quality of this image, the description also points towards the very real implications of toxic waste dumping in the waters of Somalia's coast for the health and integrity of humans, animals and nature. Indeed, the ecosystem is so far out of balance that the beach has been corrupted by sharp and viscous materials such as, respectively, aluminium and tar, jarring by-products of industrialization that harm those attempting to move across.

Ali Farah's insistence on these violent effects reflects "the status of African environments as sacrifice zones for discarded discontents of

globalization" (Iheka 158). These sacrificial elements are spelled out even further in "A Dhow Crosses the Sea":

> They told us about kids who ran into the sea for a ball, and were absorbed into the waves in the blink of an eye. This time, those responsible weren't the jinni, nor the man-eating sirens among the rocks, but sharks, most terrible and voracious, sometimes captured, dragged onto the beach, and then crushed by the enraged crowd. ("Dhow")

The sharks who are usually at home in more remote waters now appear in the bay, since one of the natural barriers separating the deep ocean from the shallower parts of the shoreline, a coral reef, has been destroyed. This destruction can be linked to the failing ecosystem caused by overfishing and toxic waste (which has possibly been washed up from its secret dumping grounds due to hurricanes, see Burnett), but also to more immediate man-made causes: in the 1980s, international aid money enabled Mogadishu to build a hyper-modern automated slaughterhouse, the construction of which necessitated the targeted detonation of large parts of the coral reef:

> At the start of the eighties, the Mogadishu shoreline was hit by a two-fold tragedy. Aid money gave us a new port and a very modern automatic slaughterhouse, where beasts were decapitated and blood spilled in the direction of Mecca.
>
> To make space for the bigger ships much of the barrier reef was destroyed, while poisons from the slaughterhouse leached into the sea.
>
> From the broken barrier, attracted by the smell of blood, the sharks entered, crazed, and pressed towards shore. ("Dhow")

These measures to develop Somalia's economy (building new airports, new slaughterhouses, new port structures), a gesture by international aid agencies "intended as a 'supposedly civilizing capitalist development,' backfired on multiple scales," and ultimately brought about more devastation (McFaul 46; quoting Caminero-Santangelo 226). As Ali Farah says in an interview, this section of her story can be read as "a criticism of the humanitarian aid system, of the latent potential for destruction inherent in good deeds" (Jacobson). The blood by the slaughtered animals funnelled into the ocean symbolizes a reconfiguration not only of global economic alliances, but also of the ecosystem and its correspondent animal-animal/animal-environment relationships: if not for the destruction of the reef and the blood in the water, the sharks would not have come this close to the coast; if not for the overfishing and the depletion of their natural ecosystem, they would not have to depend on non-oceanic food sources.

The scholar Rob Nixon has famously called the developments and linkages outlined by Ali Farah the *slow violence* of environmental catastrophe, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a

violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2; 10). Nixon warns us to remain aware of violence "that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (10). Ali Farah links together different accretive ecological disasters – overfishing, toxic waste dumping, the destruction of reefs, chemical leaks – and portrays them as intimately connected across time and space. As scholars of the critical environmental humanities, we need to do the work of engaging "the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon 20) and I believe that Ali Farah's story generously and defiantly offers us such a challenge, as it insistently foregrounds the human and more-than-human responses to ecological catastrophe within and beyond the ruins and repairs of the Somali nation-state.

The dumping of lethal debris in the Somali hinterland and its coastal areas is inextricably linked to both histories of colonialism and neo-colonial endeavors; it showcases a world order that still perceives the "global south" as less, a junk yard for Western waste. Moved by an ecocritical impulse and located at the contentious intersections of the anthropocene and the capitalocene, Ali Farah's story sheds light on capital-driven developments that began taking effect when European powers took possession of the lands of others, thus forever altering the political, social and ecological structures of the world driven by a desire to accumulate wealth and influence – and causing millions of people fleeing their now unliveable homes. The ecological realities of Somalia's coastal waters are densely layered: they reveal a country precariously balancing on the brink, its natural ecology slowly but surely dissolving, eating up itself: "The ocean, once filled with sponges and shells from multicolored pools of butterflyfish, now only delivered amputated bodies and the smell of death. The country was dismembering itself" ("Dhow"). Ecological collapse is paralleled to, happens parallel to, the collapse of the nation-state. If we want to understand the complexities of contemporary more-than-human life in the context of Somalia, we also need to pay attention to the precarious living conditions caused by empire. Or, as Iheka has argued, it is necessary to consider "the entanglement of both human and nonhuman lives on the continent" and to take "seriously nonhuman lives – plants, animals, sea life, and so on – caught in the tragedy of ecological devastation in Africa" (158). In the face of all this, he also advocates for empathetic readings that foreground "the resilience, agency, and resistance of humans" as well as "the active roles that nonhumans assume in the literary texts" (158).

Appearing in intimate dialogue with such suggestions, "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" stresses the complicated, strained relations of humans

with their environments, and the manifold ways the lives and futures of humankind are tied up with other-than-human forms of life. In a stunning turn, the story merges human and environment in a devastating union which potentially undoes both parties:

> The ocean seethed like molten lead. It could disfigure your heart. In the sand, your feet became roots of water and of iodine, your bones accretions of silicon and salt. ("Dhow")

The ocean is water and lead simultaneously, just as the human form turns into a more-than-human assemblage of bone, blood, salt, water, silicone. While Ali Farah makes sure to portray the ecological decline of Somalia's coasts as the outcome of the country's dispossession, the text here also suggests a remedy to the hostile lived realities of a post/colonial nation-state by offering a nuanced appraisal of the ways environments and humans can come together, in factious, fractious ways: the narrator's body becomes a part of the ocean world, metamorphosing into water, sand and salt. As such, the human comes to share the very same dangers the oceanic environment faces; both stand together in vulnerability. As Iheka has petitioned, "[b]y seriously considering human entanglement with other beings in the ecosystem and the vulnerability they share during conflicts, [we should be able to] extend our understanding of war casualties and reorient current conceptualizations of social crises and victimhood in African literary studies" (81). In the toxic eco-scapes of Somalia's coast, different communities witness and experience continuous and long-term ecological fallouts in communion. By suggesting an oceanic, littoral ecosystem that interlaces the non-human with the human (body, consciousness, life), Ali Farah is able to explicitly spell out loss and death – but also to pronounce the dissolution of the human/nonhuman binary as a possible alternative for her Black, female protagonist.

In "A Dhow Crosses the Sea," the human body opens up, to include other-than-human creatures, environments and sensate infrastructures, making obvious the need for a shared sustainable, liveable and possible world. Donna Haraway has argued for "making kin" as a core strategy for re-iterating relations with nonhuman nature, positing that this need not necessarily implicate a biological or familial relationship, but that "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense" (162). For Haraway, kinship is a strategy for focussing on life on earth as an interconnected assemblage. "[K]in", she argues, "is an assembling sort of word", within which we have a responsibility to others, defined not as "individuals or humans" (161) but as parts of a planetary whole. Locating such more-than-human engagement with post/colonial ecologies in the watery spaces of the Indian Ocean and Somalia's coast, allows Ali Farah to insist on forms of oceanic kinship which Katharina Fackler and Silvia Schultermandl map as "an integral part of networks of belonging, care and responsibility," in which oceans

"figure not only as physical spaces and material conditions for kinship practices, they also infuse cultural imaginations of belonging and the grammar of identity which gives expression to myriad relationalities and convergences" (196).[10] The precarious environment of Somalia's waters depicted in Ali Farah's story, and the proposal that *dissolution* of human/nonhuman boundaries might be a *solution*, unsettles anthropocentric notions of being, and instead foregrounds a distinct Black ecology, a mode of thinking together the ongoing effects of the anthropocene, racial capitalism, logics of extraction and the pollution of the global commons with modes of resistance and refusal, and the ability of Black communities to rally "cultural resources and political insights to create meaningful alternatives" (Roane *et al*. 129). The story, in other words, articulates the urgency of shared response-abilities and solidarities against the extractive necro-politics of empire.

Extending Ethical Encounters: Black Mediterranean Sisterhoods

These ecological kinship relations are complemented (and complicated) by another form of kinship: that between Somali migrant women. Back in the unnamed narrator's present and having swiftly crossed the ocean to Europe once more, we are told: "If you go to the waterfront many women will want to tell you their story" ("Dhow"). This part of the story moves us from Somalia's to Italy's coast, and in that move enables yet another connection. In what can be read as communal, testimonial auto-fiction, in this next section the text vocalizes a chorus of migrant-refugee women. Not unlike the Somali pirates and fishermen, these women have journeyed across the ocean – this time, however, not across the Indian Ocean but along other watery routes, in order to arrive in Italy. The narrator tells us of the disconcerting differences between the Indian Ocean waters and the seemingly tamer Mediterranean:

> I didn't see the sea for many years. When I saw it again, it was in Sabaudia, south of Rome. Some laughed because I thought that the tide would swell within hours. Don't put your towel near the water – the sea will take it away. The waves in Italy, they told me, don't eat everything. ("Dhow")

We know, however, that this is not true, that just as children are dying in Somali coastal waters, migrants are swallowed by waves as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean to find refuge in Europe ("Mediterranean Situation"). The passage between North Africa and Southern Europe has become one of deadliest seascapes since the transatlantic slave trade. In the next sentence, the story alludes to the relentlessness of this other oceanic space: "The sea in Italy, it doesn't even recede" ("Dhow").

Fortress Europe has done its very best, since the so-called "European migrant crisis" started and long before, to repel those seeking help and shelter. An increasingly large number of refugees have been abandoned by many nation-states and transnational state formations, including the European Union. The silencing, excluding machinations at the very heart of Europe, implemented to hermetically close itself off against those perceived as other, have taken form in organizations such as Frontex, the European Union's border agency. As SA Smythe argues in their article on "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of the Imagination," the agency "has been charged with responsibility to 'oversee' patrols of the sea. Overseeing is not doing, nor even seeing: Frontex has wilfully turned a blind eye to thousands of requests for aid" (n.p.). Instead of fulfilling its humanitarian responsibility, Frontex has denied response to distress calls and has, in perverse disregard of human suffering, shifted its patrol areas further away from sites where help is needed most.

Such necro-political regimes stand in opposition to the lives of millions of refugees who resist being made unreadable and ungrievable (Butler) as they push back against not only geographical borders (at being either expelled or taken in contingently), but also against the idea of Europe itself – thus stretching, puncturing and subverting its self-understanding as a closed space, a continuous unit of meaning or community. A concept which acknowledges another, different logic, one of inter-dependency, encounter and coalition, is that of the Black Mediterranean. First coined and conceptualized by Alessandra Di Maio, and drawing on Paul Gilroy's theorizations of the Black Atlantic (1993), the Black Mediterranean "focuses on the proximity that exists, and has always existed, between Italy and Africa, separated […] but also united by the Mediterranean […] and documented in legends, myths, histories, even in culinary traditions, in visual arts, and religion" (Di Maio quoted in Raeymaekers; see also Di Maio and Di Maio and Soyinka). As Ali Farah links together different water spaces and different histories of displacement, she creates loops of feedback and reverberation, thus reflecting on the truly global, planetary scales of oceanic migrations, while also retaining the specifics of each watery, littoral and beach space. As the story's narrator reflects on the Italian sea that does not recede, she states:

> You have to cross it to get to the stronghold, you have to cross the sea in between, the Mediterranean Sea, the White Sea to the Arabs.
>
> Many face the White Sea. But from my coasts, on the horn of Africa, before reaching the White Sea some brave the Ocean on a dhow. They want to know if it's really necessary to go so far. ("Dhow")

Here, different journeys and teleologies cross and overlay each other, happening at the same time, from multiple directions at once. By superimposing many possible starting points, migratory routes and arrival spaces, "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" deepens its engagement with the material and affective experiences of proximity and juxtaposition that had already played such an essential part in the story's depiction of Somalia's ecological collapse in the previous vignettes.

In this last section of the story, we meet a community of migrant women who relate their encounters on and in water, shedding light on female networks of care and solidarity that extend and expand the kinship relations we encountered on the Horn of Africa.[11] One such act of care is reflected in the figure of a woman called Dahabo who had shipwrecked off the Italian coast. She tells us/the narrator[12] the story of how the dhow she had travelled on capsized. Because she knew that in death people grow so desperate they hold on to anything that helps them stay afloat, even other human bodies, she distances herself from everyone else, trying to swim ashore alone. When she hears one of the women she had travelled with calling out for help ["[…] it was the friend she wasn't yet friends with […]"], however, she turns around and, in risk of her life, helps her reach the rocks:

> The friend swam after her and together they waited for the perfect wave to push them onto the rocks. After they'd been lying there for a while, stretched out and chilled, the ships arrived, shining their bright lights. Those on board, seeing the women wet and shivering, asked them to take off their clothes.
>
> So, Dahabo says, cupping her hands over her chest, she was embarrassed because she'd forgotten to put on a bra before leaving. Her breasts are no longer those of a young woman and Dahabo found herself topless, without a bra, in front of the guard ships. So, she repeats, still holding her hands over her chest, she always tells all the women they must not forget to put on their bras before leaving. ("Dhow")

This is how the story ends: on a note that is simultaneously grounded in the trauma of survival and the deeply human act of helping others survive, of passing on advice. Dahabo's precarious state of someone newly arrived echoes the precarious journeys of the narrator's grandfather whose dhow had capsized in different waters but who had not made it to the shore alive, not only linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean along different crossings and means of transport (the dhow, the rubber boat, the guard ships), but also to other, earlier oceanic migrations such as the middle passage and its slave ships. As SA Smythe writes in their reflection on Black oceanic being and relation:

> This ubiquity of the water is part of what ties us, binds us in time and spirit to the ontological depths of Black presences in historical and material relation to the Caribbean Sea and the

> Atlantic Ocean – the routes of African enslavement and genocide and to the Mediterranean Sea. (n.p.)

With its insistence on helping disenfranchised, vulnerable others in the same dangerous situation by way of the character Dahabo, or, in other words, by attending to the afterlives of Black migration at sea, the story offers a node of community- and place-making beyond "the semiotics of suffering" (Cox *et al.* 8). This move beyond suffering is enacted this time not by cross-species assemblage, as was the case in the previous sections, but by forming friendships, bravely and tenderly: "she always tells all the women they must not forget to put on their bras before leaving" ("Dhow"). Such an ethical engagement with others showcases a "commitment to building rather than assuming solidarity" (Pratt and Rosner 18), a building (and re-building) that comes to light in a story that reconstructs the troubled trajectories of migrants and refugees in a world of (neo-)colonialism and globalization.

"A Dhow Crosses the Sea" – from the familial, generational link between grandmother and granddaughter across continents, via more- and other-than-human symbioses on Somalia's coasts, to the friendship between migrant strangers in the Mediterranean waves – focuses on feminist communities of care that are firmly rooted in ideas of repair and regeneration: "unlike the sentimentalized models of [colonial] parental care and protection sanctioned by the neoliberal state," these acts of care "prioritize those most violently affected by both state power and the interarticulation of bio- and geo-politics: migrants, women and queers of color, black and brown bodies considered disposable and erased or made to disappear" (Kulbaga 77-78). The creation of empathy (between human others and non-human-others) lies at the forefront of Ali Farah's story. The auto/fictional testimonies provided here not only create communities within the text but through their collective character also open themselves up to the reader, ultimately providing the possibility of an ethical engagement across cultures, of thinking with, through and against various forms of dependency. Indeed, what Ali Farah has termed elsewhere her commitment to maintain "a sort of network of relationships throughout the world" ("una sorta di reticolo di relazioni nel mondo," "V° Seminario Italiano") is expressed through the story's various human and more-than-human kinship systems, offering a deeply collaborative practice which honors the African diaspora's historical and contemporary encounters on water. Mapping the story's different ways of activating oceanic kinship, a reading *for* and *with* water, has allowed me to not only trace the points of convergence between geographical spaces already linked by water, but to also think together the way oceanic and littoral environments intersect with the political, the ethical and the poetic – and the potential of imagination and repair inherent to art.

Concluding Remarks: "Flowers of Spray"

To conclude, I would like to circle back to the *Wasafiri* rendition of "A Dhow Crosses the Sea," a longer and more auto/ethnographic version of the vignette-like story I have discussed throughout this chapter.[13] In *Wasafiri*, the text features 10 sections (instead of the five sections offered by the pared down, more lyrical version online), and does not end with Dahabo's story and her bitter-sweet, humorous admonishment to other women. Instead, in section 10, readers stumble upon a poem titled "Aksum." This poem refers to the Obelisk of Axum, a 4th-century phonolite burial stele which was erected in the city of Axum, in what is today known as Ethiopia. By the nineteenth century, the stele had fallen (possibly due to earthquakes), and when Italian soldiers found it following the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, it had been half-buried and broken into three pieces. In 1937, it was taken as a war bounty, cut down further into 5 pieces and transported to Italy. As the note in *Wasafiri* remarks, the obelisk "was sited outside the Ministry for Colonies" on Rome's Piazza di Porta Capena, near the Colosseum (24). In 1947, Italy assented to a UN agreement about the repatriation of looted objects and promised to return the stele to Ethiopia – a promise that would not be fulfilled until more than 50 years later, and then only under considerable difficulty given the complications of transport and the strained political relations between Italy and Ethiopia and its neighbouring countries (Bhalla). The translator's note in Wasafiri states that "the poem stems from a sentence heard during a conference, in which a young Ethiopian man ironically told the Italians that he wished he could be like the obelisk itself, being granted access to Italy, staying there for seventy years and then returning to Ethiopia" (24).

The lines—"When you've crossed the sea, all you will find / is biscuits & fruit / where once your obelisk stood" (24)—once again remind us of the colonial legacies forever inscribed into our contemporary world. As Kelsey McFaul has succinctly argued, "[t]he obelisk is a symbol of the uneven history of commodity extraction and citizen repatriation between Italy and its former colonies, as well as of Italy and Ethiopia's founding amnesias as modern nation-states, while Somalia struggles to attain this status" (46). The lines thus evoke the multi-directionality that rang so ubiquitously throughout the story: while the migrant-refugee travelled across the sea, the stone monument took another route back to the African continent, they never met, missed each other like ships in the night. The poem also returns us to the kin relations between humans and their environments, articulating an ecological consciousness that spans the planet. As the lyrical I describes: "On the shore I will gather flowers of spray / white &

unyielding like bones & city walls" (24). This striking image calls forth, once more, a convergence of human bodies, coastal and oceanic environment, and organic and inorganic matter. The spray of the salty ocean waves as they meet the shore ossifies into bone and plaster, into human-made architecture which then, in turn, becomes anthropomorphized:

> Don't let them bring to me your torn-up body
> circumcised monolith, head & chest & shin bone
> what's left is a scar, gashed open in the concrete
> traced and erased in front of the colonies
> the memorial stone in the hold, the teeming sea
> (24)

Ocean, body, boat, earth and monument become one-with-another, just as empire and colony intertwine, impossible to unravel. Ali Farah's lyric evocation of a connective Black ecology that encompasses more-than-human encounters enables us to think through interlocked and self-perpetuating systems of racist oppression, global capitalism, resource extraction, toxification and ecological degradation, and recognize a web of relations which offers a space beyond the deadly logic of empire for pondering un/inhabitable worlds. As Ursula Heise reminds us in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, the challenge "is to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socio-environmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole" (10). In light of the pervasive sense of the planetary at play in Ali Farah's work, and the entanglements of ecology, politics, economy and culture that influence our daily lives and challenge our imaginations, I read the relations described in "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" as a searing account of the inextricable link between humanity and non-human actors—and as a plea for solidarity, however tenuous or fragile it may be.

Notes

1. This article has been a long time in the making, and has seen me travel from the shores of one institution to another: I want to thank Carly McLaughlin and Gigi Adair for the time and effort they spent on an early draft of this text; the other authors in this special issue for teaching me so generously and patiently about post/colonial solidarities; the interlocutors at the conferences at which I presented parts of this work for their questions and engagement (*Breaking Boundaries: Reimagining Borders in Postcolonial and Migrant Studies*

in 2021, *ALA* in 2022); and my peer reviewers at *Postcolonial Text* for their help in making this a better text.

2. "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" was originally published in Italian (title: "Un sambuco attraversa il mare") in *Wasafiri*'s 2011 Indian Ocean issue, with a side-by-side translation by Cristina Viti. I have chosen to use the newer version of the story, translated by Hope Campbell Gustafson and available online at *Asymptote Journal* in both the Italian original and the English translation; this is also the version preferred by Ali Farah at recent live events. I was honored to hear her perform the story at the VolkswagenStiftung-Symposium *In/Visibility and Opacity: Cultural Productions by African and African Diasporic Women*, organized by Anja Bandau, Cheryl Finley, Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Herandez in Hanover in 2019. This performance and our subsequent conversations planted the seed from which this article has grown. While I will focus my analysis on the 2017 version (cited parenthetically throughout as "Dhow"), I will at times reach back to the *Wasafiri* version to pay tribute to the text's multi-layered origins and its transformations over time.

3. A "reading for water" entails, as Hofmeyr, Nuttall and Lavery have so elegantly put it, "a method that follows the sensory, political and agentive power of water across literary texts. […] reading for water moves laterally, vertically and contrapuntally between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries" (303-304). See also my project *Water as Method* (2023-2024, co-led with Keyvan Allahyari, Katharina Fackler and Tyne Daile Sumner), which treads some of the same waters by articulating the significance of water not only as encompassing settler-colonial politics but also as a cultural, technological and aesthetic formation with its own mobile and diverse permutations.

4. See my previous work on the Indian Ocean and its cross-oceanic, South-South entanglements (Leetsch 2019 and 2021). For more general overviews of Indian Ocean literatures in Africa, see Adejunmobi 2009, Mwangi and Steiner 2018 or Lavery 2021.

5. The scope of this article does not allow for a comparative approach, but for a more extensive engagement with the emergence of Italian migrant, and specifically Somali Italian, literatures and the generative linkages between them, see Farah 2000, Di Maio 2009 and 2019, and Medugno 2024.

6. "Words that Build the Soul" is based on the scripts for five episodes aired on the "Dizionario" segment of the Italian radio programme *Fahrenheit* in Spring 2009. The scripts were translated by

Hope Campbell Gustafson for *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*. Ali Farah's work with the young Somali refugees is also part of the earlier iteration of the story "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" as it was published by Wasafiri in 2011.

7. To delineate the concept of the "more-than-human" I keep with María Puig de la Bellacasa, who argues that "it speaks in one breath of nonhumans and other than humans such as things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans" and that it, despite its "moral undertones that invite us to 'transcend' the human for something 'more than,'" also prompts us to topple these binaries: "Affirming the absurdity of disentangling human and nonhuman relations of care and the ethicalities involved requires decentering human agencies, as well as remaining close to the predicaments and inheritances of situated human doings" (1-2).

8. When reading this story live, as was the case in Hanover in 2019, Ali Farah sings this part, thus foregrounding multi-genre oral Somali storytelling traditions. For further reading, see Ahad 2015, Hasan, Adan and Warsame 1995 and Jama 1994. I write about the links between politics and poetry in Somalia in another context, discussing the work of Somali British poet Warsan Shire (Leetsch 2019).

9. For more background on Somalia's colonial history, see Laitin and Samatar 1987 and for a reading that complicates teleological narratives about the development of the Somali nation-state, see Bakaari 2023.

10. For another discussion on planetary entanglements, especially with regard to oceanic space, see Peri Sipahi's contribution in this special issue, on forms of transindigenous and archipelagic solidarities in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry.

11. For a reading that further foregrounds the specific diasporic community-building strategies present in the story, see Salaad 2023.

12. As Hope Campbell Gustafson observes in her translator's note in *Asymptote Journal*, Dahabo's story is one of the few instances of recognizable direct address in the story: "As readers, we don't know what of the text is direct speech and what isn't – in the act of recounting, all kinds of expression are woven into the fabric of the sentences. An example of this is found in the last paragraph, with Dahabo repeating "so" (I must note that the Italian "allora" really rolls off the tongue) – it is the only word she speaks directly; the rest of the paragraph is in third person." (Campbell Gustafson)

13. The *Wasafiri* version features an autodiegetic narrator whose voice can be much more readily connected to the life of Ali Farah, the author. Section 6, for example, begins with an account of the author's activities as an oral historian: "For nearly two years I have worked on a project on memory together with a group of Somali asylum seekers. They are all very young, or as old as the civil war is, and they are among those who have decided to go far" (21). The discussion the narrator has with her student about the term "*avventura*" and its untranslatability from Somali to Italian almost exactly mirrors Ali Farah's account in *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*, which I referred to in my introductory remarks. Sections 7 and 8 also feature discussions of books by Fatima Ahmed and Nuruddin Farah, interwoven with testimonies by refugees.

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